



# The Metropole

THE OFFICIAL BLOG OF THE URBAN HISTORY ASSOCIATION

## Digital Summer School: @LAhistory

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**LAhistory**  
@LAhistory

Jogging the collective memory of Los Angeles. People think LA has no history. They just don't know where to look.

📍 Los Angeles

📅 Joined April 2009

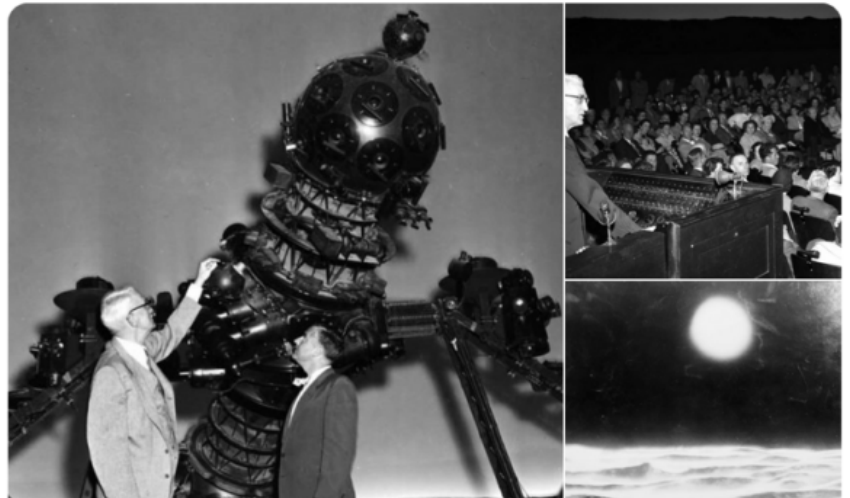
📷 2,384 Photos and videos



**LAhistory** @LAhistory · Jul 20

For #Apollo50 🌕, a look at @GriffithObserv's mid-century show "A Trip to the Moon" that started 1948. [griffithobservatory.org/events/75thAnn...](http://griffithobservatory.org/events/75thAnn...)

@USCDigLib photos (1950s): [digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/search/fie...](http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/search/fie...)



**Editor's note:** This is the third installment in our second annual Digital Summer School series which highlights digital humanities projects focusing on urban history. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor Chris Cantwell conducted our first class regarding the digital project *Gathering Places, Religion and Community in Milwaukee* (<https://liblamp.uwm.edu/omeka/gatheringplaces/>). Trinity College historian Jack Dougherty led our second course discussing his work on Metropolitan

**Hartford: On the Line: How Schooling, Housing, and Civil Rights Shaped Hartford and its Suburbs (<https://ontheline.trincoll.edu>). Public historian Victoria Bernal, co-founder of @LAhistory, instructs our third session in which she discusses how the project came into being and the kind of labor required of digital humanities working within social media.**

*Victoria Bernal*

[@LAhistory\\_](https://twitter.com/LAhistory) (<https://twitter.com/LAhistory>).

### Why @LAhistory?

In April 2009, there were no active Twitter accounts devoted solely to the history of Los Angeles as posts about the city's past were woven into feeds about current events. The social media platform was only three years old at the time so many historians didn't take it seriously. While it seems clear now, in 2009, I wanted to test the idea that Twitter could be a useful tool for promoting Los Angeles history as well as proving there was an audience for that history.



**LAhistory** @LAhistory · Mar 17

Today is the 100th birthday of Nat King Cole. In 1962, a celebration was held at the Ambassador Hotel in honor of #NatKingCole's 25th year as an entertainer. Photos from the @OviattLibrary's @bradley\_center collection: [digital-collections.csun.edu/digital/search...](https://digital-collections.csun.edu/digital/search...)



