

Heritage Hill Historical Park

Important Dates in the History of the El Toro and Saddleback Area

- 4000 BCE to 1600s First evidence of Native American occupation of the Heritage Hill site - Millstone Era mano (grinding stone) found
Juaneño-Gabrieleño cultures predominate in Saddleback Valley
- 1521 Hernan Cortez conquers the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City); claims Mexico for Spain; Spanish claims for the viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico) extend to Alta California
- 1769 July An expedition of 67 men, including 5 Franciscan friars, and 104 mules led by Capitán Gaspar de Portolá moves through what is now Orange County in the first recorded contact by Europeans in the area; the expedition camps on Trabuco Mesa to the Tomato Springs area of the Santa Ana foothills indicate that they probably passed within a mile of the Heritage Hill site
- 1776 Nov 1 San Juan Capistrano Mission founded by Father Junipero Serra as the first permanent settlement by Europeans in Orange County; as the Mission developed, the Franciscan fathers and their Native American neophytes exploited lands as far north as the Mission Viejo area
- 1799 Francisco Serrano of Aragon, Spain, a foot soldier in the Portolá expedition of 1769, becomes Alcalde of El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles (mayor)
- 1804 José Antonio Fernando Serrano born; youngest son of Francisco Serrano
- 1821 Mexico gains independence from Spain on September 15 after 11 years of struggle
- 1824 First Mexican federal constitution promulgated; Alta California becomes state with territorial status in the Mexican Federal Republic
- 1826 Mexican government outlaws slavery relieving Native American neophytes of their obligations to work for missions in Alta California; they begin drifting away from the missions and the missions begin to decline
- 1829 Don José Serrano marries María Petra Avila
- 1831 Governor Echeandia of Alta California declares secularization (nationalization) of all Mission lands; succeeding governors begin granting large land tracts to private citizens by petition; most are operated as cattle "ranchos"
- 1835 Don José Antonio Fernando Serrano, son of the former Alcalde Francisco Serrano, is made Juez de Campo (Judge of the plains) granting the authority to settle disputes over cattle ownership at the annual rodeos
- 1842 Don José petitions and receives Rancho Cañada de Los Alisos (Sycamore Canyon Ranch) from Governor Alvarado
- 1846 Don José petitions and receives additional acreage from Governor Pio Pico bringing the size of his rancho to 10688 acres (16.7 square miles)

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- 1848 Feb 2 The Mexican-American War ends and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo makes Alta California part of US territory
- 1850 California became the 31st US state on September 9
- 1863 The Serrano Adobe at Heritage Hill is built overlooking Old Camino Real and Serrano Creek, probably by Don José's second oldest son; it is the second of 5 adobe homes built on the rancho
- 1860s Severe drought from the 1860s to the 1880s decimates the longhorn cattle herds; many Rancheros, including Don José, are forced to mortgage properties; Don José took out loans at high interest from Banker Slauson of the Bank of Los Angeles
- 1870 Don José Serrano dies
- 1876 Doña Petra Avila de Serrano, Don José's widow, subdivides Rancho Cañada de Los Alisos into 10 lots and sells portions to her sons and to members of the Palomares and Yorba families who were related by marriage
- 1880 Navel Oranges introduced to Southern California
- 1881 Doña Petra Serrano dies
- 1882 Major portions of Rancho Cañada de Los Alisos are sold to A Eldred
- 1884 Dwight Whiting, a Boston immigrant, purchases a major portion to be Whiting Ranch
- 1886 Aliso Canyon School built as the first school in Saddleback Valley
- 1888 San Diego and San Bernardino Railroad completed through Saddleback Valley and Whiting Ranch and eventually joins the main line to Los Angeles
- 1889 Whiting conceives the idea of developing "Los Alisos City" between what is now the San Diego freeway and Muirlands Boulevard as a fruit and nut farming colony for English "gentleman" farmers
- 1889 Residents of southern Los Angeles County persuade the state legislature to create Orange County
- 1890 El Toro Grammar School built at First and Olive at a cost of \$2000; dedicated November 25
- 1891 St George's Episcopal Mission built on Whisler Drive through the generosity of the families of Dwight Whiting and Judge W H Keating to serve the residents of Los Alisos City
- 1892 Los Alisos City renamed to El Toro to avoid postal confusion with Alviso City in northern California

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- 1893 Whiting publishes 125-page pamphlet "Fruit Farming in Southern California" in London to recruit immigrants for 40 parcels totaling 560 acres

- 1890s Dwight Whiting plants 400 acres of Eucalyptus trees as an agricultural experiment; this large grove inspired the "Forest" part of the name "Lake Forest" and portions still exist primarily bounded by El Toro Road, Jeronimo Rd, Lake Forest Drive, and Muirlands Boulevard

- 1893 Captain Huddy brings his family to El Toro to farm

- 1897 Charles Bennett of Tustin purchases 15 acres in El Toro

- 1897 Mrs Keating adds chancel (altar area) and vestry to St George's Mission; choir area later

