

# History of Las Vegas

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This **history of Las Vegas** covers both the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, and the Las Vegas Valley.

The name Las Vegas was given to the area in 1829 by a Mexican scout named Raphael Rivera, a member of the Antonio Armijo trading party that was traveling to Los Angeles,<sup>[1][2][3][4]</sup> and stopped for water there while heading north and west on the Old Spanish Trail from New Mexico. At that time, several parts of the valley contained artesian wells surrounded by extensive green areas; *Las Vegas* means the meadows in Spanish. The flows from the wells fed the Las Vegas Wash, which runs to the Colorado River.



Southern Paiutes at Moapa wearing traditional Paiute cradleboard and rabbit robe

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## Prehistory

The prehistoric landscape of the Las Vegas Valley and most of Southern Nevada was once a marsh with water and vegetation. The rivers that created the marsh eventually went underground, and the marsh receded. The valley then evolved into a parched, arid landscape that only supported the hardiest animals and plants.

At some point in the valley's early geologic history, the water resurfaced and flowed into what is now the Colorado River. This created a luxurious plant life, forming a wetland oasis in the Mojave Desert landscape.

Evidence of prehistoric life in Las Vegas Valley was found in 1993, when a group of construction workers discovered the remains of a Columbian mammoth. Palaeontologists estimate that the mammoth roamed the area some 8,000 to 15,000 years ago.

Native Americans lived in the Las Vegas Valley, beginning over 10,000 years ago. Archaeologists have discovered baskets, petroglyphs, pictographs and other evidence in diverse locations, including Gypsum Cave and Tule Springs. Paiutes moved into the area as early as AD 700, migrating between nearby mountains in the summer and spending winter in the valley, near Big Springs.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 1829–1905: origins

A trade caravan of 60 men led by the Mexican merchant Antonio Armijo was charged with establishing a trade route to Los Angeles.<sup>[6][7]</sup> Las Vegas was named by Mexicans in the Antonio Armijo party,<sup>[8]</sup> By following the Pike and Smith routes through a tributary of Colorado River they came upon the Las Vegas Valley described by Smith as the best point to re-supply before going onto California. The travelers named the area "Las Vegas" which is Spanish for "The Meadows".<sup>[9]</sup>

John C. Frémont traveled into the Las Vegas Valley on May 3, 1844, while it was still part of Mexico. He was appointed by President John Tyler to lead a group of scientists, scouts, and spies for the United States Army Corps of Engineers who were preparing for a possible war with Mexico. Upon arriving in the valley they made camp at the Las Vegas Springs, establishing a clandestine fort there. A war with Mexico did occur, resulting in the region becoming United States territory. The fort was used in later years by travellers, mountain men, hunters, and traders seeking shelter, but was never permanently inhabited.

In 1855, William Bringham led a group of 29 Mormon missionaries from Utah to the Las Vegas Valley. The missionaries built a 150-square-foot (14 m<sup>2</sup>) adobe fort near a creek and used flood irrigation to water their crops, a process still used at the park. However, because of tensions rising between leaders of the small Mormon community, the summer heat and difficulty growing crops, the missionaries returned to Utah in 1857, abandoning the fort.

For the next few years the area remained unoccupied by Americans except for travelers and traders. Then the U.S. Army, in an attempt to deceive Confederate spies active in southern California in 1864, falsely publicized that it reclaimed the fort and had renamed it Fort Baker, briefly recalling the area to national attention. After the end of the war in 1865, Octavius Gass, with a commission from the federal government, did re-occupy the fort. The Paiute nation had declined in numbers and negotiated a new treaty with the United States, ceding the area around the fort to the United States in return for relocation and supplies of food and farming equipment. Consequently, Gass started irrigating the old fields and renamed the area 'Las Vegas Rancho.' Gass made wine at his ranch and Las Vegas became known as the best stop on the Old Spanish Trail. By 1872, Gass expanded his ranch to 640 acres (260 ha), and used his position as a legislator to have the territory around his ranch included in Nevada instead of Arizona. In 1881, because of mismanagement and intrigue with a Mormon syndicate, Gass lost his ranch to Archibald Stewart to pay off a lien Stewart had on the property. In 1884, Archibald's wife, Helen J. Stewart became the Las Vegas Postmaster.

