

## **The History of Windsor Square and the Windsor Square Association**

**Native Peoples and Subsequent Spanish Heritage.** The *Windsor Square Association* is an all-volunteer group concerned with the well being of residents in the area of the City of Los Angeles between Wilshire and Beverly, Arden and Van Ness. The indigenous people of this land were the Gabrieleno/Tongva. The first recorded visit by Europeans was on August 3, 1769, when *Gaspar de Portola*, the Spanish Governor of Lower California, arrived at what was to become Los Angeles. Some years later, on September 4, 1781, *Felipe de Neve*, Spanish Governor of California, acting under the authority of King Carlos III, led a group of forty-four settlers to found *El Pueblo de La Reina de Los Angeles*, a new town along the banks of the Los Angeles River.

Residents of the new pueblo used tar for waterproofing and to roof their adobe buildings. The tar was obtained from nearby "tar pits." In 1828, 4,439 acres of land, including the tar pits, were given to Antonio Rocha (or "Antonio Jose Roca") as a Mexican provisional land grant. "*Rancho La Brea*" is Spanish for "the tar ranch." Major Henry Hancock obtained much of Rancho La Brea during the 1860s. During the 1870s, he mined the asphalt and later drilled for oil. Not all of the land adjacent to the tar pits was included within the Rancho; some had been deeded directly from the King of Spain to the new City.

**Subdivision and Development.** Land records, circa 1868, indicate that Canadians named *John C. and Cecilia Plummer* obtained, for farming purposes, 640 acres of land originally deeded to the City of Los Angeles by the King of Spain. In 1885, during the height of the City's first big land boom, a syndicate of real estate investors bought 200 acres of the Plummer property. These two hundred acres are the area that today is between Wilshire and Beverly, Plymouth and Bronson. This group was the Windsor Square Land Company. In 1911, that group sold the land to the *Windsor Square Investment Company*, which began the subdivision process.

Nearby, to the south, the construction of homes in *Fremont Place* began about 1910. To the west, the *Hancock Park* subdivision, from Rossmore to Highland, did not start until about 1921

The creation of the community that has become today's Windsor Square was not just the product of "business, subdivision, land records, and finance." There was an element of *romance* and *vision* in its creation as well. Late in life, pioneer residents described that early vision for the community in a publication of the Windsor Square Association:

"Sometime between 1900 and 1910 a gentleman named George A.G. Howard dreamed a dream. He envisioned a beautiful tranquil park as a

setting for family homes such as one sees in the English countryside. His dream was so engrossing that he talked often with the early City Fathers and pushed to make his dream come true. And in 1911, Mr. Robert A. Rowan initiated a unique residential development and called it Windsor Square.

"The "Square" ran from Wilshire Blvd. to Third Street, and from Irving Blvd. to Plymouth Blvd. This constituted a private square in which the property owners would own the streets as well as their homes. Deed restrictions set a minimum cost of \$12,550 on each home to be built, in order to assure handsome homes in an exceptionally beautiful setting.

"At that time there were dense groves of bamboo in the area which needed to be destroyed before trees and gardens could be cultivated. Intervening walls or fences were discouraged so that one garden ran into another creating a park-like setting. Windsor Square was the first area in the city to have the power lines below grade, an extraordinary innovation for 1911.

"The English flavor was enhanced by the street names: Irving, Windsor, and Plymouth. Lorraine Boulevard took its name from the developer's daughter, Lorraine Rowan, and Irving Boulevard is believed to have honored banker and resident Irving Hellman. Prior to the subdivision, there were no streets, only fields of oats, wheat, and barley. Nurseryman Paul J. Howard designed and planted most of the magnificent gardens of Windsor Square and supervised tree planting.

"Shortly after World War I, the financial burden of street maintenance was solved by deeding the street portion of lots to the City of Los Angeles. The City was reimbursed by bond issues. And security was assured by a patrolman on his bicycle checking homes at dusk and later through the night."

As just noted, the first portion of the 200 acres to be subdivided, the original *Windsor Square* (or "Old Windsor Square") was south of Third Street -- the tract bounded by Plymouth and Irving, Wilshire and Third. The area *west* of this original Windsor Square (Lucerne and Arden from Fifth to Third Streets) had been a part of the original Rancho La Brea and was subdivided by different developers as the *Wilshire Hills* tract. Soon after the original portion of Windsor Square opened in 1913, the developers planned to proceed with *New Windsor Square*, north of Third Street. World War I intervened, and New Windsor Square did not open for lot sales until 1920. Nearby tracts within the 200 acres were called *Marlborough Square* and *Windsor Heights*.

**WSA Founded in 1925.** The protection of the single-family nature of the area always has been a primary concern of the families that purchased the lots and

homes in the tracts of Windsor Square. Even before 1920, zoning violations had become a concern for the residents of the new tracts. To protect their interests, residents banded together in 1925 as the *Windsor Square Association*. Early leaders were Murray and George Howard, Earl W. Huntley, Hugh H. Evans, Admiral Ernest M. Pace, Jr., and prominent Progressive-era reformer Judge Russ Avery.

