

# Landholders



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George E. Barrett, Jr.



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Photos courtesy of George E. Barrett Jr. Family



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The Upper Las Virgenes Open Space Preserve was part of the 113,000-acre Rancho San Jose de Gracias de Simi tract granted to Javier, Miguel and Particio Pico by the King of Spain in 1795. The Rancho, which was later transferred to Jose de la Guerra y Noriega, was eventually sold in the late 1800's to Thomas R. Bard, one of the most powerful men in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. Bard formed the Rancho Simi Land and Water Company in 1887, and divided the Rancho into tracts for residential development. A William Randolph Hearst company owned the property in the 1930's and unsuccessfully drilled for oil. In the late 1930's the property was purchased by a wealthy financier and landholder, George E. Barrett, Jr.

The Barrett Ranch raised horses, allowed filming, and was a vacation retreat for Mr. Barrett and his family. Barrett built the ranch house that still stands today around 1938. According to his daughter-in-law Muriel Barrett, he loved the unobstructed 360-degree view from the house, looking over the then rural San Fernando Valley and points south, west, and north. The only trees were the native oaks that are still standing.

Barrett also owned vast holdings in Malibu. R.E. Crummer bought those and Barrett's Calabasas holdings including the Ahmanson Ranch property in 1949. Today many of the beautiful lands bought by Mr. Barrett as investments are now protected parkland, including this park, Cheeseboro Canyon to the west, parts of Point Dume, Escondido Canyon, and Latigo Canyon in Malibu.

In 1963, subsidiaries of the H.F. Ahmanson Company purchased the property with plans to build a residential subdivision. The first attempt at development fizzled out in the 1960's. More than twenty years later, in 1986, the Ahmanson Land Company was formed to create a master-planned community—what would have been a city—centered atop Lasky Mesa and reaching out to the nearby hills and valleys.

While the project was approved by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors in 1992, the public debate about it continued to be intense. Numerous elected officials, grass roots organizers, residents, entertainment figures, and environmental groups sought preservation of the entire property, even as others called for following through on building the carefully planned community. Finally, in 2003, the last private owner of the ranch, Washington Mutual Bank, agreed to sell the ranch to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. The public parkland was dedicated April 10, 2004, thus ending one of California's most controversial land use debates and preserving this stunning wildland for future generations.