

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

BANNING PARK

Registered Landmark #147

by

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## BANNING PARK

Banning Park, perhaps, is the most important site in Wilmington. It was the home of General Phineas Banning, who was Wilmington's outstanding resident. From the old colonial building and the spacious grounds, he directed his widespread transportation enterprises. The old house and grounds seemed to be filled with the driving force of their owner. The driveways crunched and rattled under the wheels of stages and freighters; and the buildings behind, strong with the pungent odor of horses and harness, resounded to the shouts of Banning's strong and reckless men. Inspired by the spirit of the indomitable Banning, they strove to beat their rivals from San Pedro into the city of Los Angeles, or perhaps in starting for the far distant Salt Lake City.

Phineas Banning was born in 1830 at Oak Hill Farm near Wilmington, Delaware.<sup>1</sup> His father, though a man of some educational attainments and prestige, had, nevertheless, somewhat limited means with which to care for his family of eleven children, of which Phineas was the ninth.<sup>2</sup>

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1. P. Banning, The settlement of Wilmington, 1.
  2. J.M. Guinn, A history of California and an extended history of Los Angeles and environs, II, 29.

When Phineas was thirteen, he left home and trudged to Philadelphia with but a few cents in his pockets. At Philadelphia he worked first in his brother's law firm and afterward in a dry goods store. At the age of twenty-one young Banning was attracted by stories about the golden west. As a consequence, he gathered together what worldly goods he had accumulated and sailed by way of the isthmus of Panama for the Pacific Coast. He first landed at San Diego and then continued to San Pedro, where he found employment as a clerk in the freight and forwarding business of Douglas and Sangood, then operating between San Pedro and Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> From that time on, young Banning prospered. In a short time he was able to buy out his employers. He reconstructed the little business, the properties of which consisted of a few horses and a small wharf and derrick in the open roadstead of San Pedro. He began immediately to lay plans on the large scale which characterized his enterprises from that time.<sup>4</sup> Banning, before long, became a prosperous man.

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3. Banning, Wilmington, 2-3.

4. C.J. Prudhomme and T.F. Keaveney, "Early days in Los Angeles county. II. Phineas Banning and historic Wilmington," in Grizzly Bear, March 1917, XX, 5:6.

Great impetus to business was the demand from the gold fields in the north for cattle from the large ranches around Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> This was the boom which helped the young business man to expand his interests with such headlong speed.

Banning, in step with the social conditions of the time, was portrayed vividly in 1853 by a young man who had just arrived from Germany.<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible to describe my astonishment when Banning was pointed out to me; for I knew absolutely nothing of the rough methods in vogue on the Pacific Coast. There stood before me a very large, powerful man, coatless and vestless, without necktie or collar, and wearing pantaloons at least six inches too short, a pair of brogans and socks with large holes; while bright-colored suspenders added to the picturesque effect of his costume. The fact of the matter is that Banning, in his own way, was even then such a man of affairs that he had bought but a few months before, some fifteen wagons and nearly five times that many mules and had paid almost thirty thousand dollars for them.

One of the early moves of Phineas Banning was

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5. Banning, Wilmington, 3.

6. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 1853-1913, 23-24.

to establish himself on the site that became, a few years later, Wilmington. There he built wharves, warehouses, a steam saw-mill, planing-mill, shops and made many other improvements.<sup>7</sup> This new trade center not only had the advantage of being six miles closer to Los Angeles than San Pedro, but also was soon used as the government supply station for the far western Indian country. In 1857, Banning with some others purchased from the Domínguez brothers an extensive tract of land, which formed the basis of the new community. At first it was called San Pedro New Town, then New San Pedro, and finally Banning had it called Wilmington after his birthplace. Also, he cultivated about six hundred acres and dug a very large well, which was pumped by steam and was sufficient to supply the irrigation needs of his land, enough water for the new town of Wilmington, the ships in the harbor and San Pedro itself. When the dedication ceremonies for Wilmington were held, there was a large procession by water. Barges loaded with freight and visitors from Los Angeles were towed to a decorated landing, where refreshments were served. Later, when the town was properly surveyed and subdivided, Banning

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7. Banning, Wilmington, 5.

gave lots to some of his friends, and built himself a house on Canal Street. There he lived until he moved, a few years later, into a new and quite impressive mansion having thirty high-ceilinged, spacious rooms, stately columns and wide verandas. He established there his headquarters.<sup>8</sup>

Wilmington became Banning's pride. He found time, even with his numerous business activities, to treat the problems of the new community with utmost care and consideration; he was said to be mayor, councilman, constable, and watchman all in one. The struggling little town came in for a great deal of good-natured raillery in its early years. It was somewhat facetiously described in 1864 as follows:<sup>9</sup>

Wilmington is an extensive city located at the head of a slough in a pleasant neighborhood of sand banks and marshes. There are not a great many houses as yet, but there is a great deal of room for houses if the population ever gets ready to build them. The streets are broad and beautifully paved with small sloughs, ditches, bridges, lumber, dry goods boxes and the carcasses of dead cattle. Ox bones and

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8. Newmark, Southern California, 236-237.

9. J. M. Guinn, "Historic seaports in Los Angeles," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, V, 68.

skulls of defunct cows, the legs and jawbones of horses, dogs, sheep, swine and coyotes are the chief ornaments of a public character; and what the city lacks in the elevation of its site, it makes up in the elevation of its water lines, many of them being higher than the surrounding objects.

Although Banning did not engage very actively in political affairs, he was important in many of the civic and military activities of his time. He did, on one occasion, enter politics for a short time in order to advance railroad building, but was not involved in the party broils of his period. He belonged to the volunteer police department of Los Angeles, and, on three occasions, served as brigadier-general in command of the first brigade of the California state militia.<sup>10</sup>

Many were the projects of Phineas Banning in behalf of Wilmington. In 1864, during the time of the Civil War, he bought the printing press of the Los Angeles Star, and founded the Wilmington Journal, but, with the withdrawal of the United States troops from the town, the Journal died for lack of subscribers.<sup>11</sup> A short time later, in 1865, he was elected to the state

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10. Banning, Wilmington, 11.

11. J.M. Guinn, "La Estrella, pioneer newspaper in Los Angeles," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, V, 77.

senate. His main purpose in standing for election was to promote a railroad between Los Angeles and Wilmington.<sup>12</sup> If the railroad succeeded, there was, to be sure, a strong personal advantage for Banning, although to a large extent the advantage was also Wilmington's. Indeed, it was impossible to separate the fortunes of the city from those of its creator. He made two trips to Washington, D.C., in order to get appropriations for the development of Wilmington's harbor, and was successful to the extent that he obtained a half million dollars for the project.<sup>13</sup>

Such, to be sure, were only a few of the enterprises of Banning, for wherever transportation was an activity of early California, he was usually one of the important figures. The extreme competition between J. L. Tomlison, his rival, and himself forced him to be constantly on the alert.<sup>14</sup> Banning even went so far, in 1860, as to import from Leeds, England, a steam wagon supposed to pull thirty-eight tons at a speed of five miles an hour. When the news of the new venture spread, there was great excitement in Los Angeles County. Unfortunately, the roads were in such bad condition that

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12. H.H. Bancroft, History of California, VII, 753.

13. Banning, Wilmington, 9.

14. C.D. Willard, The Herald's history of Los Angeles City, 296.



the new mechanical wonder could not be operated. The only permanent result was to furnish new materials for the town wags.<sup>15</sup>

With the coming of the railroad, Banning's extensive stage and freight interests were doomed. All of his herds of mules and horses, both in California and in Arizona - for Banning's stages then ran as far as Yuma - had to be sold, and the rolling stock somehow disposed of.<sup>16</sup> The old feverish activity at the Banning mansion ceased, at least as far as the teamsters were concerned. The unnatural quiet must have seemed funereal to the restless owner. However, new interests came to claim his attention, for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, in 1878, sold its fleet of lighters and steamers to Banning with a contract to supply the railroad's needs. This new enterprise, incorporated as the Wilmington Transportation Company, soon began to prosper. In 1878, the payroll at Wilmington Wharf was \$ 2,000 a month; four years later it had increased to \$ 3,000; in 1882, the company hauled 70,000,000 feet of lumber besides 50,000 tons of other merchandise.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Newmark, Southern California, 276-277.

16. Prudhomme, and Keaveney, "Phineas Banning," in Grizzly Bear, March 1917, XX, 5:6.

17. Banning, Wilmington, 10-13.

Banning's family affairs were also of interest. He was twice married. His first wife was Rebecca Stanford, by whom he had eight children. In 1870, he married Mary Hollister, to which union three daughters were born.<sup>18</sup> The house and grounds, although taxing the ingenuity and abilities of Banning's wives, were a source of delight, and were as attractive as he could make them. The gardens were planted with native trees, shrubs and flowers. There were cypress and orange trees; a grove of eucalyptus trees lined the main drive, causing a great deal of comment. These were, perhaps, the first of their type to be introduced into California.<sup>19</sup>

As the decade of the 80's wore, the vigor and strength of Phineas Banning began to fail. More and more he was compelled to remain at his home in Wilmington, kept there by his illnesses. Even his sickness had its dramatic side, for, whenever he felt that he needed the services of his Los Angeles physician, Doctor Joseph Kurtz, he would order a locomotive sent to bring the doctor. No ordinary means would suffice for the General, as Phineas Banning was affectionately called by his friends. Finally, on March 8, 1885, death came to

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18. J.M. Gann, A history of California and an extended history of Los Angeles and environs, II, 30.

19. B.C. Truman, Semi-tropical California, 169.

Banning while he was visiting, with his wife and daughters, in San Francisco.<sup>20</sup> His bereaved family returned to Wilmington, where they resided for a number of years, until they, at last, moved into Los Angeles.

Certain civic minded women's clubs of Wilmington later began agitation for the purchase of the old Banning Mansion as a park. These organizations succeeded in getting the voters to pass a district bond issue; and on June 23, 1927, the historic old house and grounds of General Phineas Banning were purchased for \$ 278,000, and turned over to the Park Department. In this way, the home of the man whose activities so marked the early days of Southern California's transportation was preserved.

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20. Newark, Southern California, 548.

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