



A History of Arden Oaks

Before The Gold Rush to 1905

The first residents of what is now Arden Oaks were the Nisenan (also called the Southern Maidu), an indigenous people of California who inhabited the Yuba River and American River watersheds. The area now known as Arden Arcade was a small part of a Mexican land grant that was deeded to John Sutter, a Swiss immigrant who founded the first inland settlement in Northern California and built his renowned Sutter's Fort in 1839.

Sutter negotiated the land grant from the Mexican governor Manuel Micheltoarena, and in 1844, Sutter gave Eliab Grimes 44,000 acres of the land grant, an area that encompassed about eight miles north of and along the American River. Grimes called it Rancho Del Paso ("Ranch of the Pass") because it was on the road to the pass of the American River through the Sierra. Grimes died in 1848, and left the land to his nephew Hiram Grimes. When California became part of the United States with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty provided that the land grants would be honored. Grimes sold the land to San Francisco trader Samuel Norris in 1852, who in turn, then sold it to James Ben Ali Haggin in 1862.

From 1862 to 1905, Haggin was famous for breeding race horses on this land, including the winner of the 12th Kentucky Derby. He built a railroad spur here to ship his horses all over the world, but mostly he sent the horses to Kentucky. Del Paso Country Club was developed in 1919 from a portion of this ranch. In 1905, Orlando Robertson bought the Rancho Del Paso for \$1.5 million for his Sacramento Colonization Company.

The Early 20th Century and the Beginning of Arden Oaks

Orlando Robertson was a land speculator who came from Arden Hills, Minnesota, which is most likely where the name "Arden" originated. Robertson laid out the streets and developed large tracts of land for sale throughout the area we now know as "Arden Arcade." He chose street names that reflected the inventors of the period: Watt, Edison, Howe, Bell, etc. He advertised the sale of the tracts as an excellent area for farming, with its fertile soils and reliable water supply. At one time, this was one of the major hop growing regions of the world.

The horse breeding history of the area attracted Steve Williams, a developer, horseman, and pilot, who was looking for land to develop into a neighborhood with an appeal to those who loved the open spaces and desired room for horses. He and his brother Frank "Squeaky" Williams were responsible for developing the 435 acres that we know today

as Arden Oaks. His dream was to develop estate-sized lots with horse trails in and around the neighborhood. On August 16, 1945 this dream was realized with the recording of the 60-lot Arden Oaks, Unit 1, which featured lots ranging from 0.8 of an acre to over 3 acres that at the time sold from \$2,800 to \$9,000.

Along with the recording of the Arden Oaks development was the recording of various conditions, covenants, and restrictions (CC&Rs) that governed lot size, setbacks, and other controls intended to preserve the concept of the subdivision envisioned by the Williams brothers. These private CC&Rs were applicable to all lots in Arden Oaks. The original concept was to create a neighborhood of large, estate-sized lots with single-family homes, where each property owner could have their own home and have access to “horse properties” without each property needing an attached paddock and arena for housing and exercising their horses. Their innovative idea was to develop a neighborhood with ten-foot-wide trails meandering between the lots and leading to a common-area horse stable and related facilities.

At that time, the predominant style of architecture was single-story, ranch-style homes with split rail fences, all of which fit with the intended feel of living out in the country with horses. There are still a few original ranch-style homes remaining in the neighborhood, but the horses are long gone (except for the stables on Rockwood), and the horse trails were eventually either absorbed by adjacent property owners or fell into disuse and are now no longer visible. The original central area paddocks and riding club arena were eventually discontinued, and the land where they were located was subdivided for homes on two new streets, both of which were named “Riding Club Lane.”

The original CC&Rs and other zoning controls established a few restrictions that worked to enhance the value of the lots in the neighborhood. Among those early controls were provisions that no parcel can be divided more than twice. There was such a demand for estate-sized lots averaging from one half to several acres that between December 1945 and June 1954, Arden Oaks, Units 2 through 6, added close to 200 more lots to the section. According to Steve Williams, all of the new lots were sold in a short time, and some lots were later subdivided into smaller parcels for those who did not have an interest in having horse property.

