"THE MANUFACTURING SUBURB OF LOS ANGELES"

Henry Huntington, Alfred Dolge, and the Building of Dolgeville, California, 1903-1910

By Robert Phelps

A MODEL manufacturing town in the Garden of Eden. That would be something of a novelty, would it not? Yet that is what we are likely to see... for if the San Gabriel Valley is not the Garden of Eden, it is certainly a very near approach to it, with the serpent left out, while, as to the model manufacturing town, Alfred Dolge may be relied upon to see to that part of the business.1

Thus predicted the Los Angeles Times on the building of "Dolgeville," a factory town established by Los Angeles businessman Henry Edwards Huntington at the western end of the San Gabriel Valley in 1903. Built around the felt works of the Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company, the project was intended to demonstrate once and for all Los Angeles' industrial potential and represented southern California's first attempt at city planning for working class families. Huntington replicated the methods that made the region's middle class subdivisions so successful by selling land to factory operatives in an effort to create a stable community of employee home-

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Los Angeles Times, January 24, 1904.
owners. By the end of the decade however, Dolgeville was pronounced a failure, annexed to the small but relatively affluent town of Alhambra. In spite of Huntington’s efforts, few workers were able to purchase homes, and less than 1,000 people had relocated to the town. The experiment faded, and “The Manufacturing Suburb of Los Angeles,” as Dolgeville was called, became a forgotten chapter in the long history of urban planning in southern California.

Recent research has demonstrated the critical role private business played in shaping the spatial form of urban Southern California. Whether actively engaged in the political arena or transforming the desert into subdivided communities, businessmen were important factors in the growth of the region’s cities. As William B. Friedricks has shown, Henry E. Huntington’s development of streetcar systems, power companies, and real estate made him the premier private planner of urban and suburban southern California. Huntington’s business activities created the infrastructure necessary to disperse a large segment of the region’s middle class who, according to historian Robert Fogelson, were driven to the periphery of Los Angeles by aspirations for homeownership and suburbanization. This suburban ethos was codified by the Los Angeles zoning law of 1908, an ordinance advocated by local realtors to segregate land use and prevent industries from encroaching upon the residential neighborhoods of their upper and middle class clientele.

However, to gain a fuller appreciation of city planning in southern California, historians must reconcile this image of “middle class Los Angeles” with the existence of a large regional working class. “The Manufacturing Suburb of Los Angeles” represented the first significant attempt by private business to address the housing needs of the city’s industrial workers. Dolgeville’s

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4William B. Friedricks, Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California (Columbus, OH, 1992), pp. 1, 48-97.

developers sold residential lots and encouraged the construction of privately owned dwellings to house factory employees, deliberately rejecting the factory town model best personified by Pullman, Illinois, where employees rented company owned housing; and pre-dating the limited market approach used by J.P. Morgan’s United States Steel Corporation to build Gary, Indiana, in 1906. The story of Dolgeville provides an important chapter in the history of urban planning and the development of company towns, and demonstrates that the housing problems faced by industrial workers were as prevalent in southern California as in other parts of the United States at the century’s turn.

More than any single figure, Henry E. Huntington was responsible for Los Angeles’ dynamic growth between 1900 and 1920. His Pacific Electric Railway (PE), destined to become the largest streetcar system in history, was incorporated in 1901 to haul passengers and freight between southern California’s scattered cities. Together with the Los Angeles Railway (LARY), which operated in central Los Angeles, the PE opened vast tracts of land that Huntington simultaneously acquired for residential development. Between 1901 and 1905, the Huntington Land and Improvement Company and its subsidiaries, arm in arm with the Pacific Electric, penetrated as far south as Orange County and as far north as the still arid San Fernando Valley.

In March 1903, Huntington acquired the 500-acre Shorb San Marino Ranch northeast of Los Angeles and, together with a number of smaller purchases, secured the bulk of the western San Gabriel Valley for residential development. During his days with the Southern Pacific, Huntington surveyed the valley for potential right of ways and it was here that a substantial portion of his land dealings took place. Part of the Shorb land included the old San Gabriel Winery, located on a hill west of the original Alhambra Addition Tract. Built by rancher James de Barth Shorb, the winery was the most profitable on the west coast until competition from northern California made the land more valuable as residential property.

