

ANTHROPOLOGY 3 - ARCHEOLOGY, Excerpts from ORANGE COUNTY ADOBES  
By C. E. Roberts, Works Progress Administration - Historical Research Project #3105  
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Prologue

Orange County Adobes is a misnomer, to be sure: when counties came in, adobes went out. Nevertheless, here was once an "adobe country" and within the confines of this comparatively small county the Franciscans and the Indians built a fine, extensive Mission with adobe as its principle ingredient. Also stretching across the county were some of the most famous ranchos of California, with some very interesting rancho adobes overlooking the lower Santa Ana Canyon and Plain.

What true Californio has not heard of the big Bernardo Yorba Ranch Adobe?

Yes, yes, of course: but then come the embarrassing questions. How much do they know about it? And do they know that there were many other adobes? What can they tell us of the Peralta Adobes, or of the ranch buildings in this area of the Avilas, Serranos, Sepulvedas, Nietos, Ontiveras and others? How many Orange County people have visited the fine old Mission at San Juan Capistrano and who, of such visitors, have really noted the construction, the site and its situation in the little valley and the adaptation of the buildings for purposes the Franciscan Fathers had in mind.

In California, two streams of civilization met; one from the Spanish south and another from the Anglo-Saxon north. The stream of Spanish pioneers arrived in California with decided adobe traditions. At that time, 1769, they were characterized as great builders with magnificent stone edifices to their credit throughout Spanish America. No less important, though less imposing, were their adobe constructions principally because such furnished shelter and places for safe storage of food. The Northern Saxon stream, by contract, ran through forests and thus the early American arrivals were wood choppers who never learned to appreciate the adaptability of the adobe to this climate. They supplanted the adobe with lumber dwellings, so that the period between the advent of the Spanish and the coming of the Americans was the true adobe era in California.

Ignoring the scores of lesser and temporary adobes that clustered about the big houses we may say that the Californios utilized three types of adobe dwellings; the "long" type, with two or more rooms in a row; the "ell" (L) type, with rooms at right angles: and the "winged-court" type with wings extending from the rear of each end of the main part with patio between.

How this adobe construction was developed by the Spanish-Mexican residents of what is now Orange County is the chief theme of this study. It is an attempt to give as much information as is possible about the constructions, distribution, date and occupancy of every important adobe building in this field. Very little is known about many of them, while concerning others, the information is more complete.

## INTRODUCTION - General Characteristics of Orange County Adobes

Where the foothills meet the coastal plain of Southern California; there the early Spanish Padres and settlers usually located their Adobe structures. This was particularly true in the area that now comprises Orange County. Moreover, they sought out streams of running water and utilized first, in this area, the San Juan River and the Rio Santa Ana. These gave them water for domestic use, for the cattle that pastured the hills and for the thirsty crops that they planted on the neighboring plain. On the tiny San Juan River, the Padres established, in 1776, the San Juan Capistrano Mission, which in a short time became a huge pile of Adobe dwellings, store houses and enclosures. The first settlement on the Santa Ana River was made about 1810, at the present site of Olive, and from there habitations were built up and down both sides of the river.

The earliest land grant in Orange County was that of the "Santiago de Santa Ana", lying along the Southeast side of the river and granted to José Antonio Yorba and Juan Pablo Peralta in 1810. The two families, Yorba and Peralta, account for the majority of the Adobes along the Santa Ana River. One Yorba son, Bernardo, obtained a grant on the north side of the river as early as 1834, and other Yorba sons, with the Peraltas, spread over the Rancho "Santiago de Santa Ana".

The remaining land grants of the county date from 1834 to 1846 and dates of land grants approximate those of adobe origins, since the grantee was required to build on the land given to him. Some of the Ranchos granted were originally under the control of the Mission and had Adobe buildings thereon from that earlier tenure. So much for the general origin of Orange County Adobes.

As regards to the number, we must remember that the population of the Department of California was pitifully small through the Spanish-Mexican era, from which it follows that the houses and settlements were few and far between.

At the San Juan Capistrano Mission, there came to be some fifth rooms of Adobe pretty well joined together, besides great Adobe enclosures. Round about the mission were some forty Adobes, occupied by neophytes in Mission times. Later, the settlers, when the place was given the status of village, occupied some of these Adobes and built other and more imposing ones.

At old Santa Ana (now Olive) was the main cluster of house lots of the Yorbas, though they also had a group some four miles down the river and another north of the river. The Peraltas were grouped up the river at Peralta. Outside of these six groups there were perhaps never at any time more than forty-five Adobes in the whole of the Orange County area.

The Adobe era was short in California as compared with other semi-arid regions of the Southwest. California was the last Spanish outpost to be occupied and the Californians were quick to discard the Adobe when lumber could be obtained, about 1850. The Period of Mission expansion and prosperity extended through the years from 1800 to 1835, and it is reasonable to believe that there was much building activity at San Juan Capistrano before 1800 and some during the twenty years following. By 1835, the settlers were in control of government and wealth and they did the building thereafter. The attractive climate, the discovery of gold and the rich sea trade made for quick development and change in building customs as compared, for illustration, with the State of New Mexico or with Old Mexico, where the Adobe construction still persists.

The Adobe structure is typical of the Spanish colonies in America although, no doubt its lineage is from Mesopotamia and Egypt, through Moorish North Africa and Spain. It is especially adapted to

the hot, dry treeless regions of the south where it affords cool and durable shelter. Its construction requires very few timbers and demands labor rather than skill. California Adobes were products of Indian labor. The old adobes seem to have been built in groups, for mutual protection and for companionship.

An Adobe is a sun-burned, clay brick, varying in size from about 3"x10"x13" to about 5.5"x12"x20". In making them, the workmen selected a suitable clay which they wet down like mortar, mixing it with their feet. Some kind of vegetable matter, grass, rushes or weeds, was mixed with the clay to make the Adobe tough and durable. This mortar was packed into wooden forms of the size desired; which forms were set on a level plot of ground, suitable for drying the adobe. After lifting off the forms, the adobe was left to dry until it could be set up on edge or leaned, two together, for further drying. When sufficiently dry they were piled like brick, with some cover to keep them from weathering, or used at once in building. They were laid in a mortar of mud about an inch thick. The house then had to dry out before it was habitable.

The adobe house was usually a long, low structure with a minimum number of doors and windows, walls of a rough, natural white plaster and whitewash; roof of thatch or tile. The three or four rooms might be joined in the form of an ell or built all in a row. The dwelling was often joined to store rooms of the same general appearance and an adobe wall usually enclosed, with the rear of the house, a bit of garden or corral.

Of course, these were one and two room adobes grouped around the ranch house, for workmen and retainers. The main structure was, sometimes, an imposing edifice. Tile roofs were not uncommon, though asphalt was later used in Los Angeles, where the Brea pits were convenient. We cannot repeat too often that the builders used what was near at hand. Speaking of the better houses, I think we might say that they were fairly well-proportioned and showed a quite dignified attractiveness; but they seem to have lacked any artistic finish such as paint or other ornament; not all were even whitewashed.

Outside walls were from two to three or more feet in thickness, according to the building; partition walls were usually about 13" thick.

*Bancroft says in his California Pastoral, Page 401:*

"The Californians lived in the open air and in the invigorating sunshine. The low, one story dwelling of adobe-was reserved for sleep and storage. Notwithstanding the gleaming whitewashed walls and bright tile roof, it lacked allurements; was devoid of the romantic aspect. No pretty creepers, no infolding grove, no shady trees in close proximity, no ornamental garden fringe, to relieve the desolate bareness, which was increased by the absence of architectural decorations, and by the smallness and depth of the window opening, seldom glazed, and often barred."

Recent photos or paintings of surviving residence adobes often show trees and bushes about the house. In the old days, the adobe was usually built on a bare eminence and the area was kept bare for lookout and protection.

Some adobes were of two stories, enclosing a court with corridors and stairway in the court. Such an arrangement was ideal for this climate and made for privacy and outdoor life at the same time. Some of the larger establishments, like the San Juan Capistrano mission and the Bernardo Yorba home in the Santa Ana River Canyon, were immense piles of adobe made into dwellings, corrals,

shops, storehouses, and granaries.

Those old adobes did not have many windows or doors because carpenters, lumber, glass, and nails were hard to find in that day; besides every opening exposed and weakened the house wall; and why should there be more than one door and a peep window in a room anyway? The laborer's little adobe probably had a cowhide window and door. Sometimes there were bars and shutters as on the big house.

The floor was no problem at all, for the good Mother Earth furnished that, ready-made and free; but the roof was a real problem. It was difficult, in this region, to find suitable timbers for ridge poles and rafters. Willows, long, straight, and slender, were quite plentiful along the river bottoms, but they were neither strong nor durable enough for the big houses. Sycamore was plentiful on the upper plain and along with oak, was to be found in the hill canyons, but oak and sycamore were scarcely tall enough or straight enough for house timbers, except for the making of door and window frames. It was necessary to go to the distant high Sierras for the long slender pine timbers which the large buildings demanded, and they had to be dragged down the hillside or along the trail with rawhide *reatas* to which were hitched oxen or Indians. Later some timbers were brought in by ships.

When the ridge pole and rafters were in place, long slender willow and bamboo sheathing could be bound on with the native fibre cord, and over this sheathing was laid the thatch or the tile. In general construction, adobe builders followed somewhat the method already in use, and still used, in part of Mexico. They found no fan palm in California, for thatch, but used marsh grass and rushes. Later, roofs were of asphalt, that is, after boards were obtainable. Such roofs were nearly flat. The boards were covered with a coarse felt, and on that was poured a thin layer of crude asphalt as it was dug from pit or hillside. Asphalt deposits were found at Los Angeles, in Brea Canyon, and on Newport Bay. Asphalt was used even without lumber and in the following manner; a flat roof was made of rushes laid on poles and sticks. Over this was a layer of earth and over all a coat of asphalt. Sometimes seeds would sprout in the earthen part and there would be quite a growth on that roof. Especially this was the case in wet seasons. Then, too, on the hot summer days the asphalt would melt and drip without respect to things or persons below. Such was the roof construction on the humbler rural adobes where brea, or asphalt, was to be had. A still later custom of the Americans, who came to use the adobes, was to put on a gable roof, covered with long "shake" shingles obtained first at San Bernardino. Some of the older adobes, no doubt, had many roofs which were renewed as needed. The walls were practically indestructible, but if the roof was neglected, the walls soon melted away. Much neglect resulted from the frequent political and economic changes. For example, when California became a Mexican province, the mission buildings soon evidenced the neglect that culminated with secularization. When the Americans came in they soon introduced lumber buildings and the adobes were abandoned. Then, too, there were hard years, and fires that left the adobes roofless. After 1870, some isolated adobes were used as sheep camps or stables, but soon crumbled from neglect. The sheep herders were mostly bachelors who lived much in the open. Whatever buildings they found on the range were utilized to protect the lambs as much as themselves. The ranch owners did not trouble, under such an arrangement, to keep the adobes in repair. Thus, many adobes fell into ruins during the sheep era of the 1870's.

So it has come about that the present generation sees only an occasional specimen of the old California adobe and we have to trust the memory of old settlers to determine the location, construction, and occupancy of those that were here in the '70's. The Americans who bought the land found the adobe buildings a liability rather than an asset, and were finally obliged to tear them down. In some cases, appeals were made to save the old landmarks, but, to do so, funds were not

found.

Conflicting stories of the dimensions of certain adobes have arisen, no doubt, because some of the rooms, having disappeared, the later observer has seen only a part of the building as it was in its prime. Thus, some witnesses describe an old adobe from memory as having an all ground-plan and others are positive it was built in a straight line; also, the long, long row of rooms, and big corral of one observer is changed to a modest three room hut by another; probably because their observations were at different dates and parts of the adobe had been changed. Some stories of the great dimensions of certain old adobes are no doubt the result of growth by repetition in the telling. The two largest adobe establishments in Orange County were the ranch buildings of Don Bernardo Yorba in the Santa Ana Canyon and those of the mission at San Juan Capistrano.

*Horace Bell in his "Reminiscences of a Ranger" pages 198-199 has the following to say about adobe houses:*

"All of the old Spanish houses had one grand room, or sala, flanked by two other rooms, which added up the front of the houses. Two large wings extending back, with rooms generally used as dormitories, and a great, high wall in the rear forming an interior court, or square, with wide corridors or veranda on the three sides; both outside and inside generally paved with brick tiles; a good pine plank floor in the three front rooms, and, if not the same in the rear dormitories, the latter may have had brick-tile floors, like those of the verandas. Adobe walls were usually well whitewashed, with chair boards around the sala, good, substantial doors and windows with shutters generally painted green, as were also the cornice and columns supporting the verandas; the whole covered with a flat roof; and now you have a description of an old-style adobe habitation."

