

Sparks May 2022



The Golden Gate Mausoleum & Columbaria is one of the grandest buildings in the El Cerrito vicinity. Its new owners want it to become better known. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Chinese firm has ambitious plans for historic hillside mausoleum. It may be the largest building in the greater El Cerrito area, and it is almost certainly the stateliest, with a grand arched entry, marble walls and statuary, stained glass windows, and endless broad hallways filled with niches.

It also houses one of the oldest businesses in the area.

But how many of us are familiar with the former Sunset View Mausoleum, which was built in 1927 and overlooks the Bay from above Sunset View Cemetery and has recently been renamed the Golden Gate Mausoleum & Columbaria?

Not many, right? And that's something ATL USA Inc., a subsidiary of the ATL Group Limited, which says it is "one of China's largest managed service companies in the international afterlife care industry," intends to change.

At an invitation-only May 20 event, leaders of the company said they plan to retain the architectural integrity of the historic building, while expanding and perhaps adding other structures.

"We don't want to change anything. We think this building is beautiful. It is history. We would love to keep it. We can add something to the building," Eugene Xiao, executive vice president of ATL Group, said in an interview. He added: "There is plenty of room to expand."

[Golden Gate Mausoleum](#) occupies close to nine acres of land. The building itself sprawls over two and a half acres, said Dave Hepburn, a third generation cemetery professional who came out of retirement to be Golden Gate's general manager. The building was greatly expanded in the mid-20th century.

The mausoleum, like most of its neighbor, the separately owned Sunset View Cemetery, is in Kensington.

Sunset View's chapel is also in Kensington, but both businesses have adopted El Cerrito addresses: 101 and [101-A Colusa Avenue](#).

Hepburn says ATL decided to change the name because "everybody thought they were part of Sunset View Cemetery." The name itself came naturally, he said. "I looked out the window of my office at the Golden Gate. I thought, ohmigod, look at that view."

Golden Gate Mausoleum, almost 100 years old, already has plenty of history. (One niche houses the remains of George H. Johnson, who lived from 1894 to 2006 – 112 years!) But it appears that the place will make history again.

ATL Group, which was founded as recently as 2012, has partnered with temples and other locations throughout China to create mausoleums and "memorial halls," according to a promotional video shown during the event.

Now ATL hopes to expand its operation worldwide. Golden Gate Mortuary, which it acquired in February through a related company, is the first in this projected expansion.

Hepburn says ATL came upon Sunset View Mausoleum when they noticed it was for sale. Cemeteries and related properties are rarely placed on the market for sale, he said.

Dimitri Kaczmarek, ATL USA's chief operating officer, said the ATL Group sees "an opportunity to bring Eastern culture and Western culture together, to fuse the two cultures." He added, "There is a diverse group of people in the United States."

El Cerrito's mayor, Gabe Quinto, who spoke briefly, told the gathering that 30 percent of El Cerrito's population is of Asian descent. "America has new demographics," he said.

Ken Garkow, Golden Gate Mausoleum's manager, said the previous owners "were stewards of the highest devotion and integrity," but had limited assets. The new owners hope to give the mausoleum a higher profile, he said in a talk during the event.

"This building is in a place that is so unique and glorious, yet it is almost invisible. How could that be? Why has it never had an opportunity to shine?" he asked.

The founder of the mausoleum was Arthur Edwards (1880-1950), an architect who came to San Francisco after the 1906 quake and helped rebuild the city, Garkow said. Garkow said ATL's goal is to preserve "the vision of Arthur Edwards."



The El Cerrito Historical Society and members of the Japanese American community helped devise historical signage that was installed along Hana Gardens, a senior residence, and the former Contra Costa Floral Shop. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Event will honor the Japanese flower growers of El Cerrito. On Tuesday, May 31, 2022 from 5 to 6 p.m., the YWCA of Berkeley/Oakland is hosting an event honoring Japanese Flower Growers in El Cerrito in front of the historic Contra Costa Florist retail building at [10848 San Pablo Avenue](#), near City Hall. Speakers include El Cerrito Mayor Pro Tem Lisa Motoyama.

The Historical Society provided historical input to the YWCA for this program.

During World War II, Japanese American flower growers were taken from their homes, and forced to stay in internment camps. This event will honor affected Japanese American families, providing further historical information and passing out flowers in remembrance.

The former floral shop is now part of the senior residential project Hana Gardens. The El Cerrito Historical Society was instrumental in efforts to preserve the building when city officials a decade ago asked that developers seeking to build on the site demolish it.

Flora Ninomiya and Laura Iiyama of the Japanese American Citizens League, and Tom Panas of the Historical Society led this successful effort, and created a wonderful series of historical displays at the site.



Jerry Martin remains an active member within the El Cerrito community. His tale says much about Black life in the United States from the mid 20th century to today. Here he is seen enjoying driving his MG. Courtesy of Gerald Martin

Read the society’s oral history focusing on the life of Gerald Martin, a leader of El Cerrito’s Black community. Growing up in South Berkeley in the 1940s, Gerald Martin’s mentor was the man who would go on to author California’s fair employment and fair housing acts to ban racial discrimination.

Jerry sailed with the Merchant Marines during World War II, served for years in the National Guard, administered a federally funded training program for emergency personnel, and went on to hold top administrative roles in Washington D.C. with such agencies as FEMA, the VA, and the Selective Service.

And back home in El Cerrito, Jerry and his family were among a wave of Black people who established lives in town, often despite opposition from neighbors and discouragement from financial institutions. Martin and his wife went on to become community leaders.

Jerry was kind enough to tell the story of his long and varied life to the El Cerrito Historical Society. You can read [the brief version](#) in our newsletter the Forge, and the longer tale in the [oral history](#).



This is a version of the utility box mural Kristen Kong is developing to be installed on a utility box soon in El Cerrito. Courtesy of Kristen Kong

El Cerrito artist creates utility box art focusing on diversity in our city. El Cerrito artist Kristen Kong has won approval from the city’s Arts and Culture Commission to create a work of art on one a utility boxes on Fairmount Avenue near Fatapples.

Kristen called upon the Historical Society for help in selecting people who could be portrayed in this art work. She said the commission had a preference “for box art that emphasizes inclusivity, social justice movements and sustainability.”

She has sent us a mockup of what her utility box may look like once it is complete.

“Social Justice can mean many things,” Kristen says. “For the city of El Cerrito, I thought this could take the shape of illustrating the city’s diverse roots and citizens. Hopefully, this would instill El Cerritans with civic pride and send the message that BIPOC people are welcome here.”

“The Historical Society has been integral to informing the final list of citizens and ensuring that the people represented on the utility box will be represented accurately.”

Help us document and reserve the city’s history by becoming a member of the El Cerrito Historical Society. Membership, a bargain at \$30 a year, is open to everyone and includes this newsletter, our email updates and meeting notices. More importantly, it assists our mission to locate, preserve and educate people about local history. A membership form is online under “How you can help” at www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org . We also offer memberships at the sponsor level for \$75 and life memberships for \$400. We accept donations of any amount.

The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications, the Forge, which is a print publication, which we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication which we aim to produce monthly. Both hark back to one of El Cerrito's original settlers, William Rust, a blacksmith who worked at his anvil producing, among other things, sparks.

