A PAST FOR THE PRESENT: OLD SACRAMENTO HISTORIC DISTRICT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2003

PROJECT

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HISTORY
(Public History)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

FALL
2011
A PAST FOR THE PRESENT: OLD SACRAMENTO HISTORIC DISTRICT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A Project

by

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Department of History
Abstract

of

A PAST FOR THE PRESENT: OLD SACRAMENTO HISTORIC DISTRICT
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Lisa Cordova Prince

In post World War II America, cities across the nation witnessed dramatic changes to their urban landscapes as federal urban renewal policies initiated redevelopment projects designed to invigorate and reshape deteriorating city cores. Early policies encouraged wide-scale demolition to renew blighted inner cities. Historic preservation policy was yet in its infancy in terms of authoritative advocacy. Citizens interested in preserving their historic buildings and sites had little recourse but to helplessly watch as city planners and their redevelopment agencies directed bulldozers to raze their neighborhoods and downtowns.

In Sacramento, California, preservationists and historians organized to save the oldest section of the city, long regarded as one of the West’s most historic. Meanwhile, city and state officials were implementing modernizing plans, which looked toward the
future, not the past. In the end, a compromise between all interested parties created one of the nation’s first historic districts using urban renewal funds.

*A Past for the Present* is an oral history-based research project that explores the creation and planning of the Old Sacramento Historic District. It seeks to examine Sacramento as a case study of how one city utilized federal urban renewal policies to both reshape its central core and preserve its most historic district. In addition to primary and secondary sources, the project utilizes recorded interviews with three individuals who played principal roles in the creation and development of the Old Sacramento Historic District. While institutional documentation about this subject is available to researchers, there are few records of personal experience from individuals who had leading roles in shaping the historic district. *A Past for the Present* will fill that gap.

_____________________, Committee Chair
Lee Simpson, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful narrators, Jim Henley, Ed Astone, and Ted Leonard, without whom the project would not have been possible. Jim Henley, mentor, colleague, friend – I am forever grateful for all that you have taught me, not only about the unexpected complexity of Sacramento history, but how to be a decent human being. Ed Astone, I thank you for making me laugh, and for convincing me, at least some of the time, to look on the bright side. Ted Leonard, thank you for revealing the unique and special world of an architect with a poet’s heart. You are greatly missed. Thank you for sharing your fascinating, funny, sad, and valuable stories.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Lee Simpson and Dr. Patrick Ettinger, my two most helpful, dedicated, and reliable advisors. You encouraged me on this sometimes-torturous path with kindness and patience, for which I am truly thankful.

A special thank you is owed to my friends and former colleagues, Patricia Johnson, for believing in me and showing me where all the treasures are hidden; Dylan McDonald, for constantly inspiring me to think more deeply and creatively; and Steven Avella, for your generous heart and enduring friendship.

And lastly, but most especially, I thank my brilliant and amazing children, Emily Brooke Prince, and Steven Charles Prince, for providing me with life’s greatest memories, and for their undying love and support.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Sacramento Historic District, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965, was one of the first historic districts in the nation to be funded by urban renewal funds. It is an excellent case study of a city’s unique response to the post-World War II urban renewal programs that attempted to redevelop and modernize deteriorating city cores across the United States. In Sacramento, much debate emerged over a variety of divisive and unifying issues including: demolishing the city’s most historic area to build a freeway; the efforts of preservationists and powerful city, state, and federal authorities to preserve the historic district; the decisions pertaining to what was considered historically valuable and how and why it should be saved; blight designation and removal of residents; interpretive plans; and finally, innovative financing measures.

After two tumultuous decades, the historic district was created and today it is the top tourist attraction for the city, with over five million annual visitors. However, problems, perhaps written into the design of Old Sacramento, persist. These are primarily the conflict between historic preservation and business interests, and the lack of a common goal for the numerous interests doing business there: city, county, state, private owners, merchants, and non-profits. Recently, the city and state have implemented new planning and management for the historic district. Yet, the successful blending of commercial use with historic district remains a major challenge. Learning from the past and looking to the future, what strategies can be implemented to assure the survival of a workable historic district while facing these complex issues? A Past for the
Present examines these questions within the historical context of the district’s creation, and offers suggestions as revealed through the personal and professional experiences described in the oral histories.

The Origins of the Project

A Past for the Present: Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project originated in 2007 as a contract between the author and the City of Sacramento. In that year, the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center (SAMCC, presently the Center for Sacramento History), a Division of the city’s Convention, Culture and Leisure Department, commissioned the project when the city’s History Manager, Jim Henley, retired after a forty-year career. The goals for the project were to record and archive the personal and professional experiences of three primary participants in the creation, implementation, and management of the Old Sacramento Historic District. It was hoped the oral histories would supplement the available documentation on the subject, provide personal insight about the history of the district for community members and scholars, and offer useful information for incoming and future management.

The three interviewees selected had recently or were about to retire after lifelong careers involved in the Old Sacramento Historic District. They included Jim Henley, outgoing Sacramento History Manager, Ed Astone, former Sacramento Redevelopment Agency Project Director from 1964 to 1977, and Old Sacramento Town Manager from 1994 to 2007, and Ted Leonard, former Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency Architect and Old Sacramento Project Director from 1974 to 1998.
The resulting thesis project explores the history of the creation of the Old Sacramento Historic District within the historical context of the local and national historic preservation movement and federal urban renewal programs, and through the unique prism of personal experience as narrated in the oral histories. After using primary sources to research the origins of the Old Sacramento Historic District, secondary sources to conduct research on historic preservation and urban renewal, and a review of oral history theory and methodology, the interviews were planned, conducted, and recorded on audiocassette tapes at the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center. The recordings were then reviewed to arrive at new or follow up questions to clarify any confusing or incomplete information. These questions were then asked in subsequent interviews. Jim Henley was interviewed three times, and both Ed Astone and Ted Leonard were interviewed twice. The final interview was a group interview with all three narrators. The recorded interviews were all transcribed and audited according to professional standards.

The original interview recordings, full transcripts, and research materials were deposited as an archival collection at the Center for Sacramento History. There they will be available as a resource to researchers interested in the planning, creation, financing, and management of the Old Sacramento Historic District within the interrelated histories of twentieth-century historic preservation and federal urban renewal policies. This thesis relates this broader history with the personal experiences collected in the interviews, and provides a detailed account of the process of creating *A Past for the Present: Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project*. 
Chapter 2

THE INVENTION OF OLD SACRAMENTO:
A PAST FOR THE PRESENT

“Here is a unique opportunity to completely transform the heart of a city … to clear away the debris of yesteryear and build for tomorrow.”
- Sacramento Redevelopment Agency 1962

“The City of Sacramento recognizes the importance of its historic and cultural resources, which creates a distinct sense of place for residents and visitors … Preservation and adaptive re-use of historic structures also promotes sustainability.”
- Sacramento 2030 General Plan

Old Sacramento Historic District, a 28-acre National Historic Site nestled between Interstate 5 and the banks of the Sacramento River, reflects the evolution of urban environmental politics and the historic preservation movement. Home to a thriving business district in the mid to late nineteenth century, the district slid into a traditional skid row that by the middle of the twentieth century seemed an ideal candidate for slum clearance and urban renewal. That the district survived is testament to the tenacity and vision of a variety of individuals who recognized that history and historic structures could be preserved as a cultural resource, and used as a valuable tool in the economic revitalization of a city. The blight-seeking bulldozers stopped at 2nd Street and a new understanding of historic preservation that would only become mainstream years later was born.¹

Preserving the Inner City

Sacramento’s foray into historic preservation in Old Sacramento in the 1950s and 1960s puts it in the vanguard of the national historic preservation movement. Prior to passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the federal government limited its involvement in preservation to a few specific sites with an emphasis on archaeology or national glory. Even as individual cities in the late nineteenth century became aware of the threat to colonial-era structures from rapid development, no effort was made to protect entire districts. Lacking any cohesive vision or legal mechanisms for protection, it took private initiative to protect the Old Statehouse in Boston, the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia, and the Fraunces Tavern, site of Washington’s Farewell Address, in New York.2

The restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia in the 1920s represents the first effort at district-wide preservation in the United States. Yet this brilliant undertaking financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., with its emphasis on establishing a tourist moneymaker, did little to further understanding of the value of historic preservation as a tool for urban growth and development or to recognize historic structures as an important reflection of man’s interaction with his environment. Rockefeller had little interest in preservation beyond its ability to educate Americans to be good citizens. He argued that the importance of Williamsburg lay in “the lesson it teaches of the patriotism, high purpose, and unselfish devotion of our forefathers to the common good.”3

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3 Quoted in Hurley, 4.
As the twentieth century progressed, American cities pursued a growth model that emphasized development of new areas and the abandonment of older industrial sectors of their cities. By the middle of the century the problems associated with aging city cores met with the innovative concept of urban renewal. The slash-and-burn philosophy of renewal, however, posited that cities could be revitalized only by demolition of old and obsolete buildings, especially when they appeared to impede construction of modern transportation infrastructure or profitable commercial ventures.

As thousands of structures and historic areas were razed through urban renewal, urban Americans came slowly to embrace historic preservation as a way to hold onto a sense of place and identity, and as a tool to revitalize their aging cores. Unlike European cities, where structures are permitted to sit uninhabited for years before they are adaptively reused, Americans viewed older structures as derelict and worthy only of demolition. The federal government encouraged such thinking well into the 1970s with financial support of wholesale razing of neighborhoods and only limited backing of structural rehabilitation through tax credits.4

Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 represented a direct challenge to the excesses of urban renewal and marked the federal government’s recognition that the nation’s architectural heritage was worthy of protection. Inner cities now had a new tool and a new ally in their efforts to halt wholesale destruction through listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The register innovatively recognized both individual structures and entire districts; yet its emphasis on freezing districts in a

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specific period of historical significance had unintended consequences. In many cities, including Sacramento, limited periods of significance have led to what some critics have called “phony” history or ahistorical representations of the past that fail to recognize and interpret districts as sites of change and diversity.\(^5\) It is the challenge of the twenty-first century preservation movement to move beyond such limited understandings of historical resources and to redefine historic districts as vibrant and evolving components of the city.

**Abandoning the River**

The portion of the West End area that would eventually be designated as Old Sacramento was the birthplace of the city and the heart of commerce into the early twentieth century. From the city’s founding in 1849, boats carrying global migrants, miners, and merchants plied the Sacramento River arriving at Sutter’s Embarcadero at the foot of J Street. The booming riverfront quickly became the commercial and social hub of the infant city, offering vital supplies and sanctuary to the multitudes of new residents and miners headed for the nearby gold fields.

The embarcadero remained the commercial nexus throughout the city’s early decades. When the state legislature moved into the new capitol building along 10\(^{th}\) Street on December 6, 1869, the city center began its gradual shift eastward away from the river. Four years later, the Central Pacific Railroad relocated its depot from Front and K to the land-filled Sutter Slough, moving this important transportation hub away from the

\(^5\) Hurley, 9-23; David Hamer, History in Urban Places: The Historic Districts of the United States (Columbus, 1998).
riverfront. Construction of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament at 11th and K, completed in 1886, a new city hall at 9th and I, and a new city post office at 8th and I Streets in the early twentieth century, gave further evidence that the embarcadero no longer served as the city’s center. 6

While the West End’s decline escalated dramatically during the Great Depression of the 1930s, its slide began long before. A 1915 map of Sacramento’s West End lists hotels as “cheap lodgings,” “Hindoo Lodgings,” and “Jap Lodgings,” indicating that once fashionable hotels had become rooming houses to accommodate the second and third wave of immigrants arriving in Sacramento. Former theaters and fancy opera houses had converted to disreputable “moving picture galleries.” Major businesses like Breuner’s and Weinstock-Lubin moved to midtown locations, while the grand gold rush era hotels, the Orleans, Fremont, and Shasta House became transient hotels.7 As the city center and its former affluent residents moved eastward and to new suburbs outside the city, the West End’s physical condition slowly deteriorated, undermining its economic base. By midcentury, Sacramento’s West End was reported as being one of the worst slums west of the Mississippi.8

**Envisioning the City of Tomorrow**

Joining a growing national movement, the State of California enacted the California Redevelopment Act in 1945, which gave cities and counties the authority to

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7 Trainor, “Flood, Fire, and Blight,” 19.
8 *Sacramento Bee*, November 29, 30, December 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1949.
establish redevelopment agencies to address the problems associated with blighted conditions like those found in Sacramento’s West End. The Act specified that a city or county Planning Department could conduct surveys of blighted areas and make a preliminary plan for redevelopment. Blight was defined as the condition in urban areas that constituted physical and economic liabilities and which required redevelopment “in the interest of the health, safety, and general welfare of the people.”

In 1947, when the members of the Sacramento City Council looked at the West End area between the State Capitol and the Sacramento River, they saw deteriorating streets lined with dilapidated housing and low-rent commercial buildings. Over the past twenty years they had witnessed the assessed valuation of the West End decrease by 50%. While tax revenue slid every year, demands on city services escalated. The area contained 8% of the total city area and 7.5% of the population, but it had 26% of the fires, 36% of the juvenile delinquency, 42% of adult crimes, and 76% of the tuberculosis cases. Something had to be done to address the disparity. Redevelopment seemed the obvious solution; but it required strong public support since public monies would be involved to relocate residents and businesses.

Sacramento Bee writer Hale Champion helped generate support through a series of articles in 1949 that described the West End as a “disease-ridden . . . rotting core” of the city desperate for change. He wrote,

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Disease crawls out of the rooming houses, and flophouses, and chicken shacks of Sacramento’s blighted areas. Crime and vice and their junior partner, juvenile delinquency, loot cars and roll drunks and pull knives in the asphalt jungle of Sacramento’s west end. [The west end] is a row of shacks to call one’s own complete with dirt, rats, blistered, splintering boards and that stale, unwashed odor which is standard equipment in this area.12

Perhaps exaggerated, Champion’s observations nevertheless called attention to the fact that the city’s once prosperous gold rush headquarters had degraded into skid row.

