

# 9 Cultural Resources Element

## Introduction

*Vision El Monte...* A community of diverse cultures and peoples, who share common values of family and service to the community, and who share the vision that El Monte, a city of rich cultural history, represents a place of hope, opportunity, and achievement for the future.

El Monte has a diverse population and a rich history. For over seven generations, immigrant families have brought knowledge and traditions to the city and region from around the globe. Tongva, Spanish, Mexican, American Pioneers, and the Asian Pacific peoples: all have contributed to El Monte's history. These influences have created a multicultural city in the San Gabriel Valley with a unique focus on community.

This Element celebrates El Monte history and culture and seeks to define and shape the community's future through:

- ***Built environment***—imbuing the city's infrastructure and built environment—crosswalks, sidewalks, intersections, greenways, street lights, and signs—with reminders of the City's culture and heritage.
- ***Natural environment***—reclaiming the City's environmental and cultural legacy by the restoration, preservation, and maintenance of its trees, rivers, and landscape amenities.
- ***Preservation of heritage***—preserving, enhancing, and renewing any remaining buildings of historic significance or extant traces of city fabric that are significant locally and statewide.
- ***Contemporary culture***—imagining, creating, and supporting powerful events for celebrating children, family, and leaders of the community, past and present, all of whom leave an imprint.

## PURPOSE AND FUNCTION

The Cultural Resources Element is not required by state law. However, the people of El Monte recognize that affirming their diversity and history can enhance quality of life in the City and guide future development. Therefore, this element is intended to celebrate El Monte's story and provide direction on how to bring the cultural values, heritage, and meaningful lives of residents into focus in the City on a daily basis. This element also guides the City's vision for future development, provides a unifying spark for its citizens, and establishes an aesthetic feel and spirit specific to the City.

This element recognizes that cultural resources add richness to community life, provide meaning and relevance to our diverse past, and orient us toward a common future. This identity may lie in the reflection of a spirit of community in the built environment, the restoration of our environmental heritage and legacy, the creation of meaningful public spaces for civic gathering, and the imagination for powerful events that celebrate children, family, and seasons of life. This element is designed to define a unique, positive, and powerful cultural identity and a special focus on creating a city where youth and community values are celebrated.



## RELATED PLANS AND PROGRAMS

This element incorporates and distills research done for the cultural resources index and through community outreach. Moreover, the Cultural Resources Element embraces the work and knowledge of a wide range of organizations and groups in El Monte, such as the El Monte Historical Society, La Historia, Tongva Tribal Council, Chamber of Commerce, Amigos de los Rios, and other organizations. Finally, numerous individuals provided a history of traditions and memories that enrich this element.

Cultural resources do not exist in a vacuum, and this element is closely linked to others in the General Plan. The preservation of historic structures and creation of a matrix of city landmarks is an important consideration in the Community Design Element. Expanding recreational and cultural opportunities, such as along the Emerald Necklace, is fundamental to the Parks and Recreation Element. The Circulation Element addresses key infrastructure components that double as cultural interpretive corridors. Even the Land Use Element guides land use that respects and builds on past land use policies within the community.

## EL MONTE SPEAKS

Fundamental to this element is the recognition and appreciation that El Monte has a great story to tell. It is a story of a colorful past and a vibrant present. It is not limited to historic buildings and monuments, but also includes oral traditions, art, and community events. It embraces both the built and the natural environment. Cultural history exists in historic structures and in the hearts and minds of El Monte’s residents. Residents have expressed a desire to share their story, reconnect to their past, and build upon its richness to define their future.

As part of the General Plan update, the City conducted extensive surveys of the community that included schools, City officials, residents, historical groups, and businesses. Local historical groups surveyed included the El Monte Historical Society, La Historia, Tongva Tribal Council, and Chamber of Commerce. Hundreds of residents were surveyed about what constitutes a cultural resource. The City also held a public cultural resources workshop to communicate the results of the outreach process.

The survey was carefully designed to elicit responses on what makes El Monte special and what constitutes a cultural resource. Recognizing that people of different backgrounds, age levels, and experiences have different perceptions of what constitutes a cultural or historical resource, the survey parameters were deliberately left wide open. This inductive process drew a passionate response from residents of all ages and resulted in a living document called the El Monte’s Cultural Resources Index.

Eight categories of cultural resources were established to structure the input received from the hundreds of participants in the process. However, the index is much more than a list of significant places, features, and buildings. It represents a dynamic process, reflecting the collective identity and values of the City and its residents, and should be updated over time.

The following cultural resources index categories are listed below and defined on the following pages.

- Historic Structures
- Infrastructure, Urban Fabric, and Traces
- Characteristics Establishments and Economic History
- Key Landscape Features and Natural History
- Oral History
- Monuments, Public Art, and Landmarks
- Contemporary Culture



### Historic Structures

Buildings of relevance and significance to the history of the City, regardless of whether they are eligible for official registration with the federal or state government, provide a historical context for how the City has developed.

#### Historic Structures

*The Santa Fe Trail Park is a monument to El Monte as the end of the Santa Fe Trail, which started in Missouri.*

1. Conestoga wagon
2. State historical marker
3. The Osmond house and original jail



### Infrastructure

Railroads, utilities, and public transportation systems have had a huge impact on the fabric of the City and are part of its history, and should be reevaluated as critical features in the City.

#### Infrastructure

*As the transit hub of the San Gabriel Valley, El Monte is defined by its transportation infrastructure.*

4. El Monte Airport, a bustling hub for aviation enthusiasts
5. Peck Bus Shelter, with a sculpture of the river
6. Regional MTA Bus Hub, the busiest on the west coast
7. An El Monte bus, which runs on natural gas



## Urban Fabric/Traces

Some traces of historic settlements and cultures are only partially preserved in the contemporary urban fabric, or preserved as fragments of street patterns, as no complete historic districts exist.



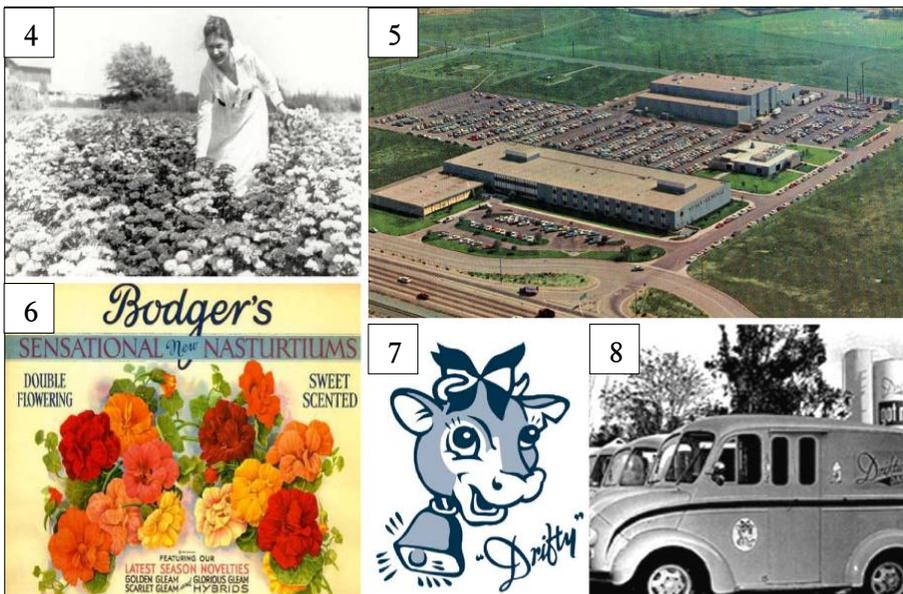
## Urban Fabric/Traces

El Monte has a rich agricultural past evident in structures, street patterns, and other forms.

1. Rurban Homesteads, a depression-era federal demonstration project with subsistence farming
2. Pumpkin Fields, representing the bounty of the agricultural industry
3. Original period architecture

## Characteristic Establishments/Economic History

There are many entrepreneurial ventures, individuals, companies, and industries whose special products and services are specific to El Monte and its history and that continue to be identified with the City.



## Characteristics Establishments

El Monte's economic history is defined by many prominent and world-renowned businesses.

