

Laguna Beach is so beautiful it was designated a national landmark

By ERIKA I. RITCHIE | eritchie@scng.com | Orange County Register February 15, 2017



A gazebo sits at the southern end of Heisler Park in Laguna Beach. The park and gazebo are one of the reasons a group of activists got Laguna Beach and its surrounding greenbelt put on the list of Historical American Landscapes. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Members of the Committee for Preservation of the Laguna Legacy (from left: Mark Chamberlain, Harry Huggins, Tom Lamb, Ann Christoph, Ron Chilcote, Verna Rollinger, Bob Borthwick, Barbara Metzger, and Eric Jessen) collected the necessary data, including pictures, maps and historical facts, to compile evidence to show why Laguna and its surrounding greenbelt qualified for the designation of a “Historic American Landscape” by the National Parks Service, Department of Interior. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Ann Christoph, a Laguna Beach landscape architect, had the idea to get all of Laguna Beach including its greenbelt noted as a Historical American Landmark. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

LAGUNA BEACH – Ann Christoph, a local landscape architect, has always known that this art-inspired town – known for its breathtaking ocean cliffs and sweeping canyons – was special. But it was a meeting with Noelle Vernon, a professor at Cal Poly Pomona, that kick-started an idea to identify Laguna – and its 22,000 acres of preserved open space – as a Historic American Landscape. Vernon, a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects, was in charge of locating areas in California that qualify for the distinction by the National Parks Service and the Library of Congress. “She was thinking something more like Heisler Park” in Laguna Beach, Christoph recalled. “I said, ‘Why not come up with something that includes all of Laguna Beach and its surrounding greenbelt and bluebelt?’” Eight years later, the idea has become reality. In December, Laguna Beach and its greenbelt were named a Historic American Landscape, one of 700 sites nationwide to get the recognition. Others include Yosemite National Park, the California missions and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

On Wednesday, a book titled “Laguna Beach and the Greenbelt, Celebrating a Treasured Historic American Landscape” will be released. Written and compiled by Christoph and eight other Laguna Beach activists, the book presents most of the documentation used to get the national designation. It includes historic homestead maps, photographs and history of the art colony and community activism.

“It’s a reinforcement of the uniqueness and high esteem Laguna deserves,” Christoph said. “Sometimes when it’s your place, you take a lot for granted. It points out how the landscape is significant to the community’s development. It’s the foundation of why we are what we are.”

The book describes how Laguna’s beauty and dramatic natural landscape are directly related to the community and its artistic traditions. It points to its geological formations, natural vegetation and coastal location and why that attracted artists even back in the early 1900s.

It also shows how the artistic influence and the character of the landscape shaped the qualities of the city.

Laguna Beach was spared from ranching because its canyons, steep cliffs and lack of vegetation didn’t work for raising cattle, Christoph said. Homesteaders who started arriving in 1870 blocked out areas and planted rows of eucalyptus to show they had improved the land and to mark their spots. The parcels were rectangular. And that is reflected in the streets today – Park Avenue and West Street both run diagonally, she said.

Instead of one landowner, homesteads were given out in small pieces. Each homesteader did something different with road patterns, lot layouts and concepts.

North Laguna was laid out in a more organized way with alleys, curbs and gutters because it was once part of the Irvine Ranch. But there was no master plan for the rest of Laguna. The hills, canyons and vegetation all led to a diverse village character and place, Christoph said.

“If we were all flat like Huntington Beach, the artists wouldn’t have come here,” she said. “The coastal cliffs, the canyons and the ocean all inspired the plein air painters. William Wendt’s painting had a spiritual component. He was trying to capture the spiritual inspiration that comes from nature.”

Christoph said artists who came to Laguna were concerned that the town could become less beautiful, so they started a garden club, planted trees to enhance the beauty.

“They were concerned the beach area could become a cheap fun zone,” she said. “Laguna Beach and its different beauty was its fame. They didn’t want it to become Balboa Island.”

The Historic American Landscape Survey program was started in 2000. It records historic landscapes in the U.S. through drawings, written histories and large-format black and white photographs and color photographs, said Christopher Stevens, a landscape architect with the National Parks Service.

“Historical landscapes foster a sense of community and place,” Stevens said. “Historic landscapes are also fragile places. They are affected by the forces of nature and by commercial and residential development and vandalism. For these reasons and for the benefit of future generations, it is important to document these places.”

The program, like the Historic American Building Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record, is overseen by the National Park Service. It is done in consultation with the American Society of Landscape Architects. The archives are housed in the Library of Congress.

Getting the designation wasn’t easy. Once Christoph came up with the idea, it would take nearly five years before Ron Chilcote, a member of the Laguna Greenbelt group, formed the Committee for the Preservation of the Laguna Legacy. Laguna’s greenbelt came about because of James Dilley, who in 1968 sought to conserve the coastal wilderness around the city.

Chilcote selected other members who have played a role in preserving Laguna’s character since the 1970s. They spent three years gathering the documentation that led to the designation.

“This distinction opens Laguna Beach to everyone throughout the country,” Chilcote said. “It’s the legacy of the past and everything that has shaped Laguna Beach. In the book we recognize the past, celebrate the present and leave a legacy to the future.”