The City’s response was “not only to curtail the blight, but to wipe it out entirely.”13 In 1948, the City Council appropriated $3,200 for a redevelopment survey. When this was completed and the need for action more clearly defined, the Council asked the federal government’s Housing and Home Finance Agency (later Housing and Urban Development – HUD) to reserve $364,000 in federal funds under Title 1 for redevelopment activities.14 In order to receive state and federal funds, the California Community Redevelopment Act of 1945 and the federal Housing Act of 1949 mandated that cities or counties create a local public agency to plan and manage redevelopment projects in their communities. The city created the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency on September 25, 1950 with a mandate to prepare the preliminary financial analysis, studies, and plans for redevelopment areas.15 That same year, upon recommendation of

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14 http://ftp.resource.org/gao.gov/81-171/00002FD7.pdf. Accessed on August 1, 2011. The Housing Act of 1949 states: “Title 1. Slum Clearance and Community Development and Redevelopment. This title authorizes the Housing and Home Finance Administrator to make loans and grants to localities to assist locally initiated, locally planned, and locally managed slum clearance and urban redevelopment undertakings. A local public agency would, after public hearing, acquire (through purchase or condemnation) a slum or blighted or deteriorating area selected in accordance with a general city plan for the development of the locality as a whole.”
the City Planning Commission, the Council adopted an ordinance designating the West End as blighted and requiring redevelopment. Redevelopment Area No. One included those city blocks from the Sacramento River east to 10th Street, and from I Street on the north, to R Street on the south. Although it was yet to be written into the city’s plan, Sacramento’s first urban redevelopment area included what would later become the nationally designated historic district called “Old Sacramento.”

Federal Policies of Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal

Like other cities in post World War II America, Sacramento initiated its policies and projects according to guidelines set by the federal government. Slum Clearance was the common terminology used to describe urban redevelopment policies implemented after passage of the Housing Acts of 1934, 1937, 1949, and 1954, and the Highway Act of 1956, all of which worked in tandem and informed the era for cities engaged in urban renewal.17

Ironically, the Housing Act of 1934, which sought to address problems of poverty and homelessness, contributed to the conditions that later led to areas being declared slums under the 1937 and 1949 Acts. Essentially, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) adopted criteria that denied mortgage insurance to many older buildings in low-

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16 Redevelopment Agency, “Sacramento Redevelopment,” 2. The federal government’s Reorganization Plan Number 3 established the Housing and Home Finance Agency to assist cities and counties with housing and slum clearance projects. Redevelopment Project No. 1 was later enlarged to 62 blocks in 1951, and to 65 ¼ blocks in 1958.
income and high-minority urban neighborhoods. The inability to purchase or restore such buildings led to the property’s further decline in condition and value. Later designated as blighted under the 1937 and 1949 Housing Acts, these properties could be acquired cheaply through eminent domain. Cities could then demolish, sell, or lease the cleared land for urban renewal projects or freeways built with funds provided by the 1956 Highway Act.

Sacramento’s West End, like many older districts in American cities, was one such redevelopment area designated for demolition and clearance. The area’s racial and ethnic make-up reflected the national norm of low-income, high-minority urban neighborhoods that had evolved as the “white flight” of an expanding middle class left the declining central city for suburbia. A 1951 Sacramento Redevelopment Agency survey of business in Sacramento’s West End identified 50.3% Caucasian, 49.7% non-Caucasian ownership – Negro, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, East Indian and other. The report concluded, “Ownerships of business are distributed almost evenly as between Caucasians and the non-Caucasian-Mexican group. In general, income patterns seem to follow the type of business rather than the race of owner; however, Negro, Mexican, and East Indian business owners seem to be concentrated more in the lower revenue

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19 Kibel, 2.
producing businesses.” Such an area would not be eligible for FHA mortgages and soon became a prime target for urban renewal.

In many cities, including Sacramento, this paradigm better served the redevelopers and city planners of central business districts rather than the residents living in the redevelopment areas. Sacramento’s Redevelopment Area No. One included the worst slum in the city’s West End, but it also included established areas whose residents did not consider their neighborhoods “blighted.”

The Housing Act of 1954 increased the flexibility of the 1949 Act, which had triggered the blight designation and slum clearance policies that reshaped American cities. The Act provided federal funds for two-thirds of the costs for planning, acquisition, demolition, and site improvement, while local entities paid the remaining one-third. The 1954 Act specified that the earlier Act’s funding for redevelopment be expanded to include commercial and industrial development. This was a shift in emphasis from replacement residential housing (urban redevelopment) to commercial development (urban renewal), which meant that low-income areas being redeveloped could be demolished and replaced with commercial structures or high-end apartments. State and local governments combined with local business interests to divide the one-third share of redevelopment costs to rebuild their city cores and central business districts. Viewing this as a profitable and painless means of dealing with distressed neighborhoods,

Sacramento’s Redevelopment Agency accelerated its urban renewal applications for federal funds after passage of the 1954 Housing Act.

Working with the Redevelopment Agency and state planners to conceive a new direction for the Capital area, in 1959 the City Planning Commission and the City Council adopted a new General Plan for the City of Sacramento. The plan was a broad statement of community objectives including standards, policies, and principles to address growth problems. The first of a series of precise plans was for the “Old City” of Sacramento – the area bounded by the Southern Pacific Railroad levee on the north, Broadway Boulevard on the south, Alhambra Boulevard on the east, and the Sacramento River on the west – essentially the original city grid.24

Between 1960 and 1962 the city and state completed a series of studies to analyze the area’s function and map its growth. The city hired the consulting firm of Leo A. Daly and Associates to prepare a comprehensive Central City Plan for Sacramento in 1960, which served as a guide upon which all subsequent plans were based. At the same time, the State Legislature commissioned a State Capitol Building Plan, which both the city and state adopted in 1961. The city adopted a new General Plan in 1963, which updated the 1959 plan. This plan included the freeway routes (Interstate 80 and Highway 50) adopted in 1962 that the State Division of Highways, in conjunction with the City Planning Commission and the Redevelopment Agency, had spent several years planning. It also included an area to be developed, marked “Historical Center.”25

The Relentless Advance of the Bulldozer

In the meantime, the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency’s projects were well underway. As noted, the city designated its first Redevelopment Area No. One in 1950. The first project was a fifteen-block portion of the area called the Capitol Mall Project No. 2-A approved in 1955. The first wide-scale demolitions began in January 1957 and by March 15, 1961 all 310 parcels in the project area had been cleared. The number of people displaced totaled 1,867, which included 408 families, 308 single householders, 417 single persons, and 350 businesses, all of which the Agency assisted in relocating. 26

The first new development to break ground was the $7 million Federal Building on Capitol Mall between 7th and 8th Streets. Sacramento was the first city in the nation to use an innovative financing measure called Tax Increment Financing, or TIF, for urban renewal projects. Using TIF, the tax yield for the new federal building was estimated to bring in seventy percent of the tax revenue formerly collected from the entire fifteen-block Capitol Mall Project area. 27 Next, came the award-winning Capitol Towers and Garden Apartments taking up the four blocks bounded by N, 7th, P, and 5th Streets in

27 Redevelopment Agency of the City of Sacramento, “Sacramento Redevelopment,” 11. This innovative type of funding used for the Agency’s projects was a first in the nation for urban renewal projects “A California constitutional amendment authorizing Tax Increment Financing (TIF) was approved in 1950, and in 1951 the California legislature enacted implementing legislation.” TIF, called the “Sacramento Plan” was later adopted by Redevelopment Agencies in cities like Portland, Oregon. “The concept of TIF is simple. Tax revenue generated by the incremental increase in value (“increment”) in the renewal area can be used to pay for improvements in the area being renewed. Once an urban renewal boundary is defined, the county assessor “freezes” the assessed value of real property within the urban renewal district. When property values go up as a result of investment in the area or appreciation, the taxes on the increase in the assessed value above the frozen base are used to pay for the improvements in the urban renewal area ... In the long term, the increment goes back at full value onto the tax rolls, from which all taxing districts benefit.” Urban Renewal in Oregon: History, Case Studies, Policy Issues, and Latest Developments, Researched and written by Nina Johnson and Jeffreyy Tashman for Tashman Johnson L L C, Consultants in Policy, Planning & Project Management. http://www.pdc.us/pdf/about/oregon_urban_renewal_history.pdf. Accessed on August 1, 2011.
1960, also part of the Capitol Mall Project 2-A. In that same year, the Agency began Capitol Mall Extension Project No. 3, a ten and one-quarter-block area that bordered the Capitol Mall Project 2-A on three sides, encompassed 222 parcels, and was “planned to be exclusively commercial in re-use character.” By 1962, over a third of the parcels had been demolished and cleared. This renewal project resulted in the displacement (and partial relocation) of 1,000 single men, 117 families, 400 businesses, and twelve institutions.28

City leaders could not have been happier over the obliteration of blight and increased revenues from redevelopment. Describing its future vision for the city, a triumphant Redevelopment Agency claimed “Sacramento’s commitment to transform the western portion of its Central Business District from a shabby run-down area into an environment of urban grandeur is rapidly being honored.”29 Listed as a future project in a 1962 Sacramento Redevelopment Agency’s report was Project No. 4 (later named Capitol Mall Riverfront Project No. 4) comprised of the fifty-one blocks remaining in Redevelopment Area No. One. Tentatively planned for this project area was a “four block ‘Old Sacramento’ historic area, a new Chinese community, a three-block cultural area, a multiple residential area, a heavy commercial corridor, and a State Office Building complex.”30 The Agency approved Capitol Mall Riverfront Project No. 4 on June 20, 1966 and soon commenced with the detailed planning, final acquisitions, and site

preparation for the historic district. The redevelopment plan emphasized “preservation, restoration and reconstruction of properties” to the period from 1849-1870.31

The final approval and adoption of this Agency plan for Old Sacramento did not happen quickly or without serious controversy, public debate, further local, state, and national studies, and what ultimately played out as a contest between opposing visions for the city’s future. The battle lines were drawn between historic preservation advocates, increasingly alarmed at the wholesale demolition practices of urban renewal, and those favoring the perceived promise of a high-tech modern city. The fight reached its peak during the freeway controversy of 1960 – 1961.

A Freeway Runs Through It

Sacramento, by the late 1950s, had come a long way from the days when the Sacramento River provided the main artery for travel and commerce. The city experienced tremendous growth and urbanization during and especially after World War II. No less than four military bases along with expanding industrialization altered the region’s environment and increased its population. Suburban tracts multiplied and travel by automobile, whether for work or leisure, became the norm. New highway systems crisscrossing the nation quickly replaced the aging travel routes of roads and rivers.

The Federal Highway Act of 1956 committed the government to invest billions of dollars in a national network of interstate highways. The federal government provided

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90% of the cost, while states paid the remaining 10%. Designed for civilian needs, the highways were meant to provide congestion relief, spur economic development and connect principal metropolitan areas. Additionally, better roads would make it easier to move military convoys in case of attack, and to evacuate large cities more efficiently. The new highway system also addressed changing traffic patterns associated with postwar population growth and suburban life as millions nationwide fled decaying inner cities. The idea was to provide speedy transport through or around urban centers. Unfortunately, state highway commissions, with the authority and responsibility to plan freeways and highways with the most direct and cost-efficient routes available, often routed them directly through established urban neighborhoods or historic sites, isolating or destroying many in the process. This was the case with the routing of Interstate 5 through Sacramento’s West End.

In 1962 the Sacramento City Council, City Planning Commission, and Redevelopment Agency, working with the state’s Division of Highways and Highway Commission, adopted plans to route Interstate 5 through the city’s western edge, by then recognized as its most historic area. Before adopting this route, the city engaged two consulting firms to study traffic routes through the city. The first, the Deleuw-Cather study in 1958, recommended the freeway be located through the West End on the east side of the Sacramento River, approximately at the site of the final adopted route. Next, the city’s 1961 Central City Plan by Leo Daly and Associates also recommended the freeway be placed east of the river, approximately between Second and Third Streets.

The Daly plan, however, considered not only traffic arteries, but also all sorts of land uses for the downtown redevelopment area, including a historical section in the West End.33

The city’s reigning political powers of the time supported the West End freeway route. These included members of the City Council, the Redevelopment Agency, Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants Association, the Sacramento Realty Board, the Sacramento County Road Commissioner, and the Sacramento Union, among others.34 The Redevelopment Agency’s interest in the adopted freeway route cannot be overstated. The Agency had lured commercial developers like Macy’s to the redevelopment area with the promise of easy freeway access.35 Moreover, the Agency’s ability to use federal highway funds to clear blighted areas in the freeway’s path also helped it finance such a large area of redevelopment.36 Although the Central City Plan and the Redevelopment Agency’s tentative renewal plans recognized the possibility of creating an historic district, it was certainly not the priority.

Preservationists who wanted the freeway routed on the Yolo County (west) side of the river were outraged and soon mounted a strong campaign against allowing a

33 California Assembly Committee on Natural Resources, Planning, and Public Works, Transcript of Proceedings: Highway and Freeway Planning Procedures and Criteria: (Historical Values), Sacramento, California, September 29, 1964, 36 – 37. Testimony of Frank D. Durkee, a member of the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency and its Old Sacramento Historical Committee, as well as a former employee and representative of the California Division of Highways and the California Highway Commission, from 1923 until 1958.

34 Trainor, 41.


36 California Assembly Committee on Natural Resources, Planning, and Public Works, Transcript of Proceedings: Highway and Freeway Planning Procedures and Criteria: (Historical Values), Sacramento, California, September 29, 1964, 41. Testimony of Frank D. Durkee. The federal highway funds paid 90% of costs.
freeway to tear through the remaining historic heart of the city. Significant opposition came from the Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission, the State Division of Beaches and Parks, the National Park Service, Sacramento Congressman John Moss, and the *Sacramento Bee*, whose publisher at the time, Eleanor McClatchy, “waged an all-out campaign in the paper’s editorial pages and led the preservationists’ fight.” Ultimately, the West End freeway proponents won the battle, but not without a long and drawn out fight. A compromise of sorts was made when the Division of Highways agreed to bulge the freeway route to the east to preserve what became the Old Sacramento Historic District.

“Old Sacramento”

The initial basis for the creation of Old Sacramento grew out of several significant reports made on the area. In 1957, the state authorized the Division of Beaches and Parks to “provide for the study of the development of a zone of preservation in the historic West End of Sacramento.” The study produced the 1958 report, “Old Sacramento: A Report on its Significance to the City, State, and Nation, with Recommendations for the Preservation and Use of Its Principal Historical Structures and Sites,” and recommended the establishment of a State Historical Monument. The report expressed the importance

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37 The *New York Times* reported on October 15, 1961 that the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior recommended the freeway be taken across the Sacramento River and back again to preserve Old Sacramento intact. “The cost of the bridges by some estimates would be about $12 million, which is not much more than the $10 million that the United States expects to contribute toward saving ancient monuments in Egypt and the Sudan.”