The property (increased to 1,800 acres (730 ha)), stayed with the family (despite Archibald Stewart's murder in July 1884) until it was purchased in 1902 by the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad, then being built across southern Nevada. The railroad was a project of Montana Senator William Andrews Clark. Clark enlisted Utah's U.S. Senator and mining magnate Thomas Kearns to ensure the line's completion through Utah to Las Vegas. The State Land Act of 1885 offered land at \$1.25 per acre (\$3.09/hectare). Clark and Kearns promoted the area to American farmers who quickly expanded the farming plots of the areas. Not until 1895 did the first large-scale migration of Mormons begin in the area, at long last fulfilling Brigham Young's early dream. Through wells and arid irrigation, agriculture became the primary industry for the next 20 years and in return for his development, the farmers named the area Clark County in honor of the railroad tycoon and Senator.

## 1905–1929: birth, growth and crisis

By the early 20th century, water from wells was piped into the town, providing both a reliable source of fresh water and the means for additional growth. The increased availability of water in the area allowed Las Vegas to become a water stop, first for wagon trains and later railroads, on the trail between Los Angeles, California, and points east such as Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad was completed in 1905, linking Salt Lake City to southern California. U.S. Senator William Andrews Clark was the majority owner of the railroad, which was a corporation based in Utah. Among its original incorporators were Utah's U.S. Senator Thomas Kearns and his business partner David Keith. Kearns, one of the richest and most powerful men in Utah, and Keith were the owners of Utah's Silver King Coalition Mine, several mines in Nevada and *The Salt Lake Tribune* newspaper. Kearns and Keith helped Clark ensure the success of the new railroad across Utah and into Nevada to California. Curiously, for a time there were two towns named Las Vegas. The east-side of Las Vegas (which encompassed the modern Main Street and Las Vegas Boulevard) was owned by Clark, and the west-side Las Vegas (which encompassed the area north of modern-day Bonanza Road) was owned by J.T. McWilliams, who was hired by the Stewart family during the sale of the Las Vegas Rancho and bought available land west of the ranch. It was from their property that Las Vegas took form.



St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church near 4th and Bridger in downtown was founded in 1910.<sup>[10]</sup>

Clark subsequently built another railroad branching off from Las Vegas to the boomtown of Bullfrog called the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad. With the revenue coming down both railways that intersected there, the area of Las Vegas was quickly growing. On May 15, 1905, Las Vegas officially was founded as a city, when 110 acres (45 ha), in what would later become downtown, were auctioned to ready buyers. Las Vegas was the driving force in the creation of Clark County, Nevada in 1909 and the city was incorporated in 1911 as a part of the county. The first mayor of Las Vegas was Peter Buol who served from 1911-1913.

Shortly after the city's incorporation, the State of Nevada reluctantly became the last western state to outlaw gaming. This occurred at midnight, October 1, 1910, when a strict anti-gambling law became effective in Nevada. It even forbade the western custom of flipping a coin for the price of a drink. Nonetheless, Las Vegas had a diversified economy and a stable and prosperous business community, and therefore continued to grow until 1917. In that year, a combination of economic influences and the redirection of resources by the federal government in support of the war effort forced the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad to declare bankruptcy. Although William Clark sold the remains of the company to the Union Pacific Railroad, a nationwide strike in 1922 left Las Vegas in a desperate state.

## 1930–1941: Hoover Dam and the first casinos

On July 3, 1930, President Herbert Hoover signed the appropriation bill for the Boulder Dam. The dam was later renamed the Hoover Dam during the Truman administration. Work started on the dam in 1931 and Las Vegas' population swelled from around 5,000 citizens to 25,000, with most of the newcomers looking for a job building the dam. However, the demographic of the work force consisting of males from across the country with no attachment to the area created a market for large scale entertainment. A combination of local Las Vegas business owners, Mormon financiers, and Mafia crime lords helped develop the casinos and showgirl theaters to entertain the largely male dam construction workers.<sup>[11]</sup>



Hoover Dam in 1942

Despite the influx of known crime figures, the local business community tried to cast Las Vegas in a respectable light when the Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur visited in 1929 to inspect the dam site. However a subordinate was found with alcohol on his breath (this was during the time of Prohibition) after a visit to Block 16 in Las Vegas. The government ultimately decided that a federal-controlled town, Boulder City, would be erected for the dam workers.

