



Fullerton Heritage

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Happy Birthday Villa del Sol

The California Hotel Turns 100

by Debora Richey

From the start, the California Hotel, now Villa del Sol, was one of the biggest news stories in Fullerton, and all north Orange County. Dedicated on January 15, 1923, the three-story building, located at the northwest corner of Wilshire Avenue and Harbor Boulevard (then Spadra Road), had 22 apartments, 55 guest rooms, and ten retail spaces on the ground level to provide extra income, along with two kitchens, a dining room, and a large, elaborately decorated lobby. The grand hotel was one of only a few buildings constructed with funds raised by public subscription. It was also the only one to be built as a replacement for a public comfort station. Open to the public, the toilet and lavatory facilities were particularly popular with area ranch residents who faced long trips home from downtown Fullerton.

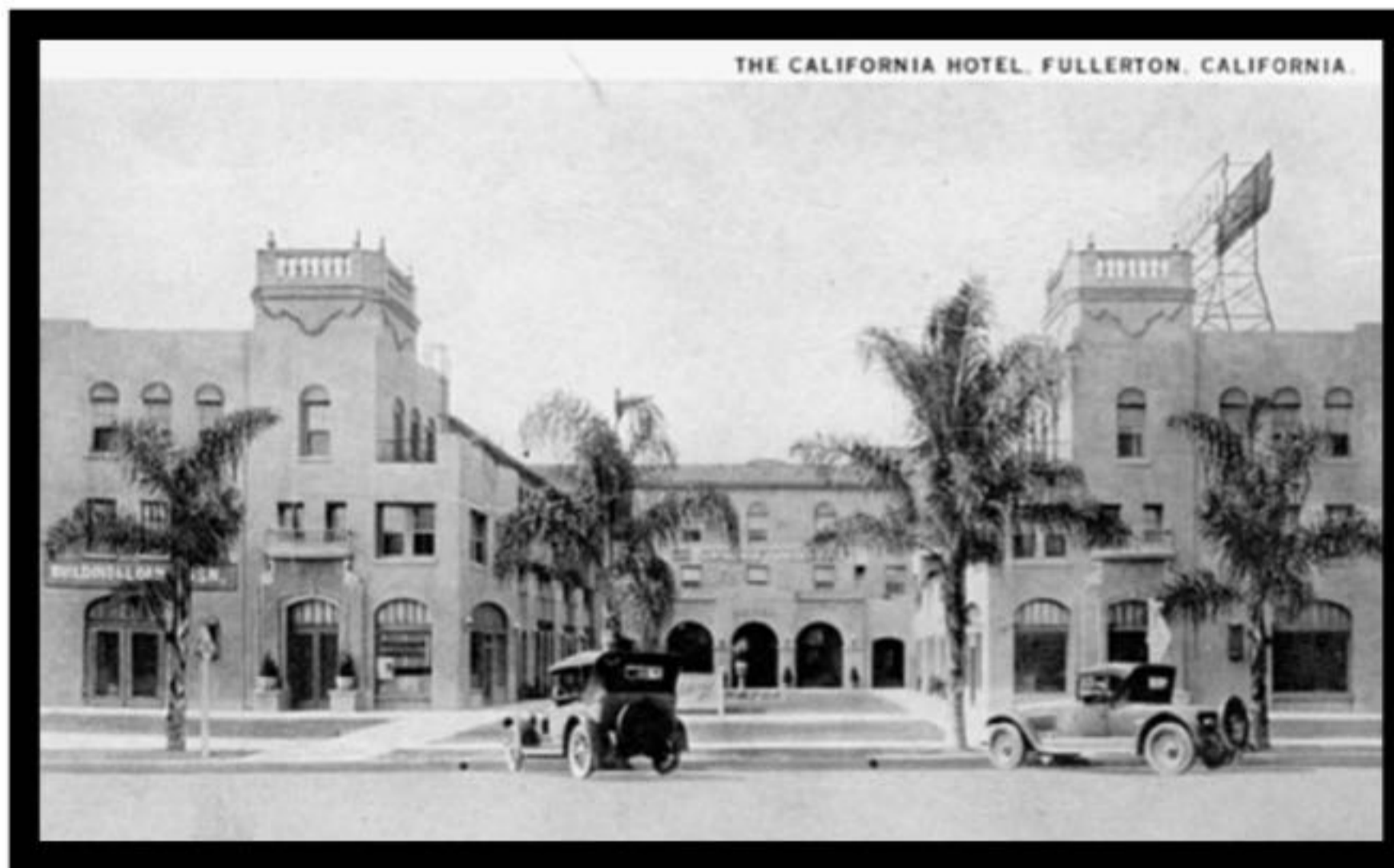
By 1920, Fullerton was a bustling, growing town of 4,440 residents that was rapidly becoming a major business center in northern Orange County, and moving into one of its most prosperous eras. What the city and north Orange County lacked was a Class A hotel for tourists, merchants, and other visitors. After some encouragement, Charles C. Chapman, then Fullerton's wealthiest businessman, agreed to spearhead a drive to raise money to build a modern hotel on the site of the public restrooms. The Community Hotel Company (CHC)

