



# Staff Report and Recommendations

## Agenda of September 20, 2021, Item 12c

County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency • Planning Division

800 S. Victoria Avenue, Ventura, CA 93009-1740 • (805) 654-5042 • [vcrma.org/divisions/planning](http://vcrma.org/divisions/planning)

### I. APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER:

**Applicant/Property Owner:** John M Cuthbert and Mary St Amer Cuthbert  
76 Oak Drive  
Ojai, CA 93023

### II. REQUEST:

A request to designate property located at 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023, commonly known as Noble Oaks Estate, as Ventura County Landmark No. 181 (CHO §1365-5) (Supervisory District 1 – LaVerre) (Case No. CH21-0023).

### III. LOCATION AND PARCEL INFORMATION:

76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County).

Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 024-0-031-150.

Historic Designation: undesignated, determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (National Register), the California Register of Historic Places (California Register), and as a Ventura County Landmark.

Common/Historic Name: Noble Oaks Estate.

Zoning (split): RA-2 ac, OS-40 ac/TRU/DKS (Temporary Rental Units Overlay Zone/Ojai Valley Dark Sky Overlay Zone)

General Plan Designation (split): Agricultural, Open Space

The Noble Oaks Estate property consists of a 5.872-acre parcel containing a two-story, Spanish Colonial Revival-style main residence, attached garage, and two detached garage buildings, as well as other site improvements, including a swimming pool, solar array, landscape features, and large specimen trees. The property is characterized by steeply sloping hillsides vegetated with native oaks, smaller native trees, and plants with non-native plants near the house. Figure 1 depicts the location of the property in the broader vicinity, Figure 2 provides a closer aerial image of the property, and Figure 3 identifies the specific location of various buildings and features on site. Figures 4, 5, and 6 provide views of the main residence's north and south elevations and a view of the attached garage, respectively.

