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## Opening Up the Archives

A new digital platform for LA Aqueduct history

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*That which Los Angeles has not and will not is not.*  
—Commemorative of the Official Opening,  
the Los Angeles Aqueduct and Exposition Park (1913)<sup>1</sup>

**I**n Los Angeles, we go about our daily lives in a world made possible by the LA Aqueduct, utterly dependent on a massive undertaking that brings water to our faucets from the Eastern Sierra more than two hundred

miles away. The very shape of the city, its famous sprawling complexity, bears the watermark of the aqueduct as well as the fingerprints of the aqueduct's masterminds, if you know where and how to read the signs. Those signs can also be traced in historical archives around Southern California, where the documentary record of the aqueduct's construction, history, and continuing impact is preserved in boxes of photographs, papers, engineering drawings, and maps.

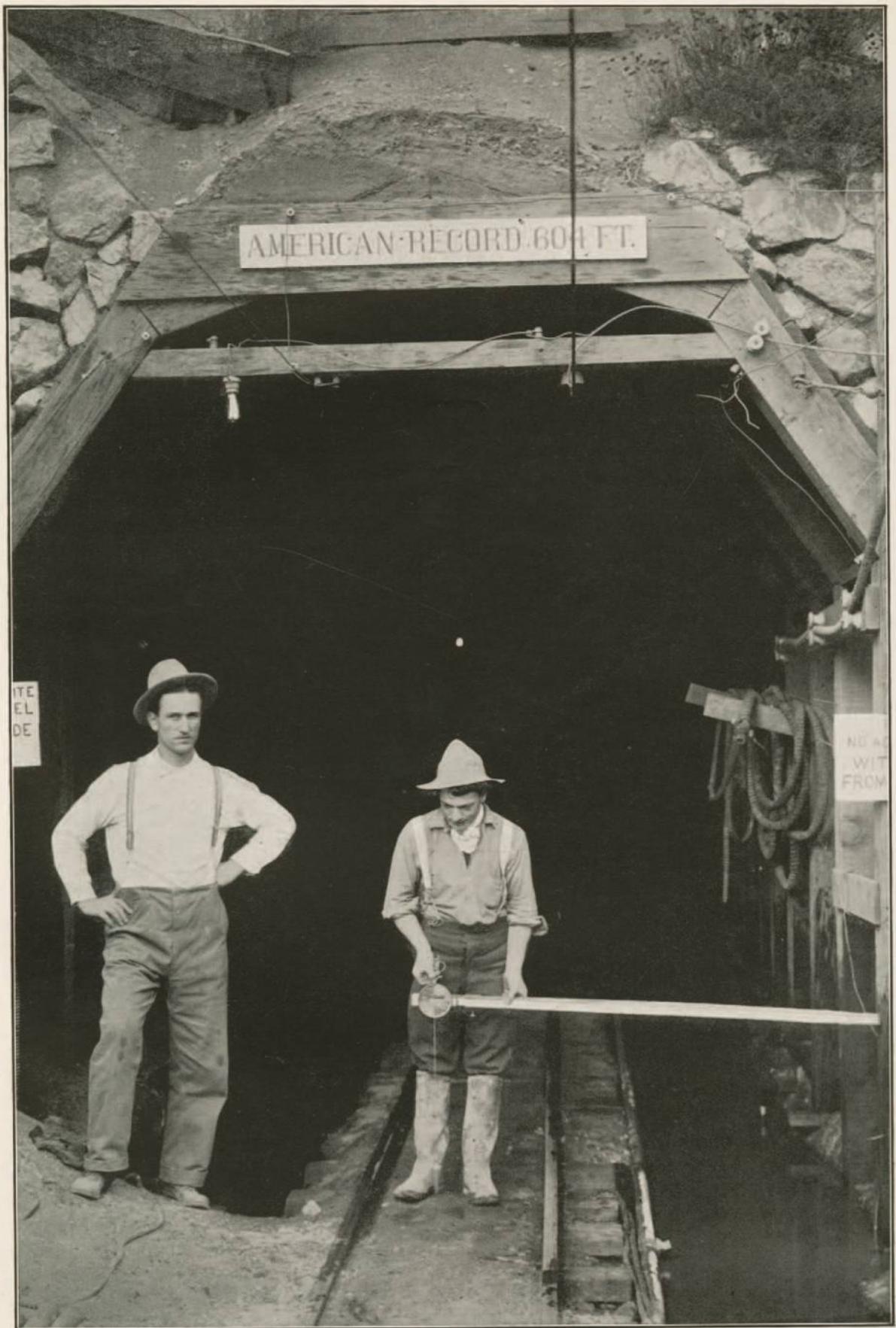
Now, in conjunction with the centennial of the aqueduct, the Los Angeles Aqueduct Digital Platform—a joint project



TUFA QUARRY AT FAIRMONT



CONSTRUCTION OF OPEN LINED CANAL IN OWENS VALLEY



PORTAL OF ELIZABETH TUNNEL, WHERE AMERICAN HARD-ROCK RECORD WAS MADE



of UCLA Library and the Metabolic Studio—is working with other archival repositories to digitize, aggregate, and curate this rich body of documentary material and make these vital records accessible to scholars, students, and citizens so that new histories can be written and new stories can be told. At the heart of these collaborative efforts is a shared belief that cultural institutions entrusted with stewardship of the city’s history have an important role to play inspiring new research and informing new conversations on the social and environmental impacts of the aqueduct and the urban developments it has made possible. The new digital platform will do this by making historical sources in the archives readily accessible, providing a context for narratives about the past, present, and future of the aqueduct, and creating a space for civic dialogue in Los Angeles, Owens Valley, and beyond.

