

The History and Charm of the Barber Tract

One of La Jolla's oldest and most enchanting neighborhoods



By Linda Marrone

The Barber Tract is a neighborhood rich in La Jolla history as well as a treasure chest of early architecturally designed homes. In this picturesque neighborhood nestled between WindanSea beach and the village, you will find proud Spanish Colonials gracing the streets alongside quaint storybook English Tudors and French Normandy style homes. Along the charming streets, vine-covered walls and garden gates hide secret gardens filled with mature landscaping, beautiful flowers and meandering pathways. Many of these European revival style homes were built from 1920 to 1940 and were designed by some of the most prominent early San Diego architects. Edgar V. Ullrich, Tom Shepherd, Herbert Palmer, Requa & Jackson, Lilian Rice, George Washington Smith and Florence Palmer, have all left their eclectic architectural imprint on this seaside terrain. After World War II, examples of California Ranch and post-war modernist homes were built on the few remaining lots. A noteworthy architect of this later era was Russell Forrester. Forrester is credited with designing two Barber Tract residences, including one home that will soon be lost to demolition. Built in the "Tiki" style, Forrester designed it in the late 40s, after returning from the South Pacific following the war. While this home will be leveled, most residents of the Barber Tract are respectful of the neighborhood's architectural history and strive to preserve its unique style and character.



Originally named "Neptunia," around 1899, the neighborhood has been known as the Barber Tract since the early 1920s and was named after Phillip Barber, its major landowner and developer. Phillip Barber was an heir to the Barber & Company steamship firm in New York. The 16th of 18 children, Barber was a visionary and dreamer with an artistic sense, who in many ways was a man ahead of his time. While on a trip to San Diego around 1920, longtime friend, A. E. Childs, showed Phillip Barber the slowly developing seaside tract of Neptunia. The acreage of the tract spread from La Jolla Boulevard west to the sea, between the center of Westbourne Street on the south and the center of Sea Lane on the north. The rugged sand dunes that ran throughout the area reminded Barber of a favorite vacation spot he frequented on Long Island, New York; it was love at first sight. Barber's daughter, Barbara Barber Stockton recalls that her very excited father telephoned their mother Mary, in Tenafly, New Jersey, and said: "Pack up the family, I've just purchased property in La Jolla, California."



The family arrived in La Jolla in 1921 and under Barber's ownership, development of the Barber Tract began to take off as he sold small parcels of land with select, architect-designed homes on them. The homes reflected the European revival styles that were gaining popularity throughout the country during this era. In 1923, Barber finished construction and moved his wife and four children (a fifth child, daughter Tootie was born later) into a sprawling oceanfront Spanish Colonial home. According to Barbara, her father was a man with a passion for woodworking and construction and she believes he

was responsible for much of the design concept and construction that went into this stately house on Dunemere Drive. Many different master architects have been rumored to have helped Barber design his home, but there has been no documentation to verify this. A building permit for the house pulled in January 1922, by architect J.H. Nicholson, states that he applied for the permit on behalf of Phillip Barber, the owner and designer.

In the mid 1920s, Barber sold the southern portion of the tract to another land developer and a large ocean front lot on Neptune to Frank P. Sherwood (for whom "Sherwood Hall" at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art is named). The lot on Neptune stretched from the bend at Fern Glen all the way to WindanSea beach. Sherwood commissioned Santa Barbara architect George Washington Smith to design the beautiful Spanish style home that still sits proudly on the ocean bluff today. The depression in the 1930s slowed development of the area for a number of years and many of the homes were left vacant. Phillip Barber himself had to relinquish his beloved home to creditors during this difficult time. Barber remained in La Jolla until 1946 and then moved to the Julian area. He passed away in 1963 and his wife Mary in 1965. Today, they are survived by three of their five children: Barbara, Tootie, Bill and many grandchildren.



The home Barber built on Dunemere Drive remains today. The barren sand dunes that once surrounded it have given way to a landscape filled with towering trees, lush plantings and expansive verdant lawns, that gently roll to the sandy beach below. The house itself has changed very little over the years, a true testament to its original owner, Phillip Barber, and also to Academy Award winning actor Cliff Robertson, who owned the home for more than forty years. Robertson carefully renovated the house with master architect Tom Shepherd. It was historically designated as "Casa de la Paz – Historic Site #520" in 2002. In 2005, the home will be sold and its legacy passed on to a new owner.



Today the Barber Tract remains an eclectic blend of architectural styles and although some original homes have met the wrecking ball, very few have been demolished. Several new homes have been built that capture the original spirit of the Barber Tract. It is always a pleasure to see one of the neighborhood's original homes receive a new lease on life. In several worthy examples, additions have been built that blend so well with the original architecture that you would never know they had just been added. The Barber Tract is one of the few neighborhoods in La Jolla that could qualify as an historic district. Several examples of voluntary historic districts have been formed in San Diego, where boundaries are drawn and homeowners have the right to choose if they want to be included as part of the district. If included, historic homes and homes that are identified as contributing factors to the neighborhood, can qualify for the Mills Act property tax reduction. In the voluntary districts that are already formed, property values have substantially increased and demand for homes in the districts is high.

According to the Barber Tract Neighborhood Association, the current boundaries for the Barber Tract Association are; from the east side of Olivetas, west to the sea, Fern Glen to the south and Marine Street to the north. Several homes just past the corner of Marine & Olivetas are also included. Neighbors to the south on Belvedere and Westbourne and their connecting streets ("Baja Barber") are invited to join the Association. Although some may refer to areas east of La Jolla Boulevard as the Barber Tract, the official boundaries have never extended to the eastern side of the Boulevard.





There is a true sense of an old fashioned neighborhood in the Barber Tract and the neighborhood association sponsors events during most holidays. I wonder if it is a coincidence that the entire neighborhood shares Phillip Barber's love of the holidays, especially the Fourth of July. The annual Fourth of July parade was created by longtime residents Max and Melissa Elliott and still takes place after more than 25 years. It begins at the center of Monte Vista Avenue, where neighbors of all ages, various types of vehicles and pets, all decked out in patriotic colors march to John Philip Sousa tunes around the neighborhood. It is truly a sight to behold! Close to Memorial Day, there is an annual pancake breakfast that on occasion has been held on the grounds of the original Barber estate, where neighbors have the opportunity to enjoy the magnificent landscape as well as the delicious food. During Halloween, haunting decorations appear all around the area and the neighborhood children are invited to a Halloween party complete with a scary mystery witch. Most memorable, are the Christmas parties held at the Fitch family's beautiful French Normandy home. The family graciously opens their doors and celebrates the holidays with their neighbors and it is always one of the highlights of the season. To keep you in touch with all of these neighborhood events and happenings, a newsletter, "The Barber Tract Times" (The original creation of former longtime resident Gordon Johnson) - faithfully arrives at your doorstep every few months. It is always filled with wit, interesting neighborhood news and photographs of holiday events. Over the years, I have spoken to many of my neighbors and everyone seems to agree how fortunate we are to live in the Barber Tract, a little piece of paradise by the sea.



***My gratitude to Barbara Barber Stockton and her sister Tootie Barber Hatch,
for their wonderful stories about the Barber Tract and its founding family.***