

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

L.A.'s First Public Transit Was Horse-Powered

Nathan Masters | December 6, 2012

Nearly fifty years since the ringing of trolley bells last echoed off the buildings of Los Angeles' historic core, voters approved of a funding measure that will likely return streetcars to downtown Los Angeles. The campaign has brought forth many fond memories of the local yellow cars of the Los Angeles Railway and the interurban red cars of the Pacific Electric Railway among L.A. downtowners, but the city's very first streetcars -- diminutive, horse-drawn cars that spawned L.A.'s first suburbs -- are much lesser known.

Public transportation was slow to arrive in Los Angeles, a city whose farthest reaches were still accessible by foot in the 1870s. But as the city began to stretch out over the surrounding landscape, some form of regular, wheeled transportation around town became a practical necessity.

On Sept. 22, 1873, public transit debuted in Los Angeles when Charles Dupuy opened his Pioneer Omnibus Street Line. The line's horse-drawn vehicles, which resembled miniature railroad cars on large, wooden wheels, followed a regular schedule and a fixed route -- a first in Los Angeles. For nearly two years the Pioneer line's buses moved riders between the historic Plaza located by today's Olvera Street and Washington Gardens, a popular beer garden and fairground located far south of the central city at Washington and Main.

But muddy streets pocked with holes plagued the line, which closed in 1875. The forerunner to today's buses would have to wait until the advent of paved roads and rubber tires to become a force in the city's public transportation. L.A.'s transportation history would be fixed to iron rails for several decades.

Though they required a hefty capital investment as well as strong connections to municipal power-brokers, street railways could provide faster and more reliable service than omnibuses by riding on tracks sunken into the city's streets.

L.A.'s first streetcars ran under horsepower. Steam locomotives were considered too dirty and dangerous for use on city streets still teeming with easily spooked horses, and cable car technology was still new and expensive. Electric-powered traction railways, meanwhile, remained more than a decade off.

On July 1, 1874, the modest, horse-drawn cars of the Spring and Sixth Street Railroad became the first streetcars to roll down Los Angeles streets. Founded by lawyer Robert M. Widney, the Spring & Sixth operated a regular schedule, running cars hourly on weekdays between 6:30 a.m. and 10 p.m. For a ten-cent fare, passengers could ride the one-and-a-half-mile route from the intersection of Temple and Spring south to Sixth, and then west to Figueroa.

Exactly one year later, another street railway joined the Spring & Sixth. Financed by John Downey, Isaias Hellman, William Workman, and others, the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad connected the city's business district near Temple Street to Agricultural Park, a haven for gamblers and vice-seekers. The park, outfitted with a racetrack, saloon, and brothel, was rechristened Exposition Park in 1913.

Soon, L.A.'s streetcar network expanded as new railways opened and existing lines extended their tracks across the city. The Plaza functioned as a central hub for the city's growing streetcar network, with lines radiating out in several directions.

At the city's periphery, streetcars played an important role in stimulating real estate development. Widney had built the Spring & Sixth in part to boost land sales near the intersection of Hill and Fourth -- then a sparsely populated area where Widney owned land, far beyond the central business district.

Later, East Los Angeles, since renamed Lincoln Heights, and Boyle Heights became L.A.'s first streetcar suburbs. The tracks of the Spring & Sixth reached East Los Angeles in 1876 and those of the Los Angeles and Aliso Avenue Street Passenger Railway arrived in Boyle Heights following year, making it practical for residents to relocate in the fledgling towns across the river from the central city.

This close relationship between street railway construction and real estate development -- evident in the city's very first streetcar line -- prefigured a pattern that guided the city's growth in the succeeding decades, as the founding of each far-flung suburb often coincided with the arrival of a streetcar or interurban railway line.

Horse-drawn streetcars remained the primary mode of public transportation through the 1880s, at their peak rolling through much of the booming city of Los Angeles. But technological innovation would doom the horse-powered street railway.