was quickly formed in 1921, and Chapman personally pledged \$25,000 toward the fund drive. Roy E. Durbin, a hotel man from Long Beach, agreed to put up another \$5,000 in return for the right to manage the hotel once it was built. The CHC board of directors included some of Fullerton's wealthiest pioneers, such as John Bastanchury, and two former mayors: Edward K. Benchley and Richard S. Gregory. When CHC stock went on sale on September 27, 1921, \$55,000 worth sold to 25 men and women in 25 minutes. Chapman

quickly hired notable architect M. Eugene Durfee, who had just been commissioned to design a new Anaheim City Hall, to prepare plans for the first-class hotel. Fullerton architect Frank K. Benchley was hired as associate architect, but Durfee was decidedly the more experienced of the two men, having

already designed a dozen hotels in Seattle, Anaheim, Los Angeles and Victoria, British Columbia.

In July 1919, the Fullerton Chamber of Commerce and other organizations had adopted a resolution to make the Spanish style the preferred architectural style in the city, so there was no question that the new hotel would be designed in a Spanish Colonial Revival style. The fact that the U-shaped stucco-on-brick structure contained a dual-controlled Otis elevator added to the prestige of the building. The inclusion of a generous amount of



Fullerton Auditorium - It's a Wrap! *by Terry Galvin*

A new era started when the curtain came down on the project on November 3, 2022, with a ribbon cutting ceremony and program in the auditorium. Fullerton Union High School (FUHS) Principal Laura Rubio conducted the program, which included a slide presentation of the construction process, and recognition of groups and individuals involved in various ways during the project, including Fullerton Heritage.

As a trivia question, how many high schools have an Alma Mater? Of those that do, how many have alums that graduated more than 25 years ago that still know the words? Not sure of the numbers, but FUHS does and the several 25+ year alums that were present at the ceremony knew the words. Pretty Impressive!

What's next for the AUDITORIUM?

Once the financial dealings with the State grant are complete, the Trustees intend to pursue possible additional improvements using local funds, including: a new curtain (the old one contains asbestos and cannot be reused), an upgraded sound system, upgraded lighting and new seats. Fullerton Heritage is looking forward to the National Register Plaque unveiling and the needed touch-up work on the Kassler Mural. Congratulations for a job well done!



Thank You, Fullerton Rotary

For many years, Fullerton Heritage has been honored to receive the Community Investment Award from the Fullerton Rotary. This \$500 award is always appreciated, and we thank the Fullerton Rotary profusely for supporting Fullerton Heritage's efforts over the years.

We have always used this award to place "plaques" on historic structures in Fullerton. So, when you see an oval or square plaque at a historic place in Fullerton, more than likely funds from Fullerton Rotary's Community Investment Award were used to help fund the plaques. We used the resources from the 2022 Award to help partially fund all plaques for the recently renovated Fullerton Auditorium. We added a new plaque for the Charles Kassler mural on the west side of the Auditorium.



The Mills Act - The City Enters Into A New Contract *by Ernie Kelsey*



The Mills Act is the single most important economic incentive program in CA for the restoration & preservation of qualified historic buildings by private property owners.

The resolution to have the City of Fullerton enter a Mills Act contract with the owner of 330 West Whiting Avenue was unanimously passed with excellent support by the City Council.

