



The Echo

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Where the Past is Present

Fall/Winter 2024

When Water Came to Altadena

by Jean Phillips

In the early 1800s much of the land between the San Gabriel foothills on the north and the boundaries of Pasadena on the south was alluvial plain; covered with chaparral, flooded in the winter, dry and desert-like in the summer heat. It was dismissed as good for little but grazing. It took visionaries like Don Benito Wilson, Benjamin Eaton, John and Fred Woodbury, and other pioneers to foresee Altadena's future.

For the first people in the area soon to be known as Altadena, water originated in the San Gabriel Mountains. Historian Sara Noble Ives



Early photo of Millard Falls

describes Altadena as lying between the great gullies of Eaton Canon and Arroyo Seco "hollowed out through the ages by the overflow of waters that have rushed through the

mountains to these escapes." The waters emerged in the Arroyo Seco Watershed as springs and streams and seeped into the alluvial sand and gravel of the Raymond Basin.

Early residents such as the Tongva or Gabrielino tribes, Spanish conquistadors and padres, settled near springs, streams, and waterfalls in Millard, Las Flores, Rubio and Eaton Canyons. The American settlers in the 1800s did the

same. Water was distributed through

primitive irrigation ditches called zanjas.

They soon discovered that natural rainfall was not sufficient to support ranches and homes and began to tap the springs and groundwater to grow crops. The first wells in the Raymond Basin were dug in 1881 for agriculture and residential use. A low dam at Devil's Gate Springs was built in the 1880s to divert water from the Arroyo Seco to the surrounding areas.

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President's Message *by Veronica Jones*



Dear members and friends of the Altadena Historical Society,

As we wrap up another successful quarter, I am pleased to share some exciting updates and accomplishments from our society.

Our Juneteenth program was a great success. Thanks to the support of members and Mountain View Mortuary we were

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able to award two scholarships to deserving individuals, furthering our mission of promoting education and preserving our heritage. (see page 9 for more information about Juneteenth and other events)

We are also delighted to welcome the addition of three new board members and a new part-time staff member who bring fresh and creative ideas to the table. Their enthusiasm and expertise will be invaluable as we continue to grow and develop our organization.

Our upcoming quarterly program in October is sure to be a highlight. Author Becky Nicolaides will discuss her book, *The New Suburbia: How Diversity Remade Suburban Life in Los Angeles After 1945* (Oxford, 2024) which includes Altadena. (See page 11)

In addition, we are thrilled to announce the launch of a new project aimed at documenting multi-generational families in Altadena, furthering our understanding of our shared history and fostering a greater sense of connection within our

community.

As we approach our 90th anniversary, we look forward to celebrating this milestone together and reflecting on the accomplishments of our society over the years. We are in the planning stages of events that will commemorate this special occasion. Please watch for your invitation in the new year.

We are grateful for the strong response to our recent membership drive, which has helped to increase our numbers and retain our dedicated members. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

Warm regards,
Veronica Jones
President

New Monday Hours: 4:30 - 7:30 p.m.
Keep up with visiting hours and coming events on our new calendar under the Events tab on our website: altadenahistoricalsociety.org

...Altadena's Water continued from page 1

Benjamin Wilson (also known as Don Benito Wilson) and John Griffin, owners of Rancho San Pasqual along with Benjamin Eaton, Griffin's brother-in-law, were among the first to see the possibilities of water



distribution systems. Wilson, a trapper and trader originally from Tennessee, helped lead the first wagon train of settlers through the mountains and desert to Southern California where he rose to

prominence, including a term as mayor of Los Angeles. In 1858 he purchased Rancho San Pasqual from Manuel Garfias, who was awarded the land during the years of Mexican rule and soon partnered with Dr. John Griffin with Griffin's name included on the title.

Benjamin Eaton, whose first wife's sister was married to John Griffin, was a Harvard trained lawyer with many skills who arrived in Los Angeles in 1852, where he held the position of Los Angeles County District Attorney and associate justice for the County Court of Sessions.



