

**THE THACHER SCHOOL**  
**5025 Thacher Road**  
**Ojai**  
**Ventura County**  
**California**

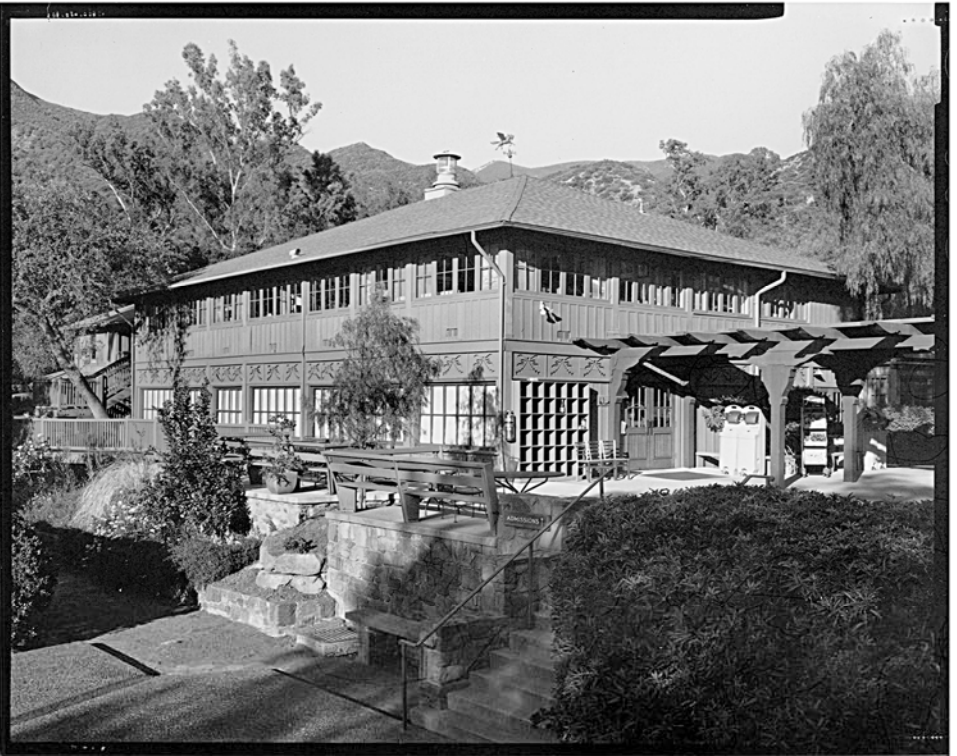
**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY DOCUMENTATION**  
4x5 CONTACT PRINTS  
SUPPLEMENTAL DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic Resources Group  
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BUSINESS OFFICE

BENEFITS OFFICE





































In Memory of  
**John van Benschoten Griggs**  
Member of Peninsula League 1945-1994  
Presided Over Tennis Courts 1945-1994  
Presided Over Netball Tennis Tournament 1948-1949







































## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### THE THACHER SHOOOL, PRE-1910 RESOURCES

- Location:** 5025 Thacher Road  
(intersection of Thacher Road and McAndrew Road)  
Ojai, Ventura County, California
- Significance:** The Thacher School is significant for its association with the development of private education in California. The Thacher School was established in 1889 in Ojai, California, as a highly selective private boys' boarding school. It remains in operation today, and after admitting girl students for the first time in 1977, is now the oldest co-educational boarding school in California. It is also the third-oldest continuously operating boarding school in the state, and the oldest of several private schools in the Ojai Valley. The school's presence and continued participation in the community of Ojai embodies a trend of educational development which is reflected in the surrounding community; today, the Ojai Valley contains the highest concentration of private schools in the state of California.
- The Thacher School campus has a rich and complex history, spanning from its early days as a ranch and ad hoc boarding school operated by Sherman Day Thacher to its establishment as a robust educational institution in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The school's history was punctuated by two major fires around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as a result, few resources remain from the school's initial period of growth and development. A small concentration of the remaining intact resources – the Dining Hall and Administration Building, the Historic Oval and Flagpole, and the Upper Tennis Courts – are located at the center of the campus and represent the physical and symbolic heart of the school. Together, they embody the earliest patterns of development at the Thacher School and reflect the school's rustic character and origins as a ranch school. While these resources have undergone substantial alterations over time, they represent some of the last remaining features dating from the Thacher School's earliest period of development.
- Description:** The Thacher School is located at 5025 Thacher Road, to the north and east of the City of Ojai in Ventura County. The campus occupies a large irregular parcel which is situated at the intersection of Thacher Road and McAndrew Road. The surrounding rural area is developed with low-density residential and agricultural properties.
- The campus is improved with a collection of residential, institutional, and equestrian buildings which date from 1895 to 2017. Buildings are oriented around a central core, which reflects some of the earliest



development patterns and spatial configurations of the campus. The Dining Hall and Administration Building, which was first constructed in 1895, is situated at the center of campus and functions as the practical and symbolic hub of campus life. A small grouping of adjacent resources dating from the same period, including the Historic Oval and Flagpole and the Upper Tennis Courts, are situated immediately to the west of the Dining Hall.

