Cultivating California

Founding Families of the San Marino Ranch

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Library, West Hall

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
Before California became the 31st state of the union in 1850, the population of Los Angeles was around 50,000. The Californios—the term used for Spanish-speaking people born in the region before statehood—dictated the social and economic climate of Southern California. Single families owned enormous tracts of land and maintained many of the mission-era traditions. This was the Los Angeles that Benjamin Davis Wilson (1811–1878) discovered when he relocated in 1846 to the emerging city from his ranch in Riverside with his Californio wife and two small children. He was looking to capitalize on the business opportunities opening up for Americans in the new territory. Wilson was highly respected by the Californios and the Americans, both for his fairness and his ability to read and speak English and Spanish. Often referred to as “Don Benito,” Wilson was elected the second mayor of the city in 1851.

With more than 75 historical items (including rare family photographs, letters, legal documents, maps, and artifacts) drawn from The Huntington’s collections and those of the San Marino Historical Society and the Pasadena Museum of History, “Cultivating California: Founding Families of the San Marino Ranch” tells the story of the Wilson, Shorb, and Patton families, who helped transform a region of one-time Spanish land grants into an agricultural paradise between the years 1854 and 1904.
But within a few years, the city was no longer a safe place for a young family. Scores of young men from the East had come west to find their fortune in the gold fields of Northern California, but few had succeeded and many traveled south. Drinking and fighting were common, as was vigilante justice. Following the death of his wife in 1849, Wilson married American-born Margaret Hereford, who had lost her husband, and they moved their combined family of five out of the city to a tract of land known as the Huerta de Cuati (possibly referring to the Spanish word for raccoon, “coati”). A beautiful property originally owned by the Mission San Gabriel, Cuati was the jewel of the San Gabriel Valley, with bountiful fruit trees, acreage primed for more production, and a large lake. It was also only 10 miles away from Los Angeles, allowing Wilson to maintain his business and political connections.

Wilson expanded Huerta de Cuati and renamed it Lake Vineyard. In addition to growing and selling citrus, he capitalized on the existing rows of Mission grapes and started producing wine under the Lake Vineyard label. Land sales were becoming increasingly important to Shorb’s bottom line. During this time, he also built a large home and christened the property San Marino, after his family’s plantation in Maryland.

Even as he made two major additions to his home, hosted large social gatherings, and entertained high-profile houseguests, Shorb fell deeper into debt. In an attempt to find a profitable business venture, Shorb expanded his reach in the 1880s and 1890s. He invested in land and wineries in Arizona; tried to start a must (grape pressing) factory in Northern California; built the San Gabriel Wine Co. with a large, new winery building; dabbled in the creation and selling of electricity; and started the San Gabriel Valley Rapid Transit Co., a small, local railway. He also kept politically active and was elected treasurer of Los Angeles County in 1892.

Shorb’s health was in steep decline by this time. As early as 1884, his brother, a physician in San Francisco, pleaded with him to take better care of himself, “I tell you that you ought to do thus and so for the restoration of your health, which you admit is in a precarious state and your...”
answer strait of adventitious surroundings is simply “I can’t.” This letter was written in the same year that Sue Shorb’s youngest sister, Ruth, married George S. Patton (1856–1927), a well-respected attorney in Los Angeles. In 1888, Patton received similar advice: he was ordered by his doctor to “take a rest,” and so he moved his family, including son George Jr. and daughter Annie, out of Los Angeles to Lake Vineyard, joining Wilson’s widow, Margaret, and Ruth’s unmarried sister, Annie.

**GEORGE S. PATTON AND LAKE VINEYARD**

As Shorb’s health continued to deteriorate, and Patton’s health improved with his distance from the city, Patton assisted Shorb with various businesses around the San Gabriel Valley, including the Alhambra Tract and the San Gabriel Wine Co. In 1896, after months of confinement, Shorb died at home. He was survived by Sue and nine children, ranging in age from 8 to 28.

Shorb also left behind hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt to various banks, all written with Sue’s personal property as security. The largest amount was owed to Farmers and Merchants Bank, owned and managed by Isaias Hellman. Though Patton worked with Sue and Hellman to attempt to sell the property and pay off the multiple mortgages, he was unsuccessful. In 1899, Farmers and Merchants Bank took Sue and her children to court. Patton was appointed as receiver for the property, managing the existing groves and vines while the contentious and complicated case was heard.