He built the first house in Altadena on Fair Oaks Ranch for Griffin's sister, Eliza Johnston where he and his family lived after she left for San Francisco. After a successful experiment with dry-farming grapes he brought additional water from Eaton Canyon to the property, added 30,000 grape vines, and produced some of the best wines in the county.

Wilson and Griffin hired Eaton to build a 13,000-foot irrigation ditch (known as



Early photo of Devil's Gate

Wilson's Ditch) from Devil's Gate Springs to the unproductive lands of San Pasqual. When he helped the founders of Pasadena's Indiana Colony to purchase a portion of San Pasqual, Eaton designed a more advanced water distribution system that connected Devil's Gate water to a 3,000,000-gallon reservoir near today's intersection of Colorado Street and Orange Grove Avenue.

The Indiana Colony created the San Gabriel Valley Orange Grove Association which later split into three companies – The Pasadena



San Gabriel Valley Orange Grove Association

— Courtesy of Pasadena Museum of History

Land & Water Company west of Fair Oaks, the Lake Vineyard Land & Water Company east of Fair Oaks, and the North Pasadena Land and Water Company north of Pasadena between Lake Avenue and the Arroyo.

In the unincorporated area above Pasadena,

water companies were formed to manage water rights and water distribution for pioneer landowners. **Las Flores Water Company**, which served what is now Central Altadena, was incorporated in 1885. Each water user purchased a one-half share in the corporation and was responsible for pipe maintenance, repair, and regulation. In 1925 Pasadena took over the water users served within her city limits.



Rubio Canyon Falls

Frederick and John Woodbury purchased 141 acres of land with water rights at the mouth of Rubio Canyon in 1881 and began piping water from a mountain spring to their fruit trees. In 1886 the Woodburys and neighbors formed the **Rubio Canyon Land and Water Association**, originally known as the Iowa Improvement Company, with small reservoirs in the canyon and at Rubio Street holding the flow. This company provided water to the area east of Lake Avenue.

In 1892 Professor Thaddeus Lowe purchased water rights and a right of way through the canyon to create and power his Mount Lowe Railway cable cars and resorts and a new reservoir was built at Rubio Street.

Lincoln Avenue Water Company began in 1885 when Levi Giddings created a small dam at Millard Springs, routing water to his California Olive Company. In 1887 he partnered with the Woodbury brothers and other residents to form the Millard Canyon Water Company, serving West Altadena. In 1896 Pasadena Land and Water divided the 700-acre district into above and below Millard Falls. The area above the falls became Lincoln Avenue Water Company; the land below the falls was absorbed by Pasadena.



Mt. Lowe Incline

Altadena Water: The Last 100 Years

by Betsy Kahn

You may take it from me that it will be a good many years before Altadena ever becomes part of an incorporated city. We are happy just as we stand, and the only thing that could cause a change is the need of acquiring a better water supply.
—Altadena Improvement Association Officer, quoted in the Pasadena Star News, February 8, 1911.

The Altadena Historical Society archives bulge with documentation of over a hundred years of fierce conflict over annexation and incorporation. There have been plenty of issues for this famously contentious town to argue about over the years, but continuing access to water would come to sorely test that zeal for independence. This streak still runs through Altadena today, reflected in a current prominent community member recently citing “our *Live Free or Die mentality.*”

In 1911, Joseph H. Tumbach, recently arrived from the Midwest, established an experimental poultry farm along Lincoln Avenue that within four years occupied 10-½ acres between Harriet and Montana Streets and housed 10,000 white leghorn hens. Together with a later plant in Riverside County, his egg-producing operation eventually became the largest on the west coast. Tumbach was later elected President of the West Altadena Improvement Association, and in 1919 led opposition to a Pasadena annexation proposal by protesting increased taxation to pay for water mains, and touting the protection of Altadena water rights and water quality. Right

