



## **CITY OF MONTEBELLO HISTORIC CONTEXT REPORT**

### **1. Introduction**

#### **Purpose and Scope**

Architectural Resources Group (ARG) has prepared the following Historic Context Report to provide information about the historic, architectural, and social character of Montebello, California. This report includes a narrative history of Montebello between the pre-contact period and the present day, and is organized around broad themes that have played a significant role in shaping its built environment.

The information contained within this report is intended to help inform the development of the Montebello General Update and Downtown Specific Plan Update, both of which are currently in progress. Promoting awareness of the broad patterns of urban, architectural, and social history that are represented in Montebello's built environment is an essential part of effectively planning for the City's future.

#### **Research Methods**

Between December 2020 and January 2021, ARG conducted extensive research about the origins, development, and evolution of Montebello, focusing on themes related to its built environment and cultural history. The following primary and secondary sources were conducted: the Los Angeles Public Library, the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* and other periodicals; the online collections of the Montebello Historical Society; online image collections of the Los Angeles Public Library, USC Libraries, and California State Library; and ARG's in-house library of architectural books and other publications.

This report was prepared by Andrew Goodrich, AICP, Associate, with oversight by Katie E. Horak, Principal. Mr. Goodrich and Ms. Horak are Architectural Historians and Preservation Planners who meet the *Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications Standards* in the discipline of Architectural History.

### **2. Description of the Community**

The City of Montebello, California is located about nine miles to the southeast of Downtown Los Angeles. Founded at the turn of the twentieth century and incorporated in 1920, Montebello is one of several municipalities in Southeast Los Angeles County that are collectively known as the Gateway Cities, so named because they are equidistant between the urban centers of Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Santa Ana. Compared to other cities in Los Angeles County, Montebello is moderate in size, with a footprint of 8.4 square miles and a population of approximately 63,000.<sup>1</sup> It is bounded by the adjacent cities of Monterey

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<sup>1</sup> City of Montebello, "Demographics," accessed Jan. 2021.



Park and Rosemead on the north, the City of Commerce on the south and west, and Pico Rivera on the east. Much of Montebello's western city limit abuts unincorporated East Los Angeles.

Two prominent natural features near Montebello have influenced patterns of development since the community's inception. Along its northern city limit is an outcropping of chaparral-studded hills that were historically called the La Merced Hills and are now known as the Montebello Hills. Long the site of productive oil wells, the hills create a discernible geographic division between Montebello and the San Gabriel Valley. Montebello's eastern city limit abuts the Rio Hondo, a channelized tributary of the Los Angeles River. The Rio Hondo separates Montebello from Pico Rivera. The northeast corner of the city is adjacent to the Whittier Narrows Dam, which restricts the flow of the Rio Hondo and the San Gabriel River.

Circulation patterns in Montebello generally ascribe to the surrounding topography. Most of the city is oriented around a skewed orthogonal grid. However, as streets approach the hills near the northern city limit they become curvilinear. Major east-west streets in Montebello include Lincoln Avenue, Beverly Boulevard, Whittier Boulevard, Olympic Boulevard, Washington Boulevard, and Telegraph Road. Major north-south streets include Garfield Avenue, Vail Avenue, Greenwood Avenue, and Montebello Boulevard.

The city is served by two major freeways: the Santa Ana Freeway (Interstate 5), which delineates a portion of the city's southern boundary, and the Pomona Freeway (SR-60), which delineates almost all of its northern boundary. Interstate 5 and its associated ramps are built at grade. SR-60 sits slightly above grade and abuts the northern slope of the Montebello Hills. In addition, there are two railroad rights-of-way that transect Montebello: one is located near the geographic center of the city and is operated by the Union Pacific Railroad, and the second is located near the southern city limit and is operated by the BNSF Railway Company. The Union Pacific Line is traversed by Metrolink and Amtrak passenger trains. Within the Montebello city limits is the Montebello/Commerce station, which serves Metrolink's Orange County Line.<sup>2</sup>

Since Montebello's inception, the Union Pacific Railway right-of-way has historically divided the community into two discrete sections: north and south.<sup>3</sup> The area to the north of the railroad tracks contains the historical core of the city and a majority of its residential neighborhoods. A majority of the city's commercial development and open spaces are also concentrated in this area. The area to the south of the railroad tracks contains a concentration of industrial uses, in addition to some residential neighborhoods.

Though Montebello contains a diverse mix of land uses and associated property types – residential, commercial, institutional, industrial, and public and private open spaces – it is generally considered to be a bedroom community. As such, residential uses account for a majority of development in the city. Very generally speaking, residential development consists largely of modest, single-family suburban houses. A lesser number of low-density multi-family dwellings are strung along major arterial streets and also pepper

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<sup>2</sup> Metrolink, "Montebello/Commerce," accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Tina Griego, "A City Divided: North-South Split in Montebello Hurts Business, Shapes Politics," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 10, 1989; Griego, "Old Issues Get New Life as Six Campaign for Two Seats on City Council," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 27, 1991.



many of the established neighborhoods along Whittier Boulevard, in and around the original town site. The majority of Montebello's housing stock was constructed between the 1940s and '70s, though some earlier dwellings are woven into the neighborhoods along Whittier Boulevard.<sup>4</sup> Consistent with the eras in which they were constructed, most houses in the city are designed in modest dialects of the Minimal Traditional or Ranch styles; earlier houses typically embody the Craftsman or Period Revival styles.

Commercial development is generally confined to the city's major vehicular corridors. Prior to the construction of Southern California's expansive freeway network, Whittier Boulevard was the route of U.S. Highway 101 and served as the primary corridor connecting Los Angeles with San Diego.<sup>5</sup> As such, a concentration of retail stores, strip malls, and other auto-oriented commercial uses are strung along the length of Whittier Boulevard. A similar pattern of commercial development exists along Beverly Boulevard.

