

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD: WHITLEY HEIGHTS

PRESERVING THE ADDRESS OF HOLLYWOOD'S EARLY ROYALTY

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp



Hollywood's chic enclave in its days as a burgeoning film capital was Whitley Heights, home to such stars as Carole Lombard and Charlie Chaplin. LEFT: In the 1920s developer Hobart J. Whitley innovatively sited the Mediterranean-style houses on hillside lots—no two were alike—and ensured that each had a view. BELOW: Whitley Heights was named Hollywood's first National Historic District in 1982; much of its character remains today.

Before Beverly Hills, and way before 90210, there was Whitley Heights. Located in the hills of Hollywood close to the silent-picture studios, Whitley Heights was the desirable address for the first film idols. During the teens and twenties stars like Rudolph Valentino, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin lived as neighbors, and the parties were legendary.

Nestled in hills covered in towering eucalyptus and pine, a few blocks north of Hollywood Boulevard between Highland Avenue and Cahuenga Boulevard, Whitley Heights has remained relatively unscathed. Although the tour buses that crawled the streets in the twenties with guides using megaphones to identify the homes of such celebrities as Wallace Reid, W. C. Fields and Marie Dressler have long since decamped for Beverly Hills and Bel-Air, many of the dis-



tinctive, if eccentric, houses exist as they did in Hollywood's nascent years.

It was during that era that Valentino built a honeymoon house for his designer wife, Natacha Rambova, on Wedgewood Place. (Housewives were said to pack their husbands off to

work early so they could be watering their gardens when he took his two mastiffs for their morning walk.) Nearby, a mansion called Topsy was home to a series of stars whose residency changed with their fortunes—Blanche Sweet, Francis X. Bushman, Eleanor

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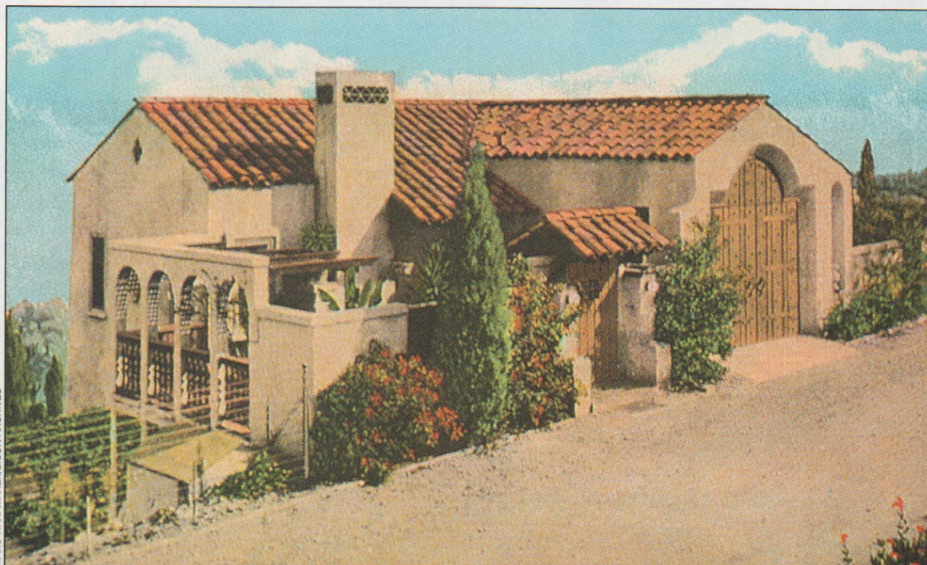
Boardman (until she married King Vidor), Tyrone Power and Hermione Gingold. Before his *Thin Man* fame, William Powell and his wife, Carole Lombard, lived in a Spanish-style house on Iris Circle, between Harold Lloyd's Mediterranean manse and a modest house of Charlie Chaplin's.

The dramatic and many-balconied house at 6809 Iris Circle belonged to Marie Dressler, who had costarred with Chaplin in the 1914 *Tillie's Punc-*

tured Romance. Dressler, in her autobiography, remembered the view: "From my second-story veranda I could see acre upon acre of green California grass and bright-hued California flowers. I could watch whole regiments of royal palms march down white avenues. I lived on my little porch." In fact, Dressler so liked the area that she bought a second house, on Milner Road, and added a swimming pool, thought to be the first in Los Angeles.

Jean Harlow, who was Dressler's costar in *Dinner at Eight* (1933), is believed to have lived at 2015 Whitley Avenue. Around the corner, Eugene O'Brien, who often starred in silent movies opposite Norma Talmadge, entertained in lavish Hollywood style at 6691 Whitley Terrace until his death in 1966. This elegant house was also the former home of Richard Barthelmess, described by Lillian Gish as "the most beautiful man who ever went before a camera."

