

Las Vegas Neon: The Growth and Glamour of a 20th Century American City

4th Grade History Unit Plan

The Neon Museum is a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to collecting, preserving, studying and exhibiting iconic Las Vegas signs for educational, historic, arts and cultural enrichment.

Standards:

H3.4.1. Compare and contrast our daily lives with children in Nevada's past.

G8.4.2. Describe how technology altered the physical environment and the effects of those changes on people.

G8.4.3. Explore the impact of human modification of Nevada's physical environment on the people who live there.

Study Skill: Demonstrate an understanding of chronology by recording events on a timeline.

Purpose:

This unit will allow students to explore the people and events that have shaped the growth of Las Vegas and the surrounding area from the founding of the city in 1905 into the 1960s as Las Vegas became a tourist destination and entertainment capital of the world. The story is told in a timeline format using images and primary resources available from The Neon Museum, and supplementary resources from UNLV Special Collections and others. Exposure to these artifacts and information should help students connect the past with the present in Las Vegas.



Unit Overview:

This unit is based on historic Las Vegas neon signs now housed in the Neon Museum in Las Vegas.

The importance of the neon sign to Las Vegas economy and culture cannot be overstated, and as such, teachers should use the Neon Museum Boneyard photos as jumping off points to gain student interest and connect to Las Vegas past and present. In addition, the Neon Museum offers **school tours** that complement this unit (see **Educator Resources** page at the end of this packet, or visit the Neon Museum's website for more information www.neonmuseum.org).

Neon signs have been ubiquitous in Las Vegas advertising, attracting people to businesses and spurring economic growth. In particular, the sign industry, which includes designing, building, and maintaining signs, was, and continues to be, big business in Las Vegas. The electricity needed to power the immense number of signs in Las Vegas is partially provided by one of the biggest feats of American engineering, the Hoover Dam. Thus for the rest of the nation, and maybe the world, neon signs are synonymous with Las Vegas.

Although sign technology has changed over time, and LED and video screens have taken over the modern sign landscape in Las Vegas, the neon sign continues to live on in parts of the city. The neon signs of Las Vegas have become a visual spectacle that both tourists and neon sign aficionados seek out when they visit. A renewed appreciation for American roadside architecture and mid-century modern design has generated additional interest, introducing Las Vegas' iconic neon designs to a new generation of fans and driving **historic preservation**.



The Boneyard Park

Teacher Preparation:

Review materials and links provided to familiarize with the subject matter. Consider the focus of the lessons and projects. All materials given do not need to be used. Teachers and students can pick and choose according to individual interests and time constraints. Determine formative and final assignments and assessments and consider rubrics and other methods of evaluation.

Administration of Lessons:

This unit is written in a timeline format, and each time period is represented through 5 different contexts: Images of signs in the Neon Museum's collection, Social Context, Important People, Lifestyle, and Narrative. Navigation through the unit and the final projects can be customized according to teacher and student interest. Please refer to the following breakdown as a guide.

1905

Neon Museum Boneyard signs: 1905 sign

Context: Birth of Las Vegas

Important People: Montana Senator William Clark, Helen Stewart, J.T. McWilliams

Lifestyle (how people lived): Tents, ranches, early homes, layout of town

Narrative (children's lives): School life, railroad jobs, chores & recreation



Golden Nugget "1905" sign
(Neon Museum collection)

1930s

Neon Museum Boneyard Signs: Green Shack, Wedding Information

Context: Hoover Dam, Las Vegas as a tourist town, gaming, wedding industry

Important People: Mattie "Jimmie" Jones, Thomas Young, Guy McAfee

Lifestyle: Homes of period, size/layout of town, population & mobility

Narrative: Tourists, casinos, hotels, more schools



Green Shack sign (Neon Museum collection)

1940s - 1950s

Neon Museum Boneyard Signs: Frontier, Flamingo, Stardust, Binion's "H" Wall, Golden Nugget

Context: Spectaculars

Important People: Sign Designers—Kermit Wayne, Betty Willis, Herman Boernge, etc.

