

City of Las Vegas
Planning and Development
Comprehensive Planning Division

Historic West



Las Vegas



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History of West Las Vegas

The history of West Las Vegas is intimately intertwined with the beginning of Las Vegas. In 1904 a surveyor named J. T. McWilliams began selling lots in the McWilliams townsite that later became known as the "Westside" because of its location on the west side of the railroad tracks. The boundaries for this townsite are Bonanza Road, Washington Avenue, A Street and H Street.



McWilliams townsite 1904

The settlement quickly became an important supply point for miners in the area when the railroad completed its connection to Las Vegas in 1905. The McWilliams townsite served as a transportation center for goods and supplies from which freight was transported by wagons to outlying areas. Additionally, the first business district in the Las Vegas Valley was established here, including the first bank, blacksmiths, wholesale houses, a drug and general store along with several restaurants. During these prosperous times the townsite population was approximately 1500.

The boom did not last, however, when in May of 1905, the railroad, owned by the Las Vegas Land and Water Co., began to auction lots in the Clark's Las Vegas townsite to the southeast across the tracks. The Las Vegas Land and Water Co. owned the majority of the water rights in the valley, forcing many residents of McWilliams townsite to relocate across the tracks, resulting in a rapid decline of the area which never really recovered.

Many of the early pioneers that settled the Las Vegas Valley, and the McWilliams townsite in particular,

were African Americans. As early as the 1930s, they purchased land and started their own businesses that thrived. However, during this time Las Vegas began to institute Jim Crow Laws which established segregation in the valley. Although African Americans had a successful established community in Las Vegas, they were forced to move to West Las Vegas, including the McWilliams townsite. Until the construction of the Bonanza Underpass in 1936, trade between the two communities was virtually cut off by the railroad tracks. Segregation and cheap land resulted in overcrowded conditions and tent subdivisions sprang up next to the McWilliams townsite to accommodate the growth.



Monroe Ave. 1943

The African American population for Las Vegas and West Las Vegas increased significantly during WWII when many came to work for the Las Vegas Army Air Gunnery Range (now Nellis Air Force Base), Basic Magnesium, Inc. in Henderson, Nevada, and the hotel casino industry which was experiencing a boom in southern Nevada. During this time African American businesses flourished in the "Westside". Hotels and casinos were built in West Las Vegas to provide entertainment for African Americans, including the former Carver House and Moulin Rouge, and the still standing Town Tavern, located on Jackson Avenue, the historic commercial strip. As African American entertainers performing on the Strip were not allowed to stay there; "Westside" hotels, boarding houses, restaurants and nightclubs such as the former Harlem Club, Brown Derby, and the Ebony Club prospered. This trend continued until the advent of civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

When integration became an established policy during the 1960s, African Americans began patronizing businesses outside the "Westside", with very little of the white population reciprocating. The resulting economic decline discouraged investment by financial institutions. For these reasons, and without any institution to address the economic and social barriers confronting this neighborhood, West Las Vegas has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s.



Sammy Davis Jr.

In the past few years, however, West Las Vegas has seen some changes. Financial institutions have begun opening branches there, and several new residential subdivisions have been developed and are being planned. The City of Las Vegas is undergoing a historic resource survey to locate historic resources important to the cultural heritage of West Las Vegas and the African American contribution to the growth of the area. A West Las Vegas plan is being developed which will help develop guidelines to enhance the quality of life for residents, and improve economic growth and development for the area while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods.

The Properties

1. C and Bonanza Railroad Underpass. Opened in 1937, this simple underpass with art deco details served as a symbolic gateway to West Las Vegas. Bonanza Road, then named Clark Avenue, was part of the Tonopah-Reno highway and served as the major link between the business center of Las Vegas and West Las Vegas, the "Original Las Vegas Townsite". Separated for 32 years by the railroad, the \$200,000 federally-funded underpass now united the two communities.



2. The Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino. This local and National Register listed property was the only interracial resort in the fifties. The once-elegant Moulin Rouge was host to such stars as Sammy Davis, Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Nat "King" Cole, Lena Horne and Eartha Kitt at a time when African American entertainers were not allowed accommodations at the Strip Hotels they performed in. The hotel was open from May to October in 1955 until forced to close due to financial troubles. Recently suffering from a devastating fire, the hotel's future is uncertain.



3. The Binion House. Built in 1940, the home was once occupied by the Binion Family, owners of the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino. The City of Las Vegas is currently exploring options for the future redevelopment of the site for civic uses.



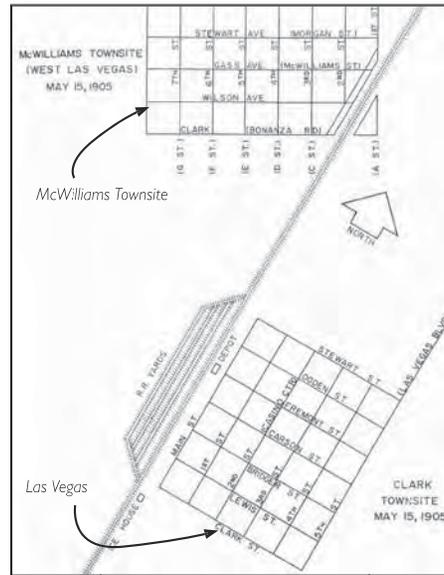
Wall murals at the Westside School, now home to KCEP, a non-profit radio station.