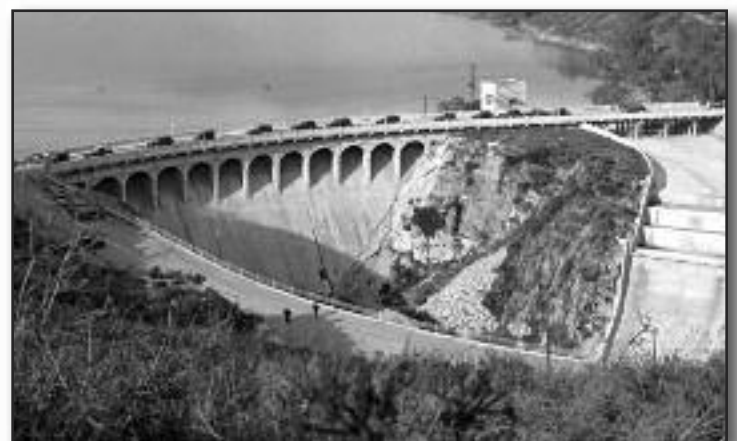
Devil’s Gate before dam — at right, dam completed

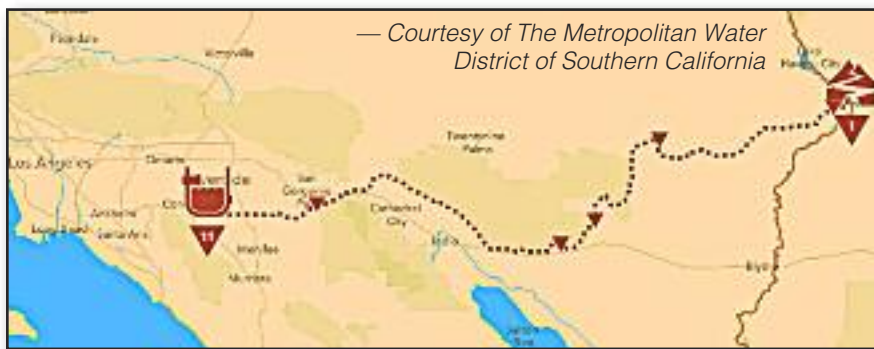


around this time Pasadena was actually exploring the possibility of incorporating the entire San Gabriel Mountain watershed north of the city into its own city limits, which would have included Altadena.

If water had a voice, we would hear it laughing at city limits, state lines, and even international borders. One of the only forces it truly respects is gravity, and in that context our local mountains are both a blessing and a curse. We welcome moderate winter rainfall flowing down and through the mountain watershed to replenish our local groundwater in the 40-square-mile Raymond Basin that sits below our part of the San Gabriel Valley. But periodic catastrophic flooding can also wreak havoc; a particularly destructive flood in 1914 caused the formation of the Los Angeles County Flood Control District, and the subsequent construction of Devil’s Gate Dam in the Arroyo Seco, completed in 1920. “Feast or famine” in our local context translates to “deluge or drought.”

Our neighboring city of Pasadena realized by the 1920s that the local water table was becoming seriously compromised, and that even new well drilling was not going to keep up with rapidly increasing demand as the city grew. Los Angeles had led the way in engineering its way out of scarcity in our semi-arid region when it tapped





Colorado River Aqueduct

into the eastern Sierra Nevada snow runoff and began piping water from the Owens Valley via the Los Angeles Aqueduct beginning in 1913. In 1924, Pasadena voters followed Los Angeles' lead and initiated its own local water importation project by passing almost \$100 million in bond funds to purchase land in the San Gabriel River Canyon above Azusa, and later passed another \$100 million bond measure to build a dam, reservoir, and miles of pipeline to bring San Gabriel River water to a reservoir in west Pasadena. Originally called the Pine Canyon Dam, it was later renamed Morris Dam, after Samuel Brooks Morris, the Pasadena Water Company's chief construction engineer. But the white-hot rate of urban growth in that era quickly outstripped freshwater supply in the region.