Huntington decided to develop his San Gabriel lands into homogenous suburbs, designed and marketed for a class specific clientele. He created Oak

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3 On Huntington’s real estate and rail activities in the San Gabriel Valley, see ibid., p. 59. Also see the Los Angeles Times, March 2, 1903 and William M. Northrup, Newton W. Thompson, eds., *History of Alhambra (Alhambra, Ca., 1936)*, p. 33.
Knoll between Pasadena and San Marino for upper class estates from one to ten acres in size and with building restrictions from $5,000 to $20,000. Oneonta Park, located in South Pasadena and named after the place of Henry’s birth, was intended for middle class home buyers, with one-half and one-third acre lots and a minimum building restriction of $3,500. Both subdivisions were reserved exclusively for single family homes, and residents commuted to distant work on Pacific Electric trains.8

In early 1903 Alfred Dolge of New York proposed building a felt mill on a portion of the Shorb Ranch. Dolge maintained that a Huntington-backed factory would undercut the manufacturing costs of East Coast mills by naturally bleaching and drying wool in the southern California sunshine. Moreover, the region’s unsurpassed climate would allow almost continuous operation of the factory, a significant advantage over Eastern competitors. The exact details of the negotiations are not known, but in the spring of 1903 Huntington formed a partnership with Dolge to build a manufacturing town employing from 500 to 1,000 factory operatives on the lands of the Shorb Ranch just west of the city of Alhambra.9

In his recent biography of Huntington, James Thorpe described Alfred Dolge as a “slick operator,” a “fast talking fraud,” and blamed Dolgeville’s failure entirely on him.10 Thorpe’s characterization is, however, unfair. Dolge was a complex man with a history of business success and social vision. The problems experienced by the felt works and the town were as much the fault of socio-economic conditions and Huntington’s lack of foresight than any mismanagement on Dolge’s part.

Alfred Dolge was born in Chemnitz, Saxony, in 1848. His father, Christian August Dolge, was a prominent piano maker and liberal reformer imprisoned for his part in the failed revolution that engulfed Europe shortly after Alfred’s birth. His mother, Auguste von Steitz Dolge, opened a dry goods business to support the family during her husband’s incarceration and trained her son in basic business skills. After his father’s release from prison Alfred was impressed into the piano making trade in Leipzig. There he was introduced to Wilhelm Liebknecht, Christian’s friend, fellow revolutionary, and future founder of the German Social Democratic Party. Liebknecht tutored

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8Friedricks, Henry E. Huntington and the Creation of Southern California, pp. 88-89.
9On arguments for the advantages of felt production in southern California, see “Prospectus of the Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company,” Dolge Felt Company Papers, HEH 11/5/3, Huntington Library. Also see the Alhambra Advocate, September 17, 1904. For projections of Dolgeville’s workforce, see Ibid., March 19, 1904 and the Los Angeles Herald, October 5, 1903.
Alfred for two years, schooled him in the economic theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and became a major influence on the younger Dolge’s views on social problems in an industrial age.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1866 Dolge finished his apprenticeship and decided to come to America to seek his fortune. “I was desirous of following the custom of the average German to go out into the world,” he said.\textsuperscript{12} Dolge found work as a common laborer at a Connecticut piano factory, supplementing his income by importing leather and piano wire from Europe. When this proved successful, he opened a small factory in a Brooklyn loft to produce felt covers for piano sounding boards. After his felt won first prize at the 1873 Vienna World’s Fair, Dolge traveled to upstate New York to find a new factory site.\textsuperscript{13} He ended his search at Brockett’s Bridge, a small village in the Adirondack Mountains. Dolge purchased an old tannery building in which to set up shop, acquired heavy machinery for felt production, and hired ten skilled workmen from New York City. Dividing his time between the felt works and his increasingly profitable New York importing business, Dolge patented a machine that glued felt coverings to piano hammers, augmented the factory’s water power with an electric dynamo, and added a railroad spur to link his factories with the New York rail network. In 1881 the factory began producing felt shoes and piano sounding boards. Brockett’s Bridge was renamed Dolgeville, and by 1895 the population of the town reached 3,000, a ten-fold increase since the industrialist’s arrival.\textsuperscript{14}

