

Historic Resources Survey Report **Brentwood – Pacific Palisades Community Plan Area**



Prepared for:

City of Los Angeles
Department of City Planning
Office of Historic Resources



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Brentwood Development History

The impetus for the initial development of Brentwood was the establishment of the Pacific Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteers. Opening its doors in 1888 on land donated by Arcadia de Baker, Senator John P. Jones, and the owners of the Wolfskill tract, the "Old Soldiers' Home" was located immediately east of the area that would become Brentwood. The town of Sawtelle grew up on the lands south of the institution.

Brentwood lies within the boundaries of the Rancho San Vicente y Santa Monica, granted in 1828 to Francisco Sepulveda. In 1905, Robert Gillis, who by that time controlled the Rancho lands through his association with the Santa Monica Land and Water Company, began to subdivide "Westgate," so named because it was located adjacent to the west gate of the Soldiers' Home. This subdivision was quickly followed by Westgate Acres, Westgate Gardens, and Westgate Heights. Los Angeles and Pacific Railroad Company tracks were installed along San Vicente Boulevard, which had been graded in 1905, to connect the new subdivisions by streetcar with the rest of Los Angeles. Advertisements for the Westgate subdivisions touted their proximity to the Soldiers' Home and boasted that the trip downtown only required 35 minutes. The tracks remained in place until circa 1942, when the Pacific Electric Railroad, which had absorbed the Los Angeles and Pacific in 1911, discontinued streetcar service and five miles of coral trees were planted in place of the tracks down the center of San Vicente Boulevard.

The name "Brentwood" first appears in 1906, when the Western Pacific Development Company bought 350 acres from the Santa Monica Land and Water Company and announced development of an exclusive tract to be known as Brentwood Park. Said to be located "midway between the National Soldiers' Home and the Pacific," the tract extended north from San Vicente Boulevard beyond Sunset (then Beverly) Boulevard, with Bristol Avenue, originally called Grand Avenue, as its central thoroughfare. The distinctive layout of the new subdivision incorporated over three dozen landscaped

traffic circles, one at each intersection, and approximately the same number of ovals situated midblock. Streets curved gracefully to follow the contours of the land and at 75- to 180-foot wide were generously scaled. Lots were varied in size and shape and most had a minimum of a 100-foot street frontage. Publicity for the development claimed that John McLaren, famed landscaper of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, had supervised the planting, which was said to incorporate some 80,000 trees, including many native sycamores and oaks.⁷ Restrictions stipulating minimum setbacks; prohibiting billboards and oil wells, business uses, more than one house per lot, and distillation or sale of alcohol; and dictating race, color, and creed of buyers and residents were imposed.⁸ Despite the reputed \$1,000,000 investment by its backers, Brentwood Park got off to a slow start, forcing Western Pacific to sell a substantial interest to Dr. Herman Janss of the Braly-Janss Company. By 1916 only about twenty-five percent of the lots had been sold, but sales and construction picked up markedly in the 1920s, when several of the most prominent architects in the region were called upon to design lavish homes in the then fashionable Period Revival architecture styles.

⁷ "Art in Nature Luxuriating: Beauties of Landscape Are Well Utilized." *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1907.

⁸ Brentwood Park website, www.brentwoodpark.org.

Subdivision activity also accelerated during the 1920s. San Vicente Park (running along Bundy between Wilshire, then called Nevada, Boulevard and Montana Avenue), Brentwood Canyon Estates (along Carmelina Avenue), Brentwood Green (north and south of Sunset along Gretna Green and Kenter) were some of the tracts recorded during the decade. In Mandeville Canyon, Alphonzo Bell, Robert C. Gillis, and Henry O'Melveny, among notables, organized the Garden Foundation, acquired some 3,500 acres stretching from Sunset Boulevard to Mulholland Highway, and established the California Botanic Garden. Residential lots on the upper slopes of the canyon were sold to endow the garden, for which 800 acres was reserved on canyon floor and lower slopes. The former dean of the University of California College of Agriculture, E. D. Merrill, was appointed director. Plans included artificial ponds and streams, woodlands, specialty gardens, and a "Forest of Fame," wherein celebrities planted trees, the event memorialized on plaques. Plant species from around the globe were imported. The partially completed garden opened in 1928, but soon ran into financial difficulties and closed permanently in 1935. A new subdivision, the Botanic Garden Park, opened in its place. Remnants of the gardens, including two ponds, non-native plant species, and some trees from the Forest of Fame, still survive on private property. The picturesque stone bridge on Westgate Road is a unique visual reminder of the area's past. Development in the canyon was further impacted by a flood in 1938, but resumed in the early 1940s, much of it oriented around horse properties.