Altadena was also anticipating a future of dwindling groundwater. In 1924, the Altadena Citizens' Association tasked a committee to investigate the legal angles of merging the three local water companies into a water district that might be able to take advantage of the prospect of imported water, but this proposal was never realized. Altadena residents continued to resist hitching themselves to continuing bond debt in the form of higher taxes, preferring a "pay as you go" approach to local development rather than long-term solutions with significant upfront investment.

In 1928, Pasadena partnered with Los Angeles and eleven other municipalities to incorporate the Metropolitan Water District, with the express purpose of funding and creating the infrastructure required to import water from the Colorado River to further supplement the

rapidly depleting groundwater of the region. Though decried by the *Los Angeles Times* as "one of the most Socialistic proposals ever submitted to a California Legislature ... [whose] defeat is deemed certain," voters approved \$220 million dollars of bond funding in 1931, and the 242-mile-long Colorado River Aqueduct was completed in 1941.

Meanwhile, in 1928 Joseph Tumbach began a 32-year run as a director of the Lincoln Avenue Water Company, sixteen of which he served as president. His company had built four new wells by 1930, and in 1932 added two reservoirs on Sunset Ridge. In 1932 the Las Flores Water Company added a fifth reservoir on Poppy Street, and in 1933 the Rubio Canyon Land and Water Company built a new reservoir on Calaveras Street. A proposed merger between the Rubio Canyon Land and Water Company and the Las Flores Water Company failed to materialize in 1931, and so our small mutual water companies built more and more local water infrastructure and maintained their independence, allowing Altadena to continue to cling to its own.



Joseph Tumbach

Despite these efforts, in 1935 the Legislative Committee of the Altadena Chamber of Commerce issued a report predicting a local water shortage as soon as 1948, and certainly no later than 1954. The report's conclusions offered three solutions: "1) Form a water district and join the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, 2) Join the City of Pasadena which is already a member of Metropolitan Water, or 3) Do nothing and wish for lots of rain." The community predictably roiled with its cyclical conflict over possible incorporation or annexation with Pasadena.

Joseph Tumbach emerged as a leader campaigning for the formation of the Foothill Municipal Water District. In May of 1951, the MWD Board of Directors approved the creation of this joint district for the foothill communities along the San Gabriel Mountains north of Glendale and Pasadena, and on September 13, 1951, *The Altadenan* reported the submission of 2241 signatures of Altadena residents, which



52-mule team used in early construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct

— Courtesy Los Angeles Water and Power Associates



California Aqueduct

— Courtesy The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California

political conflict followed under the leadership of California Governor Edmund G. “Pat” Brown. The California Water Resources Development Bond Act, also known as “Proposition One” on the November 1960 ballot, barely passed by a margin of fewer than 200,000 out of 5.8 million votes, and the California Water Project was born. It is the largest water project ever built with state funds, and spans over 705 miles from northern to southern California, including dams, storage facilities, pumping plants, and hydroelectric power plants. Since its completion in the 1970s, its waters have flowed southward in the 444-mile long California Aqueduct, accompanying travelers as they drive up and down the heart of the state on Interstate 5, and arriving in Altadena via the regional water district wholesalers

along with signatures from residents of La Canada, La Crescenta, and Kinneloa Ranch, petitioned the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to call a special election that ultimately took place the following December. The Foothill Municipal Water District was formed, with Joseph Tumbach as its first president. A second election a year later incorporated the new district as a member of the regional Metropolitan Water District, and a successful bond measure on the ballot in June 1953 raised \$500,000 to connect the three Altadena water companies to MWD via a new pumping plant and transmission lines. Altadena finally agreed to pay the price and was no longer solely dependent on local sources of water.

