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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archives, Part 2

By Nathan Masters

June 20, 2012

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Southern California's archives bridge the old and the new, offering invaluable historical

contemporary scholars, journalists, and public policymakers. **Last week, we shared six of their submissions.** This week, we share several more -- including maps, legal contracts, and even two-hundred-year-old artillery.

California as an Island

Earth scientists expect that in millions of years, tectonic forces may rend California in two and create a new island out of coastal California. If true, Los Angeles will slowly drift toward Alaska and away from the North America continent.

Early mapmakers were obviously unaware of plate tectonics, but they did prematurely anticipate geologists' conjecture by incorrectly depicting present-day California as an island. As late as 1705, Parisian cartographer Nicholas De Fer drew this map -- the oldest item in the **Los Angeles Public Library's extensive map collection** -- that showed an oceanic strait in place of the decidedly dry Great Basin.



Courtesy of the Map Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

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environment, showing the locations, sizes, and uses of the city's buildings.



Map from the 1888 Dakin fire insurance atlas. Courtesy of the Map Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

See more early maps of Los Angeles at the Los Angeles Public Library's [ongoing exhibition](#), "As the City Grew," on display in the Central Library's first-floor galleries.

From Bellamy to the Bradbury Building

[Sharon Sekhon](#) of the [Studio for Southern California History](#) submitted a book with a surprising Southern California connection: an 1888 copy of Edward Bellamy's futuristic and utopian novel, "Looking Backward: 2000-1887." Sekhon explains:

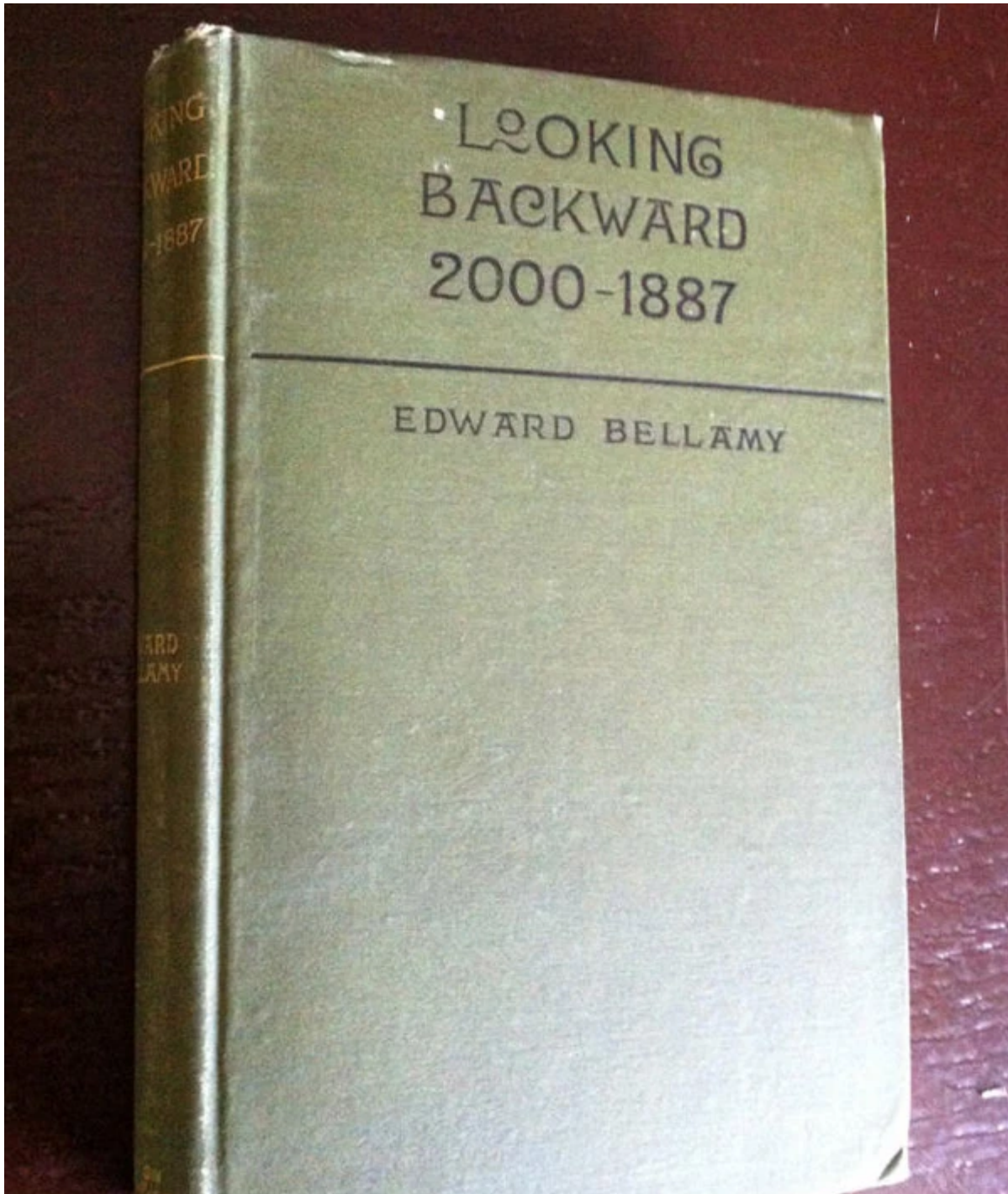
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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides, but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above....The walls were frescoed in mellow tints, to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior."



