

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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SITE of LOUIS ROBIDOUX HOUSE

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## SITE OF LOUIS ROBIDOUX HOUSE

Among the fascinating landmarks of California are the home sites of the first pioneer families. On the outskirts of Riverside, the site of the old Robidoux hacienda remains one of the points of interest in Southern California. Louis Robidoux, pioneer settler of 1844, was the owner of holdings which included a large portion of the old Bandini land grant, Rancho Jurupa. All of that territory then was included in Los Angeles County. The Robidoux rancho was one of the largest and most famous of Southern California cattle ranches. During the twenty-six years of his residence there, Louis Robidoux was an influential and respected citizen. His genial nature won many friends throughout the countryside. The spacious adobe ranch house was always the center of hospitality.

Louis Robidoux was a member of the old French-Canadian Robidoux family, early settlers of Missouri.<sup>1</sup> His

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1. The name of the pioneer is spelled in various ways. In California, the most common spelling is Rubidoux. According to some authorities this is incorrect and the name properly spelled is Robidoux, which is the French spelling and the way the original family wrote it. Louis and his brothers always spelled it Robidoux. Bancroft in his History of California, V, 698, says, "The name is variously written, but I follow his autograph." Louis Robidoux, nephew

father, Joseph Robidoux, went to St. Louis, then a village of a few houses, in 1770. He became prosperous as a merchant and was prominent in the city's early history. He was one of the representatives of the American Fur Company organized by John Jacob Astor. In 1782, he married Catherine Rollet. Of their children, six boys, Joseph, Francois, Pierre, Isidore, Antoine, Louis and Michel, took important parts in the exploration and pioneering of the West. Many landmarks in the western states commemorate their exploration and trading activities.<sup>2</sup>

Louis, next to the youngest son, was born July 31, 1796, at St. Louis. He was reared there, and, with his brothers, as sons of a wealthy and socially prominent old family, received an excellent education. An adventuresome, pioneering spirit was a dominant characteristic of all the children. At the age of 53, the elder Robidoux became blind and retired from his business and trading activities, which were taken over by his sons. That was the beginning of their exploration and establishment of trading posts in the West.

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1. (continued) of the pioneer, Louis Robidoux, quoted in the Riverside Enterprise, July 19, 1915, says: "I have only one criticism to make, and that is the way the name Robidoux is spelled here. Rubidoux is not the proper way. The correct way is Robidoux. An investigation of your records in the former county seat San Bernardino, will show that the old gentleman signed the name Robidoux."
  2. The Kansas City Star, October 16, 1924.

Joseph Robidoux, the eldest son, assumed his father's capacity as a representative of the American Fur Company, establishing new posts on the Missouri River and in the Blacksnake Hills section. From there his five brothers pushed into the West with their trading caravans.

Louis and his brother Antoine were among the first pioneer traders over the Santa Fe trail. They located for some time at a post in Taos, and engaged in profitable trapping and trading activities in New Mexico and Colorado.<sup>3</sup> During his residence in New Mexico, Louis married Guadalupe García, daughter of one of the prominent old families of New Mexico.

In the years following 1838, the fur trade declined so that in 1844 Louis Robidoux, with his wife and children, emigrated to California. Shortly after his arrival he purchased the Jurupa ranch.<sup>4</sup> Beautifully situated in the Santa Ana River Valley, it was an ideal location for a home. Although much of the area was an arid waste during the summer months, it provided many acres of fine grazing lands suitable for a cattle ranch.

Originally the rancho was a part of the Spanish land grant, Jurupa, made to Don Juan Bandini September 28, 1838, by Juan B. Alvarado, Mexican governor of California. It

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3. The Kansas City Star, October 16, 1924.

4. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, 698.

consisted of a little more than seven leagues or about 31,000 acres extending for some twenty miles on both sides of the Santa Ana River. Jurupa, an old Indian name meaning peace or friendship, was retained by Bandini and later owners of the rancho.<sup>5</sup>

Don Juan Bandini, native of Peru, came to California in 1821 and settled in Southern California. He was prominent in the early history of California under Mexican rule. Throughout his lifetime he was a picturesque figure, typical of the better class of Spanish Californians. After he secured the Jurupa land grant, Don Juan erected a house and resided there with his family.

Several years after the Bandini grant was made, the neighboring land known as the San Bernardino grant was obtained by the Lugo brothers. The owners of both grants frequently were harassed by Indian raids. The Lugo brothers gave half a league of land near the upper end of the Jurupa rancho to several Mexican families in return for which the settlers protected the stock of the San Bernardino rancho from the Indians.<sup>6</sup>

In 1843, Bandini offered the settlers a better location and more land on the upper end of the Jurupa grant across the Santa Ana River. The offer was accepted by the

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5. R. Hornbeck, Robidoux's ranch in the seventies, 60-61.

6. Ibid., 62-63.

settlers, who moved to the new location. Other families joined the settlement, which became known as Trujillo's Town. They acted as vaqueros on the Bandini ranchos as well as in the capacity of soldiers. There were many fierce battles with the Indians who menaced the stock.

In 1844, Bandini sold part of the Jurupa rancho to Benjamin D. Wilson for twenty-five cents an acre. Wilson came to California three years earlier with a party from New Mexico. He settled in Los Angeles County as a stock raiser and was prominent in Los Angeles' early history. He built a home on the Jurupa ranch where he resided with his family. After several years, Wilson and Bandini sold part of the Jurupa to James Johnson and Isaac Williams of Chino. Mr. Johnson built a large adobe house on his portion. Louis Robidoux had an extensive part of the Jurupa in 1847, including the Johnson property.

Louis Robidoux became one of the biggest and most prosperous stock raisers of Southern California. He also planted fine orchards and vineyards, and raised quantities of grain. One of his first projects was a winery, which was famous for its products. He built the first grist mill in his neighborhood. During the Mexican War, flour from the Robidoux mill was supplied often to United States troops, who, for weeks, had lived on meat. Stephen Foster, interpreter of the Mormon Battalion which

helped to occupy Southern California, recounts:<sup>7</sup>

...the commissary and myself were ordered to Los Angeles to try and get some flour. We found the town garrisoned by Fremont's Battalion, about 400 strong. They, too, had nothing but beef served out to them, but as the people had corn and beans for their own use, and by happening around at the houses about mealtime, they could occasionally get a square meal of tortillas and frijoles. Here we met Louis Robidoux, of the Jurupa Ranch, who said he could spare us some 2,000 or 3,000 pounds of wheat, which we could grind at a little mill he had on the Santa Ana River. So, on our return, two wagons were sent to Jurupa, and they brought 1,700 pounds of unbolted wheat flour and two sacks of beans, a small supply for 400 men. I then messed with one of the captains, and we all agreed it was the sweetest bread we ever tasted.

During the war, Robidoux sympathized with the American cause and served in the California battalion. In the encounter at Chino he was among those imprisoned.<sup>8</sup> His brother Antoine also supported the Americans and was wounded at San Pasqual.

Well educated and capable, Louis Robidoux always took an active part in local affairs. In 1846-1847, when Los Angeles and the vicinity were under a period of semi-military rule, he served as justice of the peace of the

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7. S. C. Foster, "Reminiscences; my first procession in Los Angeles, March 16, 1847" in *Historical Society of Southern California, Publications*, V, 268-269.

8. Bancroft, *History of California*, V, 698.

San Bernardino district, succeeding Benjamin D. Wilson. In 1846, Commodore Stockton appointed him alcalde of Los Angeles. Several years later, in 1850, he served as one of the Los Angeles township justices.

In agriculture he was progressive and farsighted.. He is credited with being the first of the large rancheros to subdivide his land and urge settlers to purchase small farms.<sup>9</sup> Most of the large ranchers maintained a small store on the hacienda for the convenience of their employees. Harris Newmark, early pioneer and old friend from whom Robidoux purchased supplies for his ranch, relates:<sup>10</sup>

Louis Robidoux maintained such a store for the accomodation (sic) of his hands, and often came to town, sometimes for several days, on which occasions he would buy very liberally anything that happened to take his fancy. In this respect he occasionally acted without good judgment, and if opposed would become all the more determined. Not infrequently he called for so large a supply of some article that I was constrained to remark that he could not possibly need so much; whereupon he would repeat the order with angry emphasis. I sometimes visited his ranch and recall, in particular, one stay of two or three days there in 1857 when, after an unusually large purchase, Robidoux asked me to assist him in checking up the invoices. The cases were unpacked in his ranch house; and I have never forgotten the amusing picture of the numerous little Robidoux, digging and delving among the assorted goods for all the prizes they could find, and thus rendering the process of listing the goods much more difficult. When the delivery had been found correct Robidoux turned to his Mexican

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9. Kansas City Star, October 16, 1924.

10. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 175-176.



wife and asked her to bring the money. She went to the side of the room, opened a Chinese trunk such as every well-to-do Mexican family had (and sometimes as many as half a dozen) and drew therefrom the customary buckskin, from which she extracted the required and rather large amount. These trunks were made of cedar, and had the quality of keeping out moths. They were, therefore, displayed with pride by the owners.

The Robidoux hacienda frequently offered its hospitality to travelers and strangers. It was a great distance between neighboring ranchos and towns so that visitors were always eagerly entertained. Then the monotony of ranch life was broken and news of the day was exchanged. Parley Pratt, of Salt Lake City, on a trip through Southern California, in 1851, wrote in his diary of stopping at the Robidoux ranch:<sup>11</sup>

Wednesday 4th Rode 13 m.s. and arrived at a farm house. Inhabited by a Frenchman (Louis Robidoux) and his Spanish wife, children and Indian servants. Here we obtained a breakfast of bread, wine, etc, for 50 cts each.

From this man we learned of the burning of Francisco city, and Stockton, with the loss of many lives, and many millions (sic) of merchandise. Also a great earthquake in Chile, and the blockade by the French of the Sandwich Islands, and that the Indians of the naborehood (sic) where we then were, had fell upon and killed a Band of American Robbers who were infesting the country and committing depredations, openly boasting of the same, and biding - (sic) defiance to the officers of the Law. The band consisted of about a dozen, well armed, and were attacked and all killed by Bows and Arrows, Lances, etc, the Loss on the part of the Indians was, one killed and 2 or 3 wounded. The whole country seemed in a state of

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11. P. Pratt, "A Mormon mission to California," in California Historical Society, Quarterly, V, 14, 69.

commotion, Robbery, (sic) Murder and other Crimes were frequent, and it is said that Bribery and corruption on the part of those who Stand to administer the Law was of so frequent occurrence that there was no prospect of Justice or protection to the citizens. All hearts were fearful, and no one felt safe in person or property.

The Indians in the vicinity of San Bernardino had always been particularly troublesome, terrifying the rancheros by their raids and depredations on stock and property. Robert Hornbeck wrote of the necessity of troops to protect the ranchers:<sup>12</sup>

In order to protect the settlers of Jurupa and San Bernardino from the incursions of the Mojave and Piute Indians, Colonel A. J. Smith of the United States infantry was sent in 1847 to the Cajon Pass with forty dragoons. In April of the same year a part of the Mormon Battalion was sent to establish a post at Chino, westward of Jurupa. In 1852 a post was established on the Jurupa grant by Captain Lovell and Colonel Smith.... A small body of troops was kept at Jurupa for two years, when they were withdrawn in 1854.

Louis Robidoux was active and continued to manage his rancho until his death there, in 1868, at the age of seventy-seven. He was survived by his widow and children. Three of the latter still reside in Riverside. His death was a great loss to the community and was felt especially among the other pioneer settlers of Southern California.

