Boulder City Historic District

Bureau of Reclamation

Ten years ago the place where we are gathered was an unpeopled, forbidding desert. In the bottom of a gloomy canyon, whose precipitous walls rose to a height of more than 1,000 feet, flowed a turbulent, dangerous river. The mountains on either side of the canyon were difficult of access, with neither road nor trail, and their rocks were protected by neither trees nor grass from the blazing heat of the sun. The site of Boulder City was a cactus-covered waste. The transformation wrought here is a twentieth century marvel.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dedicatory Address, September 30, 1935.

Published by the City of Boulder City.

The Boulder Canyon Project.

The Boulder Canyon Project was the most significant American public works project of the twentieth century. This monumental undertaking, which hinged on the construction of Hoover Dam, was the nation's first large scale, multipurpose reclamation effort. It was intended to transform the economy of the Southwest by providing domestic and industrial water and power to southern California's growing metropolitan areas and great agricultural valleys.

Boulder City was the town created to house the over 4,000 workers who built Hoover Dam, and as such was a significant integral part of the successful completion of the Boulder Canyon project. Constructed in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, Boulder City was conceived by the Federal government as a ideal town, a "model" city, to which the American people could look for hope of a better future. Subsequently, Boulder City became the first federal effort to plan and construct new towns in American history. In addition, Boulder City holds national importance for its place in the history of American city planning. It was the first fully developed experiment in new town planning, testing the theories of the infant Community Planning Movement. That movement, begun in the mid 1920's, is recognized as the force which most influenced today's city planning practices.

The original townsite of Boulder City has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the "Boulder City Historic District." The National Register is the nation's official listing of historic places worthy of recognition and preservation for their significant contributions to our national heritage.

The Boulder Canyon Project Act, which authorized the construction of Hoover Dam, was passed in 1928. At that time, a site for the dam had been tentatively selected in Boulder Canyon, a few miles upstream from the dam's present location. The monumental project would require thousands of construction workers and from five to seven years to complete. As in previous Reclamation projects, a large temporary construction camp was envisioned to house the workers. It would have been located near several Mormon settlements in the area of Boulder Canyon, so that access to the construction site and other facilities would be close at hand. However, in 1929, Bureau engineers concluded that the exact site of the dam should be located in Black Canyon and not Boulder Canyon. Rock formations, depth of bedrock, and an increased reservoir size were the determining factors.

The new location was extremely isolated, which presented problems in access to the site for construction workers. In addition to the magnitude of the construction project, facilities were also required for the management and maintenance of the dam once it was completed. Las Vegas was disregarded as the site for these facilities, due both to its distance from the project, and its social environment. It became increasingly apparent that a permanent town was needed to house the workers and engineers during construction, and to administer and maintain the project once completed.

Boulder City's Beginnings...

In July, 1930, the first Congressional appropriations for the project were authorized, and that same month the Bureau of Reclamation commissioned prominent city planner from Denver, S.R. DeBoer, to begin studies on the townsite and to develop its general plan.

By the end of 1930, DeBoer submitted his scheme for the model city to the Commissioner of Reclamation. The plan he created included many concepts which at the time were innovative and experimental. The proposed city included separation of residential and business streets from through-streets; division of city functions into specific business, residential, and industrial zones; a government center as a community focal point; and greenbelts to buffer the town from the desert. Additional considerations for recreation, parks, schools, public buildings, and the general safety of the residents were made integral parts of the city plan.

The first building efforts for the new town of Boulder City began in the Spring of 1931. The construction phase of the city, which lasted until the completion of the dam in March 1936, saw the most dramatic growth of the city. The population at the height of the construction period was estimated at between 6,000 and 8,000 persons, which then made Boulder City the third largest city in Nevada. The primary emphasis of the town's development during this time was to house, comfortably and economically, the men who would build the dam. During this period over 1,500 permanent and temporary buildings were erected to accomodate those needs. In addition, the city's basic support systems: water, sewer, electricity, and roadways were constructed. The social and civic structure of the town developed with the organization of churches, schools and fraternal groups. Private businesses were established. In general, the period is characterized as a time of orderly but phenomenal growth, and of developing a sense of "community".

With the completion of the dam, the complexion of the town changed, not only in terms of a reduction in population, but in its functional aspects as well. Through the 1940's, Boulder City's development focused on the accommodation of permanent mixed-government-related activities. Additional Federal agencies, either directly or indirectly related to the project, established operations in the city. The Power Operators responsible for the distribution of electricity from the dam established both residential and administrative facilities at Boulder City. The town flourished during this period as a regional government center, a pleasant, civic-oriented residential community, and a focal point for tourism and recreation related to the dam and lake.