The Mills Act was adopted in Fullerton in 2020. The Mills Act allows owners of historic homes in Preservation Zones in Fullerton to receive a property tax reduction in exchange for restoring and

preserving their historic home. A detailed contract is adopted, and the homeowner has to adhere to the terms or risk losing their contract benefits. This is a great way for homeowners to not only revitalize their home, but their entire neighborhood. This is currently the City's second Mills Act contract.

For more information on the Mills Act, please contact the City Planning Department at (714) 738-6540.

The California Hotel Turns 100

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Architect M. Eugene Durfee

landscaping in the courtyard area was also something not found in other downtown developments. The retail/apartment mix was new at the time and drew attention throughout Orange County. James F. Kobler, a Los Angeles builder, won the contract to construct the hotel, which would eventually cost \$200,000. Furnishings from Barker Brothers of Los Angeles cost an additional \$50,000.

Not everyone in town was enthusiastic about the project. When the Fullerton Board of Trustees (now the City Council) balked at selling the land, Chapman provided some incentive by declaring: "The day the city trustees finally and officially vote to turn the proposed site over to the Community Hotel Company, I will instruct my architect to proceed at once with the building of my property across the street". After the city trustees agreed to sell the land for \$19,169, Chapman, true to his word, commissioned M. Eugene Durfee to draw up plans for the five-story Chapman Building (110 E. Wilshire Avenue), the tallest building in Orange County when it opened in December, 1923.

It would take a full year to complete the town's showplace. To keep interest alive, the Community Hotel Company held a contest to choose a name for the building. There were 2,888 entries for the \$25.00 prize, which went to Francis Lillian Devening (Mrs. Dalnar Devening), the Society Editor of the *Fullerton News*, for her suggestion to call it "The California".

Opening Day

Everyone in Fullerton was invited to the grand opening on January 15, 1923, with throngs from throughout Southern California outside well before the 10:00 a.m.



opening. All the rooms were thrown open, with visitors allowed to inspect the entire three-story building. The just opened California Flower Shop gifted each guest with a white carnation floral souvenir. More than 260 people paid \$5.00 to attend the sumptuous evening banquet held in the lovely grey and gold dining room. With Reverend Walter Thornton of the Fullerton First Christian Church as toastmaster, the banquet, toasts, and speeches went on through much of the night, winding up with a dance that ended at 2:00 a.m. when Ira Gray's Orchestra, imported from Los Angeles for the occasion, finally played "Home, Sweet Home".

The 60,000-square foot building, with its purple and gold color interior color scheme, was the most imposing structure of its type in town for many years to come. Even before the California Hotel opened, all the storefronts, apartments, and hotel rooms were booked by appreciative guests. Traveling salesman George H. Scott of Glendale won the honor of being the first guest to register. The hotel's ground floor was filled with new shops – Bartlette's Lingerie Store, Witman's Jewelry, Lorraine Beauty Shoppe, Baird Brothers Cigar and News Stand, etc. The Fullerton Mutual Building and Loan Association cornered the coveted office fronting on both sides of Wilshire and Harbor Boulevard. The hotel also had two sample rooms where salespeople could display merchandise for the inspection of buyers for retail stores.

The California Hotel quickly became *the* place to stay when visiting the area, with advertisements touting it as "Orange County's Finest Hotel". It became a regular stopping spot for motorists, traveling salesmen, and other out-of-towners, with the local newspapers regularly reporting on celebrity sightings. Apartments and rooms within the new hotel were in keeping with the prices of the day. Daily rates for a hotel guest room ranged from \$2.00 to \$4.00, depending upon whether the room was a single or double and included a shower or tub.

The California Hotel Turns 100

Apartments rented for \$40 to \$50 per month, depending on whether it was furnished or unfurnished and extras, such as maid service, were included. A single apartment consisted of a living room, bath, dressing room, and kitchen with a built-in breakfast nook, dresser, and Murphy bed. The hotel billed itself as "having all that a home can give with none of its cares or burdens". Each hotel room had its own telephone, and later, each was equipped with a radio. When early television arrived, guests were not provided with individual sets but instead gathered in the large lobby to watch together. Starting in 1922, shuttle service was offered from the train station to the hotel, and in 1958, airport coach service from the Los Angeles Airport (LAX) was available for \$3.25.