4. Bodger Seed fields
5. Sargent Fletcher facility
6. Bodger Seed package
7. Driftwood Dairy mascot
8. Driftwood Dairy trucks

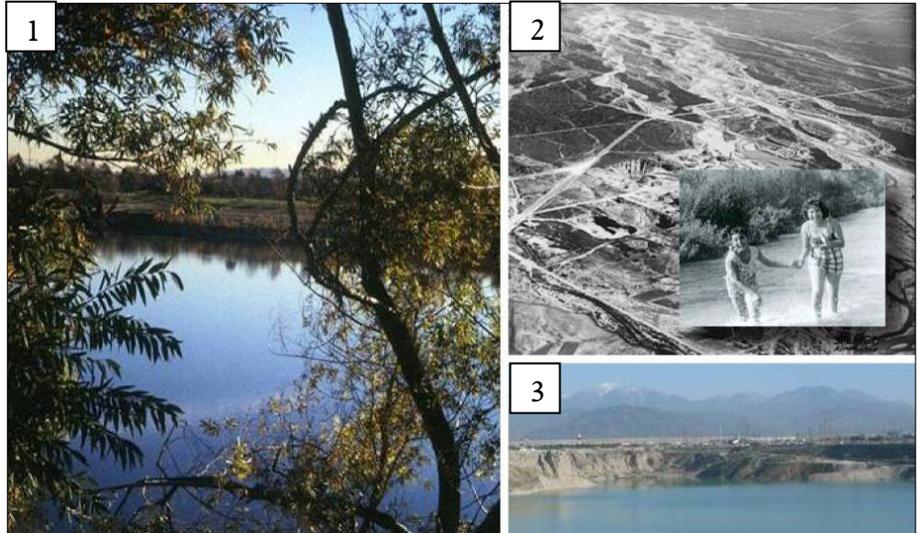
**Key Landscape Features/Natural History**

Landscape features characteristic of El Monte’s past, present, and future, such as the rivers and the mountain perspectives, are relevant and unifying forces for diverse cultures and development in the City.

**Cultural Landscape**

Located at the convergence of two braiding rivers, the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo, El Monte’s history is tied to the rivers.

1. Peck Water Conservation Park
2. San Gabriel and Rio Hondo River © UCLA Geography labs
3. Hanson Quarry, location of past mining activities and future jewel of the Emerald Necklace



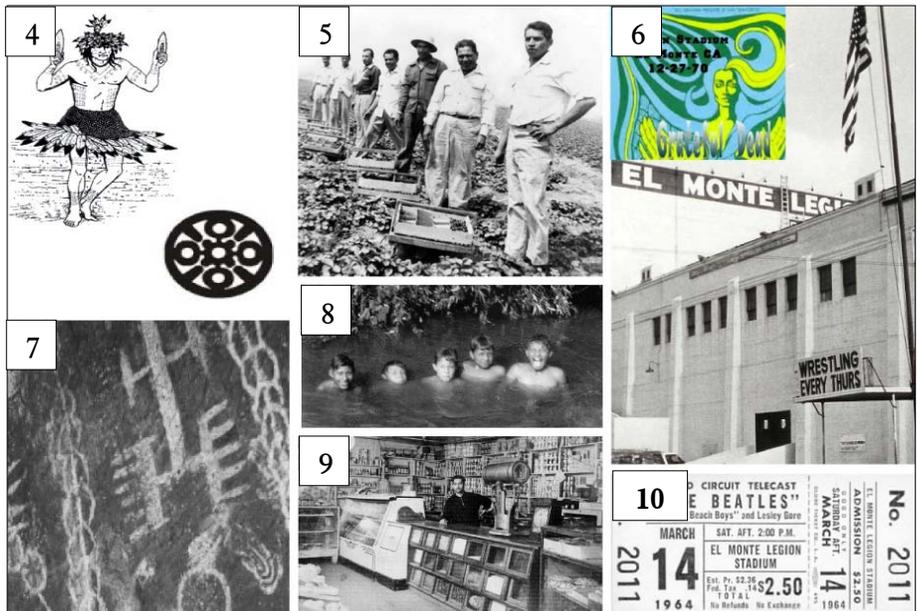
**Oral History**

Famous or unique events or places in El Monte’s history are preserved largely in collective memory and remain in the hearts and minds of residents but are not marked or recorded in the built fabric of the city.

**Oral History**

Stories are an integral part of El Monte’s past that remain in the collective memory of residents.

4. Tongva Tribal Dance
5. Berry pickers
6. El Monte Legion Stadium
7. Tongva petroglyph
8. Historical photo of river recreation
9. Grocery store
10. Concert ticket from Stadium



## Monuments/Public Art/Landmarks

Commemorative plaques and public artwork throughout the City testify to the significance of a historic event, person, building structure, or establishment no longer in existence.



### Monuments

*El Monte's landscape is defined by historic and modern monuments to its past and future.*

1. Water tower
2. Metrolink public art
3. Gay's Lion Farm
4. Marker for the First Presbyterian Church
5. Statue of Liberty at City Hall

## Contemporary Culture

Yearly events and celebrations, special public places, and institutions throughout the City, including civic buildings and parks, that give a special quality and identity to the life in the City—especially from the perspective of the City's younger residents.



### Contemporary Culture

*El Monte's contemporary culture is represented by many different symbols, reflective of its past and future.*

6. Emerald Necklace banner
7. El Monte Aquatic Center
8. Rio Vista Park

## Cultural Resources Element

### CULTURAL RESOURCES INDEX CATEGORY

#### Historic Resources

- End of the Santa Fe Trail – State
- Santa Fe Trail Historic Park/Osmond House & Jail – State
- El Monte Community Center Complex/El Monte Historical Society Museum/Grace Black Auditorium/Jack Crippen Senior Center\* – Local
- Tony Arceo Memorial Park Bandshell – Local
- Rurban Homesteads/Wye Street – Local
- El Monte Theatre/Old Valley mall – Local
- El Monte High School Manual Arts Building - Local
- El Monte Masonic Lodge – Local
- El Monte Cemetery/Savannah Pioneer Cemetery\*\*\* – Local

#### Monuments & Landmarks

- Veterans' Memorial/City Hall
- Statue of Liberty/City Hall
- Gay's Lion Farm Statue at: El Monte High School/Metro Link Station – Gay's Lion Farm Silhouette/Valley & Peck
- Historical society – 1<sup>st</sup> Protestant Church, Bronze Plaque

#### Characteristic Establishments/Oral History

- Willow Grove Inn
- Riding Stables – Charros
- Swanee River Ballroom
- Crawford's Country Store
- Lexington School – 1<sup>st</sup> Public School in El Monte
- Broger's Seed Company
- Sunshine Dairies/Driftwood Dairies
- Walnut Farms
- Turkey, Pig, Rabbit Farms
- OH Kruse Grain Mill
- Japanese settlements
- Tumbleweed Theatre
- El Monte Legion Stadium
- Mr. J's Night Club/Santa Fe Inn
- El Monte RV
- Ball Glass/Saint Gobain Containers
- Aerospace/Aerojet, Sargent Fletcher
- Costa Azul
- El Monte Drive-in Theatre
- Agriculture: Vegetable and Fruit Farms

\* These items are determined as having both historic and cultural value

\*\* These sites are potential cultural resources

\*\*\* Outside contemporary city limits

#### Infrastructure

- Southern Pacific Railroad
- Ramona Boulevard Red Line
- River San Gabriel and Rio Hondo
- Freeways
- Water Companies/Water Tower
- "Municipals"

#### Urban Fabric/Landscape Features

- End of the Santa Fe Trail
- Old Main Street/Old Valley Mall – Well
- Hick's Camp/River Camp/Wiggin's Camp
- Medina Court/Costa Azul/Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
- La Mision Camp/Creek
- Canta Ranas Camp/Las Flores Camp/Granada Camp/Chino Camp
- The Wye Street/Rurban Homesteads
- Rancho period – San Francisquito, El Monte Township
- Gay's Lion Farm
- Watershed Ecology – washes, creeks, and mountain views
- Hanson & Rodeffer Quarries\*\*
- Riding Stables – Charros

#### Contemporary Cultural & Civic Resources

- El Monte Community Center\*/El Monte Historical Society Museum\*/Grace Black Auditorium/Jack Crippen Senior Center\*
- Tony Arceo Memorial Park
- Tyler Library/Norwood Library
- El Monte Aquatic Center
- La Historia Museum
- The Women's Club
- Old Main Street/Old Valley Mall
- Pioneer Park/Fletcher Park
- Peck Water Conservation Park
- Future Teen Center
- American Legion
- Chinese Historical Society of Southern California
- Riding Stables – Charros
- Medina Court/Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
- Rio Hondo & San Gabriel Rivers
- Water Shed Ecology – washes, creeks, and mountain views
- Masonic Lodge
- El Monte Trolley Station
- El Monte Airport

## Cultural Resources Context

Many families have chosen El Monte because the City is a place of hope and promise, opportunity and achievement. The City's population reflects myriad waves of folks who risked their lives to make their way to California and El Monte to find a better life. Another common thread is the importance of family and shared sense of community that connects diverse populations throughout the City. Residents share a desire to create unique and wonderful opportunities for their children and families.