Figure 1 – Regional Vicinity

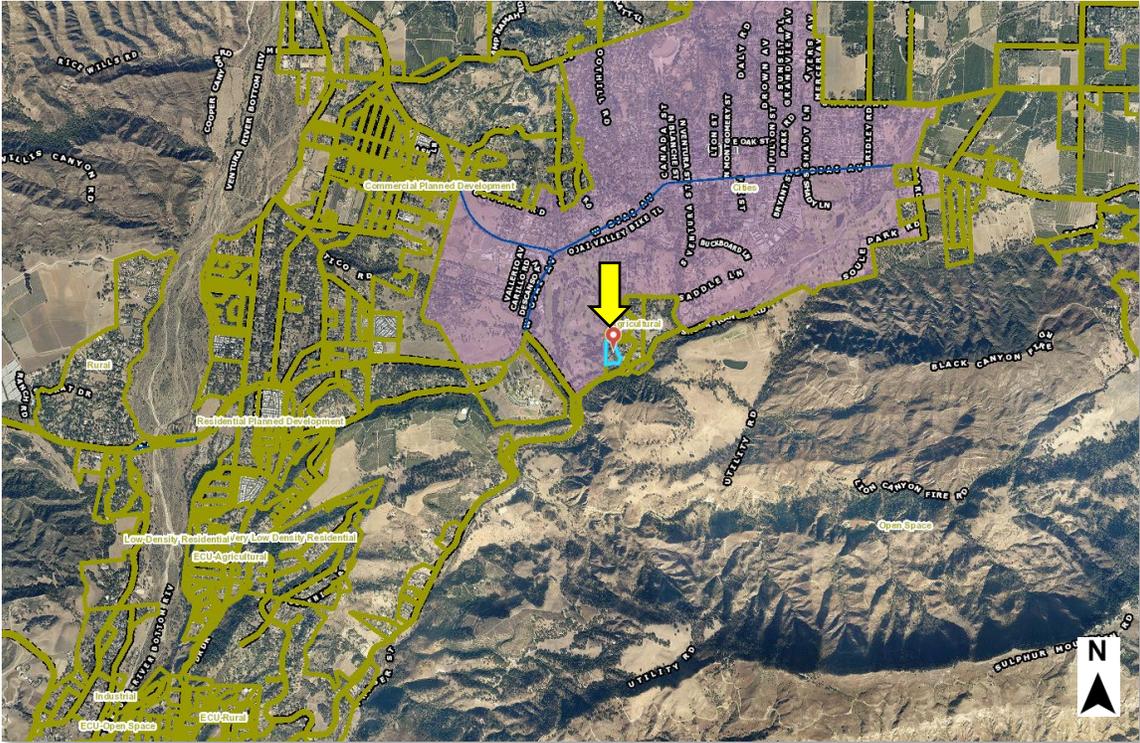


Figure 2 – Aerial View of Site

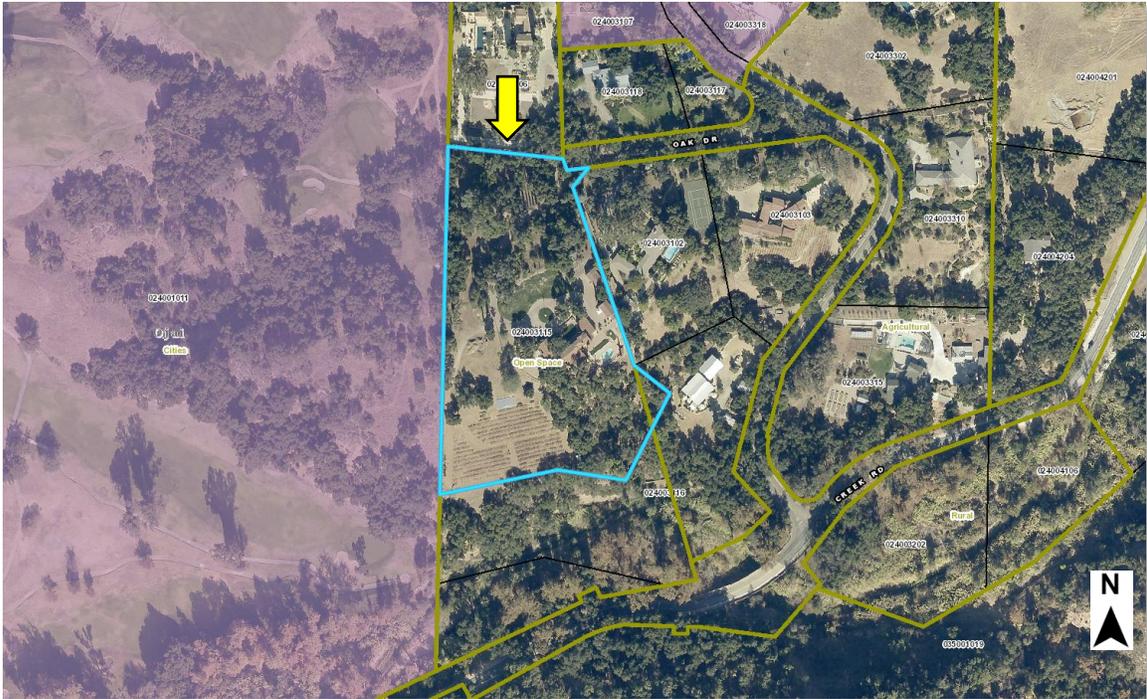


Figure 3 – Detailed Aerial View of Site



*Credit: Post/Hazeltine Associates*

Figure 4 – Main Residence, North Elevation (looking southeast)



*Credit: Post/Hazeltine Associates*



*Credit: Post/Hazeltine Associates*

Figure 6 – Attached Garage, East Elevation (looking Southwest)



*Credit: Post/Hazeltine Associates*

#### **IV. PROJECT SCOPE:**

The Property Owner requests the Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) designate property located at 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023, commonly known as Noble Oaks Estate, as Ventura County Landmark No. 181 (CHO §1365-5).