While building activity may have slowed in the early 1930s, it recovered as the decade progressed. Brentwood Glen, although subdivided in the 1920s as the Ratteree Tract, saw its definitive development between 1935 and 1942. More dense in layout than many other Brentwood neighborhoods, this Westwood-adjacent enclave saw its growth stimulated by the opening of the University of California campus in 1929, attracting many members of the UCLA faculty. It was somewhat isolated by the construction of the 405 Freeway between 1954 and 1960.

Brentwood was affected like all communities by the World War II suspension of building activity. In 1946, rising housing costs and the post-war housing shortage led four musicians to form a cooperative association for the purpose of combining their housing budgets, reasoning that they would therefore be able to afford communally what was beyond their means individually. Interest in the concept mushroomed, and membership in the Mutual Housing Association eventually reached five hundred. Eight hundred acres off of Kenter Avenue were purchased and leading architects were interviewed. A contract was signed with Whitney R. Smith and A. Quincy Jones as architects and Edgardo Contini as engineer. In 1948, the team presented the Association with a booklet, *Mutual Plans*, containing 28 house designs, from which the Association chose eight to be constructed. One hundred and sixty homes were eventually built, utilizing materials such as concrete block and wood, expansive glass walls, and low-pitched roofs. Communal facilities included a nursery school, credit union, and park; plans for other amenities and services were not realized. Crestwood Hills, as the development became known, was the only successful housing cooperative in the state of California.⁹ Unfortunately, approximately five dozen of these midcentury modern homes were destroyed in the 1961 Bel Air fire.¹⁰

⁹ Buckner, Cory. A. Quincy Jones. New York and London: Phaidon Press, Limited, 2002. Pages 88-99.

¹⁰ Seventeen of the original MHA residences are designated Historic-Cultural Monuments.

As construction of single-family homes accelerated to meet demand in the post-World War II years, builders ventured further up the canyons north of Sunset Boulevard.

These years also witnessed a large leap in the scale of single-family development efforts.¹¹ Additionally, a neighborhood of multi-family apartment buildings was constructed on the old Westgate tract.

Brentwood was from the outset a “suburb, away from the noise, dust, and in harmonies of the city.”¹² A handful of commercial and institutional developments supported the growth of the community. As the main street of the Brentwood community and site of the interurban railway tracks that linked the area with the rest of Los Angeles, San Vicente Boulevard immediately west of the Old Soldiers’ home developed as the first commercial and institutional enclave.

In 1928, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, constructed a Catholic women’s college, Mt. Saint Mary’s, on 33 acres in the Brentwood hills. The Brentwood Country Club, which had a checkered history, changing sites and owners over the years, was established in its current location by the late 1920s. The Brentwood Presbyterian Church was constructed in 1929 and expanded following World War II. One of the most notable landmarks of the Survey Area, the Eastern Star Home, a retirement facility now the home of the Archer School, was erected on Sunset Boulevard in 1931, its Spanish Colonial Revival architecture by the William R. Mooser Company epitomizing the characteristics of the style.¹³ In 1943, the University Synagogue was organized and in 1955 moved into its permanent home on Sunset Boulevard and Saltair Avenue. Brentwood Country Mart opened in 1948 on land set aside in the 1920s Brentwood Place subdivision for commercial purposes. Brentwood Village developed around the same time, spurred by the post-war residential explosion in the area.

Summary

As of 2000, the population of Pacific Palisades totaled 23,940 and Brentwood numbered 31,344. The Survey Area is still a “bedroom community” of mostly single-family homes which enjoys one of the lowest population densities within the City of Los Angeles.

While the majority of historic resource property types are single-family houses, other property types reflecting the area’s development history are also present, and include commercial, institutional, and religious properties. Overall, property types remain from most of the significant eras of the community’s development, representing a variety of historic contexts and themes.

¹¹ One attempt at this larger-scale development in the postwar years was Southdown Estates. Launched in 1952 by Pardee-Phillips Construction Co., Southdown Estates was intended as a “luxury-grade” residential subdivision of two- to four-bedroom Traditional ranch-style homes designed by architectural & engineering firm Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall (DMJM). Occupying 25 acres of the former Hamilton Garland estate near the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Bienvenida Avenue, the site was subdivided into 89 residential lots. However, this plan was ultimately unsuccessful, as Modernist architects Jones & Emmons were subsequently brought in to develop innovative designs to infill on the smaller lots. As such, the original vision for Southdown Estates was never fully realized.

¹² “Art in Nature Luxuriating: Beauties of Landscape Are Well Utilized.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1907.

Complete report at:

<http://www.preservation.lacity.org/files/Brentwood%20Pacific%20Palisades%20Report.pdf>