38 Trainor, 41.

of protecting historical sites to develop and sustain public memory: “The very things that Americans adore abroad they destroy systematically at home. Old buildings are broken up in the United States as fast as used packing boxes, to make way for new ones … without them we are perpetual juveniles, starting over and over, a people without a memory.”

In May 1960, the Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission, at the request of the City Council, submitted its report, “Telling the Sacramento Story by the Preservation and Enhancement of Historic Landmarks: A Report of the Ways and Means of Restoring and Preserving Historic Landmarks and Heritage of ‘Old Sacramento.’” The report included recommendations to establish a State Park, a City-County Museum, the imposition of architectural controls through a zoning ordinance in the proposed preservation plan, and to establish an Old Sacramento Authority to operate the project. Also included was the understanding that the proposed Old Sacramento area met the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s criteria for suitability, particularly that the structures had outstanding historical and cultural significance in the nation, state, or region in which they existed, and that they retained their integrity of original materials and location.

In 1961, the National Park Service, the agency responsible under law for preserving historic sites and values of national significance, prepared the third study, which temporarily stalled the freeway project. The study investigated the impact of I-5 on

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40 Division of Beaches and Parks, Department of Natural Resources, State of California, “Old Sacramento,” 2. From an Architectural Forum editorial quoted in December 1957’s Reader’s Digest.
41 Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission, “Telling the Sacramento Story.”
Historic Old Sacramento. In its statement of findings the report noted that a freeway route on the west side of the Sacramento River in Yolo County would not effect Old Sacramento, but that any of the proposed routes on the east side of the river would require demolition or removal of old buildings of considerable historic interest and value to the community, the state, and to the nation. The report continued, “Old Sacramento contains 31 old structures importantly associated with broad aspects of Western history and with notable men and events … these buildings offer an opportunity to re-create and preserve a significant segment of the pioneer western scene for the inspiration, education, and enjoyment of future generations.” The National Park Service urged preservation and restoration of Old Sacramento as far as possible emphasizing that large-scale demolition of so many historic structures should be a “matter of deep concern and determined efforts should be made to avoid such destruction.” The findings recommended that if a choice had to be made, the removal of historic buildings was preferable over demolition.

The publication of the three reports established the importance of the local, state, and national significance of Old Sacramento, an area that some believed to be the West’s most historic city. The old Sutter embarcadero and surrounding buildings marked an important part of American history – the opening of the West – to the nation and the world. The gold rush, Pony Express, first telegraph and transcontinental railroad lines, headquarters of banking and agricultural firms among others, were all represented here.

The efforts of preservation advocates convinced the city’s urban renewal planners to commission a master study plan for the Old Sacramento Historic District in 1963. The Candeub Fleissig & Associates consulting firm was hired to prepare a plan for the development of the Old Sacramento Historic Area and Riverfront Park with the objective to achieve, “… practical re-creation of a living, self-sustaining community reflecting the atmosphere, character, architecture, enterprise and color of the early gold mining period for the inspiration, use and enjoyment of the people and to stimulate their appreciation of historical values as they pertain to our national heritage.”

The Candeub Fleissig master plan helped coordinate the renewal plans for Sacramento’s West End. The Division of Highways modified the adopted freeway route in order to save more buildings, although it would still cut through the city and isolate the district from downtown. The master plan included the following assumptions:

- The district should be commercial and self-sustaining
- It should be achieved through a maximum of private investment,
- In so far as possible, it should be an authentic re-creation of Old Sacramento, recognizing the significant stages of Sacramento’s growth and development.
- Development of the area should be practically and economically feasible.
- The plan should maximize the educational, cultural and historical values of the area, presenting an accurate portrayal of life and activities in Old Sacramento.

Further preservation efforts came on January 12, 1965 when the Secretary of the Interior declared Old Sacramento as an “Historic District” and therefore eligible for nomination as a Registered National Historic Landmark, provided that its rehabilitation satisfy the guidelines and standards of the pending Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Soon after, the State of California designated a portion of the district as a State Historic Park.

**Preservation for Use**

While many people and agencies worked toward the initial creation of Old Sacramento, one individual stands out for his untiring efforts to make it happen – Dr. Vernon Aubrey Neasham. Aubrey Neasham was a trailblazer in the historic preservation movement, leaving his mark on an impressive legacy of prominent sites across the western United States. Born in 1908, his long career in history began in 1936 when he was appointed supervisor of a Works Progress Administration research project of California’s historical landmarks shortly after obtaining his Ph.D in history from UC Berkeley. He later worked as Regional Historian for the National Park Service in New Mexico, Hawaii, and Alaska. Appointed State Historian for the California Department of Natural Resources Division of Beaches and Parks in 1953, he led projects to preserve historic areas in Monterey, Coloma, Columbia, the Pueblo de Los Angeles, Hearst Castle, Donner Memorial State Park, Fort Ross, Sonoma Mission, Sutter’s Fort, and Old Sacramento.46

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46 Aubrey Neasham Collection, Finding Aid Biography, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, CA.
Neasham’s work with the State Division of Beaches and Parks included research on Old Sacramento’s historic buildings and sites, used in the initial 1957 state study on the area. He left the Division in 1960 to form Western Heritage, Inc., a historical consulting firm, after which he became heavily involved in the efforts to protect, preserve and restore Old Sacramento. Neasham took a leading role in navigating the complex relationships and controversial issues that shaped the project from its beginning. He understood the politics involved in working with so many disparate governmental agencies, civic groups, and economic concerns. Although initially an opponent of the West End freeway route, he worked with the parties involved for a solution to save the district, and had a leading role in convincing the planners to move the freeway eastward to save both sides of 2nd Street.

Neasham’s Western Heritage Inc. was the historical consulting firm used for the Candeub Fleissig master plan. His idea of using historic preservation as a tool for urban renewal was a new idea to apply to an entire district. His theory of “Preservation for Use,” informed the master plan and likely sold the idea to city planners who liked the promise of commercial redevelopment in an area that had so recently been a drain on city services and its tax base. “Preservation for Use” implied that the area would be an integral and self-sustaining part of the city’s business district. The restored and reconstructed buildings would operate as shops, restaurants, hotels, bars, theaters, offices, and residences. The buildings and sites would tell the monumental stories that occurred there – the gold rush, Pony Express, first transcontinental telegraph and railroad lines,
and the headquarters of the leaders in government, business, and agriculture. As Neasham himself explained it,

“Preservation for Use” shall be its guideline. No dead museum piece will this be, but a living, pulsating element of modern life, to be enjoyed by the living. To integrate the old with the new shall be its challenge. Preserved, with an economic as well as a cultural reason for being, it will have nationwide importance. As a model and guide in historical restoration, interpretation, and use, its influence will be exerted throughout the land, thus enabling us to better understand what made America great.47

A charter member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Neasham understood, advocated, and implemented the early ideas of preserving the historic environment. His idea was to “freeze” Old Sacramento in the era of the Old West of early glory and triumph – the stories of remarkable firsts and great men whose actions were historically significant not only for the city, but for the state and nation. The rehabilitated or reconstructed buildings in the historic district would represent the early developmental stages of Sacramento within the 1849 – 1870s period, although they had never actually existed this way in the real past. Some critics later claimed the decision to select only certain historical aspects of the period was an attempt to mythologize it for commercial purposes. It is important to remember that Neasham was not only informed by the era’s historic preservation standards, but also bound by its political and economic conditions. But it might also be argued, especially in hindsight, that savvy redevelopers collaborating with city officials and preservationists “co-opted the preservation movement for their own interests while capitalizing on the public’s nostalgia for yesteryear.”48 Nevertheless,

creating Old Sacramento was an enormous undertaking that overcame many obstacles to become the city’s largest draw for visitors to the region, and which consequently corrected its unsustainable decline as the city’s former skid row.

When finally approved in 1966, and funded in 1967, it still took several more years before Old Sacramento resembled a cohesive historic district. Surrounded and isolated by the “bombed out” look of massive demolition and freeway construction until the early 1970s, the Old Sacramento project took time. The Redevelopment Agency, working with planning, historical, and architectural consultants was creating one of the first ‘historical developments’ in the United States, using a combination of federal urban renewal funds, local TIF financing, and special tax incentives for private investors. By 1976, in time for the nation’s bicentennial, a number of the buildings had been restored or reconstructed, the waterfront had been cleared, and while some of the streets, sidewalks, and waterfront docks had yet to be built, businesses were operating, and visitors were coming.

The Historic Buildings and Sites of Old Sacramento

While Aubrey Neasham and the early proponents of Old Sacramento saw the district’s structures as emblematic of a period of great men and heroic firsts, recent research has provided evidence of a more nuanced and inclusive story that includes tangible evidence of Sacramentans’ intense interactions with their environment. More than a story of miners and entrepreneurs, the buildings of Old Sacramento tell a story of
inundations – of people, commerce and culture converging at the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers. Yet despite their best laid plans, nature struck back in the form of fires and floods. It is in the remains of the early built environment where visitors can best witness the often-epic struggle between inundations of people and inundations of nature that shaped Sacramento’s development.

Several of the district’s buildings stand testament to that story. The Lady Adams building, located at 119 K Street, is one of the oldest buildings in the district and a survivor of the 1852 fire that destroyed most of the city. Built in 1849, the building was constructed by shipwrights who fashioned a building out of reclaimed timber from the Lady Adams ship and locally made brick. Roofed with a mixture of rough planking, tin, brick and sand, and with steel shutters, the building proved to be impenetrable. The structure survived intact until 1970 when a city work crew trenching in the adjoining alley undermined its foundation causing a wall to topple and the roof to cave in. Given its significance as one of the oldest surviving buildings, it became one of the first buildings restored in the district.

Like the Lady Adams building, the B.F. Hastings building, located at the corner of 2nd and J Streets, stands testament to the importance of building with brick in a commercial district. Built to replace a structure destroyed by the 1852 fire, the B.F. Hastings building housed Wells Fargo, the Alta Telegraph, the Pony Express Terminal, an office for Theodore Judah – whose ideas created the transcontinental railroad – the Sacramento Valley Railroad, and the California State Supreme Court. In 1976 the
building became part of the State Park portion of Old Sacramento, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Lady Adams and B.F. Hastings buildings also provide evidence of the city’s battle against inundations of water. Devastating floods in 1852, 1858, and 1862 led to construction of a massive levy system and a decade-long engineering project to raise the city streets. While some property owners chose to raise the buildings to meet the new street levels others, like the owners of the Lady Adams chose to turn first floors into basements. It is in the basement of the Lady Adams building where visitors can see the original beams used to construct the building in 1849. Evidence of the street raising can also be seen in the semi-buried window openings of buildings like the Mechanics Exchange building on I Street and in the sloped alleys between Front and Second Street. These traces of history – the meaningful evidence of the interaction of humans and their environment – would be gone had the bulldozers been allowed to continue their relentless assault on the city, just as the floodwaters had ravaged it a century before.

**Bridging I-5**

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Sacramento was more than forty years into its experiment in historic preservation in Old Sacramento. By several measures, the experiment could be deemed a success. First and foremost, a blighted district that had been home to the city’s skid row had been converted into a vibrant commercial district and the city’s premier tourist attraction, host to the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee (Memorial Day weekend) and Gold Rush Days (Labor Day weekend). Travel writers across the
nation and around the globe have written favorable reviews of the district, encouraging their readers to make the trip to Sacramento as part of their travel plans for Northern California. *The Travel Trade Gazette of the UK and Ireland* described the district in 2002 as “a nugget often overlooked,” while Australia’s *Sunday Mail* found it in 2007 to be “much more than a tourist trap.” *Washington Post* travel writer, Cindy Loose, suggested in 2004 that the district had clearly achieved Aubrey Neasham’s vision of “preservation for use.” She wrote, “It could easily have become one of those dead, re-created-village places where people in period customs [sic.] run around, not fooling you for a minute. Instead, the city allowed merchants to open real restaurants and shops in some of the 53 historic buildings, making it feel historic but alive.”

Yet the district’s disconnection from downtown, created by the construction of I-5 and touted by proponents as a positive outcome of construction that would protect the integrity of the district, had become one of the its biggest hindrances. While the freeway isolated the district from the city’s modern core, the hoped for nineteenth-century atmosphere failed to materialize, as the freeway became both a visual and auditory hindrance to history and a hulking barrier to visitors. Although recommending a visit to Old Sacramento, a travel writer for the *New Zealand Herald* captured the problem in this 2008 review:

> Across from the Hastings Building is a statue erected to the memory of the Pony Express riders. It is of a heroic young man on a rearing horse, his mouth agape, determination in his piercing eyes. Behind him is the cutting edge of a freeway and, on this clear morning, I try to take an emblematic photograph of this

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monument to a brief, defining period in Sacramento’s life 150 years ago. But the freeways are there in every snap of the shutter, the new imposing itself on the old.50

In the late 1990s, the city started what has become a concerted, yet unfortunately abortive effort to end Old Sacramento’s isolation through a variety of proposed fixes that provide evidence of changing sensibilities regarding the environment and appropriate use of urban space. The once-revered interstate highway, celebrated as a catalyst for urban and economic revitalization, has come to be seen as a contributor to blight, or, at the very least, an obstacle to implementing the city’s vision of becoming “the most livable city in America.”51 In 1998 the city began to take a serious look at alternatives to undo the damage of a previous generation. With removal of the interstate an unfeasible alternative, a new generation of city leaders and planners suggested re-conceptualizing the freeway as “usable public space.” Looking to Seattle’s successful decking of I-5, Sacramento planners gave serious thought to bridging the freeway as a means to “make downtown whole.” While waiting for completion of lengthy environmental and engineering studies on bridging, the city moved forward with an enhanced pedestrian underpass as a first step in reconnecting the old city with the new.52

Opening of the pedestrian tunnel (in 2000) provided a better connection for pedestrians to Old Sacramento, but it failed to address the visual and noise pollution caused by the interstate and did not significantly alter the district’s isolation from the rest of the city. City leaders continued to explore the decking option and in 2000 commissioned the first of a series of feasibility studies. Conducted by the city

52 Sacramento Bee, June 14, 1998.
Department of Transportation, the project overview illustrates the city’s altered understanding of its relationship to both its history and to its natural environment. In explaining the need for the project, officials noted that the opening of I-5 forty years previously had effectively cut off downtown Sacramento from its riverfront, “isolating the community from its historic origin and the Sacramento River.” Noting that construction of the interstate between Capitol Mall and the Crocker Art Museum at O Street put the freeway below grade and lower than city streets, the department proposed decking I-5 at this location.53

In the initial planning phases, residents and planners put forth an ambitious plan to create new useable space over the freeway that would provide space for “shops, parks, housing and other uses.” Projected costs were expected to be in excess of $250 million, however, which forced the city to pare back its plans and focus on a non-decking alternative that would still meet the project’s main goal of connecting downtown to the waterfront and Old Sacramento.54 In September 2009 the Department of Transportation presented this alternative to the City Council for approval before beginning work on preparation of an environmental impact report.