David Post describes how his father, A. Alan Post, bought one of the smaller lots in 1946 on what was then called Vista Road, now Rockwood Drive. His father personally built a house, where he dug his own swimming pool by hand, and his wife, Helen Post, was responsible for the electrical and plumbing in the house. Theirs was just the sixth house built in Arden Oaks. Alan and Helen Post lived there for the rest of their lives, until 2011, and today, his grandson, Matt Post, and his family live there. In 1972, David and his wife Susan purchased a house on Winding Creek Road where they continue to live today; that house was among the first five homes ever built in Arden Oaks, not far from the home where David grew up.

David fondly recalls his time while growing up in Arden Oaks, playing in vast open fields dotted with huge oak trees and jackrabbits everywhere. The creeks were filled with crawdads, frogs, toads, and pollywogs, and he remembers finding a large king snake crawling across his front yard. In those days, all the mailboxes for the neighborhood were on Watt Avenue, a two-lane road at the time, and the volunteer firemen were his neighbors just down the street. He remembers a Swiss goat herder, who lived in a shack at what is now Country Club Center, and he would herd his goats through Arden Oaks almost everyday. The goat herder spoke very little English, but he would bring berries and grapes to David's mother, who would make jam for him in exchange.



Arden Oaks, 1946. Photos courtesy of David and Susan Post

The tradition of the Arden Oaks Fourth of July parade started during the 1960s. Although the goat herder was gone by then, the early parades were led by a goat named Hattie, who pulled a goat cart decorated with crepe paper, and the (human) kids would pile into the goat cart to be pulled through the neighborhood. Documentation of one of the early parades described 250 people attending, with about 285 cups of lemonade being served. After the parade, there was a program and watermelon at one of the neighbor's homes, and awards were given for oration, best musical and choral group (the winning 30-member group was awarded four and a half gallons of ice cream), pie eaters, and a wide variety of costumes. Fall was often accompanied by large bonfires of burning leaves. To celebrate the holidays, there was candle-light caroling throughout the neighborhood.



Arden Oaks Fourth of July parade, circa 1960s.

Late 20th Century and Development of Arden Oaks

By the 1970s, Arden Oaks had evolved into one of the most desirable locations in Sacramento, with a predominance of homes that were selling in the range of \$125,000 to \$400,000 and featuring tennis courts, swimming pools, and secluded park-like settings. There remained a country-like atmosphere, one-story ranch-style homes, split rail fences, no sidewalks, and an abundance of majestic old oak trees. Adjacent to Watt Avenue, Arden Way, and Eastern Avenue, Arden Oaks had become a residential oasis amidst growing commercial development in the area.

In the late 1970s, the original CC&Rs expired. In the absence of these private zoning controls, there began a series of lot splits within Arden Oaks that technically complied with the County zoning codes and regulations but would not have been allowed under the now expired CC&Rs. This upset residents and the neighborhood at large. Because of the lot splits, a number of lots in the neighborhood became smaller and a large number of new homes of varying styles were built throughout the neighborhood. During the 1980s and 1990s, Arden Oaks began to further evolve from open fields and horse trails peppered with 30-year-old ranch-style homes into a sophisticated neighborhood of multi-level luxury estates.

Then in 1980, the County Board of Supervisors adopted a Neighborhood Preservation Area (NPA) ordinance for Arden Oaks, as well as for a number of other older, established neighborhoods in other parts of the county. These new NPAs were all distinct in their provisions and controls, but all were intended to preserve the unique qualities of each neighborhood where they applied. As a result of the Arden Oaks NPA, specifically the requirement for a minimum lot size and minimum front yard setback, the number of lot splits was substantially reduced and eventually eliminated. The setbacks in the NPA were generally consistent with the original CC&Rs, and homes that did not meet the new setback requirements in the NPA were “grandfathered in” and did not require any changes.