Cable -- and later electric -- railways offered a clear advantage over horse-drawn streetcars. Horses fouled up the streets and struggled on even slight grades, meaning that the hilly terrain to the west of L.A.'s early business district was inaccessible to horse-powered public transit. Cable cars, on the other hand, were cleanly whisked through town by underground cables pulled by a remotely located, stationary steam engine. And as Andrew Hallidie's Clay Street Hill Railroad in San Francisco had proved, cable cars had no trouble climbing steep grades.

In 1885, the cable cars of the Second Street Cable Railway began scaling the slopes of Bunker Hill, opening up the city's western reaches to development. Newer technology promptly replaced many of the city's horse-drawn streetcars. Los Angeles' last horse railway, the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad, traded in its horses for electric wires in 1897.



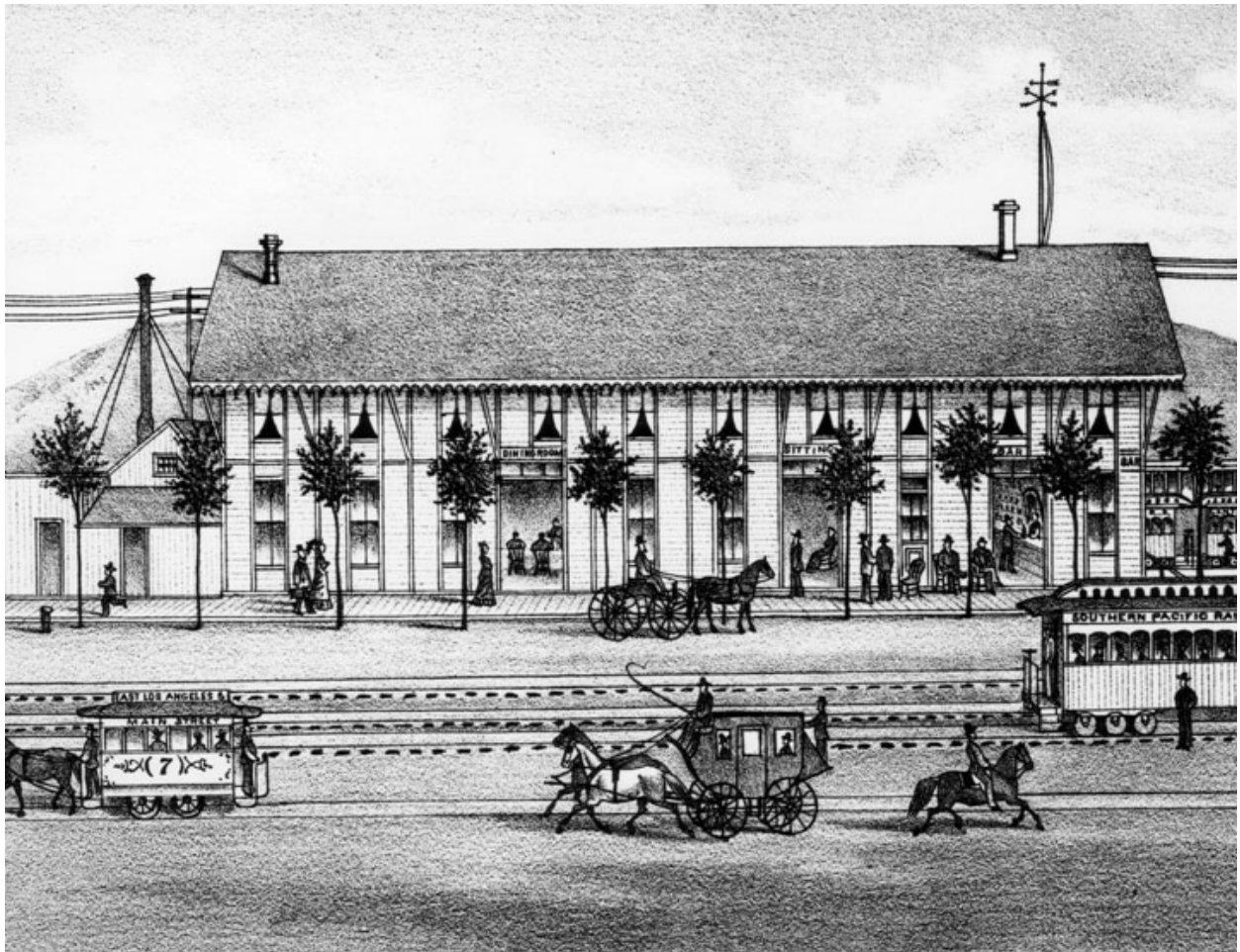
A horse-drawn streetcar of the Spring & Sixth railway in front of the Pico House. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