What do we gain from preserving and contextualizing the archival records of the aqueduct? The most striking and immediate reward is a history of technology, a story of engineering prowess. Glance at the photographs of the aqueduct’s creation in UCLA’s Library Special Collections, and you’ll see evidence of the sheer ambition of one of the

largest municipal projects undertaken in this country and the practical challenges faced by the workers, animals, and machines that built the aqueduct. You’ll also find evidence of the political maneuvering and, some might say, corruption, as well as the planning necessary to create and transport raw building materials, and the organization required to recruit, house, and provision workers in isolated construction sites—all necessary for the completion of the aqueduct. These archives give us a sense of the hubris and determination of the aqueduct’s builders, an attitude captured by the closing words of the commemorative volume celebrating its completion: “That which Los Angeles has not and will not is not.”

Archival records document the attitudes of the individual, municipal, and corporate entities that designed and built the aqueduct, as well as such figures as President Theodore Roosevelt, who endorsed the construction and hailed the aqueduct as a product of progress and development in the American West. But, just as importantly, the archival records preserve multiple perspectives and subaltern voices, which haunt the history of the aqueduct, voices

that risk being marginalized or forgotten altogether if they are not archived, preserved, cataloged, and remembered.

The creation of the LA Aqueduct pitted Owens Valley and the City of Los Angeles in a bitter dispute over water rights and consumption of natural resources. One striking theme that can be traced through the aqueduct's archives is the controversy surrounding the impacts of the aqueduct on the environment in Los Angeles itself, in addition to the environment in Owens Valley and the Mono Basin, whose water the city exploited. From its inception, one might say, the story of the aqueduct has dripped with political, human drama—corruption and exploitation, victory and defeat—the stuff of movies for which the city is justly famous. Warring newspaper columns are but one rich source of material for understanding the dense, complicated social,

economic, and political discourses through which the meaning of the aqueduct has been debated. The debate continues. The language in these archives provides a record of the continued conflict, compromise, and contentious conversations surrounding the use of water, conversations that can still provide intellectual resources for new, innovative perspectives on the history and the future of Los Angeles.

But these archives of the aqueduct also transcend narrow regional histories and offer windows into larger themes of urban growth in the twentieth century, federal land regulation, labor organizing, economic development, as well as evolving conceptions and legal definitions of the public interest in natural resources. The story of the aqueduct may be told in light of other iconic, historic building projects, such as the Brooklyn Bridge or the Panama





Canal, whose stories likewise are entangled in histories of labor, politics, environment, and economic development.

Wallace Stegner famously said that California is like the rest of America, only more so. In this regard, the history of the development and allocation of water resources, a cornerstone of Southern California history, is an index of a larger story of American and even global urbanization. The Los Angeles Aqueduct is a living artifact of LA's history, an implicit part of our everyday lives, but it is also part of a greater, global story of the development of

urban landscapes, the social implications of forms of urban development, and their effects on surrounding environments.

Efforts such as those by UCLA and Metabolic Studio to preserve and provide access to the aqueduct's archival record provide resources for deepening a crucial, challenging civic dialogue between Los Angeles and Owens Valley. They may also ultimately enable us to re-envision the integral relationship between our great cities and the rest of the world. **B**



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> F.B. Davison, *Commemorative of the Official Opening, the Los Angeles Aqueduct and Exposition Park: November Fifth and Sixth, Nineteen Hundred Thirteen* (Los Angeles: Kingsley, Mason & Collins Co, 1913), [26].

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, CHARLES E. YOUNG RESEARCH LIBRARY, UCLA. First page: Cottonwood Reservoir site, 1905, from photograph album of Owens Valley. Second page clockwise from upper left: Tufa

Quarry at Fairmont, Portal of Elizabeth Tunnel, Construction of Open Lined Canal in Owens Valley, from *Construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct Final Report*, Board of Public Service Commissioners of the City of Los Angeles, 1916. Third page from left to right: Los Angeles Aqueduct Right of Way from Collection of California Postcards (Collection Number 1351), Finishing the open section of the aqueduct from Collection of Scrapbooks (Collection Number 155). Fourth page: Owens Lake south from Cottonwood, 1906, from Photograph Album of Owens Valley (Collection Number 94/194).