#### **V. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION:**

The Noble Oaks Estate property consists of the following structures and features:

- A two-story Spanish Colonial Revival-style main residence (built in 1928) with attached garage;
- Two detached garage buildings (one built circa 1928 and one built circa-1990s);
- Hardscape and landscape features, including sandstone retaining walls and a water feature off the house’s south elevation, large specimen trees, and informal landscaping; and,
- Other non-historic features, including a swimming pool, solar array, wall along the east property line, and a vineyard.

In July 2021, the Property Owner’s consultant, Post/Hazeltine Associates, completed a historic resources report (HRR) for the Noble Oaks Estate property (refer to Exhibit 1 – Historic Resources Report).<sup>1</sup> All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from this report, unless otherwise noted. A description of the structures, including character-defining features and known alterations, is included as follows:

- Main Residence (built in 1928).
  - Features:
    - Exterior: The residence is a two-story wood frame building with a partial basement level set on a continuous concrete foundation. The house is composed of a central wing with a two story volume flanked on either end by one-story wings with an attached three-car garage off its east elevation. The house’s one and two-story wings, informal layout, and varied roof lines are characteristic of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. Facing towards Oak Drive, the north elevation is the house’s entrance façade, the east elevation is the garage/service wing, the rear elevation opens onto informal terraces for entertaining, and the west elevation houses the family bedrooms with expansive views towards the

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<sup>1</sup> Post, Pamela, Ph.D. and Timothy Hazeltine, Post/Hazeltine Associates, *Historic Resources Report Evaluating the Eligibility of 76 Oak Drive (APN 024-0-031-150), Ventura County, California For Nomination as a County of Ventura Landmark*, July 27, 2021. All substantive information regarding the characteristics, history, and significance of the property generally comes from this report, unless otherwise noted.

west end of the Ojai Valley. Exterior walls are clad in plaster, the roof is covered in c-shaped terra cotta tiles, and fenestration is composed of wood casement and fixed windows. Chimneys feature plaster and terra cotta elements. Architectural embellishments, including wrought metal and wood grilles, wood lintels, wood plank shutters with wrought iron shutter dogs, and decorative tilework are characteristic features of the Spanish Colonial Revival style.

- Interior: The interior arrangement of the house features a division into public, family, and service elements, a common feature of upscale homes built between the early 20th century and the late 1940s. Finishes in public rooms, which include an entrance hall, living room, and dining room, feature wood or tile floors, plastered walls, Spanish Revival-style heating vents, and coffered or beamed ceilings, also in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Tilework in the entry hall features a pattern of red, buff yellow, and embellished tiles. Embellished tiles, which emulate Mayan motifs, may have been manufactured by the Batchelder Tile Company in Los Angeles. Other tilework was by Malibu Potteries. The entry hall's ceiling features exposed wood beams. The living room features an exposed Mediterranean-style wood truss ceiling, hardwood floors, and a plastered fireplace surrounded by a cast-stone mantel and tilework from the Batchelder Tile Company. The dining room features a polychromatic wood ceiling with shallow coffers. Bedrooms retain, for the most part, their original configuration with wood floors, plastered walls, and ceilings.
- Alterations:
  - Known alterations were made by Harold Burkett for the Diedrich family (circa 1930s) and as part of the Burton renovation (1990s). Prior to 1988, the following alterations were made: (1) the attached garage's bay doors, which were likely wood, were replaced with metal units; (2) the porch off the living room's south elevation is an original feature, which was covered by an awning. The awning was replaced by a pergola during the Burton renovation, and eventually was replaced by the current tile roof; and (3) at some point, what appears to have been a sleeping room at the southwest corner of the house, was modified when glazing was installed.
  - In the 1990s, the following additional alterations were made: (1) the house's wood shutters, which were severely deteriorated or missing, were replaced to match the originals; (2) exterior plasterwork was largely replaced to match the originals; (3) windows and doors were repaired where feasible. Non-repairable

