

Rancho Nipomo and the William Goodwin Dana Adobe Nipomo, California

*A self-guided Walking Tour for one of the
Most Significant Historic Sites on the Central Coast*



Introduction

The **Dana Adobe** or "Casa de Dana" is a historic landmark in Nipomo, California, lying about 25 miles south of San Luis Obispo. It was one of the earliest adobe dwellings built in San Luis Obispo County and became the celebrated home of **William Goodwin Dana**, his wife **Maria Josefa Carrillo Dana** and their very large family. William Dana was a wealthy Boston sea captain who settled first in Santa Barbara, where he courted and married Maria Josefa in 1828. In 1837, Mexican California Governor Juan Alvarado granted Rancho Nipomo to Captain Dana, over 50,000 acres, as a reward for his loyalty. Dana employed many native Chumash laborers and others to build the adobe between 1837 and his death in 1858, a tumultuous time in *Alta California*.

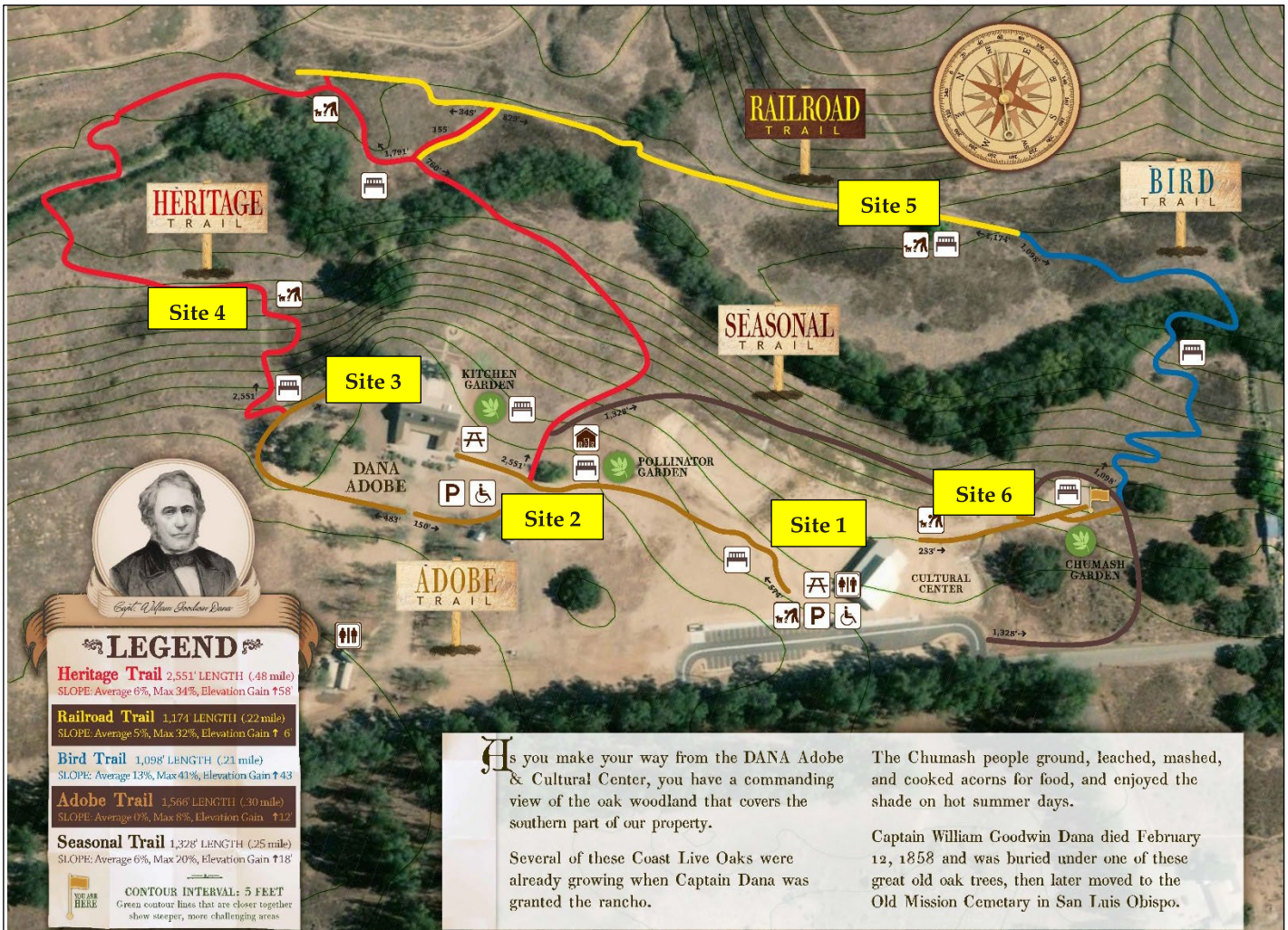
Over their 30 years of matrimony, William and Maria produced 21 children, 13 of whom survived into adulthood. The Dana family hosted key figures such as **John C. Fremont** in this Nipomo home, whose California Battalion enjoyed the hospitality of the Dana family in December 1846. From this point, a friend of the Danas, William Foxen, told Fremont of an impending ambush in Gaviota. He then diverted his march to San Marcos Pass, and seized Santa Barbara without bloodshed, enabling the peaceful transition of sovereignty of *Alta California* to the US.