But regional population growth and development continued unabated during this post-war boom period, and the MWD began to look even farther afield for another source of imported water. In 1951 the “Feather River Project” was presented to the California Legislature; it included a proposed dam and reservoir near Oroville, in Butte County, north of Sacramento, and was spurred on by a massive series of storms in the winter of 1955-1956 that caused dozens of deaths and millions of dollars in damage, mostly in Sutter County and Yuba City. Almost a decade of fierce

(MWD and FMWD) to which our small local water companies have access.

The turn of the new millennium inaugurated a multi-year drought on the Colorado River, and every year residents all over California anxiously await the news of the yearly Sierra snowpack measurement. Water consciousness has become a way of life all over the state, especially here in semi-arid southern California. Now our water providers are concerned with updating aging infrastructure, developing recycled water systems, improving stormwater capture and storage, maintaining safe water quality, and constructing emergency connections among agencies, but citizens have a role to play in household and workplace water conservation. Our forebears created a garden out of a desert, but now it is up to us to contribute to creating a sustainable way to preserve the paradise we call Altadena.

Pure and Safe to Drink

by Cynthia Pearson

“Altadena’s Water is PURE, WHOLESOME, SAFE,” according to early press promotions aimed at prospective residents. In 1911, the Los Angeles Times stated that “Altadena lies so close to the mountains that the water supply is received fresh from the heights above with “that sweet, refreshing taste which only comes in water from snowbanks and deep underground straits.”

The idea of Altadena as a place of abundant water in “pure” form continued into the early decades of the 20th century. Water analysis was available free upon request, stated an account from the 1930s, but no monthly water testing was deemed necessary. The same article acknowledged it was written to “refute the word-of-mouth untruthful propaganda, the



detected, leading to a “hurried, expensive effort to control possible storm runoff by the Devil’s Gate Reservoir.” In 1982, the Rubio Cañon Land and Water Association reservoir was decontaminated after the discovery of potentially harmful bacteria, with drainage from the reservoir being

“discharged onto Lake Avenue over a period of several days,” and in 2001, high levels of arsenic were detected in a well serving Millard Canyon. Direct use of the canyon outflow was forbidden in the 1970s and 80s by the California Department of Water Resources.

Now all water providers, regional districts and local organizations alike, maintain water safety. To address potential contamination – naturally occurring and/or inherent to an urbanized area – and provide the necessary water to Altadena, each water company has treatment systems in place... For instance, Rubio Cañon Land and Water Association collects water from several sources within the canyon into its treatment facility, then delivers the water to its reservoir before it is sent on to customers.

An additional source of contamination more specific to Altadena is related to the activities and waste disposal carried out by JPL over the years, which have resulted in significant radioactivity in the Arroyo Seco water and VOCs (volatile organic compounds) and perchlorate in the groundwater of the Hahamongna watershed detected in 1984. The NASA JPL Groundwater Clean-up Program is ongoing, and Lincoln Avenue Water Company has developed and maintained treatment processes to supplement those efforts.



Lincoln Ave. Water Co. treatment facility

— Courtesy of LAWC

unsupported gossip of contamination, and debunk insidious propaganda.”

However, threats to the safety of Altadena’s water began to emerge in the late 1920s and concerns about the safety and scarcity of Altadena’s water supply have led to treatment and remediation efforts.

In 1959, a “bacterial invasion” was

AHS in the Community

2024 has been a busy year so far. We've participated in several community events:

- In partnership with the Altadena Library District, we held two events including the Mid-Century Modern Architecture History Talk and the Millionaires Row Historical Tour.

- We celebrated the history of Meadowbrook Rd. with the Altadena Guild of Huntington Memorial Hospital. This annual community outreach event allows us to connect with the community and highlight our resources and research services.

- A bench with plaque recognizing the life and work of beloved Altadena resident, Astrid Ellersieck was installed at the Altadena Community Center. Attendees included representatives from LA County, Altadena Historical Society, Altadena Heritage, and NAACP.