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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

of the **Bradbury Building** and decide for yourself how closely Wyman's design adheres to Bellamy's vision.



1978 interior view of the Bradbury Building. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Electric Railways Arrive in Los Angeles

Although the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) was formed in 1993, **the agency's archives** preserve the records of Metro's predecessor agencies and chronicle L.A. transportation history dating to the late nineteenth century.

Archivist Denise Villegas submitted a document from the early years of Los Angeles' long life as an electric railway city. Villegas writes:

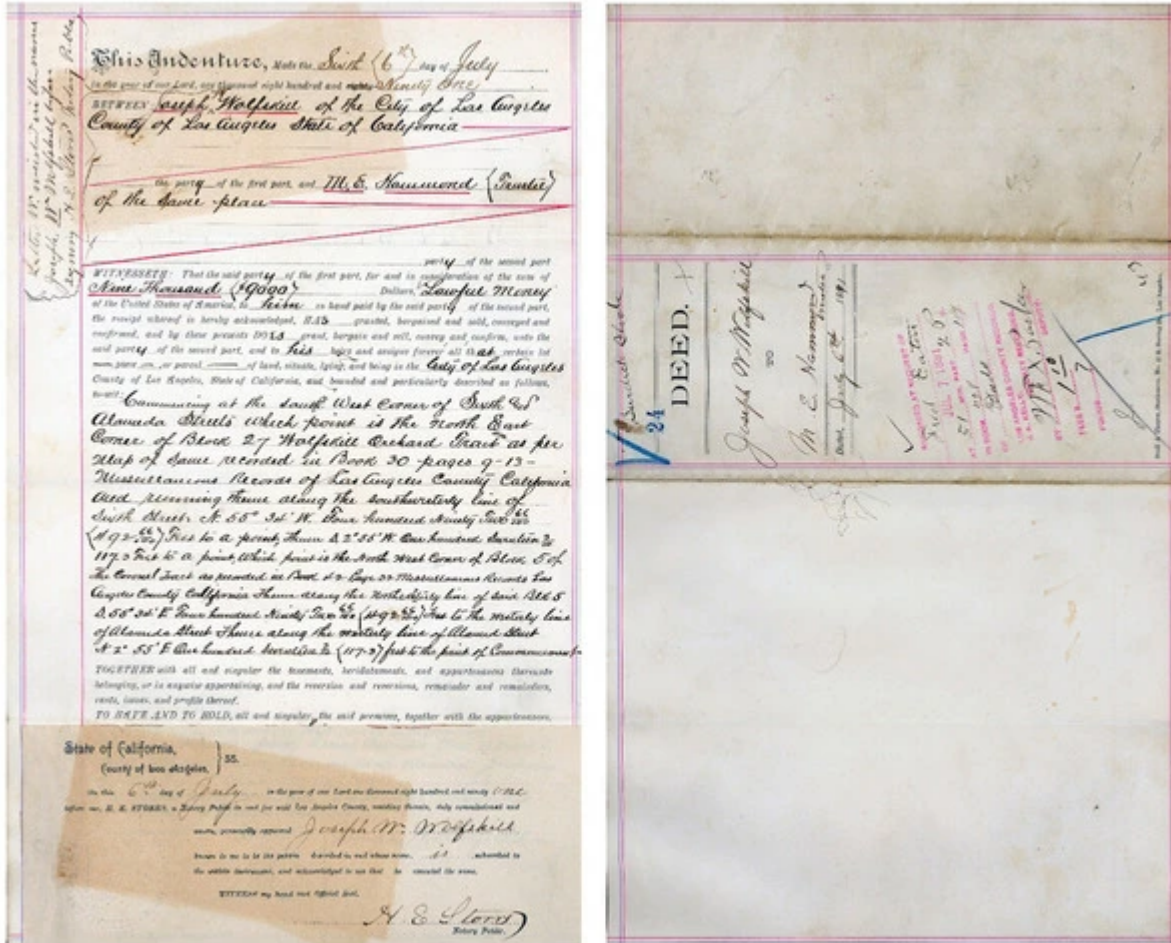
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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

cable railway and the Los Angeles Consolidated Electric Railway was able to expand service, the company was financially unstable and was acquired by the Los Angeles Railway Company, which ran the popular and well remembered yellow streetcars, providing local service throughout Los Angeles.



