Arroyo Seco Parkway

The Arroyo Seco Parkway is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated by ASCE as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1999.

Source of the following photo and Overview is: https://www.nps.gov/places/arroyo-seco-parkway.htm

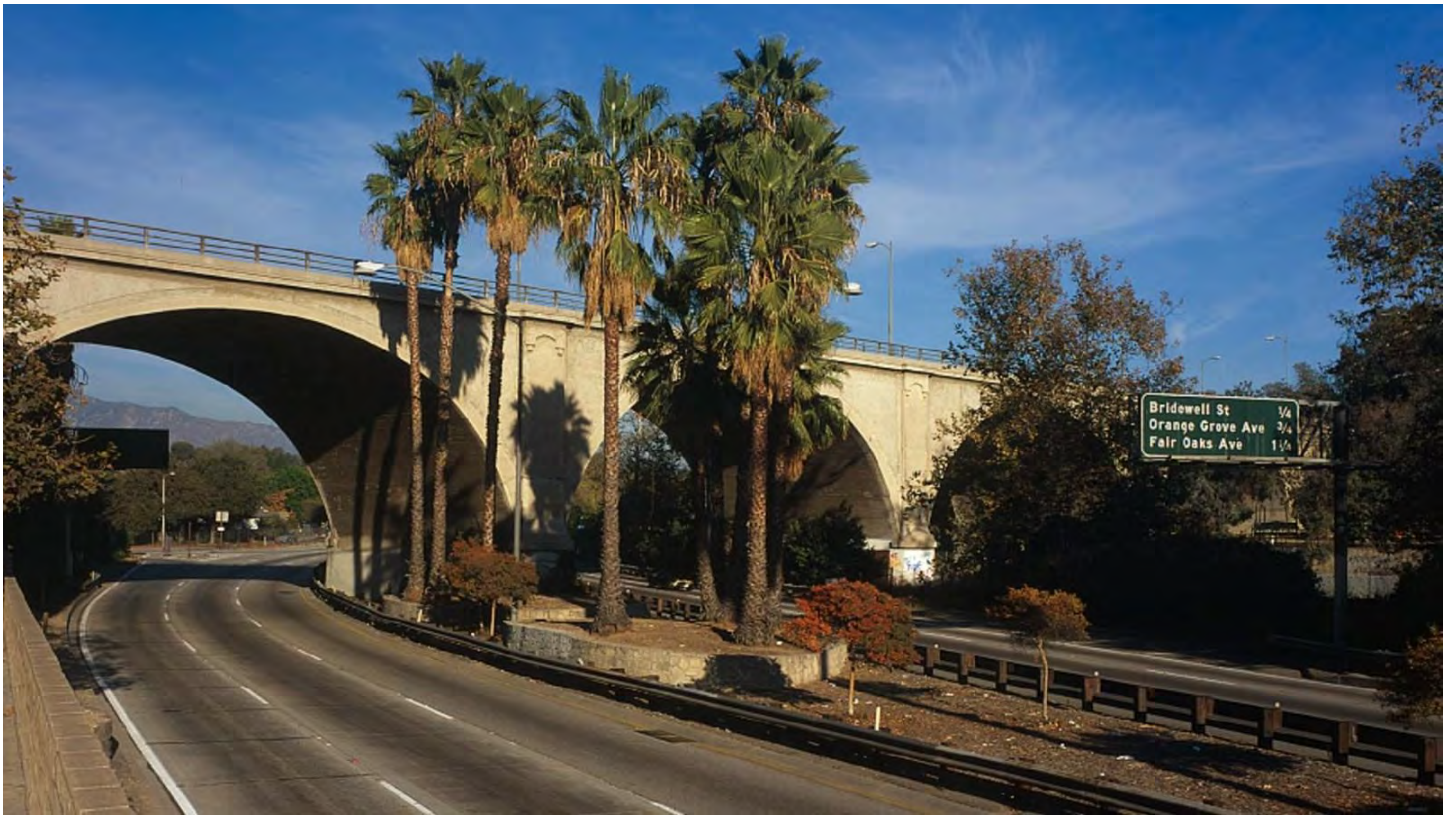

Photo by Brian Grogan, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ca2777.photos/?sp=1

Overview of Arroyo Seco Parkway

A drive through the Arroyo Seco is a ride through history. Some call the Arroyo Seco Parkway the starting point for Los Angeles car culture. It was the first "freeway" in the West and an engineering marvel of its time. Add to that the distinction and imprint of historic Route 66 and you have the makings for the perfect adventure by car.