Life in the Federal Town.

Throughout both of these periods several unique conditions contributed to the success of Boulder City as a model town. One of the most important was the government's commitment to the long term financing and administration of the City.

To ensure that their objectives for the new town were met, the Bureau of Reclamation acquired complete control of project lands by designating them a federal reservation. They also insured proper development of the city plan, by approving all construction efforts in the city. They controlled the amount and types of commercial development through a permit-lease system; encouraged the development of social, religious and educational elements; and administered and enforced the rules which governed the conduct of Boulder City's citizens.

Administration of the town was under the strict control of a city manager, who was responsible only to the Chief Construction Engineer for the Project. In 1931, Sims Ely was appointed Boulder City's first City Manager.

Authority of the city manager was far reaching, and was intended so, to carry out the government's policies of close control of townsite activities. City Manager Ely was responsible for issuing the permits for private buildings, collecting city revenues, overseeing the public works of the city, and monitoring the health and general welfare of the residents. The city manager was also responsible for law enforcement, and persons caught violating rules, including gambling or alcoholic possession or consumption, were answerable directly to Sims Ely.

Union Pacific R.R. Collection.

Special Collection Department, UNLV

Landscaping was a major component in the development of Boulder City. In late 1931, Congress authorized a special appropriation for landscaping and the Bureau of Reclamation hired Wilbur Weed, a Oregon landscape architect, to design and field-supervise the installation of landscaping along all streets, parks, and around public buildings.

Bureau of Reclamation

After weeks of investigation into suitable plants for the desert conditions of Boulder City, Weed selected the plant varieties and, in early 1932, planting was begun. Within months large areas of Boulder City were transformed from desert to green lawns and gardens.

The long-term success of Boulder City can be largely attributed to the interest and enthusiasm of its residents, their loyalty to the town's institutions, their investment in its future, and their determination to perpetuate their ideal community. Within a very few months after construction was began on the town, Boulder City had developed from a collection of strangers to a cohesive unit working as a whole to make their community a successful and beautiful place to live. Most residents felt they were priveleged to live in this model city; insulated from the reality of the Great Depression, with pleasant, safe surroundings, complimented by social, religious and educational activities more ideal than could be found in most American cities. Boulder City was a model town many believed was destined to become the first, real All-American city.

Boulder City, Nevada

Denver Public Library, Western History Department

The Boulder City Plan.

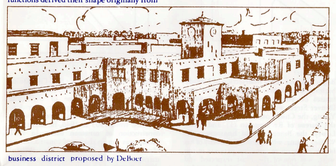
At the time the Boulder City Plan was commissioned, American city planning was on the threshold of a new era that was to have significant and lasting impacts on the shaping of contemporary urban planning. The Boulder City Plan emerged at a time when the most progressive city planners and social reformers were developing new approaches toward solving the urban dilemma, approaches which were in sharp contrast with traditional housing and planning objectives in the United States. The history of city planning in America from 1890 until 1950 witnessed a dramatic and rapid evolution of movements which included the concern for the beautification of cities, the desire to solve critical housing problems, and finally the need for regional urban planning in the hopes of improving the human and social condition.

The Community Planning Movement emerged in the United States in the mid 1920's. It emphasized the integration of physical and social planning into a single program which included all of the variables affecting urban residential environments. The prototype for this movement was the new town of Radburn, New Jersey, built in 1929, which utilized the "superblock" concepts of grouping houses around the perimeter of huge blocks which enclosed large interior central parks. Other innovations included roads for specialized uses, separation of pedestrian and motorized travel, and greenbelts to buffer haphazard development. Although the town was never completed, the "Radburn Idea" became the most important milestone in the history of American city planning.

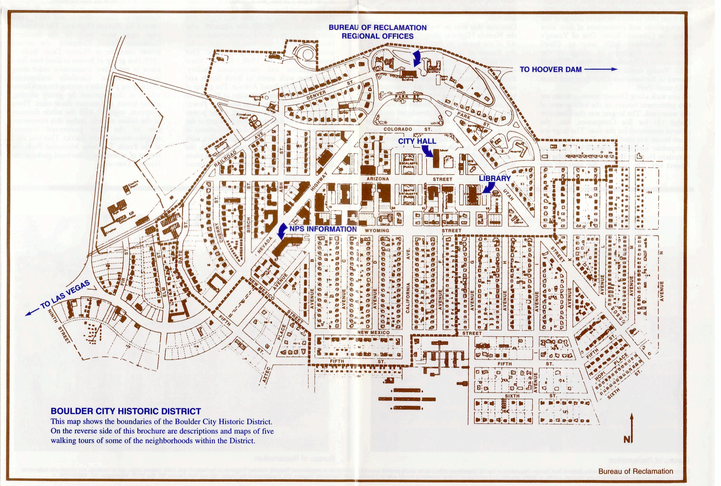
The Boulder City Plan, designed between July and December, 1930, was the first fully-developed new town in America to be patterned after the Radburn Idea. The original plan not only included a literal interpretation of Radburn's innovative site-planning concepts, but successfully incorporated development economics, governmental structure, environmental concerns, and social planning as integral parts of the planning process.