Realizing that gambling would be profitable for local business, the Nevada state legislature legalized gambling at the local level in 1931. Las Vegas, with a small but already well-established illegal gambling industry, was poised to begin its rise as the gaming capital of the world. The county issued the first gambling license in 1931 to the Northern Club, and soon other casinos were licensed on Fremont Street like the Las Vegas Club and the Apache Hotel. Fremont Street became the first paved street in Las Vegas<sup>[12]</sup> and received the city's first traffic light in 1931.

In reply, the federal government restricted movement of the dam workers to Las Vegas. Smuggling and circuitous routes then were developed. In 1934, to curtail these activities and the resulting growth of criminal figures in the gambling industry, the city's leading figures purged gambling dens and started an effort to stem the flow of workers from the dam. This only emboldened some dam workers who still contrived to visit Las Vegas. A celebration of this era has become known as Helldorado Days.<sup>[13]</sup>

Although the suppression efforts resulted in declines at gambling venues and resulted in a business downturn, the city was recharged, literally, when the dam was completed in 1935. In 1937, Southern Nevada Power became the first utility to supply power from the dam, and Las Vegas was its first customer. Electricity flowed into Las Vegas and Fremont Street became known as Glitter Gulch due to the many bright lights powered by electricity from Hoover Dam. Meanwhile, although the dam worker population disappeared, Hoover Dam and its reservoir, Lake Mead, turned into tourist attractions on their own and the need for additional higher class hotels became clear.

In 1940, U.S. Route 95 was finally extended south into Las Vegas, giving the city two major access roads. Also in 1940 Las Vegas's first permanent radio station, KENO, began broadcasting replacing the niche occupied earlier by transient broadcasters.

## **1941–1945: war years**

On January 25, 1941 the U.S. Army established a flexible gunnery school for the United States Army Air Corps in Las Vegas. Mayor John L. Russell signed over land to the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps for this development. The gunnery school later would become Nellis Air Force Base. The U.S Army was not pleased with the legal prostitution in Las Vegas and in 1942 forced Las Vegas to outlaw the practice, putting Block 16, the local red light district permanently out of business.

On April 3, 1941, hotel owner Thomas Hull opened the El Rancho Vegas. It was the first resort on what would become the Las Vegas Strip. The hotel gained much of its fame from the gourmet buffet that it offered.

On October 30, 1942, R. E. Griffith rebuilt on the site of a nightclub called Pair-O-Dice,<sup>[14]</sup> that first opened in 1930, and renamed it Hotel Last Frontier. A few more resorts were built on and around Fremont Street but the next hotel on the Strip publicly demonstrated the influence of organized crime on Las Vegas. Although ethnic organized crime figures had been involved in some of the operations at the hotels, the Mafia bosses never owned or controlled the hotels and clubs which remained monopolized by hard-bitten local Las Vegas families who were unwilling to cede ground to the crime bosses and proved strong enough to push back. This changed in post-war Las Vegas when Jewish gangster Bugsy Siegel, with help from friend and fellow mob boss Meyer Lansky poured money through Mormon owned banks for cover of legitimacy and built The Flamingo in 1946.

## **1947–1963: postwar boom and organized crime**

The Flamingo initially lost money and Siegel died in a hail of gunfire in Beverly Hills, California in the summer of 1947. Additionally, local police and Clark County Sheriff deputies were notorious for their heavy-handed tactics toward mobsters who "grew too big for their pants." However, many mobsters saw the potential that gambling offered in Las Vegas. From 1952 to 1957, through money and institutional lending provided by the Teamsters Union and some Mormon bankers they built the Sahara, the Sands, the New Frontier, the Royal Nevada, the Showboat, The Riviera, The Fremont, Binion's Horseshoe (which was the Apache Hotel), and finally The Tropicana.

