

**Marie Naglee Robins**  
**Developer of Naglee Park**

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**Marie Naglee Robins**  
**(Mrs. Thomas M. Robins)**  
**1866-1969**

# **Marie Naglee Robins Developer of Naglee Park**

## **Introduction**

This spring, residents of the Naglee Park neighborhood in Downtown San Jose are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of their neighborhood. Naglee Park is Santa Clara County's first modern subdivision, perhaps the earliest in the Bay Area. Certainly I could find no earlier examples of subdivision development with the features that Mrs. Robins brought to Naglee Park. The Naglee Park development was so successful that it was quickly imitated in many other locations around the Bay. The most immediate example in our area is Lou Hanchett's development in 1905 on The Alameda. Known as Hanchett Park, this prestigious development followed the model introduced by Mrs. Robins. There are several similar examples of residential development of this type, such as the beautiful Claremont district in Oakland, which were also built a year or so later.

A native of San Jose, Mrs. Robins brought her development ideas from the many East Coast communities person who did not seek the limelight. I became aware of Mrs. Robins and her accomplishments while doing research on her prominent father, Brig. General Henry Morris Naglee. During the course of that work, I have had many letters from Mrs. Louise Robins Lord, granddaughter of the developer of Naglee Park. Notes from those letters and interviews form much of this research.

So here on the anniversary of the founding of the Naglee Park neighborhood, we have an opportunity to consider another person who made a lasting she visited. She came from a very well-to-do family but felt that social responsibility came with wealth. Her contributions to San Jose and to California have been overlooked since she was by nature a impact on our town.

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## **I. Naglee Park - The New California Subdivision**

The idea of subdividing a family property was not new; pioneer families in San Jose had been dividing their ranches into house lots since the state was founded. Early maps of San Jose show dozens of such subdivisions, usually named for the earlier owner. Prevost's Subdivision, White's Addition, Divine's Survey are just a few of dozens of little territories in our urban landscape that were once surveyed and measured at the request of an owner.

Downtown San Jose was settled by landowners who subdivided in order to sell a portion of their land for a house or a business. The owner paid the surveyor, filed the necessary map with the County Recorder, and sometimes put an advertisement in the local paper. Buyers would buy a lot or two, find a contractor and build a house. Many of these early subdivisions stood for years with just one or two structures, houses that looked rather lonely amid all of the other vacant land.

The idea that an area could be advertised by giving it a fancy name in order to attract buyers was not new; in San Jose the College Park and Chapman and Davis subdivisions appeared in the 1870's. Real estate ads have always been full of enticing adjectives. "We have a very pretty cottage in Evergreen Park that could be purchased very low" the ad promises.

But Mrs. Robins was one of the earliest developers to understand that a developer could attract buyers more quickly if certain amenities were already

in place. The development company that she established in 1902, Naglee Park Improvement Company, (NPICo) was willing and financially able to provide some attractive amenities to her potential buyers. And the amenities that she provided in Naglee Park became standard requirements for other builders.

When Naglee Park was first opened for development after the turn of the last century, it was the last major open parcel of land adjacent to Downtown San Jose. It had been the country estate of California pioneer and Civil War general Henry M. Naglee, a house and related structures on 140 acres that had been beautifully landscaped. Naglee's gardens had been developed by an English landscape designer, James Lowe, and were one of the most notable sights in San Jose. The town of San Jose had grown up around three sides of Naglee's estate, and the town of East San Jose bordered on the fourth side. With mature trees and its proximity to town, the estate was a highly desirable location.

Naglee Park was the first subdivision in San Jose to be built with modern sewers, gas lines, electrical power and telephone service already installed and available to the prospective buyer. The utilities were located on poles on an easement at the rear. No unsightly wires in Naglee Park! It would be years before other neighborhoods routinely offered these easements.

Paved streets, sidewalks and curbside landscaping were already provided in Naglee Park, offering an attractive view to the prospective buyer. Since the modern automobile was not yet in widespread use, a paved street in lieu of a dusty gravel road was luxury indeed.