Five Sisters Production along with a live virtual tour of Ellen's birthplace by The Robbins House. Many community partners make this event possible.



- Altadena Historical Society members were among the crowd of well-wishers as Webster's Community Pharmacy owners Michael and Meredith Miller cut the ribbon at the Grand Opening of their new location in the Chase Bank complex on Lake Avenue. Webster's is a significant part of Altadena's history and AHS salutes their commitment to the community.

- AHS joined the Good Cemeterians in the cleaning of the 1,000th headstone at Mountain View Cemetery. It belonged to one of Altadena's founders, Frederick J. Woodbury, whose great-great grandson's family were special guests.



- We shared two images from our archives taken on the Dedication Day at Pasadena Municipal Airfield (1919) in Altadena with Pasadena Museum of History's exhibit, *Lights, Camera Action! Hollywood Magic in Pasadena*. Part of the field was known as the Cecil B. DeMille Airport.

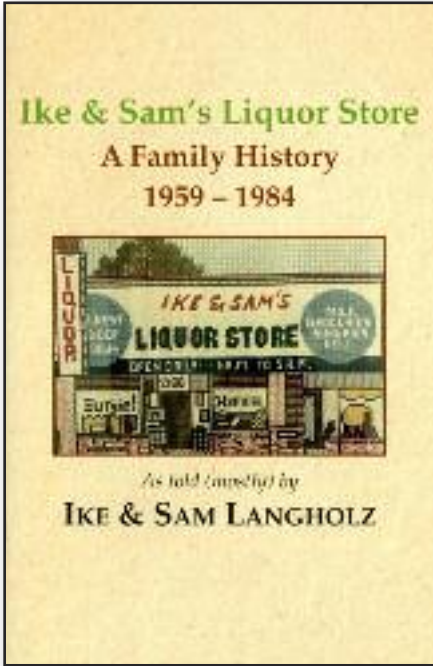
- We attended the Agave wall-raising ceremony for supportive housing being built on the site of the former Altadena Hospital at Lake Avenue. AHS is working with the developers to honor the building's historic roots.

- We celebrated Juneteenth with our third annual Ellen Garrison Clark Scholarship Award Ceremony by providing \$1000 scholarships to two John Muir seniors. This year's luncheon included a film screening of *Ellen Garrison: Scenes from an Activist's Life* by

- Aveson Global Leadership Academy teachers toured the archives and met with community leaders at the Community Center as part of a program to encourage integration of the local community in classroom projects.

New to the Archives

Altadena Historical Society is proud to announce Paul Ayers has selected us as the home for **The Paul Ayers Digital Collection** of over 150,000 items – documents, maps, and images from his many years of historical research and collection. Thank you, Paul! We are beginning the work to secure and make this collection available to the public. We'll keep you informed of our progress – stay tuned.



More from Paul: a group picture taken at Brian Marcroft's annual December excursion to Mount Lowe in 2000 with a key to some of the people in the photo, three photo albums, a plate fragment from Echo Mountain, 18 Altadena-related postcards, and a railroad line map to Rubio Canyon.

Susan Auerbach gave us a booklet written by Sam Langholz, *Ike and Sam's Liquor Store: A Family History 1959-1984*. **John Steven Fode** contributed digital images of Kinneloa Mesa, **Jim and Joanne Morse** donated photos of Bob Lucas Library before the current renovation, and **Junso Ogawa** brought in five Mt. Lowe Military Academy yearbooks (1965-1970) as well as 48 issues (6 years' worth) of the school newspaper, the Mt. Lowe Sentinel.