At the far north end of the city, along the SR-60 corridor, are contemporary commercial uses including a regional mall (the Shops at Montebello) and adjacent shopping center (Montebello Town Square). These uses are physically separated from the rest of the city by the Montebello Hills. While SR-60 demarcates most of Montebello's northern boundary, a small section of the city extends north of the freeway. This peripheral pocket of the city is developed with residences and a memorial park (Resurrection Cemetery).

Public and private institutional uses are interspersed throughout the community. Schools and churches represent the most common types of institutional development, and are generally located along the major arterial streets that frame and transect the city's residential neighborhoods. Municipal services – including a city hall, public library branch, and police station – are clustered in a civic center complex along Beverly Boulevard. A private hospital facility (Beverly Hospital) is also located on Beverly Boulevard. Several public parks are woven into the city's neighborhoods. At the northwest corner of the city is a 120-acre golf course (Montebello Country Club) that is situated at the western foot of the Montebello Hills. 480 acres of privately-owned land in the Montebello Hills constitute the city's largest swath of remaining undeveloped space.<sup>6</sup>

Industrial development is concentrated in the southern half of the city, in the area to the south of Olympic Boulevard and the Union Pacific Railway right-of-way. This area is developed with warehouses, light and heavy manufacturing facilities, freight yards, and other industrial uses.

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<sup>4</sup> Construction dates obtained from the Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Parker, "History of U.S. 101 Route Changes (1924-1964)," accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Montebello Hills Project Moves Forward," *Daily News*, Dec. 11, 2008.



### 3. Development History

#### Early History

Prior to the Spanish colonization of California, what is now the City of Montebello was undeveloped and consisted of vast expanses of flatlands and chapparal-studded hills. Like much of Southern California, the area was inhabited by the Gabrielino-Tongva people and was located within the indigenous world of Tovaangar, which stretched between the Pacific Ocean, the San Bernardino Valley, Saddleback Mountain in Orange County, and the San Gabriel Mountains.<sup>7</sup> The Gabrielino-Tongva have been described in ethnographic accounts as a peaceful group of hunter-gatherers who subsided on small game in addition to the berries, seeds, roots, and nuts derived from the area's native plants. They lived in a network of about 100 ephemeral villages that were typically located in proximity to stable sources of water.<sup>8</sup>

These indigenous settlements were upended upon the arrival of Spanish colonizers in the mid-eighteenth century. In 1769, California was “discovered” by an intrepid group of Spanish explorers led by Gaspar de Portolá, Father Junípero Serra, Juan Crespí, and others, which culminated in the Spanish colonization of Alta California. Upon their conquest of California, the Spanish imposed their own tripartite land use system – *presidios* (military fortifications), *pueblos* (civilian settlements), and *missions* (religious centers) – and through a combination of coercion and force, relocated California's indigenous population away from their ancestral villages and to the missions.

The first site of the San Gabriel Mission was located in present-day Montebello. During the Portolá Expedition, Father Crespí identified the Whittier Narrows area as an ideal location for a mission because of its ample water supplied by the San Gabriel River, its fertile soil, and its abundance of trees that could be used as building material. This area was also located near Tongva settlements, whose inhabitants “would form the basis for the work of the missionaries.”<sup>9</sup> In accordance with Crespí's wishes, the mission was built on the west bank of the Rio Hondo in 1771. Though it initially performed well as a farm and cattle ranch, the mission was destroyed by a devastating flood about four years later and was subsequently relocated to higher and drier ground, in present-day San Gabriel.<sup>10</sup> The original site of the mission (called La Mision Vieja), at the northwest corner of San Gabriel Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue, is designated as a California Historical Landmark (CHL).

During the Spanish era of California (1769-1822), the state's abundant land was carved into large swaths, or *ranchos*, which were in turn conferred to those who were held in high regard with the Spanish government. This practice continued after Mexico won independence from Spain in 1822. What would become Montebello fell within the boundaries of three ranchos during this time: Rancho San Antonio

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<sup>7</sup> Sean Greene and Thomas Curwen, “Mapping the Tongva Villages of L.A.'s Past,” *Los Angeles Times*, May, 9, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “The Founding of Mission San Gabriel,” Mar. 4, 2010, accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; Ian James, “On a Mission: Renovation of San Gabriel Landmark Nears Completion,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 1, 1995.



(south and west, conferred to Antonio Maria Lugo in 1810), Rancho Paso de Bartolo (east, granted to Juan Crispin Perez in 1835), and Rancho La Merced (north, conferred to Casilda Soto de Lobo in 1844).<sup>11</sup>

In 1845, Casilda Soto de Lobo and her three sons erected an adobe residence on a gentle bluff overlooking the Rio Hondo, in what was then the Rancho La Merced. The adobe was subsequently acquired by rancher Juan Matias Sanchez, who lived there until his death in 1885.<sup>12</sup> Known as the Sanchez Adobe, the structure is still standing and is currently occupied by the Montebello Historical Society. The Sanchez Adobe is the oldest known built resource in Montebello, and is a rare example of an extant structure associated with Southern California's Mexican-era roots.

The Montebello area was the site of a decisive moment in the Mexican American War. In 1847, a battalion of about 500 Mexican soldiers faced off against American insurgents in what was known as the Battle of Rio San Gabriel. The battle took place along the banks of the Rio Hondo, and ultimately resulted in the surrender of Los Angeles and Alta California to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Today a plaque, two cannons, and an American flag commemorating the battle are installed at the intersection of Washington Boulevard and Bluff Road in Montebello. The site is recognized as a California Historical Landmark (CHL).