In the ensuing years, as the new American culture and institutions evolved in California, the Dana adobe and Rancho Nipomo also served as an important exchange point on the first official U.S. mail route between Monterey and Los Angeles.



The Dana Adobe is listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). The entire Rancho Nipomo is listed as a [California Historical Landmark](#). This Walking Tour will tell the story of the Adobe, the Rancho, and this extraordinary "founding family" of California – Maria Josefa and William Goodwin Dana and their children.

HISTORY CENTER
SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY



Aerial Photo of the Dana Adobe Cultural Center site with trails – courtesy of DANA Adobe and Cultural Center

Site 1: Cultural Center

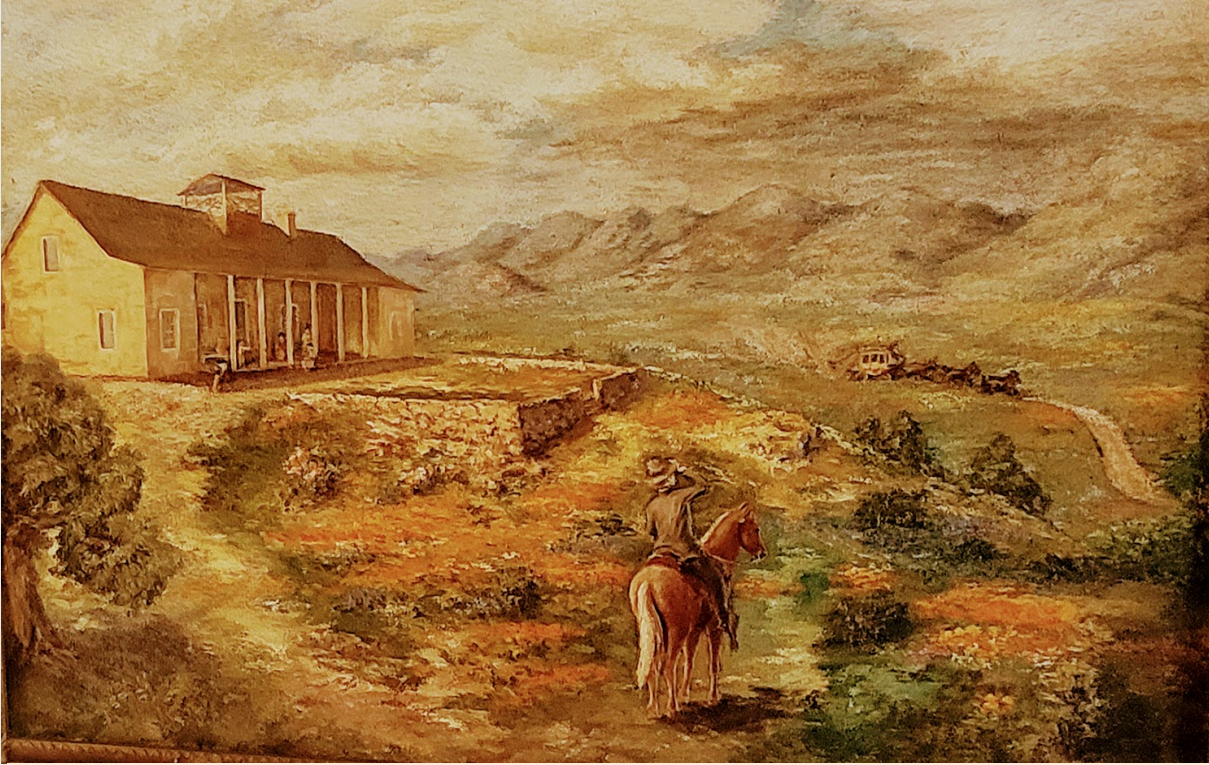
Visitors should begin their tour at the modern Cultural Center – **Site #1** – to get oriented. It's located near the entrance on Oakglen Road in the southern part of the 130-acre property. This building serves as a museum, gift shop, gallery, and gathering space. It was developed by DANA, the non-profit organization that maintains the Dana Adobe with grant funds and donations from the community.