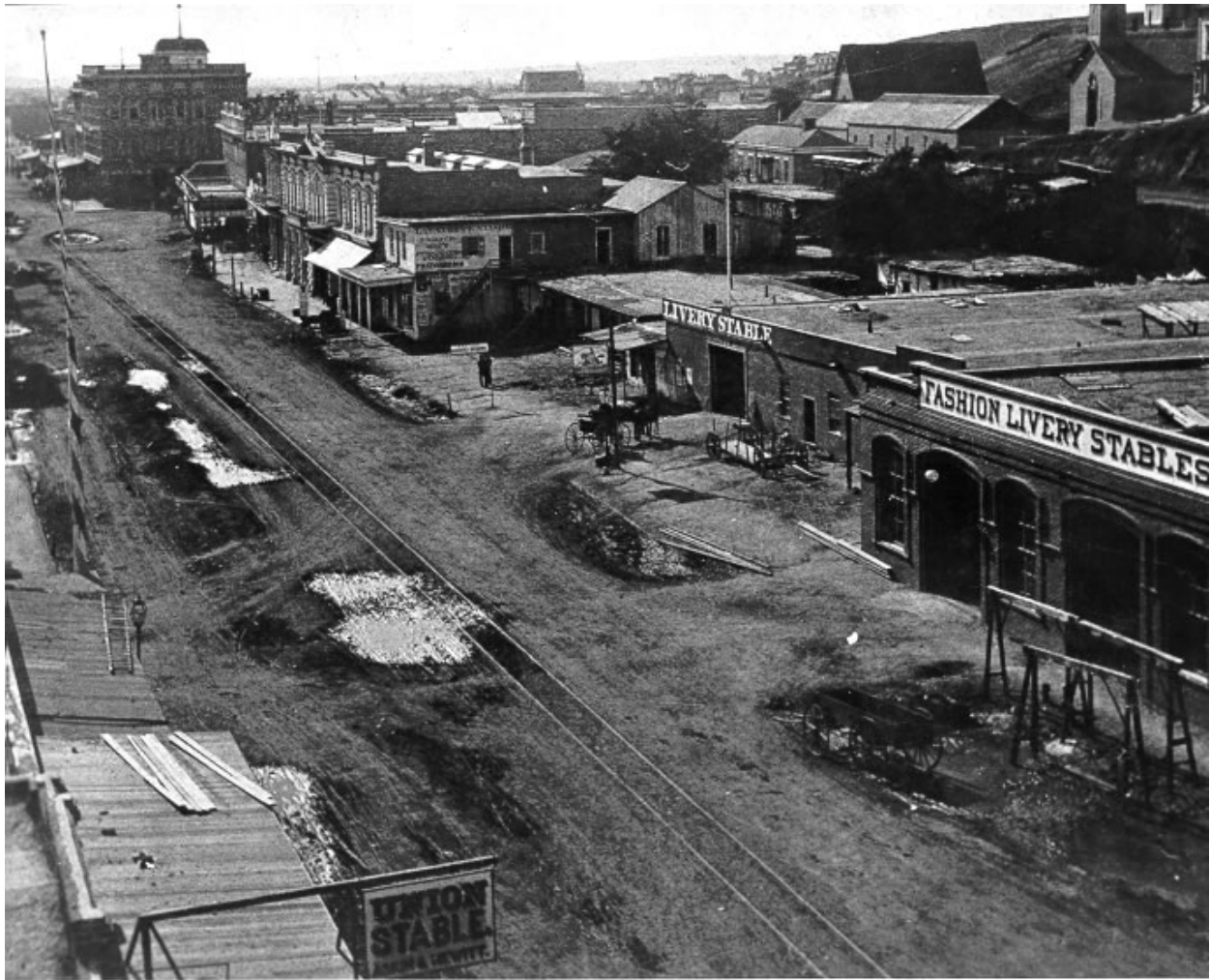
A Main Street and Agricultural Park horse-drawn streetcar rolls past St. Vibiana's Cathedral on Main Street in 1884. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



