

# *Old-Growth Infrastructure: Redwood in Los Angeles*



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From Southern California, the redwood forest of Humboldt and Del Norte counties is a two-day drive. It might as well be another country. L.A. does palms and jacarandas, not redwoods. In Golden State history, timber barons and tree-sitters seemingly belong somewhere north of Berkeley. Angelenos do not consider themselves remotely connected to Arcatans and the “redwood wars.”

That's not quite right. Lumber from coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) is all over the metropolis, both hidden from view and hiding in plain sight—a legacy of a commercial relationship. Southern California's greatest construction phase, the first half of the twentieth century, coincided with the heaviest cutting on the redwood coast.

At the time of statehood in 1850, something like 2 million acres of northwestern California were covered in redwood. By 2000, only 5 percent of this old growth remained, effectively all of it protected in public reserves. That's the "redwood forest" famous around the world. There's also a second, much larger "redwood forest": cutover land regrown as plantations.

The 2x4 redwood boards you see at Home Depot come from the second-growth forest. Although young redwood is very good material, it's not superlative like the old stuff. To use a Hollywood metaphor, old-growth redwood is CinemaScope in Technicolor at the movie palace; second-growth is digital projection.

For the building of California civilization, old-growth redwood "outranked all other natural resources," including gold, argued Willis Jepson, the state's leading botanist, in 1923. These trees contained more "clear" or "grade-A" lumber than any trees any loggers had ever seen. "Grade-A" meant solid, knot-free heartwood with fine, straight grains. Clear redwood was perfect building material. No other wood product matched its combination of lightness, evenness, and durability. It almost deserved the extravagant claims of the California Redwood Association, which advertised "nature's lumber masterpiece" as shrink-proof, warp-proof, split-proof, blemish-proof, insect-proof, rot-proof, and waterproof.

Best of all for Golden State consumers, redwood was cheap and available. They found uses for it everywhere—inside, outside, underground.

Imagine taking a daytrip from Los Angeles to Long Beach in the 1920s. You sit on redwood seats in a trolley moving over tracks laid on redwood ties; you gaze at downtown buildings topped with redwood tanks; you pass a forest of redwood derricks on Signal Hill; and you arrive at a beachfront equipped with red-

wood boardwalks and redwood piers, with a view of a port built upon redwood piling.

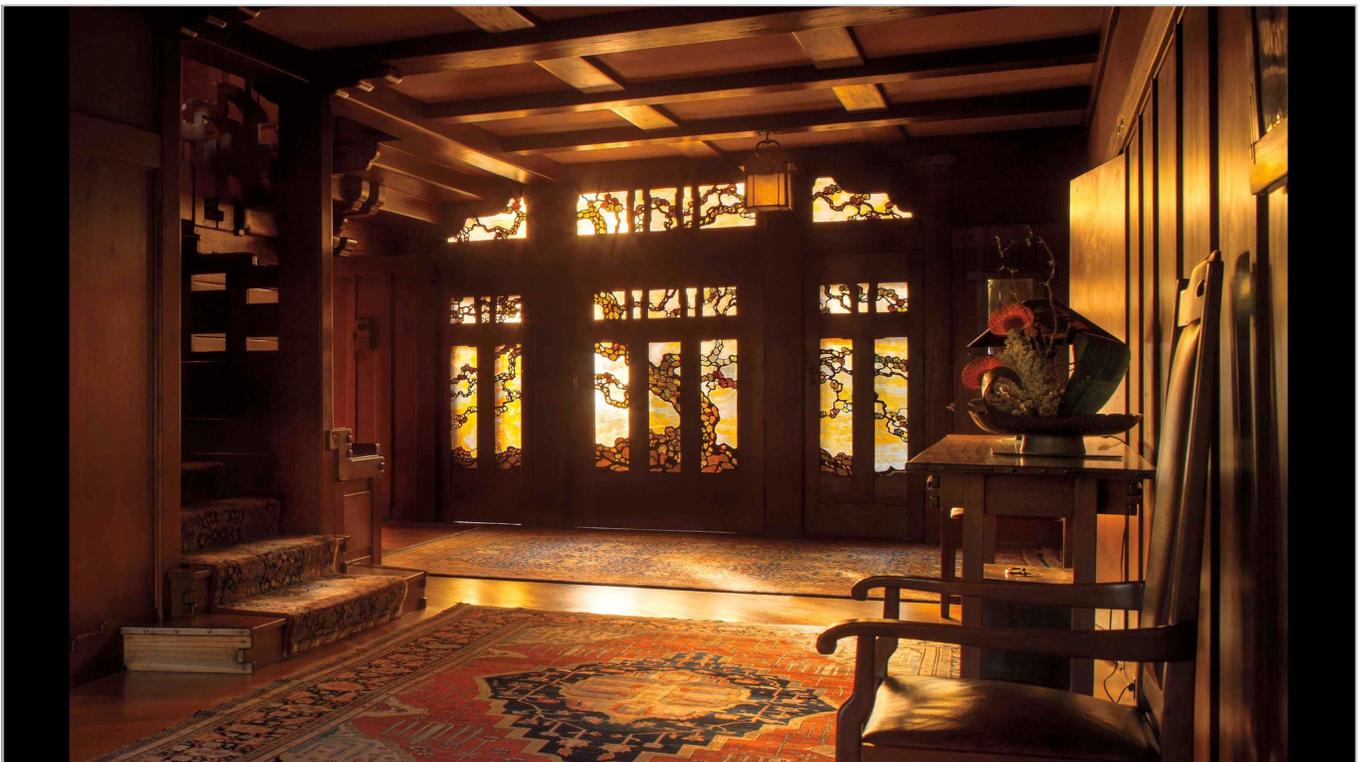
Inside their homes, too, Californians of yesteryear relied on redwood whenever they opened a faucet or flushed a toilet. For water delivery and sewage disposal, many cities used tongue-and-groove redwood stave pipes, reinforced with wire hoops. Because it performed well under liquid pressure without imparting any taste, redwood was also ideal for wine and tanning vats.