Check ahead for visitor hours. Tours may be scheduled ahead of time on weekdays, but weekend tours are available on a drop-in basis. The Adobe and grounds are occasionally reserved for special public gatherings or for private events.

Within the Cultural Center, rotating exhibits tell the story of the Dana family and the region as a whole. That story is interpreted along the miles of trail threading the property, as well as in the songs of the birds and the many native plants. Enjoy three specialized gardens, all maintained by DANA volunteers, and the open landscape that offers views out to Tematatte Ridge to the east and into the deepest recesses of Nipomo Creek.

The Dana Adobe in American Fine Art



Frances Mead Jensen oil painting of the Adobe - 1929 (on display in the Adobe)



Fandango at the Adobe - Frances Mead Jensen

Site 2: Adobe Trail & Gardens

After your orientation at the Cultural Center, wander north toward the Dana Adobe on the trail past several memorial benches and the sign, and note the enclosed gardens as you approach the “main attraction” on the rise ahead. There’s a “Pollinator Garden” as well as a separate “Kitchen Garden” near the intersection where the Heritage Trail (Site 4) intersects from the east.



As you approach the Adobe, take some time to enjoy the Pollinator Garden, designed to attract bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, bats, and other pollinator insects essential to the diverse plant life of the Mesa. As you continue your walk, take note of the single olive tree next to the Adobe: It’s derived from the original La Purisma olive grove.

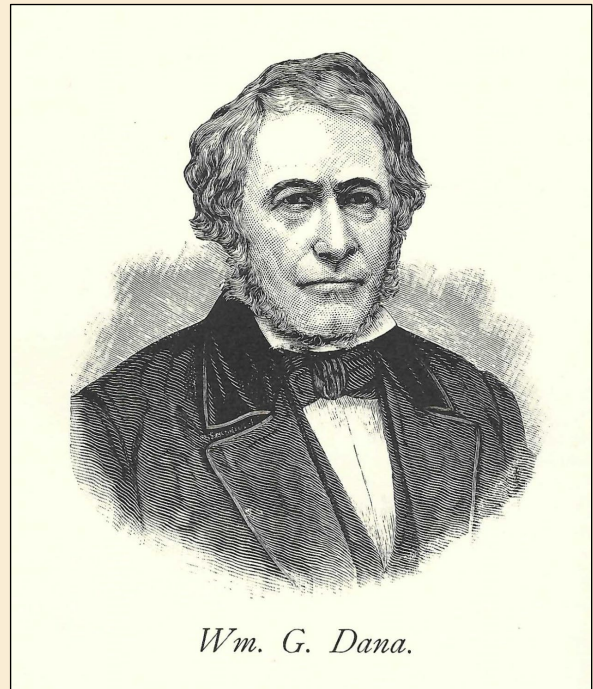


Just beyond is the Kitchen Garden, like the one where Maria Josefa Carrillo Dana would have cultivated her own vegetables and fruit trees to supply the needs of their household.

William Goodwin Dana

From Seafaring Yankee Adventurer
to *Californio* Ranchero

William Goodwin Dana was born in Boston in 1797. Although orphaned in 1806, he acquired a good education, and at 18 he joined his uncle, a Boston merchant, to China, India, Hawaii, and Russian Alaska before returning to Boston in 1818.

