

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY HISTORY



Ranch on Alameda Street, 1932-1933.
Courtesy, California Historical Society



Residence on 70th St., between Compton and Makee, 1932-1933.
Courtesy, California Historical Society

Early History

Florence-Firestone is part of the Los Angeles Basin's rich history, including its indigenous history. The Los Angeles Basin was home to many indigenous tribes. The Gabrielina/Tongva tribe is known to have roamed the area that encompasses Florence-Firestone. The Gabrielino/Tongva were hunter-gatherers and lived in permanent communities near a stable food supply and protection from flooding. Community populations generally ranged from 50-100 inhabitants. While specific historical resources have not yet been identified in Florence-Firestone, the tribe is known to have traveled through the area as part of the historical trade route that led to the San Pedro coast.

Turn of the Century

The area that is now Florence-Firestone once contained farmland that yielded abundant crops of sweet potatoes, grain, and corn watered by artesian wells. Grape vineyards were common, as were eucalyptus groves planted for firewood. Farms in the area ranged in size from 40 to several hundred acres.

In 1869, a rail line paralleling Alameda Street from Los Angeles to Wilmington was completed by the Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1876, the trans-continental rail line was completed, connecting the area to the nationwide rail system. The unincorporated districts of Florence and Graham were established as outposts along these rail lines. Southern Pacific and Pacific Electric Railroads had stops along Florence Avenue and Graham Avenue. The name Florence-Firestone may have originated from these outposts. In 1877, the first post office in Florence-Firestone was established. With the construction of the Pacific Electric inter-urban line red cars, which ran from Los Angeles to Long Beach along Graham Avenue, the area had additional regional rail connections by 1902.

Development initially occurred around the rail and streetcar lines. During the 1800s and early 1900s, development was concentrated between Compton Avenue and Alameda Street. In the 1920s, the community started spreading eastward and westward and was almost completely built out by the 1940s. The 1960 Census indicated that 72% of all housing in the community was constructed before 1940. Many of the structures built between the 1920s and 1940s remain today.

Portions of Florence-Firestone have, in previous times, been identified by different place names. Graham, Starks Palm, Central Gardens, Roosevelt Park, Gage-Holmes and Firestone Park Zoned Districts were all named after previously

existing neighborhoods in Florence-Firestone. Watts, an adjacent community to the south, was incorporated as an independent city in 1907 and was annexed to the City of Los Angeles in 1926.

Early 1900's

The rail line and proximity to ocean ports made Florence-Firestone and its surrounding areas an ideal location for factories, with abundant manufacturing jobs in the early 1920s. Goodyear Tire Company opened in 1920 on Central Avenue in the City of Los Angeles near the community's boundary. In 1927 Firestone Tire and Rubber Manufacturers opened a plant at the intersection of Firestone Boulevard and Alameda Street in South Gate also near the community's boundary.

At its peak, Goodyear Tire employed over 2,500 people and operated 24 hours a day. In addition to the tire and rubber plants, steel manufacturers, automobile assembly plants, derrick and equipment companies, and other manufacturing companies provided a variety of good jobs for the community. This in turn supported a vibrant commercial district, with three movie theaters opening in the community in the 1930s, two on Florence Avenue and one on Compton Avenue. The onset of World War II brought additional manufacturing jobs to the area with the growth of the defense industry. However, after World War II the defense industry declined and manufacturers transitioned to the auto industry.

Post War II Years

In 1948, the "whites-only" housing covenants were lifted in the Los Angeles area and African-Americans began to purchase and rent homes in the recently desegregated parts of the community. Racial tensions began to grow, eventually leading to violence in the 1950's when white residents bombed, fired into, or burned crosses on the lawns of African-Americans' homes. In response, African-American boys formed clubs for protection and the first gangs were established.

In the 1960s, the community was affected by deindustrialization. Factories began to move to outlying areas where there was more space, cheaper land, and less of the perceived social ills of the urban core. Residents and retail establishments followed, resulting in lower rents in the community. The job base, once supported by a strong manufacturing presence, shifted increasingly to lower-wage, service-sector jobs with less stable local employment options. At the same time, the community underwent its first major demographic shift.



Industrial use on Slauson, 1932-1933.
 Courtesy, California Historical Society



Fox Theater on Florence Avenue ca. 1931.
 One of three movie theaters in the community at that time.
 Courtesy, Los Angeles Public Library.



