

“THE ATLANTIC CITY OF THE PACIFIC COAST”

The legacy of Robert Northam can still be seen today in the southern California communities he helped found, including La Mirada, La Habra, and Whittier. Northam’s spirit of boosterism was also shared by Henry Huntington’s Huntington Beach Company, who in the early 1900’s looked to develop Northam’s former ranch into a booming resort.

However, even with the extension of rail service along the coast, Huntington Beach experienced only modest expansion. With the discovery of oil in 1919, though, Huntington Beach quickly developed into a boom town, eventually growing into one of the state’s largest oil fields. Industrial success also led to commercial and residential growth on a massive scale, and today Huntington Beach has grown into the city of the original founders’ dreams.

Through it all, the Northam Ranch House remained at the center of the city’s transformation. The mansion served as a headquarters for the Huntington Beach Company, and as a private residence for succeeding generations of company managers. Over the course of the century, the Northam Ranch House came to symbolize the Huntington Beach Company.



A view of the port cochere following the fire. The blaze left the mansion a complete ruin.

A LEGACY LOST

By the turn of the millennium, the open expanses of ranch land surrounding Robert Northam’s mansion had long been replaced by modern commercial and residential developments. The home itself had been abandoned several years earlier, and the future of the historic site lay in doubt.

Tragically, the night of March 22, 2000 saw the Northam Ranch House destroyed in an intense blaze that left the mansion in ruins.

Following the fire, developers, city officials and a local architecture firm collaborated in salvage operations. Several historically significant artifacts were salvaged from the rubble, while measured drawings were prepared using the surviving elements of the mansion’s foundation. Finally, a historic marker was constructed using brick from the original foundation of the Northam Ranch House.

Do Not Take From This Room
FOR REFERENCE

Northam Ranch House



For almost a century, the Northam Ranch House stood watch as a small seaside town grew into a beautiful city. Today, the mansion is gone, but the Northam Ranch House has left an indelible mark on the history of Huntington Beach.

REFERENCE
PAMPHLET FILE
HUNTINGTON BEACH - HISTORY
FEBRUARY 10, 2004



Above, a view of Huntington Beach, circa 1970. The vacant lot at center is the site of the present-day civic center, and the Northam mansion is located in the wooded area just above.



Detail of the front porch, looking north. The tree visible at the upper right was part of the Huntington Beach Company's effort during the early 1900's to beautify the area and attract residents to the fledgling community.

The House That Northam Built

Originally part of a Spanish rancho, the area comprising present-day Huntington Beach remained largely a rural backwater until the last decade of the nineteenth century. However, with the draining of nearby swamps, and with plans laid for a coastal rail line, the region was ready for growth when Robert J. Northam arrived on the scene in the mid-1890's.

Known as "Diamond Bob" because of his expensive tastes, Northam's land dealings had made him one of the most powerful men in Southern California. In 1896, Northam purchased the final 1400 acres of the Rancho Las Bolsas, and soon developed his property into a bustling ranch.

In 1897, Northam used a mule team to haul an existing house in Buena Park across 12 rugged miles to his new ranch. Situated on a hillcrest, Northam's home provided a vista from which the land baron could observe the day-to-day operations of his ranch.

Northam made considerable additions to his home, possibly even moving a second house onto the site and adjoining it with the original structure. The final product of Northam's efforts was a single-story Victorian mansion, combining elements of the Queen Anne and Neoclassical styles. The mansion's two wings formed an L-shaped structure, with deep colonnaded porches ringing the interior of the ell, and forming a port cochere, or carriage porch, on the south side of the residence.



Detail of the port cochere, looking east. The port cochere, or carriage porch, allowed a horse-drawn vehicle or automobile to pass underneath.

Although accounts vary, Northam probably made the mansion his home from 1897 until about 1904. Water was obtained from a nearby well, and a two-story water tower stood on the north side of the residence. Northam also stumbled upon the oil pockets on his property, and piped natural gas in to light his home.

Northam made the mansion a headquarters for both his ranch and his land dealings, and used a flag to signal local traders that he was open for business. Beginning in 1901, Northam gradually sold off his property to the West Coast Land and Water Company, which was later absorbed by the Huntington Beach Company. The sale was completed in 1905, by which time Northam had moved to Los Angeles, where he died in 1912.