windows were replaced in-kind to match the originals; (4) the interior was rehabilitated with extensive alterations confined to the basement, bathrooms, and service rooms such as the kitchen; and (5) roof tiles were retained where feasible or replaced with tiles matching the originals in form and appearance. The service rooms, which feature wood floors, no longer convey their original appearance. Most of the bathrooms have also been remodeled with some fixtures replaced, and tilework and cabinetry largely replaced. With the exception of the public rooms, trimwork, such as baseboards, appear to have been replaced. Original doors, for the most part, appear to have survived or replaced in-kind. The basement was extensively remodeled in the 1990s and no longer conveys its original appearance or finishes.

- Detached Two-Bay Garage (built circa 1928). This building, located southeast of the house, is a one-story wood frame garage with plastered walls and a side gable terra cotta tile roof with flush eaves. Two bays, covered by metal doors, are located on the west elevation. A precise construction date for this building could not be determined. It is possible the building was constructed around circa-1928 when the house was built.
- Second Detached Two-Bay Garage (built circa 1990s). This is a one-story stucco-clad, wood frame, two-bay garage located northeast of the house. The building is capped by a gable roof with terra cotta tiles and flush eaves. The building was built in the 1990s.
- Landscape and Hardscape Features. The property features remnants of an informally designed landscape around the house composed of sandstone retaining walls, steps, parapets, brick and interlocking pavers, an ornamental water feature, and stone and concrete barbeque off the house's south elevation. The remainder of the property is a vernacular rural landscape composed of turf, trees, and informal plantings. The rear garden's stonework terraces, retaining walls, parapets, steps, barbeque, and water feature date to the period of significance. Interlocking pavers, some of the brick paving and all of the plantings, with the exception of large specimen trees and larger native oaks, appear to postdate the period of significance.

## **VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

The main residence, completed in 1928, was designed by architect Harold E. Burkett for John and Constance Burnham. At the time, the residence was known as Burnham Hill. John Burnham (1895-1952), originally from New York, found success in the Santa Barbara real estate market in the early 1920s. In 1926, Burnham purchased 60 acres in the Ojai Valley adjacent to the Ojai Inn and Country Club and developed the land as a residential subdivision. Burnham engaged the services of his friend, architect Harold E. Burkett, as well as that of Austen Pierpont in planning the new subdivision,

called the Country Club Estates, and approving the architectural plans submitted by prospective buyers.

During World War II, Burkett worked as an architect for the Navy, helping to design the Port Hueneme Military Base. During his career, his practice varied from commercial, ecclesiastical, and institutional projects to residential commissions. Among his most notable non-residential commissions were the Ventura High School Auditorium, the Ventura City/County Library, the Community Presbyterian Church, Our Lady of Assumption Church in Ventura, and the design of the jail annex to the Ventura County Government Center. Other commissions included the W.P. Daily house in Camarillo, the Baptist Church in Camarillo, and the Firestone building in Ventura. Like many architects of the era, Burkett practiced in a range of styles, including Art Deco, Streamline Moderne, and Period Revival.

The Burnham's and their children lived in the residence for only two years before moving to the nearby Arbolada housing tract, developed by Edward Libby in the early 1920s. As a result of the Great Depression, the Burnham's were forced to sell Burnham Hill in 1931. Lawrence and Alta Diedrich, who had found success in the Oxnard automotive parts business, purchased the property and renamed it to Casa Don Alta La Mar. The Diedrich's retained the services of Harold Burkett and made several alterations to the residence to accommodate their family. In addition, they increased the size of the property by another approximately four acres by adding an undeveloped parcel adjacent to the former Burnham property. This additional parcel was developed as the L. N. Diedrich BBQ Park as a private recreational area for the family and included a two-bedroom cabin, a "chuckwagon" style kitchen building, two barbeque pits, picnic tables, as well as shuffleboard and badminton courts. Lawrence Diedrich lived in the house for only four years before his death in 1935. Alta Diedrich owned the property until 1943 before selling Casa Don Alta a Mar to Laura Wells Noble.