Nothing in the California Hotel was more popular than the California Hotel Café, later the California Cafeteria, which offered "cuisine of metropolitan standards amidst surroundings of class and refinement". Chef Henry F. Strombeck, a Danish immigrant who had previously worked at the Los Angeles Athletic Club and the Ambassador Hotel, served both simple and sophisticated dishes. Open to the public, the café served breakfast, lunch and dinner, along with a very popular \$1.50 chicken plate, but the dining room could also be booked for private parties and banquets. Soon dinner dances, masked balls, proms, and dance contests became regular events at the hotel.

Over the decades, the California Hotel became the social center of Fullerton. It was the place to bring clients and out-of-town guests for lunch or dinner. *Fullerton News Tribune* reporters covered glittering private parties, dances, notable speakers, business conventions, wedding receptions, and political rallies. Dozens of groups and service organizations used the first-class facility for gatherings and lunch meetings. The Fullerton Chamber of Commerce opened its first formal headquarters on the north side of the building. In 1924, the hotel served as headquarters for the Fullerton "Coolidge for President Campaign", whose members pushed for Charles C. Chapman as vice-president (he graciously declined). Every March after



Dick Riedel (left) getting his trim from barber Werner A. Schiess, while Bill Barris has his clipped by Morris Hove at the hotel's barber shop, 1949.



Cartoon from the February 20, 1923 *Fullerton News* of Roy E. Durbin, the hotel's first manager.

World War II, Los Angeles baseball players of the old Pacific Coast League would check in to start spring training at nearby Amerige Park. In 1949, hometown heroes Dick Riedel and Bill Barris, who had just set a world endurance flight record, were treated to free haircuts in the barber shop. In 1960, just outside the hotel, a young Ted Kennedy enthusiastically addressed a crowd in support of his brother John Kennedy's presidential election. The California Hotel was so financially successful that by May, 1923, every original stockholder was paid up in full.

The success of the hotel inspired M. Eugene Durfee, Frank K. Benchley, and hotel manager Roy E. Durbin to form the California Hotel Company in 1925. Using very



California Hotel, San Bernardino, built in 1925.

The California Hotel Turns 100



The California Hotel shortly after its opening.

much the same plans used in Fullerton, the three men built another California Hotel in San Bernardino on the northwest corner of Fifth and E Streets.

Errant Husbands, Booze, and Chloroform Burglars

The names of new hotel arrivals were frequently published in the local newspapers, but hotel management was discreet when it came to registering local residents. Husbands who had deserted their families, such as packing house owner William L. Benchley, son of former mayor Edward K. Benchley, often moved into the California Hotel until divorces were finalized. Any married man or woman living in the hotel was a source of gossip around town, and hotel staff remained cautious about revealing the names of guests or residents in order to protect the reputation of the hotel. On occasion, a single or widowed wealthy guest would move in permanently to take advantage of the hotel's services. There were few if any nursing homes or hospice facilities, and it was not unusual for well-to-do locals, such as newspaper owner Edgar Johnson, to spend their final days at the hotel.

Fullerton's conservative elite ensured that the city from the start was a "dry" town where alcohol was banned, but hotel guests had no trouble obtaining liquor. There was most likely little surprise when hotel clerk Arthur Hayes was arrested in November 1924 for selling whiskey. Speakeasies were also conveniently located

adjacent to the hotel.

One of the hotel's saddest events took place on February 8, 1958, when Neri Hews Sipe, a retired locomotive engineer, committed suicide by jumping from the third floor. Sipe, who had moved to Fullerton just two months before with his wife, registered at the hotel five minutes before his death leap. Some believe that Sipe's spirit still haunts the building and associate his presence with sudden cold gusts, flying pots and pans, and a voice humming 1930s and 1940s tunes.

Probably the most bizarre news story associated with the California Hotel is the case of the chloroform burglars. In late June and early July 1927, Hollywood pioneer actor and director Ralph Ince, now best known for his role as a gangster in *Little Caesar*, moved into the hotel with his crew and cast of 16 members. Ince was directing and starring in a silent film called *Shanghaied*, which was being filmed in Santa Ana Canyon. On June 30, 1927, he went to sleep in his room while his cast and crew went to a movie at the nearby Alician Court Theatre (now the Fox Fullerton Theatre). When they came back from the show, Charles Gillette, assistant director, and Harry Crooker, an actor, noticed an odd sweet smell coming from Ince's room. They woke him up and discovered that he had been knocked out by chloroform sprayed into his room. Scratches on the

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Ralph Ince

door indicated that the attacker had stood on the doorknob and pumped the chemical through the transom. Although groggy, Ince quickly recovered. Other guests reported similar experiences.