The plan created by DeBoer for Boulder City has as its key element a civic center of government buildings at the crest of the hill. A large park serves as a focal point and reinforces the formal setting of the government buildings. The city's triangular shape is derived from the location of three primary roadways which radiate southward from the government center. The west Boulevard, Nevada Highway, extends eventually to the Boulder Highway and Las Vegas. The opposite roadway, Utah Street, descends the hill in a southeast direction to New Mexico Street, which transects both boulevards and forms the base of the triangle. California street, the central north-south street leads to the park and civic center and reinforces the symmetry of the plan's basic elements. The major components of the city, commercial zone, multi family zone and single family zone radiate respectively from the apex of the civic center. All three functions derived their shape originally from the superblock ideas, with internalized landscaping and perimeter roads for vehicular traffic. A greenbelt was planned to serve as a recreational divider between the multi family and single family zones.

Construction of the city began in March 1931. Ideally the town was to have been built first, and once completed, the construction of the dam would begin. However, as the Depression worsened, political pressure for unemployment relief forced an accelerated schedule for construction of the dam. This in turn created an immediate demand for housing to shelter the thousands of construction workers flocking to the Southern Nevada desert. The original city plan was modified by the Bureau of Reclamation to meet that unanticipated condition. The greenbelts, for example, were eliminated in favor of more space for additional workers housing. Residential blocks, planned with their houses to surround huge central parks, gave way to rows of more economical cottages. DeBoer's overall concept, however, withstood these changes and the essence of his vision of a model city, with many of the plan's finest features, was kept intact.



business district proposed by DeBoer



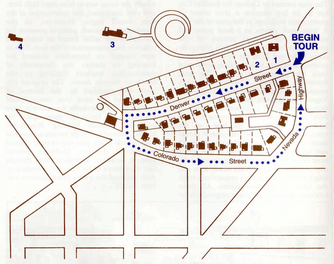
BOULDER CITY HISTORIC DISTRICT

This map shows the boundaries of the Boulder City Historic District. On the reverse side of this brochure are descriptions and maps of five walking tours of some of the neighborhoods within the District.

Bureau of Reclamation

Boulder City Historic District Walking Tours

1 Bureau of Reclamation Residential Area



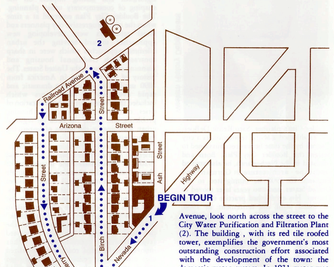
Begin this tour at the intersection of Nevada highway and Denver Street. The first two houses on your right as you walk along Denver Street were occupied by Walker R. Young, the Chief Construction Engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation (1), and Frank Lowry, the Bureau's Field Engineer (2). Walker Young, who spent the majority of his life working on reclamation projects in the west, was one of the most respected and capable engineers of the twentieth century. He joined the Reclamation Service in 1911, and from 1921 to 1924 he was in charge of the investigations and evaluations of dam sites along the Colorado River. One of Young's most important jobs was as Chief Construction Engineer in charge of the construction of Boulder Dam from 1930 until 1935. Young would eventually serve as the Bureau of Reclamation Chief Engineer from 1945 until 1948.

As you walk along Denver Street, you can see two prominent houses on the hilltop west of the watertank. The largest was the Executive Lodge (3) for Six Companies, Inc., the general contractor for the dam. The large ten room house was used by the Executives of Six Companies and other dignitaries including President Herbert Hoover when visiting the Project site. The house to the west (4) was occupied for a time by Six Companies Construction Superintendent Frank Crowe. Crowe is considered one of the most competent construction engineers to work in Reclamation. During his career, which spanned from 1905 to 1946, he supervised construction of nineteen dams. In 1931 Crowe was put in charge of construction of Hoover Dam. Due to his skillful management and ability to inspire men to their fullest working abilities, Crowe was able to complete the dam 22 months ahead of schedule.

