The Graber Olive House

A legacy of California heritage, craftsmanship, and family enterprise, 1894–present

315 East Fourth Street · Ontario, California

In a city transformed by freeways, subdivisions, and the accelerating pace of Southern California life, the Graber Olive House has long represented a quieter kind of continuity. Behind its familiar entrance on East Fourth Street, generations of workers cured, sorted, packed, labeled, and shipped olives using methods closely associated with the enterprise's nineteenth-century beginnings. Its significance lies not only in the product that carried the Graber name across the country, but also in the remarkable survival of an agricultural workplace within the changing city around it.

This report traces the company's beginnings in Ontario's Model Colony, its distinctive methods and family stewardship, the physical character of its historic grounds, and the uncertain future that followed the suspension of canning operations. It draws on City of Ontario preservation and planning records, the Graber family's published history, and contemporary reporting. Historical photographs are identified and linked in dedicated reference panels; they are not reproduced in this edition.

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPH

Graber Olive House entrance and signage (2011)

Photograph by Uzma Gamal, public domain, Wikimedia Commons. The linked page includes the original image.

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A beginning in the Model Colony

Ontario was still a young agricultural settlement when Clifford C. Graber and his brother Charles arrived from Indiana in 1892. The Chaffey brothers had promoted a carefully planned colony of irrigated small farms, and the Grabers acquired a ten-acre tract within that landscape. Like many of their neighbors, they first looked toward citrus and other crops. Yet the experiment that would define the family name came from olives: Clifford studied local curing practices, prepared barrels of his own, and discovered that friends and neighbors wanted more. By 1894, the enterprise that became the C.C. Graber Company was underway.

A craft built on patience

The company developed an identity around olives allowed to ripen on the tree rather than harvested green. Their delicate condition demanded careful picking, transport, and processing. The result was a product associated with a distinctive texture and flavor, marketed through a business that combined hands-on craft with increasingly sophisticated distribution. As the company grew, its Ontario buildings remained the place where fruit became a recognizable finished product.

Innovation was part of the story, too. City preservation records credit Clifford Graber with developing an olive-grading machine around 1910 that sorted fruit by diameter, making it possible to pack olives in more consistent sizes. The machine stands as a reminder that this family enterprise was not merely preserving old customs: it adapted technology to improve a traditional food. Mail-order marketing helped extend the reach of the company well beyond the Inland Empire.

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPH

Historic olive-curing vat room (2011)

Photograph by Uzma Gamal, public domain, Wikimedia Commons. The image documents the processing environment.

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A family business, a community landmark

The Graber enterprise was also a family undertaking. Ontario's historical walking-tour materials recount that Clifford directed the canning business while Mrs. Graber prepared labels and managed mail-order correspondence. In 1907, Clifford built a Craftsman-style residence on the property for his wife, Georgia Bell Noe. House and workplace became interwoven parts of a single landscape, connecting family life to agricultural production.

Through the twentieth century, the growing operations moved beyond the original Ontario acreage, first to the Hemet area and later to the San Joaquin Valley. But the Ontario plant continued to process, pack, and sell the olives. A 1990 Los Angeles Times account described long-serving employees and the painstaking handling of fruit during the fall harvest. For visitors, the grounds offered a rare opportunity to observe a working food business whose machinery and atmosphere seemed to belong to another era.

The architecture of continuity

The historic grounds preserve more than a single storefront. The City of Ontario's 2020 district record describes a collection of processing and storage buildings, the 1907 family bungalow, machinery, irrigation features, and mature landscape elements. Together, these resources illustrate the evolution of a working agricultural property over many decades. The district documentation identifies 25 contributing resources of several types, rather than 25 separate buildings.

The original ten acres had contracted to approximately 2.58 acres by the time of the historic survey. Nevertheless, the surviving buildings and landscape retain a powerful sense of place. Redwood, oak, and olive trees frame the site; utilitarian structures reveal how olives moved from curing to packing and sale; and early irrigation features recall the planned colony that made the enterprise possible.

Ontario recognized the site as contributing to the College Park Historic District in 2000, and designated the Graber Olive House Historic District in October 2020. Such recognition is not a promise that every structure will remain unchanged, but it acknowledges that the ensemble has cultural and architectural significance that warrants careful consideration in future planning.

A difficult new chapter

After more than a century of family production, the Ontario canning operation halted in 2023. In a 2025 planning report, the City attributed the interruption to a combination of drought-related crop problems, changes in the industry, and pressures stemming from the pandemic. Proposals to revive canning and introduce restaurant, hospitality, and event uses brought fresh attention to the property, as well as questions about compatibility with the surrounding residential neighborhood and the obligations of historic preservation.

The proposed adaptive reuse was discussed in City planning proceedings in 2025. News coverage later that year described an investor's withdrawal and financial uncertainty for the property. These reports document a difficult period, not a definitive outcome for ownership or future development. As of the family's published website statement consulted for this report, on-site canning and tours remain suspended, while the Graber brand continues through olive oil, jarred olives, and related merchandise.

What preservation would mean

The Graber Olive House occupies a rare position in Southern California history: a business whose product, machinery, buildings, and family identity developed together on the same site. Its legacy is both tangible and human. A preservation-minded future would seek to retain the qualities that make the place recognizable while finding a viable purpose for the buildings. Whether that future includes renewed olive production, carefully managed reuse, or another approach, the essential question is how to carry a working landscape's memory into the next generation.

Selected chronology

1892 Clifford C. and Charles Graber acquire an agricultural parcel in Ontario.

1894 The olive-curing enterprise is formally established.

1907 The Graber family residence is constructed.

Circa 1910 Olive grading machinery and expanded distribution help shape the business.

1930s–1960s Family succession and changing growing locations accompany continued Ontario processing.

2000 Site recognized as a contributor to the College Park Historic District.

2020 Graber Olive House Historic District receives local designation.

2023 On-site olive canning operations stop.

2025 Adaptive-reuse proposals and financial challenges attract public attention.

Research notes and sources

• City of Ontario, Graber Olive House Historic District Record (2020)

• City of Ontario, Zoning Administrator materials, July 7 and July 21, 2025

• City of Ontario, College Park Neighborhood Walking Guide

• Graber Olive House, Our Story and Our Mission

• La Verne Magazine, Generations of Harvesting Quality (2002)

• Los Angeles Times, Olives Alive (1990)

• CBS Los Angeles, Graber Olive House future in doubt (2025)

• Wikimedia Commons, Graber Olive House photographs by Uzma Gamal (2011)

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