

Henry E. Huntington



HENRY EDWARDS HUNTINGTON WAS BORN in 1850 in Oneonta, N. Y. At the age of 21 he joined the railroad enterprises of his uncle, Collis P. Huntington, in an association that was to shape the course of his life. His first job in the railroad business was managing a sawmill near St. Albans, W. Va., which supplied cross-ties and bridges for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

In 1873 Henry married Mary Alice Prentice, and the couple settled into a small home in St. Albans. Their only son, Howard, was born in 1876, followed by daughters Clara Leonora in 1878, Elizabeth in 1880, and Marian Prentice in 1883.

In 1892, Huntington moved his family to San Francisco, where he shared with his uncle the management of the Southern Pacific Company, a holding company for the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific railroads. (He would eventually attain the post of vice president.) In the spring of that year, he visited Southern California and was entertained at the ranch of James de Barth Shorb and his wife Maria, daughter of Benjamin D. (“Don Benito”) Wilson, the great landowner and first mayor of Los Angeles. The Shorb ranch was named San Marino in memory of Shorb’s boyhood home in Maryland; his grandfather, it is said, had named his home after the tiny republic in Italy, which had the same acreage as the Maryland property.

Henry Huntington was very impressed with the Shorb ranch and the beauty of the San Gabriel Valley. He was also intrigued by the business possibilities offered by Southern California. The impression stayed in his mind. Several years after Huntington’s visit, Shorb died and the bank foreclosed on the mortgage of the ranch. In 1902, Huntington moved to Los Angeles, and in 1903 he purchased the property. His family remained behind in San Francisco, and his first marriage ended in divorce a few years later.

Huntington’s new neighbor to the west on the Lake Vineyard Ranch was George S. Patton Sr., another son-in-law of Don Benito Wilson and father of the famous World War II general. It is said that the small canyon between the two properties was used as the stake in the card games played by the two friends, and that this piece of land changed hands as often as did their luck at cards.

Huntington had great faith in the potential of Southern California to become a major commercial and cultural center, and he began immediately to put his plans into effect to develop the area. His endeavors included consolidating and extending the city’s numerous electric street railway lines into two companies, which rapidly expanded throughout the region. The Los Angeles Railway operated within the city limits, while the Pacific Electric Railway’s “Big Red Cars” provided efficient transportation in both urban and rural areas throughout greater Los Angeles. Much of the subsequent growth of the city and surrounding counties can be attributed to the creation of this interurban railway, which eventually stretched from Newport Beach to San Fernando, and from the Pacific Ocean to Redlands.

Meanwhile, Huntington was also actively engaged in developing land and providing utilities for the expanding population of Southern California. He organized a series of private companies to provide electricity, gas, and water at a time before municipalities were doing so. At one time, he controlled a total of 23 companies in Southern California, including a number of gas and electric companies such as the Pacific Light and Power Co. and Alhambra Water Co.

In 1910, at the age of 60, Huntington sold much of his interest in the Pacific Electric Co. and began to devote most of his time and attention to books—his lifelong passion—and to the growing collection that formed the nucleus of one of the greatest research libraries in the world. In the beginning the books were kept in New York; but as soon as the library building was completed on the property in 1921, railroad cars full of books began to arrive in San Marino, where they were to be permanently housed.

While his book collection was growing, Huntington was also developing an interest in art, influenced in large part by Arabella Huntington, widow of his uncle Collis. Arabella was one of the wealthiest women in America and one of the most important art collectors of her generation. Henry and Arabella eventually married in 1913, when they were both in their early 60s, and together they amassed a world-class collection of British and French art.

The Huntington residence, which now is home to the European art collection, was built in 1911 by the Pasadena architecture firm Hunt and Grey. This handsome Beaux-Arts mansion, overlooking the San Gabriel Valley, was first occupied by the Huntingtons in 1914. Meanwhile, the San Marino Ranch was being transformed from a working ranch with commercial crops of citrus, peaches, nuts, grain, and avocados to a grand estate that showcased a growing collection of diverse botanical specimens. A young landscape gardener named William Hertrich was responsible for creating many of the gardens that still exist today, beginning with the Lily Ponds, the Palm Garden, and the desert collection, and followed shortly afterward by the North Vista, the Rose Garden, and the Japanese Garden.

Henry Huntington made careful plans for the use of his collections after his death. In 1919 he and Arabella signed a deed of trust transferring their San Marino property and collections to a nonprofit trust and establishing a research institution to serve scholars. The five original trustees were George S. Patton Sr.; astronomer George Ellery Hale; Henry's son, Howard E. Huntington; Arabella's son, Archer M. Huntington; and attorney William E. Dunn.

Arabella Huntington died in New York on Sept. 14, 1924, and Henry died nearly three years later—on May 23, 1927. Both are interred at The Huntington in the mausoleum designed by John Russell Pope, who later designed the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. The institution opened to the public in 1928.

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