Continue this tour by walking back towards the Nevada Highway along Colorado Street. All of the houses on this tour were built by the Bureau of Reclamation between March 1931 and June 1932 to house field and office engineers working on the Boulder Canyon Project. An important aspect of the Bureau construction efforts was its attempts at standardizing housing types without creating the monotony of similar houses on the same street. Bureau engineers developed standard floor plans for only five houses, and different styles were used to vary the architectural character of the streetscape. The success of the Bureau's housing efforts has resulted in one of the finest historic neighborhoods in Boulder City.

Bureau of Reclamation

2 Power Operators Residential Area



Begin Tour 2 at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power Building (1). Originally called the Bureau of Power and Light, this company is one of the two agencies who contracted to operate the power generators at Hoover Dam and distribute electricity to the southern California power allotees. This building, built in 1940, houses their administrative and maintenance facility. From here walk south to Birch Street and then north to Railroad Avenue. The group of houses located along both sides of BirchStreet were built in 1937 to house Bureau of Power and Light employees working at the power plant. This neighborhood presents one of the most pleasing architectural environments in Boulder City. Sensitively designed, each with red tile roofs and white stuccoed walls, the houses were built from three basic floor plans alternated along the streetscape. At Railroad Avenue, look north across the street to the City Water Purification and Filtration Plant (2). The building , with its red tile roofed tower, exemplifies the government's most outstanding construction effort associated with the development of the town: the domestic water system. In 1931 water was delivered to Boulder City from the Colorado River which required a twelve inch water main six miles in length and rising 2000 feet in elevation. The condition of the water required a pre-sedimentation plant at the river, and the elevation change necessitated four pumping stations and five water tanks. This efficient filtration plant, built in February 1932, was the culmination of the system and was necessary to purify and soften the water before its distribution.

From Birch Street, walk along Railroad Avenue to Cherry Street and then south toward the Nevada Highway. The houses on your right were built by the Southern California Edison Company, the second power operator at Hoover Dam. Built in 1939, this group of houses utilized four floor plans in repetitive, consecutive order along the streetscape. Carefully maintained landscaping provides a setting for each house which is characterized by gently sloping, grassy lawns, and mature shade trees. These elements, together with the subtle diversity of the house models, makes this streetscape one of the best preserved historic neighborhoods in the district. This tour ends at the Frank T. Crowe Memorial Park, the largest of several neighborhood parks in the Historic District.

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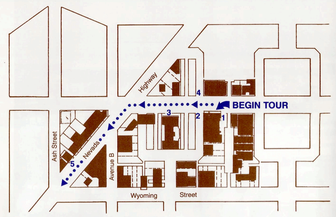
3 Commercial District



Tour 3 of Boulder City's historic commerical areas begins at the Boulder City Theater (1) on Arizona Street.

As originally envisioned in the city plan, the business district was to be composed of arcaded commercial blocks surrounding three landscaped parking plazas in the center of town. The emphasis was on pedestrian movement from shop to shop. A southwestern architectural style was chosen as a guideline to ensure visual continuity of these large, multi-use buildings and create a shopping district with a unique character. Innovative in 1931, this idea was the predecessor of today's shopping plazas.

Although the concept was not completely adhered to in the commercial zone, the Boulder Theater (1) and the adjacent Uptown Hardware Building (2) came the closest to the idea of large single buildings of a common style housing multiple business enterprises. The theater, completed in April 1932, seats 728 people and was the largest movie house in Nevada at the time. The Uptown Hardware Building, with apartments on the second floor, was built in 1939.

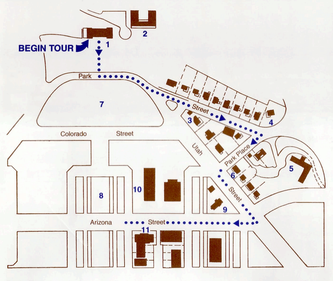
In order to accomodate a growing tourist industry once dam construction was underway, a hotel was built in 1933. The Boulder Dam Hotel (3) is the most conspicuous deviation from the Southwestern appearance suggested by the Architectural guidelines. It is a large, Southern Colonial building and is a key focal point in the commercial district. Fine hospitality, a richly appointed interior and a private bath for each room were some features which contributed to the hotel's popularity and success during the 1930's.

