

Windward Circle Neighborhood Profile

Windward Circle is a residential area in Venice, California, named after the traffic circle where Windward Avenue meets Main Street. Located two blocks inland from the beach, Windward Circle is defined by Venice Boulevard to the South, Westminster Avenue to the North, Abbot Kinney Boulevard to the East, and Main Street to the West. The neighborhood also incorporates a couple of blocks between Main Street and the beach, notably Windward Avenue, that are home to the remaining Venetian-inspired buildings built when Venice was founded. Windward Circle was the original center of developer and dreamer Abbot Kinney's Venice-of-America, a community on the Southern California coast initially modeled after Venice, Italy.

Abbot Kinney

At the end of the nineteenth century, Abbot Kinney, a man from Morristown, New Jersey who had made a fortune first as a commission merchant and, later, as the manufacturer of Sweet Corporal cigarettes, arrived in Southern California from the Midwest. Beginning in 1887 Kinney began buying and selling properties all over Southern California thanks to a great land boom. In 1891 he decided to take on a business partner, Francis G. Ryan, and together they purchased the Ocean Park Casino and adjoining lots in Santa Monica. Kinney's and Ryan's business became very successful when they began to sell off the lots. They invested in improvements in the community, including a gift of a 250-foot by 850-foot oceanfront lot to the Y.M.C.A., to attract more buyers for their real estate. South Santa Monica had come to be known as Ocean Park in 1893, and it was clear to everyone in Los Angeles County that Abbot Kinney was the force behind the developments and improvements made in the area. It was his first attempt at building a resort town.¹

Venice-of-America

His next attempt turned out to be the largest and most successful venture of his life. For this, Abbot Kinney turned his attention to an uninhabited mile-and-a-half stretch of oceanfront property, specifically, his 50 percent share of the land owned by The Ocean Park Improvement Company of which he was one of four partners. The company, devoted to the development and improvement of Ocean Park, owned a tract of a property called Rancho La Ballona. When the company dissolved and its holdings were subdivided, Kinney won a coin toss and chose the undeveloped portion of the property as his share and put into motion his dream of creating the Venice of America in 1900. The marshland landscape of his newly acquired piece of land reminded him of the lagoons of Venice, Italy, and he set about building a community that he hoped would foster a cultural renaissance in America. Kinney envisioned a resort town that was culturally reminiscent of its Italian namesake, complete with canals, gondolas, amusement piers, hotels, and Venetian-styled structures.

His first step was to commission architects Norman F. Marsh and C.H. Russell to design the project. Kinney directed the architects to design a thoroughly equipped city with business streets, hotels, residences, and 15 miles of concrete canals radiating from a central artery called the Grand Lagoon, the site of the present-day traffic circle.² With the design process underway, Kinney's next step was to negotiate with Henry E. Huntington's newly organized Pacific Electric Company to assure transportation to the site. Huntington constructed the Lagoon Line south from Santa Monica in 1901, and the following year began grading an entirely new route, the Venice Short Line, directly from downtown Los Angeles.³ Commuters were able to travel from Hill Street in downtown Los Angeles to Venice in about fifty minutes.

Venice-of-America opened in July 1905 with an amusement pier and exciting attractions such as Italian gondoliers poling their boats down canals, a concert orchestra playing music, camel rides, exotic hotels catering the best tastes, and a miniature railroad circling the entire scene. Entertainment ranged from high cultural to popular sporting events. Kinney offered the public a potpourri for all tastes in an effort to attract people, show them a good time, and get them to buy lots.⁴ When the Venice-of-America canal network was near completion, Venice began to grow at an enormous rate. The Grand Canal was the main artery of the network along which lots sold for an average of \$1,000-\$1,250. Smaller lots on the tributaries of the Grand Canal sold for not much less, though lots along the dirt roads that alternated with the canals sold for \$200-\$500. Sand lots along the beach were rumored to have sold for as little as 10 gold coins. And they all sold fast. In July 1905 the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 335 lots had been sold in Abbot Kinney's development for an aggregate investment of \$405,000 and claimed, "all records for all sales in all classes of subdivision property were eclipsed."⁵ On these lots residents built a mixture of small beach cottages and larger Craftsman homes. Early immigrants to Venice included a flood of Midwesterners and a small African-American community centered north of Electric Avenue between Westminster and San Juan Avenues.⁶