Following the Mexican American War (1846-1848), Mexico reluctantly ceded most of the American Southwest to the United States; California was admitted to the Union in 1850. In theory, the owners of Spanish and Mexican ranchos could retain title to their land; in practice, ownership became a contentious issue due to discrepancies between Mexican and American title law and policies that favored the interests of Americans. The land around Montebello passed through a succession of owners in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In 1885, much of what now encompasses Montebello and East Los Angeles was sold to a consortium of Los Angeles businessmen including banker Isaias Hellman and wholesale grocer Harris Newmark. The businessmen purchased the land from the estate of Alessandro Repetto, an Italian American sheep rancher, for \$60,000, or approximately \$12 per acre.<sup>14</sup>

## Community Origins

Members of the consortium subsequently divided the land among themselves. Approximately 1,200 acres of the Repetto land was given to Newmark and his nephew, Kaspere Cohn. Interested in subdividing and developing the land, Newmark and Cohn enlisted the help of hydraulic engineer William Mulholland to construct a water system that would bring much-needed irrigation to the area. Completion of the

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<sup>11</sup> City of Montebello, "The History of Montebello," accessed Jan. 2021; Glen Creason, *Los Angeles in Maps* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> Montebello Historical Society, "Museum," accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Medina, "Battle of Río San Gabriel and American Exploration of the Sierra Madre," *KCET*, Oct. 28, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> City of Montebello, "The History of Montebello," accessed Jan. 2021.



water system circa 1899 rendered the area suitable for new development. Newmark, Cohn, Mulholland, and their associates incorporated the Montebello Land and Water Company in 1900.<sup>15</sup> It was at the behest of Mulholland that the name “Montebello” was bestowed upon the tract, invoking the Italian word for “beautiful hill” and referencing the hills that framed its northern edge.

When the Montebello Land and Water Company was incorporated, roughly forty acres of the Montebello tract were subdivided into a town site that was originally known as Newmark. Bounded by Cleveland Avenue (north), Los Angeles Avenue (south), First Street (east), and Fifth Street (west), Newmark consisted of 192 parcels of roughly equal size that were marketed as ideal sites for new suburban houses.<sup>16</sup> The town was located along the route of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railway, which was built shortly after the town was platted. It was also bisected by Whittier Avenue (now Boulevard), then the main road between Los Angeles and Whittier. Consistent with prevailing patterns of development at the time, streets, blocks, and lots were oriented around an orthogonal grid.<sup>17</sup>

The rest of the tract was subdivided into five- and ten-parcels that were marketed as sites for agriculture. To entice prospective buyers, promoters of the tract promised that each landowner would be granted access to the ample water supplied by the Montebello Land and Water Company. “Each purchaser of land receives one share of water stock to the acre and water for irrigation will be supplied at the rate of one inch to eight acres,” reported the *Los Angeles Times* upon the opening of the tract in 1900, all but ensuring that anyone who improved the land would be met with success.<sup>18</sup> Among the early investors in the Montebello tract was Mulholland, who had engineered its water system.

Not long after its inception, the name Newmark was scrubbed from the local vernacular, and the entire subdivision – including the town and its agricultural environs – were all referred to as Montebello. The decision to re-name the town allegedly came at the urging of Mulholland, who told Newmark – who was of Jewish lineage – that “no one would buy lots in a town if they thought it was Jewish.”<sup>19</sup>

In its early years, Montebello was aggressively marketed as an agricultural community, notable for its ample amount of developable land, plentiful water, and mild climate that was free of frost. The *Los Angeles Times*, then a key promoter of real estate activity, regularly published articles and advertisements about the tract that touted these attributes. In a 1901 article, the *Times* reported that:

The most extravagant language can not do more than justice to this wonderful spot. In its fertile

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<sup>15</sup> “Incorporations,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan, 11, 1900.

<sup>16</sup> Tract Map MR072 93/94, Jan. 8, 1900, accessed Jan. 2021 via the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “A New Subdivision,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar.16, 1900.

<sup>19</sup> “Early Jews of Los Angeles – Who Was Harris Newmark?” *Adobe Dust* (Newsletter of the Juan Matias Sanchez Adobe Museum), Apr. 2017, 3-4.



loam lie fortunes for the market gardener, the orange grower, or the producer of deciduous fruits. With more water than can be used, even in the driest seasons, it presents a striking contrast to other portions of the southwest...Vegetation flourishes as if by magic. A garden, sprinkled with seeds, springs into a bed of richest growth. Fruits take a mellow sweetness from the air and soil, commanding the highest prices in the market. Vegetables become large, full, and of exceptional quality.<sup>20</sup>

Development in Montebello was slow to start, due in large part to a dearth of transportation infrastructure between the town and Los Angeles. “Montebello has an excellent location,” observed the *Los Angeles Times* in 1907, “but its development has been retarded because of its poor railway connections.”<sup>21</sup> When the Montebello tract opened, there was no streetcar service to the area, and the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad that abutted the town’s southern edge had not yet been built. Though the tract was accessible via Whittier Boulevard, cars were still few and far between.

Nonetheless, investors began to purchase land in Montebello, eager to capitalize on the area’s agricultural potential. Beginning in the early 1900s, many of the tract’s five- and ten-acre parcels were purchased and planted with an assortment of crops. Oranges, berries, apricots, walnuts, barley, alfalfa, and corn were among the many crops that were cultivated in the area. In particular, Montebello became known for its nurseries and ornamental flower fields. The area’s vast expanses of open land were blanketed by “beds of stunning red roses beyond which are acres after acres of pink, white and crimson carnations and expansive fields of variegated sweet-peas, cannas, lilies, violets, marigolds and innumerable other species of flora.”<sup>22</sup> Groups of day trippers from Los Angeles and beyond would arrange auto trips to Montebello to gaze at the flowers. In 1912, the Montebello Women’s Club organized the community’s first annual flower show, which became a beloved community tradition.<sup>23</sup>

The town of Montebello began to develop as the agricultural and floriculture industries flourished. In the 1900s and 1910s, several houses were erected on the blocks on either side of Whittier Boulevard, in what was then the center of town. Reflecting the modest means of those who commissioned them, these houses tended to be small in size and vernacular in style, loosely embodying characteristics of the Craftsman style and other idioms that were popular at the time. Residential development was accompanied by new commercial and institutional buildings that were built to serve the needs of those who lived in the fledgling town. A schoolhouse – Montebello’s first public building – was completed in 1902, and by the end of that year the town also boasted its own store and post office. Several churches and markets were built within the town’s neighborhoods. A large new high school opened in 1909, and by the early 1910s a bustling business district had emerged along Whittier Boulevard, the epicenter being

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<sup>20</sup> “Homes of Luxury,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 10, 1901.