Across the street from the Boulder City Theater is the Nevada Drug Building (4). Built in 1941, this unique building is constructed of prefabricated elements and designed in the International Style. It is the largest and best example of that popular style in the Boulder City's commercial district. From the Nevada Drug Building, walk west to the intersection of Nevada Highway and Avenue B. The buildings on the west side of Nevada Highway represent the earliest commerical structures in Boulder City. Walk along the highway south to Ash Street. The original buildings stand out for their arcaded facades and stuccoed exeriors.

Ida Browder's Cafe (5) is one of the most significant. Built in December 1931, it is the oldest remaining commercial building in the city.

Manis Collection, Special Collections Department, UNLV.

4 Parks and Public Buildings



Begin Tour 4 at the Bureau of Reclamation Regional Headquarters (1) at Park Street. Originally called the Administration Building, this facility is the most important as well as the most dominant government building in Boulder City. It was completed in January, 1932, and housed the offices of the Chief Construction Engineer and other Bureau of Reclamation staff during construction of the dam. To the east of this building is the Government Dormitory (2) which accomodated unmarried government engineers. It is now used as additional administrative offices for the Bureau. Both buildings are some of the best examples of the Southwestern architecture which is characteristic of the Boulder City Historic District. From the hilltop walk east along Park Street. Prominently located at the intersection of Park and Utah Street is the home occupied by City Manager Sims Ely (3) from 1931 to 1941. Continue along Park Street. The two story Spanish mission style house on your left was built by the Bureau of Reclamation for its Chief Counsel, J.R. Alexander (4). Across the street is the Boulder City Hospital (5) originally built in 1931 by the contractor for the dam, Six Companies, Inc. It is now used as a retreat by the Sisters of Charity. Reruen to Utah Street and walk south to Arizona Street. On your left is the house once occupied by Boulder City's landscape architect, Wilbur Weed (6). The landscaping of Wilbur Square (7) and Escalante Plaza (8), as well as Boulder City's streetscapes are some of his finest accomplishments.

At Arizona Street, walk east past St. Christopher's Episcopal Church (9). Built in 1932, it is one of the four oldest churches in the city. Facing Escalante Plaza at Colorado and Arizona Streets is the Boulder City School (10), now used as the City Hall. Because Boulder City was within a Federal reservation, its residents were tax-exempt, creating a problem in the building and operation of a public school. In the spring of 1932, Congress appropriated $70,000 for the erection and operation of a school in Boulder City, but this amount proved adequate only for the construction of the building. As most of the children were from Six Companies' families, the company agreed to finance the operation of the school and pay teachers' salaries. The new school opened with eleven teachers on September 26, 1932. Across Arizona Street is the original Boulder City Municipal Building (11). Built in 1932, it served as the offices of the City Manager and his staff, and housed the Public Library and the Police Department.

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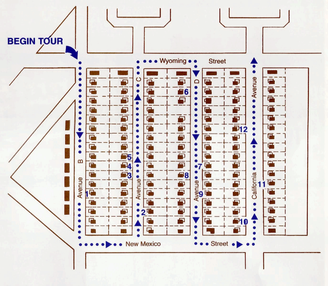
5 Six Companies' Residential Area



Tour 5 encompasses the housing area built by Six Companies for their married employees. The Six Companies, Inc., as general contractors for the huge project, were responsible for several portions of the construction of the town and played an important role in shaping its present environment. Housing for their married employees occupied a significant area of the original townsite. The location of these dwellings extended along the broadest portion of the base of the triangular townsite. Long, rectangular blocks, from Wyoming Street south to New Mexico Street, were laid out parallel with the north-south axis of the town. Bounded on the west by Avenue B and on the east by Utah Street, the area contained 230 three- and two-room single-family cottages built in 1931. This residential district was supplemented in 1932 with an additional 450 cottages to the south, bringing the total number of Six Companies housing in this area to 660 detached dwellings.

The first of the single-family houses to be constructed by Six Companies were located between Avenue B and Avenue F. Each streetfront contained 17 houses with the northernmost lot reserved for group parking. The three-room houses were built of identical plan, and contained a living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. They were built of frame construction and stuccoed. A covered screen porch extended the length of one side of the structure and across half of the front. Although intended to be temporary housing which would be removed after completion of the dam, these homes were later sold to individuals wishing to stay in Boulder City beginning in 1935. No houses were modified prior to that time, but after that date most underwent some remodeling to accomodate larger families or to improve the efficiency of these small cottages.

Begin the tour at the intersection of Wyoming and Avenue B. Travelling south to New Mexico Street, up Avenue C to Wyoming Street, and through the rest of the Six Companies "village" a few houses (numbered 1 through 12) depict very nearly the original appearance of these construction workers' cottages.

Bureau of Reclamation

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