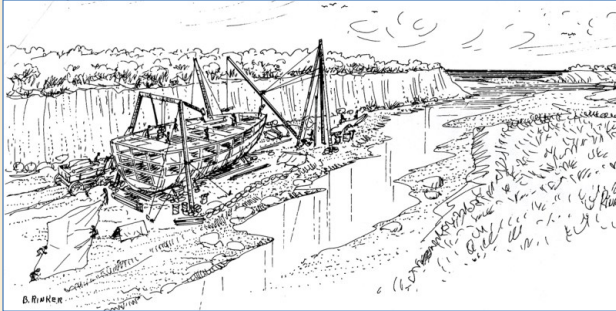


Wm. G. Dana.

His stay in Boston was brief. Soon certified as a navigator, Dana learned the business of the China trade. In Hawaii, he took command of the brig *Waverly*, and sailed to China to engage in trade between that country, Hawaii, Sitka, and California. In 1820, he erected an extensive warehouse in Honolulu, and made several voyages to Canton, Russian America, Mexican California, and the South American west coast. By 1825, he established a store in Santa Barbara and soon after began courting the daughter of a leading *Californio* family, Maria Josefa Carrillo, age 16. Early in 1828, he applied for permission to marry her, and after a five-month wait required by law, they were wed.

William Goodwin Dana and family, cont.

A skilled trader and a natural leader, “Guillermo” Dana soon gained his Mexican citizenship and quickly ascended the ranks of social status in Santa Barbara. In 1828, he built a 33-ton schooner in Goleta, believed to be the first seaworthy ship launched in *Alta California*, with scavenged fittings from the remains of a shipwreck in San Pedro.



Construction of California's first schooner in Goleta Slough

Captain Dana was appointed *Alcalde* of Santa Barbara in 1836, and a year later Governor Alvarado awarded him a land grant for the 50,000+ acre Rancho Nipomo, nearly spanning the current boundary between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara County. Construction of a four-room adobe was largely complete by 1839, and William and Maria Josefa made it their home. By that year, they already had ten children – but only five had survived their infancy.

The Danas would proceed to have eleven more children, eight surviving into adulthood. One child, Adeline Eliza, was named for William's sister but she died at age 5; her tiny coffin is interred in the walls of Mission San Luis Obispo. That same year (1848), Maria Josefa gave birth to another daughter and the family conferred the same name on that baby girl; she lived to age 66.

Tour the comfortable interior of the “Casa de Dana,” and imagine it filled with the laughter of children and Spanish *palabras*.

Site 3: The Dana Adobe and Grounds

Captain Dana ultimately expanded his *casa* to two stories and 14 rooms. His son Juan Francisco recalled the details of the settlement: “...being so far removed from all base of supplies, early on (he) saw that he must depend upon his own resources, and commenced to make preparations accordingly. Additions were made to the house for workshops, and the Indians, the only labor available at the time, were trained in some of the trades... By 1848 the house had grown large enough to contain one large room fitted with bins for the different grains, one milk room where butter and cheese were made, one room for a loom and spinning wheels, one for a blacksmith shop, one for a carpenter shop... one general storeroom and kitchen.”



West courtyard of the Casa de Dana

The structure is regarded as a fine example of a blend of Yankee architecture and Mexican style, blending the two cultures with ample light and practical considerations to the placement of rooms and windows, an interior hallway serving the main rooms, and a welcoming veranda overlooking Temattate Ridge and the foothills to the east. Juan Francisco Dana continued: “In those far-off days, homes were few and far between. Cities were unknown and the few pueblos were also many leagues away... Each ranch was a kingdom of its own.”

Doña Maria Josefa Carrillo Dana



Maria Josefa Carrillo Dana

The history of the Dana Adobe is indelibly tied to the story of the matriarch of the family who first occupied it.

Maria Josefa Petra del Carman Carrillo was born in Santa Barbara on June 29, 1812, as the first child of prominent *Californios*. She was baptized the day after her birth, marking the beginning of a life devoted to the tenets of her Catholic faith. Her father, Carlos Antonio de Jesus Carrillo was a Spanish soldier, businessman, and civic leader. Her mother, Maria Josefa Raimunda Castro, had also been born into a prominent *Californio* family in Monterey.