<sup>21</sup> “Montebello,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 17, 1907.

<sup>22</sup> “Flower Garden of Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 1, 1913.

<sup>23</sup> City of Montebello, “The History of Montebello,” accessed Jan. 2021.



near the intersection of Whittier and Fifth Street.<sup>24</sup> An anchor of the business district was the Montebello State Bank, a two-story brick edifice that was constructed in 1912.<sup>25</sup>

One of Montebello's most prominent early institutions was a monastery that occupied 30 acres on the outskirts of town, near the present-day location of City Hall. Chartered in 1905 by an order of Benedictine monks, the monastery was established "specifically to minister to the needs of the Basque population living in the western [United] States."<sup>26</sup> On the land, the monks constructed a large chapel and living quarters, which was intended to "be the central point from which the work of the Benedictines will be carried on through various parts of California, and particularly in the southern part of the State."<sup>27</sup> A new monastery was built in 1912, after the original compound was destroyed by fire.

Agriculture and floriculture were the primary engines driving Montebello's economy during the community's formative years. However, industry also played a heavy hand in sustaining the town's early growth. In 1905, the Simons Brick Company – a manufacturer of red commonface bricks – opened a brickyard in the southern reaches of Montebello, about two miles south of the center of town. Known as Simons Brickyard No. 3, the facility grew into what was described as the single "largest brick-manufacturing plant in the world," occupying 223 acres and producing some 750,000 bricks per day.<sup>28</sup>

### **Oil, Cityhood, and the Advent of the Automobile**

Circa 1917, the Standard Oil Company discovered underground oil reserves in the hills north of Montebello, on land that had once been part of Rancho La Merced and by this time was owned by the locally prominent Baldwin and Temple families. Emboldened by the discovery, Standard Oil and other companies leased a large amount of land in the hills under agreements by which the owners were given royalties for use of their land.<sup>29</sup> From a number of new wells that were drilled, the oil companies extracted an extraordinary amount of crude, and almost overnight the Montebello area became one of California's most lucrative sites for oil production. One of the wells drilled by Standard Oil, for instance, yielded "10,000 barrels daily, making it the biggest producer in the State" upon its discovery.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "New High School," *Los Angeles Times*, Jul. 4, 1909; "Home of Montebello State Bank," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 1, 1912.

<sup>25</sup> "Home of Montebello State Bank," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 1, 1912.

<sup>26</sup> "Montebello Monastery," *Adobe Dust* (Newsletter of the Juan Matias Sanchez Adobe Museum), Mar. 2016, 2.

<sup>27</sup> "Big Move of Benedectines," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 19, 1905.

<sup>28</sup> "Brick Plant is Small City," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 14, 1925.

<sup>29</sup> Paul R. Spitzzeri, "Drilling for Black Gold on the Temple Lease, Montebello Oil Field, June 1917," accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> "Brings in Two New Oil Wells," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1917.





The discovery of oil was a boon to Montebello. Along with agriculture and manufacturing, oil production became one of the key engines driving the town's economy, ushering in a significant wave of new development that paved the way for incorporation. In September 1920, a group of Montebello residents petitioned the County Board of Supervisors to become an incorporated city. The following month, the issue was taken to a vote and was overwhelmingly approved, with 397 residents voting in favor of incorporation and 97 against.<sup>31</sup> The staunchest opponents of incorporation were the oil companies who operated in the hills and were concerned about increases in local taxes.

By the 1920s, Montebello had unequivocally shed its rural roots and now resembled a full-fledged suburban community. Its population, once consisting of only a few hundred people, swelled to approximately 6,000 residents. To house the growing population, a number of new houses were erected on the town's residential streets, filling in its sparsely-developed blocks.<sup>32</sup> New subdivisions were also platted in more peripheral areas on the outskirts of town. As in previous years, houses constructed at this time tended to be relatively humble with respect to size, scale, and style, catering to those of modest means who were employed in the area's farms and oil fields. Most were designed in modest dialects of the Period Revival styles that were popular at the time.

The tax revenue that resulted from incorporation also provided funding for a variety of municipal improvements. In 1922, city officials proudly announced the installation of an electric streetlight system comprising "regular, modern, watt-eating electrical lamps."<sup>33</sup> Reporting on development activity in Montebello in 1924, the *Los Angeles Times* remarked that "there are twenty miles of improved streets, and a splendid ornamental lighting system graces eight blocks of the business district."<sup>34</sup> By 1926, Montebello was home to seven churches, six schools, a commercial core anchored by two banks, and institutions including a Masonic lodge and a women's clubhouse. Two new civic buildings – a city hall and a library (now the Montebello Senior Center) – were in the works, as was a park (Montebello City Park).<sup>35</sup>

Montebello's prosperity in the 1920s was also shaped in part by the advent of the car and car culture. Once a luxury item out of reach to the average person, the passenger car had become much more widely available by the 1920s, as advances in mass production allowed for cars to be produced in mass quantities and rendered them more affordable.<sup>36</sup> Whittier Boulevard – which had long been the main

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<sup>31</sup> "Montebello to Become a City?" *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 4, 1920; "Big Majority in Montebello Votes for City," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 10, 1920.