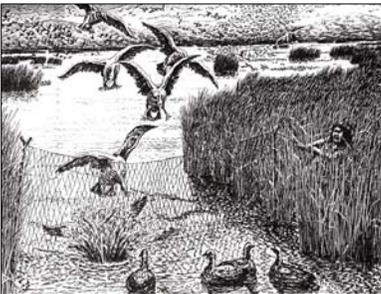
Driving from one end of the City to the other today, few would grasp the richness and diversity of the population and the important cultural milestones the City and its people have experienced. The built environment is relatively homogenous from street to street. But the City is and has been home to a diverse population, world-renowned businesses, and rich historical eras and events. In such an environment, the challenge is to recreate in a meaningful way “odes to the people, places, and events” that are of critical importance to El Monte's residents.

To that end, the best place to start is the beginning. Over El Monte's eventful history, seven eras are apparent, each leaving an imprint on El Monte today. This section traces El Monte's history through these eras:

- ***Prehistory.*** The Tongva culture that lived along the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo Rivers and the Catalina Islands.
- ***Mission and Rancho Period (1770s to 1840s).*** The Spanish mission settlements of early California, and later Mexican government.
- ***Early California Settlement (1860s to 1900s).*** The pioneers who settled in El Monte and saw its expansion into a township.
- ***Garden City of the Valley (1900s to 1930s).*** The development of the agricultural industry in El Monte.
- ***Emerging Cultures (1910s to 1950s).*** Chinese laborers, the Mexican-American barrios, Japanese immigration, and cultural assimilation.
- ***Industrial Eras (1940s to 1970s).*** World War II industry and the suburbanization of El Monte.
- ***Contemporary El Monte (1980s to present).*** Urbanization and defining a new direction.

## PREHISTORY – THE TONGVA

El Monte's early history is not confined to the present city boundaries. El Monte has a special natural setting, as a fertile island between the Rio Hondo and the San Gabriel River, and one of the most diverse ecosystems in the San Gabriel Valley. In fact, the term "el monte" means "wooded place." This oasis attracted settlers and visitors throughout history, and the rivers continue to shape and characterize the City to this day.



Photos courtesy of the Tongva Tribal Council

The Tongva peoples brought the first culture to the Los Angeles region. *Tongva* means "people of the earth." The Tongva are also referred to as the Gabrieleño/Tongva or Gabrielino/Tongva tribe. They occupied the land from the San Gabriel Mountains to the southern Channel Islands from as early as 7000 BC to the time of Spanish settlement more than two centuries ago (1770s). Major village sites were established near El Monte (Houtngna), Azusa (Azuksangna), Covina (Weniingna), La Puente (Awingna), and Whittier (Sejatngna).

The Tongva derived their sustenance and culture from the rivers. They traveled throughout the watershed, using reed canoes for hunting, fishing, and gathering, and they venerated the rivers in ritual bathing ceremonies. The Tongva sustained themselves on a wide variety of ecosystems. The basin prairie provided deer, pronghorn antelope, elk, and migratory birds. The mountains offered autumn harvests of pine nuts. The rivers provided fish and medicinal herbs from riparian plants. But the Tongva's primary food was acorns from the oak woodlands, which they tended like orchards, pruning, weeding, and even using controlled burning to clear underbrush and fertilize the trees.

Today, there are 300 enrolled members of the Gabrieleno/Tongva Council of San Gabriel and an estimated few thousand that still live in California. In El Monte, the Tongva have established a Young People's Village (Youth Center at 4528 Baldwin Avenue in El Monte).

## MISSION PERIOD INFLUENCE

### *Mission Period*

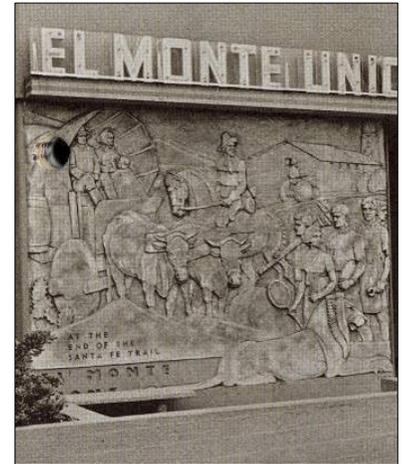
From 1770 to 1821, Spanish missionaries and soldiers used the El Monte area as a camp. In 1771, just south of present-day El Monte, the first Mission San Gabriel Arcangel, or La Mision Vieja, was established on the banks of the Rio Hondo as a stopping point between the missions in San Diego and Carmel. Severe flooding, along with hostility between Spanish soldiers and a local village, eventually forced the mission to move to its present location in the City of San Gabriel in 1775.

Many Tongva were brought in to live at the mission and required to abandon their native traditions. They became Catholic converts, laboring to maintain and expand the mission by learning to farm in the European style. They tilled land and dug irrigation trenches to plant wheat, corn, and vegetables. Others were trained to tend cattle, butcher meat, and tan hides. Women were responsible for feeding the mission community, making soap and candles, and weaving rope. Fed by the waters of the San Gabriel River and the labor of the Tongva, the mission became the most productive agricultural center in California by 1815.

### *Rancho Period*

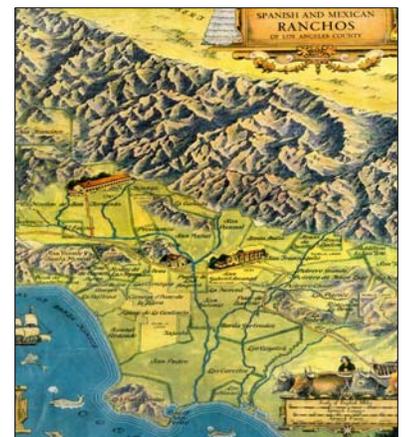
In 1821 the area now constituting El Monte became part of the Mexican Republic. The mission era came to an end with a decree from the Mexican Congress that stated missions were to be reduced to parish churches. Included in this law was a provision that the missionaries be offered posts as priests, mission buildings be converted to Native American pueblos, and Native Americans receive enough land “for their support and wellbeing.” However, the officials charged with overseeing the missions divided the land into private *ranchos* and valuables were sold off, decimating the wealth of the missions in a decade. The Tongva who had become dependent on the missions for survival subsequently lived on the fringes of society.

Although the mission era had formally ended, the area now constituting El Monte was still an important stop along the Santa Fe Trail, an ancient route that originally terminated in Santa Fe, Mexico. Traders and merchants continued to use the trail, exchanging American manufactured goods for furs and other items. Traders sent caravans to Missouri as part of this international trade. One of the City’s state historical markers is in the Santa Fe Trail Historic Park in downtown El Monte.



#### **El Monte’s History**

*Pictured is a relief depicting El Monte’s early history as the end of the Santa Fe Trail.*



#### **Spanish and Mexican Ranchos**

*El Monte was part of the original Spanish and Mexican Ranchos.*

## EARLY CALIFORNIA SETTLEMENTS

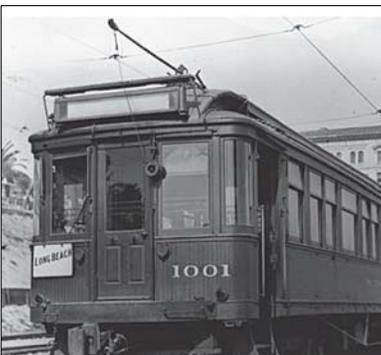
El Monte played a significant part in California's early pioneer history. The area was the location of the first encampments along the extension of the old Spanish trail from Missouri to Santa Fe. On January 13, 1847, California became part of the United States with the signing of the Treaty at Cahuenga. By the 1850s some began to refer to El Monte as the "end of the Santa Fe Trail," as it became the western extension of the trail that originally ended in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



By midcentury, pioneers traveling from the Midwest were drawn to California by the Gold Rush and the prospects of riches. Although few found such riches, the El Monte region offered abundant land, fertile alluvial soil, and water for agriculture. The first pioneer family to arrive in El Monte from across the United States—the Thompsons of Iowa—settled here in 1851 after a 14-month journey. Subsequently, the charismatic Captain Johnson of Lexington, Kentucky, led another group of pioneers to El Monte in 1852 and established a settlement named after his home town.



The area of El Monte was designated a township in 1866 by the state legislature in an effort to organize the state into smaller, more defined governmental units. In 1868 the township's name was changed from Lexington to El Monte. Valley Boulevard was an extension of the Santa Fe Trail, and was used throughout the 1870s by the Butterfield Stage, which connected Los Angeles to Riverside. El Monte boasted the stagecoaches' first official stop—the Thompson family's Willow Grove Inn.