Owned and operated by a joint combination of Mormon elders who provided political and business legitimacy and people involved with organized crime who provided unreported income and street muscle, such as Meyer Lansky these crime hotels became regarded as the epitome of gambling entertainment. Even with the general knowledge that some of the owners of these casino resorts had dubious backgrounds, by 1954, over 8 million people were visiting Las Vegas yearly pumping \$200 million into casinos. Gambling was no longer the only attraction; the biggest stars of films and music

like Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Andy Williams, Liberace, Bing Crosby, Carol Channing, and others performed in intimate settings. After coming to see these stars, the tourists would resume gambling, and then eat at the gourmet buffets that have become a staple of the casino industry.

However, the confluence of various marginal and/or suspected groups such as Jews, Sicilians, and Mormons into the gambling enterprises in Las Vegas and the subsequent cornering of the gambling market in the city by these groups sparked a two-year investigation by Senator Estes Kefauver and his Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950–51. The hearing concluded that organized crime money was incontrovertibly tied to the Las Vegas casinos and was becoming the controlling interest in the city thereby earning for the groups vast amounts of income which was strengthening their influence in the country. This led to a proposal by the Senate to institute federal gambling control. Only through the power and influence of Nevada's Senator Pat McCarran did the proposal die in committee.

Along with their connections in Hollywood and New York City, these interests in Las Vegas were able to use publicity provided by these media capitals to steer the rapid growth of tourism into Las Vegas thereby dooming Galveston, Texas; Hot Springs, Arkansas; and other illegal gaming centers around the nation.<sup>[15]</sup> Nevada's legal gaming as well as the paradoxical increased scrutiny by local and federal law enforcement in these other locales during the 1950s made their demise inevitable.

## 1950s: atomic testing

While the Strip was booming, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission on January 27, 1951 detonated the first of over a hundred atmospheric explosions at the Nevada Test Site. These atmospheric tests would continue until enactment of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 when the tests moved underground. The last test explosion was in 1992. Despite the dangers and risks, greatly underestimated at the time, of radiation exposure from the fallout, Las Vegas advertised the explosions as another tourist attraction and offered *Atomic Cocktails in Sky Rooms* that offered a great view of the mushroom clouds.



Nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site

The influx of government employees for the Atomic Energy Commission and from the Mormon-controlled Bank of Las Vegas spearheaded by E. Parry Thomas during those years funded the growing boom in casinos. But Las Vegas was doing more than growing casinos. In 1948, McCarran Field was established for commercial air traffic. In 1957 the University of Nevada, Las Vegas was first established, initially as a branch of the University of Nevada, Reno and becoming independent in 1969. In 1959 the Clark County Commission built the Las Vegas Convention Center, which would become a vital part of the area's economy. A new utility company, Southwest Gas expanded into Las Vegas in 1954.

## 1955–1980: the beginning of modern Las Vegas

### Howard Hughes

In 1966, Howard Hughes, the eccentric hero of the American aviation industry, and noted American entrepreneurial financier with vast connections to long established networks in the country, moved to Las Vegas. Initially staying in the Desert Inn, he refused to vacate his room and instead decided to



purchase the entire hotel. Hughes extended his financial empire to include Las Vegas real estate, hotels and media outlets, spending an estimated \$300 million and using his considerable powers to take over many of the well known hotels, especially the organized crime connected venues and he quickly became one of the most powerful men in Las Vegas. He was instrumental in changing the image of Las Vegas from its Wild West roots into a more refined cosmopolitan city.

## **Hank Greenspun**

The local newspaper *Las Vegas Sun* and its editor Hank Greenspun led a crusade in those days to expose all the criminal ties, activities, and government corruption in Las Vegas. His investigative reporting and editorials led to the exposure of Clark County Sheriff Glen Jones' ownership of a brothel and the resignation of Lieutenant Governor Clifford A. Jones as the state's national committeeman for the Democratic Party. Before his death in 1989, Hank Greenspun founded The Greenspun Corporation to manage his family's assets, and it remains a major influence in Las Vegas, with media holdings in print, television and the Internet; substantial real estate holdings; and ownership stakes in a number of casinos.