<sup>32</sup> Development patterns gleaned from Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps dated 1925.

<sup>33</sup> "Montebello to Celebrate New Electric Lights," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 18, 1922.

<sup>34</sup> "Rapid Development Registered in Three Thriving Communities Near Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 22, 1924.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid; "Montebello in Prosperous Era," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 28, 1926.

<sup>36</sup> City of Los Angeles, "SurveyLA: Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, Context: Commercial Development, Theme: Commercial Development and the Automobile," Aug. 2016, 5.



road between Los Angeles and Whittier – became a part of the historical alignment of US 101, the principal thoroughfare between Los Angeles and San Diego. From central Los Angeles, US 101 traveled down Whittier Boulevard through Belvedere Gardens (now East Los Angeles), Montebello, and Pico Rivera, passed through Whittier, and then continued south into Orange County.<sup>37</sup> By the 1920s, the stretch of Whittier Boulevard in Montebello was peppered with businesses that catered to the motoring public. In addition to service stations, garages, and repair shops, the boulevard featured various other commercial uses – motels, strip malls with ample on-site parking, and restaurants with bold, eye-catching forms and signage – that were designed to attract the attention of passersby. These included The Oil Can, a diner building that was literally shaped like an oil can, and Currie’s Ice Cream parlor, which featured an enormous rooftop sign in the shape of an ice cream cone.<sup>38</sup> Both buildings have been razed.

Most new development in Montebello at this time was located near the original townsite, along Whittier Boulevard and north of the Union Pacific Railway (formerly the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad) right-of-way. However, by the 1920s a second, lesser-known population center had also emerged on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. The Simons Brickyard facility in South Montebello had built a company town for its workforce, most of whom were immigrants from the Mexican states of Michoacán, Guanajuato and Jalisco. The town, which was formally called “Simons” but was known colloquially as “El Pueblo de Simons,” was a sophisticated operation, complete with “its own stores, post office, bank, school, churches, recreation centers, moving-picture theater, billiard halls,” and hundreds of dwellings to house the company’s laborers and their families.<sup>39</sup> In its heyday, the town even had three baseball teams and its own company band.<sup>40</sup> Most of Simons has since been redeveloped, but vestiges of the former company town remain in the form of small houses along Date Street and Español Avenue.

The vast expanses of open land on the periphery of Montebello – especially the flatlands to the immediate west and north of the town – continued to be dominated by agricultural uses. One of the largest and most successful agricultural operations in the area was the Wilcox Nursery, a 30-acre nursery that was founded by Roy Wilcox in 1919. The Wilcox Nursery was known for growing flowers and ornamental trees – it specialized in the cultivation of Kentia palms and boxwoods – but also produced many roses and other popular varieties of cut flowers.<sup>41</sup> Other nurseries in the area included those of C.J. Groen, H.N. Gage, Merrick Norris and Sons, Figueroa Nurseries, and the Germain Seed Company.<sup>42</sup> As noted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1927, “flower growing represents only a part of Montebello’s

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<sup>37</sup> Scott Parker, “History of U.S. 101 Route Changes (1924-1964),” accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Gleaned from historic photos obtained from the USC Digital Library, Dick Whittington Collection, accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>39</sup> “Brick Plant is Small City,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jun. 14, 1925.

<sup>40</sup> Virginia Escalante, “Montebello’s Past Rooted in Brickworkers’ Labor,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 23, 1982.

<sup>41</sup> “A Miniature Forest,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jul. 10, 1921; Steve Chawkins, “Market for Exotic Palms Goes to Pot,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 26, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Helen W. King, “Montebello Area Famed for Production of Flowers and Ornamentals,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 25, 1927.



activities, but it contributes a tremendous amount to the progress of the busy little city. The companies operating there employ a large number of people, and nearly all of these live and trade in the town.”<sup>43</sup>

Prior to World War II, Montebello was home to a Japanese American population.<sup>44</sup> The area’s Japanese American community primarily worked in agriculture, growing flowers and working as truck farmers.<sup>45</sup> The presence of a Japanese American community is noted in a *Los Angeles Times* article dated 1927, which states that “numerous small nurseries operated by Japanese gardeners” exist near Montebello.<sup>46</sup>

### Industry and Subdivision

In the 1920s, several of the communities adjacent to Montebello became epicenters of industrial development. Industrial development in Southern California began to the east of Downtown Los Angeles, between Alameda Street and the Los Angeles River, and then gravitated to the south and east to communities including Vernon and the City of Commerce. In 1922, a syndicate of Chicago-based industrialists established the Central Manufacturing District, a tract comprising 300 acres to the south and east of Downtown Los Angeles. The district encompassed land that is now located in Vernon and the City of Commerce.<sup>47</sup> The surrounding areas thereafter evolved into hubs of heavy industrial activity. The industries that settled to the south and east of Los Angeles were attracted to its ample amount of developable land, its convenient access to major freight rail lines, and the presence of a local labor force.

In 1927, the Pacific Goodrich Rubber Company erected a new, four-million-dollar manufacturing plant on Ninth Street (now Olympic Boulevard) in East Los Angeles, bringing with it scores of new factory jobs.<sup>48</sup> Shortly thereafter, in 1929, the Samson Tire and Rubber Corporation constructed a massive, Assyrian style factory plant in what is now the City of Commerce.<sup>49</sup> Other industrial employers whose plants were located near Montebello at this time included the Kittinger Furniture Company, the Willys-Overland Company, the Union Pacific Shops, the Willard Storage Battery Company, the Consolidated Steel

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> National Park Service, “Prewar Japanese/Japanese American Communities and Evacuation Experienced of Manzanar Evacuee Population,” accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Mike Sonksen, “On Location: Montebello,” *KCET*, May 22, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> King, “Montebello Area Famed for Production of Flowers and Ornamentals,” 1927.