**HENRY E. HUNTINGTON AND SAN MARINO**

When the case was decided for the plaintiff and San Marino was sold to Farmers and Merchants Bank at public auction, Sue Shorb relocated to San Francisco. Patton continued to manage the property after its purchase by the bank. When Henry E. Huntington and his business partners purchased the property in 1903 Patton wrote a lengthy letter to Huntington describing its needs, including details regarding the water, soil, and fields. Huntington was clearly impressed with Patton and hired him as general manager of the Los Angeles Land Co. and the Huntington Land and Improvement Co., both headed by Huntington. Patton spent quite a bit of time at San Marino and was responsible for locating and hiring William Hertrich, the superintendent who worked so closely with Huntington in the creation of his gardens and estate.

By the time Huntington built his house on the San Marino property in 1911, the population of the Los Angeles county had expanded to more than 500,000. The city itself was a growing urban center, with nearby towns connected by rail lines. The old industries of cattle ranching and agriculture were being replaced by tourism, entertainment, and the beginnings of manufacturing. Wilson, Shorb, and Patton—who lived at Lake Vineyard until his death in 1927—were closely involved in this modernization and growth. Without Wilson, the port of Long Beach and Los Angeles would never have received recognition or funding from the state and federal government. Shorb was instrumental in promoting immigration into California and expanded the population of the San Gabriel Valley by bringing public transit to his subdivided lots. Patton’s management of the San Marino ranch and his work with Henry Huntington’s property companies facilitated the expansion the Pacific Electric Railway, making way for the suburban lifestyle for which Southern California is famous to this day.

Jennifer Allan Goldman, Curator, Manuscripts and Institutional Archivist

“Cultivating California: Founding Families of the San Marino Ranch” is supported in memory of James De Barth Shorb by Barbara Vucanovich, Grant and Susan Anderson, Reynolds and Rebecca Cafferata, and Treat and Patricia Cafferata. This exhibition is also made possible by the Robert F. D’buru Exhibition Endowment.

**COVER:** Members of the Shorb family, including James De Barth, Shorb and Maria de Jesus “Sue” Shorb on the east porch of Shorb house, ca. 1882.

**BACK COVER:** B. D. Wilson & Co. Burgundy label, ca. 1868.

Ynez Shorb and Stephen S. White wedding party, 1894.
Preschool Series: One Hundred Years Ago  
Feb. 6, 13, 20 & 27 (Wednesdays) 10 a.m.–noon  
Join the centennial celebration as the class explores what life was like growing up a century ago. Led by instructor Laura Moede, each class will feature art projects, stories, and more. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Ages 3–4. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Taste of Art: Cultivating California  
March 3 (Sunday) 9 a.m–12:30 p.m.  
Before The Huntington was a lavish home and museum it was an agricultural ranch run by some of the who’s-who of Los Angeles. Join chef and art educator Maite Gomez-Rejón and celebrate the City of San Marino’s centennial by viewing the exhibition and preparing a seasonal California meal. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Talk and Book Signing  
San Marino: A Centennial History  
March 5 (Tuesday) 7:30 p.m.  
Elizabeth Pomeroy, author of San Marino: A Centennial History, will give a lecture about the first 100 years of the city that Henry Huntington helped found and its transition from agricultural ranchland to affluent residential community. A book signing will follow the program. Free; no reservations required. Friends’ Hall

Curator Tour: Founding Families  
March 13 (Wednesday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.  
Join curator Jennifer Allan Goldman for a private tour of the exhibition and gain insights into the early years of The Huntington property through the papers and photographs of the Wilson, Shorb, and Patton families drawn from The Huntington’s collections. Members: $15. Non Members: $20. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Wine Class and Lecture: Cultivating California  
March 20 (Wednesday) 5–7:30 p.m.  
Join Jennifer Allan Goldman, curator of the exhibition, as she discusses the early years of The Huntington, which was once a rural agricultural property and a prominent vineyard. Following the lecture, participants will taste California wines with Brad Owen from the Art Institute of California. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Children’s Workshop: Founding Families Cooking Class  
April 14 (Sunday) 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.  
How did San Marino get its name? And who lived here before Mr. Huntington? Step back in time as we learn the history of The Huntington with chef Ernest Miller. Participants will explore the exhibition before cooking up some tasty treats inspired by the ranch. Ages 7–12. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Members: $30. Non-Members: $35. Registration: 626-405-2128.