Naglee Park houses were built with restrictive covenants which specified that only residences could be built, no commercial establishments allowed. Houses had to cost more than \$2500. Stables were limited to the rear of the lots and the construction of unsightly and unsafe businesses such as lumber yards were strictly forbidden in Naglee Park.

Mrs. Robins was an astute businesswoman who understood the local community. Although she had been born in San Jose and spent her early years here, her primary residence as a married adult was in Philadelphia and so she realized that she would be seen as an outsider. To overcome any resentments from local citizens, she contracted with a prominent local Realtor, T. S. Montgomery, in order to manage the sales of her new development.

At the turn of the last century, Montgomery was considered the leading real estate developer in San Jose. He was past middle age and had already sold his large real estate partnership, contemplating retirement. His greatest achievements in rebuilding San Jose were still ahead, initiated in great measure by the 1906 earthquake. But when Mrs. Robins contacted T. S. Montgomery with her plans for her development, his career was at a turning point.

Mrs. Robins' relationship with Montgomery was profitable for both parties and Montgomery eventually had a town house built for himself in Naglee Park. Part of Mrs. Robins' strategy was to have some houses built "on spec" by local contractors for sale to interested parties. Montgomery was just

one of several Realtors who had houses custom built in Naglee Park for prospective clients. You might say she was "priming the pump".

The Montgomery house in Naglee Park was built as a duplex or a pair of flats, one living unit over the other. Although Montgomery had a large country estate in Saratoga at this time, it is assumed that he planned to share the residence with his son who was also in the real estate business. The house is located at 131 South 15th Street and has recently been remodeled into a single family home.

The first subdivision map for Naglee Park was filed in the County Recorder's Office on April 15, 1902 by the Naglee Park Improvement Company. NPICo was a development corporation, chartered under the laws of Arizona with offices in San Francisco. The four major partners of NPICo were the two daughters of Brig. General Henry M. Naglee, Marie and Antoinette, and their husbands.

Only the first two blocks were offered for immediate development. Those blocks included all of the blocks between 11th Street and Coyote Creek and between Santa Clara Street and San Antonio Streets. Altogether, this totaled about twelve city blocks with about 22 house lots per block, a total of around 260 lots. Lots began to sell immediately, the most popular being the lots closest to the trolley line on Santa Clara Street.

Records show that the first Naglee Park lots sold within a day or two of the opening of the tract and the first houses were under construction within weeks. Homes began to be completed by late summer and the pace of sales

was very gratifying. Nearly all early buyers contacted an architect or builder who built a custom designed home for their clients. Within three years NPICo was able to open the next tier of blocks for sale and by 1908, the subdivision map for remaining area adjacent to William Street was recorded.

Sales in Naglee Park slowed somewhat during the 1906 earthquake as local capital was spent on repairs due to damage. There are no reports that any of the new Naglee Park homes suffered major damage in the quake although many business buildings downtown were total losses.

Research on the early owners of Naglee Park shows that Mrs. Robins built and sold at least half a dozen houses, selecting lots in the center of blocks.

Mrs. Robins favorite builder was a contractor named Zibeon O. Field, a general contractor who built business buildings as well as residences. Field later made his family home in Naglee Park at 167 South 14th Street. Mr. Field also built a country house for Mrs. Robins near the Crystal Springs reservoir in San Mateo County, a home that was badly damaged in the quake and later abandoned.

All lots in Naglee Park were sold in less than ten years and the Naglee Park Improvement Company disbanded in 1911. Most of the lots had houses on them by this time; there were approximately 650 lots in the neighborhood. Success of the Naglee Park area inspired development of the area just south of William Street across from what is now William Street Park. This area was marketed in about 1919 as Naglee Terrace.

The success of Naglee Park encouraged railroad builder Lewis E. Hanchett to try a similar idea in an area just west of San Jose along The Alameda. Hanchett acquired 76 acres which had once been the County fairgrounds and built a neighborhood around his railway line. Like Mrs. Robins he had the streets paved and landscaped, the houses designed by local architects and called his creation Hanchett Park. Imitation, as we have been told, is the sincerest form of flattery.