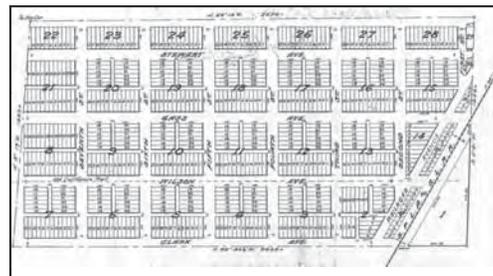
4. Westside School. Las Vegas' oldest remaining schoolhouse, originally called "Branch No. 1, Las Vegas Grammar School" was built in 1922 on land donated by Helen J. Stewart. It was the first public school attended by Native American students from the Piaute Indian Colony. The Westside School is a historically and socially significant building for the black community, giving many black students their first experience with racially integrated education during the early 1940s. The building is now home to KCEP, a public non-profit radio station that has served the community with music and public affairs programming for more than 30 years.



5. The Christenson Home. Built in 1932, this home belonged to "Cowboy" Roy Christenson, a well-known wrangler and rider. Roy worked for several ranches in the West and later ran his own stable. He often rode in the Helldorado parades and supplied many of the horses and buggies that others rode. The house currently serves the community as the Catholic Worker Hospitality House.



The map of the old townsite in relation to Las Vegas, and the original 1905 plat.



This is the original townsite laid out by surveyor J. T. McWilliams in 1905. None of the original buildings remain from this time, however the original block pattern with lots running both north/south and east-west, unlike the future development in the area, can still be seen in some areas.

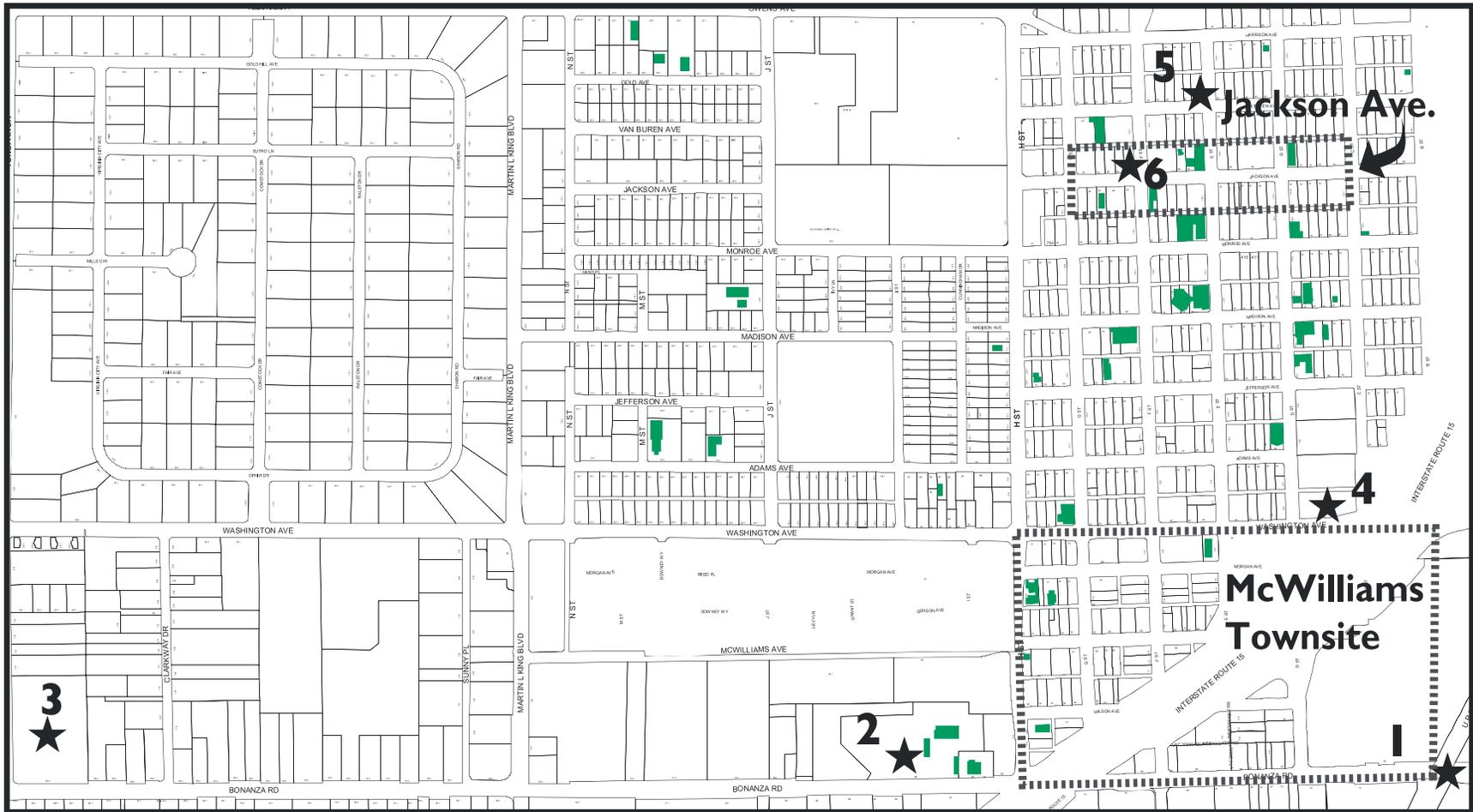
6. The Town Tavern. Built in 1955 to serve the racially segregated black population, this casino has a rich history as a social gathering place for the black community.

Jackson Avenue. The historic commercial and entertainment district of West Las Vegas. Some of the original socially significant buildings remain, such as the Town Tavern, although most have been demolished or have changed uses and ownership.



Religious Properties. Religion and the use of religious meeting houses for community gathering has long been a staple in this West Las Vegas community, with several located in the historic section. Many of the church buildings are converted homes, occasionally nestled side by side with larger churches that take up entire blocks. On Sundays the streets come alive, lined with cars and people walking and socializing.





■ Religious Properties

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