The Arden Oaks NPA is codified under Title V, Chapter 31 of the County Zoning Code. As stated in the NPA, its intent is “to preserve and protect the existing single-family residential estate atmosphere . . . , to preserve the unique social, architectural and environmental characteristics of the Arden Oaks area, and to prevent further encroachment of commercial uses in the area.”

The NPA and Further Development of Arden Oaks into the 21st Century

In the late 1980s, there was increasing interest by residents to remodel their homes and, in some cases, redevelop lots. Many of the original single-story ranch homes were now over forty years old, and residents either wanted to tear them down or substantially remodel them. The original construction of a two-story mansion on Maple Glen Road touched off a lot of controversy at the time, partially because of the fill that was added to raise the level of the lot as well as its overall massing and ornate style. Some neighbors at the time likened it to a train station. The controversy grew into infamy when the owners, one of whom fled the country, after allegedly setting the home on fire in an effort to collect insurance proceeds.

In 1989, Sacramento County amended the Arden Oaks NPA for the first time in an effort to make it more comprehensive. The amended NPA was more detailed and added a two-story height limitation to any new homes being built in the neighborhood. During the early to mid 1990s, as a result of economic conditions, the remodeling and reconstruction boom in the neighborhood started to flatten out but then picked up again in the late 1990s. With older homes selling for significantly more than they ever had previously, home buyers and residents alike realized that the value of Arden Oaks real estate was substantially in the large lots more so than in the houses built on those lots. With the increase in lot values, newly constructed homes began getting larger than the ranch-style homes they replaced. The new millennium continued that trend, with extensive renovations and new construction of large, two-story mansions and wrought-iron fencing.

Nevertheless, despite the booming growth of the neighborhood, the Arden Oaks sense of community prevailed and even expanded in certain respects. The tradition of the Fourth of July parade continued, with the addition of sack races, pie-eating contests, and water balloon tosses. During the 1990s, the neighborhood began a new event, an annual fall barbecue, where the entire neighborhood is invited to share a meal and music together. In December each year, the children (and adults) all looked forward to riding in the horse-drawn, hay-filled wagon that clip-clopped through the neighborhood, where everyone would sing holiday songs. The hayride would end at a neighbor's house for a final treat of hot cocoa and cookies.

During the early 2000s, as homes were becoming larger and larger and the green space around the newly constructed homes was becoming more scarce, there was a renewed effort to amend the Arden Oaks NPA in an effort to preserve many of the neighborhood's original characteristics. A number of potential new controls were considered by the Arden Oaks Neighborhood Association, NPA Committee and, eventually the residents at large. Over a period of several years and after several polls of residents, ten proposals were developed and submitted to a vote by the residents. The proposals included a proposed maximum house size of 10,000 square feet, and patterned after other affluent towns and cities in California with similar large estate-sized lots, a minimum ratio of lot size to house and pavement size, intended to preserve green space around homes. There were a number of residents strongly in favor of the changes and a number that were largely opposed. Ultimately, eight of the ten proposals were approved by the Arden Oaks residents at the 2004 Annual Meeting. However, after the meeting, the County was concerned about the number of residents who still opposed the proposals and ultimately decided not to advance any of the proposals for consideration by the Board of Supervisors or to make any further amendments to the Arden Oaks NPA at that time.

In the mid 2000s, an issue arose regarding the interpretation of the Arden Oaks NPA and its two-story height limitation. The County Zoning Code applies in Arden Oaks along with the NPA regulations. At the time, the Arden Oaks NPA limited homes in the neighborhood to two stories but didn't mention overall height. The zoning code, however, limited the height of all two-story homes in Sacramento County — including Arden Oaks — to 30 feet. A new resident had purchased two lots on Ladino Road and merged them into one 3-acre lot with the intention to build, initially, an approximately 50,000-square-foot mansion (eventually reduced to 33,000 sq ft) that would technically be two stories, but 46 feet in height. The County