## **II. Marie Naglee Robins, Her Life and Family**

Mrs. Robins would not have characterized herself as a developer or a builder. Although she was extremely interested in building and construction, it was only one facet of managing the enormous estate that she had inherited from her wealthy father. Her father had been a civil engineer by training and a San Francisco real estate developer during the early days of statehood so whether by nature or by nurture, Mrs. Robins seemed to have inherited her father's interest.

Marie Naglee was the adored oldest daughter of Brigadier General Henry M. Naglee and his beautiful young wife, Marie Antoinette Ringgold. She was born in San Jose on June 28, 1866 and came into a life of luxury and social position. But unlike many wealthy young ladies of the time, she was brought up to believe that wealth brought social responsibility. Her father also believed that education was important, and insured that his daughters had the best education available for young ladies of the time.

Her father, Henry M. Naglee, was fifty years old when he married and was already one of the richest men in Santa Clara County; his bride was eighteen. Marie Antoinette's family was not wealthy but her social pedigree was impeccable. She was a descendent of President James Monroe and several generations of Ringgold men were military officers noted for their gallantry. One member of the family, Major Samuel Ringgold, achieved national prominence as a fallen hero of the Mexican-American War, and had

a popular song written about him to commemorating his deeds. Another officer, Commander Cadwallader Ringgold is credited with the first official charting of the waters of San Francisco Bay. Marie Antoinette's father, Colonel George Hay Ringgold, also had a distinguished military career.

Colonel Ringgold was living in San Francisco as the result of a military assignment but the family considered the Baltimore and Philadelphia area their home. The Ringgold's were part of a social set that spent a great deal of time making calls and visiting the country estates of friends. Today we might think of them as the "landed gentry", a social group that included many of the families of our Founding Fathers and their friends. Brig. General Henry M. Naglee, a native of Philadelphia, was acquainted with many of the same people in this social group and the two families had much in common.

Henry M. Naglee was born in Philadelphia and attended the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. He graduated with a degree in civil engineering, resigned his commission soon after graduation and practiced civil engineering for several years. The oldest child in a family of three boys and three girls, he also helped his father, a commission merchant, in the family business.

Like many other West Point graduates, Naglee was called to serve in the Mexican-American War. He came to California with a group known as the New York Volunteers, a brigade of recruits put together by a New York politico named Colonel Jonathan Stevenson. The group arrived in California

too late to participate in the War, but they were just in time for the discovery of gold.

Leaving the Army again in 1849, Naglee used his business experience to open what is noted by historians as the first bank in California. With Richard Sinton, a former Army paymaster, Naglee opened an exchange house in San Francisco known as Naglee & Sinton. He also built houses for rent and acquired two ranchos. Naglee's Pescadero Rancho covered more than 35,000 acres and is located near Tracy<sup>25</sup> in San Joaquin County. His Los Coches Rancho holdings were smaller, he bought only one-third of this property, around 600 acres or so, but the area covered what is now Downtown San Jose.

In addition to his real estate and banking interests, Naglee imported Durham cattle for his Pescadero Rancho and was interested in experimental horticulture. He tested various types of grapes to find the best variety for the manufacture of brandy. He established a brandy distillery on his San Jose estate and is noted as being one of the pioneers of the industry in California.

His many business ventures and investments brought him a substantial amount of wealth. He was called into the service once more during the Civil War, serving for more than a year in the field under harsh conditions during 1862. He was wounded by shrapnel during the Battle of Seven Pines, suffered a minor bullet wound to his chest and had three horses shot from under him. He was however, one of the few West Point graduates who went to the field with his own cook and a good supply of his own brandy.

When Henry M. Naglee finally married at the age of fifty, he had led a very full and extremely profitable life. His first daughter arrived a year after their marriage, but his young bride lived for only four more years, dying soon after the birth of her second daughter who was also named for her mother, Antoinette.

Henry M. Naglee was a doting parent who spared no expense on raising his two little girls, Marie and Antoinette. Although their Aunt Mary from Philadelphia took charge of some of their upbringing, their father secured a French governess and a private tutor for them, part of a retinue that went with the family when they traveled.