By 1920, Los Angeles was already under the spell of the automobile. Although well-developed interurban trolley lines were enabling the city's sprawling character, the automobile was widely recognized as the future. Anyone caught in the 5 o'clock crush downtown would say the future had already arrived, as thousands of gridlocked cars kept the trolleys from running on time. Traffic congestion was a problem with which city planners were already engaged. Since the city was a nascent metropolis at the dawn of the automobile age, it was better positioned than any other city in the nation at that time to plan future development around the car.

It did so only gradually, however. Various regional plans, beginning as early as 1907, called for first an overarching grid of Parisian-style boulevards, then a network of landscaped parkways, and finally, as the

Second World War approached, a region-wide system of limited-access highways that, for better or worse, became a model for the rest of the nation and indeed the world.

The first link in this system would be a 6.2-mile stretch of highway called the Arroyo Seco Parkway, which straddled the design line between parkway and freeway. It ran primarily along the water course of the Arroyo Seco, a tributary of the Los Angeles River that snaked southward from the San Gabriel Mountains north of Pasadena's Rose Bowl through the Arroyo Seco canyon and into downtown Los Angeles.

Upon its completion in 1940, it was designated an alignment of Route 66 becoming the first stretch of the Mother Road to run over a modern, limited-access highway in the nation. If the spread of the freeway concept, eventually embodied by the national Interstate Highway System, spelled the beginning of the end for Route 66, the Arroyo Seco Parkway still stands as a remarkable piece of urban transportation history and holds a unique place in the story of Route 66.

The final form of the Arroyo Seco Parkway proved to be a hybrid of the scenic parkway aesthetic and the then-developing idea of a high-speed, limited-access freeway. Grade-separated overcrossings for existing streets, combined with on- and off-ramps (woefully short by modern standards) placed it squarely in the freeway camp. But the fact that it was heavily landscaped with native plants, and that it ran through dedicated parkland for much of the route in Los Angeles, including going through Elysian Park near downtown via a series of four tunnels, gave it much of the character of a parkway. These are the only known tunnels along the entire route of Route 66. To the contemporary observer, it feels much more like a parkway, despite many compromises to the landscaping for safety purposes over the years.

As you travel the route, pay particular attention to the many bridges under which the Parkway passes, including the graceful 750-foot long steel historic Santa Fe's Arroyo Seco Railroad Bridge (now the Metro Gold line) that spans across the entire Arroyo Seco and passes 100 feet overhead. Most of these bridges maintain their historic integrity, and their varied construction styles present a very different design aesthetic than more contemporary freeway architecture. This is even more the case for the four Figueroa Street tunnels that carry northbound traffic through Elysian Park. The Art Deco design of the tunnels marks them unmistakably as from another era, and you will immediately recognize them from countless film and television productions. There is a gateway sign welcoming a northbound traveler to South Pasadena constructed of arroyo stones taken from the watercourse that fits the region's importance to the Arts & Crafts Movement.

Travel along Route 66 during World War II, which the U.S. entered just a year after the Parkway was completed, was light, and the bulk of the traffic along the new alignment would have been local. But as travel boomed after the war and the Route 66 experience began to grab the national imagination ever more tightly, those who sojourned along it to the Pacific experienced the Arroyo Seco Parkway as a shining new example of the future of highway travel in America. Speed and convenience, the driving forces behind the automobile's rise earlier in the century, were now reflected in highway design. If this had the ultimate effect, as many would argue, of disconnecting highways from their local context, few stretches of road can make you feel more rooted in a place than does the Arroyo Seco Parkway.

The Arroyo Seco Parkway (California State Route 110) runs northeasterly from the Four-Level Interchange with U.S. 101 just outside downtown Los Angeles (mile post 23.69) to East Glenarm St. in Pasadena (mile post 31.89), CA. It is a National Civil Engineering Landmark, a National Scenic Byway, and the first of just two California Historic Parkways (the other being S.R. 163 through Balboa Park in San Diego). In 2011, the Parkway and associated features were listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Arroyo Seco Parkway Historic District.