"This writer stands by the adobe house as the coolest house, the warmest house, the cheapest house, and the most earthquake proof house, (might as well try to shake down a haystack), and the best house for fandangos that ever existed in this old city."

The above applies to the better houses of the late Mexican period in Los Angeles. There must have been few houses in Orange County of a similar description, although rural houses were as a rule less pretentious. However, the house of Don Bernardo Yorba in Santa Ana Canyon and of Don Juan Avila in Capistrano were said to have been as grand as the best.

Fireplaces for heating were rare and small. Some dwellings had a small fireplace for cooking, but usually cooking and baking were done in an outdoor oven. There are several modern adobes in this region; structures that have been built of adobe for sentimental reasons rather than for economy. The clay mortar has been poured into forms as cement is handled and the wall plastered with a stucco finish. They have proven to be comfortable and attractive.

A word in recapitulation needs to be added in regard to the occupancy in general of the Orange County Adobes. The occupancy will be noted in describing the individual adobes but in general it may be said that they were built for and occupied by the families of those who received land grants. The Indian laborers continued to live in grass huts or very modest adobes that only occasionally survived the secularization of the Mission. Such substantial buildings as the Mission had, on their outlying ranchos, were occupied by soldier or neophyte majordomos, until such time as the corresponding lands passed to individuals by grant. Americans sometimes bought land with an adobe house on it. Usually they were not appreciated and so fell to ruin. However, some have seen long occupancy by American families. In the latter case they have been remodeled until they have

lost most of their typical Spanish atmosphere.

#### RANCHO CAÑADA DE LOS ALISOS - THE SERRANO ADOBES

The Serrano Adobes are in the vicinity of El Toro, along the north side of Aliso Creek, above the highway leading from Los Angeles to San Diego. **Don José Serrano** received a grant of over ten thousand acres in 1846 and there he and three of his sons built their adobe homes.

The site of the original Serrano Adobe is said to have been near the crossing of Aliso Creek by the 101 Highway. It has been located on the north side of the creek and east of the highway by members of the family. Nearby was the adobe of **Juan Avila**, a brother-in-law of **Don José**. This site is mentioned by **Benjamin Hayes** in his Diary.

Serrano Whiting Adobe. **Don José Serrano** later built on a bluff overlooking El Toro Creek and about one and one-fourth miles north of El Toro. This house was restored, 1932, by the Whiting heirs, so that it is an attractive cottage with a caretaker and is used week-ends by the Whiting family.

Mr. **Stanley Goode** of Santa Ana deserves much praise for preserving this adobe until the owners came to appreciate it and make the expenditures necessary for its restoration.

**El Señor Serrano** must have built this home after 1856, because Judge Hayes in his Pioneer Note written that year, page 112, describes the Serrano home as on Aliso Creek.

An examination of the ground plan shows this adobe to be of the wing-patio type, very common, as we have seen, of ordinary size. It is difficult to discern much about a "restored" adobe but it would seem that at one time there were other adobe rooms to the rear, beyond those shown as complete. **Don José Antonio Serrano** was the typical ex-soldier who turned to ranching when the Government failed to remunerate him for his services. He died in this house, 1870. This part of the ranch was purchased by **Dwight Whiting** in 1880.

**Joaquín Serrano Adobe**. East of El Toro about one and one-fourth miles, and south 300 yards of the Aliso Canyon highway, stands the ruins of the Joaquín Serrano Adobe. **Joaquín** was the son of **Don José**; married **Encarnación Olivares**; built this adobe and here they reared their nine children.

After **Joaquín Serrano** left this house it was occupied by a **J. A. Wilkes** who describes it as having at that time, a wing to the south, four rooms all, shake roof, and a dug well. **Mrs. Wilkes** also recalls the Francisco Serrano Adobe about one-half mile southeast of **Joaquín's**, that it was somewhat larger, in good repair at that time, but unoccupied. It had been used by sheepmen. It was damaged by the flood of 1884. **Mrs. Wilkes** and others recall the Reyes Serrano Adobe shown on the map RAL-F(T). It stood about five-eighths of a mile south of the Santa Fe Depot at El Toro. There were several vineyards and some fruit trees alongside these adobes.

Of the Joaquín Serrano Adobe there are some walls standing and some parts of an adobe oven joined to the northeast corner of the building. The roof was burned in 1914 when **Mr. Carlo** was burning brush around about the house. Since then it has gradually crumbled away. It is on the Whiting land.