The family lived in four locations and travel was a common occurrence. Naglee built a country home on 140 acres in San Jose, a Gothic style "cottage" set in a landscaped garden in the English style. The grounds featured fountains, statuary imported from Italy and a pond. The gardens were open on weekends to visitors who wanted to drive through and view the General's collection of exotic botanical specimens imported from Australia and elsewhere. The General imported many varieties of eucalyptus and acacia for his garden.

In San Francisco the family lived in a suite of rooms in the Occidental Hotel on Montgomery Street. A first class establishment with a notable dining room, the Occidental was the preferred hotel for high ranking military men who visited San Francisco. The Occidental was just three short blocks from Naglee's business office, a four-story building at the corner of

Montgomery and Merchant Street. The Naglee Building was in the heart of the financial district and just across the street from the fabled Montgomery Block.

In San Joaquin County the family stayed at their rancho which they reached by ferry boat. From the earliest days of the gold rush the Port of Stockton was reached by paddle wheel steamers that ran several times an hour from San Francisco's wharves. The Pescadero Rancho had its own dock known as Naglee's Ferry on the banks of the Old River near Union Island.

And finally, the family had a home in Philadelphia, although in later years they stayed with other members of the family during their visits. Travel between San Jose and San Francisco was by train, which ran every hour after 1864. The two young Naglee daughters were experienced travelers from a very tender age.

Marie Naglee Robins was raised in a society and under circumstances where people deferred to her needs and wishes. According to her granddaughter, Marie Naglee assumed a role as the hostess for her father from an early age, taking charge of her younger sister and ensuring that her father's visitors were looked after properly. According to family stories, the General liked to entertain his old Army classmates and acquaintances, old men who drank, smoked cigars and talked a lot about their campaigns. Marie found them distasteful, but took her responsibility seriously.

Her granddaughter Mrs. Lord sums up Marie Naglee Robins in two words; she was a *grande dame*. In appearance she was not a classic beauty like

her mother; she seems to have inherited her father's determined chin with its little cleft dimple. She also seems to have inherited his intellect and his interests, but perhaps we should attribute that more to her education and her early experiences rather than her breeding.

From the time she was an infant, Marie and her sister had a French nurse. When she was old enough to begin lessons, a French governess accompanied the family. Her father spoke fluent French; it was a requirement at the Academy. The responsibility of the governess was academic instruction, the girls also had a nursemaid to look after their personal needs.

As a proper young lady, the Naglee daughters were sent East to finishing schools. They became acquainted with their cousins and attended St. Timothy's School in Baltimore. Introduced into society in the East, Marie married Thomas Robins of Philadelphia, a man whose family lineage in America dated from before the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. Obedience Robins had been awarded a royal charter to a substantial portion of Connecticut shortly after 1600. Thomas Robins had been educated and trained as an attorney, but he did not practice law and spent his time looking after the family interests.

General Naglee died in 1886 at the age of 71. The bulk of his estate was left to his two daughters. His only stipulation was that the family estate in San Jose could not be sold or subdivided until the youngest daughter reached the age of thirty, a precaution to help protect his daughters from

fortunehunters. He also requested that neither of them marry until they were at least age 25, a request that both of them ignored. The two girls were ages twenty and sixteen when their father died.

Marie married soon after her father's death. Marie and Thomas Robins would have five children, and for the first years after her marriage, she was focused on raising her family. Their first three children, Margaret, James and Henry were adolescents when Mrs. Robins initiated her Naglee Park development project. Mrs. Robins was forty years old when the development was begun and the responsibilities involved with raising the three older children had decreased. The two younger Robins children, Helen and Thomas, jr., were born in 1909 and 1911.

It is important to note that Naglee's youngest daughter, Antoinette, was also married and raising a family. She had married her first cousin, John Naglee Burk, a person who was also well versed in looking after the Naglee financial interests. When John Burk was sixteen he traveled to California to help manage his uncle's ranching activities in San Joaquin County. He married Antoinette Naglee when he was forty and she was eighteen and they had two children, a son and a daughter.