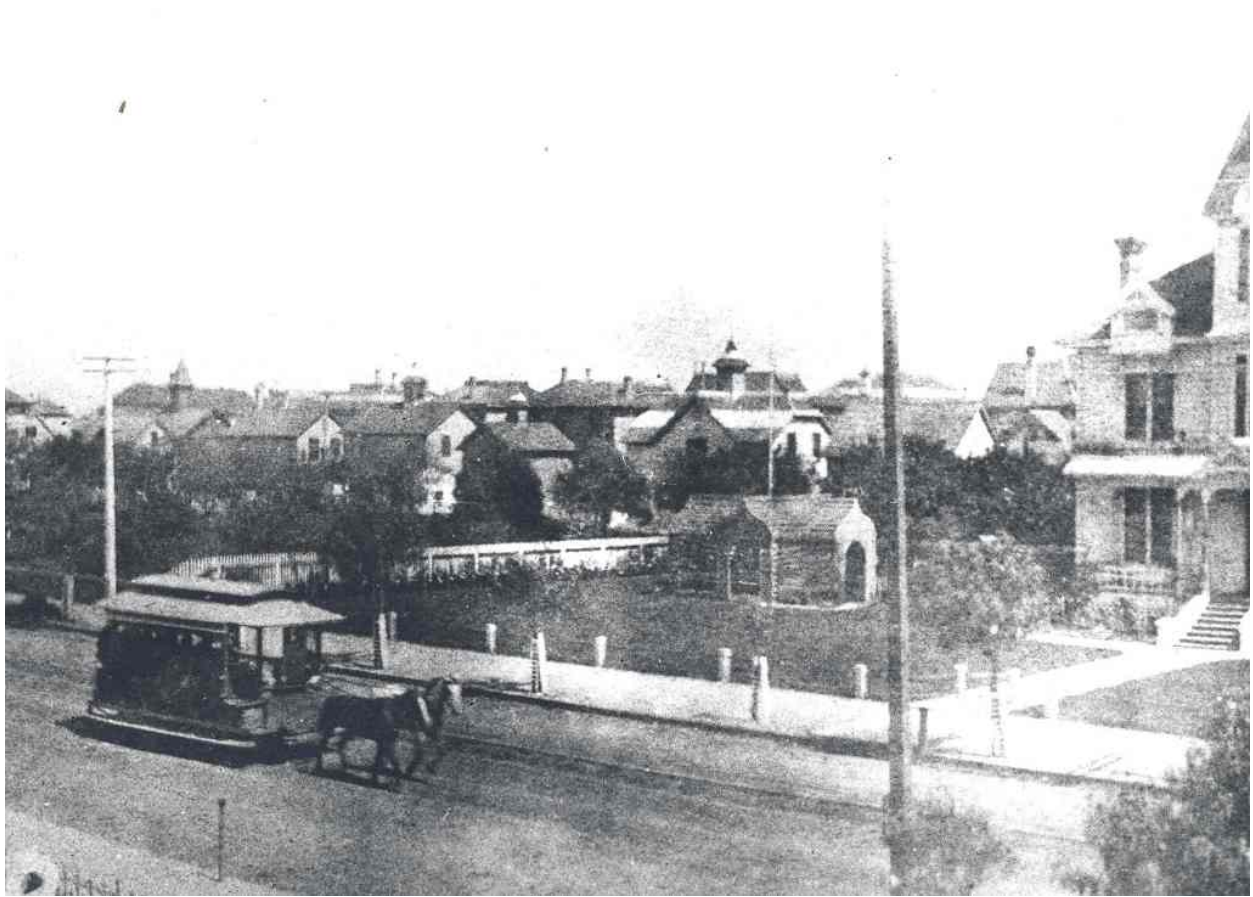
In this circa 1880 lithograph, streetcars from three competing railways cross in front of the Downey Block. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