The bridging proposal reflects Sacramento’s vision of its future that demonstrates a radically different vision of growth from the past. The 2030 General Plan, adopted in March 2009, emphasizes the need for the city to follow “Smart Growth Principles” that encourage green building technology, infill projects, and protection of both built and natural resources. The plan includes a historic and cultural resources element that notes

the importance of historic and cultural resources to the creation of “a distinct sense of place for residents and visitors . . . that differentiates Sacramento from all other cities.” In addition, the Plan recognizes that “preservation of historic and cultural resources is important because cities with distinctly identifiable places and history are generally more livable for residents and more attractive to new businesses that sustain the economy. Preservation and adaptive re-use of historic structures also promote sustainability by reducing the need for new construction materials.”  

No longer does the city envision the type of wholesale destruction of neighborhoods seen as vital to growth in the 1950s and 1960s. How successful it will be in implementing that vision, especially given the economic realities of the 2008-2009 recession that brought an abrupt end to any discussions of bridging or decking I-5, remains to be seen.

The Issue of Integrity

In 2004 the Old Sacramento Historic District found itself on a watch list maintained by the National Historic Landmarks Program. The program report noted that the district suffered “from both the deterioration of contributing buildings and the cumulative affect of incompatible treatments, such as signage and the district-wide installation of parking meters. The result is the erosion of the overall integrity.”

Old Sacramento’s status as a threatened historic resource reflects one of the potential outcomes of the policy of “preservation for use.” How does a historic district

55 City of Sacramento General Plan, Historic and Cultural Resources (2009), 2.
protect its historic integrity while remaining useable in the modern world? Sacramento turned to parking meters, for example, in response to the problem of decreased funding. In 1999, facing budget cuts, the city chose to divert $415,000 in general funds from Old Sacramento to other parts of the city. Proponents of the installation of parking meters hoped they would provide a secure and reliable funding source and anticipated a revenue stream of about $400,000 annually.\textsuperscript{57} Even at the time of installation, however, city officials were aware that the meters threatened the district’s integrity. They conducted an eight-month study of the issue and looked at alternatives to meters, including installation of sticker-dispensing boxes that would be less obtrusive. Their consultant, along with the city and state preservation officers, concluded that parking meters would create a serious threat to historic integrity.\textsuperscript{58}

Threatened removal from the National Register of Historic Places galvanized the city and Old Sacramento property owners to re-examine the balance between preservation and use in the district. The city took a more active role in enforcing sign ordinances and maintenance agreements with property owners so that by 2010, other than the parking meters, most of the criticism of the National Landmarks Program had been addressed. In addition, the city instigated reorganization of the various non-profit entities that managed Old Sacramento to increase cooperation and help develop a cohesive vision for the district. The resulting Historic Old Sacramento Foundation, formed in 2008, has succeeded admirably in building a coalition between State Parks, the Old Sacramento

\textsuperscript{57} Sacramento Bee, June 3, 1999.
\textsuperscript{58} Sacramento Bee, June 27, 2000.
Business Association, and the city that is finally bridging the gap between preservation and use through an intensive and concerted interpretive program.

At the center of the new vision for Old Sacramento is a desire to reconnect to the environmental history of Sacramento. No longer is it sufficient to preserve or rebuild historic structures to either celebrate a mythic gold rush past or sell T-shirts and candy to tourists. Gone are the Mark Twain audio boxes and the majority of knick-knack shops. In their place are new business ventures including high-end loft housing, and well-developed living history tours that emphasize a variety of gold rush experiences that extend beyond the stereotypical male forty-niner. Each summer the Foundation sponsors a series of weekend street performances that bring visitors into some of the most historic structures in the district including the Eagle Theater and the Central Pacific Passenger Station. Most impressively, the Foundation has sponsored the creation of Underground Tours that explore Sacramento’s most significant environmental history – the raising of the streets in response to flooding. As tour author Heather Downey notes,

> The underground’s eerie, musty spaces are portals to the past that tell a variety of stories about Sacramento’s unique history. These architectural relics are more than symbols of Sacramentan’s early struggle with nature. They spark people’s imaginations, and help them to become more familiar with the city’s landscape. They are significant resources for the Sacramento region, reminding us of this city’s singular origins. They are material proof of the physical, financial and political effort Sacramentans exerted to save their city in the wake of frequent natural disasters.  

In essence, the tours remind visitors of the city’s intimate and precarious relationship to the river that continues to give it life and shape its destiny.

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The river provides the central focal point for the revised Old Sacramento State Historic Park general plan. Developed in 2010-2011, the plan outlines a new vision for the state-owned portion of the district that seeks to uncover the traces of early Sacramento history that can still be found both above and below ground. Building upon the underground tours, the state plans to develop an excavation exhibit where visitors can view the remnants of the Gold Rush era buried underground. Above ground, the state plans to reconstruct certain commercial buildings from the 1860s-1870s to explore the commercial history of the district.\(^{60}\)

In addition, the state plans extensive development of the waterfront to help return the district’s focus to the source of its origins. First, the plan envisions creating an exhibit space from which to view a sunken 19\(^{th}\) century ship currently hidden from view. Second, the plan proposes facilitating visitor access to the river via water taxi tours or some other form of historic boat tour. The river, however, remains hidden from view by the Central Pacific freight and passenger depots. Like the river, the railroad is another defining feature of Sacramento history, and the new general plan calls for emphasizing the railroad as the second focal point of the district. The plan calls for reconstruction of historic train tracks for use by excursion trains and restoration of the freight and passenger depots to their 1870s appearance.\(^{61}\)

While the revised General Plan has received favorable reviews from the City Council and in public comment, the ability of the state to implement the plan over the next twenty years is certainly far from assured. In 2010 voters rejected a ballot measure

\(^{60}\) Old Sacramento State Historic Park General Plan Draft Preferred Alternative, April 20, 2011.
\(^{61}\) Old Sacramento State Historic Park General Plan.
proposing to increase vehicle registration fees by $18 to finance a state park system trust fund. Faced with millions of dollars in deferred maintenance and an additional slashing of the department’s general fund in the 2011-12 fiscal year, there is little money for implementing an ambitious general plan like that for Old Sacramento.

**Why Save Old Sacramento?**

What inspired preservation advocates to save this district of outdated and dilapidated buildings while modernizing efforts were progressing all around them? Why was it important to do so, and who would benefit? Walter Frame, Vice President of the Conference of California Historical Societies and an advocate for Old Sacramento, echoing concerns across the country explained,

> We are deeply concerned with the destruction of California’s landmarks throughout the State. The mushrooming population of our State, the careless redevelopment of the older parts of our cities and the witless urge to bulldoze history into dust has destroyed much that is of great value and threatens what we have left.62

Yet the threat to historic sites came not only from the razing of buildings. It came also in the form of “frozen” historic districts cut off in time from the rest of their history. In a 1977 *Museum of California* article, entitled, “Everyone Applauds Preservation – But Something’s Missing,” History Curator, Thomas Frye challenged preservation that “is impersonal and anonymous, which endeavors to conjure up what ‘used to be’ – preservation that treads on the pretext of history.” Historic districts, old towns, and

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pioneer parks are areas where “the politics of preservation, economic forces and stereotyped views of history are likely to combine to create the outcome.” The outcome, Frye suggested, is the nineteenth-century lithograph – the imagined bird’s eye view – in other words, inauthentic, a construct. Recognizing that such adaptive use is a good way to preserve old structures and get neighborhoods back on the tax rolls, somehow it all made Frye uneasy. It was not just the bisecting freeway soaring nearby, “No,” Frye argued,

Something is missing. My history is missing. It wasn’t like this. I am a stranger here … Old Town’s 20th century history has been eradicated as systematically as possible. The successive layers of the buildings have been peeled back and thrown away, leaving no evidence of their varied use as rooming houses, bars, wholesalers, pawnshops, and labor headquarters. These middle years are not represented in the restoration, not even a few examples … are being kept for future interpretation by the urban historian. Some of my history was destroyed when they peeled off those layers and threw them away.63

Perhaps Frye missed the whole point of creating an Old Sacramento Historic District, which aimed to celebrate the city’s dynamic early years. Nevertheless, Frye asked painful but necessary questions about how we consider, select, and interpret the history of our built environment. Who is it for? What does it serve? Can it help us make sense of a past to which we may not feel a connection?

The preservation of Old Sacramento provides stunning evidence of the changing environmental sensibilities of urban America. It reveals competing visions of urban identity in relation to preserving a glorious past or looking forward to a promising future. The collision between urban renewal and historic preservation interests in Sacramento

exposes the ways disparate civic groups, business interests, local, state, and federal officials negotiated and competed for public support, limited funds, and planning control to recreate a contested urban identity.

In hindsight, there are aspects about the creation of Old Sacramento to criticize, most notably its isolation from the rest of the city and its celebratory focus on the gold rush era, yet the district remains an increasingly valuable historic resource with much to contribute to the past, present, and future vision of Sacramento. Is this a district worthy of preservation? Are there solutions to the district’s many problems? The answer is an unequivocal yes. It will take the concerted vision and effort of the next generation of Sacramento preservationists, along with city and state planners who, hopefully, will be as innovative as their predecessors.
Chapter 3

ORAL HISTORY: ORIGINS, THEORY, METHOD, AND USE

_A Past for the Present_ was intended to record and preserve the personal experiences of three individuals who had significant roles in the creation and management of the Old Sacramento Historic District. The project’s goals were to supplement available documentation on the subject, provide personal insight about the history of the district, and offer useful information for future district management. As noted, the interviewees were selected precisely because they had or were about to retire. The city recognized the opportunity to document this history while these early participants were still available to talk about it. The resulting oral histories examine the development of the Old Sacramento Historic District through the lens of personal and collective experience as recalled and shared in the interviews.

Humans have been remembering, sharing, and passing down their individual and collective stories for as long as can be recalled. Undeniably, throughout history in any part of the world, people have learned about the past through the spoken word. Generations have consciously attempted to preserve first-hand accounts of family life, cultural traditions, and all the life-altering actions and events that make history. This wish to collect life histories often occurs at the time when the “historical actors themselves, and with them their memories, are about to pass from the scene.”64 If untold, these histories, and with them their potential meaning, might be lost forever.

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Recognizing oral sources as reliable interpretations of the past has long been a point of debate for many historians, primarily because it calls into question history’s traditional reliance on written sources. While oral history raises doubts about the reliability and accuracy of oral sources, it also asks us to evaluate how we think about the relationship between history and memory. As historian Michael Frisch explains, oral histories

force us to look at what the interviews actually represent, rather than at what they cannot claim to be. In these terms, the question of memory – personal and historical, individual and generational – moves to center stage as the object, not merely the method, of oral history. What happens to experience on the way to becoming memory? What happens to experience on the way to becoming history?  

Oral history has grown from a practice of collecting human experience as raw data to a unique method of exploring the interaction of individual and collective experience and how it creates historical consciousness. It opens the field to the diversity of human experience, offering an expanded view of the history of the world and the many meanings we may find there.

**Origins of Contemporary Oral History Practice**

The practice and acceptance of oral history in established academic disciplines, especially history departments, has evolved dramatically in the last half century, and not without controversy and conflict. Twentieth-century developments in the theories, methods, and uses of oral history challenged the practice of history and ignited

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exploration into new fields of study in a wide range of disciplines including ethnology, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Oral history has opened up new theoretical frameworks with which to explore the complexity of historical relation to subjective narratives, the politics of empowerment, and the study of memory, and the ways these relationships create historical meaning.

Oral history is difficult to define but after more than half a century of established practice most historians will agree with Ronald J. Grele, former Director of the Columbia Oral History Research Office, who defines oral history as “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction.”

The Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writers Project (FWP) was a remarkable early effort to collect oral accounts of the past. The FWP was one of the federal government’s New Deal programs that put multitudes of unemployed historians, journalists, writers, and others to work during the Great Depression. The FWP traveled through several states to collect the life histories of ordinary Americans during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The project’s goal was to gather a broad spectrum of American life through interviews ranging from people dealing with the hardships of the Great

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Depression to the “slave narratives” of elderly former slaves living in the South.68 The FWP interviewers recorded the life histories by taking hand-written notes during the interviews, which, while valuable for their overall testimony of experience, raised questions about their reliability and veracity.69 With the new post war technological advances of recording devices that could preserve the exact words of narrators, the potential for capturing accurate testimony accelerated the interest in and practice of oral history to supplement and broaden the written historical record.

Oral history as a “systematic and disciplined effort to record on tape, preserve, and make available for future research recollections deemed of historical significance” is credited to the work of Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the late 1940s and is considered by most historians to be the beginning of the contemporary practice of oral history.70 Nevins decided that interviewing the participants of recent history would supplement available documentation, which was often bereft of the kind of personal records like diaries, letters, and memoirs on which historians and biographers rely. With the onset of the first commercial tape recorders in 1948, interviews could be recorded, transcribed, and preserved for future researchers. That same year, after Nevins conducted his first recorded interview with New York civic leader George McAneny, he helped found the Columbia Oral History Research Office, and the contemporary oral history movement was born.71

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., The Columbia Oral History Research Office holds the largest oral history archive in the world.
The early projects at Columbia Oral History Research Office focused on the life experiences and contributions of leaders in government, business, civic, and social life, who were, not surprisingly, white males and representative of the powerful “elite.” The transformative cultural, social, and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s motivated historians (many just entering the field) to study segments of the population who had either been ignored or marginalized by traditional history and its invariable focus on the actions and experiences of the powerful. The civil rights and women’s movements, labor and political activists, and racial and ethnic minorities like African Americans, Chicanos, and Native Americans all demanded and began to be recognized as legitimate actors in and contributors to the history of America. This “new history from the bottom-up” broadened the scope and reach of oral history as a way to help democratize the historical record and to give voice – literally and historiographically – to those who had long been silent.