Lifestyle: Mid-century modern homes, car culture

Narrative: Fear of nuclear attacks, travel for leisure, modern conveniences for the middle class

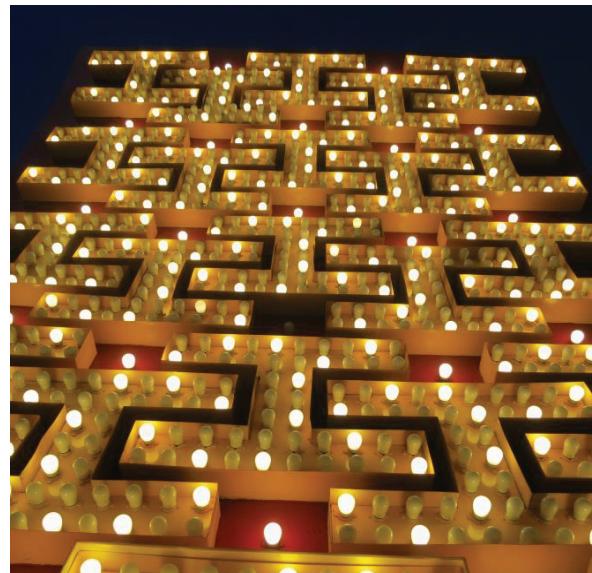


Wedding Information sign, (Neon Museum collection)





Stardust sign letters, with star tower in background
(Neon Museum collection)



Binion's "H" Wall section
(Neon Museum collection)

1960s

Neon Museum: La Concha building (visitors' center), and Boneyard signs

Context: Mid-century modern architecture, “Googie” style

Important People: Paul Revere Williams, Jackie Gaughan, Kirk Kerkorian, Buzz Leming

Lifestyle: Sun, fun, luxury, car culture

Narrative: Population increase, more schools, car culture, technology advances, national economic prosperity



The Neon Museum's visitors' center, the former La Concha Motel lobby





Restored La Concha pylon sign
(Neon Museum collection)



Original La Concha Motel and super pylon sign (photo from *Spectacular*, p 76; UNLV Special Collections)

Background for the Teacher

Source: *Spectacular: A History of Las Vegas Neon* (see **Educator Resources, select bibliography** for complete citation)

1905

The **Golden Nugget** sign from the 1960s pays homage to this time with its “1905” emblazoned along the top. Las Vegas began as a stop on the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake railroad in the early 1900s. The railroad purchased Helen Stewart’s Las Vegas ranch, originally the site of the 1855-1857 Mormon Mission, and auctioned off lots to create a town site in 1905. Interestingly, Las Vegas wasn’t officially incorporated until 1911, but 1905 is commonly considered the beginning of Las Vegas as we know it.

The name Las Vegas means “the meadows” in Spanish, and refers to the water that was available in the area as travelers crossed the Mojave desert. During the early days the city catered to visiting workers and new arrivals by providing hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, saloons, and gambling establishments. Early signs for businesses would have been canvas banners or made of painted wood. No lights yet! According to the *Las Vegas Review* newspaper, the Overland Hotel was displaying the first neon sign in the city in 1928, around the time of the signing of the Boulder Dam Act.

1930s

The 1930s are represented in the Neon Museum Boneyard by the **Green Shack** sign. The Green Shack was owned by a woman named Mattie "Jimmie" Jones who began the business in her home in the late 1920s. She eventually opened a restaurant inside the city limits in the early 30s, where it remained until 1999, run by members of her family. Her location allowed her to cater to the workers and other travelers who were making their way back and forth between Las Vegas and the Dam. The site is on the National Register of Historic Places, but the Green Shack building no longer exists and has not been replaced.

See the filing document for this designation:

<http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/nrhp/text/94000552.pdf>.

In the 1930s, while the rest of the nation struggled through the Great Depression, Las Vegas enjoyed some economic stimuli unique to the state. First, the United States government approved the building of the Boulder (later renamed Hoover) Dam. This project brought thousands of workers and their families to the area, as well as tourists to see the building of the Dam and the finished product. Also notable during the 1930s was the liberalization of gambling and divorce laws at the end of Prohibition. These changes in the law brought tourists to gamble, drink, and they would often stay the required six weeks to get a divorce. The already easy marriage laws started another industry in Las Vegas - wedding chapels.

1940s - 1950s

During the late 1940s through the 1950s, Las Vegas saw the development of what we now know as "The Strip." Huge signs, called "**spectaculars**," ruled the day in sign design, stretching the talents of many sign crafters to create amazing displays designed to attract tourists into the casinos and showrooms. Spectaculars embellished functional buildings, giving them a dazzling glamour that belied their nondescript exterior structures. Furthermore, spectaculars were effective advertising. Soon the Las Vegas Strip became known for the sheer number and size of spectacular signs – something for which it is still famous today.

The Neon Museum's Boneyard collection contains several examples of spectaculars, including pieces from The **Flamingo**, **Golden Nugget**, **Binion's Horseshoe**, **Stardust**.



“Neon lighting took on a particular resonance in Las Vegas and in other parts of the open landscape of the Southwest. Without many trees or buildings, the illuminated neon sign could be seen from miles away in the evening. Western motels used the neon medium perhaps more than any other business. This was also perhaps afforded by the low profile of casino and motel buildings when casinos within Las Vegas’ city limits were once limited to two stories. The low, horizontal profile has allowed building-mounted signs to be seen at longer distances. Traveling north on the Strip, the neon glow of Las Vegas acted as a beacon signaling toward the city.” (Spectacular, p 44)

Although the spectacular Golden Nugget “1905” sign was created in the late 1950s, it referenced Las Vegas’ past as it was perceived in popular culture. By the 1950s popular fiction and movies capitalized on the allure of a romantic, adventurous “old west,” and the earliest casino properties featured western themes for both sign design and décor.

The famous “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign, which still stands on the median of Las Vegas Boulevard South, was built in the 1950s, and designed by Betty Willis . For Willis, this was a rare accomplishment in the male-dominated graphic design business during that era. Willis designed many more signs, including the **Moulin Rouge**, which is now in the Neon Museum collection.

Iconic properties such as **The Desert Inn**, **The Sahara**, **The Sands** and **The Dunes** all opened in the 1950s, bringing glamour to the dusty western town, offering visitors entertainment, celebrities, and nightlife. Las Vegas was transformed into an exciting and sparkling desert oasis – a city unlike any other in the United States.

1960s

The visitor center of the Neon Museum is the original lobby of the **La Concha Motel**, which was built and opened in 1961 on Las Vegas Boulevard, next to the **Riviera**. The La Concha was designed by architect **Paul Revere Williams**, who did quite a lot of work in Las Vegas (including the Berkley Square tract in West Las Vegas, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places) <http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/FactsStatistics/23163.htm>). In 1923, Williams was the first African-American admitted as a fellow into the American Institute of Architects (<http://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/>).



Development continued on The Strip and elsewhere in town, with more attention being paid to the architecture and design of both buildings and signs. The La Concha is often considered an example of **Googie** style architecture, a mid-century modern style that used unusual shapes and methods to evoke the future, a kind of space-age aesthetic. In addition, the La Concha lobby reflects the fusion of structural engineering and architecture of the time. Thus the La Concha shell shape fits neatly into the vernacular of roadside novelty architecture as it developed from the 1920s onward, including the southern California Googie style which swept the nation during the 50s and 60s.

The La Concha, owned and commissioned in 1960 by the Doumani family, remained open as a motel until the early 2000s, at which time the Doumanis donated it to the Neon Museum. It was subsequently moved to its current site on north Las Vegas Boulevard in 2006, after being cut into eight pieces for transport

(<http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2007/todays-news-2007/la-concha-motel-move-has-a.html#.Vgln6f-FPIU>). It opened as the Neon Museum visitors' center in October, 2012. The La Concha is a fine example of **historic preservation** and **adaptive reuse** in Las Vegas.

The exterior roadside sign for the La Concha is fully restored neon (installed October, 2012) and resides in the Neon Museum's Boneyard. Its shape echoes the roof of the La Concha structure through the use of curvilinear, shell-shaped sections, which are considered unusual design choices for the 1960s. The restored La Concha sign was originally part of a "super-pylon" sign extending vertically high above Las Vegas Boulevard, and was designed to be seen from a great distance as drivers made their way down the highway looking for lodging in Las Vegas.

Inside the La Concha is a fully restored neon "mosaic" sign that was salvaged from the construction demolition when the building was donated. The refurbished La Concha mosaic sign now illuminates the lobby's interior once again.



Restored La Concha "mosaic" sign (Neon Museum collection)



Unit Plan:

This will be a research-based project in which students will conduct guided research to produce a product of some type. Possible final products are given below. Decide on a few guiding questions students should try to answer through the course of their research. Two suggestions would be: “How were the lives of children in Nevada in the 1930s the same and different as the lives of children now?” “How did neon signs change the environment in Nevada and how did that affect the people who lived there?” Perhaps some students will answer one question, others will answer both; maybe some will develop their own questions.

Begin the project by showing Boneyard images listed in the lesson plan. Ask students if they have any idea what these things are, where they are or were located, and how they might be related. Let them speculate. Encourage them to look closely at the photos to get as much information from the details as possible. Once they have talked about possibilities, use the *Background for the Teacher* section to help them fill in some details to a timeline blank you provide for them (or they can draw one of their own). A good way to start might be to give them the time headings (1905, 1930s, and so forth) and let them try to place the images on the timeline.

Give students time to think about what they know about the time frames they will be investigating. Do they know what it was like to live in Las Vegas in 1905, or 1950? Some students will likely need help with this. Perhaps gather some other images that can be used in this phase.

Tell students they will be doing some research to understand what life was like for people, especially children, living in Southern Nevada between 1905 and the 1960s. Discuss the standards/questions they will be exploring.