<sup>47</sup> “Repetto Park,” promotional pamphlet, ca. 1929, accessed Jan. 2021 via Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps, Inc.

<sup>48</sup> “East Side Held Due For Spurt,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 4, 1927.

<sup>49</sup> Leon Whiteson, “An Assyrian Palace is Reborn as a Discount Outlet in a Fusion of Style and Savvy,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 3, 1991.



Corporation, and the Crane Company.<sup>50</sup> All provided an ample number of jobs to those who live nearby.

The proliferation of heavy industry created new demand for housing among those who were employed at the factories. This, in turn, resulted in the subdivision and development of large housing tracts and planned communities in Montebello and adjacent communities. Beginning in the mid-1920s, developers began acquiring large tracts of land to the west of Montebello that had been used for agriculture and cattle grazing. One of the largest and most prolific developers in the area was the J.B. Ransom Corporation. In 1925, the company acquired a large piece of property to the south of Whittier Boulevard known as the Babbitt Ranch and subdivided it into a planned community called Montebello Park.<sup>51</sup> The subdivision, located partially within the city limits of Montebello and partially within the adjacent community of unincorporated East Los Angeles, was one of the largest developments in the area, comprising hundreds of modest residential parcels arranged around a network of gently curving streets.

Noted landscape architects Wilbur Cook and George Hall (Cook and Hall) of Los Angeles were retained by the developers to landscape the Montebello Park, for which they proposed “thirty acres of parks, thousands of trees, flowers and shrubs with pedestrian walkways that provide the maximum of open areas.”<sup>52</sup> The goal was to create a well-planned community for the working-class households that the developers aspired to attract. Speaking of the landscape plan for Montebello Park, Cook remarked that:

It is more worthy, to my mind, to create a beautiful home community, with parks, trees and flowers, for the working man than for the millionaire...The millionaire need not suffer for the comforts and luxuries of a large home and beautiful surroundings, for he has many diversions, but the man who works hard all day certainly deserves comfortable and enjoyable home surroundings to retire to after his day’s work.<sup>53</sup>

The Ransom Corporation aggressively pursued other development opportunities nearby. In 1927, the company acquired the Bicknell Ranch, a 491-acre property to the north of Montebello Park, and announced plans to develop the virgin land with a large new residential subdivision. About 120 acres of the subdivision were aside for a golf course, laying the groundwork for the present-day Montebello Country Club. The golf course was designed by landscape architects Cook, Hall and Cornell, and was anchored by a resplendent Spanish Colonial Revival style clubhouse designed by architect Claud

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<sup>50</sup> City of Los Angeles, “SurveyLA: Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, Context: Industrial Development, 1850-1980,” Sept. 2011, rev. Feb. 2018, 9.

<sup>51</sup> “Rancho To Be Developed,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 26, 1925.

<sup>52</sup> “Montebello Park To Be Landscaped,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 30, 1925.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



Beelman.<sup>54</sup> Originally a privately owned facility, the course was sold to the City of Montebello in 1941.<sup>55</sup>

In 1929, the Ransom Corporation acquired another large tract of land to the north of Montebello Park and to the west of the golf course. Comprising 852 acres, the acquisition was previously a part of the Repetto Ranch, which “was held intact during the thirty-year period in which Los Angeles has materialized its greatest growth.”<sup>56</sup> Once acquired by Ransom, the land was subdivided into yet another large subdivision called Repetto Park. Like Montebello Park, Repetto Park skirted the boundaries of Montebello and East Los Angeles, and it too was geared toward families in search of quality, affordable dwellings. Advertisements for Repetto Park emphasize the tract’s adjacency to nearby industrial plants and factories, indicating that the tract was subdivided and developed with factory workers in mind.

Since Montebello’s inception, Whittier Boulevard had served as the city’s primary east-west street. However, when the car had come of age by the mid-1920s traffic conditions along Whittier Boulevard and other major Los Angeles roads became a problem of increasing magnitude. In 1924, area officials commissioned a study called *A Major Traffic Street Plan for Los Angeles*, which, among other recommendations, proposed a network of new roadways throughout the region to better manage traffic and alleviate congestion. Among the new roads proposed in the plan was Beverly Boulevard, which would pass through Montebello and Whittier and provide an alternative to the heavily trafficked Whittier Boulevard.<sup>57</sup> The four-mile stretch of Beverly Boulevard within Montebello was completed in 1927, passing directly through the future Repetto Park tract and opening up this area of the city to growth.<sup>58</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, development in Montebello was on an upward trajectory. However, as the economic impacts of the Great Depression began to take effect in the early 1930s, additional development in the city was stymied. While a handful of model houses had been erected in the Ransom Corporation’s expansive tracts on the west end of town, additional development within these neighborhoods was meager during the 1930s, leaving swaths of previously subdivided land undeveloped. The limited amount of new development that took place in Montebello at this time consisted largely of individual houses in established neighborhoods. There also continued to be some commercial development along Montebello’s major corridors at this time. In 1937, famed theater architect S. Charles Lee renovated the Vogue Theatre on Whittier Boulevard in the then-popular Streamline Moderne style.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Montebello Park Country Club, Montebello, 1927,” map accessed Jan. 2021 via the UCLA Library.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “East Side Area Will Be Opened,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 24, 1929.

<sup>57</sup> “A Major Traffic Street Plan for Los Angeles,” prepared by Frederick Law Olmsted Harland Bartholomew and Charles Henry Cheney, May 1924, 22-23, 36.

<sup>58</sup> “Boulevard Completion Celebrated,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 9, 1927.

<sup>59</sup> Online Archive of California, “Finding Aid for the S. Charles Lee Papers,” Oct. 9, 2017.



Compared to broad regional and national trends, Montebello fared somewhat better during the Depression era in that its development significantly slowed but did not grind to a complete halt. This may be attributed to the presence of large industrial plants in the area that provided much-needed jobs.

