

# GRIFFITH PARK

## Summary: Description

The largest interurban wilderness park in the United States, Griffith Park is a 4,218-acre City of Los Angeles public park located within the eastern edge of the Santa Monica Mountains, due northwest of downtown Los Angeles and adjacent to a 4.9 mile stretch of the Los Angeles River. Most of Griffith Park is a chaparral wilderness of rocky hills, canyons, and gullies with large portions of open, rugged natural landscape. Plant species within the Park include an abundance of coastal native trees, shrubs, vines, and herbs, and riparian vegetation, including small quantities of threatened Manzanita and Berberis species. Non-native specimens are also well-represented, including numerous eucalyptus and redwood specimens. Griffith Park features seven peaks that exceed 1,000 feet. These upper elevations provide panoramic viewsheds of the greater Los Angeles metropolis and the Pacific Ocean under certain circumstances. Likewise, Griffith Park's hilly, natural terrain is visible for miles, and this upper viewshed is accentuated by two of the City's most iconic treasures: City Historic Cultural Monument (HCM) No. 111: the Hollywood Sign and HCM No 168: the Griffith Observatory.

Throughout Griffith Park are lower lying areas that feature lawns, picnic areas, infrastructure buildings, various recreational and educational amenities, and previously declared City of Los Angeles HCMs. Some of these resources represent the City's early cultural history, including City HCM No.112: the Gabrielino Indian Site, which is the only archeological landmark in Los Angeles and City HCM No. 401: the 1853 Feliz Adobe, which is the oldest building within Griffith Park. Many of the buildings in Griffith Park are excellent examples of a number of architectural styles, including the Classical Moderne Griffith Observatory of 1935; the 1927 Spanish Colonial Revival Municipal Plunge; the Wilson & Harding Golf Club House of 1937; the 1930 Second Greek Revival Greek Theatre, and the Mid-Century Modern Girls' Camp by Jones, Emmons & Contini completed in 1952. City HCM No. 474: the "Little Nugget" is a custom 1941 Union Pacific Club Car. Railroading as an educational, hobbying, and recreational activity is well represented in Griffith Park. Griffith Park also contains important objects and landscapes such as the Griffith Park Merry-Go-Round, Fern Dell, and abundant other examples within the terrain of rusticated Park Style infrastructure built by federal assistance programs in the 1930s.

Circulation through Griffith Park is achieved through 53 miles of hiking and bridle trails, in addition to various automobile roads which integrate and correspond to the natural terrain of the Park. The majority of the built amenities in the Park are located off of the auto roads, which themselves are primarily

located at the lower lying perimeter areas of the Park. The primary entrance into Griffith Park is on Crystal Springs Drive, which enters the Park at its southeast portion near the Griffith Park & Southern Miniature Railroad (1947,1961), and the Pony Rides (1946).

Crystal Springs Drive is the primary auto route running parallel to the Park through its northeast, flatlands portion, changing its name briefly to Western Heritage Way as it passes the Autry National Center, and again changing its name to become Zoo Drive as it runs north of the Los Angeles Zoo. Both the later-era Autry National Center (1988) and Los Angeles Zoo (1966) are located within Griffith Park at its northeast portion, and are important cultural destinations for Los Angeles residents. The Los Angeles Live Steamers Museum and Travel Town Transportation Museum are present along Zoo Drive in the northwest portion of the Park. Griffith Park Drive runs through the hilly portion of the Park in a manner loosely parallel to Crystal Springs Drive, and located along it are the Wilson and Harding Golf Courses with a 1938 Clubhouse built by the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Boys' Camp, the Old Zoo, and Park Center with its various amenities. The Wilson and Harding Golf Courses are two of five municipal golf courses throughout the Park. Major automobile roads into the park accessed at the Park's southern portion include Vermont Canyon Road, which passes the Greek Theatre, the Bird Sanctuary, and leads to the Observatory, Fern Dell Drive, and Canyon Drive, which leads to the Hollywoodland Girls' Camp. Commonwealth Drive ends at a gateway into the park, yet this road is not open to the public.

The Los Angeles River serves as a historic boundary for the north and east sides of Griffith Park. Portions of Griffith Park are located north of the Los Angeles River, and these include amenities such as the Los Feliz Golf Course, North Atwater Park, the Griffith Park Equestrian Center, the Central Service Yard, the Bette Davis Picnic Area, and an open, undeveloped flatlands riparian area called the Pollywog. Additionally, a portion of Griffith Park is located east of the Crystal Springs Drive entrance, and includes amenities such as Friendship Hall, a former clubhouse for the Los Angeles Breakfast Club called the "Ranger House," the Municipal Plunge and the rest of the multi-resource Griffith Park Recreation Center. The following page is a GIS map highlighting areas and resources of particular historic sensitivity in addition to areas that have been altered. Appendix 4 is a spreadsheet with GPS points for the vast majority of the resources discussed in the description essay, including all of the features highlighted upon the attached map.