1880 drawing of the Pacific Hotel next to the Southern Pacific depot, showing an East Los Angeles-bound streetcar. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



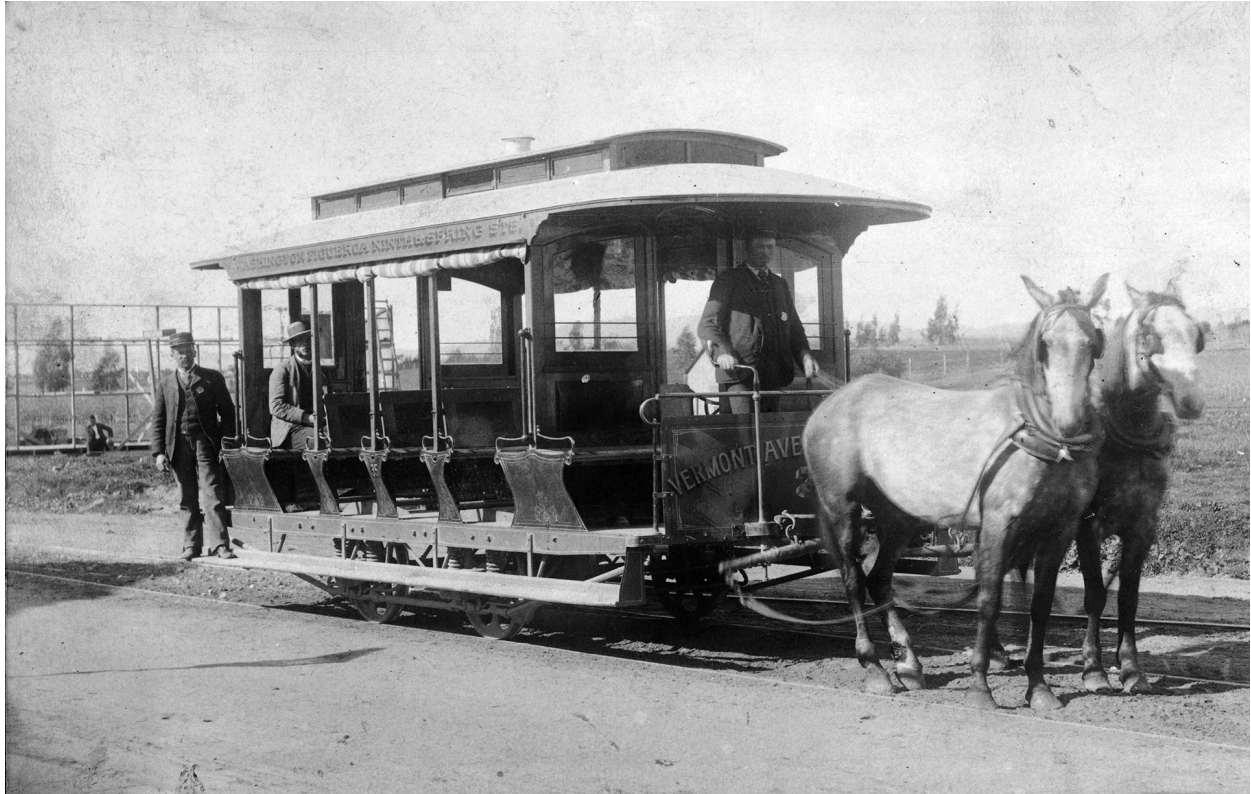
Circa 1875 view of Main Street, showing the tracks of the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.



A City Railroad horsecar proceeds down Olive Street at Tenth Street in 1885. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.