### **Postwar Development and Suburbanization**

Like many communities in Southern California, Montebello witnessed an unprecedented wave of growth after World War II, transforming it from an agricultural community dotted by oil fields into a sprawling postwar suburb. Rapid development in the postwar era is typically attributed to an array of factors including a heightened demand for new and affordable housing, particularly among military veterans who had recently returned from World War II; federal policies and programs that promoted homeownership and the mass construction of detached, single-family dwellings; proliferation of the car and expansion of the regional network of roads and highways; and pent-up consumer demand.

The swift suburbanization of Montebello was hastened by the construction of a vast network of freeways throughout Southern California, which significantly improved connectivity between the region's major employment and population centers. The freeways rendered peripheral communities like Montebello easier to access by car and opened up swaths of agricultural land to new suburban development.

Beginning in the mid-1940s, California's State Division of Highways broke ground on the Santa Ana Freeway (Interstate 5) through the communities of southeast Los Angeles County. The freeway originated at the Four Level Interchange in Downtown Los Angeles, charted a diagonal course through the Gateway Cities, along Telegraph Road; and continued south into Orange County. The freeway was completed in segments between 1947 and 1956, and reached as far south as Montebello in 1953.<sup>60</sup>

Planning of the Pomona Freeway (SR-60) commence shortly thereafter, in the late 1950s. Transportation officials considered several possible routes for the freeway, one of which would have passed directly through the center of Montebello, lopped off a portion of the Montebello Country Club, and severed the community into two halves. Montebello officials lobbied against that route, instead advocating for a northern alignment to the north that approximated the boundary between Montebello and Monterey Park and skirted the northern slope of the Montebello Hills.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, this alternative alignment was selected, and the freeway was constructed between the mid and late-1960s.<sup>62</sup>

Buoyed by the incredible demand for new housing, vacant parcels in existing residential tracts like Montebello Park and Repetto Park – both of which had been subdivided in the 1920s but had then sat mostly dormant during the Depression years – were swiftly filled in with new suburban houses

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<sup>60</sup> "Three New Freeway Links to Open for Traffic Monday," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug.15,1953.

<sup>61</sup> "Two Cities Deadlocked on Route of Freeway," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1958.

<sup>62</sup> Robert S. Diamond, "State Moves Ahead on Pomona Freeway," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 25,1964.



between the late 1940s and early 1950s. By the 1950s, these tracts were built out. By virtue of the sheer number of new houses that were constructed within these tracts – almost all of which were designed in the Minimal Traditional style that was popular at the time– the tracts took on the essential character of postwar suburban neighborhoods, despite the fact that they had been planned and platted decades prior. Similar patterns of infill development shaped the established residential blocks along Whittier Boulevard at this time, rounding out patterns of development in the city’s historic core.

Through the 1960s, almost all of the new suburban development in Montebello took place in the area south of Lincoln Avenue. North of Lincoln Avenue were the Montebello Hills, which continued to yield a considerable amount of crude and continued to be owned by oil interests. However, over time many of the area’s once-productive wells were depleted, and the oil companies sold off portions of their land to developers. These interests, in turn, subdivided the hilly terrain into a number of large new suburban tracts. Consistent with prevailing trends in planning and subdivision design at the time, these new tracts were generally oriented around curvilinear networks of streets and cul-de-sacs, distinguishing them from the orthogonal orientation and gridded streets of earlier neighborhoods. The houses within these new tracts tended to be designed in the Ranch style.

As the trajectory of residential development in Montebello moved away from the downtown core and into the northern section of the city, so too did the city’s public institutions. In 1962, the Montebello City Council authorized construction a new civic center at Beverly Boulevard and Maple Avenue, on the former site of the Benedictine monastery.<sup>63</sup> The site that was selected for the civic center was located about a mile to the north and west of the city’s existing civic buildings, which were concentrated downtown. The new civic center complex was anchored by a modern city hall building, which was constructed in 1963. Designed by architect William Allen of Los Angeles, who specialized in civic architecture, the new Montebello City Hall was designed in the Mid-Century Modern style and stood as a bold testament to the city’s remarkable growth in the postwar period. Allen also designed a new public library and police station within the civic center complex, both of which were erected in 1964.<sup>64</sup>

South Montebello continued to be dominated by industrial uses in the postwar period. Along with the adjacent communities Commerce, Vernon, and East Los Angeles, all of which had significant concentrations of industrial development, the industrial landscape of Montebello benefited from the construction of Interstate 5 and continued to be well-served by the freight rail line that paralleled the course of the freeway. In 1948, Helms Bakery, one of Southern California’s largest distributors of bread and other baked goods, opened a second production plant in Montebello at 480 S. Vail Avenue (now Bimbo Bakeries).<sup>65</sup> In 1969, Helms shut down its original plant in West Los Angeles and moved its entire

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<sup>63</sup> “Council Oks Montebello City Hall Plans,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 30, 1962.

<sup>64</sup> “Montebello Library Tentative Plans OK’d,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 22, 1964; Montebello Police Department, “Our History,” accessed Jan. 2021.

<sup>65</sup> “32 Years Serving the Southland,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 3, 1963.



production apparatus to Montebello.<sup>66</sup> Kaiser Steel operated a fabrication plant on Telegraph Road in Montebello in the 1950s and '60s. Other industries in Montebello at this time included Finley's Color Laboratory, processors of color film; the Time Trucking Company, a commercial trucking enterprise; and the Transicold Corporation, major suppliers of truck and trailer refrigeration systems. Lever Brothers operated a large soap and detergent manufacturing plant nearby in the City of Commerce.<sup>67</sup> Though it fell outside of the city limits, the factory employed many Montebello residents.

