Important Historical Events at Sunnylands

Walter and Leonore Annenberg wanted their California winter estate, Sunnylands, to be preserved and to host high-level retreats where world leaders could gather and discuss ways to foster international. However, many important events took place at Sunnylands while the Annenbergs were still in residence.

In July 1976, Frank Sinatra married Barbara Marx at Sunnylands. The wedding was designed to be a secret to avoid press attention. Invitations were sent to guests to attend an engagement party, but the press found out and lined up around the iconic pink wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous bride and groom. With 120 guests in the atrium and living room to escape the summer heat, Barbara and Frank were married in front of the fireplace.

In 1983, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip journeyed on a 10-day goodwill tour of California. During this tour, the Annenbergs hosted a luncheon at Sunnylands with a guest list that included the royal party, several top-level diplomats, and former President Gerald Ford and First Lady Betty Ford. At lunch, Queen Elizabeth II noticed that the Annenbergs had the same Flora Danica china that she had. After lunch, the Annenbergs took the royal party to tour the estate, although it was pouring rain. They dressed in rain gear and piled into golf carts for a spin around Sunnylands.

From the comfort of the Room of Memories, President Ronald Reagan, Walter Annenberg, and others watched the 1986 New Year's Day address by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to the citizens of the United States on the new status of relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. To be aired at the same time, President Reagan had also released an address, speaking to the citizens of the Soviet Union about nuclear disarmament.

In 1988, President Reagan signed a landmark U.S.-Canada trade agreement at Walter's desk. President Reagan was visiting Walter and Leonore at Sunnylands and, as was often the case, continued to do official presidential work while enjoying the beautiful Southern California estate. This trade agreement went on to inspire the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In March 1990, President George H.W. Bush was scheduled for a weekend visit to Sunnylands when a crisis erupted. After tolerating a huge trade deficit with Japan, Congress was threatening to retaliate in-kind. To avoid a trade war, President Bush invited Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu to Rancho Mirage for an emergency meeting. The meetings were held at Morningside Country Club, and an official state dinner took place at Sunnylands. This was one of the few times a state dinner was held outside the White House. The Annenbergs and their experienced staff had only three days' notice. Due to the meetings and the successful dinner, a trade war was averted. The city of Rancho Mirage recognized Sunnylands as an historic estate based on this event.

Recognizing the unique role played by historically Black colleges and universities and their limited resources, the Annenberg Foundation pledged $50 million in 1990 to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). In March 1990, a ceremony to honor Walter for his contribution was held by UNCF at Sunnylands. The 4-to-1 challenge grant was designed to stimulate the UNCF to aim high. The Fund had to raise at least $200 million to get Walter's $50 million. By 1996, the campaign had secured over $280 million.

Supreme Court Justices came to Sunnylands several times, including in 2004 and 2007 to discuss and create educational materials on the constitution for K-12 students. Supreme Court

Justices Stephen Breyer, Sandra Day O'Connor, and Anthony Kennedy were all part of these important gatherings.