

THE RIVIERA'S First 75 Years
(1850 – 1925)

“Location! Location! Location!” We’ve all heard those words. Suffice to say that in terms of desirability the Riviera got off to a rocky start. Following Statehood in 1850, land east of the Mission came under the control of the United States Government and could be acquired by preemption.

Among the first to purchase land via this method was attorney Charles A. Storke. With fees he received for handling a land settlement case, he bought 123-acres for \$1.25 per acre. He aptly called his tract, “Rockland.” Anyone who has ever attempted to dig a trench on the Riviera will attest to the area’s rocky underpinnings. And the miles of sandstone retaining walls lining its roadways give mute testimony to the rocky consistency of the region’s soil.

Storke planned to sell his tract in four-acre-sized parcels. But with no readily available water source, the distance from town, plus the lack of easy access, locals dubbed the tract, “Storke’s Folly.” By 1876, the lights from Storke’s home at 1740 Grand Avenue were the first to shine from the hillside.

In 1886 the town celebrated the Mission’s Centennial. That same year, San Francisco Capitalist Walter S. Hawley arrived in Santa Barbara. Hawley felt certain an economic boom would follow the 1887 completion of the rail line between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. Hawley purchased the Arlington Hotel from the Estate of Col. William Wells Hollister and constructed two large commercial buildings in the 1200 block of State Street.

Hawley purchased Storke’s “Rockland” holdings for \$2.50 per acre, renaming them “Arlington Heights.” Local residents preferred to call it “Hawley Heights,” a name that stuck. Hawley’s Santa Barbara Land Development Company immediately set about improving the infrastructure. In March 1887, he built a boarding house for 25 men that he employed to lay out lots, plant trees, install culverts, and construct bridges over lower Riviera canyons. “All [improvements] designed to bring this section of the city into market as a desirable residence location. . .”

As anticipated, the first train arrived in 1887. A 60-foot wide street with easy grade in a winding course was built to the top of Mission Ridge. Other roads followed natural contours of the land. Many were appropriately named for religious associated with the Mission. Various handsome sites for villas were identified. But, only a few houses were built.

It seems that a hospital was destined to be located on the Riviera. In January 1889, Hawley offered the ladies of The Cottage Hospital Society a gift of a building site on Hawley Heights.

The “ladies” were urged to select a “pretty Spanish or Italian name meaning “the heights” and to avoid the term hospital. “A house set on a hill cannot be hid. It should be beautiful to the eye, and have a name pleasing to the ear.” According to the 28 January 1889 paper, the Society accepted Hawley’s gift of a site for the Cottage Hospital. However, in 1891 Cottage Hospital opened on Santa Barbara’s westside.

Enthusiasm for speculation in land declined at the end of the Century. The nation slipped into an economic depression. Hawley died in 1891. His heirs disbanded his development company.

Early development centered near the Riviera’s west-end. It had its downs and ups. In 1902, at the base of the Riviera, a sanatorium was constructed near the intersections of East Arrellaga and California

Streets. By 1908 the Order of the Sacred Heart of Mary founded a “hospital” near-by. Avoiding that term, the Sisters christened it “Salsipuedes.” Spanish speakers were amused, for it translated into, “Escape if you can!” St. Francis Hospital was deemed a far more acceptable name.

Meanwhile higher up on Mission Ridge, [1904] Francesco Francheschi [Dr. Emanuel Fenzi] purchased 40-hilltop acres, where he began his famed acclimatizing work, rare specimens of which survive today at Francheschi Park.

Dr. Prynce Hopkins opened a private school for underprivileged boys [1912] on a 13-acre tract near the intersection of Las Tunas and Tremonto Roads. Within three years, rocky soil precluded creation of athletic fields, causing Hopkins to relocate “Boyland,” to what we know today as The Samarkand.

About this time, George Batchelder, the “Riviera’s Father,” enters our story. Batchelder, a retired investment banker, often hiked to the top of Mission Ridge, enjoying the unexcelled views. While locals viewed the barren hillsides overlooking the city as an eyesore, they reminded Batchelder of the French Mediterranean coast. He is credited with “coining” the term “Riviera.”

Events of 1913 prompted Batchelder to buy 100 acres from Hawley’s heirs, plus an additional 200 acres. He incorporated “The Riviera Company,” for the purpose of developing the area. He served as president, with W. A. Staats, as Vice-president, and R. H. Gaud, as General Manager. Their offices were on the top floor of the San Marcos Building at 1129 State Street. Batchelder built his home at 1617 Paterna, while Gaud’s Lasuen Road home was featured on postcards.

Staats’ name appears on the 1920s subdivision maps for development of the land below Alameda Padre Serra, such as the De la Guerra Heights tract.

Batchelder plated home sites on curving streets, ensuring that houses had unobstructed views. To beautify the area, he brought hundreds of oak seedlings from his nursery in Atherton. Italian stone masons, supervised by Joe Dover, dressed readily available fieldstones to create retaining walls, stairs and gateposts. Batchelder’s vision included underground utilities, and purchasers signed agreements to build tile-roofed, white stuccoed homes that cost not less than \$4,000.

If Batchelder was the Riviera’s Father,” Edna Rich Morse is the “Riviera’s Mother.” For it was Edna, who gave birth to the idea of constructing a Normal School or teachers’ college at the west-end of the Riviera. The site was selected in 1909. She wrote pioneering legislation to secure \$100,000 in funding for this endeavor. School construction spawned and spurred further development, including roads and public transportation.

James M. Warren recognizing the need for faculty and student housing began constructing cottages on Lasuen Road. Within three years only a few students resided in the cottages. None-the-less Warren constructed a central cottage-type hotel, which evolved into the popular El Encanto resort.

During this time Clarence A. Black built “El Cerrito,” an Italian villa at 2130 Mission Ridge Road. Scottish stonemason Peter Poole constructed the distinctive stone retaining walls. In 1942 Marymount School for Girls purchased the property from the Weber Estate. This educational institution has also played a role in shaping Riviera history.

A main thoroughfare serves to separate the upper and lower Riviera. Alameda Padre Serra was envisioned as an “around the city boulevard.” While graded early on, paving wasn’t completed until 4 June 1925. The eastern section of roadbed proved especially difficult. Costs reached \$100,000. To avoid additional costs and excessive blasting, a single two-lane road was created.

In 1944, the College was absorbed into the University of California system and quickly outgrew the site. Instead of rezoning the land, the City sold it to the highest bidder. [Roy D. Lewis] Subsequent owners and numerous businesses have occupied the former campus: Brooks, Montessori School, ABC-Clio . . . The Towbes Group. Today it is known as the Riviera Park.

Few people realize it was George Batchelder, who donated Quail Canyon, which became the County Bowl. In 1929 Batchelder sold the City a 9-acre hillside parcel with 500-foot frontage on Alameda Padre Serra for \$30,000, the future home of Jefferson School. In 1972 concerns for earthquake stability closed the school. Brooks Photography bought it for \$292,651 and continues to occupy the site.

Sale of the large eastern end tracts of Loma Media and Las Alturas commenced in the mid-1920s. The Earthquake of 1925, subsequent Depression, and WWII cooled interest in Riviera development. At the conclusion of the conflict, cosmetic improvements [tree planting] were made to the Riviera in the hopes of luring returning veterans to purchase lots. The Sycamore Fire in July 1977 drastically altered the face of this portion of the Riviera.

Today, few people can visualize Storke’s “Rockland” devoid of trees, homes, streets, and sidewalks. As someone remarked to historian Walker A. Tompkins in 1979, “We know how lucky we are not to have to go to Europe to enjoy the Riviera lifestyle. We’ve got a better Riviera right here in Santa Barbara.”

Contributed by Kathi Brewster