Seeking to professionalize and standardize oral history practice, the Oral History Association (OHA) was established in 1966. It sought “to bring together all persons interested in oral history as a way of collecting and interpreting human memories to foster knowledge and human dignity.”72 In 1968, the OHA issued its first “goals and guidelines” to establish the “principles, rights, and obligations that all interviewees,

72 The Oral History website: http://www.oralhistory.org/. Accessed on 10-15-2011. With an international membership, the OHA serves a broad and diverse audience. Local historians, librarians and archivists, students, journalists, teachers, and academic scholars from many fields have found that the OHA provides both professional guidance and a collegial environment for sharing research. In addition to fostering communication among its members, the OHA encourages standards of excellence in the collection, preservation, dissemination and uses of oral testimony. To guide and advise those concerned with oral documentation, the OHA has established a set of goals, guidelines, and evaluation standards for oral history interviews.
interviewers, and sponsoring institutions needed to take into consideration.” These were then revised to produce a new set of “evaluation guidelines in 1979, to assist practitioners involved in conducting, preserving, and processing oral history interviews.”\(^{73}\)

Subsequently, the OHA periodically analyzed, revised, and expanded its Goals and Evaluation Guidelines to include a Statement of Principles and Standards to support and professionally guide oral history practitioners. The OHA adopted revisions in 1990 to accommodate new issues of ethics, including a greater awareness of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and culture in the interviewing process; the impact of oral history on the communities in which they take place; and preservation and use of collected materials. In 1998 the OHA again revised and expanded the evaluation guidelines (adopted in 2000) to include new sections on recording equipment and tape preservation as well as the impact on the profession by rapidly changing technologies and media.\(^{74}\) In 2009, the OHA again revised and adopted its “Principles and Best Practices for Oral History.”\(^ {75}\)

Formally established in 1996 at the Ninth International Oral History Conference in Göteborg, Sweden, The International Oral History Association (IOHA) is a professional association “established to provide a forum for oral historians around the world, and a means for cooperation among those concerned with the documentation of human experience.”\(^ {76}\) The IOHA works to stimulate research that uses oral history to “foster a better understanding of the democratic nature and value of oral history


worldwide.” The IOHA also works to promote the development of standards and principles in the field for both public and private individual and institutional practitioners, “who have the responsibility for the collection and preservation of historical information gathered through the techniques of oral histories, in all forms.”77 Like the OHA, the IOHA organizes conferences, collaborative networks, supports other oral history organizations, and publishes an online journal, *Words and Silences* available in the Association’s official languages of English and Spanish.78

Both the OHA and the IOHA have done much to professionalize, support, and foster growth and collaboration between the interdisciplinary practitioners of oral history. Throughout the last quarter century, the practice of oral history around the world has developed beyond an attempt by historians to gather data to supplement the written record, to become a creative, dynamic, and interdisciplinary field. Suffice it to say that oral history has come a long way from being the marginalized “step-child” of the history profession to gaining worldwide respect for its unique contributions in the collecting, preserving, interpretation and presentation of history.

**Theory, Method, and Use**

The theories behind the practice of oral history have also gone through a radical transformation. In the early days, the historian’s concern was the search for data, and ideas about memory were concerned with its accuracy to support the data. The relationship between the interviewer/historian and the interviewee/”subject” was an

77 Ibid.
78 The International oral History Association’s online journal can be accessed at: wordsandsilences.org.
unequal one, and interpretation rested with the interviewer/historian alone. Dynamic changes in the theories and practice of oral history occurred during the 1970s, for the societal reasons discussed earlier, and because influences from cultural studies were making an impact on the practice of oral history. Historians began to look deeper into the structure of the interview. Rather than regarding the relationship between interviewer and interviewee as monopolistic, it became a dialogical process of joint creation, a “shared authority” as historian Michael Frisch described it.79

Historians became more interested in how people organized their stories of the past – how “narrative ability (the construction of a set of concepts linking past, present, and future) is inherent in experience.”80 Memory began to be regarded as a construction of historical consciousness and not merely its data. Debates arose over the construction of narrative, the interaction between historian and narrator, the struggle over the rights to assign meaning, and how to analyze and understand the narrative.81 What theoretical and methodological frameworks do historians apply to the interview, and to oral history practice in general, to reconcile the tension between analysis, interpretation, narrative, and meaning in history?

Like Frisch, oral historian Linda Shopes argues that oral history might be understood as a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record. Although the conversation takes the form of an interview, in which one person—the interviewer—asks questions of another person—variously referred to as the interviewee or narrator—oral history is, at its heart, a dialogue.  

Shopes describes the best interviews as having a “thinking-out-loud” quality, as perceptive questions and answers create a conversation to work and rework the topic being explored. It is a two-way reconstruction of history as the interviewer and interviewee/narrator work together to uncover and clarify recollections and details. The best interviewers are careful listeners and have the presence of mind and courage to ask difficult questions in the most effective and sensitive ways. They are prepared for the interview by carefully researching the topic, informing the narrator of the purpose of the interview, understanding as much as possible the state of mind and physical condition of the narrator, and being aware of the particular interpersonal dynamic between the narrator and themselves. As Shopes explains, interviews can take on many forms depending on the dynamic “between narrator and interviewer: an interview can be a history lecture, a confessional, a verbal sparring match, an exercise in nostalgia, or any other of the dozens of ways people talk about their experiences.”

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83 Ibid., p. 3.
For Shopes, oral history interviews are valuable as “sources of new knowledge of the past and as new interpretive perspectives on it.” 84 They have enriched the work of a generation of social and cultural historians, and have challenged the power of dominant political or cultural forces, as ordinary or marginalized individuals are able to contribute their life experiences to the historical record.

However, oral history sources can be problematic. As with all sources, historians must evaluate and make attempts to verify oral history sources. At the same time, oral sources are not simply another source to be evaluated like other historical sources. As Frisch argues, this tendency to use the “raw material” of oral history interviews “that sees ordinary people as sources of data, rather than as shapers and interpreters of their own experience,” is what he terms the “More History” approach, which reduces “oral history to simply another kind of evidence to be pushed through the historian’s controlling mill.” 85 It is important to remember that an interview is an act of memory, which can result in inaccurate or incomplete information, based upon how the individual has processed and reconstructed their memories – often influenced by the larger context of historical consciousness or social memory. To reconcile this, Shopes argues for “an understanding of oral history not so much as an exercise in fact finding but as an interpretive event, as the narrator compresses years of living into a few hours of talk, selecting, consciously and unconsciously, what to say and how to say it.” 86

84 Ibid., p. 5.
Michael Frisch, recognizing that most interviews lie somewhere between pure memory, with all its faults, and pure history with all its limitations, contends that they require the most careful reading. He suggests three questions to help in exploring the complexity of the interviews. First, what sort of person is speaking? We might consider social class or status, political position or identity, or more importantly, how the individual functioned historically in terms of the event or period being discussed. Second, what sort of thing is he or she talking about? What is the topic, and did the narrator experience it as actual experience or observe it at some remove? Are they speaking in generalities, or with personal details of specific actions and effects? And third, what sorts of statements about it are being made? How do people generalize, explain, and interpret experience? Are they using cultural or historical categories to help present and make sense of their individual view of experience? Frisch explains that by evaluating interviews in this way, we can see the “selective, synthetic, and generalizing nature of historical memory itself … by seeing people turn history into biographical memory, general into particular, we see how they tried to retain deeper validation of their life and society.”

Alessandro Portelli, internationally recognized as one of the most influential oral historians in the field, has been developing groundbreaking projects in oral history for many years. Portelli reveals an evolved theory of the unique value and uses of oral history. His work, primarily with the working-class and marginalized in Italy and the

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United States, has challenged official accounts of political and social unrest and empowered those who had previously been silenced or ignored. In 1979, he challenged the critics of oral history with his article, “What Makes Oral History Different?”88 In it he argued that the distinctiveness of oral history – its orality, its subjective and narrative form, different credibility of memory, and the relationship between interviewer and narrator – should be considered as strengths rather than weaknesses, a different sort of resource rather than a problem.89

For Portelli, the orality of source means that language with all its tones, volume range, and rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations, which are difficult to translate into the written word. He stresses the importance of preserving the oral source, as it often will reveal a different, deeper meaning than its transcription. Oral sources are narrative sources and therefore must be considered within the frameworks of narrative theory in literature and folklore. What makes oral history different then, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning ... the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker’s subjectivity. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.90

While subjectivity in history is problematic, in oral history it becomes a tool to understand the deeper implications of the narrator’s perceived experience, and, for example, can teach us the extent of the actual cost of a decision made by a government official to an individual and his community. This is a historical source that cannot be obtained through traditional documentation, especially when those in positions of power create the documentation of a specific decision or event.

As Portelli argues, the oral source is credible but with a different credibility. Its importance may lie more in its departure from fact as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Once the credibility of an oral source is cross checked against other sources—such as those from other witnesses or documented sources—“the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.” 91 This is especially relevant to understanding that memory is an active process of the creation of meanings, and not a “passive depository of facts.” Thus, the very special uses and distinctiveness of oral history, Portelli argues, is “not so much in its ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory.” The changes in the experience recalled by memory reveal an effort to make sense of the past, to give life a form, and meaning. 92

Oral history asks us to reexamine the boundaries of historical significance. Historians may not know that there are areas of experience worthy of exploration. Just as narrators may not know that their own personal experience may be historically relevant. As Portelli understands it, “ultimately, oral history is about the historical significance of

91 Ibid, 68.
92 Ibid., 69.
personal experience on the one hand, and the personal impact of historical matters on the other. The hard core of oral history lies exactly at this point, where history breaks into private lives.”

United Kingdom historian Lynn Abrams points to the success of the wide-ranging and interdisciplinary crossover of oral history as a tried-and-tested research practice, which has resulted in a variety of uses in the last half century. Scholars and professionals worldwide have utilized oral history as a valuable research tool for studies, publications, documentaries, and exhibitions. Oral history has been a useful and popular tool in educational projects for people of all ages. Prosecutors have employed oral history as an evidential tool in court cases, including war crime trials. It has been used by governments and during political transitions, as in the officially sanctioned Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. It is also used in community studies, volunteer-led local-heritage projects, social work, and family history projects. It is a widespread and highly adaptable method for searching, capturing, and presenting the past whether for practical, political, or historical aims.

**Practical Matters**

Beyond theory, what practical guidelines can be used to prepare for, conduct, process, and present an oral history project? There are many publications available to assist in the fundamentals of a successful project. Donald A. Richie’s *Doing Oral*
History: A Practical Guide was extremely useful to the author and is a favorite in the field, used by beginners and experts alike.95 Richie breaks down the process of doing oral history from describing what is needed to set up a project, preparing for and conducting the interview, legal and ethical considerations, processing and preserving the recordings, to interpreting, using, teaching, and presenting the results. The Oral History Association’s “Evaluation Guidelines and Principles and Best Practices” are also very helpful in guiding oral history practitioners to use professional standards and best practices. In the next chapter, the author will describe the specific methodology used for creating A Past for the Present: The Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project.

Chapter 4

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

*A Past for the Present: Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project*

includes oral histories of three individuals recorded on audiotapes, all of which are fully transcribed. Included with the transcriptions is a synopsis for each interview session, which includes a biographical summary for each narrator.\(^{96}\) The Oral History Association’s (OHA) Principles and Best Practices guided the author as she set forth to effectively and professionally proceed with the project. Additional sources proved invaluable for the practical matters concerned with conducting an oral history project. Most useful for the purposes of this project were Donald A. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson’s *The Oral History Reader*, and Edward D. Ives’ *The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. Additionally, the numerous other books, articles, and websites that informed the author and helped to direct and guide the project are listed in the project bibliography.

**Defining the Purpose and Scope**

The first step was to define the purpose and scope of the project. Both Richie and the OHA outline the most important questions to ask as one goes about beginning an oral

\(^{96}\) In oral history literature and theory, the term “interviewee” is often used interchangeably with the term, “narrator,” I use both throughout this thesis project.
Beyond the agreement with the city, the author’s goals for the thesis project were to record and archive the personal and professional experiences of three primary participants in the creation, implementation, and management of the OSHD. Guided by Richie and the OHA, it was hoped the oral histories would complement the available material on the subject, fill in the gaps left in the city’s official history, provide unique

personal insight and perspective about the past – in this case the history of OSHD, which had not been adequately documented or made available – for community members and scholars.98 An additional, yet unstated goal was to provide useful information for incoming and future district management.

Identifying and Selecting Participants

The next step was to identify and select the most likely participants to meet the project’s goals and objectives. How should potential interviewees be identified? According to Richie, “if a project is part of a larger organization, its leaders and members may have their own recommendations.”99 For the purposes of this project, the individuals to be interviewed were selected by Sacramento city management within the Department of Convention, Culture and Leisure, which oversees the management of a significant portion of the OSHD, as well as the city’s History Division, the Center for Sacramento History (CSH).100 As happens for many private or public individuals, families, communities, and even governments, the desire to collect the histories from those who are about to leave the scene in one way or another can often inspire an oral history project.

Such was the case for A Past for the Present. The three narrators selected for the project were about to retire or had recently done so. Considered the most knowledgeable and practiced in the creation and management of the OSHD, the City of Sacramento

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98 Ibid.
100 The Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center was renamed the Center for Sacramento History in 2009.
recognized the imperative to collect their experiences before they fled the scene. Their testimonies, it was assumed, would help fill in the gaps left in the official, and in many cases, inaccessible record. The narrators selected were for several decades closely involved in the creation, implementation, management, and evolving design of the OSHD. They were: Jim Henley, the outgoing SAMCC History Manager and City Historian, active participant in the preservation of Old Sacramento, founding member of the Sacramento History Center, and of the Archives of the City and County of Sacramento; Ed Astone, Project Manager of the OSHD for the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency, and later the Old Sacramento Town Manager for the Sacramento Convention and Visitor’s Bureau; and Ted Leonard, former Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency Architect and Project Director of the OSHD from 1974 until his retirement in 1998, and thereafter redevelopment consultant to the City of Sacramento.