**Wilshire Boulevard Issues Before the 1950s.** One of the neighborhood's biggest challenges came in the early 1950s, and the Windsor Square Association was in the forefront in protecting the rights of the residents. Wilshire Boulevard, believe it or not, was a single-family residential street during the early decades of the Twentieth Century. Many prominent citizens, such as General Harrison Gray Otis (of the *Los Angeles Times*), rancher, explorer, and oil entrepreneur G. Allan Hancock, and lawyer Henry W. O'Melveny owned substantial homes on Wilshire Boulevard, between Westlake (now MacArthur) Park and the Ambassador Hotel. Similarly, Wilshire Boulevard adjoining Windsor Square and, to the west, Hancock Park, was restricted to single-family homes. By the 1920s, there was movement of commercial development west from downtown along Wilshire, and the Boulevard's single-family nature around Vermont Avenue began to change. The big houses were demolished or moved. For example, in 1930, Henry O'Melveny moved his house, originally built in 1908, from Wilshire and New Hampshire to the Windsor Square corner of Fifth and Plymouth, where the house was further restored in the early 2000s.

**1950s Development Pressures.** By the 1950s, the Wilshire Boulevard commercial development pressure had moved west to Windsor Square. Oilman *J. Paul Getty* assembled about a dozen lots and houses -- all but one of the properties in the block between Irving and Lorraine, Wilshire to Sixth Street. He announced his intention to demolish all the homes and build for Getty Oil Company an 18-story high-rise world headquarters. Under the leadership of Windsor Square Association leaders Edward D. Lyman, John V.H. Challiss, Admiral Pace, and Hugh Evans, residents assessed themselves to fund litigation against the Getty interests. The result was a much lower office building and the preservation of most of the block's Windsor Square houses (one of which, years later, was given to the City by Getty Oil to become the Mayor's official residence, *Getty House*).

**WSA Revitalizes and Incorporates in the 1970s.** After the Getty crisis passed, the Windsor Square Association apparently became relatively dormant during the 1960s. In the early 1970s, Jack Challiss and Knox Farrand revived the Association, recruiting *Marcus E. Crahan* to become president. Marcus was succeeded by *Michael A. Cornwell* and *Jane Ellison Usher*. The current president is *Carolyn Ramsay*. During Crahan's tenure, the Association became a California nonprofit corporation.

The revitalized Windsor Square Association took on many projects to protect and enhance the quality of life for the residents of Windsor Square. First and foremost was *public safety*. The Association met with the LAPD and all the interested security companies. From those efforts, efficient security patrol service became available in Windsor Square and, ultimately, expanded to neighboring communities.

**Street Trees, Park Mile, Median, and More.** Also in the 1970s, under the leadership of *Catherine Crahan*, Windsor Square Association-sponsored *street tree plantings* got underway on Third Street and Larchmont Boulevard. Additionally during this period, the Association was a key participant in the effort opposing developers' plans to rezone the entire area north and south of Wilshire Boulevard, between Wilton and Highland and from Eighth to Sixth. The developers' plan was to close many north-south streets to make "super blocks." The houses then would be demolished in order to construct ten-story office buildings, in a "park-like setting," to create a linear, mini-Century City.

In a two-year effort, from 1978 through 1980, under the leadership of the Windsor Square Association and associations from neighboring residential communities working with *City Councilman John Ferraro*, the developers' plan was beaten back. The resulting *Park Mile Specific Plan* has protected Wilshire-adjacent single-family residential neighborhoods since December, 1980.

Over recent years, the Windsor Square Association has continued the neighborhood-improvement street tree project started by Catherine Crahan, first under the leadership of *Norman Murdoch*, and now *Scott Goldstein*, with the assistance of *Richard Lawton* and many block captains and residents. Today, brand-new trees are flourishing from Arden to Van Ness, Beverly to Third. Other Association activities have included addressing parking and related problems associated with *Larchmont Village*, such as the loss of neighborhood-serving shops and the threatened proliferation of banks, real estate offices, and restaurants.

In the late 1990s, the Association was prominent in working with residents and the *Marlborough School* to negotiate mutually acceptable improvements in connection with the school's constructing its new soccer field. Stakeholders in Windsor Square are participating in the new *Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council*. Continuing Association efforts are underway to maximize *public safety* in the community.

One the association's most recent achievements is the Larchmont Median, located between First and Third Street on Larchmont. This project was inspired and motivated by Windsor Square neighbors and built in partnership with the City of Los Angeles.

*Douglas Meyer* and *Linda McKnight* each independently came up with the idea that a landscaped median would beautify the two residential blocks below the village and slow speeding traffic as well. Doug, an architect, sketched a rendering of the plan, which they then used to build support in City Hall and within the neighborhood. The Fourth District Council office garnered a \$200,000 grant from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for the project. *Carolyn Ramsay* raised \$100,000 in more than 300 donations from the community. The effort took four years, from conception through construction to a small dedication ceremony on October 20, 2002.

The Windsor Square Association continues to look for ways to maintain and enhance this wonderful neighborhood we share and to lend assistance on issues of concern to our residents. ***Participation in any of these community efforts is always welcome.***

This brief history was compiled in September, 2003 by John H. Welborne, based in part on materials from Jack Challiss, Knox Farrand, Greg Fischer and Carolyn Ramsay.