David Chavez rescued 32 Franklin Elementary Yearbooks, nine Franklin Elementary class pictures, and a 1958 newspaper clipping from the trash after PUSD



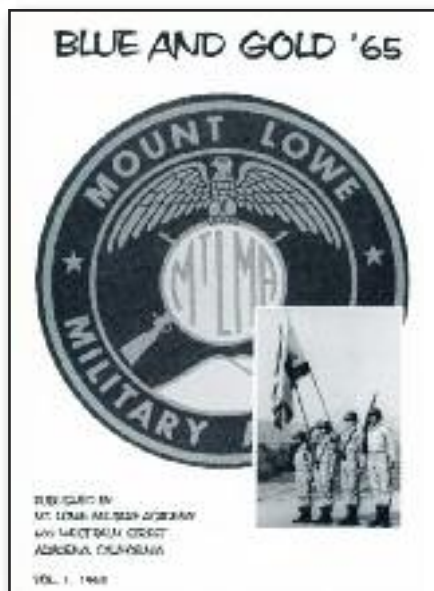
Altadena Community Quilt
— Courtesy of Deb Squared Photos

closed the campus. **Shawn J. Dienhart** donated photos of the Giddings home and Thaddeus Lowe's mansion on Orange Grove Blvd. plus several newspaper clippings of Altadena news and natural disasters.

Kathleen Tuttle gave us two copies of her book, *Sylvanus Marston, Pasadena's Quintessential Architect*, and **Dina Zанrosso** contributed a copy of the 2006 edition of *Hometown Pasadena: The Insider's Guide*.

Paul Rippens donated images of Devil's Gate in the late 1890s.

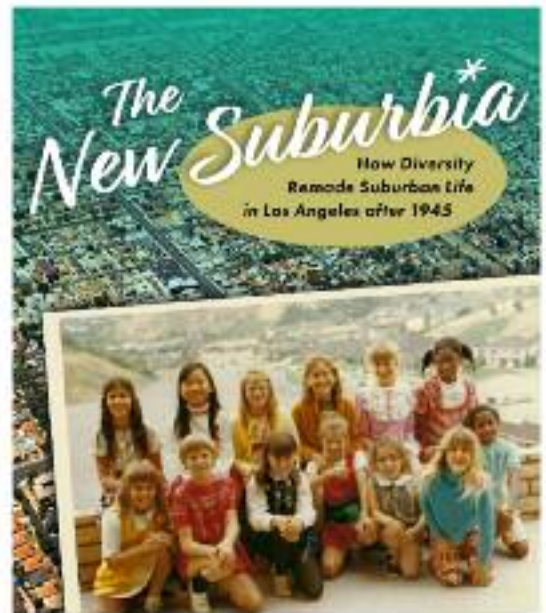
Altadena Library District's donation to the archives is hanging on the east wall of the Community Center's community room – a beautiful exhibit of the Community Quilt and explanatory photographs. Don't miss it.



Author Talk with Becky Nicolaides

Monday, October 28
7pm-9pm

Altadena Community Center
730 E Altadena Dr, Altadena, CA 91001, USA



Becky Nicolaides will discuss her new book, *The New Suburbia: How Diversity Remade Suburban Life in Los Angeles After 1945*. Altadena appears in this work as a community caught up in the civil rights struggles that rocked the region.

Books will be available for purchase.

Becky Nicolaides is a historian and consultant specializing in the history of suburbs, metro areas, and Los Angeles. She is the author of three books, including *The New Suburbia: How Diversity Remade Suburban Life in Los Angeles After 1945* (Oxford, 2024), and her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other outlets. She's taught at UCSD, UCLA, Pitzer College, and Arizona State University West, and is currently a research affiliate at the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. She received her BA from USC, and her PhD from Columbia University. Becky served on the LA Mayor's Office Civic Memory Working Group and is co-founder of the consulting firm History Studio.

Space/ seating is limited and will operate on a first come first serve basis.

Event begins at 7pm with doors opening at 6:30pm.





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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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Altadena Historical Society (AHS), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization was founded to gather, preserve, and make available information about the people, places and events that have shaped Altadena's past.

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