Once the interviewees had been identified and selected, the next step was to contact each one for final agreement and to set up a preliminary non-recorded meeting to describe the project’s aims and answer any questions or address any concerns they might have. This pre-interview session also allowed the author to explain the details of the interview process and the need for informed consent and legal release forms. An introductory conversation with each narrator to better understand their role in the district

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101 The interview transcriptions in the appendices of this thesis contain a biographical summary for each narrator.
102 The Sacramento History Center has since been renamed the Sacramento History Museum, and the official archives of the City and County of Sacramento, previously known as SAMCC, is now named the Center for Sacramento History.
103 It is with great sadness that the author informs the reader of the death of Ted Leonard in April of 2010.
and to get a sense of their personalities, mindsets, and attitudes was very helpful in designing the interview questions.

**Interview Preparation**

After securing the narrators’ agreement and setting up the interview dates, the next step was to conduct research on the Old Sacramento Historic District in order to develop a list of possible topics or themes to cover in the interviews. To more fully understand the historical context in which the OSHD was created necessitated an in-depth study of the early development of Sacramento from its founding in 1849 to the post-World War II federal urban renewal programs that radically transformed its landscape, as well as the emerging historic preservation movement.

The author conducted most of her research at CSH, accessing the governmental records of the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, City Council minutes, The City Planning Department, Old Sacramento Town Management Collection, numerous state and local studies and reports, and manuscript collections such as the Aubrey Neasham Collection, the Frank B. Durkee Collection, the Gunther Grumm Collection, and the Ken Lastufka Collection. The local newspapers, the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Sacramento Union*, were also utilized for local information about the period, especially concerning the “freeway battle,” as were a multitude of secondary sources for the broader historical context.

Was so much research necessary? Yes, it is the only way to fully understand the topic in question and the historical period in which it existed. Conducting extensive and
careful research allows the interviewer to identify key areas of scholarly interest to more effectively determine what questions to ask.\textsuperscript{104} The following are a few of the key areas of interest that guided the author as she formulated questions with the future researcher in mind:

- How was Sacramento similar to other American cities responding to mid-twentieth century growth and urbanization?
- How is Sacramento a case study of federal urban renewal’s slum clearance policies colliding with the increased organizing and advocacy efforts of local preservationists and historians?
- How was it unique in its attempt to revitalize its deteriorating city core?
- What compromises were made between city and state officials, preservation advocates, and redevelopment interests to build the Old Sacramento Historic District?
- How would you describe the Old Sacramento Historic District, in terms of successes or failures?

These were the areas the author wanted to explore, keeping in mind the local nature of the study on which the interviews would focus. The resulting open-ended questions were designed to get the narrators to talk about their own experiences and perceptions in a local story that had national implications in its time. For example, the following questions were posed to Ted Leonard, the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency Architect and Project Director, who was recruited by the Agency from Seattle:

- Considering your experience with urban renewal projects and historic districts in Washington State, did you see similarities with the Sacramento project? If so, what were they?

\textsuperscript{104} Donald A. Richie, \textit{Doing Oral History}, 86.
• What did you think of the original (1964) Master Plan for the historic district, in terms of preservation concepts and plans?

Jim Henley, the outgoing History Manager was the individual most knowledgeable about the historical significance of the area and of the historical architectural details for the buildings in Old Sacramento. Henley’s professional introduction to Old Sacramento came through his work with the state historian Aubrey Neasham. The author planned to ask him the following questions:

• Can you tell me about Aubrey Neasham and the Historic Landmarks Commission that he was involved with? In what ways did they respond to the city’s redevelopment activities and plans?
• Most cities consider themselves unique in one way or another, and indeed they are. Regarding urban renewal and historic preservation, how was Sacramento unique?

Ed Astone, the first Sacramento Redevelopment Agency Project Director, and later Old Sacramento Town Manager, took the author on a personal tour of the OSHD before the scheduled interview. This gave her a valuable insider’s close-up look at the district from Astone’s perspective, which prompted her to prepare the following questions:

• What were your early aspirations and goals for the district, and do you believe they were met?
• You spoke of some compromises you and the team in Sacramento would have to make in order to fulfill the goals of redevelopment, especially when compared to other grant-driven historic districts like Williamsburg. What, ultimately, were some of those compromises?
These were the questions that the author planned to ask after doing careful research and meeting all the narrators. The goal was to stay focused on the purpose of the project and its objectives and goals, which were to discover the undocumented stories and “hidden” history of the creation of the OSHD. At the same time, as historian Michael Frisch argues, it is wise to remember the “shared authority” of the oral history interview, which maintains that both participants in an interview are responsible for its creation and share its authorship. Even though the interviewer has made clear the objectives for the project, and has formulated questions to get to the information she seeks, she must “always be prepared to abandon carefully prepared questions and follow the interviewee down unexpected paths” because, as Richie contends, “the ultimate value of oral history lies in the substance of the interviewee’s story.” Nor does the interpretation of the interview rest exclusively on the interviewer’s side of the microphone, for interviewees are constantly reinterpreting and analyzing their own motives and actions as they recall them.” This became very clear to the author as she at times struggled with allowing the narrator to tell his story his way, while not losing total control of the interview.

Finally, the author needed to choose the recording equipment. The author had conducted several interviews in the past and felt most comfortable using an audiocassette tape recorder and external microphone, which were readily available to her for the project. The recording device was a Radio Shack Vox CTR-121 cassette recorder. The external microphone was a RadioShack Omni-Directional Dynamic Microphone 33-

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107 Ibid.
3036. The author used 60-minute Maxell Professional Industrial Communicator Series cassette tapes, which featured low noise and high output. The interviews were conducted in 2007, and while digital recorders are now the standard for oral historians, cassette tapes were still being used at the time, although less frequently. The OHA’s “Principles and Best Practices” adopted in 2009 state that “Oral historians should use the best digital recording equipment within their means to reproduce the narrator’s voice accurately.” Additionally, “Before the interview, interviewers should become familiar with the equipment and be knowledgeable about its function.”\textsuperscript{108} The author made sure to have extra blank cassette tapes on hand, an extension cord, and extra batteries for the recorder in the event of the unavailability of electrical outlets, and a notepad and pencil for taking notes during the interview.

**Conducting the Interviews and Legal Considerations**

The interviews took place in the conference room at CSH, which was a quiet room away from intrusive traffic and noise. The author greeted the narrator, asked him to have a seat and make himself comfortable, and offered him bottled water. It was important to sit and talk for a few moments without the recorder on to review the project’s aims, and to remind the narrator that the interview would last up to two hours but that it could be stopped at any time. The author went over the legal release form and reminded the narrator that the interviews and their transcripts would be archived at CSH with the city and county’s permanent historical collections, and made available to

researchers. The author made sure the narrators understood that the signing of the release form would transfer their copyrights to the oral histories to SAMCC, and that the form included a section wherein they could specify any restrictions or conditions to the donation.\textsuperscript{109} Once all of these administrative and legal details were understood, the narrator and interviewer signed the release forms and the interview was ready to begin.

The author had set up the recorder and microphone before the narrator arrived and had made the preliminary test to make sure they were functioning properly. At the start of each interview session, the author recorded a “lead” to focus the session’s goals, state the date and location, and to introduce the narrator, for example:\textsuperscript{110}

Hello, my name is Lisa Prince and today is July 18, 2007. I’m here at the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center in Sacramento, California, on behalf of the City of Sacramento’s Old Sacramento Oral History Project. Today I’ll be talking with Jim Henley, the manager of the Sacramento Archives, for our first interview. Good morning, Jim.

During the initial session with each narrator, the author began the interview by asking the narrator to talk a little bit about his background – where he was born, grew up, went to school, and whatever else he wanted to mention about his early years. All three narrators responded well to the interviews with prolonged and detailed answers, explanations, and recollections.

After reviewing the recorded interviews, the author identified areas where she had missed opportunities to listen more carefully instead of feeling a need to return to the scripted questions, or inject perhaps unnecessary comments. But in most cases, the

\textsuperscript{109} Donald A. Richie, \textit{Doing Oral History}, 76.
narrators took the interview in the direction their recollections wanted to go, not necessarily following a prescribed chronology. Often, questions or remarks seemed to touch off a memory of an event or a story, which, in retrospect opened new areas of perception not previously discovered or expected. As Richie argues,

> You must be willing to deviate from the prepared questions whenever something unexpected and interesting develops. Oral history, after all, addresses neglected areas of knowledge. The best items uncovered are often subjects that you were not prepared to ask questions about and perhaps had read nothing about in your research. A good interviewer hears an unexpected statement and follows up with additional questions.\(^{111}\)

For the most part, the interviews went well and lasted the entire two hours, with the exception of an initial one-hour interview with Jim Henley, and the final group interview, of which a portion was unrecorded. There were a couple instances where the recorder did not work properly and some of the interview was lost. Luckily, the author had been taking notes and was able to provide most of the unrecorded information. Ted Leonard’s interviews were the most problematic. In his interviews distracting background noise can be heard as he had a habit of tapping the table with his fingers to stress a point. Moreover, because Leonard often tended to go off on elaborate tangents the author felt that she had lost too much control of the interview when she was failed to return the conversation to the desired line of questioning. After reviewing and transcribing Leonard’s interviews, however, the author discovered that they contain perhaps the most detailed and interesting personal perspective on the period and the place. Unfortunately, his interviews ended abruptly when time ran out before the author was able to ask a good “wrap-up” question to end the session, which, as Richie asserts,

might have caused him to reflect back on his life and experiences and draw some conclusions about his experiences in Old Sacramento, as had successfully been done with Ed Astone and Jim Henley.\textsuperscript{112} The author asked Leonard if he might want to return for one more session, but time constraints would not allow it. However, the final group interview did allow for a final “wrap-up” of the project.

\textbf{Processing the Interviews and Related Materials}

To ensure that the oral histories are appropriately stored, preserved, and made accessible for use takes us to the final step of “processing” the interviews. Processing oral histories refers to the tasks associated with assembling all the materials that relate to the interview and preparing them for transfer to the agreed-upon repository. For the purposes of this project, this included the following steps.

First, the author made “user copies” of the original (the master) recordings. The masters and the user copies were deposited with the rest of the interview materials with the understanding that only the user copies would be made accessible for future researchers. All masters and copies were labeled with the date, number of tape in succession, project title, narrator’s name, interviewer’s name, and repository/location. For example:

\begin{quote}
July 18, 2007 – TAPE 1 of 5 – MASTER
Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project
Interview of Jim Henley
Interviewer: Lisa C. Prince
CSH
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 108.
The next steps were to transcribe, edit, and audit the interview recordings. Transcription refers to creating a written document of the recording. Editing refers to how closely the document follows the actual recording. Some oral historians record the interview word for word, while others allow for greater latitude, omitting “false starts,” such crutch words as *uh, uh-huh, um-hum,* and *unh-uh,* and even in some cases correcting grammar. Auditing is the process of reading the transcript while listening to the interview tape to make any corrections necessary. While transcribing and editing may be a matter of personal style, there are important guidelines to inform the process. Ideally, the transcript should be as close to the recording as possible, making certain that it accurately reflects the narrator’s words and meaning.\(^\text{113}\)

Are transcripts really necessary? As a general rule, the transcript of an interview can be invaluable for researchers. There is some debate among oral historians regarding which is the primary document of an interview. Is it the interview itself, the recording of it, or the transcription of the recording? According to folklorist and oral historian Edward D. “Sandy” Ives, the transcript makes the best “useful and useable primary research document” of what is on tape, although, if possible, researchers should be able to listen to the tape if they wish, as some historians consider it the primary source.\(^\text{114}\) Richie also makes a convincing argument for transcribing interviews. He contends that,

The deteriorating sound quality of audio and visual recordings over time is just one of the many incentives for transcribing oral history interviews … even with the best recording devices, listeners will find it hard at times to understand interviewees, especially older people whose voices have grown faint, or those


who speak with a pronounced accent or in a regional dialect. Given a choice, researchers invariably prefer transcripts over recordings.\textsuperscript{115}

The author found the transcription and auditing process to be by far the most difficult and time-consuming part of the project. Comprehension, rather than typing speed, is what is critical when transcribing an interview. According to Richie and Ives, transcription can take anywhere between ten to twenty hours per \textit{each} hour of interview.\textsuperscript{116} A \textit{Past for the Present} resulted in a total of thirteen-and-a-half hours of recorded interviews, conducted within a period of about three months. Approximately ten to twelve hours were spent to transcribe, edit, and audit each hour of interview. The author followed the Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association to create as accurate a record of the tape as possible.\textsuperscript{117} She used punctuation carefully, omitted some false starts, and superfluous crutch words, as long as it did not detract from the narrator’s meaning, but kept the text as close to the recording as possible to retain not only the meaning, but also the rhythm and flavor of the narrator’s speech. The author included an interview history, which contained all the applicable interview information, biographical summary, and subjects discussed for each interview.

Finally, the last step was to gather all the materials relating to the project to deposit at the archival depository as per initial agreement. This included the original and copies of all recordings, the transcripts, legal release forms, and any related research materials. These will be stored, preserved, and made accessible for future researchers at

\textsuperscript{115} Donald A. Richie, \textit{Doing Oral History}, 64.
\textsuperscript{116} Donald A. Richie, Doing Oral History, 65; Edward D. Ives, The Tape-Recorded Interview, 75.
The Center for Sacramento History houses many archival collections such as the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Collection, among others. These collections will complement *A Past for the Present: Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project*, which should prove useful to researchers interested in historic preservation, urban renewal projects, and, of course, the creation of the Old Sacramento Historic District.

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118 Information regarding The Center for Sacramento History, formerly known as the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center (SAMCC), can be found at: [http://www.cityofsacramento.org/ccl/history/](http://www.cityofsacramento.org/ccl/history/).
Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Participating in the creation of the Old Sacramento Historic District was, for the most part, a rewarding experience for the three narrators of *A Past for the Present*. Two of the narrators, Jim Henley and Ed Astone, both Sacramento Valley born and bred, were very young men just entering their professional careers, factors which had an impact on how they perceived their roles in the redevelopment/preservation project and its ambitions. Ted Leonard, on the other hand, was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, and came to the project ten years after Henley and Astone. Leonard was also older, and a practiced architect, when he joined the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency in 1974, which perhaps influenced his experiences in a different way.

