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Photos: The Arroyo Seco Parkway, The First Freeway, Turns 75

By [Danny Jensen](#)

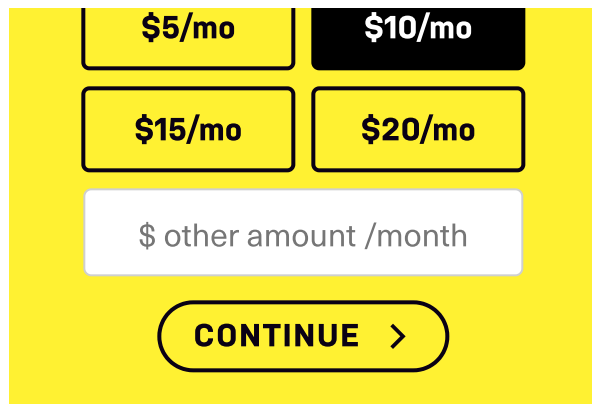
Published Dec 30, 2015 11:00 PM

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The Arroyo Seco Parkway, which connects downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena, opened 75 years ago today and is considered by many to be [the first freeway](#) in the United States.

Built during the Great Depression, the six-lane freeway first opened to cars on Dec. 30, 1940, and much of the historic roadway has remained largely unchanged since then. And while the narrow and curvy Arroyo Seco Parkway (aka 110 Freeway) may seem quaint and even a bit treacherous now, it was an engineering marvel for its day and set the stage for L.A.'s expansive freeway system.

The freeway—which got its name from the adjacent seasonal river—cut travel time between L.A. and Pasadena from 27 minutes to 12 minutes, according to [Metro](#). Of course, that travel time was based on the 45 mph speed limit set when it opened. It was also a lot less crowded back then—designed to carry 27,000 automobiles a day rather than the more than 122,000 cars it sees today.

The Arroyo Seco Parkway: Then and Now, 1939 and 2...



The historic roadway also has an unusual history. Long before it was built for cars, proposals for the route included a faster route for wagons. In 1897, a proposal for an elevated wooden bicycle path beat out a plan for a parkway. The cycleway for commuters opened on Jan. 1, 1900, and it stretched for several miles, but years later was abandoned and torn down as the [Pacific Electric streetcars](#) made the journey easier for more people.

Then in 1924, a plan for the parkway began to take shape in Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Harland Bartholomew's landmark Major Street Traffic Plan For Los Angeles, which suggested that a new parkway would provide drivers with a "great deal of incidental recreation and pleasure." Construction for The Arroyo Seco Parkway then began in the 1930s, after the Automobile Club of Southern California successfully lobbied the state legislature, according to [KCET](#).

On Dec. 30, 1940, Rose Parade Queen Sally Stanton and California Governor Culbert L. Olsen officially opened the Arroyo Seco

Parkway at a dedication ceremony. When it first opened, the freeway became part of [U.S. Route 66](#) for a while, and on Nov. 16, 1954, the name changed to the Pasadena Freeway as it became the northern extension of State Route 110. It's also one of only three “federal scenic byways” in California, and was designated a historical engineering landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

So, while there may be plans underway to make the Arroyo Seco Parkway [safer for modern drivers](#), there's still plenty of great history to admire about the historic, scenic route.



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