When she was fourteen, she met the man who would become her husband, Captain William Dana. By then, California was Mexican territory, and her father Carlos Antonio held an important position in Santa Barbara. Dana was one of about 200 Americans who hoped to prosper in Mexican California and become landowners. To succeed at this endeavor, these

Yankees had to become Mexican citizens, embrace the Catholic faith, and learn to speak Spanish. This “entitled (him) to own land and marry a native daughter – usually a dark-haired maiden about 16.”

Dana began to press for Maria Josefa’s hand. Parents generally chose their daughters’ husbands. Carlos Antonio Carrillo had a business relationship with Dana and was willing to permit the marriage; in fact, all his daughters eventually married Americans. But marriage to a non-citizen of Mexico required permission of the provincial authority, and Governor Jose Maria Echeandia in Monterey took five months before finally permitting the marriage. In August 1828, Maria Josefa and William Dana married at the Santa Barbara Mission. She was 16 and he was 31 – a significant age gap, but not unusual.

The Danas remained in Santa Barbara for the first decade of their marriage. Within a year, Maria Josefa gave birth to her first child, a daughter also named Maria Josefa. When her second child, a son, died shortly after birth, William Dana wrote to a friend that he was not worried: “We will soon have enough.” They did, though it took six more years. Between 1830 and 1834 four more babies died before the next, William Charles, survived. Altogether, Maria Josefa bore 21 children; thirteen lived to adulthood (two girls and eleven boys). Their second surviving daughter and twelfth child, Adelina, was named after Captain Dana’s sister.

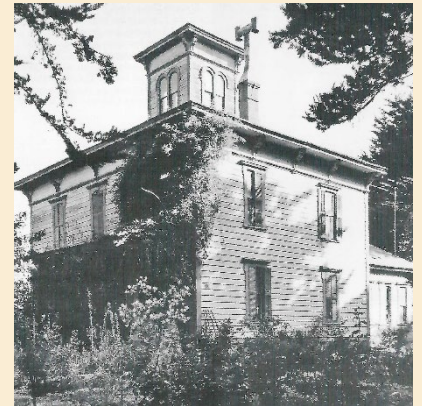
Mexican women, unlike their American counterparts, could own land in their own names, or in joint tenancy with spouses. In 1834, as the Danas awaited confirmation of William Dana’s citizenship, Maria Josefa petitioned the Mexican government for a land grant in Ojai, but it already had been taken. A year later, with citizenship papers in hand, William Dana filed his own petition for Rancho Nipomo. It was approved in 1837. Maria Josefa’s name was not on the title, but her husband arranged to leave the property in trust to his wife upon his death, with the understanding that all profits earned over her remaining years would go to her.

In 1839, the family of seven moved from Santa Barbara to settle in Rancho Nipomo. Their adobe home, Casa de Dana, was built by local Chumash workers and initially consisted of only four rooms. As the family grew larger, ten more rooms were added, as well as a second story. Though they lived sixty miles to the north, over the next six years, Maria Josefa would return to Santa Barbara to give birth. She considered it “safer,” according to sources. Since transportation was rudimentary, it is likely she left home weeks before her due date and stayed with her parents immediately before and after the births. Not until 1846, and the birth of her sixteenth child, did she remain at Casa de Dana.

Meanwhile, Casa de Dana served as an oasis of sorts for travelers in both directions on the El Camino Real. Friends, business associates, politicians, family, even strangers might stay overnight, for days, weeks, or even longer. In 1847, Rancho Nipomo was named a designated transfer point for the nascent US mail service, the spot where riders changed horses and exchanged their mail bags. The riders sometimes became guests. In 1849, following the Mexican War, Casa de Dana served as a polling place for choosing delegates to California’s first Constitutional Convention, adding even more guests.

As members of the elite, the Danas had cooks, servants, and ranch hands for operations generally. Captain Dana was often away on business. Thus, Maria Josefa had the monumental task of organizing her household despite frequently not knowing how many people needed to be housed, fed, and entertained with fiestas, dances, barbecues, musical performances, and wrestling matches. As a devout Catholic, she sometimes managed to get away to worship at the San Luis Obispo Mission, staying in a house her husband had built nearby – the first frame house in San Luis Obispo, occupied by Maria Josefa’s sister Ramona Carrillo Pacheco Wilson and her Scottish husband John.