Another [@LAhistory](https://twitter.com/LAhistory) (<https://twitter.com/LAhistory>) goal was (and is) to draw daily attention to the plethora of online and offline resources available to local history buffs. New online archives create a buzz of attention but once the social media din dies down, those resources can fall off our collective radar. As a (subtle) reminder of this treasure trove of history, I use the "This Day in LA history" format to link to images, quotes, oral histories, and videos from a variety of local and national online archives. Offline lectures, historic commemorations and civic celebrations hosted by both large and small institutions are also given equal attention on our platform along with recent and out-of-print books. @LAhistory doesn't have an active website because the goal has always been to shine the social media spotlight on the nooks and crannies of Los Angeles history.



The @LAhistory tagline is “People think LA has no history, but they just don’t know where to look” because the project also reminds Angelenos where to find Los Angeles, beyond the museum exhibits, old buildings, and history books. Like many in this field, I see expressions of history everywhere – offline and online – and I use Twitter to catch history’s mediated representation as it flows through the torrential river that is social media.

### How did @LAhistory come to fruition?

@LAhistory started as a mother-daughter effort. My mom wrote about greater Los Angeles for *Sunset Magazine* from the 1960s-1980s, and then worked at the Huntington Library for the last 25 years of her career. I grew up surrounded by this history and started working on my own history projects and volunteering for local organizations. After finishing a dual master’s program from USC Annenberg & the London School of Economics (my LSE thesis explored the intersection of public radio and local history), I worked a corporate job but wanted to use my communication skills to give back to the LA history community. And frankly, I just grew tired of waiting for the history Twitter feed I wanted to see.



*Mother and daughter on a Sunset Magazine assignment in the Bradbury Building.*

In addition to our collective professional experience, mom and I have about 130 years of family history in Southern California. Mom's first ancestor came from New York just before 1888 and my dad's family came from Mexico in the 1920s. How my family history weaves through the region's past definitely plays a role in what's tweeted. It's why I feel strongly about sharing the ways folks live and celebrate LA history that might be outside the purview of an academic historian.

### What do you hope people take away from @LAhistory?

First and foremost, I hope that followers see the breadth and depth of Los Angeles history. While I've never articulated this on Twitter, I'd like people see enough of themselves in the city's history that they are inspired to document their own history. That's why I post about public events that offer to scan family photos and record neighborhood stories. There is still so much Los Angeles history stored away in people's closets, garages, and memories that have yet to reach an institutional archive. This is especially true for Angelenos of color. Before an archive can reach an institution, family members have to see the historic value in those photos, letters and other ephemera instead of selling them at garage sales or throwing it all away.



**LAhistory** @LAhistory · May 31

May 31, 1949: Edward Roybal was elected to LA City Council #OTD 70 years ago. He was the first **Mexican** American elected to #LACityCouncil since 1881 (@LACityClerk's "City of LA Officials" database -> [cityclerk.lacity.org/ChronoLA/index...](http://cityclerk.lacity.org/ChronoLA/index...)).

@laplphotos (1949): [tessa.lapl.org/cdm/singleitem...](http://tessa.lapl.org/cdm/singleitem...)



While @LAhistory supports and promotes the work of academics and journalists, the Twitter feed is consciously not an academic or journalistic effort. First, I don't have the financial resources to ensure such standards. Second, on the Twitter feed, I'm unabashedly biased towards Los Angeles history and those working to document, preserve and share it. Third, I developed @LAhistory to have room for a more raw and unpolished version of lived history. I recently interviewed designer Roland Young, who said that when he designed music album covers, he liked to "keep it dirty." He explained that too much

cleaning can jeopardize the intimacy and the passion of the work. His words resonated with my intention for @LAhistory, which is to highlight both the work of those who keep a professional distance along with those for which Los Angeles history is a very personal, messy and passionate topic.

### Who is the audience?

The main audience I write to is the average Angeleno interested in Los Angeles history. The assumption made, whether correct or incorrect, is that our followers also have a general understanding about local history which is why I rarely use the words “hidden,” “forgotten” or “lost” in my own language (though it might be in a retweeted title). While we have a number of followers outside of Los Angeles, @LAhistory keeps a clear and consistent focus on Los Angeles County with the occasional post outside greater Los Angeles (e.g. the opening of Angel Stadium or vintage images of Angelenos vacationing at Lake Arrowhead).