"Coney Island of the Pacific"

Unfortunately for Abbot Kinney, the majority of the inhabitants of Venice-of-America did not share his interest in art and culture. Even though he hired the best lecturers and performers of the time, the Chautauqua-like Assembly lost \$16,000 the first summer.⁷ By December 1905, Kinney knew his dream of creating a great cultural Mecca had failed and, ever the astute businessman, he turned his attention to accommodating the wishes of the public. The character of Venice succumbed to the beach goers and summer holiday guests who frequented the community's many amusement attractions and Venice came to be known as the "Coney Island of the Pacific." By mid-January 1906, an area was built along the edge of the Grand Lagoon that was patterned after the amusement thoroughfares of the great 19th and 20th century expositions. It featured foreign exhibits, amusements, and freak shows. Kinney and some of the nearby residents were aghast at some of the low-class shows that Venice began to offer, but it was considered the best congregation of amusement devices on the Pacific Coast, and it made a handsome profit.

Development of Venice's amusement attractions continued throughout the 1910s. Any event or holiday was cause for celebration in Venice since attracting large crowds on weekends and holidays was vital for the city's economy. Whenever an important convention was in Los Angeles, the delegates were invited to Venice, and a large portion of winter hotel bookings came from the eastern states and Canada.⁸ This "golden era" of Venice lasted uninterrupted up until around 1920, the year Abbot Kinney died. During this time it was home to many famous silent film stars including Francis X. Bushman, Sidney Chaplin (Charlie's brother), and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. However, it was not long before Venice's popularity as an amusement center began to wane as radio, motion pictures, and widespread ownership of the automobile began to compete for entertainment dollars.⁹

Consolidation and Destruction

Though Venice managed to continue to prosper throughout the early 1920s, it was also besieged by a series of fires that destroyed several of its amusements piers. The piers were later rebuilt, but their owners incurred losses in the millions of dollars. There were other problems such as an undependable supply of fresh water, and many started questioning Venice's ability to govern itself. The question of whether or not Venice should be consolidated with the city of Los Angeles was hotly contested among the residents of Venice. Those against consolidation were worried about Venice losing its unique civic identity, and some supported consolidation with

Santa Monica as a more viable alternative. In the end, consolidation won by a vote of 3,130 to 2,215, and Venice became a part of Los Angeles on November 25, 1925.¹⁰

The city of Los Angeles quickly removed the miniature railroad and filled in what was left of the Venice-of-America Canals —some canals had already been filled in the early 1920 s’— to make way for increased automobile traffic. Another series of canals, the Short Line Canals, managed to survive and are the only waterways left in present-day Venice. However, since they are located south of Venice Boulevard, they are not considered to be a part of the Windward Circle neighborhood. In 1930 oil was discovered on the Venice peninsula which presented more problems for the community. Within a year, 148 oil wells were producing over 40,000 barrels of oil a day. Some jobs were created, but environmental destruction was widespread; the residential areas and beaches of Venice quickly became heavily polluted.

The Depression hit Venice hard, but the community rebounded a bit during World War II as a major draw for sailors and soldiers on weekend leave. Sadly, this period of prosperity ended with the war. Venice floundered throughout the 1950 s,’ with only small attempts made to bring a resurgence of business to its ailing dance halls and piers. Some members of the Beat generation settled in Venice including artists John Altoon, Ben Talbert, and Fowad Magdalani, and poets Stuart Perkoff and Lawrence Lipton. The Beats were lured by Venice s’ low rent, mild climate, and toleration of their lifestyle.¹¹ The Beats were soon followed by a generation of hippies and artists. Artists such as Chuck Arnoldi and Laddie Dill settled in Venice in the 1960 s’ because studio space was cheap. Unfortunately, as Venice was becoming an important artistic community, wheels were in motion to deal the community a huge blow that would make it more difficult for artists to settle there. At the center of it all was the Earthquake Code Enforcement Act.

In accordance with the act, more than 550 buildings were destroyed in Venice by 1965. The buildings were deemed unsafe by the city according to seismic regulations. Several property owners tried to obtain landmark status for their buildings along Windward Avenue, nearly all of which had been condemned. They formed an organization called the Shoreline and Landmarks Society. Their goal was to have the Cultural Heritage Board declare the Venetian-style buildings replicas of those in Venice, Italy, and, therefore, have them preserved for historic value. The Board declared that the buildings were not representative of Southern California Architecture, and landmark status was denied.¹² In the end, roughly one third of Venice was destroyed; witnesses compared the wreckage to a war zone. Included in the destruction was nearly all of the Italianate buildings that comprised Abbott Kinney s’ original Venice-of-America, with the exception of a handful of buildings along Windward Avenue and its nearby streets.

Venice Today

Though many historic buildings still exist in Venice, mostly in the form of residences, there are precious few that have been awarded landmark status. The Venice Branch Library at 610 California Avenue, the Venice-of-America House at 1223 Cabrillo Avenue, the Warren Wilson Beach House (also known as the Venice Beach House) at 15 30th street, and the Venice Canal Historic District (the original Short Line Canal network), are all listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The surviving Venetian-style arcade building at 67-71 Windward Avenue, including the columns and capitals, was designated City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument #532, a designation that did not preclude it from being eventually demolished. It is not known how much of the original housing in Windward Circle survives today, though it is widely believed that roughly 50 percent of the housing in the neighborhood dates from before World War II. After the war, dozens of new bungalows were built, adding many homes to the neighborhood of older Craftsman homes and beach bungalows from the 1920 s.’

Some building continued throughout the 1960 s’ and 70 s,’ including several multi-family dwellings. In the 1970 s,’ Venice experienced a rebirth as a major tourist destination spurred by the roller skaters on the broad walk. The roller skaters drew crowds, and with the crowds came

street performers, sidewalk vendors, and artists, creating a unique and eccentric environment that persists in Venice today. However, the carnival spirit of Venice exists mostly near the beach; the community is quieter inland from the beach in the Windward Circle neighborhood. The traffic circle and adjoining Main Street are home to a number of small businesses, restaurants, and residential buildings that cater to the mix of tourists and permanent residents that populate Venice on a daily basis. Around the small commercial district of Windward Circle, about 50 percent of the residential buildings are multi-unit structures. There are more single-family dwellings east of the traffic circle in the neighborhoods on the site of what was once the Venice-of-America Canals.

From the 1980 s to the present, new residential construction has continued in Venice. Contemporary houses and new loft-style apartments are interspersed with the older homes built throughout the last century, giving the community its signature eclectic feel. Property is expensive in Windward Circle since there is little, if any, vacant land available. Small two and three bedroom bungalows sell from between \$400,000-\$700,000, larger Craftsman homes sell for over \$800,000, and several beach-front properties begin at around \$1.5 million and sometimes sell for over \$3 million. The community attracts a multi-ethnic mix of creative professionals, artists, designers, and businessmen, all of whom are drawn to Venice for its distinct neighborhood flavor and unique history. There is a strong movement among some residents to preserve the surviving buildings and canals of Venice s history, a cause that is also championed by several community groups such as the Venice Grassroots Neighborhood Council, the Venice Chamber of Commerce, the Venice Library, the Venice Historical Society, and the Venice Canals Association.

¹ Carolyn Elayne Alexander, Abbot Kinney's Venice-of-America: The Golden Years: 1905-1920, vol. 1 (Venice, CA: Venice Historical Society, 1991) 7.

² The traffic circle is not as large as the former Grand Lagoon though, like the lagoon once did, it forms the heart of the Windward Circle neighborhood.

³ Patricia Adler, A History of the Venice Area: A Part of the Venice Community Plan Study (Los Angeles: Department of City Planning, 1969) 9-10.

⁴ Jeffrey Stanton, Venice of America: "Coney Island of the Pacific" (Los Angeles, CA: Donahue Publishing, 1988) 14.

⁵ Alexander 24.

⁶ Adler 14.

⁷ Stanton 14.

⁸ Stanton 52.

⁹ Stanton 70.

¹⁰ Stanton 105.

¹¹ Stanton 157.

¹² Stanton 158.