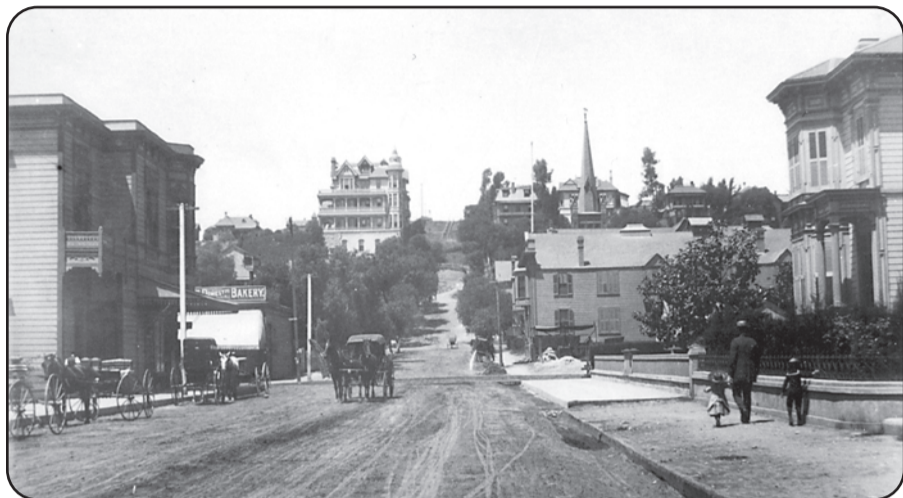


History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Hynda Rudd
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An unpaved Third Street, looking west past houses to the Crocker Mansion atop Bunker Hill in the distance. Horse-drawn vehicles are on the street. A bakery is at left and the steeple of the First Congregational Church at right.

Historical Bunker Hill

Here's a look at the origins of one of downtown's best known areas. Part one covers 1867-1949.

Hello dear readers, please welcome this month's guest columnist – a friend of mine, the architectural historian and writer Nathan Marsak. I really enjoyed reading his treatises on Bunker Hill, and I know you will, too!
– Hynda

Story by Nathan Marsak; Photos courtesy the Security Pacific National Bank and Times-Herald Collections, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Christina Rice, acting Sr. Librarian.

Bunker Hill: known to every Angeleno for its temples of finance and corporate plazas, and revealed to every newcomer by the forest of skyscrapers rising from its backbone. Our high-rise cityscape may be LA's immediate identifier, but once upon a time, Bunker Hill was a nest of gabled gothic, replete with grand mansions... though with dark alleyways. Lofty aspirations commingled with dark desperation, as our palaces of the social elite cast long shadows—but this balance between sunshine and *noir* was no match for the City, which erased Bunker Hill and its 11,000 inhabitants, as if wiping a stain from a countertop.

It began with a dusty, chaparral-covered hill. The native peoples paid it no mind. The Spaniard and subsequent Mexican overlords had no use for the looming scrub, and the Americans after 1848 grazed a few sheep and mined the clay pits on its eastern flank for the new fiery brick kilns. The hill had always just been a boundary between *La Placita* (the Plaza, where LA was born) and the howling wilderness beyond. The hill was subdivided by George Hansen, Stephen H. Mott, and Prudent Beaudry, though it is Beaudry who stands out from the pack. Beaudry cofounded the City Water Company (now our DWP) in 1869 to pump water up to the hill; in 1874 he christened the topmost thoroughfare Bunker Hill Avenue (after the upcoming American centennial), forever giving the hill its name. Immediately thereafter, Beaudry was elected mayor of Los Angeles, and continued to develop Bunker Hill.

In short order, the well-to-do turned their eye to Bunker Hill. The 1880s saw the vogue for Carpenter Gothic turn to Eastlake and to the grandest of all flamboyant architectural styles, Queen Anne. Phineas Banning's docks in Wilmington imported not just endless Oregon pine, but also the carpenters and turners and masons to construct Victorian Los Angeles. Bunker Hill's elaborate corner towers, wide-spindled veran-



Mayor Prudent Beaudry, in an undated photo.

das, ornate balconies, intricate gables set into steeply pitched roofs, variegated shingles, and panoramas of sparkling stained glass are the stuff of legend.

The well-to-do were enticed to Bunker Hill by its airy location and views to the sea. The legendary architectural team of Samuel and Joseph Cather Newsom designed the vast Bradbury Mansion (a masterpiece of American Renaissance architecture, and arguably their best building) at Court and Hill in 1887, as well as the tall, ornate shingle-style home of Rev. Edward T. Hildreth at Fourth and Hope in 1889. Sen. Leonard Rose hired Curlett & Eisen to design his 1888 gem atop Fourth and Grand. The Brunson, the Crocker, the Bryan, and Brousseau mansions were masterpieces of craft and ingenuity.