### ***Dining Hall and Administration Building***

The Dining Hall is located at the center of the Thacher School campus, on a terraced hillside supported on a stone retaining wall. The building is flanked to the west by narrow wood deck and the Historic Oval; to the north by the Middle School building; to the east by the landscaped McCaskey Commons; and to the south by the Thacher Commons building, to which it is connected by a wood pergola. The Dining Hall is surrounded by lush landscaping, including several large pepper trees. Constructed in 1895, the dining hall is a vernacular building of wood frame construction, with an irregular L-shaped plan. The building's central block and north wing are two stories in height and have hipped roofs with open eaves and asphalt composition roofing shingles. The exterior walls are clad in board-and-batten siding. The east wing is of exposed concrete masonry unit (CMU) construction, with a flat wood-framed roof and central roof monitor clad in built-up roofing. There are board-and-batten equipment screens on the east wing roof. The primary (west) façade of the central block is symmetrical, with seven bays on each story divided by simple wood posts and beams. The central and two end bays are slightly wider than the remaining four. Fenestration consists of two bands of divided light, wood sash windows that partially wrap the north and south façades. The first story windows include fixed twelve-light sash in the three wider bays and vertically sliding eight-light pocket windows in the narrower bays. Above each first-story window is a decorative wood panel with a jig sawn garland pattern. The second story windows are grouped four-light casements, quadripartite in the wide bays and tripartite in the narrow bays. The building's primary entrance is asymmetrically located on the south façade and consists of a pair of six-light paneled wood doors accessed from the pergola. There is a projecting one-story volume at the southeast corner, glazed with fixed divided-light wood sash windows, with a flat roof and roof deck above accessed by an exterior wood stair.

The north wing (Administration Building), was constructed as an addition the Dining Hall around 1899. It is asymmetrical, with a recessed second-story balcony with wood posts and corbels and a wood balustrade, accessed by an exterior wood staircase. Below the staircase is a passage with wood corbels, partially enclosed by a projecting bay with fixed, divided light wood sash windows.



Fenestration at the north wing consists primarily of one-over-one and four-over-four double hung wood sash windows. Fenestration at the east wing consists of metal sliding windows.

### ***Historic Oval***

The Historic Oval is located immediately to the west of the Dining Hall and Administration Building and the Thacher Commons Building. The Oval is flanked to the north by the Middle School Dormitory; to the south by the Milligan Center for the Performing Arts; and to the west by the Upper Tennis Courts. The Oval is a landscaped open space generally defined and bisected by paved pathways. Its topography slopes gently downhill to the west, where it is bounded by a low retaining wall of natural stone, which separates the Oval from the Upper Tennis Courts to the west. A bench constructed of wood and natural stone is situated in the southern portion of the Oval, beneath a mature camphor tree. A large rock is situated in the northern portion; it is mounted with a metal plaque noting that the Oval has been dedicated as the Forest Cooke Garden. The Oval also features several significant trees, including the mature camphor as well as heritage Canary Island Date Palm dating from around the 1890s.

### ***Flagpole***

The Flagpole is situated at the northeastern edge of the Historic Oval, and is flanked by the Middle School Dormitory to the north and the Dining Hall and Administration Building to the east. The flagpole is constructed of wood and is topped with a metal eagle ornament. The base of the flagpole has decayed, and the flagpole is now secured to a wood support pole by metal bands. The support pole sits on a small concrete pad.

### ***Upper Tennis Courts***

The Upper Tennis Courts are located immediately to the west of the Historic Oval and are flanked by a faculty residence to the north, open space to the south, and the Perimeter Road to the west. They consist of a grouping of six courts which are each surrounded by a chain link fence. A low retaining wall of natural stone, constructed around 1895, defines the eastern boundary of the tennis court area.

### **History:**

The Thacher School was founded by Sherman Day Thacher (1861-1931), a Connecticut native and Yale University graduate who first arrived in Ojai in 1887. Thacher was traveling with his brother, who was suffering from tuberculosis, and the family hoped that the California climate would improve his health. At first, Sherman Thacher intended to stay for only a few weeks, but soon became enamored with the mild weather and landscape and found satisfaction with the physical labor that accompanied ranching. He borrowed money to acquire a 160-acre claim adjacent to his brother Edward's property and constructed a three-room frame cottage. By



January 1888, he was ready to become a rancher on the site he called the “Casa de Piedra.”

Two years later, Sherman Thacher received a request from a family friend to host his nephew for “a year of outdoor life combined with study in preparation for college.”<sup>1</sup> Thacher agreed, and it did not take long until “somehow it became known all over Ventura County that Sherman was willing and able to tutor.”<sup>2</sup> Sherman Thacher’s favor to a friend soon became a full-fledged operation. At the time, public schools in the county were considered to be unsatisfactory, and while he was inexperienced, due to his Yale education Thacher was still better qualified than other local teachers.<sup>3</sup> Area parents pressed Thacher to take on more boys, and Thacher accepted, with the initial intention of tutoring only ‘until the oranges should make his fortune.’<sup>4</sup> With Sherman Thacher’s acquiescence, the Casa de Piedra Ranch school was formed.

From the earliest days of the school now established at the Casa de Piedra Ranch, its character was decidedly antithetical to any kind of institutional development. The earliest advertisements made note of the fact that “the place has not been given the title of school. While it is a school as far as progress in study goes, it is hoped that it will always preserve distinctly the more normal life of a household and ranch.”<sup>5</sup> At first few provisions were made for the additional residents of the ranch; all school operations were conducted out of the stone house – the “first real building” Sherman Thacher constructed on his ranch in 1889.<sup>6</sup> Within just a few years, however, Thacher had taken on enough pupils to make this arrangement unsuitable. By 1892, Thacher was compelled to hire an additional teacher and construct several additional buildings.

By 1895, Sherman Thacher had developed a working school. Admittedly, “the equipment was little better than adequate and the buildings were neither handsome nor luxurious. But he knew that the physical plant of a school is of slight importance to anyone except parents.”<sup>7</sup> On the night of June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1895, a fire broke out in the kitchen building. Without water storage via a tank or reservoir with which to fight the fire, the entire school complex was completely consumed in less than thirty minutes. The boys, staff, and the Thacher family all escaped without injury, but the loss of property was almost too great to contemplate. Sherman Thacher was substantially underinsured, holding coverage for perhaps a quarter of

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<sup>1</sup> LeRoy McKim Makepeace, *Sherman Thacher And His School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Makepeace, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Makepeace, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Makepeace, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Makepeace, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Makepeace, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Makepeace, 99.



the total value of the property's improvements, and had almost no money in the bank.<sup>8</sup> However, he immediately announced that he would rebuild at once, a process that was greatly aided by the financial contributions of friends and family members.

When planning and construction commenced on the new school buildings, it was decided to relocate the ranch and school operations to a new site up the hill, a few hundred feet to the south of the former site, and campus operations remain oriented around this location today. Two buildings were constructed, a parlor and dining hall (now the present-day Dining Hall and Administration complex), and a dormitory and classroom building. Sherman Thacher's brother Edward, who had studied as an architect, designed the two new structures with some assistance from Santa Barbara architect Samuel Ilsley. The two buildings, which were constructed of redwood and designed in a rustic vernacular style, were ready by the commencement of the new school year in October 1895.

The campus was once again threatened by fire in the autumn of 1910. The core of the school plant – study hall, classrooms, and living quarters for the two upper classes – was almost completely destroyed; the only major structure to survive the fire was the present-day Dining Hall and Administration building.

The 1910 fire marked a turning point in the physical development of the school. New buildings constructed immediately following the fire were designed in popular Period Revival styles, reflecting the changing architectural tastes of the period. Subsequent building campaigns introduced new styles to the campus aesthetic and expanded the physical plant of the school. Today, few resources remain from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which represents the earliest period of physical development at the Thacher School. The most intact concentration of these resources is situated at the center of the campus and includes the Dining Hall and Administration Building, the Historic Oval and the Flagpole, and the Upper Tennis Courts.

#### ***Dining Hall and Administration Building***

The Dining Hall was originally built in 1896 as one of two buildings constructed to replace the school's facilities which were destroyed by fire in 1895. Both buildings were designed by Sherman Thacher's brother, Edward, with assistance from Santa Barbara architect Samuel Ilsley. (The second of the two buildings was later destroyed in a subsequent fire in 1910.) Of this building, LeRoy McKim Makepeace writes, "The Main Building, surrounded on two-and-a-half sides by a piazza, contained the parlor and dining room, with a kitchen adjoining the rear. In the second story were bedrooms for the younger boys.

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<sup>8</sup> Makepeace, 100.



The outstanding feature of the parlor was a large fireplace made of stone quarried on the Gridley Ranch five miles away. Mr. Thacher was always proud of this fireplace, which he helped design. It was simple and sturdy, and it drew well. A single plank three inches thick formed the mantel.”<sup>9</sup>

While the building quickly became the hub of campus life, its capacity was almost immediately surpassed by the growing student population, as well as the administrative and functional needs of the school. Over time a number of alterations and additions were made to accommodate the larger student body in both the dining area and the dormitory upstairs. Eventually, the housing crisis was alleviated by the construction of a dedicated Lower School dormitory building in 1949, and a new modern kitchen was added in 1951. Following the relocation of the dormitory functions, the second floor remained largely vacant for the next thirty years, save for the occasional storage of costumes, until a major campaign of improvements to the building commenced in 1979. This work resulted in substantial alterations and upgrades to the dining room and kitchen facilities as well as the conversion of the second-floor dormitory space into administrative offices; the existing administrative offices in the adjacent Business Building (#22) were then utilized by student organizations, including the staffs of *El Archivero* and *The Thacher Notes*.

### ***Historic Oval***

The Historic Oval originated from open space whose boundaries were established by the construction of an oval track to the west of the Dining Hall. The clearing remained unimproved over time, although plants and trees were introduced in the 1890s. An analysis of archival photographs appears to show horse races in progress along the oval track, and it is possible that the area served as an ad hoc racing track until the acquisition of the New Field in 1904. However, as is typical with many improved landscape features, the oval track and infield are not identified on most archival or contemporary maps. The only pictorial notation for this area occurs on a 1939 campus map, which notes the area as the “Oval” and calls out a fish pond – an improvement which corresponds with many archival photographs of the period. It is clear from examining an array of archival photography that the infield landscaping was improved, and extant landscape elements from this period may represent some of the earliest efforts at a designed landscape on campus. Although most of the landscaped improvements, including the fish pond, are no longer extant, the oval infield has been retained today as landscaped open space. The Oval was later renamed in honor of longtime Thacher faculty member and administrator Forest Cooke.

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<sup>9</sup> Makepeace, 105.



**Flagpole**

Although the precise date of construction for this flagpole could not be confirmed, a review of archival photographs shows a flagpole in this general location since around 1895. Its initial presence in photographs coincides with that of the newly-constructed Dining Hall, but it is not shown in any earlier images where the Dining Hall has not yet been completed. It is possible that given the spatial arrangements and circulation patterns established by the construction of the Dining Hall, the flagpole was installed around that same time.

**Upper Tennis Courts**

The Upper Tennis Courts were the first courts to be constructed at the Thacher School and represent some of the earliest organized sports on campus. The courts were developed at the encouragement of William Thacher; as LeRoy McKim Makepeace explains, "Interest in tennis was negligible until the arrival of Mr. William Thacher, but his enthusiasm and skill soon made it the most popular game at the school and in the valley. He had been champion of Yale, runner-up in the national Intercollegiate singles, and doubles champion. Not only was he a first-rate player himself, but he enjoyed teaching everyone else. New courts were built at the school, a tennis club was established in the village, tournaments were organized, and matches arranged between the valley and the school and with teams from other towns." Initially, two courts were constructed end-to-end shortly after William Thacher's arrival in Ojai in 1895, and a second pair was constructed adjacent to the first around 1905. The courts were situated on terraced land to the west of the Dining Hall and were defined by stone retaining walls. As the tennis program expanded, two additional courts were added here around 1964.

**Sources:**

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**Project Information:**

This report was prepared for The Thacher School by Paul Travis, AICP, Principal, and Heather Goers, Architectural Historian, of Historic Resources Group, Pasadena, CA.

This report was prepared in partial fulfillment of the mitigation measures stipulated by the County of Ventura Cultural Heritage Board at the Board’s meeting on May 8, 2017, and detailed in the meeting minutes available at [http://vcrma.org/planning/pdf/meeting-agendas/chb-archives/CHB\\_07-10-2017\\_Agenda%20and%20Minutes.pdf](http://vcrma.org/planning/pdf/meeting-agendas/chb-archives/CHB_07-10-2017_Agenda%20and%20Minutes.pdf) (accessed November 2017).

The specific mitigation measure addressed is as follows:

*3) Documentation – Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) Level 3 to consist of Sketch Plan, Photographs and Written data (short form) – Create a historic record by documenting the pre-1910 campus buildings, spatial relationships, and (including the 1895 Upper Tennis Courts) in accordance with The Secretary of Interior’s Guidelines for Architectural and Engineering Documentation.*

Photography was provided by Tavo Olmos.