

APPENDIX A: HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES RIVER

The City of Los Angeles is located where it is because of the Los Angeles River and its easily accessible supply of irrigation water. The river and its tributaries supported native peoples for centuries before the arrival of the first Europeans. Within 100 years after the founding of the Pueblo de Los Angeles, the population and its use of water had outgrown the flows in the river. Eventually the river's natural flooding patterns became too much of a threat to the developing land uses. The river was viewed as something that had to be "controlled" in order for the city to keep growing. Now, there is a renewed interest in the river, its historic significance and its importance as a natural resource. This document developed as part of an effort to find ways to reestablish a positive relationship between the Los Angeles River and the people who now live along it.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES RIVER	
10 million years ago	The region that will later become the Los Angeles River coastal plain is under water. Later the valleys and coastal plain are formed by the gradual erosion of the uplifted mountain ranges.
48,000 + years ago	Earliest human inhabitants occupy the coastal plain, supported by the waters of the Los Angeles River and its tributaries.
1000 + years ago	The Tongva tribe (later called Gabrielino by the Spanish) inhabit villages throughout the region, including the village of Yangna, near the river on the current site of City Hall. A part of the Shoshonean culture, the Tongva produce beautiful baskets and soapstone ware.
1769	Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portola is the first European to pass through the region. Juan Crespi, the expedition's diarist, described the river: "...through a pass between low hills we entered a very spacious valley, well grown with cottonwoods and alders, among which ran a beautiful river from the north-west and then, doubling the point of a steep hill, it went on afterwards to the south...We halted not very far from the river, which we named Porciuncula." (The previous day, August 1, having been the jubilee of Our Lady of Los Angeles de Porciuncula.) An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 Native Americans live in the region. Native place names are preserved in modern words: Kawenga became Cahuenga, Asukangna became Azusa, Maliwu became Malibu, Simj became Simi.

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1776	Juan Bautista de Anza travels and camps along the Rio Porciuncula with the 300 soldiers and settlers he is leading from New Spain (Mexico) to found the Presidio and Mission at San Francisco.
1777	A site along the Rio Porciuncula is selected as one of the two civilian settlements, or pueblos, to be founded in California (San Jose is the other). The decision is based on Phelipe De Neve's recommendation: "Three leagues from that mission [San Gabriel] is found the Porciuncula River with much water easy to take on either bank and beautiful lands in which it all could be made use of..."
1781	A group of 45 settlers arrives from Mexico to found the Pueblo de Los Angeles. Plots for homes and fields are laid out and the Zanja Madre, or main water ditch, is completed which carries both domestic and irrigation water from an upstream weir on the River (near North Broadway).
1790	Population of the pueblo is 140.
1800	Population of the pueblo is 315.
1815	Floods wash away the original pueblo plaza; the river breaks its banks and changes course at Alameda and Fourth Streets, emptying into Ballona Creek.
1820	Population of the pueblo and the surrounding area is 650.
1822	California is transferred from Spain to Mexico.
1825	The river floods again and returns to its original course. Woodlands between the pueblo and ocean are washed out; marsh land is drained by the new channel.
1848	California Gold Rush. California is annexed to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
1854	Prompted by an increasing population and a lowering water table, the city appoints a water overseer to administer the distribution of irrigation and drinking water.
1858	Los Angeles is incorporated as an American city.

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1861-62	Fifty inches of rain in five weeks washes away the river banks and existing water distribution system. Much of San Fernando Valley is under water.
1863-64	Severe drought kills most of the livestock in the region. This is a disaster for the ranchos which have been under financial and legal pressure to give up their extensive land holdings.
1867	Floods cause the river channel to overflow again, creating an immense temporary lake out to Ballona Creek.
1882	The first electrical plant in Los Angeles is built to generate light and power.
1890	Population of Los Angeles County reaches 101,000.
1892	Angeles National Forest established by President Harrison as a 1.5 million acre preserve "primarily for the purpose of watershed protection and improvement of water flow conditions."
1904	William Mulholland, Superintendent of Los Angeles City Water Company, announces that Los Angeles will need new water sources—the population has outgrown the Los Angeles River and local aquifers.
1913	The Owens Valley Aqueduct opens, bringing water to the city from the eastern Sierra Nevada.
1914	Flooding causes \$470 million (in 1990 dollars) in damage. Discussion of channelizing the Los Angeles River begins.
1915	The Los Angeles Flood Control District is formed. James R. Reagan, controversial head of the district, opposes the County Board of Engineers' recommendation which emphasizes controlling flood water upstream to minimize the flows downstream. Instead, Reagan supports channelizing the river.
1920	Devil's Gate Dam completed—first dam built by Los Angeles County Flood Control District. Population of Los Angeles County reaches 930,000.
1927	Merrill Butler, chief engineer of bridges, completed the Glendale/Hyperion Bridge with the intent to "preserve forever the unusual beauty of this viaduct by means of a park which will extend under and all around the bridge, making it an architectural jewel in a landscaped setting."