Another important point about the audience is that I work to make @LAhistory as user-friendly as possible. Event announcements include the date, time and location. Threaded tweets are spaced about 30 minutes apart so as to not overwhelm an individual’s feed. I avoid vague posts with cryptic language and use Twitter jargon and acronyms sparingly. Because @LAhistory shares followers with other LA-centric accounts, I’ll wait a few hours (or days) before posting a popular history article so that our shared followers aren’t bored by seeing the same info scroll through over and over. I feel honored that users have added @LAhistory to their Twitter feed, so I try to be respectful of that privilege.



### What are the obstacles?

@LAhistory is not affiliated with any organization so there is no institutional support for items like marketing, conferences or evaluation. It is a “labor of love” by choice, which also means that it has always been a challenge to make time for researching stories and crafting content while balancing work and life. In fact, I always say that @LAhistory is a work in progress as there are still so many facets about Los Angeles history which I’d like to post.

One of my biggest obstacles was personal, and that was finding my way back to @LAhistory after my mom died in 2015. In fact, even while answering these questions, I toggle between “our” and “my” as I still feel her in the project. We were always close but building this inter-generational social media project brought a beautiful depth to our mother-daughter relationship. @LAhistory was created to draw attention to the work of others and yet, after my mother’s death, I realized how much I also did it for her. I considered ending the project in 2015 because the pain of revisiting our shared social media space without her was too much. The project has continued but with a significant shift in the content as I work through the grief (more retweets, less original research).

### Over the course of @LAhistory’s lifespan, what has changed?

Since starting in 2009, the biggest change is the sheer number of social media accounts devoted to the region’s past. A more than welcome development. The region is too large and complex for one institution or person to be the voice of Los Angeles history. At the end of 2009, there were approximately 18 million (<https://mashable.com/2009/09/14/twitter-2009-stats>), Twitter users[1]. That number grew to 320 million (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/07/twitter-q4-2018-earnings.html>) monthly daily active users at the end of 2018[2]. In that ten-year-span, the institutional archives I linked to in 2009 had developed their own Twitter feeds. I’ve had to adjust my content so that @LAhistory continues to complement their work.



**LAhistory** @LAhistory · Jun 29

“Originally a camera shop, this unique structure (now a restaurant) is one of the city's last remaining examples of #programmaticallyarchitecture,”

@LAConservancy. [laconservancy.org/locations/dark...](https://laconservancy.org/locations/dark...) #NationalCameraDay



With more accounts comes the opportunity for increased specificity on a city’s past. In addition to the broad topics of preservation (@LAConservancy (<https://twitter.com/laconservancy?lang=en>), & @Esotouric (<https://twitter.com/esotouric>))

[ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](#))) and academic history (@HUSC\_ICW ([https://twitter.com/husc\\_icw?lang=en](https://twitter.com/husc_icw?lang=en))) and archival work (@LAasSubject (<https://twitter.com/laassubject?lang=en>), and @laacollective (<https://twitter.com/laacollective?lang=en>)), there are social media accounts that focus on the history of specific neighborhoods, especially by local museums, libraries and historical societies now active on Twitter. Several accounts have live-tweeted key moments in LA's past, such as the uprisings of 1965 and 1992. @FreewaysLA (<https://twitter.com/FreewaysLA>), @MetroLibrary (<https://twitter.com/MetroLibrary>) and @LARailHistory (<https://twitter.com/LArailhistory>) feature the region's transportation history. The Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation (@Official\_LAHTF ([https://twitter.com/Official\\_LAHTF](https://twitter.com/Official_LAHTF))) posts eye-catching images of our historic theatres. @LADeathTrip (<https://twitter.com/LADeathTrip>), @GourmetGhosts (<https://twitter.com/gourmetghosts>), @DerangedLACrime (<https://twitter.com/derangedlacrime>) and @CemeteryGuide (<https://twitter.com/cemeteryguide>) are just a few of the accounts that look at death in the City of Angels along with some of the more scandalous sides its history. Now there are so many more accounts championing local history, I can't keep up. And hopefully, those @LAhistory followers outside of California will find inspiration about the myriad of ways to use social media to explore a city's past.