A hillside residence at 6672 Whitley Terrace belonged to Barbara La Marr, leading lady in the 1921 *Three Musketeers*, who was eulogized as being "too beautiful to live." After five unhappy marriages, she overdosed on heroin at the age of twenty-nine, one of Hollywood's first casualties. The more lighthearted Maurice Chevalier lived a few doors away; director Robert Vignola's house lay just beyond. Over the years, 6660 Whitley Terrace was home to actors Joseph Schildkraut, Rosalind Russell and Beulah Bondi, who owned it from 1941 to 1981. Next door was the house of Chester Morris, known for his film character Boston



Rudolph Valentino resided in Whitley Heights at the peak of his fame, moving away about a year before his death in 1926. ABOVE: A 1924 postcard depicted Villa Valentino, the home of the star and his wife, the designer Natacha Rambova. RIGHT: Valentino and his mastiff stand near his Avion Voisin roadster at the entrance of the house, which was demolished in the late 1940s to accommodate the Hollywood Freeway.



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Blackie. Carmen Miranda lived in a bungalow on Padre Terrace; for twenty-five years, before and after he played the television Topper, Leo G. Carroll resided on Grace Avenue.

How did this tiny neighborhood attract such a galaxy of stars? Location, location, location. An important but largely forgotten real estate developer, Hobart Johnstone Whitley, had recognized the significance of this burgeoning community: Besides the studios, the Electric Theater, the first in the country to show only moving pictures, had opened in 1907, and the nearby Hollywood Hotel was doing brisk business.

Whitley had come to southern California at the turn of the century with two decades of experience in developing towns such as Oklahoma City for the western railroads. In Los Angeles he acquired fifty thousand acres and helped create what would become the suburbs of Van Nuys, Re-



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While some construction in Whitley Heights was done by moonlighting film studio designers and carpenters, Whitley himself favored a select group of architect-builders. ABOVE: The lush foliage surrounding the Arthur Watson-designed house Gloria Swanson leased during the filming of *Sunset Boulevard*—including a secluded garden court—has been maintained. BELOW: Across the street is Villa Vallombrosa, designed in 1929 by Nathan Coleman as a three-story jumble of rooms and courtyards.



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seda, Lankershim (now Studio City), Sherman (now Sherman Oaks) and Owensmouth (now Canoga Park). Subdividing four hundred acres along the Cahuenga Pass earned him the moniker the Father of Hollywood; he was instrumental in laying out and naming streets, including changing the name of Prospect Avenue to Hollywood Boulevard. Whitley also planned and built the Los Angeles–Pacific Railway, which linked downtown Los Angeles with Van Nuys, opening up the San Fernando Valley for development.

In 1902 Whitley bought the hill that would become Whitley Heights, which he considered his crowning achievement. The ambitious real estate mogul remarked, "I look upon it as the culmination of a lifetime of development, and frankly, the most beautiful piece of property I ever developed." He modeled the community after hill towns that he had enjoyed while traveling in Italy: From the outset, he sought a Mediterranean atmosphere for the city's smart set, many of whom had European roots.

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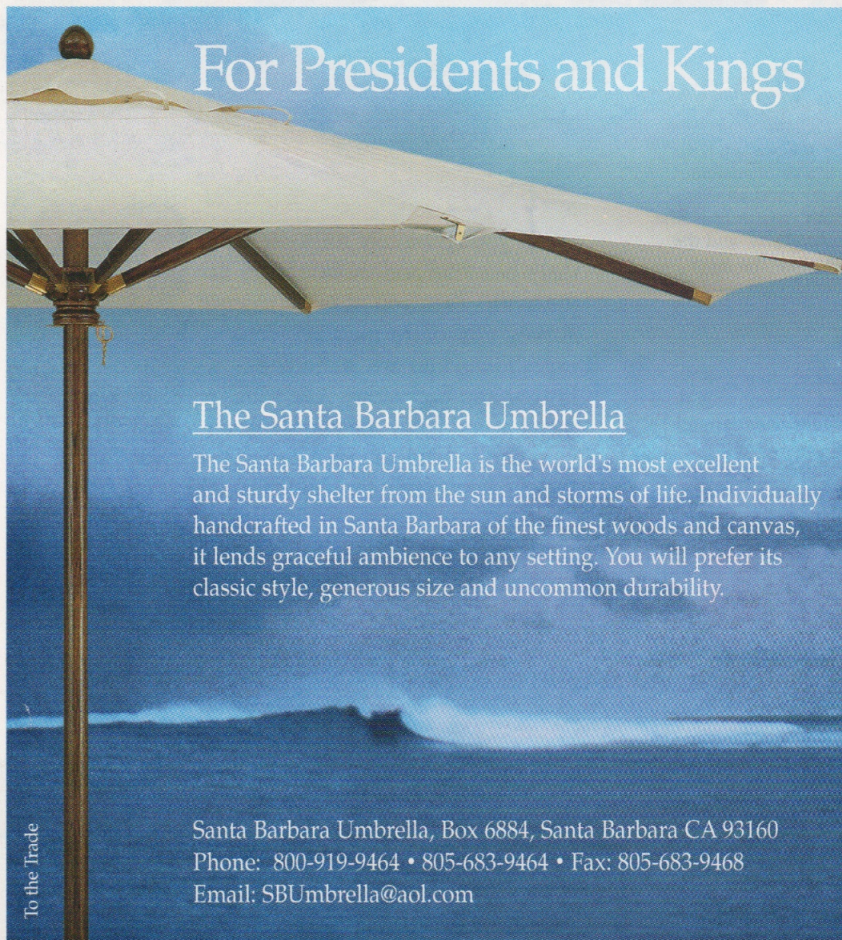
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Whitley was one of the first to take advantage of Los Angeles's markedly Mediterranean climate and landscape. He sent his architect Arthur Barnes to study the hillside architecture of Italy and Spain; Barnes returned to build numerous houses in Whitley Heights between 1918 and 1929. Other architects who built in the area included Nathan Coleman, Paul Laszlo, Kem Weber, Arthur Watson and Harry McAfee, who was later the head of set design at MGM.