Dolge believed that the town was an integral part of the factory and was convinced that living conditions in Dolgeville affected labor relations at the firm. Pullman and Homestead, the most infamous company towns of the late nineteenth century, had both suffered violent and debilitating strikes between 1892 and 1894. Dolgeville provided a stark contrast to both. Workers at Alfred Dolge & Son enjoyed a three-tier system of support that included old age pensions, life insurance policies, and an “Earning-Sharing” program whereby laborers received a percentage of company profits to be released at the time of his or her retirement.\textsuperscript{15} A savings plan was created and employees were paid six percent interest to deposit money with the firm. To assist workers in

\textsuperscript{11}Simon Franz, Dolge (Herkimer, New York, 1980), pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 11-16. Also see Alfred Dolge, Pianos and Their Makers: A Comprehensive History of the Development of the Piano from the Monochord to the Concert Grand Piano (Covina, California: Covina Publishing Co., 1911), pp. 104-118.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., Dolge, p. 23; Economic Theories as Practically Applied in the Factories of Alfred Dolge & Son, at Dolgeville, N.Y. (Dolgeville, NY, 1896), pp. 31-41.
buying their own homes, Dolge experimented with a program whereby the company built houses from plans drawn by the prospective owner. The employee repaid the cost of the house by monthly installments that were fixed at the going rental rate. The home–building plan was eventually discontinued, but Dolge was confident that the pension and insurance plan would protect homeowning families if the primary breadwinner became sick or died. He purchased park land for the community, and paid for its upkeep out of his own pocket. To educate the more than 300 children of the town’s factory workers, two school buildings were built between 1887 and 1889, a large part of the cost covered by Dolge himself. In 1889 the town opened the first free kindergarten in New York State in the upstairs clubhouse of a Dolge factory building. The following year a permanent kindergarten, a new free library, and a public gymnasium were added. As the New York State Superintendent of Education asserted, “It is doubtful if there is another village in the State of New York which has so much money invested in school property as has Dolgeville.”

Dolge claimed that his system of industrial welfare ensured “the promotion of harmony between employer and employed, and the absolute elimination of so-called labor troubles from Dolgeville.” This promise of industrial peace in an era of increasing conflict between capital and labor inspired a great deal of interest in American business circles, and by the 1890s Dolge was widely quoted by the national press. In 1896 he published an extensive review of his program in a book entitled The Practical Application of Economic Theories in the Factories of Alfred Dolge & Son. Comparisons to other “Captains of Industry” were inevitable. One cartoon appearing in a national journal compared the social welfare policies of Dolgeville to the conditions at Homestead, Pennsylvania, where Andrew Carnegie employed Pinkerton detectives and Pennsylvania State militiamen to crush striking steel workers. “Carnegie,” the cartoon argued, may have needed “the entire military force of a State to preserve the peace at his mills,” but Alfred Dolge “not only shares the confidence of his workmen, but also shares with them the profits of their toil.”

Unlike many utopian schemes, Dolge never pretended to be a defender of communal rights. Dolge possessed a very genuine concern for his employ-

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16Ibid., pp. 32-35.
18Economic Theories as Practically Applied in the Factories of Alfred Dolge & Son, at Dolgeville, N.Y., p. 32.
In the spring of 1898 the factories of Alfred Dolge & Son went into bankruptcy. Dolge had been carrying a heavy debt for some time, and the uncertain economy of the 1890s, as well as his involvement in ill-considered railroad construction, proved too much for his over-extended finances to bear. Much of Dolge's real estate holdings, as well as the felt works, were sold under assignment. Some accused Dolge of fraud in trying to extricate himself from debt, but the charge was never proved. Though it was tempting for some to blame Dolge's social welfare policies for crippling the company's finances, the causes for the bankruptcy were generally seen as unrelated. As one Pennsylvania newspaper put it, "A review of the facts . . . shows that it was not because of the profit sharing system the firm went under. The reason was that Mr. Dolge had too many irons in the fire."  

His New York experiment over, Dolge decided, like so many others, to go west. The influx of eastern and midwestern capital into southern California provided Dolge with an opportunity to rebuild his shattered reputation as a skilled felt manufacturer. In Henry Huntington, Dolge not only found someone who could finance a new felt works, but whose interest in land development offered the possibility to recreate his model factory town.