initially approved the plans for the building and issued a permit, but after a number of residents raised concerns about noncompliance with the County's height regulations, the County changed course and denied the permit because the proposed height exceeded the zoning code's 30-foot height limitation. The County's zoning appeals board reversed that decision and ruled that no overall height limit applied in Arden Oaks, and the matter ended up in litigation. A group of 80 residents, who lived throughout the neighborhood, came together and brought a writ of mandate action against the County. Eventually a trial court, and later an appeals court, ruled that the County's zoning appeals board had erred in its interpretation of the applicable standards and that it was, according to both courts, "unambiguous" that both the two-story and 30-foot height limitation in the NPA and zoning code applied in Arden Oaks. The lots in question on Ladino Road were eventually subdivided into three lots, two street-facing lots and one flag lot, and new homes were built on each.

During and after 2010, there was another wave of new construction and renovations that resulted in a number of residents submitting variance requests to Sacramento County that sought exception from the Arden Oaks NPA regulations. The County approved some of the variances, but denied others, and was not entirely consistent in its interpretation of certain provisions in the NPA. In particular, there were contrary conclusions reached by the County with respect to the applicable side yard and back yard setback requirements. After another in a long line of contentious variance hearings, the County agreed with the Arden Oaks Neighborhood Association to conduct a poll among the residents in order to determine their preference in the size of setbacks to be included in the NPA. After the poll and several public meetings with the residents, the County eventually amended the Arden Oaks NPA for a second time to reflect the desires of the residents by clarifying the building and setback standards that apply in Arden Oaks. The result is the current Arden Oaks NPA, which was adopted by the County in 2017. The NPA continues to set forth specific development standards regarding lot size and setback requirements, although as of January 2022, we understand that certain aspects of the NPA have been overridden by Senate Bill 9, a statewide law that was adopted with an intention to create more affordable housing throughout California.

Arden Oaks Today

Today, less than ten miles from downtown Sacramento, the residents of Arden Oaks enjoy many of the same benefits of a rural neighborhood that attracted the original residents as well as the convenience of living near a growing cosmopolitan city. Many of the current residents are second or even third generation families that continue to make Arden Oaks their home. With a natural environment, where songbirds abound and wild turkeys roam (though the jackrabbits are gone), Arden Oaks continues to offer a tranquil setting amidst majestic trees and free-flowing creeks.



Valley Oak (*Quercus lobata*) in Arden Oaks



Strong Ranch Slough in Arden Oaks

After more than half a century, Arden Oaks families still gather each year for their own Fourth of July parade and games. Residents still dress up, mostly wearing red, white, and blue, and some drive their classic Model A cars, while others ride bicycles, skateboards, wagons, and strollers, all adorned with red, white, and blue streamers, flags, and balloons. A few still ride horses in the parade. Commencing on Rockwood Drive near the former residence of the neighborhood's original developer, Steve Williams, the parade proceeds through the neighborhood with a mid-way stop for homemade root beer, and the festivities culminate at Windemere Park, where friends, families, and neighbors play old-fashioned games and enjoy live music by neighborhood musicians. And at the end of every summer, the neighbors have one huge block party, where all residents are invited to a neighborhood, sit-down barbecue, with music and games for the children. Recently, the neighborhood has started a holiday lighting and decoration contest, where residents of any age can be a judge to determine who will win the prizes and yard signs announcing the winners.



Arden Oaks 4th of July parade, 2021.



Arden Oaks Neighborhood Barbecue, 2021

Residents of Arden Oaks, both old timers and new comers alike, have found peaceful living in this tranquil tree-lined oasis, tucked away from the freeways and frenzy of the 21st century.

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Prepared by Joyce Hsiao and Eric Stiff, April 2022

Sources:

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3. Arden Oaks NPA Committee Report dated May 8, 2003.
4. Personal communications with David Post, 2022.
5. Personal communications with Linden and Ed Beck, 2022.