
Meet the Founders

Four men, who came to California during the great land boom, became Monrovia's founders. These men had made their fortunes in building railroads and in banking. The fifth founder was a ranch foreman. These five men became friends and business partners, and they bought land from Lucky Baldwin. They took their land along the rolling foothills, with the oak trees and a few dirt roads and turned it into a community. These farsighted men were William Newton Monroe, Edward F. Spence, James Fillmore Crank, John D. Bicknell, and Jeremiah F. Falvey.

William Newton Monroe

Young William Monroe's father was a farmer in Soap Creek, Iowa. William spent his days helping his father. He had morning chores to do before breakfast, then lessons at school, and more chores before supper each evening. During the summer he swam in Soap Creek with the other children. One wintery day the men of the Baptist Church chopped a hole in the frozen Soap Creek, so that William and his sister Lucy could be baptized when they joined the church.

William was a good student and attended college at Ashland University. When he graduated, he took a job as a school teacher. He earned \$40 a month. For two years, he worked in a school that had thirty-six children of all ages. He lived in the homes of some of his students.

His career soon changed. President Abraham Lincoln needed soldiers in the Union Army to fight the Civil War. William joined the army. He trained other soldiers and helped move a tribe of Sioux Indians farther west. But he was not sent to fight in the terrible battles of the war. When the war was over in 1865, William was discharged. Now he needed a new job.



W. N. Monroe

*William Newton Monroe
Born – June 4, 1841 in Flat Creek, Indiana
(Monrovia Historical Society collection)*

A New Career

While William Monroe was a soldier, he met and fell in love with Mary Jane Hall. She was a teacher in Kearney, Nebraska. When they got married, an army captain performed the ceremony.

William and Mary Jane Monroe moved to Omaha, Nebraska. There, Mr. Hall, Mary Jane's father, gave William a job working on the construction of a railroad in Nebraska. While they lived in Omaha, two sons, Milton and George, were born into the family.

The family spent some time living with Grandfather Sanders Monroe and Grandmother Catheren Monroe at the Soap Creek farm. A daughter, Myrtle, was born while they lived there. Later, the young Monroe family left the farm and moved to Lawrence, Kansas. They bought a home, and soon another son, Jesse Lee, joined the family. During this time, William Monroe learned how to build railroads.

William Monroe met many important men in the railroad business. One was a man from California, Charles Crocker. He asked William to move to California to help build railroads in the West.

It was a hard decision to make. Mr. and Mrs. Monroe were both excited about the new job, but it meant saying good-bye to Grandfather and Grandmother Monroe and to Grandfather and Grandmother Hall. In addition it would be a long hard trip to make with four small children. In 1875, they packed their belongings and moved to Los Angeles.

The Boxcar Family

When the Monroes arrived in Los Angeles, they settled in a downtown hotel. Mr. Monroe wanted a business. He bought the hotel where they lived. When he needed to be away from home, Mrs. Monroe ran the hotel and took care of their business. In 1880, Mr. Monroe was elected to the Los Angeles City Council.

In 1882, Mr. Monroe was given the big job of building a railroad in Texas. The railroad would begin in San Antonio, go to El Paso, and then south into Mexico. This meant that Mr. Monroe would be gone from home for a long time. He was not happy about that, so he decided that his family would go to Texas with him.

Mr. Monroe and his family could not stay in one town while he worked. They had to keep moving as the railroad was built. So Mr. Monroe ordered some boxcars to be fixed up like a home. They had bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen space. The boxcars moved along the new tracks as the work progressed. What a strange rolling home!

While the family was staying in San Antonio, Texas, their little seven-year-old son, Jesse Lee, died. But soon a baby sister, Mabelle, was born. She brought them new happiness.

Before he left Texas, Mr. Monroe bought a train carload of mules and shipped them to Los Angeles. There he sold them for two hundred dollars apiece. With the "mule money" and money from the railroad job, he decided to buy a country home for his family. No more wandering!

The Country Home

Mr. Monroe arranged with Lucky Baldwin to look at part of his Rancho Santa Anita. With the whole family riding in a wagon, he arrived at Mr. Baldwin's guest house one April afternoon in 1884. Mr. Baldwin drove them around the ranch. He took them to the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains and showed them a view of the beautiful valley below. The hillside was covered with shady oak trees. The Monroes loved the spot immediately. What a wonderful place to build their home and raise their family!

The Monroes stayed that night with Mr. Baldwin and thought about their plans. The next morning they made another trip to the rolling hills near the mountains. Now they were sure. This was the land they wanted.

The following day they all returned to Los Angeles. Mr. Monroe wrote to Mr. Baldwin and said that he would buy about two hundred acres of land.

In May, the family packed their things into the wagon and rode through the San Gabriel Valley to their property in the foothills. They brought a tent to live in while Mr. Monroe and his workers cleared away the rocks and built a cottage. This was their temporary home while their beautiful country mansion was being constructed. It was built among the large oak trees, and Mr. Monroe named it "The Oaks." It was surrounded by a beautiful garden with fountains and rare trees. The Monroes moved into their country home and enjoyed entertaining their friends when they came to visit.