## **Local government**

One problem for the City of Las Vegas was that the Strip did not reside in Las Vegas proper. Because of this, the city lost tax revenue. There was a push to annex the Strip by the City of Las Vegas, but The Syndicate used the Clark County Commissioners to pull a legal maneuver by organizing the Las Vegas Strip properties into an unincorporated township called Paradise. Under Nevada Law, an incorporated town, Las Vegas, cannot annex an unincorporated township. To this day, virtually all of the Strip remains outside the City of Las Vegas.

## **Desegregation**

Much like in other American settled counties and towns throughout the United States, entertainment venues were segregated between black- and white-owned businesses. With almost all of the businesses owned and operated by whites, Black Americans were barred from entering the venues which remained focused, regardless of their legitimacy or criminality, on entertaining a white-only clientele. As a result of property deeds, businesses owned by or mainly serving non-whites were confined to clubs on the "west side" of the tracks. This also was enforced in many of the work positions. Thus, African Americans (except those who provided the labor for low-paying menial positions or entertainment) and Hispanics were limited in employment occupations at the white-owned clubs. However, because of employment deals with black worker groups, many clubs favored black workers, and the Hispanic population actually decreased ninety percent from 2,275 to just 236 by the mid-1950s.

Organized crime-owned businesses saw an opportunity in not dividing their clientele by race and, despite property deeds and city and county codes barring such activities, made several attempts at desegregating their businesses in the hopes of putting out of operation the non-white owned clubs and expanding their own market share. An attempt was made at forming an all-integrated night-club modeled on the Harlem Clubs of New York City during the 1920s and 1930s, like those owned by German-Jewish gangster Dutch Schultz. On May 24, 1955, Jewish crime boss Will Max Schwartz, along with other investors, opened the Moulin Rouge. It was a very upscale and racially integrated casino that actually competed against the resorts on the Strip, especially the non-white owned strips on the west side. By the end of the year, the casino closed as Schwartz and his partners had a falling out, but the seeds for racial integration were sown.

Many sources have credited Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack as a significant driving force behind desegregation in the casinos.<sup>[16]</sup> One famous story tells of Sinatra's refusal to perform at the Sands Hotel unless the hotel provided Sammy Davis Jr. with a room.<sup>[17]</sup> The famed performing group made similar demands at other venues, forcing owners to amend their policies over time.<sup>[18]</sup>

However, it took political action, most often supported by Jewish crime groups, for racial desegregation to occur. In 1960, the NAACP threatened a protest of the city's casinos for their policies. A meeting between the NAACP, the mayor and local businessmen resulted in city-wide casino desegregation, starting with the employees. Many whites were attritioned from positions and their jobs given to the black unions. Along with the rest of the country, Las Vegas experienced the struggle for civil rights. Activists like James B. McMillan, Grant Sawyer, Bob Bailey, and Charles Keller dragged Las Vegas to racial integration.

Aside from seeing no business advantage to excluding non-white customers from casinos and clubs, the organized crime groups themselves were composed of people of ethnicities (Jewish and Italian) that faced discrimination from WASP America and thus could understand the plight of blacks. This was also a driving force behind the integration advocated by ethnic performers such as Sinatra and Martin.

Another big force for equality was Mayor Oran Gragson. Spurred into local politics by a vigilante ring of cops who repeatedly broke into his appliance store, he implemented infrastructure improvements for the minority neighborhoods in Las Vegas, backed the NAACP in its actions, and promoted black workers for jobs. He also championed the cause of the Paiute tribe that owned a small portion of Las Vegas. Gragson stopped the U.S. government from evicting the tribe and actually made infrastructure improvements for them. His work helped reverse the decrease of minority populations in Las Vegas.

Local legislation kept up with the national legislation and integration was finally established. The only real violence came as a result of school integration, with violent riots and fights occurring in Clark High School when black gangs and youths began attacking the whites. Integration sparked white flight from the school district from 1965 to 1971.