In 1943, Laura Noble, along with her two unmarried daughters, Lorraine and Grace, purchased the property and renamed it to Noble Oaks. Laura's husband, Frederick Noble, had been a farmer and ranch operator on the Oxnard Plain before his death in 1941. Laura Noble died in 1958 and her two daughters continued to live at Noble Oaks until their deaths in 1988. During the ownership of Noble Oaks by Laura Wells and her daughters, there appear to have been no major modifications or alterations to the house. In 1991, the property was purchased by Hollywood film director Tim Burton, known for his critically acclaimed "gothic"-inspired fantasy and horror films, including *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993). Burton set about to restore and renovate the main house, which had badly deteriorated. Burton owned the property until 1998 when it was purchased by Michael Greynald, a contractor, and his wife, Nicole Strauss. Greynald and Strauss owned the property only for a year before selling the property to its current owners,

John and Mary Cuthbert. The Cuthbert's, who have owned the property since 1999, continued the restoration of Noble Oaks first initiated by Tim Burton.

## **VII. EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

### County of Ventura Landmark

The Cultural Heritage Board (CHB) must find that the proposed Landmark satisfies one of the criteria in CHO §1365-5(a), noted as follows:

- 1) *It exemplifies or reflects special elements of the County's social, aesthetic, engineering, architectural or natural history;*
- 2) *It is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Ventura County or its cities, regional history or the cultural heritage of California or the United States;*
- 3) *It is associated with the lives of persons important to Ventura County or its cities, California, or national history;*
- 4) *It has yielded or has the potential to yield, information important to the prehistory or history of Ventura County or its cities, California or the nation.*
- 5) *It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region or method of construction or represents the work of a master or possesses high artistic values;*
- 6) *Integrity: Establish the authenticity of the resource's physical identity by evidence of lack of deterioration and significant survival of the characteristics that existed during its period of importance. This shall be evaluated with regard to the retention of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.*

In addition, the CHB must find the proposed Landmark satisfies the additional designation standards identified in CHO §1365-6 and noted below:

- a. *It shall have historic, aesthetic or special character or interest for the general public, and not be limited in interest to a special group of persons.*
- b. *Its designation shall not require the expenditure by the County of Ventura of any amount of money not commensurate with the value of the object to be preserved;*  
*and*
- c. *Its designation shall not infringe upon the rights of a private owner thereof to make any and all reasonable uses thereof which are not in conflict with the purposes of this Article.*

The main residence at Noble Oaks Estate is significant for its reflection of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style, a popular style amongst the middle, upper middle, and wealthy classes in southern California in the early 20th century, as well as those design elements that exhibit the skilled, handcrafted workmanship typical of the time period (Criterion 1).

Further, the property is significant for its association with John Burnham, an important figure in the early residential development of the Ojai Valley (Criterion 3). As one of the first developers of a planned, residential subdivision, Country Club Estates, in 1926, Burnham along with another visionary, Edward Libby, helped to cultivate the suburban development of Ojai Valley.

Moreover, the property is significant for its representation of the work of Harold E. Burkett, a master architect who contributed significantly to the architectural heritage of southern California, and in particular, the County of Ventura (Criterion 5). His career spanned over four decades and produced a number of noteworthy residential and non-residential commissions, including designs for civic, institutional, and ecclesiastical buildings.

In addition, the property retains sufficient integrity to convey its association with the Burnham family and exemplifies the architectural contributions of Harold Burkett to the architectural heritage of Ventura County (Criterion 6). The main residence is an almost intact exemplar of a Spanish Colonial Revival Style house designed for the consumption of the upper middle class. The house remains in its original location and continues to retain almost all of its original construction materials, including siding, fenestration, and roof cladding, as well as those design elements that exhibit the skilled, handcrafted workmanship typical of the time period.

Moreover, the property was recommended eligible for listing in the National Register and California Register for its significant associative and design value, as discussed in this staff report.

The following buildings, structures, and landscape features were identified as contributors to the historic significance of the property:

- Main Residence;
- Sandstone retaining walls, parapets, steps, barbeque, and ornamental water feature, located off the south side of the house, as well as the plastered wall and entrance court off the north side of the house;
- Entrance court and its hardscape features, including a bedrock mortar and native oak tree; and
- Overall pattern of the surrounding landscape composed of trees and open space.

Lastly, the property appears to meet the additional designation standards required by CHO §1365-6 as it contains interest to the general public; there are no foreseeable costs to the County in designating the subject site as a County Landmark; and the designation shall not infringe upon the rights of the Property Owner as this designation is being requested by the Property Owner. The property will continue to be subject to the requirements of the Ventura County Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance and CHO.

**VIII. STAFF CONCLUSION:**

The evidence provided in the HRR (Exhibit 1) supports making the findings under Criteria 1, 3, 5, and 6 that the property is eligible for designation as a Ventura County Landmark. In addition, the evidence provided in the HRR supports making the additional designation findings in CHO §1365-6 mentioned above as the site has historic character, value, and interest to the general public, there are no foreseeable costs to the County in designating the subject property as a County Landmark, and the designation shall not infringe upon the rights of the Property Owner as the property may continue to be used as a residence, as it historically has been, and the Property Owner is the one requesting this designation. Therefore, CHB Staff recommends the CHB approve the request for landmark designation.

**IX. OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW HARDSHIP:**

At the CHB public hearing on this matter, if desired, the Property Owner is provided the opportunity to present facts and evidence demonstrating a failure to grant the requested COA would cause an economic hardship as provided by CHO §1366-3(d).

**X. HEARING NOTICE AND PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

A public notice was sent by U.S. mail to the Property Owner of the subject property not less than fifteen days prior to the date of this hearing (Exhibit 3 – 15-Day Public Hearing Notice). No public comment regarding this item has been received to date.

**XI. CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (CEQA):**

CHB Staff has determined that the designation of the Property as a Ventura County Landmark is Categorically Exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 15308 of the State CEQA Guidelines as an action taken by a regulatory agency for the protection of the environment. As a result of this determination, a finding of exemption is recommended for adoption by the CHB.

**XII. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:**

CHB Staff is recommending the CHB take the following actions regarding designation:

1. **CONDUCT** public hearing, **RECEIVE** oral and written testimony, and **CONSIDER** the Planning Division Staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto;

2. **FIND** that the designation of the Property as a Landmark is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15308 as an action taken by a regulatory agency for the protection of the environment;
3. **FIND** that the Property Owner was given a 15-day notice in accordance with CHO §1365-2, that the Property Owner concurs with the designation by the CHB of the Noble Oaks Estate property as Ventura County Landmark No. 181, and placement of said designation in County lists;
4. **FIND** that the Noble Oaks Estate property meets County Landmark Criteria 1, 3, 5, and 6 as required by CHO §1365-5(a), and the additional standards required by CHO §1365-6 based on the substantial evidence in the staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto; and
5. **ADOPT** CHB Resolution No. 2021-3 (Exhibit 4) approving the designation of the Noble Oaks Estate, located at 76 Oak Drive, Ojai, CA 93023, as Ventura County Landmark No. 181.

Prepared by:



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Reviewed by:



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Exhibits:

- Exhibit 1 – Historic Resources Report
- Exhibit 2 – Property Owner Letter
- Exhibit 3 – 15-Day Public Hearing Notice
- Exhibit 4 – CHB Resolution No. 2021-3