



# Episode 016 – How Burbank Got Its Name (transcript)

## Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org).

## Announcements

Madeline L'Engle said, "The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been." Speaking of getting older, 2021 is Burbank's 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary and we are planning fun activities this summer for Burbankers to celebrate! Check our calendar of events or keep informed by following the City of Burbank and the Burbank Public Library on social media. We're on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter!

## Story

And now for today's story.

Do you ever wonder how a city gets its name? Well, the city of Burbank does not take its name, as many erroneously believe, from the late famed horticulturist, Luther Burbank. It was named for a man who, curiously enough, technically did not found the city at all! A man who drove a covered wagon across the plains while Luther Burbank was still in leading strings. That voyager was none other than Dr. David Burbank, and he was one of California's illustrious pioneers.

David Burbank was born in the hills of New Hampshire on December 17, 1821. He trained as a dentist and began a practice in Waterville, Maine. While still in his thirties, he gave up his dental practice to join the great migration to the west. He arrived in San Francisco in 1853 and practiced dentistry there for thirteen years. A subsequent move to Southern California was to change the course of history.

Shortly after his arrival to Los Angeles in 1867, Dr. Burbank purchased La Providencia Rancho from David Alexander and Francis Mellus. He also purchased the western portion of the San Rafael Rancho from Jonathan Scott. He paid \$9000 for 9,200 acres, uniting the two historic ranchos into one huge 'dry farming' ranch. In that same year, he built his ranch house on what would later be the backlot of Warner Brothers. The house stood until the 1950s when it was destroyed by fire.

Dr. David Burbank married Clara A. Kauffer and together they had two daughters: Flora and Adie, the latter sadly died at just ten years of age. David and Clara used the land to farm wheat, alfalfa, and sheep. In fact, they quickly became one of the largest and most successful sheep-raisers in southern California, which caused Dr. Burbank to stop practicing dentistry altogether and began investing heavily in real estate around Los Angeles.

In 1873, the Southern Pacific Railway constructed an extension of the rail line from downtown L.A. through the property owned by David Burbank. He was such a huge advocate of the railway that he sold a 100ft x 14,000 ft stretch of right-of-way to Southern Pacific for one dollar. As a result of this rail line, many parts of the San Fernando Valley were platted as it provided a vital commercial link to Los Angeles.

During the summer of 1879, the Providencia School District was formed and David Burbank donated an acre of his land for the construction of the first school which was located near where Burbank Boulevard and Mariposa meet today. In 1886, the area was hit by a devastating drought. It is claimed that area's picturesque hillsides were literally covered with sheep that had died from lack of water. Some have thought this was the reason that Dr. Burbank sold nearly 9,000 acres of his land. The Providencia Land, Water and Development Company bought the land for \$250,000. Within one year of their purchase, the company had surveyed and platted both ranchos into one single tract of land; and then on May 1, 1887, for the purpose of distinguishing it from other parts of Los Angeles, declared the town's name Burbank after the esteemed doctor. This date marks the day that the plat was filed and the day city lots and farms were first offered for sale. David Burbank stayed on as one of the directors of the Providencia Land, Water and Development Company as he continued to further establish the rural town. That same year, David Burbank oversaw the construction of the Burbank Villa, a hotel designed to attract people to the area. The name was later changed to the Santa Rosa Hotel and it served the community until the 1930s when it was torn down to make way for the central post office which remains in its place today.

Only one year after Burbank lots were put on the market, the real estate bubble had burst. This event financially ruined nearly all of the directors of the Providencia Land, Water and Development Company. Despite the bust, David Burbank remained a successful businessman. He had involved himself in real estate development all over Los Angeles and even his own primary residence ended up being on Main Street in downtown L.A.

Just across the street from that home, he built an opera house which opened in 1893 called the Burbank Theater. It spent its first few decades as a legitimate, but struggling venue, but by the 1940s was better known as the most successful burlesque house on the west coast. Burbank died just two years after his theater was built and his obituary read, "Dr. David Burbank was a pioneer citizen of Los Angeles, and by his business ability and integrity acquired property and fortune and the respect of numberless friends. He was an indefatigable worker and though 74 years of age was taken sick while superintending the work of constructing the loges in his theater. The many friends of the old gentleman are greatly pained at his death, and the theater people are particularly grieved. He leaves a widow and daughter, Mrs. John W. Griffin, to mourn his demise [along] with his brother, Franklin Burbank."

Dr. Burbank's life was one well-lived. He left his legacy in this city that proudly preserves its history so that it may be shared with future generations. And though we may not think it when we talk about our town, but we are constantly keeping his memory alive whenever we utter the word Burbank. It is a testament to his dedication to this area and his commitment to building the foundation that our current city sits triumphantly upon.

## News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the August 16, 1903 *Los Angeles Times*:

The Burbank [Theater] programme may be a good one for those who sit in the dress circle and listen to it, but it isn't as interesting as the cage of animals in the box. This does not refer to the affable ticket sellers or charming treasurer of the theater, for they are more than human. What it does have reference to, however, are the thirty-seven crickets kept in the office.

Burbank theater-goers have doubtless noticed through the box office window a cracker box about a foot square, having a glass front. Some people may have imagined that the cashier had snakes, but he is troubled with nothing more than crickets.

All actor people have crickets—that is, all genuine members of the 'profesh.' They don't carry them around in their pockets but there is always place for them in all well regulated theaters. These little beasts are revered by play actors because they are always lucky and every theater with a cricket box is bound to do the business.

Down at the Burbank every actor is supposed to catch every cricket he sees and drop it in the box. There is a hole in the top of the box, plugged with a cork, and every time any theater attaché snares a cricket it is dropped through the hole with the proper solemnity attending all functions that bring good luck to people. A real actor would rather forget six lines in the third act than to miss catching a cricket every day or so, for it has the same soothing effect as kissing the blarney stone.

Hereafter, if you see a glass front box in a theater ticket office, don't think you see snakes. They're nothing but crickets.

And that's the Burbank news from August 16, 1903.

## End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org)

Thank you for joining us today.