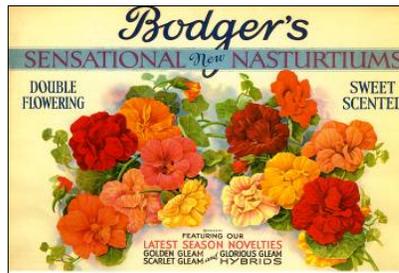
El Monte grew exponentially when the Southern Pacific Railroad built the first tracks through the city in 1873. In 1876, the first weekly newspaper was founded, the *El Monte Herald*. Main Street was paved in 1906; and one year later, the Pacific Electric Red Cars were serving as public transportation for the town. The Red Cars traversed the city from east to west along the Ramona Boulevard corridor. El Monte was incorporated in 1912.

## GARDEN CITY OF THE VALLEY

### *Burgeoning Agriculture*

El Monte's successful early small farms cultivated fruit, hops, cotton, castor beans, grain, honey, wool, and bacon. The turn of the century saw continued bounty from the land. In the early 20th century, El Monte was known as the "Garden City of the Valley." Walnuts, fruit, berries, vegetables, and flowers grew in abundance and supplied areas across the country. With the rich alluvial soils of the rivers, El Monte was a fertile place to grow anything. The official logo of the City of El Monte included walnuts.

Bodger Seed, Ltd., leased large swaths of land in southern El Monte to grow flowers. The brilliant-colored rows became a regional draw and an international legend as these products of California horticulture were exported to Europe. Local farmers claimed that anything would grow that you put in the ground. Orchards, groves, and a growing dairy industry began to replace field crops. The thriving agricultural industry required more water than was locally available, thus began the importation of water.



### *Roaring Twenties to Depression*

The renowned Gay's Lion Farm—the Disneyland of the 20s and 30s—opened to the public in 1927 with 57 lions. The farm was on the present site of Valley Boulevard and Peck Road. It raised lions for the growing film industry and put on shows for visitors. Hundreds enjoyed the farm and its roaring creatures. Jackie, one of Gay's prize animals, was chosen for the MGM logo, and the local high school adopted the lion as its mascot. Although the farm is long closed, its memory lives on with statues of Jackie at the Aquatic Center and at Valley Boulevard and Peck Road.

During the Depression, El Monte was chosen as the location of a unique federally funded program, an experimental subsistence program called Rurban Homesteads. The government purchased a walnut farm east of Peck road and subdivided it into 100 single-acre lots. Each lot offered a home with enough land to produce vegetables and raise livestock. The project was successful and repeated across the country. Some of the original Rurban Homesteads and the layout of the visionary development are still visible along the The Wye in the northeast quadrant of the City.



---

***Mexican-American  
Barrios***

*Medina Court, the last of the City's original Mexican-American barrios, has provided El Monte with a long line of civic and business leaders, establishing its reputation as a "Gateway to the American Dream" for generations of new Americans.*

---



## EMERGING CULTURES

The Chinese first came to the greater El Monte area during the construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Many Chinese remained in the El Monte area and ran trucks for the burgeoning agricultural industry. However, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1862 largely reduced the Chinese influence, forcing many Chinese immigrants to leave their homes in the San Gabriel Valley, although some stayed in the area. Johnson Sting, a native Chinese, owned the largest asparagus farm in southern California. Today, Chinese is the fastest growing ethnic group in El Monte.

Japanese immigrants came to California in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as unskilled farm workers. Like Mexican immigrants, they were segregated in public schools by racial covenants on property deeds and lived separate and distinct lives from other American residents in El Monte. By the 1920s, many Japanese assumed the trucking farms formerly held by the Chinese. A large number of Mexican Americans worked on their farms. However, the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II caused them to lose their farms and literally removed this community from El Monte.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 displaced large numbers of Mexican citizens and brought waves of immigrants into California over the following decades. Many of these immigrants found work in El Monte in the dairy, walnut, and berry farming industries. They brought with them great knowledge of agriculture and a strong equestrian tradition—the Charros legacy—that is still strongly felt in certain parts of the city. By the 1930s, Mexican immigrants constituted 20 percent of El Monte's population.

City ordinances required that Mexican immigrants live in designated areas; thus nurturing a unique Mexican American culture for more than 40 years. Approximately nine barrios were established in El Monte, such as Hicks Camp, Wiggin's Camp, Garvey Camp, Chino Camp, La Granada, and Medina Court. Houses were small wooden or even cardboard structures, usually with two or three rooms. Most families had an outhouse, although a few people had plumbing. Families had gardens and tended animals. Each barrio had its own stores, churches, and cultural establishments.

The barrios were a unique part of El Monte's history that continues to leave an imprint on community life. Although most of the barrios were demolished between 1953 and 1970, many of the residents stayed in the area to raise families and start businesses. The one remaining barrio is Medina Court, which was originally established around Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Medina Court has provided El Monte with a long line of civic and business leaders, establishing the neighborhood's reputation as a "Gateway to the American Dream" for generations of new Americans.

## WORLD WAR AND INDUSTRIAL ERA

World War II brought dramatic changes to El Monte. It brought the defense industry, harkening a shift from agriculture to industry. Aircraft parts factories and manufacturing began to emerge. Dairies and agricultural uses gave way to modern industry. Some of the best-known companies included Sargent Fletcher and Navcom.



Local workers produced parts for small planes, bombs, and other aircraft. At this time the industrial area now called Flair Park was established, as well as the northwest industrial area where Ball Glass opened to produce glass containers of all varieties.

The City of El Monte continued to expand as a suburb of the greater Los Angeles Region. To accommodate this population and reduce the threat of flooding, the Army Corps of Engineers cemented the river channels to allow for housing and industry within the flood plain. The quarry industry adjacent to El Monte to the north began in 1950 and still remains today. Much of the present freeway system was also established during this time. Much of the natural landscape was permanently replaced by flood control channels, freeways, quarries, and industrial uses, leaving a legacy of environmental issues.

El Monte's regional popularity increased with the opening of Valley Mall and its integrated music venue that drew international talent for the enjoyment of all—the El Monte Legion Stadium. El Monte RV, begun in 1970, became one of the nation's premier RV rental companies, represented by several hundred travel companies worldwide. Establishment of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Bus Terminal and Metrolink commuter rail helped establish El Monte as a transit hub of the San Gabriel Valley. As in the rest of southern California, the culture of the automobile took over, and El Monte became a regional destination to purchase cars.

As is the case with early industrialization and suburbanization throughout the southern California region, unintended legacies remain from this era. City leaders today face pollution from past industrial activities, underground water contamination, congestion from an overtaxed transportation system, and public health challenges of modern life in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.



## CONTEMPORARY EL MONTE – 1980S TO PRESENT

The City of El Monte has a colorful past, made up of many generations of individuals and families who traveled across the world to settle in El Monte. Although diverse in background, El Monte residents today share a special civic spirit of conviviality based on a belief in family and community. The City celebrates its younger citizens in a series of yearly events designed to delight the young and young at heart: Holiday House, the Art Festival, and Children’s Parade. The Parks Department hosts an excellent set of recreation opportunities for youth, and the state-of-the-art Aquatics Center is a major asset to the health and well-being of residents.



El Monte’s special identity is found in acknowledging and embracing the richness and the inextricable relation between the cultural and natural history of the community. Any time a foundation is dug for a new building in El Monte, the rich alluvial soils the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo once deposited across the valley floor are unearthed. A critical part of the cultural resources program will be to re-establish a balance between the natural environment that gave the City its identity throughout history as a “wooded place – a meadow between rivers” and future development.

El Monte has taken a leadership role in the Emerald Necklace, a vision for restoring the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel River channels. The City wishes to revitalize its downtown core, beautify and open up its rivers, and strengthen the economy. In this renewal process, the city anticipates future growth, opportunity, and continued celebration of diversity. The strategic position of the city as a central hub where regional bus, Metrolink, highway, and local trolley services converge is a great strength and offers opportunity to develop world class transit-oriented developments.

El Monte will always be remembered for its colorful past and its unique contribution to the history of California. Contemporary El Monte, however, will be defined by its future. Civic leaders have the opportunity to define a legacy that respects and leverages its past. This new legacy will be one that embraces a clean and healthy environment, that recognizes and affirms its cultures and places and imbues the physical and natural environment with reminders, that cherishes its residents and families, and that offers people of all cultures a place of security, and promise and a launching point for realizing their dreams. El Monte is at a pivotal moment in its history and evolution.

## Goals and Policies

El Monte is committed to acknowledging, celebrating, protecting, and enhancing its cultural resources throughout the City in a variety of ways. General Plan goals and policies support this commitment. The first goal and policies establish a broad-based cultural resources program. Goals 2, 3, and 4 address the importance of incorporating cultural resources into the built and natural environment. The fifth goal and supporting policies enhance support for the important yearly civic events that the City sponsors. The cultural resources index informs the proposed policies and goals in different ways, serving as useful references, tools, and sources of inspiration for cultural resource policy.

### COMPREHENSIVE CULTURAL RESOURCES PROGRAM

Although the land the City occupies is known to have been widely inhabited by the Tongva tribe, there are no material remnants of this living culture. Buildings and structures relating to the period of the first Mission, early settlers who followed the Santa Fe Trail to California, the barrios, and other historical eras have been erased. Much of El Monte's history is alive only in street names, photographs, journals, and collective memories of inhabitants. All told, there are many important memories but relatively few official historical buildings or monuments.

By comparison, peer cities may have a higher concentration of classified historic places and official historic buildings. Citizens of El Monte as a collective are interested in the contemporary relevance of their shared history. In El Monte, the residents in multiple areas are carefully preserving knowledge of historic urban fabric and the associated culture. Examples of this include Barrio History at La Historia, the early settlements and pioneer culture preserved at El Monte Historical Museum, and subsistence gardening history from residents of the Rurban Homesteads.

The guiding principle of the Cultural Resources Element is that El Monte's cultural resources are dynamic and multifaceted, involving many aspects of community life. Unlike other cities with many examples of historic resources, the challenge for a city like El Monte is how to re-create in a meaningful way a contemporary presence of the layers of history that are no longer physically present, but remain in the hearts and minds of residents. This is not a traditional preservation processes but a challenge to acknowledge the importance of people and events in the history in the City in a myriad of innovative ways.



Urban History



Natural Features



Community Events



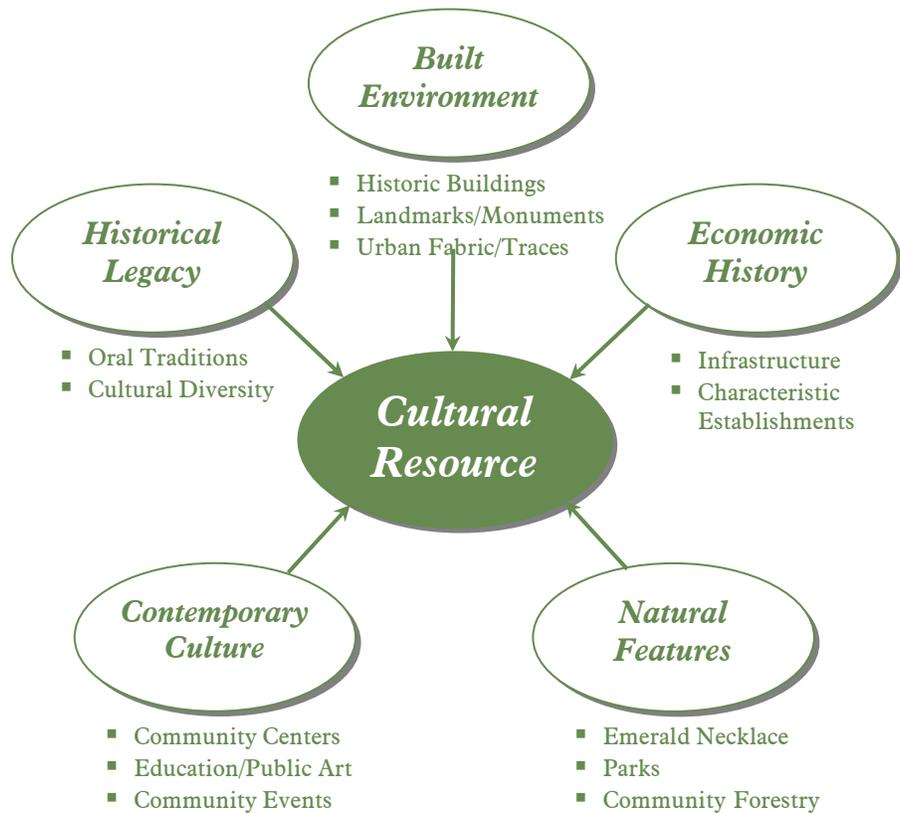
Urban Fabric/Traces



Economic History

## Cultural Resources Element

Fundamental to addressing this challenge is understanding the nature of El Monte's cultural resources and the fact that such resources touch every facet of community life, the natural environment, and the built environment. The graphic below shows a broad view of El Monte's cultural resources. The cultural resources index is organized in a similar fashion.



Given that cultural resources involve every facet of community life, and that the City of El Monte now has a cultural resources index, perhaps the most fundamental task is to establish a formal cultural resources program. Such a program would acknowledge the leadership, achievements, accomplishments, and histories of its residents and provide a galvanizing force for the City. The program could also forge a new identity rooted in reclaiming the balance and heritage of El Monte. The following goal and policies provide a starting point for such an endeavor.

## Goal CR-1

---

A multifaceted program for enhancing cultural resources in the City as a means to acknowledge and celebrate the leadership, achievements, accomplishments, and diverse histories of its residents.

---

### Policies

- CR-1.1 Cultural Resources Index.** Ratify the cultural resources index as a living document recording people, places, and events of local significance to the City of El Monte, and establish a protocol for updates and additions.
- CR-1.2 Cultural Resources Map.** Create a cultural resources map capturing the dynamic layers of El Monte's history; locate the original map at a major civic institution and use reproductions throughout the city as appropriate.
- CR-1.3 Cultural Heritage Commission.** Establish a commission to develop and oversee cultural resources programs, including public art programs, annual cultural resources awards, collaborative school curriculum, and special events.
- CR-1.4 Cultural Resources Ordinances.** Update the El Monte Municipal Code to include authorizing ordinances that govern the designation, preservation, and recognition of cultural resources in El Monte and to delineate the roles of commissions.
- CR-1.5 Cultural Resources Plan.** Create a comprehensive cultural resources plan, based on the cultural resource index and map, to imbue the natural and built environment with symbols and improvements drawing from El Monte's rich cultural heritage.
- CR-1.6 Cultural Resources Education.** Inspire public support and recognition of cultural resources through a public education program, including school district curriculum, public art, library corners, displays in local museums, and special events.
- CR-1.7 Government Role.** Fully support the establishment of a cultural resources program and provide funding, staffing, and other mechanisms to maintain the program.

## ORAL HISTORY

Telling stories of the City's critical cultural and historical events and places enriches residents' lives and is a source of pride, entertainment, and education. Oral history brings places alive and encourages citizens to consider where their city has been and where it is going. In the rush of modern living, oral histories allow us to pause and reflect. There are many waves of history and cultures that have influenced El Monte, but a few time periods of time stand out for many residents. In citizen surveys, the following key elements were the most commonly cited:

- ***Tongva Gabrieleño Culture.*** This widespread Native American culture used the Rio Hondo and adjoining areas for hunting, fishing, and gathering for thousands of years.
- ***Lexington School.*** This was the first public school in California and El Monte's only public school until 1923. Its story of segregation and desegregation reflect changing values and social activism.
- ***Gay's Lion Farm.*** This lion zoo and training center for Tarzan movies was one of the Southland's biggest attractions before World War II. The lion has become the City's most visible and endearing symbol.
- ***El Monte Legion Stadium.*** First a school gymnasium, then bought by Northrop Aviation before becoming an American Legion Hall, it became a noted venue for sporting events before bringing in live music.





## TRACES OF URBAN FABRIC

El Monte's cultural history exists both on the ground and in the collective memory of its citizens. Traces of urban fabric are patterns of streets and urban elements within the contemporary landscape that remain as remnants of earlier settlements of cultural significance.

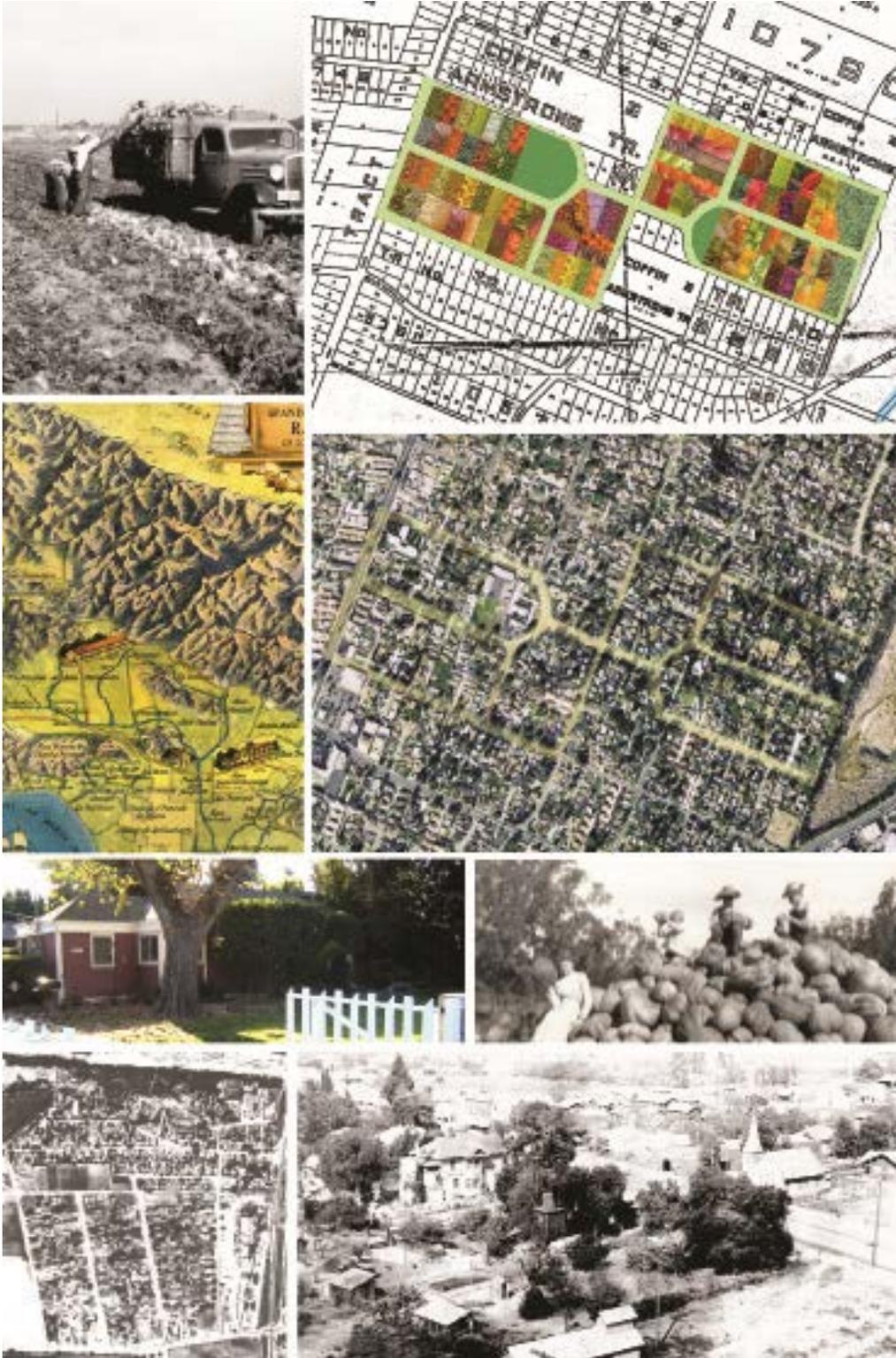
As cities grow and change, physical remnants of street patterns, buildings, and other elements often remain. In many cases, however, change is so pervasive that all traces of a historical event or time period are lost. In the case of El Monte, both conditions are true. Where significant examples in the landscape survive they should be preserved; where they do not, more creative approaches are needed to keep cultural history alive.

The highest ranked traces of urban fabric in the City are noted below. Other aspects of cultural history have been totally erased by modern development, but could be brought back with appropriate markers, displays, or symbols.



- ***Valley Boulevard/Valley Mall.*** El Monte's original Main Street and a key route between Los Angeles and San Bernardino, this area is the best known place to enjoy a walkable and relaxed shopping experience.
- ***Streets Named for Pioneers and First Settlers.*** El Monte was first settled by pioneers whose names are commemorated as street names throughout the City.
- ***Medina Court.*** The last of the original nine El Monte barrios, its nucleus was the Lady of Guadalupe Church and it produced a rich legacy of city leaders, workers, and citizens
- ***Rurban Homesteads.*** This Depression-era program encouraged subsistence living in a semiurban setting. The unusual lots, ample open space, and unique street patterns persist.
- ***Hicks and Wiggins Labor Camps.*** These camps were built along the Rio Hondo in the early 1900s. The camps were demolished but their story is indicative of the social and economic life of the era.

Preserving traces of urban fabric can also be a stimulus for the creation of cultural resource districts throughout the City (see Community Design Element). Based on cultural and historic development patterns, several districts have already been identified and could serve as the basis for streetscape improvements, public art, and cultural displays.



## Goal CR-2

---

**A community that embraces the rich diversity of residents and the cultural heritage they bring from all over the world by incorporating local cultural history and special places into the fabric of the built environment.**

---

### Policies

- CR-2.1 Cultural Districts.** Designate cultural districts based on historical development and cultural settlement patterns. Where little historical precedent exists, evaluate the creation of a district from existing site or urban design characteristics.
- CR-2.2 Historic Overlay Zones.** Assess the feasibility of creating historic overlay zones, as relevant, that contain elements of potential historic significance such as the Valley Mall, El Monte Theatre, Wye Street/Rurban Homestead area, and Medina Court.
- CR-2.3 Cultural Elements.** Develop elements relevant to defining traces of urban fabric: elements may include new gateways, streetscape elements such as kiosks with maps, special street signs, distinct textures for crosswalks or sidewalks, landscaping specific to districts, relevant public art, and interpretive signs.
- CR-2.4 Public Spaces.** Assess the feasibility of creating distinctive public space and walking routes in each district and Citywide, with a central gathering place and an interpretive map of the history of El Monte. An example of this would be the El Monte Historic Plaza between the Valley Mall and Valley Boulevard.
- CR-2.5 Capital Improvements.** Create a plan for making infrastructure improvements (e.g., signage, historical markers, park improvements, public art, and other media) that incorporate relevant images of El Monte's cultural heritage.
- CR-2.6 Cultural Icons.** Develop a program for placement of City symbols on sidewalks, street signs, retaining walls, freeway ramps, crosswalks, and other infrastructure to signify El Monte's unique cultural heritage.

## NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The City of El Monte is one of the few urban places in southern California that has been so influenced by its natural environment. El Monte’s most important natural features—its surrounding rivers—have affected its culture and continue to do so. Known as the “wooded place between the rivers,” El Monte existence and culture have long depended on water. Before the rivers were channelized, seasonal waters deposited rich, alluvial soils along their banks, making El Monte the Garden City of the Valley.

These rivers provided enough fertile soil and water to produce the largest agricultural center in California at the height of the Mission era. The rivers attracted early California settlers and fed the robust walnut, dairy, fruit, vegetable and flower industries that brought fame to the region in the early 20th century. And they were the center of social life for Mexican farm workers, who are responsible in large measure for the present cultural identity of El Monte. In a sense, the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel River have woven the disparate and unique cultures of El Monte’s heritage together.

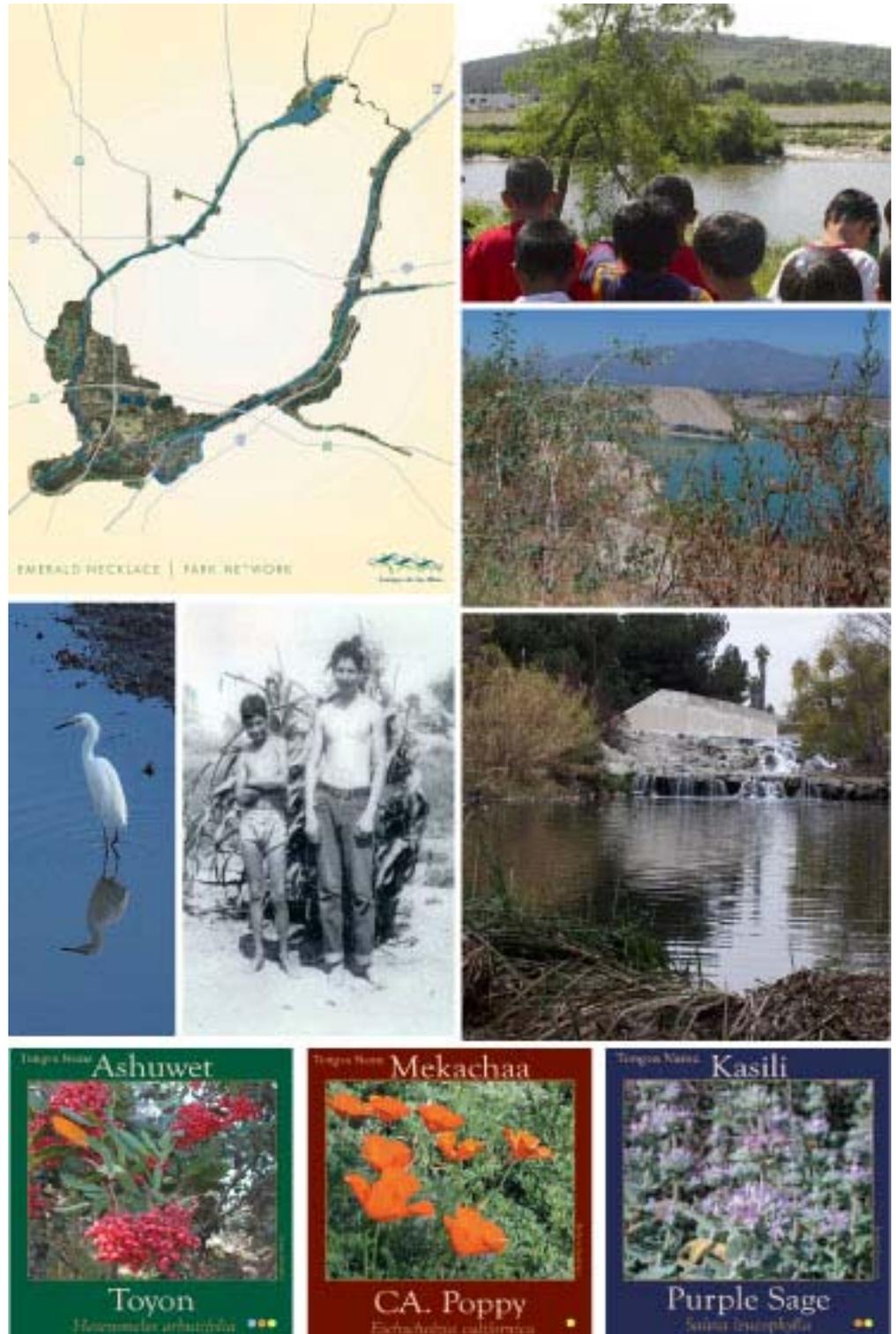
The dream of restoring these rivers has coalesced in the Emerald Necklace Vision Plan (see Parks and Recreation Element), a 17-mile loop of parks and greenways. This is a far-reaching, multibenefit plan was modeled after the Emerald Necklace, designed by 19<sup>th</sup> century architect Frederick Law Olmstead in Boston. This regional plan will link natural and cultural resources in a truly world-class urban park system, combining habitat restoration, water quality, recreation, open space, and cultural educational opportunities. El Monte’s portion of the Emerald Necklace is the heart of the plan and its cultural aspect is the primary concern of this element.

As mentioned earlier, El Monte’s name derives from its legacy as a meadow and wooded place. The San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo flowing from the mountains fed marshes and provided habitat for rich riparian woodland. Restoring some of this natural environment and integrating it into the modern suburban fabric of El Monte is an important way to evoke the cultural heritage of the community. As further described in the Parks and Recreation and Community Design Elements, El Monte is committed to creating a network of greenways, lush community forests, community and neighborhood parks, community gardens, and linear parks.

El Monte envisions the enhancement of its natural environment as a means to not only improve the environment, but also to tangibly express its cultural and historical heritage as a wooded place between the rivers.



Cultural Resources Element



## Goal CR-3

---

**A community that respects and re-creates its natural environmental and cultural legacy through a comprehensive program to restore the natural environment.**

---

### Policies

- CR-3.1 Community Forest.** Develop a community forest program that balances indigenous trees and plants and modern requirements for maintenance, water conservation, and aesthetics, as a visual reminder of the City's heritage and natural environment.
- CR-3.2 Landscape Amenities.** Create an integrated network of greenways, medians, parkways, and other landscaped amenities using a consistent and meaningful palette that balances the need for maintenance and cultural significance.
- CR-3.3 Emerald Necklace.** Continue to support, through a cooperative public/private/regional partnership, the realization of the Emerald Necklace Vision Plan (see Parks and Recreation Element for more detail).
- CR-3.4 Cultural Exhibits.** Include cultural exhibits and displays within linear parks, along greenways, and at other recreational facilities of the Emerald Necklace and City parks to acknowledge the unique contributions of people of all backgrounds.
- CR-3.5 Cultural Walk.** Create an El Monte cultural history river history walk linking key sites throughout the City with representative symbols, displays, and information acknowledging each cultural heritage of the city.
- CR-3.6 School Curriculum.** Create an educational packet for El Monte public schools explaining the role of the watershed in the City's historical and cultural heritage, including its historical use, watershed management, and conservation.
- CR-3.7 Yearly Events.** Create a series of yearly events and celebrations fostering youth and family involvement in the preservation, maintenance, and restoration of the cultural and environmental landscape of El Monte.

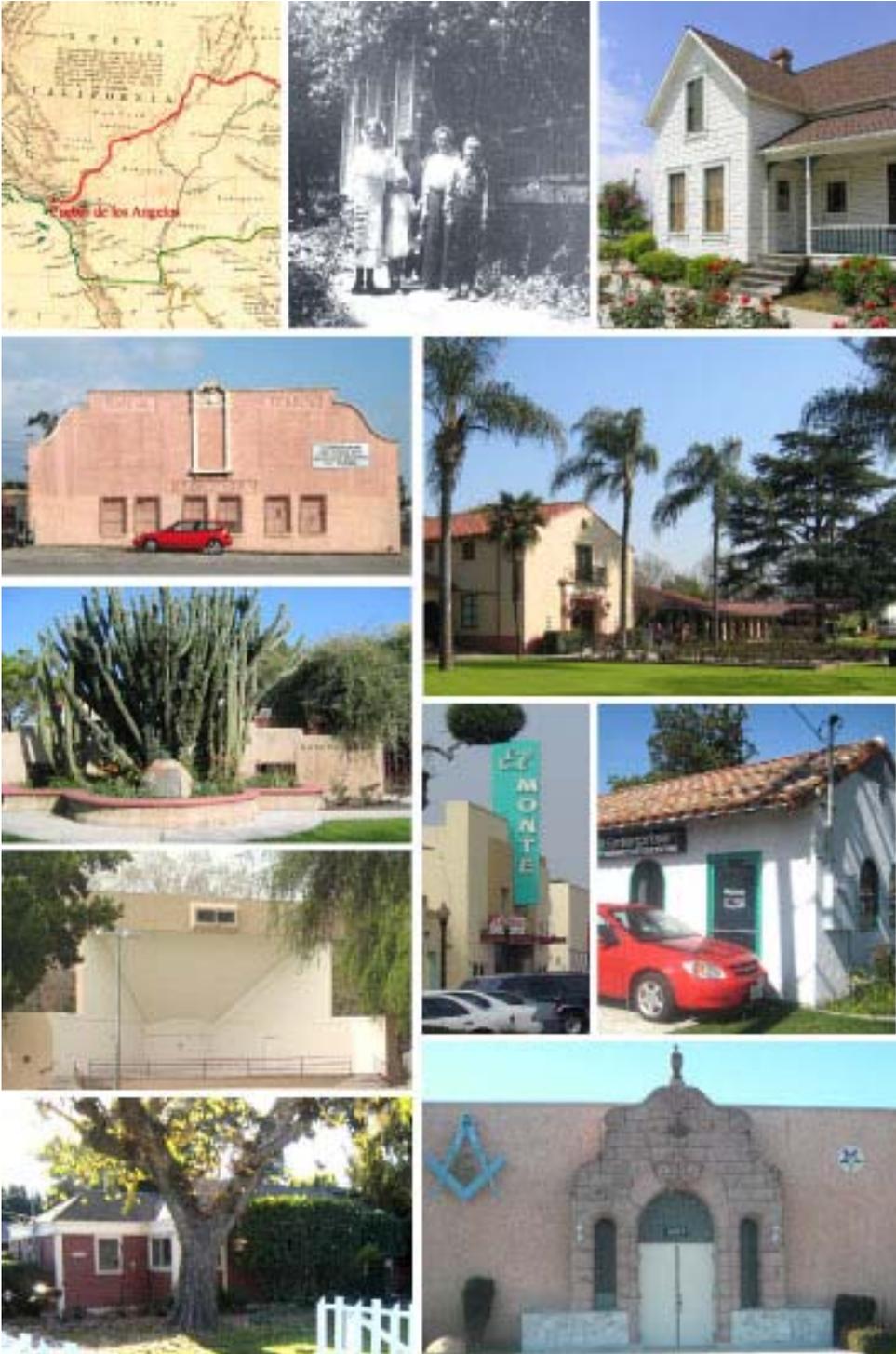
## HISTORIC STRUCTURES

Historic buildings remind us how El Monte developed over time. Although many of El Monte's historic buildings have been lost, the city does have some important landmarks, two of which are registered with the state: the Santa Fe Trail Historic Park and the Osmond House/Jail at Pioneer Park. The former is a state historic landmark representing an early southern California settlement by American immigrants along the Old Spanish Trail; the latter is an excellent example of early 20<sup>th</sup> century vernacular. These structures embody key aspects of the history of the California, the region, and the City and should be preserved, enhanced, and made fully accessible to the broadest number of residents.

In addition to these official landmarks, there are several buildings of significance to the history and culture of the city. Buildings of particular significance to the community include the El Monte Community Center Complex, which contains the beautiful Grace Black auditorium, courtyard, and El Monte Historical Society Museum. This site was originally donated by the Bodger Seed Company. Contemporary buildings of architectural significance such as the El Monte Aquatic Center should be considered for inclusion into a list of buildings of local significance.

Along the Old Valley Mall corridor stands the El Monte Theatre, a wonderful art-deco building with a well-remembered wishing well. Not far from this location, the Manual Arts Building, remnant of the original El Monte High School campus, on Valley Boulevard and the Masonic Lodge on Tyler are candidates for preservation and enhancement. If the original character of buildings such as these can be preserved within a scheme of adaptive reuse, they will give great character to the area and become an anchor for cultural history. Similarly, Costa Azul on Peck, a former Medina Court restaurant and now an Enterprise Rent-a-Car, is a potential candidate for enhancement as a cultural resource.

The Rurban Homesteads were a formative part of El Monte's early history. Any one of the original wood-frame houses of the Wye District could be preserved. In addition, 1920s homes and their original subsistence lots built during the Depression could be purchased and restored as a contemporary subsistence garden and linked to healthy eating and self reliance. Finally, there are wood-frame homes scattered throughout the city from the turn of the century through the early 1940s, whose historic character creates a pleasant complement and anchor among otherwise modern homes.



## Goal CR-4

---

**A community that acknowledges, identifies, protects, enhances, and expands its inventory of historic buildings, sites, and resources.**

---

### Policies

- CR-4.1 El Monte Historic Register.** Establish an El Monte Register of Historic Buildings and Places and seek listing for appropriate properties to the national and state registers of historic places.
- CR-4.2 Architectural Inventory.** Survey all potentially historic structures and create an architectural period and styles inventory for El Monte as a means to identify potential historic or locally significant structures.
- CR-4.3 Local List of Historic Places.** Create a local list of historic places for properties that do not meet criteria of the national or state Registers but are important to protect in terms of local significance. Tie this to the cultural resources index.
- CR-4.4 Historic Preservation Ordinance.** Adopt a preservation ordinance that would require a special permit to demolish or modify a historic resource.
- CR-4.5 Preservation and Rehabilitation.** Promote the preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reuse of older structures through the Mills Act and other programs.
- CR-4.6 School Curricula.** Link El Monte's Register of Historic Places and national and state monuments to multidisciplinary school curricula (literature, art, and social studies), with a living history component to include guest speakers and local field trips.
- CR-4.7 Adaptive Reuse.** Encourage the adaptive reuse of buildings of historical significance to serve meaningful contemporary uses while preserving the character, spirit, and original identity of the structures.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

El Monte’s culture is embodied not only in the built and natural environment, but also in the varied expressions of community life. Cultural resources in community life are expressed in many different ways—through stories and traditions that are carried down for generations and preserved in museums; through visual and performing arts that express our thoughts, concepts of beauty, and personal growth; and through community events that provide reminders of our collective and diverse heritage and provide opportunities for El Monte residents to come together.

### *Arts in Community Life*

Visual and performing arts create meaningful educational experiences. A well-rounded arts program in school can improve school performance, help improve social skills among youth, nurture creative thinking, and help students relate better to their schools and community. Arts can reach at-risk children and youth by giving them a way to express themselves, develop talents, and improve self-esteem. The arts are also as a unifying force in communities, by expressing and communicating the challenges and aspirations faced by all of humanity, regardless of culture or background.

El Monte is expanding opportunities for displaying its cultural resources. In addition to its most prominent monuments and landmarks—the Gay’s Lion Farm Statue, Statue of Liberty, and Veterans Memorial—the City has adopted a street banner program, is encouraging public art, and has begun to place historical markers and displays in key areas of the City. The school district also supports arts in its curriculum. The goal is to help foster a community where artistic expression and cultural diversity can flourish, and where City leaders support the arts as a part of civic life.

### *Celebrations in Community Life*

Yearly events and celebrations also bring forth and reinforce a spirit of identification, shared history, and destination for a community. Such celebrations are also powerful uniting forces for residents. El Monte’s residents have rich heritages from places all over the globe and have brought to the City a panoply of traditions and experiences. Yet certain values are shared regardless of culture. El Monte has therefore made it a priority to develop, perpetuate, and inspire the creation of powerful and imaginative events for celebrating children, family, the seasons of life, and other common values among El Monte residents.



## Cultural Resources Element

The City of El Monte sponsors a wide variety of events for residents to celebrate holidays, the community's cultural heritage, or just socialize with close friends and neighbors. The Holiday House has been a tradition for over 30 years and draws 15,000 residents annually. During the summer months, the Concert in the Park series draws 2,500 residents to each event. El Monte also celebrates its commitment to youth through its annual Children's Day Parade and Festival, attended by 10,000 residents. Other seasonal events are held throughout the year, such as the Veterans Day Parade, Fourth of July events, and many others.



### *Education in Community Life*

Cultivating an understanding of El Monte's cultural resources is a key way to appreciate and to personally connect to our rich heritage. We all learn from our past and it is our past that helps inform future decisions. As many of El Monte's cultural resources are preserved through stories and pictures, the City values the role education can play in remembering the contributions of El Monte residents and community leaders. In many ways, education can make relevant El Monte's historical and cultural heritage and allow residents and leaders today to draw upon the lessons it offers.



The City's museums offer opportunities for cherishing El Monte's past. The El Monte Historical Museum documents the community's history as a destination for pioneers traveling on the Santa Fe Trail, focusing on events since 1849. The La Historia Society Museum pays tribute to the City's Latino history, commemorates the nine original barrios in El Monte, and highlights contributions from the City's diverse cultures of Latinos, Chinese, Japanese, Tongva, and American pioneers. The City's growing Asian population is represented by the Chinese Culture Center in Flair Park, which includes a 60,000-square-foot facility for library uses, performing arts and conventions, festivals, and classes. In addition, the Chinese culture is also represented by the number of temples and churches that have been developed along corridors, like Lower Azusa Road.

Taken together, the goal is to help foster a civic environment where cultural expression and diversity can flourish, and where local government and City leaders legitimize and promote cultural resources as an essential component of civic support, funding, and decision making.



*Celebrating El Monte in the Built Environment*

- *Banners*
- *Monuments/Fountains*
- *Street Signs*
- *Posters*
- *Murals/Public Art*
- *Landscape Features*
- *Creative Walls*
- *Landscape Features*



**Goal CR-5**

**A community that celebrates the diversity of El Monte neighborhoods and recognizes people for their hard work, vision, and leadership in defining and shaping the City's past and future community.**

**Policies**

- CR-5.1 Community Events.** Support events of community-wide significance that represent and promote the City's varied cultural influences and community values.
- CR-5.2 Museums.** Working with partnerships, strive to financially support all museums in the City in order to preserve El Monte's unique history and culture and provide accessible and adequate venues for residents of all ages to appreciate these resources.
- CR-5.3 Gateways and Signage.** Preserve existing traces of the City's historic urban fabric throughout residential, commercial, industrial, and open space areas by creating a network of cultural districts, markers, and streetscape symbols.
- CR-5.4 Interpretive Signage.** Expand the public display of historical and cultural displays, commemorative plaques and public art works testifying to the significance of historic events, persons, buildings, or establishments no longer in existence.
- CR-5.5 Story of El Monte Art and Cultural Resources Program.** Develop a program for creating and placing interpretive historical markers at significant and visible sites in El Monte using interpretive categories from the index.
- CR-5.6 Art and Public Places.** Support an art in public places program through creating a cultural resources/public art map, establishing a public arts commission, creating a public arts master plan, and sponsoring and placing public art in El Monte.
- CR-5.7 City Regulations.** Use incentives, land use regulations, design guidelines, and other City policies to integrate the creation and display of art and cultural resources into every aspect of the community.