In 1858, Captain Dana died at the age of sixty, leaving Maria Josefa with nine children still at home between the ages of three and seventeen. Her widowed sister Encarnacion and several of her children came to live with her at Casa de Dana. In 1880, she moved into a home built nearby by her sons. A newspaper society columnist was on hand to describe the housewarming for her new home, dubbed “Casa Grande.” It featured windows on all four sides, offering views of the surrounding hills and filling it with light. The home served as a gathering place, the columnist wrote, “a place you went as regularly as church.” There were always sugar cookies, parties, and someone playing the piano.



With her free pass on the new Pacific Coast Railway – granted to her as a reward for their right of way across the Rancho – Maria Josefa would often ride to Mission San Luis Obispo for Mass. That is where her funeral was held in September 1883. After a lifetime of good health, Maria Josefa went down for breakfast one morning and announced that she did not feel well. She went back upstairs to lie down, and died shortly thereafter at the age of 71.

Her lengthy obituary noted her childhood among one of the most aristocratic Spanish families in California. She had lived long enough to “rear her large family with the proud satisfaction of seeing all arrive... self-dependent.” Maria Josefa herself was independent, often traveling to San Luis Obispo alone. She was “held in affectionate and high esteem.” Numerous city leaders greeted her coffin at the San Luis Obispo train station and carried it to the church and then to the family plot alongside her husband, where she rests today.

Casa de Dana and Mexican Colonial Design



Main "sala" on ground floor with period furnishings and organ



Window showing thickness of adobe



"Ramon's Bedroom" with baby bed



Handmade Quilt in Main Sala



Milk Room With Original Weathered Adobe Walls and Dirt Floor



East facade and veranda

The Dana Hides and Tallow were major products of Rancho Nipomo. Thousands of *vacas* would be slaughtered in the *matanzas*. Workers would boil the fat in large vats, pack the rendered tallow for use in soap and candles, keep some for their own use, and pack the hides onto *carretas* for export.

After you visit the eastern veranda and the tallow works, proceed to the north and pick up the "Heritage Trail" (Site 4)



View to southeast with path to Tallow Works



Site of tallow works



Tallow vat excavated from site, on display in Adobe

Site 4: Heritage Trail

One can best appreciate the Dana Adobe by traversing some of the trails that intertwine throughout the 130+ acres surrounding it. The Heritage Trail begins just north of the adobe and proceeds downslope toward the creek where it swings left to follow the path of the historic Stagecoach Road for a short distance. After crossing Nipomo Creek, it follows this route along the creek and intersects with the Railroad Trail (Site 5) before re-crossing the creek and looping back up to the adobe.

The trail features many native trees and plants, but one tree deserves special mention: The large sycamore near the Adobe features a sign that denotes it as “Captain Dana’s Sycamore Tree.” It’s believed to have been transplanted there from the Los Berros Creek area, possibly in the 1850s – during Captain Dana’s lifetime.

California live oak trees are also abundant on the property. Acorns from these oaks were an important staple food for the native Chumash. About 1,000 were planted across Nipomo Creek from the adobe as mitigation for a road project to the north.



Captain Dana's Sycamore Tree



The course of Nipomo Creek is thick with willow trees. Water surfaces in the streambed only after a good storm, although historically the water table was high enough to support a year-round stream with a run of steelhead salmon.

If time permits, continue to Site 5, the Railroad Trail, and return to the Cultural Center via the Bird Trail (Site 6). If not, you may take a short-cut to return to the vicinity of the Adobe by continuing on the Heritage Trail, arriving between the Kitchen and Pollinator Gardens.



Restored Windmill

One of the features along a “spur” of the Railroad Trail, close to Nipomo Creek, is an 1890 windmill installed by Captain Dana’s sons to modernize their farming operations around the Rancho. The windmill is not operational at this time, but it stands tall.