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1930's	Groundwater levels are dropping by 2 to 20 feet per year. The first spreading grounds are constructed.
1930	Comprehensive Plan of the Commission on Recreation and Parks and Beaches proposes the purchase of lands in the flood plain for a linear greenbelt and settling grounds.
1931	First Comprehensive Plan for Control and Conservation of Flood Water developed. Elements include debris basins, concrete and rock lined channels and other bank protection, storm drains to carry surface water to channels, spreading grounds to conserve flood waters, and soil erosion control measures.
1934	Heavy flooding causes \$100 million (1990 dollars) in flood damages; forty people die in the La Crescenta area.
1935	Congress appropriates nearly \$19 million under Emergency Relief Act of 1935 for construction of storm drains and debris basins resulting from 1934 flooding.
1936	The Flood Control Act of 1936 redefined the role of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from providing emergency relief, to supervising permanent future flood control plans for the Los Angeles, Rio Hondo and San Gabriel rivers. The Act authorized \$70 million in federal dollars for improvements.
1938	<p>Heavy flooding causes \$795 million (1990 dollars) in damages; 49 people die across Los Angeles County. The Flood Control District asks Congress for the assistance of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.</p> <p>Congress passes the Flood Control Act of 1938 authorizing the Army Corps of Engineers to prepare a revised plan for the entire Los Angeles County Drainage Area (LACDA).</p>
1939	<p>14 dams and numerous debris basins are completed in mountain canyons to control flooding and debris in downstream areas.</p> <p>A freeway is constructed on a narrow strip of land which parallels the Arroyo Seco, eliminating most adjacent parklands.</p>
1940	<p>A freeway in the Los Angeles River bed is first proposed and denied.</p> <p>Population of Los Angeles County reaches 2.7 million.</p>

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1941	<p>Congress approves the Los Angeles County Drainage Area plan, authorizing \$230 million for construction of a comprehensive system that will include five major flood control basins (Hansen, Sepulveda, Santa Fe, Whittier Narrows, and Lopez), debris basins in 31 tributary canyons, construction of 93 miles of main channel and 147 miles of tributary channels, and reconstruction of 316 bridges on the Los Angeles, Rio Hondo and San Gabriel rivers. Construction of the Los Angeles River channel takes 20 years to complete. The effort requires three-million barrels of concrete and 10,000 workers.</p> <p>Sepulveda and Hansen Basins completed.</p>
1949	San Fe Dam completed.
1950	Population of Los Angeles County reaches 4.1 million.
1954	Lopez Dam completed.
1957	Whittier Narrows Dam completed.
1960	<p>Golden State Freeway separates the Los Angeles River from Griffith Park, and isolating the Glendale/Hyperion bridge from part of its "landscaping setting."</p> <p>Population of Los Angeles County reaches 6.0 million.</p>
1969	<p>Los Angeles County flooding kills 73 people and cause \$4.5 million (1990 dollars) in damages.</p> <p>The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is authorized by Congress to evaluate the need for improvements to the Los Angeles County Drainage Area system (LACDA).</p>
1972-76	Flood Control District creates the Landscape Treatment program with a \$550,000 per year budget.
1977	Los Angeles River/Rio Hondo Channel (LARIO) trail opens. Over 20 miles of bike and equestrian trails are built.
1978	Flooding causes \$350 million (1990 dollars); eleven people die county-wide. Proposition 13 passes and flood control funding is cut by two-thirds.

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1979	Voters pass Proposition A to allow for benefit assessments to supplement other funding of the flood control system. Assessment based on estimated amount of storm runoff from each parcel of land in the District.
1980	Floods cause \$375 million in damages; 18 people die. The population of Los Angeles County reaches 7.4 million.
1983	Floods cause \$48 million in damages; six people die.
1986	Friends of the Los Angeles River (FOLAR) is founded, a nonprofit group dedicated to restoring the Los Angeles River and creating a "Los Angeles River greenway from the mountains to the sea." FOLAR organizes community volunteers for annual river cleanups.
1989	Truckway in the Los Angeles River bed; the proposal was denied.
1990	The Mayor's Task Force is formed to study ways to increase opportunities along the Los Angeles River and improve the appearance of the river. The Task Force proposes three demonstration projects and recommends that an interagency master plan be prepared for the entire river. Earth Day: Friends of the Los Angeles River and Sierra Club hold river celebration.
1991	Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approves the development of a Master Plan for the Los Angeles River to be coordinated by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. LACDPW forms a Planning Team with the Los Angeles County Departments of Parks and Recreation and Regional Planning and the National Park Service - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. L.A. Beautiful sponsors a Los Angeles River forum attended by over 300.
1992	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers publishes the LACDA Feasibility Report and EIS. The Master Plan Planning Team convenes a Los Angeles River Advisory Committee to develop goals for the river and to guide the planning process. The interjurisdictional Advisory Committee represents community groups, river adjacent cities and state and federal agencies. Floods cause \$74 million in damages; 8 people die.

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1993	<p>Over 200 people attend community meetings to discuss opportunities for recreation, environmental enhancement, aesthetic improvements, economic development, flood management and water conservation as part of the Master Plan development.</p>
1994	<p>Northeast Trees, a nonprofit urban forestry group, plants the first trees of the Los Angeles River Greenway.</p> <p>Several hundred people participate in the Los Angeles River Conferences organized by Friends of the Los Angeles River and UnPAVE L.A.</p> <p>The existing flood control system, in the Los Angeles County Drainage Area, has prevented a total of nearly \$3.6 billion in flood damages.</p> <p>Population of Los Angeles County is over 9.0 million.</p>
1995	<p>Los Angeles County Department of Public Works publishes the LACDA Master Environmental Impact Report.</p> <p>Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approves the Los Angeles Drainage Area (LACDA) flood control project developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. A major element of the project is the construction of flood walls on top of the levees along Rio Hondo and the lower Los Angeles River.</p> <p>Santa Monica Mountains dedicates Elysian Valley Gateway Park adjacent to the river.</p>
1996	<p>City of Los Angeles begins construction of first phase of the Los Angeles River Bike Path.</p> <p>Los Angeles River Master Plan completed by the interagency Planning Team and released by the Advisory Committee to cities, agencies and interest groups for consideration and/or approval.</p>

INFORMATION COMPILED BY

Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority

American Institute of Architects, Los Angeles River Task Force

Friends of the Los Angeles River

National Park Service-Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

Los Angeles County Department of Public Works

Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning

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