Although the narrators’ experiences in Old Sacramento were often fraught with bureaucratic obstacles and various frustrations that continue to this day, their remembrances proved largely positive, and each one was remarkably willing to open up and talk about their lives. All expressed the enthusiasm, devotion, and satisfaction they felt in helping to shape the historic district, an innovative project of national significance. Preserving the historic heart of the city was meaningful not only for them, but as a legacy for future generations interested in discovering the city’s unique history.

Interpretation: Assessing the Interview

The personal perspectives in oral histories add considerable value to unexplored areas of the past, deepening our historical consciousness in countless ways. However,
one must be mindful about oral sources when dealing with the subjectivity of memory, which can present problems of reliability. Thus, as with all other sources, the historian must cross-check and weigh the information against other narratives and sources.  

Conducting the interviews for *A Past for the Present* provided the author with the ability to compare and cross-check the recollections of the narrators, all of whom were discussing many of the same events, people, and circumstances. This does not mean that the veracity of the narrators is based on similar information given while describing their experiences. Instead, as Allesandro Portelli asserts, the remembering of “shared” experience is influenced by both the historical context and by social frameworks of memory.  

This not only teaches us something about the event in question, but allows us to better gauge its impact and meaning.

Michael Frisch suggests applying the following three questions to help explore the complexity of the interview: *who is talking? What are they talking about? And what sorts of statements are they saying about it?*  

Understanding the individual narrator and his relationship with the topic of discussion – who he is, what sort of personal stake he may have had in presenting a particular version, or simply how his personal worldview colored his perspective and therefore his telling – can prove useful in assessing the interview. An example of this can be found in the different “stories” told about Eleanor

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120 Ibid.

McClatchy, then president of her family’s newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*, regarding how the narrators perceived her support or lack of support for Old Sacramento.

Henley and Astone each described how they perceived Eleanor McClatchy’s reaction to and support of the historic district, through her newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*. Henley described how McClatchy waged a fight against routing the freeway along 2nd and 3rd Streets, because this would destroy the *Bee*’s historic building on 3rd Street. The final route chosen did indeed go through 3rd Street, and the *Bee* building was demolished. McClatchy had every brick put in storage, and at that point, according to Henley, “she walked away from the project.”122 Thereafter, she had very little to do with Old Sacramento for many years. Henley recalled,

> The *Bee* took a kind of benign position on Old Sacramento at that point. They didn’t oppose things but didn’t really get out and actively support it for quite a long time. I may be overemphasizing a point but I thought I could see a change in the way the *Bee* looked at Old Sacramento … it isn’t that they didn’t report on what was going on down there, they did, but there was no zeal for the project for years.123

Conversely, Astone remembered it a bit differently. While admitting that Henley knew “the story much more intimately than I do,” he recalled that because of the selected freeway route,

> They did not carry any reporting animosity because of that decision. They reported us, they were kind, they were complimentary, they did some fun things, some funny things, you know? Some of the ads that some – well, we did a lot of stuff with the *Sacramento Union* too – but the *Bee* did a good job, they didn’t carry a grudge or anything like that, except editorializing about what a dumb place to put the stupid freeway.124

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123 Ibid.
While this may seem like an insignificant piece of the overall history, it points to layers of perspective that are endowed with meaning.

Distinct personality traits or tendencies that may influence the narrator’s outlook come through in the dialog. Henley, the city’s History Manager, qualifies his recollection, perhaps in the attempt to be fair, or precise: “I may be overemphasizing a point,” “I thought I could see,” and “it isn’t that they didn’t report on what was going on down there.” But by claiming the *Bee* had no “zeal” for the project, Henley’s impression is clear. In his view, the McClatchy’s *Bee* took a definite position on the Old Sacramento project and it was lukewarm, if not outright unfavorable. Perhaps this came from having a deeper connection to the McClatchy family at the time, and from being an insider on the preservation front more so than Astone, or perhaps it was simply his measured take on this particular history, filtered through subsequent experience.

Astone, the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency Project Director, and self-described “implementer” of the Old Sacramento project, concedes that Henley “knows the story much more intimately” than he does, yet his tendency to see the positive sides of things is evident here. Throughout his interviews, Astone repeatedly sees himself as “seeing the glass half-full.” His experience with the *Bee* is a positive one, and he focuses on memories that validate this position. Neither is “wrong” here – an in-depth study of *Sacramento Bee* editorials and articles of the time may reveal a certain slant to favoring one position over another – but the larger point is that oral history, as expressed by Portelli, “… is not only about the event. It is about the place and meaning of the event
within the lives of the tellers.”

Understanding that both perspectives are “true” tells us more about what it meant within the lives of the narrators, and how it may have shaped this particular history.

**The Form: How Stories Construct Historical Experience**

*A Past for the Present* was an oral history project designed to unearth historical information about a specific time and place: the creation of the Old Sacramento Historic District. But the content of these oral histories – *what* was said – is only part of its value to researchers. *How* it was told can also be useful in addressing larger historical questions. According to folklorist Barbara Allen, story is “one such form that affords rich interpretive potential for historians interested in how narrators perceive and construct historical experience.”

The author discovered that each narrator told many stories to communicate their experiences, to illustrate a point, or answer a question. According to Allen, stories often appear in oral histories because they are a natural means of describing experience and expressing its meaning. Additionally, stories can tell us “something about the larger structures of historical consciousness within which individual narrators understand their own experiences. This is what makes them valuable to historians, for stories of personal experiences told in oral history can suggest larger, collectively constructed notions of experience.”

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127 Ibid.
The stories told in the interviews revealed key elements or categories of how memory is organized and constructed, and how this shapes historical understanding and meaning. Recurring themes in an interview can suggest what the narrator considers a key aspect of his historical experience. Recurring themes in *A Past for the Present* include anecdotes about overcoming challenging obstacles – which Ed Astone, the self-described “implementer” – consistently surmounted. Jim Henley, a natural storyteller, recalls the people, or cast of characters, as central to shaping almost everything that happened. Ted Leonard’s somewhat artistic and philosophical mindset seemed to recall many of his experiences as tragic or comedic, or a mix of both. All of this seems to suggest a way that the narrators understand their own lives. And for the purposes of this project, it can also reveal how personal stories often reflect common understandings of the kinds of experiences people have, which help to shape a collective historical consciousness.

**Project Findings: Areas of Scholarly Interest**

The findings relate to the following areas of scholarly interest, which guided the author in identifying themes and formulating questions for the purposes of *A Past for the Present*. They are based upon the experiences as told by the three narrators. As with most oral history projects, these findings are selections from a study of somewhat limited scope. A project of wider scope would most likely have revealed radically different social, cultural, and political histories of the place and the time in which the Old Sacramento Historic District was created. However, it is important to note that the

128 Ibid., 607.
objectives of the project were specific and purposely limited in design. The particular goal was to obtain the collective knowledge and experience of the three narrators, who had left, or were about to leave their management roles in the Old Sacramento Historic District. With this in mind, the author will utilize the narratives to briefly examine the following key issues involved in the creation of the historic district.

The Old Sacramento Historic District was one of the first historic districts in the nation, designated in 1965. Its creation is an excellent case study of a city’s unique response to the post World War II federal urban renewal programs that attempted to redevelop and modernize deteriorating city cores. In Sacramento, the urban renewal policies, championed by city planners looking to the future, collided with the efforts of preservationists looking to save the past. Debate emerged over several divisive and unifying issues, some of which included: blight designation and eminent domain; plans to demolish the city’s most historic area to build a freeway; and the efforts and compromises made to preserve the historic district.

**Blight Designation and Eminent Domain**

The Sacramento Redevelopment Agency had governmental authority to declare properties blighted in order to redevelop the particular site or area. They could do this in one of two ways: offer to purchase from the current owner, or seize the property through eminent domain. Not surprisingly, this controversial program created many problems for the Redevelopment Agency and city officials, but mostly for displaced people and businesses. The author asked Ted Leonard, the Agency Architect, how areas were
designated blighted for redevelopment purposes, although much of the early redevelopment areas had been cleared by the time he arrived in 1974. He replied:

That was back in the early seventies or late sixties, which precedes my interest in Old Sacramento, but the Capitol Mall, the Capitol, which was the gateway, was a lot of residential, and little Mom and Pop grocery stories that primarily sold liquor. And they probably used the same criteria, you know, the economic value to the city, what the crime rate was, what the health problems were, the state of the property—all the tools the government had to declare that there was a higher and better use.\(^\text{129}\)

Leonard responds with verifiable information, which is direct and to the point. He is not necessarily taking a side in a difficult issue. He reminds the author that it preceded his “interest” in Old Sacramento therefore telling this particular part of the story from a perspective of some remove.

Ed Astone, the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency Project Director, however, took a different position, which is clearly based on his position with the Agency as a young man, the responsibility that entailed, and his own views on political and social issues. This topic was difficult and uncomfortable for Astone, and the interviewer saw the need to tread lightly during this part of the interview, while wishing to get the information at the same time. Asked about the property owners in Old Sacramento who may not have been interested in selling or renovating their buildings to the new historic district’s specifications, Astone replied with a story:

Now, in most cases I was meeting with a second or third generation owner who had no interest in spending money on this trashy old building, or this vacant site. They just wanted to be left alone because they were milking it, it was either a flophouse or a bar, or a parking lot, or a junkyard, or however it was being used as part of a derelict area. So they would say, “You’ve gotta be kidding, you’ve gotta be kidding.” I’d say, “No, no. We really want you to redevelop your property and

this is what it’s going to look like.” They’d say, “Well, I don’t want it to look like that.” “Well, this is what it’s gonna have to look like because it’s the master plan, it says this is what it’s supposed to look like and the [city] ordinance says you gotta follow the master plan, so if you’re going to do anything on your property, this is what it has to look like.” … “Well, you blank, blank, blank …” you know, and then he got very personal, and started swearing and this and that. I said, “However, now that it’s clear that you’re not interested in developing, we’ll buy you out. We have the resources to buy you out.”130

When the author asked if this meant eminent domain, Astone instead referred to it as “negotiating a purchase, under the ‘threat’ of eminent domain. There’s a big difference.”

Astone seemed to believe that “negotiating under the threat of eminent domain” and actual eminent domain would result in something different if a property owner refused to go along with the redevelopment plan. As it turned out, there were property owners who sued over the issue. Astone described one case in particular as another story to illustrate the Agency’s means to acquire properties in the redevelopment zones. This story involved the owner of a restaurant who went to court over the amount offered for her property. The court awarded her $10,000 over the Agency’s original offer, which was much less than what she wanted. But the Agency used this settlement as a precedent – the “negotiating for purchase ‘under’ the threat of eminent domain.” Astone clearly saw this as a triumph for himself and the Agency – a difficult obstacle had been overcome.131

The Freeway Battle and Compromises Made

The battle over where to put the Interstate 5 freeway in Sacramento occurred during the late 1950s and lasted until the final route was selected in 1962. On one side

131 Ibid.
were the Redevelopment Agency, City Council, Chamber of Commerce and the State Division of Highways, who all agreed the route should cut through 2nd and 3rd Streets, which would obliterate many historic buildings in its path. On the other side were the preservationists, who became increasingly alarmed and resistant to the Agency’s wide-scale demolition of the city’s historic urban landscape. After much debate, public hearings, and a press fight between the Sacramento Bee (against) and the Sacramento Union (for), the parties involved negotiated a compromise. The freeway route would bulge east of 2nd Street to save Old Sacramento and create the historic district. The author asked the narrators to describe how this struggle and compromise created and critically impacted the district. Jim Henley, during the final group interview offered the following synopsis:

Certainly the Redevelopment Agency was working in an area that was foreign to them, they weren’t very knowledgeable for that matter. Old Sacramento is probably the first, if not one of the first, historic urban renewal districts in the United States. There was no precedent for it, and so therefore, they didn’t quite know what they were getting into. On the other hand there’s another factor to it too, unlike other project areas in Sacramento – Old Sacramento is forged out of a compromise and a very heated fight. A real community struggle over I-5, and so it has that baggage that goes with it … 132

One consequence of the Agency not knowing “what they were getting into” resulted in a tendency to hire consultants for district planning. This, in the view of the narrators, was not always successful for a variety of reasons; one being that governments usually ask consultants for comparables – a model of what something should look like. But Old Sacramento had no precedent; it was a unique urban renewal historic preservation project.

Ed Astone recalls the conflict as a conversation between the planners of redevelopment and those interested in preserving the historic buildings, led by preservationists in the state’s Department of Beaches and Parks, the forerunner to State Parks and Recreation.

Redevelopment began to look at this whole area. In those days, clearance was the way to go … oh heck, they want to route I-5, where are they going to put I-5? I know, put it right along the waterfront. [The Department of Beaches and Parks] did an inventory of the buildings down there … it formed the basis of “Wait a minute, time out, time out, you don’t route the freeway right down the waterfront because you’ll wipe out the bulk of the collection of those buildings. Put it on the other side of the river.” [Redevelopment planners] said, “Well, we can’t do that because your city council says that they’re negotiating with Macy’s to put in a department store, and Macy’s will only put in a department store if they have an off-ramp right next to their store, so it means the freeway has to be on this side of the river. So, okay … why don’t we just come under Capitol Mall … and out here over the railroad yards, then you’ve got this little area here called Old Sacramento?"

The compromise meant that for the Division of Highways, the freeway plans could commence, “the city council was satisfied because they could get their Macy’s,” and the preservationists were satisfied because most of the buildings were saved.

Jim Henley remembered the roles of Eleanor McClatchy and Aubrey Neasham (the state historian and a leading preservationist), as most central to the story of the freeway battle. McClatchy put up a fierce fight to prevent the freeway from plowing through the historic Bee building, and, according to Henley, went as far as to use her connections with the Kennedy Administration to have the construction funds frozen. Neasham by now was working all sides of the fight to try to reach an agreement between

the Redevelopment Agency – who had already signed an agreement with Macy’s – the State Division of Highways, the city council, and preservation interests.