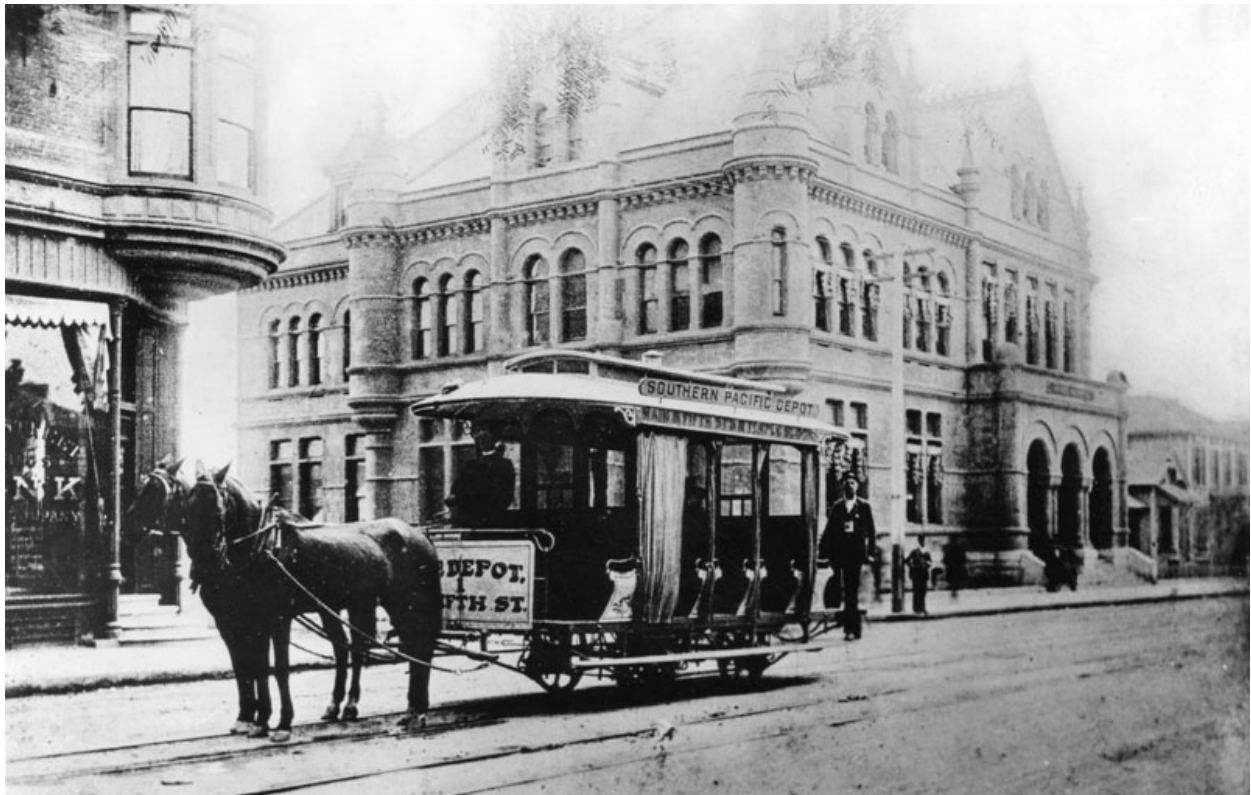
Two horse-drawn streetcars travel on Spring Street between First and Temple in 1885. Courtesy of Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



A two-horse City-Central streetcar, circa 1886. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.



Two horsecars pass each other in a blur on Main Street between First and Second streets, circa 1889.



A horse-drawn streetcar in front of the Los Angeles post office on Main Street, circa 1892. Courtesy of the Security Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Workers pose with a Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad car shortly before the line was electrified in 1897. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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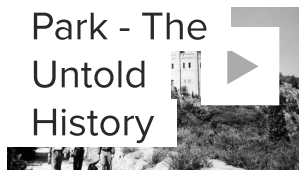
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NATHAN MASTERS

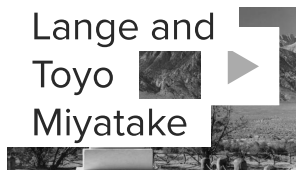
Nathan Masters is host and executive producer of *Lost L.A.*, an Emmy Award-winning public television series from KCET and the *USC Libraries*. The show explores how rare artifacts from Southern California's archives can unlock hidden and often-surprising stories from the region's past. Nathan's writing has appeared in many publications, including *Los Angeles Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

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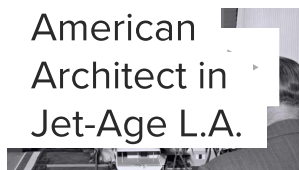
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