## **Summary : Significance**

The result of a remarkable act of generosity, Griffith Park is the largest interurban wilderness park in the United States, and is now surrounded by the vast metropolis once predicted by Colonel Griffith J. Griffith. At 4,218 acres, Griffith Park comprises one-fourth the total acreage of Los

Angeles City parkland. Aside from natural wilderness, Griffith Park consists of numerous educational, recreational, and other built amenities, some of which are already vested with historic significance as icons for the City. Griffith Park represents the largest private land gift Los Angeles has ever received and is unique, even at a national level, for possessing a large-scale, mostly untouched landscape in the center of an urban metropolis. Large portions of this landscape appear to retain integrity dating back to the period of the Gabrielino Indians who were the earliest known inhabitants of the region.

Griffith Park meets **the first Criterion for City of Los Angeles Historic Cultural Monument (HCM) eligibility, “...in which the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community is reflected or exemplified:”**

Colonel Griffith specifically mandated that the property forever be available as a park to people of “modest means.” The gift of Griffith Park to the City and its people in 1896 by Colonel Griffith and his wife Mary Agnes Christina Mesmer (Tina Griffith) is a historically significant gesture completed within the turn-of-the-century context of large-scale philanthropy from the wealthy to the many, in addition to the context of the City Beautiful Movement. Griffith Park is also significant in the City’s historic pursuit of a reliable year-round supply of water for its rapidly increasing population at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Griffith Park meets the **second City of Los Angeles HCM Criterion, “...which are identified with historic personages or with events in the main currents of national, state, or local history:”**

Griffith Park is historically associated with *Colonel Griffith J. Griffith* and his wife *Tina Griffith* who deeded 3,015 acres of their property to the City of Los Angeles. Prior to this act, Colonel Griffith’s consistent and substantial deeds of philanthropy to the City in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century made him one of the “wheel horses,” as he was called by contemporaries, of the City’s early development. Aside from donating the park land itself, Colonel Griffith underwrote the Greek Theatre and the Griffith Observatory, both completed after his death in 1919.

Griffith Park is historically associated with *Van Griffith*, Colonel Griffith’s son, who as park developer and commissioner in the years following his father’s death implemented and defended his father’s wishes for Griffith Park. Griffith Park is historically associated with Park Superintendent *Frank Shearer* who oversaw the first recreational and irrigation developments in the park. Griffith Park is also historically associated to later Recreation and Parks Superintendent *George Hjelte*, a noted national authority on recreation who oversaw the expansion of various recreational activities in Griffith Park during the World War II era. Many of these recreational amenities are primary reasons why the Los Angeles citizenry and their children make Griffith Park a destination today.

The history of Griffith Park presents passing associations with other important Angelinos, including *Corporal Jose Vicente Feliz*, the first *Comisionado* (Manager) of the Los Angeles Pueblo and original owner of the Feliz Rancho—the majority of which is today Griffith Park; *Don Coronel*, a *Californio* and early Los Angeles mayor who later owned and lived on the rancho; and *Walt Disney*, who was a frequent park visitor and whose model railroad workshop was moved to the Los Angeles Live Steamers Railroad Museum. The diversity of these individuals points to Griffith Park’s significance as an early testament of a transforming Los Angeles—from open rancho to Anglo settlement, and its later association to people intimately identified with the City and its image across the world.

Griffith Park is eligible for City HCM listing under **the third City monuments Criterion: “...which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural-type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction:”**

Within Griffith Park are numerous structures and buildings that are intact and expressive examples of the Spanish Revival, Moderne, and Second Greek Revival design systems. The vast majority of these resources were completed within the Park’s period of significance: 1896-1958. Additionally, throughout Griffith Park are many excellent examples of retaining walls, culverts, drainage channels, barriers, pedestrian bridges, and drinking fountains primarily completed by various federally assisted work groups of the 1930s including the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). These objects are built in the rustic, “Park Style” of design as seen within National Parks of the same era.

The National Park Service defines a Cultural Landscape as “a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.”<sup>1</sup> Taken as a whole, Griffith Park’s eligibility under the above mentioned criteria render it a historically significant cultural landscape for the City of Los Angeles.

Griffith Park is significant under **the fourth City Monuments Criterion, “...which are a notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age:”**

Griffith Park contains the Griffith Observatory, completed by the firm of *John C. Austin & Frederic M. Ashley* who were architects of Los Angeles City Hall. Their work was done in consultation with the unsung architect *Russell W. Porter*, a noted expert in the field of telescope design who contributed greatly to the final design of the Griffith Park Observatory. Other locally significant architects with buildings in

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<sup>1</sup> National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior (Charles A. Birnbaum, ASLA), “Preservation Briefs 36: Protecting Cultural Landscapes.” online version. Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 1994. <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief36.htm> viewed 24 April 2008.

Griffith Park include *Peter K. Schabarum*, architect of the Greek Theatre; *William L. Pereira & Associates*: architects of the former Children's Theater Costume Workshop—today called “LA Shares”—and the Modernist firm of *Jones, Emmons & Contini*, architects of the Griffith Park Girls' Camp.