The eventual agreement pleased many of the parties involved and would help “pay for a master plan for an urban renewal project called Old Sacramento.” The compromise meant that the freeway would still tear through the city’s heart and historic sites, and that some buildings, like the Bee’s, would be lost. It also meant that for Neasham, “this freeway creates a barrier between Old Sacramento and the rest of the city that allows us to do it differently than the rest of the city would do. We can do a really intense development here.”134 As Henley recalled, “He came to believe it as a bonus. At the point he did that, I don’t think Eleanor [McClatchy] ever spoke to him again.”135

Looking back to the controversy, Henley acknowledged a strong tendency in all who were involved in Old Sacramento to sometimes rationalize things.

If you can’t change it, you tend to look at it in terms of what can you get that’s good out of it, you know? I’ve always felt that I-5 is a negative influence on Old Sacramento from an overall perspective. It’s a sound blight, it’s a visual blight, it provides enormous circulation problems. On the other hand, it has some positive aspects for Old Sacramento. Neasham was right, it allowed for a concentration of development that would never have been possible.136

Ted Leonard, too, although not in Sacramento during the freeway battle, viewed the outcome in terms of what it did for Old Sacramento. It “created Old Sacramento in the sense that it set it apart, so that there is a distinct boundary. In so many other cities, the

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135 Ibid.  
136 Ibid.
historic district flows into the central business core.” But setting it apart also, according to Leonard, made access to Old Sacramento difficult.137

Narrators’ Parting Thoughts

The author conducted the group interview after all three narrators had been interviewed twice, with the exception of Henley, who was interviewed three times. This interview proved problematic for a couple of reasons, the most significant being the loss of a part of the recording. The other issue was the difficulty in trying to have a conversation with three people at one time. For the most part, it went smoothly, there were not too many instances where more than one narrator talked. Immediately after the interview, the author felt that she had completely lost control of it, but upon review and transcription, she recognized that it provided a completely different dynamic that seemed to free the group from earlier constraints as they participated in a more frank and informal conversation.

This openness, and perhaps because it was the last interview of the project, allowed the narrators to discuss their opinions, frustrations, and regrets about their experiences in Old Sacramento. They also came to some consensus about what they saw as the most pressing issues for the district. A major issue was the lack of interpretation in old Sacramento. All three narrators had also discussed that regret in their individual interviews. As Ted Leonard sees it,

People looked at Old Sacramento and they saw what they saw, but they didn’t know, really, what Old Sacramento was all about – the general public. And that

was one of the shortcomings, and in my opinion is still part of the shortcomings. They see it from their own perspective … we’ve not done a good job of educating the public as to the significance of each of the buildings.\footnote{Leonard, group interview, September 19, 2007.}

While Ed Astone agreed about the lack of interpretation in the district, he also saw it from a development perspective. Because the original plans had settled on individual property developers as opposed to a single developer, the problem of “too many cooks” arose, resulting in a lack of cohesion, or common goal to effectively participate in the enhancement of Old Sacramento as an historic district.

I think what we did and how we did it was right, for the moment, and there was strong support all the way across the line, from the mayor, council, city management, and everybody, to do it on this individual basis. And these little fires would pop up now and then, but we would kind of stay the course, and it became developed. One of the shortcomings has been the quality, or lack of quality, of the ideas and integrity of the property ownership. And that’s a major problem today in 2007.\footnote{Astone, group interview, September 19, 2007.}

Multiple property owners and merchants, and the conflicts between commercial and historic interests have been problematic for Old Sacramento from its inception. But the fact is it had to be designed as a commercial district in order for it to be built. As Henley remarked,

> In my estimation there are some big successes down there, there are some things that have gone reasonably well. I think overall, the use of redevelopment funds as a force, a financial tool to make a historic district happen, is well proven that it could happen there …but the biggest problem in Old Sacramento has been in the failure to look at the big picture – to look at the larger context of why you do it, and what you do with it once you’ve done it, and how you manage it when you have it.\footnote{Henley, interview, July 31, 2007.}

Regardless of the ongoing issues and frustrations the narrators experienced as they oversaw the creation and direction of Old Sacramento, they expressed a real joy and
sense of satisfaction in having been a part of preserving an area of national historic
significance. Ted Leonard discussed how the story of gold in California was a historically
significant global event, and the commercial heart of it was in Sacramento. “As far as
the west coast goes, it’s very significant. A lot happened here; a tremendous amount of
things happened here that influenced the entire world.” He also admitted that there was a
little bit of ego involved in it too, “from the standpoint of being part of something that
was significant, whether your name ever appears anywhere.”141

Jim Henley expressed complex feelings about Old Sacramento, and his forty years
of involvement in it. He maintained that he came into a project that was already
conceptualized. It had some form to it and he understood the vision of the people who
put it together because he had the opportunity to interact closely with them, one of whom
was Aubrey Neasham. He accepted that vision and tried to carry it forward. Henley
thought the historical image of Old Sacramento is not necessarily the historical
impression he would like to leave but “the impression is there. I would say the same
thing about Old Sacramento as I said about a couple of other projects that I’ve been
associated with for a long time. I grew it and it’s somebody else’s job to mature it.”142

In answer to what he felt was his most successful plan in Old Sacramento, Ed
Astone remarked, “the most successful is the fact that it’s there.” The history of how it
came to be is secondary to Astone. What is important is that it exists and that people can
enjoy themselves at its restaurants and shops, take a train ride or float down the river on a
riverboat. Irrespective of how it was done or who did what, “I got to be part of a major,

142 Henley, interview, July 31, 2007.
major, transformation of a very important part of Sacramento – it’s where the city was founded, where it started. And the fact that it is a reality gives me an enormous amount of pleasure.”143 This is what gives Astone satisfaction about his role in Old Sacramento, and as he describes it, he was one of the key implementers to make it happen.

**Conclusion**

*A Past for the Present* was a complicated project that involved an enormous amount of research and time. Because it was underwritten by the City of Sacramento, a governmental institution, there were some constraints as to the expectations for the project as well as to its scope and content. Gathering the history of the Old Sacramento Historic District from early and significant participants was crucial to discovering the information sought. However, after researching the topic, the author discovered that this particular story needed to be told from the perspective of other community members who had also experienced this transformative era in Sacramento history. Interviews with early merchants, community activists, displaced residents and business owners would have portrayed a more complete history of not only how the Old Sacramento Historic District came to be, but also what it meant for the people and the larger community that it impacted. Unfortunately, the time and funding required to expand the project was unavailable.

However, for the purposes of the project, the author discovered many remarkable stories behind the creation of Old Sacramento as told by the narrators and through her

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research on the topic. It took an incredible amount of vision and passion for preservationists to stop the relentless onslaught of urban renewal to create Old Sacramento. This could be seen as an expression of competing visions for the city’s identity – one looking to the future, the other looking to the past. Old Sacramento was an innovative experiment in using federal urban renewal funds to create an historic district, one of the very first in the nation. This ‘experiment’ included years of trial and error to create and sustain it.

Applying oral history theory to interpreting the interviews was especially revealing, in terms of better understanding how memory is constructed by the retelling of events, and how that shapes historical consciousness. The group interview especially, revealed how the narrators, helped along with a collective remembering, often reached a shared history. Yet, one could see how their individual experiences and worldview affected their initial impressions of Old Sacramento, and consequently, their memories of those impressions. Finally, the sharing of the narrators’ individual and collective experiences also forced the author to reevaluate some of her own preconceptions about the topic. Overall, A Past for the Present proved to be an educational, rewarding, and insightful experience for all involved.
APPENDIX A

Sample Contact Letter
Dear Mr. Leonard,

My name is Lisa C. Prince and I am in the beginning stages of an oral history project that I will be conducting for the City of Sacramento. The project relates to the origins, planning, and eventual realization of the city’s historic district known as “Old Sacramento.” Considering your involvement as the former Agency Architect for the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency, and as Old Sacramento Project Manager, we are hoping you will agree to be interviewed for this project. If you are in agreement, would you kindly let me know if you will be available for two interview sessions to be conducted the third and fourth weeks of August? If this presents a scheduling conflict, please let me know if you would be available in July instead, and I can easily rework my schedule to conform to yours.

I thank you in advance for your consideration. If you would like to reach me to discuss the project or available times to be interviewed, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at the following phone numbers:

SAMCC: 916-264-7072, or
My Home: 916-441-1541

With all best regards,

Lisa C. Prince
APPENDIX B

Sample Release Form
ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

We hereby donate to the Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center (SAMCC) for such scholarly and educational purposes as SAMCC shall determine, all rights, title, and copyright interest in the tape (audio/video) recordings, transcriptions, and their contents of our interview conducted on 8/21/2007.

Subject to the following conditions

Theodore R. Leonard
(Name of Narrator)

Lisa C. Prince
(Name of Interviewer)

Theodore R. Leonard
(Signature)

Lisa C. Prince
(Signature)

(Address of Narrator)

21 Aug '07
(Date of Agreement)

"Old Sacramento Historic District"

Subject of Tapes:

Oral History Project
APPENDIX C

Sample Interview Questions
Old Sacramento Historic District Oral History Project

Sacramento Archives and Museum Collection Center

July 18, 2007

# 1 Interview with James Henley

Background Information

1. Tell me a little about when and where you were born.

2. Where did you grow up? Childhood interests, siblings

3. Education, Interests in history? Historic preservation?

4. When did you come to Sacramento? What were your first impressions? Where did you live? Jobs?

5. Were the urban renewal projects well established by this time? Can you talk about this a bit? What were some of the early projects?

6. When did you meet Dr. Aubrey Neasham? Tell me about the circumstances of this meeting.

7. What was your relationship with Dr. Neasham?

8. How did you get involved with the Old Sacramento Historic District?
9. What were Dr. Neasham’s goals and objectives for the historic district?

10. Did you share these same goals and objectives? Why? If not, how were yours different?

11. What began the impetus for preservation of the historic district?

12. What was the relationship between the city of Sacramento and the Federal government in terms of the construction of the Interstate 5 freeway?

13. What was the state’s role in this?

14. Was this one of the early historic preservation efforts in the country? Were there any comparable efforts being made in other cities that you knew about? If so, did you study these? What were they? How were they different or the same?

15. Did you know Eleanor McClatchy? Tell me about this. What was her influence in the urban renewal projects?

16. What was Aubrey Neasham’s role in the project? Tell me about the Historic Landmarks Commission that he was involved in, when was that formed? Was this in some ways a reaction to the city’s redevelopment activities and plans?

17. Do you think this was a familiar scene in cities across the country after the war?

18. Most cities consider themselves unique in one way or another, and indeed they are. But in several ways, particularly regarding urban renewal and historic preservation, how was Sacramento unique?

19. Tell me about your role in Old Sacramento. What was your relationship to the city? The Redevelopment Agency? What was you title, responsibilities?
20. Aubrey Neasham gave this Old Sacramento historic preservation project a name: “Preservation for Use,” how did he define this? Did or do you agree? Why or why not?

21. Was this a feasible objective? How? Why or why not?

22. What does preservationists – v – historians mean to you? Can you tell me something about this conflict, if indeed it did exist?

23. What about preservationists and historians – vs – developers?

24. How did this work and not work in Old Sacramento?

25. Tell me how and why “historic distinctiveness and identity” was added to the commercial interests?

26. I’ve read in some of the redevelopment agency’s materials that the master plan for Old Sacramento had specific goals and philosophies for the historic district some of which were: A living museum setting; “preservation for use;” and that “authenticity should be the watchword.” Can you tell me about this?

27. Authenticity – vs – Atmosphere -- What are the differences? How does this apply to Old Sacramento?

28. Why was the time frame limited to 1849 –1870? Who made this decision? Did it work, why or why not?

29. How would you answer the charge of Old Sacramento being a sort of “theme-park history” setting, an interpretation of history? Or an exploitation of old buildings for modern commercial interests?

30. Was this direction unavoidable? Why, if you could, how and why would you do it differently?
APPENDIX D

Sample Interview Review
June 21, 2007

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Old Sacramento Historic District

Review of first interview (June 21, 2007) with Ed Astone

The interview went very well. It went the full 2 hours and we agreed that we should meet for one more session next week because I have some areas that I think need to be covered in more detail, and even some questions that I did not get the opportunity to ask. Ed gave me lots of information about many aspects of Old Sacramento and his role there, however, I sort of feel that we were all over the place and that the interview did not stick to a chronology, like my formed questions had sought. But, this is the beauty of oral histories. There is only a certain amount of control that the interviewer should insist upon. The interviewee ought to be given at least some free reign to express him or herself through the stories about the topic. This involves the jogging of memories, sometimes this is not so clean and well defined, in terms of insisting upon a strict order of things. Ed went off on some tangents, we always were able to get back to the topic at hand – but—this is a very complex and many layered history and I feel as though we are making great progress.

I will listen to the tapes (2 hours). We can then discuss the areas that need more detail or explanation, as well as other subjects or topics not covered this time.

Lisa C. Prince
APPENDIX E

Ed Astone (Transcripts)
Interview History and Transcripts: CD attachment

Interview History includes interview information, date and location, biographical summary, and subjects discussed. Interview history and transcripts are located on CD attachment.

E1: Interview History for June 21, 2007
E2: Transcript, Tape 1
E3: Transcript, Tape 2
E4: Interview History for June 28, 2007
E5: Transcript, Tape 3
E6: Transcript, Tape 4
APPENDIX F

Jim Henley (Transcripts)
Interview History and Transcripts: CD attachment

Interview History includes interview information, date and location, biographical summary, and subjects discussed. Interview history and transcripts are located on CD attachment.

F1: Interview History for July 18, 2007
F2: Transcript, Tape 1
F3: Interview History for July 26, 2007
F4: Transcript, Tape 2
F5: Transcript, Tape 3
F6: Interview History for July 31, 2007
F7: Transcript, Tape 4
F8: Transcript, Tape 5
APPENDIX G
Ted Leonard (Transcripts)
Interview History and Transcripts: CD attachment

Interview History includes interview information, date and location, biographical summary, and subjects discussed. Interview history and transcripts are located on CD attachment.

G1: Interview History for August 21, 2007
G2: Transcript, Tape 1
G3: Transcript, Tape 2
G4: Interview History for September 11, 2007
G5: Transcript, Tapes 3 and 4
APPENDIX H

Group: Astone, Henley, & Leonard (Transcripts)
Interview History and Transcripts: CD attachment

Interview History includes interview information, date and location, biographical summary, and subjects discussed. Interview history and transcripts are located on CD attachment.

H1: Interview History for September 19, 2007

H2: Transcript, Tape 1 & 2
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