Although Mediterranean architectural styles and hillside building are now common in Los Angeles, it was achieved with great panache first in Whitley Heights. Large, irregularly shaped lots were created along streets as winding and narrow as those of a Tuscan village. Barnes completed more than one hundred homes, most in creamy stucco with red-clay tile roofs, arched doorways, balconies, courtyards and ornate iron detailing. The two- or three-level houses were built downslope or upslope, depending on the house's hillside position—all were designed to take advantage of the remarkable vistas. Buyers were given a discount if they agreed to build promptly and in the Mediterranean style—thus the community was developed quickly and homogeneously. (Curiously, Whitley's house, a Neo-classical Palladian villa with formal gardens, departs from the standard.)

Whitley Heights was the site of utilitarian innovations as well. Power and telephone lines were laid underground to preserve the views. The spiraling streets were linked by six hillside stairways that continue to serve pedestrians. Heavy iron posts connected by chains, which still line the streets, were installed to prevent automobiles from careering off the steep inclines. To this day, the original gas streetlamps emit a warm, diffuse light.

Los Angeles has an unenviable reputation for sacrificing its architectural history to commercial development, and the Hollywood that now surrounds Whitley Heights is a bedlam

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of mini-malls and high rises. Yet more than one hundred houses in Whitley Heights have remained much as they were in the Roaring Twenties.

Several historic homes are clustered together on Watsonia Terrace, which was named after its architect-builder. While making her comeback film, *Sunset Boulevard*, Gloria Swanson lived at 2058 Watsonia Terrace; in the thirties William Faulkner worked in the studio of the same house. One of the best-preserved buildings in Whitley Heights is the Venetian-style Villa Vallombrosa at 2074 Watsonia Terrace, designed by Coleman. It was home to actress Janet Gaynor and costume designer Adrian. Mercedes de Acosta Reynal, purported lover of Greta Garbo, had dinner at the Villa with Adrian and Garbo during the filming of *Mata Hari*, on which they both worked. She described it as "more like a stage set than a residence... with oval doors and all sorts of balconies, which made it seem romantic and theatrical, but I felt it was as unreal as cardboard.... One evening a large stone rolled down the mountain, broke through the wall of the house, and calmly sat itself down in the living room

the only one in the neighborhood.

The Whitley Heights Civic Association, which was founded in 1923, is the oldest continuing organization of its kind in Los Angeles, formed to resist efforts at redevelopment and modernization. But the area has not been immune to change. In 1948 The Hill, as it is known, was cut in two by the Hollywood Freeway. Over the protests of Hollywood residents, the former house of Valentino was demolished along with forty others, including Chaplin's. During the sixties the old Bushman estate burned down and Bette Davis's house was razed to make room for a Hollywood museum that was never built. (It is now part of a parking lot for the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, a clapboard barn where Cecil B. DeMille made the first feature-length Hollywood movie, *The Squaw Man*, in 1913, and which today houses a collection of silent-movie memorabilia.)

Threatened with further destruction, the Whitley Heights residents mobilized to draw national attention to the district. Because of their efforts, in 1982 Whitley Heights was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was designated a

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with the other guests. This was the kind of thing that could only happen in Hollywood."

The Villa was later rented by the flamboyant photographer Baron Adolph de Meyer, who scandalized even his bohemian neighbors when he dyed his hair blue. At different times it was leased by the English Surrealist Edward James, writer Ben Hecht and conductor Leonard Bernstein. It is now owned by designer Annie Kelly and photographer Tim Street-Porter, who, in light of the house's pedigree, agreed to have it designated a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument,

Historic Preservation Overlay Zone in 1992, which means that no exterior alterations can be made without being approved by an architectural review board.

As a result, the pastel-colored houses with their tiled fountains and courtyards of potted oranges and bougainvillea will continue to look much as they did when Valentino lived there. Indeed, you can almost picture him speeding up the hill in his sleek red-leathered Avion Voisin, waving gaily to Bushman as his neighbor, driving a lavender Rolls-Royce, cruises tipsily home. □

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