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12. Hornbeck, Robidoux's ranch, 85-86.

In 1869, four thousand acres of the Robidoux rancho as well as some acreage of neighboring ranchos was purchased by the California Silk Center Association. Louis Prevost, organizer of the association, a prominent silk grower in Los Angeles, owned a large mulberry tree nursery and cocoonery. He planned the creation of a silk worm colony and chose the Robidoux rancho as an ideal location for his experiment. Shortly after the purchase, Prevost died suddenly and the project was abandoned.<sup>13</sup>

In 1870, the Southern California Colony Association organized by Judge A. J. North, native of Rensselaer County, New York, purchased the land from the silk association, at \$3.50 an acre, for a town site. Under the supervision of Judge North, a town, Jurupa, shortly afterward renamed, Riverside, was laid out. The scarcity of water was the only obstacle in the way of the colony's success. However, this was overcome by the means of an irrigation ditch which diverted the waters of the Santa Ana River for the use of the new town.

Harris Newmark wrote concerning the purchase:<sup>14</sup>

To many persons, the price was quite enough: old Louis Robidoux had long refused to list his portion for taxes, and some one had described the acreage as so dry that even coyotes, in crossing, took along their canteens for safety.

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13. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 390-391.  
14. Ibid., 391.

Judge North extensively advertised in California and the eastern states fine opportunities offered by the colony at Riverside. Soon a number of families took up homesteads there where they engaged in small farming and planted orchards. The town progressed slowly and successfully.

Within a few years after the creation of the new settlement, the old Robidoux rancho became the setting for California's orange growing development. Among the first settlers of Riverside were Mr. and Mrs. Luther C. (Eliza) Tibbets, who went there from the East. Before she started for California, Mrs. Tibbets visited the propagation gardens of the Department of Agriculture at Washington where she secured several fruit trees to plant at her new home. Among the trees she received were two of the Washington navel orange, which had, shortly before that time, been introduced into the United States from Bahia, Brazil. Mrs. Tibbets planted the two orange trees by the door of her small cottage in Riverside, California. She cared for them faithfully. It is said that she carried her dish-water out to them every day because of the scarcity of water. Within a couple of years the two trees bore fruit of such a superior quality that they attracted attention throughout Southern California. Growers of the State budded their seedling

orange groves with buds from the Tibbets navel orange. The entire navel orange industry of California grew up from those two trees. It was an unexpected boom for Riverside, which became one of the world's famous citrus regions. Today the site of Riverside, once, as the bench lands of the Robidoux rancho considered a worthless arid waste, is among the wealthiest regions of the State.<sup>15</sup>

Overlooking the prosperous city with its surrounding picturesque countryside, the hill known as Mt. Robidoux perpetuates the name of the early pioneer. It was so named by Juan Bandini, from whom Louis Robidoux purchased the Jurupa rancho. Near its base, Juan Bautista de Anza camped, in 1774, when he made his first exploration by land to the Pacific Coast. A road winds up to the summit from which is seen the wooded river bed of the Santa Ana, almost waterless in summer. Irrigational engineering has made possible the countless orange groves and fertile fields which extend in all directions, the snow covered Sierras beyond. In 1909, a cross and tablet on the mountain top, dedicated to the memory of Padre Junípero Serra, was unveiled by William Howard Taft. Every Easter morning a pilgrimage and service there draw people from all of California.<sup>16</sup>

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15. J. Boyd, History of Riverside County, 419-431.

16. A. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 122-123.

The site of the old Robidoux home is about a mile west of the Santa Ana River bridge, near the western entrance to Riverside. Only a few ruins remain of the old ranch house, a one-story adobe with broad verandas, typical of early California ranch houses. A few of the many old trees which sheltered the house still stand. The State D.A.R. has placed a Robidoux memorial tablet on the bridge which spans the Santa Ana River near the ranch house site.

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