The incident gained national attention and was reported in movie magazines of the day. Fullerton Police chief Thomas K. Winters played it down, but the burglars moved from the hotel to adjacent homes, pumping chloroform into open windows, even knocking out dogs. Lurid newspaper headlines – “New Terror Reigns”, “Ether Man is Abroad Again in Fullerton” – alarmed Fullerton residents for weeks until the chloroform bandits were captured.

Adaptive Reuse to Villa del Sol

Roy Durbin remained hotel manager for a few years, then the lease passed to a series of other administrators, including two local residents: Lottie E. Morse and Arthur W. Chaffee. The California Hotel

struggled to survive the Great Depression, but Charles Chapman remained in control of the CHC until his death in 1944. It was sold in 1945 to Huntington Beach oil man Tarver Montgomery and his wife Minnie, who retained their interest in the hotel until 1955, when they agreed to sell it for \$150,000 at five percent interest to Joseph K. Eichenbaum and his partner Ben Weingart of northern California. By 1964, business had begun to fade at the hotel, and Eichenbaum and Weingart began to seek ways to unload their hotel, which had become relatively empty of paying guests. On November 30, 1964, the *Fullerton News Tribune* announced that the owners were discussing with a Los Angeles firm plans to tear down the hotel and replacing it with a modern car wash. Those plans were abandoned, however, and in 1965, the co-owners, now joined by Howard Eichen of Development Coordinators of Fullerton, announced plans to redevelop the three-story building, one of the largest single commercial plots in downtown Fullerton, into a series of small shops, restaurants, and offices.

The building lost some of its effect when it was converted to its commercial

use in 1965. As part of the conversion, a new two-story addition was added across the front enclosing the courtyard. At the same time, tile roofs over the courtyard and second floor balconies were added; the railings that were located on the towers were removed; the turrets located on the towers were eliminated; and other modifications to ground floor openings were made in order to accommodate retail uses. Unfortunately, the new addition and balconies were designed with a different Spanish style – Mission Revival – instead of Spanish Colonial Revival and consequently did not match the existing architecture. In 1995, the building was extensively retrofitted and rehabilitated and some of the former detailing was restored, and the work done in the 1960s was altered to better fit a Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style.



Christmas Decoration Contest

by Noelle Rossi

We want to recognize and congratulate the winners of our 1st Annual 2022 Christmas Decorating contest. Flyers were passed out to the residents who live in the Preservation Zones in Fullerton. Going forward, we plan on expanding this contest to include Halloween.

The winners received a \$100 cash prize and a Fullerton Heritage membership for one year. Once announced, all three winners were so happy to win and humbly proud to call their neighborhoods home.



Winner of Best Lighting:
340 W. Brookdale Pl.



Winner of Most Creative:
438 W. Malvern Ave.



Winner of Best Lawn/
Porch: 235 W. Malvern Ave.

Happy New Year! We're starting this year with a 100-year anniversary. The Hotel California, now the lovely Villa Del Sol, turned 100 on January 15, 2023. Please enjoy the extensive article we've included in this issue to celebrate this milestone.

A lot has happened since our last newsletter. One highlight was our Annual Meeting in late June, 2022, at Rutabegorz Restaurant in downtown Fullerton. We had a very nice turnout and celebrated 30 years of Fullerton Heritage accomplishments. Owner Paul Berkman and General Manager Dane Anderson are so supportive of our efforts. They even opened for us on a Sunday. We'll be back next year. Thank you Paul & Dane!

Our historic downtown walking tours are back in full swing so check out our website or social media outlets for our latest offerings. We're also leading the effort to restore the iconic Fullerton Police Department neon sign. Please watch your mailbox for a postcard information on how to donate to this great cause. Let's get that sign glowing again.

Over the last several months, we have heard from two neighborhoods wanting to become Preservation Zones. This is great news but reminds us that it takes a lot of effort to get this done. We're moving forward!

We're waiting for the final confirmation of our latest National Register nomination. I'll have more to report in the next newsletter, but check our website (fullertonheritage.org) for the latest breaking news from Fullerton Heritage.