Site 5: Railroad Trail

The Railroad Trail extends along the eastern edge of the property roughly on the route of the old Pacific Coast Railway. This narrow-gauge railroad was launched in 1876, and served as the primary transportation corridor for San Luis Obispo and northern Santa Barbara County until it was finally abandoned and disassembled in 1942. The smaller rail system ultimately could not compete with the larger Southern Pacific Railroad, whose route served Oceano and Guadalupe to the west, in the 1890s.

The PCRR only arrived in Nipomo in 1882, long after Captain Dana had died (1858). His family agreed to provide the railway with a right-of-way through their land, and the rail company agreed to permit his widow, the venerable Maria Josefa, to ride the entire system for free for the remainder of her life.



Site 6: Bird Trail and Chumash Garden

From the southern end of the Railroad Trail, the Bird Trail turns west, re-crossing Nipomo Creek and ascending the gentle wooded slope that leads back to the Cultural Center (Site 1). Within the grove of oaks studding this hillside may be the site where the remains of Captain William Dana were laid to rest in February, 1858 – although later, his coffin was disinterred and relocated to the Old Mission Cemetery in San Luis Obispo to rest alongside his wife Maria Josefa.



Tomb of William G. & Maria Dana, San Luis Obispo

The Chumash Garden occupies a significant part of this site, including several native plants that were used by the yak tit'u tit'u yak tihini, the Northern Chumash people who had resided in the Nipomo area for at least 13,000 years and used their vast knowledge of the different local habitats for hunting, fishing and cultivating the landscape to obtain food, to make tools and medicine. Featured plants in this garden are:



Elderberries - used for food, drink, medicine, and even musical instruments

Toyon berries, toasted for food, wood for tools and weaving



Arroyo willow – Bark and branches used for building shelters, for medicine, and for weaving baskets, clothing, and mats

Coastal sage – used to make tea or dried and burnt as incense in ceremonies



Rancho Nipomo and the Dana Adobe and Cultural Center

SOURCES AND RESOURCES FOR THIS WALKING TOUR

SOURCES: *Here are a few recommended books for further reading*

Joseph L. Dana, *'To Discourage Me Is No Easy Matter' – The Life of California Pioneer William Goodwin Dana*, Arroyo Grande, CA: South County Historical Society, 2007.* Contains an excellent reading list.

Rocky Dana and Marie Harrington, *The Blond Ranchero: Memories of Juan Francisco Dana*, Second Edition, Arroyo Grande, CA: South County Historical Society, 1999.*

Doug Jenzen, *Nipomo and Los Berros*, Images of America Series, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2012.*

Myron Angel, *History of San Luis Obispo County, California*, originally published 1883, reprinted by Valley Publishers, 1979.

Richard B. Rice, William A. Bullough, and Richard J. Orsi, *The Elusive Eden: A New History of California*, McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2002.

Ramon A. Gutierrez and Richard J. Orsi, editors, *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*, University of California Press, 1998.

Annie L. Morrison and John H. Haydon, *Pioneers of San Luis Obispo County and Environs, Friends of the Adobes*, San Miguel, California, 2002. Printed in Association with Word Dancer Press, Sanger, California.

* Available for purchase at Dana Adobe and Cultural Center

RESOURCES: The History Center of San Luis Obispo County highly recommends the web site for the Friends of the DANA Adobe and Cultural Center, www.danaadobe.org/the-100-acre-success-story/ where the contemporary story is told of how the property was acquired in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Dana Adobe web site also provides information upcoming events; scheduling tours; and how to join the organization, donate funds, or volunteer for the many tasks involved in managing this property.

The South County Historical Society also manages several historic sites in the community of Arroyo Grande, some of which have a direct relation to the Dana Adobe and the family. Their web site is <https://www.southcountyhistory.org/>

The History Center also recommends these community organizations that collaborate with us to improve our understanding of our shared history and our evolving diversity, recognizing the need for improved social equity and inclusion of historically neglected minorities and indigenous cultures:

yak tit'u tit'u yak tilhini (ytt) Northern Chumash - <http://www.yttnorthernchumash.org/>

Salinan Tribe of Monterey and San Luis Obispo Counties - <https://salinantribe.com/>

Diversity Coalition of San Luis Obispo - <https://www.diversityslo.org/>

NAACP, San Luis Obispo Chapter – <http://naacpslocty.org>

Latino Outreach Council - <https://latinooutreachcouncil.org/>