While in many ways Dolge's interests were sentimental (though by no means devoid of the profit motive), Huntington's motives in creating a factory town were purely economic, both in the narrow sense of land sales and in the wider notion of regional boosting. Huntington preferred to purchase cheap unimproved land because it tended to give him a freer hand in the

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20 See Dolge's opinions on the labor upheavals of 1886 in ibid., pp. 65-72.
21 ibid., p. 85.
development process and because, as he told a local realtor in 1904, there was “a greater opportunity for profit in them.” However, Dolgeville’s primary importance was in demonstrating southern California’s industrial potential. Huntington desired to help “people California—particularly our general section of it—with a fine class of industrial people. . . ,” but that could only be accomplished if someone showed the way. As he told George S. Patton, Sr., manager of the Huntington Land and Improvement Company:

California is well advertised for tourists along the flower garden, climate, scenery, and ‘big tree’ line: but very little is done to impress people with its advantages industrially except in the direction of fruit raising, etc. I believe there is a field for good literature along industrial lines and one reason I am anxious to have the Dolgeville enterprise prove an actual success and a substantial one, commercially speaking, is on account of the example it would exhibit to the world of possibilities doubted in many skeptical quarters.

The Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company (ADMC) was incorporated on May 9, 1903, with Dolge as president and Huntington and William G. Kerckhoff, among others, on the Board of Directors. Kerckhoff had developed the San Gabriel Valley’s power system prior to Huntington’s arrival, and was a partner with him in the Pacific Light and Power Company. The firm provided the motive power for both the PE and the LARY from the Kern River, some 200 miles from Los Angeles. Kerckhoff’s primary job was to represent the often absent Huntington, with whom Dolge had little personal contact.

In January 1904, Huntington directed the San Gabriel Wine Company to transfer its winery buildings and twenty acres of surrounding land to ADMC. The main buildings were large, 217 by 143 feet and 262 by 166 feet respectively. A Los Angeles concern manufactured the felt machinery, and a Pacific Electric engineer modified the winery buildings to house them. The felt processing equipment, as well as the felt shoe department were placed on the second floor of the fermenting house, with the washing department below it. A second building housed equipment for the making of felt piano hammer covers. Operations began in the spring of 1904. Dolge relied on the former

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22Henry E. Huntington to S.J. White, July 8, 1904, HEH 8163, Henry E. Huntington Personal Correspondence, Huntington Library.
23Henry E. Huntington to George S. Patton, July 6, 1904, HEH 7862.
26On the opening of the Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company, see George S. Patton to Henry E. Huntington June 29, 1903, HEH 12883. Los Angeles Herald, October 5, 1903; Los Angeles Times, October 25, 1903; Pasadena Daily Star, October 5, 1903.
customers of his New York works for felt orders, a confidence that was justified in early sales. Large numbers of piano board covers were made, and as many as 500 pairs of shoes were turned out a day by the factory with orders from Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. By September 1904, 300 people were employed at ADMC to meet the growing demand for its felt products.

To diversify the community's economic base, Huntington attracted additional businesses to the factory town. The Tallerday Manufacturing Company opened in April 1904. Tallerday built steel tanks and pipes for a variety of uses with customers throughout the Pacific Coast and employed a few dozen men. In 1907 the Electric Heating and Manufacturing Company, a maker of home appliances, relocated from central Los Angeles. The factory employed over fifty men and women, and a number of workers followed their place of employment and relocated to Dolgeville.

While Dolge and his associates struggled to get ADMC on its feet, Huntington developed the residential sites surrounding the factory. The Dolgeville Land Company was incorporated on June 3, 1903, with its headquarters in Los Angeles. Dolge, Kerckhoff, and George S. Patton, Sr., were made directors, as well as Huntington's son Howard. Although the younger Huntington, newly graduated from Harvard, served a brief stint as the company's president, Patton replaced him in October. The latter's management of the massive Huntington Land and Improvement Company, as well as the San Gabriel Wine Company gave him the experience necessary to make the project a success. Howard never had the business abilities of his father, and Patton, beyond cultivating a firm friendship with the elder Huntington, was adept at transforming his employer's broad strategic vision into concrete action.