Looking back, this all seems prodigal. How could Pasadenans justify using multi-millennial megaflora for bleachers at the Rose Bowl? Stands of old-growth seem sacrosanct. The world's tallest trees have aesthetic and spiritual significance to people far beyond the Golden State. It's hard to imagine a time, only a century ago, when this priceless resource was utilitarian and regional, a California product for California infrastructure.

In the early twentieth century, the redwood industry modernized with consolidation and mechanization. Machine-cut timber arrived by ship to the ports of Oakland and Los Angeles. After the earthquake and firestorm of 1906, San Francisco replaced burned-up redwood buildings with brand-new redwood buildings. As Los Angeles surpassed San Francisco in subsequent years, incoming barges of redwood passed by outgoing barges of oranges.

In L.A. County, redwood consumption stood out in wealthy neighborhoods. Pasadena became renowned for its Arts and Crafts architecture, including generous use of redwood paneling, shingling, and furnishing. California's nature-loving bourgeoisie—the class of people who belonged to the Sierra Club and later the Save-the-Redwoods-League—desired this distinctively Californian way of living. The Gamble House, a historic landmark in Pasadena, is the most extravagant specimen of this wooden style.



It wasn't just millionaires on Orange Grove Boulevard who lived in the presence of old-growth products. During the 1920s real-estate boom, and the post-war mega-boom, redwood was democratized as all-purpose building stock. All classes of homeowners had access to it. For many transplants to Greater Los Angeles, their "redwood ranch home," featuring beautiful all-wood siding and decking, signified their attainment of the California Dream.

Even to the grave, redwood used to be a class-leveler. Funeral homes once carried affordable caskets made of “wood everlasting.” Even pet cemeteries offered “Nature’s Timeless Protection” in the form of cat-sized caskets. In one year, 1948, the California casket industry consumed over 21 million board feet of solid redwood. Some of the finest lumber ever made was planted six feet under at Forest Lawn.

Today, high-grade redwood reenters the market after events like the salvaging of the Union Pacific’s trestle across the Great Salt Lake. Such reclaimed wood is treated as premium material for specialty uses. No one would dream of reusing it for infrastructure, given the cost advantages of alternative materials, including engineered wood.

Recalling the go-go period of state growth, you may wonder if California made a wise trade: An ancient forest in the north for an instant metropolis in the south. In the original Promised Land, the old-growth Cedars of Lebanon were depleted, but the world got Solomon’s Temple out of the transaction. In America’s promised land, what did the world get—the Gamble House? To be fair, edifices may be the wrong measure of worth in Greater Los Angeles. Think instead of all the one-story bungalows in once-affordable neighborhoods subsidized by hundreds of years of slow growth on the foggy North Coast. Modern L.A. may have been built on sunshine, and peddled with palms, but without redwood it couldn’t have grown like a weed.

**Jared Farmer** is author of *Trees in Paradise: A California History*. This piece originally appeared on October 23, 2017, on the KCET blog accompanying Episode 2.3 of *Lost L.A.*