It wasn't all the wealthy on the Hill, though. Judge Robert Widney, cofounder of USC, worked tirelessly to help common folk gain homes on the Hill. Widney also started the first horse-drawn streetcar in Los Angeles (granted, because he wanted a quick way to his home on Bunker Hill to have lunch each day). Bunker Hill was ground zero for all early L.A. transportation experiments: In 1885 cable cars ran across Bunker Hill up Second Street, and by 1886 they ran up Temple. Immediately after the Third Street tunnel opened in March 1901, the funicular Angels Flight ascended Third, from Hill to Olive, in January 1902. Another funicular, Court Flight, which ran from Hill Street up to Court Street, opened in 1905.

Bunker Hill's heyday as fashionable residential district for the upper class declined as newer, less dense, more modern developments sprouted up to the west as Los Angeles began its inexorable march to the sea. Great homes, like the Brousseau and the Hildreth, were divided up into apartments and adorned with a jumble of fire escapes. Other structures were less fortunate: The Crocker was felled in 1908, replaced by an Elks Lodge; in 1917, after years as a boarding house, the Brunson was replaced by an automobile service garage; the Bradbury was demolished in 1929, the Rose, in 1937. But by and large, apartment-hotels symbolized the new era: Elden Bryan pulled down his home in 1904 to erect a hotel. Mira

Hershey had her own grand home moved to another spot on the hill and hired celebrated architects Neher & Skilling to turn it into apartments.

Apartment houses sprouted up everywhere. Granted, these apartment buildings were first-rate, and by top names, e.g. the Moore Cliff by Dennis & Farwell, J.C. Newsom's Erms Apartments, and the Fremont Hotel by John C. Austin. Even so, apartment complexes, plus shoe repair, cleaners, drug stores, indeed altered the demography of the Hill. There were a mere few commercial buildings on Bunker Hill at the turn of the century, but by 1914, 136 had been added to the landscape. As pioneers vacated west to Westlake and Hollywood, single men, the working poor, and bohemians moved in. Photographer Margrethe Mather lived in the carriage house behind the Hildreth, and famed astrologer/mystic Max Heindel moved in with Augusta Foss (she, a founder of the Rosicrucian Fellowship) on Bunker Hill Avenue. These kinds of characters contributed to the formation of Jack Webb, who grew up in the heart of the hill in the 1920s



Circa 1890: The exterior of the mansion owned by businessman Leonard John Rose, on the southeast corner of Grand Avenue and Fourth Street. The lavish home, completed in 1888, was designed by Curlett & Eisen and cost approximately \$50,000 to build.

real neighborhood. It's true, Bunker Hill harbored the marginalized element. The media focused upon this rather than the fact that, in the 1940s, the vast majority of Bunker Hill's residents were the aged lower-middle class. All this notwithstanding, it was the fact that City tax revenue from Bunker Hill was less

than the estimated cost for fire, police, and health services that ultimately doomed a community to extinction. Come 1948, the L.A. City Council formed the Community Redevelopment Agency. In 1949, Harry Truman signed the Housing Act, which tossed Federal monies at L.A. to help condemn private property through eminent domain. The 1950s are the tale of the strangulation and death of Bunker Hill before she was wiped clean and born anew in the 1960s... a tale to be told in part 2, coming next.



Court Flight Cable Railway, 1920. The Court Flight cable railway, at Broadway and Second. It was very similar to the better-known Angels Flight, one block away at Broadway and Third. At the top of Court Flight was the "One Big Look" tower, advertised as the highest point in the downtown area. Next door, at 205 S. Broadway, the Hotel Broadway had just opened.

and 30s. Bunker Hill became a world in and of itself: The Second Street tunnel and the Pacific Electric Red Cars bored under the hill in the mid-1920s, further isolating it from the city below.

Calls to remove the Hill in its entirety began in the late 1920s. The media grew fascinated with the Hill and its role as an obstacle to urban expansion. Through the 1930s and '40s, civic and public calls to destroy the Hill served as a destabilizing influence. Eventually, it became a renter's community, but it was a community nonetheless: Careful study of photographs, documentary film, and interviews with residents from the time reveal it to have been not a cesspool of vice, but a

About the Author



Architectural historian Nathan Marsak is author of the book *Los Angeles Neon*, a contributor to the 1947 project, *OnBunkerHill* and *InSROLand* blogs, and history columnist for *DTLAX* magazine. Though a Louisiana oil and gas man by trade, he makes Highland Park his home.