The two Naglee girls were very different in both personality and interests. Marie, the oldest by four years, was very assertive by nature. In contrast the younger girl, Antoinette, was reportedly a very shy and quiet person. One can only speculate on the impact that losing her mother may have had on her development. She remained a relatively reclusive person

her entire life, splitting her time between the Pescadero Ranch and a home in San Francisco. The Burk children were at a younger age when Naglee Park was developed, and other than signing the various incorporation papers, Antoinette Naglee Burk did not participate in the development of Naglee Park to a significant degree.

Marie Naglee Robins, in contrast, was the leading force behind the development of Naglee Park. It was her willingness to make a significant financial investment in what we characterize today as "infrastructure", the construction of roads, sewers, utility poles and other amenities that made Naglee Park such an overwhelming success. In addition she was willing to build houses for purchase and to carry the notes on trust deeds on several other properties. She understood the importance of marketing and made every effort to promote Naglee Park.

Newspaper articles at the time talked about the proposed project and mentioned that acreage adjacent to Coyote Creek would be donated as a park. It is not clear if this was her actual intention, or wishful thinking on part of the newspaper reporter. Land adjacent to the creek was subject to periodic flooding and early Naglee Park title documents show that the land was acquired by several local investors. The land was later filled and developed as Arroyo Way.

In later years, Marie Naglee Robins was an infrequent visitor to the San Jose area. However she made a generous gift to San Jose residents by presenting them with a statue honoring her father, which was dedicated in

1915 and stands in St. James Park. In 1961 she presented a collection of her father's papers to the Bancroft Library at Berkeley and personally hired a professional historian and archivist to organize and catalog the material she donated. Papers relating to the development of Naglee Park are included in this important collection which consists of 30 boxes of letters, diaries and other important documents.

Marie Naglee Robins experienced two family tragedies after the development of Naglee Park. She had another daughter in 1909, a baby that lived only a few days. Her youngest son, Thomas, jr. was born in 1911 and he was reportedly the apple of her eye. Sadly he was lost too, killed in a boating accident before he reached the age of 20.

She remained active and vital her entire life, intensely interested in space exploration and other events. After the death of her husband she lived with her daughter Margaret. Her younger sister Antoinette died in 1952 but Mrs. Robins survived to see a man on the moon, passing away in 1969 at the age of 102. She is buried with her husband and children at the Church of the Messiah in Gwynedd, PA.

### III. Naglee Park, Yesterday and Today

After several decades of civic neglect, Naglee Park is once again regaining its place as a Downtown neighborhood of social significance. During the 1960's and 1970's, urban planners promoted redevelopment over neighborhood revitalization, and entire neighborhoods were bulldozed rather than rebuilt.

Naglee Park was a victim of these plans and policies, planned for piecemeal demolition into high-rise apartments as the demand for student housing at San Jose State increased. The University requested that the area be zoned for high-rise apartments in order that additional boarding houses for students be allowed. Many Naglee Park residents put up a bitter fight, and only part of the area was zoned R-3, a designation which allowed high density construction.

Few apartment buildings were built in the newly designated zoning and social conditions in Naglee Park reached a terrible low as the large old houses were taken over by various social programs. The early 1970's were an era when group homes were developed and licensed to serve various types of social groups. Because Naglee Park was the only area of San Jose that had both large houses and R-3 zoning, it was quickly taken over by social programs.

Within a few years Naglee Park was characterized in the local newspapers as a “board and care ghetto”, a neighborhood that was no longer suitable or desirable for single family use. There were group homes for battered women, for former felons, for recovering addicts, for recovering alcoholics, for the mentally ill, for the developmentally disabled and for jail diversion for youth. There were shelters for homeless families, low-income housing for welfare recipients and houses for seniors, all centered within the Naglee Park neighborhood.

By late 1979 the neighborhood requested a change in zoning, asking that the neighborhood be returned to a single family neighborhood. The idea met with skepticism by the local planners, but determined Naglee Park residents have made a profound difference in the destiny of their area. Changes in federal and state legislation now encourage the preservation of important areas such as Naglee Park. Naglee Park has demonstrated to the City of San Jose that good planning and good design are worthwhile investments. Naglee Park remains as a lasting testimonial to the vision and efforts of Marie Naglee Robins.

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