

# History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

## Watts Joins the City

■ **Once an independent city whose growth was energized by the railroads, Watts joined the City of Los Angeles in 1926.**

Within the historical record collections found in the Los Angeles City Archives is a group of former municipality records that are now communities within the City of Los Angeles. These former cities are Eagle Rock, Hollywood, San Pedro, Tujunga, Venice, Watts and Wilmington. This article will focus on the history and records from the former City of Watts.

In 1983, a student intern, Mary Ellen James-Ray from the Public History Department of California State Dominguez Hills, received the assignment to create a formalized collection from the records of the City of Watts. Her responsibility was to process these records according to archival traditions to be indexed, boxed and placed in the City Archives. The following is the history of Watts and an overview of its records collection through the compilation of Ms. James-Ray.

### The History of the City of Watts: 1907-26

In the mid 1800s, the Abilas, a Mexican family, settled on land about eight miles south of Los Angeles. They called their ranch *Tajauta* (Spanish for "low bluffs"). Until the turn of the century, only a very few other pioneers joined the Abilas family; they purchased large tracts of the territory.

In 1902, the Pacific Electric Railroad Company made several surveys for an electric rail line between Los Angeles and Long

Beach. The railway office then began negotiating for land right-of-way. Anticipating the railroad would be of financial benefit to them, and fearing the line would be constructed over another survey, the Tajauta citizens living along the right-of-way donated much of the 300-foot right-of-way to the Pacific Electric Railway. One of the more generous donors of land was an Anglo, Charles H. Watts of Pasadena, a landowner and civic leader. When the railway line was completed, the railroad conductor began calling the stop "Watts." Incidentally, early in the 20th century, the Watts family also purchased a large tract of land northeast of Watts, eventually called Eagle Rock.

The citizens of Watts boasted that they had the only four-track electrical line that ran between Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Pedro, Newport, Huntington Beach, Balboa and Santa Ana. It was also a junction point with Gardena, Redondo and Torrance lines. Watts was the center through which the population of all the above-mentioned areas passed through to reach Los Angeles.

With the construction of the railroad, the early ranches were divided into smaller plots as the value of the property increased. Eventually the residents of Watts included Germans, Irish, Mexicans, blacks, Greeks, Scottish, Italians, Japanese, Jewish and American Indian settlers. Watts became an incorporated city in 1907. The Mexican American community developed because of the railroad workers building the Pacific Electric Railway. Many blacks moved to the area later because men were Pullman car porters and waiters, as well as working on other railroad work.

Watts continued to grow and mature. It had one voting district in 1907, and by 1926, when it consolidated with the City of Los Angeles, there were eight voting districts. In 1907, the population of Watts was 1,400. This area was

basically a farming and working-class community at about 103rd street. This was definitely a multi-ethnic community. By 1910, there were 1,922 residents. By the beginning of World War I, many citizens were employed in the large sugar beet fields. During the Prohibition era of the 1920s, Watts was known to be a shelter for bootleggers.

Mudtown was a known district of Watts. Southern blacks excluded from other communities in the Los Angeles area due to racial covenants and segregation found a home in this region. A young Ralph Bunche, an American statesman and diplomat, and former Mayor Tom Bradley grew up in that area. Famed author Arna Wendell Bontemps, who lived in Mudtown, wrote a novel in 1966, *Anyplace But Here*, depicting life in a Los Angeles ghetto.

Why did Watts join the City? There are at least two possible – and very different – reasons. The first

suggests that, prior to 1926, the proud citizens of Watts decided on the idea because the educational and health facilities were inadequate for the increasing population. Along with that, there were needs to improve streets, lighting, flooding problems and a need for a sewage system – all to be assessed to the homeowners.

The other possible reason comes from the authors, Dr. Leonard and Dale Pitt, in their book, *Los Angeles A to Z*, that states, "By 1926, African Americans seemed poised to dominate the Watts government ... To undercut African American voter strength, the Ku Klux Klan moved to annex the independent city to Los Angeles." A letter dated Feb. 26, 1926, from the Watts Chamber of Commerce found in the City Archives might allude to this by stating, "A political clique, actuated solely by selfish desires, is now at work instigating, manipulating, conniving to railroad this community into annexation." While no names or organizations were given about the group, one has to wonder what this means. Only further research will tell.

On April 2, 1926, a special election in Watts was held to vote on consolidation. It passed, 1226 to 601. Watts officially became annexed into the City of Los Angeles as Annexation number 68, Ordinance number 54687 (New Series) on May 29, 1926.

### Watts Records in the Los Angeles City Archives

The City of Watts records were processed according to archival tradition and the City's Records Management Ordinance. The nineteen-year history of records of the municipality consists of six bound books of minutes of the City Council from the first meeting held on May 28, 1907; resolutions; contracts, bond and licenses; ordinances; and audits. There are four acid-free Hollinger boxes housing unbound records as well.

The focus of much of the information in the records revolved around the political battle over "saloons" or "no saloons" in the area. Such records are found relating to petitions, resolutions and letters discussing the pros and cons of opening of pool halls, permits for liquor stores, the consumption of alcohol, the establishing of social halls and licenses to gamble and operate slot machines. And of course there were also records relating to the common everyday issues of street improvements and a sewage disposal system.

The City of Watts had an all-encompassing city government, and the Watts records in the City Archives reflect that. The records include affidavits of publication; animal regulation; assessments; audits; bonds; building and

safety; city attorney office; city clerk office; city contracts/agreements and bids; city engineer office; city schools; elections; fire department; health/sanitation; licenses; ordinances/resolutions/public notices; organizations; permits; personnel; planning, develop-



A young Tom Bradley, who grew up in Watts. He would later be mayor of Los Angeles.

ment and growth; police; public library; public nuisances; public utilities; public works; Pacific Electric Railroad; revenues/receipts; streets; street lighting; subdivision of land tracts; transportation; trees; board of trustees; veterans; water; and World War I.

The official records of the City of Watts can be found in the City Archives, Space 320, Piper Technical Center. The telephone number is (213) 485-3512. The e-mail address is jay.jones@lacity.org. Please ask for Jay Jones or Michael Holland. Also, ask to see Mary Ellen James-Ray's catalog of the City of Watts holdings found in the City repository.



American statesman and diplomat Ralph J. Bunche, in his UCLA graduation picture, 1927. A Watts native, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Bunche Hall on the UCLA campus is named after him.

Photos courtesy Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archives, Carolyn Cole, Director