Courtesy of the Metro Library.

L.A. Government in Transition

Between the surrender of Mexican and Californio forces in January 1847 and the admission of California as a state in September 1850, governance in Southern California transitioned from civilian administration under Mexican law to U.S. military

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

Americans ('indios ladrones')."

Circular
Circular
Ranchos de las Leguas
No. 14 Salinas
A todos los interesados en los Ranchos que constan al margen Sabid, que siendo nombrado St. Andrew Pies encargado de la defensa de la frontera facultado para demandar ~~todos~~ ^{ciudadanos} ~~de~~ los Ranchos ~~que quedan~~ el auxilio de hombres y de caballos que necesitase de tiempo en tiempo para contener las incursiones de los Indios ladrones. toda persona ^{que} ~~se~~ ^{asista} con el auxilio pedido luego que sea avisado bajo la pena de ser inobediente.

Circular from CSLA-22, Documents from the History of Nineteenth-Century Los Angeles, Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles. Courtesy of the Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

Registering Cattle Brands with a Newly Formed County of Los Angeles

The transfer of Alta California from Mexican to American civil administration following the Mexican-American War forced many longtime Californians to react quickly in order to preserve their property rights -- including the wealthy and influential rancheros. In this May 1850 letter, Bernardo Yorba requested that his cattle brands be registered with the County of Los Angeles, incorporated just three months earlier.

Stephanie George of CSU Fullerton's [Center for Oral and Public History](#) explains some of the letter's features:

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

County. Of course, pages could be written about Bernardo Yorba, one of the most successful ranchers in Southern California. His 13,000-plus acre Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana was located along the Santa Ana River in eastern Orange County, currently Yorba Linda, California.

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

Historical Society's Quiet Cannons

For decades, two cannons have lain in the Charles Fletcher Lummis' El Alisal, their origin unknown. Recently, the **Historical Society of Southern California**, which operates the house as a museum, resolved to search its archives and discover the cannons' history. Researchers found two yellowing documents that tell the cannons' tale.

One was a letter from Brigadier General Alexander McDowell McCook dated March 9, 1891, states: "The Honorable Secretary of War being present at these headquarters on this date directs the Commanding Officer of the Department of Arizona to take possession of the old iron Cannon referred to within and remove them to a place of safe custody. The Department Commander accordingly designates the rooms of the Historical Society of Southern California as the place of safe custody for these historical relics and they are not to be removed from the custody of said Historical Society without the order of the President of the United States, or a future Secretary of War."

The other was a Los Angeles Daily Herald story dated February 24, 1891, reporting that a few "old cannon," veterans of the **Mexican-American War**, would soon find a new home at the Historical Society of Southern California.

As Historical Society executive director Patricia Adler-Ingram **explains in a recent issue of the organization's newsletter**, the cannons played an important role in the Battle of the Mesa, fought in the San Gabriel Valley just miles from Los Angeles. The artillery helped Commodore Robert Stockton achieve victory over the defending Californio forces, who surrendered days later at Campo de Cahuenga.

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News & Community

Food & Discovery

The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

The Historical Society's cannons, veterans of the Mexican-American War.

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Southern California.

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Southern California.

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

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Warships, Canneries and Floating Cranes: Melancholy Memories of the Terminal Island We've Lost

The socially and historically complex Terminal Island has become a mono-culture of standardized, containerized commerce. Writer D.J. Waldie recounts a personal history of a once scruffy seaside that is now the nation's top cargo port.

Highlights at the Archives Bazaar: 10 Fascinating Southern California Collections and Historical Organizations

Every year, Southern California museums, libraries and archives come together at the annual Archives Bazaar to exhibit historic items and artifacts. Here are 8 collections and historical

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The Oldest Things in Southern California's Archive...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

The Pirate, the Mailman and the Avocado: The Accidental History of Avocados in California

The history of commercial avocados in California comes from a collection of chance discoveries, Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.

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