The Simons Brick Company, one of the city's oldest largest and oldest industrial plants, closed its Montebello brickyard in 1952. New methods of construction that had been developed and honed during World War II emphasized the use of wood and prefabricated materials, rendering structural brick obsolete. "Simons brick homes didn't suit the tastes or needs of subdivisions built with hastily erected prefabricated wallboard and stucco," which pushed the company to wind down its operations.<sup>68</sup> The 245-acre site of the former brickyard – bounded by Vail Avenue (west), Greenwood Avenue (east), Date Street (north), and the BNSF Railway right-of-way (south) – was sold in 1953 and subsequently converted into a modern industrial tract. After its sale, the site was redeveloped with a walnut shelling plant operated by the Walnut Growers Association, utility warehouses for the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company and Western Electric Company, and warehousing facilities for the Vons Grocery Company.<sup>69</sup>

Montebello was largely built out by the 1970s. "In some cases, businesses could modernize their buildings and industrial firms could make more efficient use of the land," noted the *Los Angeles Times* in 1979, "but with the exception of its hills, most of Montebello is developed."<sup>70</sup> The only remaining developable land in the city was located in the Montebello Hills, which were still used for oil production.

### Contemporary Development

Since the 1970s, development efforts in Montebello have focused on the redevelopment of the Montebello Hills. Though the hills had been productive sites for oil extraction for much of the twentieth century, the wells were eventually depleted, and oil companies were selling off portions of the land.

In 1974, city officials designated 800 acres of the Montebello Hills as a redevelopment project area. Under the auspices of the Community Redevelopment Act, state enabling legislation that permitted local governments to target blight and attract private investment, the city could "make use of tax increments

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<sup>66</sup> "Helms L.A. Production Unit Closed," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 28, 1969.

<sup>67</sup> "Start Made on Huge Lever Bros. Plant Here," *Los Angeles Times*, Jul. 24, 1949.

<sup>68</sup> Cecilia Rasumussen, "Brick Firm Cemented Lives, Communities," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 6, 1995.

<sup>69</sup> "Brickyard Lands Bring \$2,485,000," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 16, 1953.

<sup>70</sup> "Melting Pot of the Southeast," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 23, 1979.





to build streets and storm drains and provide power” by establishing the redevelopment project area<sup>71</sup> Tax increment financing also provided mechanisms whereby the city could recruit private developers to improve the land. Designation of the redevelopment project area ushered in a significant wave of new development in subsequent years. Several new housing tracts totaling hundreds of new houses were developed in the Montebello Hills. By 1977, 978 new single-family residences had been built within the redevelopment project area, adding thousands of new people to the city’s population.<sup>72</sup>

In 1980, city officials approved the construction of a large new mall at the northern edge of the city, adjacent to the Pomona Freeway. The mall site occupied land that had long been owned by the Chevron Land and Development Company.<sup>73</sup> Ground was broken in 1984; construction was complete in 1985. Designed by Gruen Associates of Los Angeles, the multi-level complex spanned 60 acres and was anchored by three department stores: Mervyn’s, J.C. Penney, and the May Company. Its styling embodied popular architectural trends of the era, with “a color scheme of warm shades of terra cotta and sand” and an exterior composed of “rough-textured split-faced block with reflective glass vaults.”<sup>74</sup> Inside, it was lit by “barrel-vaulted skylights [that] run the entire length of the mall.”<sup>75</sup> The mall was, and continues to be an important commercial anchor of Montebello and a regional shopping destination.

In 1990, the city approved the construction of a 20-acre commercial center on a large parcel of land across the street from the mall.<sup>76</sup> Known as Montebello Town Square, the project is anchored by several large retail chains and a movie theater. It complements the adjacent mall and solidifies this area of the city as a regional commercial center. In 1993, city officials approved a \$6.7 million proposal to renovate the Montebello County Club, resulting in a comprehensive redesign of the golf course, replacement of its existing buildings and facilities, and construction of a new hotel in the late 1990s.<sup>77</sup>

Recent development activity in the city has involved the proposed construction of a large new housing development in the Montebello Hills, as outlined in the 2009 Montebello Hills Specific Plan. The new development would entail the construction of up to 1,200 new residential units in an area bounded by Lincoln Avenue and Montebello and San Gabriel boulevards. The development “is planned as a ‘walkable’ community with a pedestrian friendly street system including walkways separated from the street by

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Barber, “Development of Montebello Hills Opens New Era,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jul. 3, 1977.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Rebecca Trounson, “Pact Signed to Develop Shopping Mall,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 25, 1980.

<sup>74</sup> “95-Million Montebello Shopping Center to Open,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 15, 1985.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Tina Griego, “Montebello in the Driver’s Seat for Auto Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct.14, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> “Montebello: City OKs \$6.7-Million Plan to Renovate Golf Course,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 7, 1993.



landscaped, tree-lined parkways.”<sup>78</sup> Two-thirds of the site would be maintained as open space with trails, public and private parka, and a nature reserve.<sup>79</sup> Construction is expected to begin in the near future.

Like many of the suburban communities in Southeast Los Angeles County, Montebello’s population has become increasingly diverse over time. Today the community is home to a large Mexican American population, and roughly 80 percent of Montebello residents have Hispanic or Latino origin.<sup>80</sup> The city is also home to a sizable Armenian American population. In 1968 a 75-foot-tall concrete tower dedicated to the victims of the 1915 Armenian Genocide (the Armenian Genocide Martyrs’ Monument) was erected in Montebello’s Bicknell Park. It continues to be one of the city’s most prominent visual features.

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<sup>78</sup> “Montebello Hills Draft Specific Plan,” prepared by TRG Land, Inc. et al., Mar. 2009, 1-5.

<sup>79</sup> Mike Sprague, “Long-Delayed Montebello Hills Project Clears Hurdle for First 349 Homes,” *Whittier Daily News*, Jan. 13, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> City of Montebello, “Demographics,” accessed Jan. 2021.



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