**In today's twitterverse, how does one distinguish their feed from other competing feeds? What makes @LAhistory so successful?**

With any communications project, having a clear goal (drawing attention to LA's history community, broadly defined) has been the backbone of @LAhistory. Unique content and an authentic voice are other key elements. I learned early on that the authentic voice for @LAhistory was really no voice at all. So many talented tweeps (Twitter + peeps) post with pith, wit and snark but that just doesn't come across as authentic for me on social media. This makes for some dry @LAhistory content but the platform is already overcrowded with opinions and hot takes so additional commentary from me seems unnecessary.



**LAhistory** @LAhistory · May 12

Happy Mother's Day! In #LACHinatown, #YCHong built the Gate of Maternal Virtue (on Broadway) in honor of his mother. @TheHuntington (1939): [hdl.huntington.org/digital/collec...](http://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collec...)



Funny, I've never thought of @LAhistory as 'successful' though I realize having almost 40,000 followers is something to appreciate. A robust social media project has followers and also engages with its community. [Vintage LA](https://www.facebook.com/VintageLosAngeles/) (<https://www.facebook.com/VintageLosAngeles/>) and [Hidden LA](#)

(<https://www.facebook.com/HiddenLA/>), are two LA-based projects that have cultivated a strong sense of community on social media, especially Facebook. Yet cultivating that engagement and moderating online discussions takes time that I've never had. In fact, many new social media projects don't budget enough staff time to sustain a thriving feed, so it can be disappointing for those new to the platform. It took ten years for @LAhistory to reach almost 40,000 followers while others have increased followers much quicker. In terms of @LAhistory's success, it's difficult to measure when one of the goals is countering the cliché that Los Angeles has no history on a daily basis. Not only does the city, county and region have a rich deep history, there are (and have been) so many passionate people working hard to preserve, collect and share that history. The primary goal has always been to raise the profile of LA's history community, broadly defined. @LAhistory is a small token of my appreciation for the work of those unsung heroes.

### Where do you hope it goes in the future?

In the short term, I want to add more audio stories to the Twitter feed. Audio storytelling has always been a passion of mine, so I plan to embed more audio by linking to my "Sounds of LA History" page on SoundCloud.

I'd love to build a map of @LAhistory tweets by applying a zip code for each story to better visualize neighborhoods represented on @LAhistory, which could also serve as a resource for researchers. Before I think too far into the future, I simply want to improve upon what we started by ensuring content reflects all of Los Angeles. With a handle like @LAhistory, I feel strongly that the content needs to draw that social media spotlight to ALL the 4,084 square miles (<http://www.lacounty.gov/government/geography-statistics/statistics/>), of Los Angeles County equally. It's a goal I fall short of often, but one for which I strive.



*Victoria Bernal is a chronicler, public historian, researcher and writer who specializes in Los Angeles history. Having worked with a variety of history organizations, Victoria founded the @LAhistory twitter project in 2009 to raise social media awareness about the Los Angeles history community. She presented her work at the 2016 Society for American City and Regional Planning History conference and also at Digital LA, a symposium hosted by the Huntington-USC Institute for California and the West. Her articles about local history have appeared on popular sites such as KCET, CurbedLA, California Historical Society, LAist and KCRW. For the past five years, she's coordinated an L.A. History Happy Hour that brings together those working from difference disciplines (archivists, academics, librarians, preservationists and media makers) to build a community of those interested in the city's history. She graduated with a dual-master's in Global Media & Communications from USC's Annenberg and the London School of Economics.*

[1] <https://mashable.com/2009/09/14/twitter-2009-stats> (<https://mashable.com/2009/09/14/twitter-2009-stats>).



[2] <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/07/twitter-q4-2018-earnings.html>  
(<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/07/twitter-q4-2018-earnings.html>).

## 2 thoughts on “Digital Summer School: @LAhistory”

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