- 1901 Bennett acquires an additional 15 acres (30 total)

- 1902 Bennett acquires an additional 25 acres (55 total)

- 1902 El Toro Community Hall built

- 1903 Bennett acquires 5 town lots in El Toro; plants oranges, prunes, and apricots

- 1908 Charles Bennett builds the Bennett Ranch House at Cherry Avenue and Second Street

- 1910 Harvey Bennett, Charles' son, becomes foreman after Charles contracts pneumonia

- 1913 Harvey Bennett marries Frances McDonnell of Santa Ana and they move into the Bennett Ranch House where they raise 6 children and farm citrus; Frances' father builds the kitchen cabinets

- 1914 New 2-room brick schoolhouse; Edna Nichols becomes first principal

- 1915 Stanley Goode Sr, Superintendent of the Whiting Ranch, replaced the roof on the Serrano Adobe and possibly added the kitchen and dining room

- 1915 Indoor plumbing added to the kitchen and bath of the Bennett Ranch House; cold water only

- 1916 St George's Mission becomes ward of Holy Trinity Church in Orange

- 1916 El Toro Grammar School moved to El Toro Road and opened as St Anthony's Catholic Church

- 1917 Harvey Bennett acquires an additional 10 acres and Charles acquires an additional 2 (77 total)

- 1918 Harvey Bennett and Will Woodhouse pioneer use of deep (80-1000') wells for irrigation

- 1920 Bennett porch converted to sleeping porch

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- 1920 Highway 101 built through El Toro
- 1921 George Osterman takes over operation of the El Toro Country Store; owner until 1945
- 1928 Electricity, water heater, refrigerator, and electric stove added to the Bennett Ranch House; two bedrooms and a service porch added and the bathroom and fireplace relocated
- 1930s Services suspended at St George's due to low village population
- 1932 George Whiting, Dwight's son, and his wife Mary restore and remodel the Serrano Adobe adding the dining room, bedroom, kitchen, and bathrooms; they get the building designated California State Historical Landmark #199 and use it as a vacation home and hunting lodge
- 1934 Harvey Bennett acquires an additional 8 acres (85 total)
- 1935 CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp built on hill opposite the Serrano Adobe as depression jobs program for Saddleback Valley
- 1940 St George's Mission used for non-denominational religious schooling
- 1943 Regular Episcopal services resume at St George's Mission; Dwight Whiting rebuilds belfry
- 1943 US Federal Government purchases 400 acres of Irvine Ranch and builds El Toro Marine Corps Air Station for WWII Marine Corps pilot training
- 1950s Brick and glass walls added to front porch of the Bennett Ranch House
- 1955 Pews donated to St George's by another church
- 1955 Disneyland opens in Anaheim coinciding with Orange County's boom in suburban development which radically alters the character of the country from rural and agricultural
- 1958 The Whiting family sells the Serrano Adobe and 5000 acres to V P Baker
- 1960 Highway 101 is rebuilt as the San Diego Freeway (15) signaling the end of the area's rural history
- 1963 Harvey Bennett and Ray Prothero bring in the Metropolitan Water District
- 1964 Leisure World opened on the site of the Salter Ranch as the first modern subdivision in El Toro
- 1966 St George's Mission no longer a ward of Holy Trinity Church
- 1968 St Anthony's (El Toro Grammar School) abandoned when St Nicholas's was opened

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- 1969 V P Baker sells 5000 acres of the old Whiting Ranch to Occidental Petroleum with the stipulation that the Serrano Adobe be donated to a public agency as a historic site; Occidental Petroleum donates 55.9 acres, including the 4.1 acre Heritage Hill site and a mile and a half of Serrano Creek, to the County of Orange for development of a historic park and recreational facilities; Occidental Petroleum develops Lake Forest subdivision

- 1969 New St George's Church built near I5/El Toro Road and the old building leased by other sects

- 1971 Harvey Bennett died

- 1973 Saddleback Area Historical Society formed

- 1973 Laguna Hills Mall phase 1 opens

- 1976 Saddleback Valley Historical Society acquires the El Toro Grammar School (St Anthony's Church) and St George's Episcopal Mission and moves them to the Heritage Hill site

- 1976 Serrano Adobe listed in National Register of Historic Places

- 1978 Mrs Francis Bennett sells the Bennett Ranch to the William Lyon Company which cooperates with the Historical Society in moving the Bennett Ranch House to the Heritage Hill site

- 1982 Heritage Hill Historical Park opened in May

- 1982 First Annual Victorian Christmas Event held at Heritage Hill

- 1985 Francis Bennett died

- 1985 Restoration of Bennett Ranch House completed and dedicated May 19

- 1985 Heritage Hill Historical Park phase III completion and dedication September 14

- 1986 First Annual Candlelight Walking Tour held at Heritage Hill

- 1991 El Toro renamed Lake Forest and incorporated as a city