A treasure trove of historic information was discovered in sewer and water connection ledgers from the 1920s and 1930s found in City Hall. These ledgers are so important because they list the builder and architect for the property, information that's not always easy to find. The Fullerton Heritage board voted to donate funds to the Local History Room at the Fullerton Public Library so the ledgers can be indexed allowing the information to be found easier.

We are excited to see how the Hunt Library projects concludes and look forward to adding some local and national landmarks to our inventory soon. We'll keep you updated.

If you haven't yet, please renew your Fullerton Heritage membership today. You can do this by check or online at fullertonheritage.org. Our members are what make us an efficient and effective organization. Please renew today.

Thank you for your ongoing support and here's to a great 2023!

With warm regards,

Ernie

Renew Your Membership Today

It's that time of year again for your membership renewal. Please take the time to renew. There are two easy options to make your renewal easy. See back of this newsletter for details.

Your membership matters! It supports Fullerton Heritage, making it strong as we work to preserve Fullerton's past so future generations can enjoy this great town for many years to come.

Memberships make great gifts!

Welcome New Members:

Paul Berkman / Debra & Lance Brunner
 Amanda Creacy / Penny Hlavac / Terri Hill
 Naomi Johnson / William Maple / Rosanne Nitti
 Alan Ray / Brian Stowe / Jane Sylvester
 Anjali Tapadia / Salvador Zarate

Board of Directors 2022-2023

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WHY YOUR MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

For over 30 years, Fullerton Heritage has worked to save and restore Fullerton's historic places. A privately funded nonprofit organization, we:

- Provide continued education and promotion of the conservation and restoration of the city's rich architectural and cultural resources
- Furnish assistance to businesses and homeowners who want to restore, remodel, or make additions to their historic properties
- Advocate for and monitor on-going restoration projects throughout the city
- Nominate local historic properties to the Local Landmarks registry and the National Register of Historic Places
- Work closely with city staff to ensure that preservation programs are effectively implemented

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Initiated, drafted, and worked with city staff to establish Residential Preservation Zones, as well as accompanying guidelines; ten Zones have been designated so far
- Nominated and successfully listed 12 properties on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as adding over 100 structures, resources, and environments to the Local Landmarks registry
- Assisted in the establishment and implementation of the *Mills Act*
- Plaqued hundreds of historic properties and districts throughout the city
- Compiled an online vendor resource directory of businesses and craftsmen for restorationists
- Increased awareness of the city's history and historical resources; the publication of books, articles, and newsletters, walking tours, workshops, and presentations
- Advocated for the preservation of historic properties, including the Fox Fullerton Theatre, Beckman Instruments, Inc., and the Amerige Bros. Real Estate Office
- Liaisoned with other city and county historic preservation groups in Orange County
- Served on several advisory committees, including the Ad Hoc Hillcrest Park Committee and the Transportation Center Specific Plan
- Donated books, photographs, and historic materials to the Local History Room of the Fullerton Public Library
- Identified, documented, and photographed hundreds of historic properties in the city, continuously updating the first 1978 history survey



Fullerton Auditorium Clock Tower, built 1930

OUR MISSION

Foster an appreciation of our City's cultural history and ensure the preservation of our historic architectural resources and environments.

Fullerton Heritage is a nonprofit corporation and tax-exempt charity registered as an IRC Section 501 (c) (3)

cut here and mail

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Yes, I want to support Fullerton Heritage in preserving Fullerton's historic cultural and architectural resources.

Please check one:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$10 Student | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Friend |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$15 Senior (65 & over) | <input type="checkbox"/> \$250 Corporate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$20 Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 Patron |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Non-profit | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1000 Benefactor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$30 Family | <input type="checkbox"/> \$ _____ Contribution |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$50 Small Business | |

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ ZIP: _____

TELEPHONE: _____

E-MAIL: _____

DATE: _____

I would like to be active in Fullerton Heritage, and am interested in the following activities:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advocacy/Issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Restoration Resources & Referrals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Programs/Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Downtown walking tour docent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contribute to the Newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> Other interest (please list): |

Renewal New member Gift Membership

Send check along with this form to:

Fullerton Heritage / PO Box 3356

Fullerton, CA 92834-3356

Or join/renew online: <https://www.fullertonheritage.org>