Aerial view of Alameda Street and Florence Avenue, 1955.
 Courtesy, Los Angeles Public Library

Between 1950 and 1965 the African-American population increased from 18% to 57% of the total population. The 1960s was also a time of civil unrest surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and protest against the Vietnam War. In Los Angeles, racial tensions stemming from racial injustices, discrimination, and economic hardship led to the Watts Riot of 1965.

Recent Development

Deindustrialization continued into the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in widespread unemployment in the area. The Goodyear and Firestone plants closed in 1982, leading to a massive loss of jobs.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were significant population shifts in Florence-Firestone spurred by immigration from South and Central America. People of Hispanic origin represented 61% of the population in 1980, 77% in 1990, 86% in 2000, and 91% in 2016. The African-American population in Florence-Firestone declined from 60% in the 1960s to 9% by 2016.

The commercial and industrial makeup of the community changed as well. Unable to compete with new, outlying industrial parks in suburban locations, industry and jobs continued to decline. Physical constraints, such as narrow or shallow lot depths, and competition from large shopping malls further contributed to the decline of Florence-Firestone's historical commercial corridors. The effects can still be seen today with an increasing vacancy rate, closed storefronts, vacant lots, and abandoned buildings. Although, the lower commercial rents have enabled the establishment of small, locally-owned businesses.

Florence-Firestone has been the subject of several studies and reports conducted by Los Angeles County, dating back to the 1970s. In 1970 and 1971, the community was one of two Model Neighborhoods under Los Angeles County's Model Cities program administered by the Department of Urban Affairs. This program sought to coordinate urban services. A community plan background study and staff report was developed in 1971, with the intention to adopt a community plan. However, the community plan was not adopted at the time, perhaps due to the proposal to construct two freeways through the community, the east-west Route 90 along Slauson Avenue and the north-south Route 47 along Industrial Avenue. These freeways were not built and the community plan was also not finalized.



Metro Blue Line train in Florence-Firestone.

In 1990, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) opened the 22-mile Metro Blue Line, connecting Downtown Los Angeles and the City of Long Beach. The Metro Blue Line is the system's first and longest rail line. The Blue Line runs through the community, with three stops located at Slauson, Florence, and Firestone. The line provides an important north-south connection to jobs and opportunities throughout the Los Angeles region. At a total cost of \$877 million, the Blue Line represents the most recent major infrastructure investment in the community.

In 1992, South Central Los Angeles was affected by civil unrest that occurred in part as a response to the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating Rodney King. The six days of unrest that followed were also a result of widespread structural inequalities, including economic disparity, poverty, high unemployment, as well as a nationwide recession and breakdown of social institutions. In Florence-Firestone, several businesses suffered considerable damage, with losses concentrated heavily in commercial areas along major corridors, especially on Florence and Central Avenues.

In 2002, in an effort to improve services to the community, Los Angeles County formed the Florence-Firestone Community Enhancement Team (FFCET). Comprised of staff from various County agencies, collaborators from the

community, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders, the FFCET sought to provide integrated services and prioritize service enhancements. The FFCET provided a forum for community members and County service providers to come together to discuss issues, identify solutions, and work together for the betterment of the community. Completed projects initiated by the FFCET include: expansion of park youth programs; initiation of a Sheriff's Special Enforcement Team to abate gang violence; publication of a resource guide, the Community Connection; coordination of street sweeping, garbage collection, and parking enforcement; installation of roadway and pedestrian lighting and 1,450 new street name signs; formation of the first unincorporated area Business Improvement District; formation of a Community Standards District; and enhancement of code enforcement efforts.

In 2010, the County opened the newly renovated Florence-Firestone Service Center. The center provides comprehensive social services to neighborhood residents which include elderly care, emergency food assistance, internship opportunities, and mediation and conflict resolution. Many County departments and other public and private agencies have satellite offices at the center.



Florence-Firestone Service Center and drought tolerant garden.

In 2015, the LA County Arts Commission, in partnership with the Temporary Institute of Unincorporated Studies at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), launched a creative placemaking project that features the people, histories, and cultures of Florence-Firestone in an effort titled the “Someplace Chronicles”. The project is funded by the Office of Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas and will result in a book documenting the community profile and history as told by community members working with the artist. The book, titled “A Paseo Through Time in Florence-Firestone” will be one of the few documented histories of the community. The project also included events and programming, engaging with the people who live and work in the community. More information can be found at: someplacechronicles.org/florence-firestone/.



Arts Festival held at Graham Library as part of the LA County Arts Commission Someplace Chronicles project. *Some Place Chronicles: A Paseo through Time in Florence-Firestone*, by Jeannene Przyblyski. A project of the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, funded by the Office of Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas