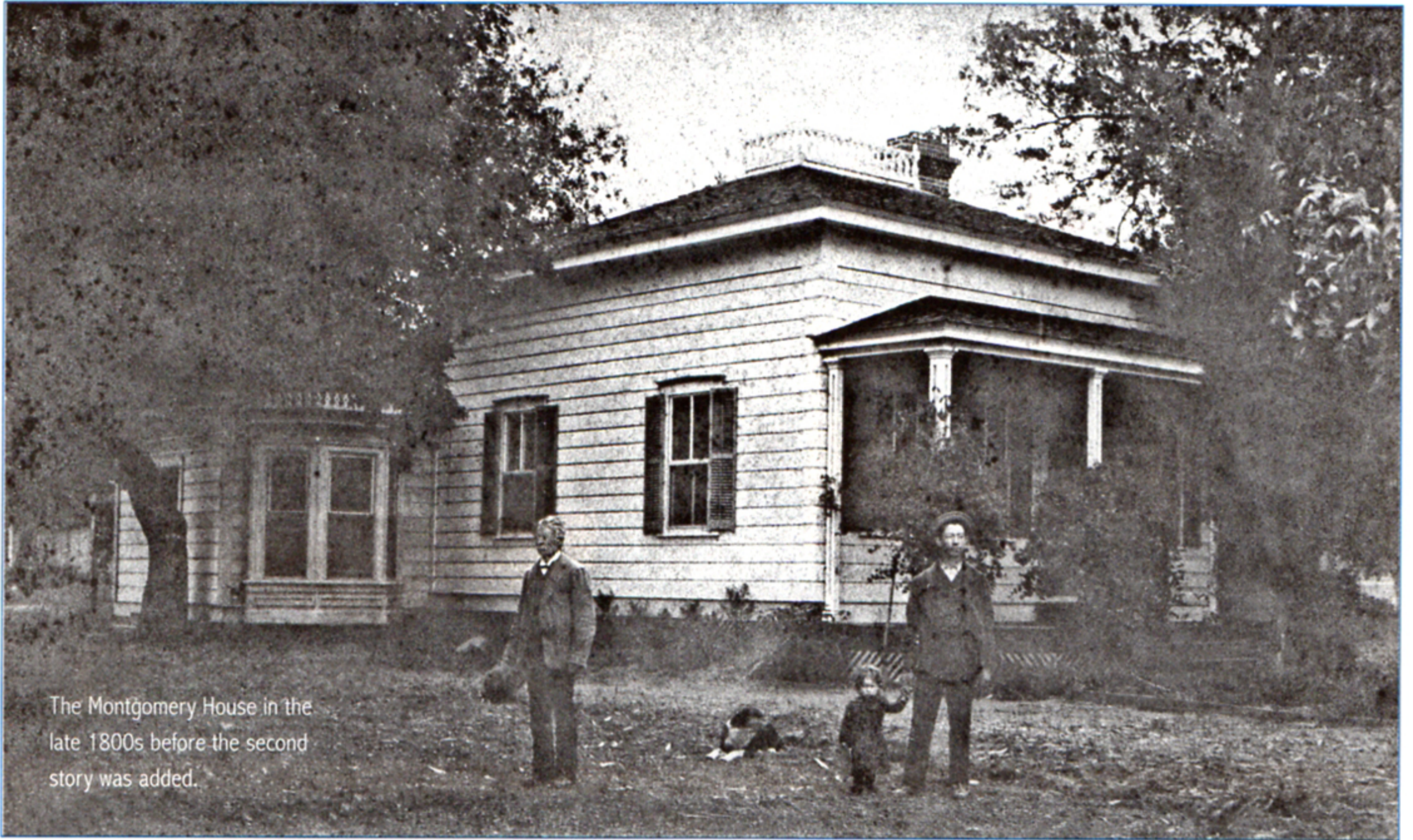


A front porch view



The Montgomery House in the late 1800s before the second story was added.

of the area's history

A CONFLUENCE OF THE PAST AND THE FUTURE AT OJAI'S MONTGOMERY HOUSE

Story by Bill Warner



The Montgomery House today.

Visitors to the Porch Gallery will find some of the most contemporary art Ojai has to offer. They will also discover one of the town's most laid-back atmospheres.

The incisive quality of Porch Gallery art is perhaps best exemplified by its recent Water Works II show, which featured 70 works by 54 artists devoting their creative energies to the

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topics of water resources and drought. As for the easygoing ambiance of the gallery, it is probably best appreciated on Sunday mornings, when passersby are welcome to step up and enjoy a cup of coffee while relaxing in any of the numerous chairs on The Porch's actual front porch.

"I immediately bonded with this place," said Lisa Casoni, who, along with artist and curator Heather Stobo, opened the gallery in October 2013. Both had relocated to Ojai,

attracted by the prospect of a more tightly knit community than what Los Angeles was offering at the time. "You don't move to Ojai," she said. "Ojai moves into you."

Casoni could not have picked a better address for bonding with the heart and soul of Ojai: the Montgomery-Baker House, in which The Porch is located, is one of the oldest structures in town. For much of the 19th century, the Ojai Valley was more or less a large, oak-shaded cattle ranch, a Mexican

land grant established in 1837. In 1874, though, a real estate developer by the name of Royce Surdham acquired extensive property in the lower Ojai Valley, which he proceeded to subdivide and advertise for sale. One of his first customers was John Montgomery.

A native of Liverpool, England, Montgomery was a successful merchant who had lived for many years in Mexico. He had first visited the Ojai

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A sculpture from the Water Works II exhibit rises gracefully from the gallery's front yard.



"Balance" is the title piece of the Porch Gallery's exhibit of works by artist Souun Takeda. The show will run through Aug. 2.

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Valley looking for a climate in which the health of his wife might improve. He liked what he saw here, and late in 1874 he purchased 1,300 acres of a community prospectively to be called Nordhoff — 1,300 acres covering most of what is the city of Ojai today.

Today, the address of the house he built — and that of The Porch — is 310 E. Matilija St. In Montgomery's day, though, there was no Matilija Street; his property fronted on East Ojai Avenue. If you stand in the west side of the

Chevron station parking lot at 360 E. Ojai Ave., you'll be near the site of what was once the Montgomery family's front gate. The yard between there and the house was largely an orchard, comprising a variety of trees, including olives. If you

stand in front of the Lavender Inn, 210 E. Matilija St., you'll be looking at what was once the acre or so of land donated by Montgomery for the first elementary school in the lower Ojai Valley, the Nordhoff Grammar School.

In the next decade, he sold his home to Edwin Baker, another businessman who, like Montgomery, had moved to the Ojai Valley for reasons of personal health. Baker immediately initiated changes to the dwelling. "The original house was adobe," said Craig Walker, chairman of the

To See:

- WHAT** Summer fare at the Porch Gallery includes Balance
- WHEN** The show will run from June 25 through Aug. 2. Gallery hours are Thursday-Friday, noon - 5 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.; Sunday 9:30 a.m. - 1 p.m.; and by appointment.
- WHERE** 310 E. Matilija Ave., Ojai.
- HOW** Visit www.porchgalleryojai.com or call 805-620-7589

Ojai Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). “It had been built in keeping with the many years he’d spent living in Mexico.”

The personal tastes of Baker were more in keeping with that owner’s rather proper character, Walker said, so the adobe was soon covered over with Victorian clapboard. But Baker also added much of what today accounts for the building’s charm, including side rooms, alcoves, side entrances and hallways — not to mention the entire second floor.

In the second half of the 20th century, the house was acquired by the Clausen family, who converted it into a residence and funeral home.

At present, the house is not an official Ojai Landmark, but it is on the HPC’s priority list of historic structures having the potential for such designation. “It’s definitely something we would look at,” Walker said. “Not only does the site have the historical connection to two of the founding fathers of Ojai, but it’s also one of the few examples of that period’s architecture still around. It’s a nice house and it’s been well kept up.”

The house’s integral connection to the town has not been lost on Casoni and Stobo. “One question we’ve asked ourselves is, How can we interconnect with the community and with other local institutions?” Casoni said.

The Water Works II show, again, is a good example of their answer. The artwork in the show was exhibited at several locations around the valley, including a significant portion at the



“Something in the Water,” a mixed media work by Wendy Osher, was a centerpiece of the Porch Gallery’s Water Works II show in 2014.

Ojai Art Center. But The Porch also organized a panel discussion of water issues in conjunction with the exhibit, as well as a joint presentation given by photographer Terri Lane, whose work has documented the progress of drought in the Ojai Valley, and conservation specialist Cinnamon McIntosh.

Casoni and Stobo have also looked to integrate gallery events with creative skills from the community at large. Local musicians, mixologists and chefs are regularly invited to participate in exhibit openings, and in conjunction with this year’s Ojai Music Festival, the gallery hosted a reception honoring the composer John Luther Adams.

Accordingly, the Sunday morning custom of serving coffee on the porch grew out of The Porch’s proximity to the popular Ojai Farmers Market. People were walking up to look in the gallery windows on their ways to and from the market, Casoni said. It just made sense to open the doors and offer some quiet hospitality. “But we do buy all of our coffee from Java Joe’s across the street,” she adds. “We don’t want to take anything away from local businesses.”

It’s fitting, then, that a homestead once central to the beginnings of the community should still strive for a vital connection to it. “We’ve made a point of reaching out and feeling we’re part of something bigger than just this space,” Casoni said. That’s an attitude of which we think John Montgomery might very well approve.



Ojai writer akka b. (left) and Porch Gallery curator Heather Stobo enjoy a conversation on the porch.