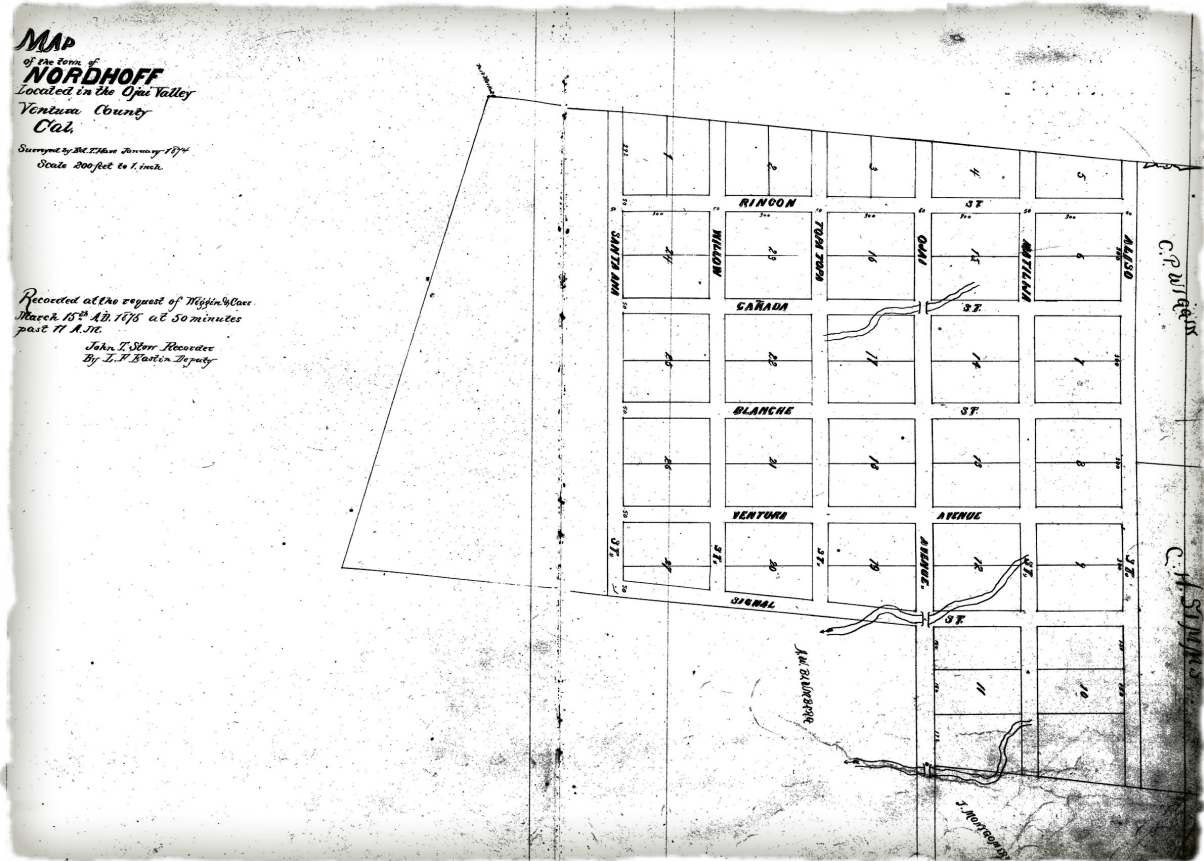


Town of Nordhoff (1874-1898)

2. Town of Nordhoff (1874-1898)

A. Commercial and Residential Development

In 1874 Roys Gaylord Surdam, real estate speculator and entrepreneur, obtained several parcels of Rancho Ojai from his friend Thomas Bard and platted the town of Nordhoff on 1,606 acres. The town was named after the writer Charles Nordhoff, who had so effectively publicized California in his popular 1873 book *California: for Health, Pleasure, and Residence*. The town was surveyed by Ed Hare in January 1874 but not recorded until March 15, 1875. The streets followed a typical Western grid pattern. The townsite boundaries were Santa Ana Street on the south, Aliso Street on the north, Rincon Street on the west and John Montgomery's property on the east. Surdam sold few lots in his new town. John Montgomery was one of the handful who responded to his advertising. Searching for a healthy climate for his wife, he purchased 1,300 acres of Surdam's 1,606 acres, building a house on the eastern edge of the new town site.