## **MGM fire**

On November 21, 1980 the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, suffered a devastating fire. A total of 85 people died and 785 were injured in what remains the worst disaster in Nevada history. The property was eventually sold and reopened as Bally's Las Vegas, while MGM moved south to Tropicana Avenue.

## **1970-Late 2000s: explosive growth**

On a percentage basis, Las Vegas and Clark County experienced incredibly high growth rates starting in the 1930s and lasting until the late 2000s recession. During that period, the population of the city more than doubled in most decades. The rate slowed down in the 1970s with the decrease of the white birth rate, but never dropped below 60% (1980–1990), and even accelerated after 1990 due to immigration.

By 2000, Las Vegas was the largest city founded in the 20th century,<sup>[19]</sup> and by 2006 it was the 28th largest city in the US, with a population of 552,000 in the city and nearly 1.8 million in Clark County. The explosive growth resulted in rapid development of commercial and residential areas throughout the Las Vegas Valley. The strong boom in the resort business led to many new condominium developments all along the Strip and downtown area. Also urban sprawl development of single-family homes



continued across the valley, building the areas of Henderson, North Las Vegas, Centennial Hills, and Summerlin. The rapid development and population growth both halted abruptly in the late 2000s recession.<sup>[20][21]</sup>

During this period of time, American author and journalist Hunter S. Thompson wrote and published his seminal novel, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, detailing the experience of his 1971 trip to the city.

## Since 1989: the megaresort era

The "Mafia/Rat Pack" Las Vegas of the mid-20th century came to a gradual end in the 1980s with the aging out of the World War II generation, the decline of organized crime elements, and the rise of baby boomer entrepreneurs who began a new chapter in the city's history, the so-called megaresort era. Las Vegas began to become a more commercialized, family-oriented place with large corporations coming to own the hotels, casinos, and nightclubs in place of Mafia bosses. The megaresort era kicked off in 1989 with the construction of The Mirage. Built by developer Steve Wynn, it was the first resort built with money from Wall Street, selling \$630 million in junk bonds. Its 3,044 rooms, each with gold tinted windows, set a new standard for Vegas luxury and attracted tourists in droves, leading to additional financing and rapid growth on the Las Vegas Strip. Numerous landmark hotels and other structures were razed to make way for ever-larger and more opulent resorts including:



The Strip resorts in late 2009

- 1990: Rio and Excalibur
- 1993: MGM Grand, Treasure Island, and Luxor,
- 1996: Stratosphere Tower and Monte Carlo
- 1997: New York-New York
- 1998: Bellagio
- 1999: Mandalay Bay, Venetian, and Paris
- 2000: Planet Hollywood (Formerly Aladdin)
- 2001: Palms
- 2005: Wynn (opened in April by Wynn Resorts Limited opened its new flagship, the constructed at a cost of US\$2.7 billion.)
- 2007: Palazzo
- 2008: Encore
- 2009: CityCenter
- 2010: The Cosmopolitan

Helldorado Days was resumed in 2005 for the City of Las Vegas' centennial celebration.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Late 2000s towards 2010s: downturn and recovery

Despite the success, the home mortgage crisis and the late 2000s recession affected the economic success. Soon after, new home construction was stalled, and construction projects were either canceled, postponed, or continued with financial troubles. Some of these projects included the MGM Mirage property of CityCenter, Fontainebleau, Echelon, and The Plaza. The global financial situation also had a negative effect on gaming and tourism revenue, causing many of the companies to report net loss.

Las Vegas has still managed to host many conventions and major events, such as the annual Latin Grammy Awards.

Many analysts agree that the Las Vegas economy is recovering, with improving conditions in tourism and the housing market for 2013.<sup>[22][23]</sup> Prices are rising and there has been a large increase in the million dollar home market, with many new custom homes being built. January 2013 marks the 19th consecutive month with home sales higher than the same month in the previous year.<sup>[24]</sup> In addition, Las Vegas was named America's Top Turn Around Market for 2012 by Trulia.<sup>[25]</sup>

## See also

- Las Vegas in the 1940s
- Las Vegas in the 1950s
- Timeline of Las Vegas

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