Excerpt from 1997 NHCEL nomination package: A two-page excerpt from the nomination package is reproduced on the following pages and provides basic information on the Landmark. Because the Arroyo Seco Parkway was designated as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1999, additional details are not presented in this Route 66 nomination package. The entire 1997 nomination package for the Arroyo Seco Parkway is available on the History and Heritage Committee Teams site.

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS
HISTORIC CIVIL ENGINEERING LANDMARK NOMINATION FORM

To: Committee on History and Heritage
American Society of Civil Engineers
1015 Fifteenth Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

Date: APR 30 1997

From: Los Angeles Section

This is to nominate the following for designation as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark:

ARROYO SECO PARKWAY (Pasadena Freeway since 1954)

Located at: CALIFORNIA STATE HIGHWAY #110 from the I-5 interchange in Los Angeles to Glenarm Street in the City of Pasadena (postmile 25.48 to postmile 31.91). See Attachment A, part of Automobile Club Map.

County: LOS ANGELES State: CALIFORNIA

Please furnish below the latitude and longitude to the nearest minute or UTM coordinates:

Lat. 34°06'N, Long. 118°12'W
(See Attachment B, part of USGS Los Angeles Quadrangle.)

The Proposed Landmark's Owner:

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

In support of this nomination the following information is provided:

1. Dates of Construction: January, 1938 - December, 1940 (See Attachment C)

2. Names of key professionals associated with the project: Spencer Y. Cortelyou, Fred J. Grumm, and Lloyd Aldrich (See also Attachments D, G, H, and I.)

3. Historic national significance of this landmark: First fully grade-separated, limited-access landscaped freeway that was built as a non-toll state highway, direct ancestor of urban freeways in the U.S. (See Attachments E, F, G, H, I, and J.) Initial link in California's statewide freeway system of grade-separated, limited-access urban State Highways. (See Attachments E, F, G, H, I, and J.)

4. Comparable or similar projects, both in the Unites States and other countries:

   Various east-coast parkways, the initial segment of what was to become the Hollywood Freeway, the Terminal Island Freeway in Long Beach, and other early limited access highways. See Attachment J for a detailed list.

5. Unique features or characteristics which set this proposed landmark apart from other civil engineering projects, including those in 4 above:

   The Arroyo Seco Parkway was the first limited access highway to be adopted by the State and built through an already-urban environment. Additionally, as a comparison test of asphalt and portland cement concrete pavements, one traffic lane of each of the three-lane roadways had asphalt concrete pavement while the other two lanes of each roadway had portland cement concrete pavement. Construction was marked by unusually good inter-agency collaboration among the three cities, the Division of Highways, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Works Progress Administration.

6. Contribution which this structure or project made toward the development of: (1) The civil engineering profession; (2) the nation or a large region thereof.

   (1) The Profession: The Arroyo Seco Parkway proved to highway engineers nationwide that a fully grade-separated highway in an urban area was feasible, that such a highway would be popular with motorists, and that substantial user benefits could be realized from such a highway.

   Additionally, traffic operations experience on the Arroyo Seco Parkway established the value of speed-change lanes at the access points on limited-access urban highways and the minimum practical width for a planted median.

   (2) The Region and the Nation: The pioneering Arroyo Seco Parkway was followed by State Route 163 in San Diego (1942), the Terminal Island Freeway (1943), the Downtown Extension of the Hollywood Parkway (1946-1948), the San Bernardino Freeway (1950), and the Santa Ana Parkway (1949-52). These wartime and early postwar projects were designed for general traffic use and were later renamed as "Freeways". The Arroyo Seco Parkway itself was extended after World War II to connect (in 1953) with the Hollywood and Santa Ana Parkways at the Four-level Interchange in Downtown Los Angeles and in 1954 was redesignated as the "Pasadena Freeway".

   The Arroyo Seco Parkway established the practice of building state highways in urban areas as freeways in landscaped strips. Subsequent to the Highway Act of 1943, which established the Federal-Aid Urban classification, and following the model of the pioneering California freeways, roughly 15,000 miles of limited-access highway have been constructed within urban areas in the United States. Over 400 route-miles of freeway have been built in Los Angeles County alone. These urban freeways have had nationwide effects on land use, personal travel habits, social structure, public policies, and the economies of urban areas.

Local and vicinity maps: