



Historical context excerpted from:

***West 4th Street Enhancement Project Historic resources  
Assessment***

Author(s): Kautz Environmental Consultants, Inc. (Teri H. Christensen and Robert R. Kautz)

Date: June 2003

Geographical limits of Survey: West 4<sup>th</sup> Street between Vine Street and West Street. Reno, Washoe County, Nevada

Location of Report: Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, 100 North Stewart Street, Carson City, NV 89701

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# **WEST 4TH STREET ENHANCEMENT PROJECT HISTORIC RESOURCES ASSESSMENT**

Federal Project No. STP-0647(003)  
CRR: Wa03-005S

***Submitted to:***

T. H. Turner  
Chief Archaeologist  
Nevada Department of Transportation  
Environmental Services Division  
1263 S. Stewart Street  
Carson City, Nevada 89712

***On behalf of:***

Glen B. Daily, P.E.  
Senior Civil Engineer - Public Works  
and  
Wayne C. Nash  
Assistant Civil Engineer - Traffic Engineering and Public Works

City of Reno  
P.O. Box 1900  
Reno, NV 89505

***Submitted by:***

Teri H. Christensen and Robert R. Kautz, Ph.D.  
Kautz Environmental Consultants, Inc.  
5200 Neil Road, Suite 200  
Reno, Nevada 89502

June 2003

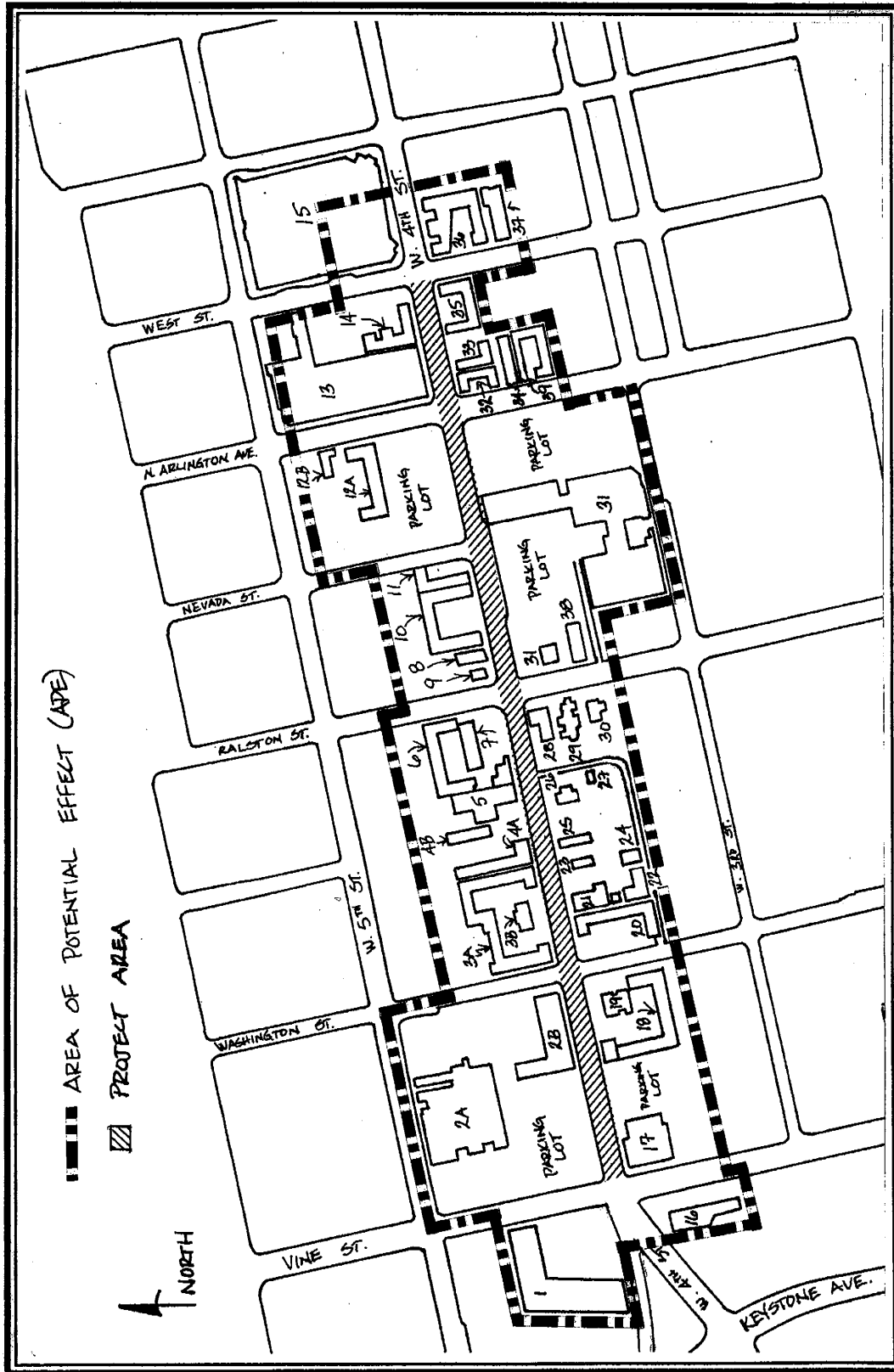


Figure 1.5 Detail map of enhancement project area with APE boundary and buildings in blocks along the corridor. Note map is not drawn to scale.

## 2.0 HISTORIC CONTEXT

The following text presents a brief synopsis of downtown Reno history. According to National Register guidelines, “the significance of a historic property can be judged and explained only when it is evaluated within its historic context” (National Register Staff 1995). This context provides a framework for identifying the relevant theme, geographical context and chronological period for each property and the project area. Consequently, is an important part for assessment of not only which resources are historically significant or important but also the potential effect a proposed project may have on a given historic resource.

Reno lies along both banks of the Truckee river at the north end of the Truckee Meadows, and had long been within the core territory of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California at the time of Euroamerican contact. The early history of Reno has been presented in a number of temporally and creatively eclectic frameworks (c.f., Townley 1981, 1983; Hummel 1888; Peckham 1920; Horton 1997; Land and Land 1995). Several recent documents submitted to SHPO for review have provided fairly detailed contexts, most of which are particularly relevant to development in the vicinity of the current project area (see JRP Consulting Services 2002; Myra L. Frank & Associates, Inc. 2000). Koval and Boyne (1993) have discussed the florescence of downtown Reno by emphasizing those factors that encouraged local development. The latter organization will be adopted and only briefly summarized herein.

By 1868 railroad surveyors had laid out the original Reno townsite north of the river. Myron Lake operated the first depot for the Central Pacific near the center of the grid with the commercial district on both sides. Following a public auction in March 1868 of 160 acres of land, houses and businesses sprung up along the railroad corridor. Early business were primarily low, wooden, false-front buildings and early on most residences were to the north of the railroad. Because of recurring fires, including devastating ones in 1873 and 1879, most of the early wooden buildings did not survive and the early commercial buildings were quickly replaced by those of brick or stone construction. Reno quickly became a significant crossroads for the west with important ties to San Francisco. The ties to Virginia City and the Comstock mines were completed with construction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad in 1872. During the 19th century the core of Reno included an approximate 21 block area within the bounds of West and East Streets, and the River and 4th Street. Most of the commercial buildings were along Commercial Row and East 4th Streets. The current project area developed as residential properties prior to 1900 and was known as the Western Addition, extending from Virginia Street west to Vine Street, and from the railroad north to 7th Street (Townley

1983:236). By 1900, Reno had surpassed the population of Virginia City to become Nevada's largest and most prosperous city. Reno was fully incorporated by 1903 with the imposition of municipal services that included flood control, water and other utilities transmission, taxing functions, education, and a formal legal and political apparatus.

Following a series of local and national economic depressions during the last part of the nineteenth century, the gold discoveries in Tonopah, Goldfield, and the other late mining booms of central and southern Nevada funneled wealth into Reno. Reno also became the supply center for the agricultural expansion that accompanied the Newlands Project and the vast farming enterprises at Fallon. Accordingly, Reno's population grew from about 4,500 in 1900 to ca. 11,000 by 1910, 18,000 by 1930, and 21,300 by 1940. Accompanying this growth was the construction of five new schools by 1910 (Bullis 1977), a Carnegie Library (1903), a new post office (1907), and a new County courthouse (1910-11) (Koval and Boyne 1993:5-6).

Along with the above factors (renewed mining and irrigation development projects), Koval and Boyne (1993) point to a series of socio-political, natural, and economic factors that also stimulated the growth of downtown Reno during the twentieth century. These include in a slightly modified format the following thematic areas directly relevant to the project area: Gaming, the Divorce and Marriage Industries, and Transportation.

- **Gaming:** Gambling was outlawed between 1910 and 1931. At all other times, gambling had a powerful effect on the face of downtown Reno. Many of the smaller retail and repair shops were absorbed by this growing industry. Following its re-legalization in 1931, many buildings were retrofitted to accommodate gaming. For example, the Riverside Hotel that had been built in 1927, added a casino to the ground floor and built a major expansion in 1950, and Abe Zetooney, owner of the Art Deco style El Cortez Hotel, still extant today, was able to charge \$6 a night instead of the prevailing rate of \$2.50 (Koval and Boyne 1993:10). Other properties include the Mapes Hotel built in 1948 as the prototype of the modern high-rise hotel casino and famous for the remote broadcasts of the Ed Sullivan television show. Reno's commercial core changed between the 1940s and 1960s as the gaming industry expanded. The increasing numbers of tourists coming to Reno to play required new construction of lodging facilities to house them. Modest motels and restaurants were constructed along the highway but laws associated with the core gaming district eventually shaped expansion towards the design of high-rise hotel-casino properties beginning in the 1950s and up through the present. The gaming industry continues to draw tourists to Reno and has resulted in impacting the architecture and economic viability of downtown Reno.

- **Divorce and Marriage Industries:** During the early part of the twentieth century, most states were stiffening their divorce laws in conformity to Edwardian concepts of morality. Nevada, on the other hand, provided liberal divorce laws creating a flourishing industry centered on serving the needs of a transient population which temporarily relocated here to take advantage of the state's (and city's) reputation as a divorce center. This was acquired in 1906, when the wife of the president of U.S. Steel obtained a highly publicized divorce. Reaping the economic benefits of it's fame as a "divorce center," Reno in 1927 reduced its residency requirements from six months to three months. Then in 1931 the residency requirements were reduced to six weeks. By 1936 more than 3,000 divorce decrees were being issued to the economic benefit of divorce lawyers, hotels, divorce/dude ranches, apartments, and entertainment localities. Between 1929 and 1939, over 30,000 divorces had been granted by courts in Washoe County (Harmon 1977). Locally, dude ranches and apartment complexes were built to accommodate the divorcees, with the Riverside Hotel, perhaps the most prominent example. The original Riverside was built in 1927 coinciding with a California law imposing a three day waiting period for marriages. However, the vast majority of divorce seekers were of middle or working class. Consequently, much of the housing in the downtown area during the 1930s-40s reflected this reality. New modest apartments and hotels were constructed, while numerous single-family homes were modified to add a "sleeping room" for rent, or the entire residence was converted into multiple apartment units or boarding rooms (Harmon 1977). According to one source, "nearly every block within a half-mile distance of the river in either direction contained residential buildings that had housed at least one divorce seeker between 1931 and 1934" (JRP Historical Consulting Services 2002).

Both gaming and the divorce trade brought a transient and tourist based economy to Reno from 1920-1945. The commercial and residential architecture of Reno began to reflect the increasing role of automobiles in accessing the community during the 1930s and 1940s. Automobile service, repair and gasoline shops sprang up along West 4th Street, then known as Highway 40 (the Victory Highway), which was the principal route accessing the city. Also constructed were autocourts, tourist camps, and motels/hotels became dominant along this corridor in the 1950s and 1960s.

While some sought quick divorces, Reno also allowed for quick marriages. This apparently never had quite the same physical or economic effect as did the divorce industry but the built landscape of downtown Reno still reflects this activity. Reportedly, wedding chapels as separate business entities did not develop until after World War II (JRP Historical Consulting Services 2002). Within the project area there are several such wedding chapels.

- **Transportation:** The Southern Pacific Railroad and the national highway systems both contributed to the growth and economic vitality of the downtown Reno area. Adjacent to Commercial Row, the railroad constructed its Southern Pacific Depot (1925) and the American Railway Express Station (1925-26), as well as the Freight Station (1931). Downtown Reno transportation was further augmented by the construction of a number of bridges that cross the Truckee River. Six bridges were built during the first half of the twentieth century that remain today at the following locations -- Arlington Avenue, South Arlington Avenue, Sierra Street, Virginia Street, Center Street, and Lake Street.

The proposed project area, West 4th Street, had its first major improvements as a portion of the Victory Highway which was the primary transportation corridor into and out of Reno during most of the early and middle twentieth century (c. 1920s-70s). The Victory Highway was organized in 1919-20 by northern California and Salt Lake City tourism interests combined with a group of people in Kansas who desired to build a memorial highway to honor the veterans of World War I (Rishel 1983:100; Duncan 2001). The concept was to create a road which would be the shortest route east-west and coast-to-coast across the United States while passing through popular scenic tourist draws (Rishel 1983:100). Construction of the road began in c. 1921 in various locations. Apparently, a large sum of money raised by Northern California tourism and Victory Highway interests provided assistance for the project in Nevada, "It was decided to raise \$150,000 in the northern section of the state, and to devote a major portion of that sum to making a passable road across Nevada" (*Battle Mountain Scout* 1921).

Several articles in the *Sparks Tribune* reported on construction progress in 1923 as the road was graded, graveled (and eventually concreted) near Verdi and Reno. In 1926, the route was designated U.S. 40, although a Victory Highway dedication ceremony with memorial monuments was held on July 24, 1928 at the California-Nevada line near Verdi (*Sparks Tribune* 1928). From its beginnings, the Victory Highway competed with the Lincoln Highway for funds and travelers (AARoads n.d.). Until c. 1939 the Lincoln Highway was more traveled but after U.S. 40 was designated a national defense highway and appropriated federal funds, automobile tourists began to follow the more well maintained Victory Highway (AARoads n.d.). Soon after completion of Interstate-80 in the 1960s and 1970s, the importance of U.S. 40 as a major transportation artery into Reno and through Nevada and California dwindled. California decommissioned U.S. 40 in 1964 and the western terminus was moved to Reno in 1966 (Brusca 2002). In 1975 Nevada followed suit, although apparently one official U.S. Route 40 sign in Reno remained until c. 1985, being "overlooked" by highway crews for years (Brusca 2002). Much of U.S. 40's route was assimilated into the Interstate 80 alignment

although small segments including business loops through towns, like 4th Street, and frontage roads have been maintained. Obviously, the development of this important highway through Reno played a major role in commercial development along the 4th Street corridor beginning in the late 1920s and continuing up through the early 1970s.

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