

LAS ALTURAS: A RIVIERA REVERIE

A Saturday April 19, 1924 Santa Barbara newspaper article announced that “Las Alturas is Center of Interest; Building Plans of Noted Bishop Forecast High Character of Development; Many Visitors.” Land in the Riviera subdivision of “Las Alturas” (“The Heights”) was first offered for sale to the public in August 1923. According to Stella Haverland Rouse, while hundreds of people visited the tract, “lots did not sell as fast as anticipated.”

A sales manager was on the tract daily to show visitors around. It was pointed out that Las Alturas combined the conveniences of the city with the seclusion one associates with rural living. Every home site had panoramic views of the city, sea, mesa and/or mountains, which makes residence in Santa Barbara “so alluring.”

By April 1924, it was reported that interest in the tract was “steadily increasing.” A half-dozen lots had recently sold. Among those buying building sites was Bishop Nathaniel S. Thomas of Wyoming, D.D.,L.L.D., a distinguished Episcopalian churchman who had purchased two lots. He planned to retire in 1925, and “repair to a new home he is to build on his Las Alturas property, and devote his time to literary pursuits . . .”

But the 1925 Earthquake, the Depression, and World War II doubtless dulled the allure for home ownership. By 1927 the *Santa Barbara City Directory* lists fourteen residences on Las Alturas Road. No addresses are listed, nor is there a listing for Thomas. Notable among the property owners were architect Joseph J. Plunkett and artist William L. Otte.

The major access route to the sub-division was via Las Alturas Road. The approximately 1.6-mile road steeply descends 600-feet down the Riviera’s eastern face. In 1927, the road commenced southwest at the west end of Mission Ridge Road continuing to the intersection with “Camino Rey Alberto” (Alameda Padre Serra). The road’s numerous curves and turns, which intersect with several cul-de-sacs, have been compared to San Francisco’s Lombard Street.

The name of Reverend N. S. Thomas first appears in the 1930 City Directory. His address is given as 1100 Las Alturas Road. At that time, Thomas and his wife Edith spent half of each year in Santa Barbara and the other half in Palm Beach, Florida. Thomas was serving as rector of Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Palm Beach. He retired from his pastorate in mid-March of 1937, fully intending to establish himself permanently in Santa Barbara. He died at Palm Beach on 4 April 1937 and was buried at the Santa Barbara Cemetery on April 8, 1937. The simple graveside services were conducted by Dr. Royal Hunt Balcom of Trinity Episcopal Church and witnessed by five Episcopal Bishops. Mrs. Edith Prince Thomas continued to reside at 1100 Las Alturas. She died in May 1949 and is buried beside her husband.

The 1940 City Directory contains only four additional residential listings. Artist Channing Peake had taken up residence at 420 Las Alturas Road. In 1949 the number of

residences has increased to twenty-four. By 1960 The City Directory contained fifty-two residential listing for Las Alturas Road. Over the ensuing years, as the result of population increases and a 1977 natural disaster, Las Alturas Road's built environment has undergone dramatic changes.