Map of Nordhoff, surveyed by Ed Hare in 1874 and recorded in 1875. (Ventura County Recorder)

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The “Boom of the ‘80s” spurred by the arrival of the railroad in Ventura County through the Santa Clara Valley to Ventura in 1887 brought a short-lived upswing in development in areas with direct access to railroad lines. Although access to the Ojai Valley remained limited to a stagecoach, local developers attempted to participate in the boom. The flurry of real estate activity lasted just a few months during the summer of 1887, but several new tracts were opened during this time. The largest was the Stewart’s Addition to Nordhoff recorded at the request of George E. Stewart in September 1887. This tract pushed the original townsite north from Aliso Street to Summer Street between Canada Street on the west and Lion Street on the east. Other tracts laid out in 1887 and 1888 included the Fox Tract, Bellevue Tract and Keystone Tract south of Ojai Avenue and east of present-day Montgomery Street. The Wolfe Tract, established in 1888, was the first subdivision north of Grand Avenue.

Through the late 1890s, Nordhoff remained a relatively isolated village, due mainly to limited access via two difficult roads. Creek Road was the main route of travel between Ventura and the Ojai Valley until 1878 when a second road, the Casitas Pass Road (now State Route 150) was built for stagecoaches. This road permitted safer passage between Santa Barbara and the Ojai Valley, compared to the coast road, which was only available at low tide. The Casitas Pass Road was constructed by William McKee, who desired improved access to the Oak Glen Cottages in Ojai, which he had opened in 1873.

B. Resorts and Tourism

Surdam advertised Nordhoff in eastern newspapers and proclaimed the area as the “great sanitarium and health resort of California.” He offered to provide land for free to whomever would build a hotel, and in 1874 Abram W. Blumberg answered the challenge by constructing the Nordhoff Hotel, later known as the Ojai Valley House, Oakdale Hotel and finally as the Ojai Inn. The large two-story hotel, with several additions, was considered a “first class resort” in the 1890s and was located on Ojai Avenue in the center of town where Libbey Park is today. Other resorts followed, including the Berry Villa on Ojai Avenue just west of the Nordhoff Hotel, and the Oak Glen Cottages (1874), later known as the Gally Cottages, to the east. Additional resorts near Ojai included Matilija Hot Springs, Lyon’s Springs and Wheeler’s Springs, established during the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. The Ojai Valley quickly gained a reputation as a resort community, attracting visitors who came to the valley for health reasons. They would also be inspired by the area’s natural beauty.



Oak Glen Cottages, circa 1887. (Bancroft Library)

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C. Industry

i. Agriculture. Farming was an attraction for many who settled in the Ojai Valley during the 1870s, when land became available with Bard's 1867-70 subdivisions. Several homesteaders also claimed public lands in the eastern portion of the Ojai Valley and along the foothills. By 1878 ranchers in the Ojai Valley were raising a variety of crops including the dry farming of wheat, barley and alfalfa and irrigated crops, including oranges, fruit trees and vineyards. A partial list of "Farmers on the Ojai," as recounted in the *Ventura Free Press* for May 11, 1878, included:

F.S.S. Buckman, has a quarter section of Government land on which is 20 acres of wheat, 20 acres of 5 year old orange trees, 4 of orchard, and 3 acres of strawberries, from which he gets 100 pounds of berries per day, and the yield will soon be double. He has 6,000 trees in his nursery.

Nick Walnut, has taken up a 160 acre claim and is clearing off the brush and timber preparatory to putting out a 20 acre vineyard. He has about 10 acres of wheat.

G.B. Horn also owns a tract of Government land, and has 12 acres of wheat, 2 of corn, 2 1/2 of beans, 3/4 acre of potatoes and a small orchard and 400 grapevines.

W.S. McKee, owns 75 acres and has 35 of it in wheat. His "Oak Glenn Cottage" has a wide reputation. Robert Ayers, owns a fine 304 acre farm, and has 175 acres of wheat, 25 of barley, and 30 head of hogs. Mr. Montgomery, owns a tract of 700 acres, and has a crop of 3 acres of wheat and 2 acres in orchard.

The first citrus planted in Ojai was undertaken by F. S. S. Buckman on his 160 acre ranch east of town in 1872. By 1894 enough citrus was being grown in the valley to form the Ojai Citrus Growers Association. Another crop which gained popularity among ranchers in the Ojai Valley during the 1880s was olives. Seymour Dalton Munger was supposedly the first rancher to plant olives on 40 acres on the eastern end of the valley. By 1892 a number of Ojai ranchers were growing the crop.

ii. Oil Industry. When Thomas Bard purchased Rancho Ojai in 1864 for Thomas Scott, it was with the idea of prospecting for oil in the area. The first well was drilled by Bard near the confluence of San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River, off of Creek Road. This well did not produce commercially, due to problems with the viscosity of the oil and the depth of drilling required. Another well was drilled on the north side of Sulphur Mountain in 1867. This well, referred to as "Ojai Number 6," is considered to be the first commercial oil well in California. Another well was drilled during the 1890s in the Upper Ojai on the Pirie Ranch. Union Oil eventually took over this well and shipped the oil to Santa Paula. The largest production of oil in the Sulphur Mountain area occurred primarily on the south side of the mountain range in the Santa Paula area.

D. Social and Cultural Life

i. Library. Early attempts at starting a library began during the early 1890s with the formation of a Library Committee which raised funds through candy sales and garden parties. In 1893 Sherman Thacher donated \$500 towards the establishment of a library in memory of his brother George Thacher, who had died shortly after his move to Ojai. Funds were raised from the community to construct the new 14 by 14 foot wooden

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board and batten-sided library building in 1893 on the north side of Ojai Avenue, adjacent to the other commercial buildings.

iii. Ojai Tennis Tournament. During the 1870s tennis came to the United States from Great Britain, first played on the East Coast as an upper-class sport. It was in the east that Sherman Thacher's brother William got his start in tennis while attending Yale, where he held the title of New England and intercollegiate doubles champion along with two other players. After visiting the valley several times, William Thacher relocated permanently in 1895, and that same year established the Ojai Valley Tennis Club.

The first tennis court in the Ojai Valley was a dirt court laid out at Sherman Thacher's Casa de Piedras School in 1892. The following year the first open tournament was held there, attracting six students and two teachers. A second dirt court was laid out in town on land near the Ojai Athletic Club, located on Ojai Avenue. The new tennis club was open to all residents and visitors and held its first tournament in 1896 when valley residents played Ventura. Each of the following years saw the tournament expand to include Santa Barbara players. (Thacher, 2000: 12-18)

E. Education

Public education in Nordhoff began with the first one-room brick school house built in 1874 on the north side of Matilija Street between Signal and John Montgomery's property. This school house was extensively altered into a two story wood-sided residence and is now a bed and breakfast inn. By the 1890s, enough growth had occurred in the town to necessitate a larger school. In 1895 a new two-story wood frame school with four rooms and assembly hall was built on the corner of Ojai Avenue and Montgomery Street.

Private schools established in the Ojai Valley were attracted by the temperate climate, proximity to the national forest, and the area's natural beauty. The first private school to open was at the eastern end of the valley in 1889 when Sherman Day Thacher took in students on his ranch. Born circa 1862 in New Haven, Connecticut, Thatcher graduated from Yale University where his father was a Latin professor. Following graduation, he worked for a business in New York for a year and then decided to attend law school at Yale. Upon completion, he took a job in a Kansas City, Missouri law firm for a brief time in 1887, and found that the practice of law was not to his liking. During this period he supplemented his income with tutoring. Thatcher returned to New Haven and in September 1887 accompanied his ailing brother George to California to live with their brother, Edward, who had purchased a citrus ranch in the Ojai Valley.

Sherman Thacher was immediately enamored with the Ojai Valley. Finding fruit ranching more appealing than the law, he purchased a homestead claim of 160 acres adjacent to his brother Edward's property, borrowing money for the purchase from his brother William. By January 1888 a three room frame house was built on his ranch and an olive orchard planted. In June 1889 Thacher received a letter from an old family friend asking him to tutor his nephew for a year of outdoor life combined with college prep classes. Thus Sherman Thacher began what would be the start of a private boy's prep school at his ranch, which he called Casa de Piedra. Each year brought more students and eventually Thacher hired teachers, cooks and helpers, and constructed classrooms and dormitories.

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F. Religion and Spirituality

As with every new community, churches were among the first buildings constructed in a new town. Nordhoff's first congregation was the Presbyterian Church organized in 1877, although it was not until 1883 that the church building was constructed east of town. It was moved to Ojai Avenue and Montgomery Street in 1900 where it joined with the Congregational Church which had been established in 1888.

G. Architecture

The architectural styles present in the Ojai Valley reflect both the changing tastes and the increasing affluence of its residents, as well as technological innovations and transportation improvements.

The architectural styles in the area from the 1870s through the end of the 19th century commonly include Italianate, Stick-Eastlake, Queen Anne Victorian, and the many variants of the Folk Victorian styles. During the pre-railroad era, for the most part these buildings were designed not by architects but by their builders or owners, and constructed of materials which could be obtained locally.



Fox House, 601 Pope Lane. An example of the Italianate mode of the Victorian style probably constructed circa 1885. (San Buenaventura Research Associates)

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