In Dolgeville the land company was charged only with subdividing and selling lots, thus leaving the town's development entirely to market forces. The decision to sell individual lots to workers represented a deliberate rejection of

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Footnotes:
1. Dolge's contacts with American piano manufacturers, see "President's Report on Trip East, November 5th, 1903 to January 12th, 1904, to the Board of Directors of the Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company," and "W. W. Kimball Co. to Alfred Dolge, December 1, 1902," Dolge Felt Company Papers, HEH 11/5/3.
2. Hemet Advocate, April 16, May 14, September 17, November 19, 1904. Los Angeles Times, August 11, 1904.
3. For a typical ADMC advertisement, see ibid., January 1, 1905.
5. Hemet Advocate, January 12, July 3, 1907. Also see the Pictorial American, Greater Los Angeles Illustrated; The Most Progressive Metropolis of the Twentieth Century (Los Angeles, 1907), pp. 112, 142-143.
7. See George Patton's relationship with Huntington, see Friedericks, Henry Huntington and the Creation of Southern California, p. 59. On Howard's management abilities, see ibid., pp. 83-84. Also see the Los Angeles Times, March 3, 1903.
the residential arrangements at Pullman, where the company rented houses to its employees. This approach had the advantage of giving the company control of "the social and political environment" of its workers, but it also tended to focus employee complaints about wages, rent, working conditions, and housing on a single entity. Indeed, the great strike of 1894 was directly attributable to George Pullman’s policy of lowering wages without a corresponding reduction in rents and confirmed for many the dangers inherent in company housing.34

The reasons for the Pullman Strike were well known by 1904, but the increasingly volatile labor situation in southern California made utilization of the company housing model particularly dangerous. Between 1902 and 1904, Huntington was involved in suppressing simultaneous attempts by the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees to unionize LARY workers, Pacific Electric trainmen, and Mexicans working on the railway construction gangs. Although Huntington told Harrison Gray Otis, owner–editor of the union busting Los Angeles Times, that he wanted "to see Los Angeles quoted as the ideal city for the wage worker, the city where the fairest wages are paid & the squarest treatment accorded . . .," he also warned that the "tendency" of American workers was "revolutionary &., as in the case usually of revolutions, the dictator, otherwise called labor leader. . . has come to the fore and grown insolent with a power beyond his dreams . . ."35 With over 5,000 employees in southern California and in the midst of a vicious labor dispute, Huntington probably feared that the Pullman strike could be easily replicated in southern California if he was cast in the role of both employer and landlord.

Yet Huntington’s reliance on a market model also ignored the social welfare methods that Alfred Dolge had pioneered in New York. Huntington assumed that, like his upper and middle class subdivisions, reliance on the market would effectively colonize the town with a stable population of employee homeowners. The community would be shaped as the laws of supply and demand saw fit. Dolge however, took press representations of the "Manufacturing Suburb of Los Angeles" as a "model" town literally.36 With

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34On the desire of factory town owners to control "the social and political environment of their workforce," see Foglesong, Planning the Capitalist City, The Colonial Era to the 1920s, p. 190. On the Pullman model of company housing and the 1894 strike, see ibid., pp. 191-193 and Buder, Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930, pp. 60-91, 161.

35Henry E. Huntington to Harrison Gray Otis, December 14, 1904, HEH 7854; and Henry E. Huntington to Harrison Gray Otis, August 27, 1903, HEH 7842. On Huntington's labor difficulties between 1902 and 1904, see Friedricks, Henry Huntington and the Creation of Southern California, pp. 135-141.

36Dolgeville was often labeled a "model town" by the southern California press. See for example the Los Angeles Times, January 24, 1904.
The Dolge Plan as it appeared in the Los Angeles Herald in June 1903. Photo by author.

Huntington in New York to oversee his uncle Collis’ estate and gather capital for his expanding interurban system, Dolge entered into negotiations with a landscape architect to make preliminary drawings for a model city Dolgeville. It is unclear whether Dolge attempted to commit Huntington by a fait accompli or simply misunderstood his subordinate role in the factory town project, but the design, which was promptly published in the Los Angeles Herald in June 1903, indicated that he was at cross purposes with his partner.37

The Dolge plan resembled the suburban designs reserved for upper and

37Los Angeles Herald, June 14, 1903.