Give students access to some of the books or websites listed in this unit plan or to other resources and encourage them to look through them. Have them write down or remember a few things that they will share with the group. Share and develop a vocabulary list of terms that may need to be defined.

Provide students with their final project option(s). You may choose to have everyone do the same thing, or give them a menu to choose from. Allot several days to do the research and produce their projects. Finish with presentations or some other way for students to show their projects—perhaps their own “museum” set up in the hallway for others to view.



Project Ideas:

Construct a **foldable** comparing life of children now and in one of the time periods studied, or between time periods. We recommend the **Foldables** series by Dinah Zike for ideas. Construct the foldable depicting an area of town before development and after development (the downtown area as a ranch in 1900s and as a tourist destination in the 1950s, for example).

Write one or a series of **diary entries** as if the student is a child growing up in one of these time periods. What might they see and do? What would they do for chores? What would they do for fun with friends, or if they had to amuse themselves alone? What kinds of clothes would they wear? Where would they get their clothes? Where would they go to school, where would their parents work? How would they get to school or work?

Write a **script** and re-enact a scene of Mattie Jones opening and/or running her restaurant, or Helen Stewart negotiating with Senator William Clark to sell her ranch in 1902.

Create **posters** or other visuals that answer questions such as “How did the development of neon signs affect the lives of people in the Las Vegas Valley?” or “What would have happened if the Hoover Dam had not been built so near Las Vegas?”

Design your own “**spectacular**” sign or a building using the design style of one of the time periods. Think about what the Green Shack (or other) sign might have looked like if that business had been opened later on, for example, in the 1950s or 60s? What would the La Concha or Stardust signs have looked like if they were made much earlier, in the 1930s?

Create a **timeline** depicting one, two or all of the contexts considered. For example, a timeline showing the important people in their proper places, or a timeline representing the various social contexts with details added.





View of Fremont Street c. 1930, before neon transformed the landscape. Photo from Su Kim Chung, *Las Vegas Then And Now* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2002), p. 20.



The construction of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s drew many new residents to Southern Nevada. Some dam workers and their families lived in temporary tent housing near the dam site. Photo from Joan Burkhart Whitely, *Young Las Vegas: Before The Future Found Us, 1905-1931* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2005), p. 230.

Educator Resources

About the Neon Museum: Founded in 1996, the Neon Museum is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated to collecting, preserving, studying and exhibiting iconic Las Vegas signs for educational, historic, arts and cultural enrichment. In addition to an approximately two-acre Neon Museum campus, and includes the outdoor exhibition space known as the Neon Boneyard, comprised of more than 150 signs. The museum also encompasses a visitors' center housed inside the former La Concha Motel lobby, as well as several restored signs installed as public art throughout downtown Las Vegas. Public education, outreach, research, archival preservation and a grant-funded neon sign survey represent a selection of the museum's ongoing projects. Both the Neon Boneyard and the La Concha Visitors' Center are located at 770 Las Vegas Boulevard North, in Las Vegas.

Educator Resources

Neon Museum website: www.neonmuseum.org

For school group tours and program information, please visit our website or contact
Education@neonmuseum.org

La Concha Preservation:

http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/cs/idcplg?IdcService=GETFILE&dDocName=LACONCHA_NOMINATIONREPORT&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased

<http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/saving-a-place/modernism-recent-past/Case-Studies/la-concha-motel-lobby.html#.VgMwXf-FPIU>

<http://blog.preservationnation.org/2012/12/14/viva-la-concha-mod-motel-recast-as-las-vegas-neon-museum/#.VgloSv-FPIU>

http://www.chattelblog.us/2012_10_01_archive.html

Historic Sign Preservation: <http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/25-signs.htm>

Paul R. Williams: <http://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/>

Nevada History: UNLV Special Collections & Exhibits online resources

<http://digital.library.unlv.edu/>

Nevada Statistics: <http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/factsstatistics/history.htm>

General Timeline for Nevada History: <http://www.lasvegassun.com/history/>

Nevada Historical Society: online resources

http://nevadaculture.org/museums/index8a02.html?option=com_content&task=view&id=1313&Itemid=462

Hoover Dam: Boulder City/Hoover Dam Museum <http://www.bcmha.org/>

Architecture terms:

<http://architecturaltrust.org/outreach/education/glossary-of-architectural-terms/>

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Educator Resources (continued)

Sign Terms: <http://www.art-kraft.com/sign-information.htm>

Commercial Archaeology: Society for Commercial Archaeology
<http://www.sca-roadside.org/>.

Vernacular Architecture in Nevada:

<http://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/vernacular-architecture-nevada>

Select Bibliography

Johnson, Melissa, Carrie Schomig, and Dorothy Wright. *Spectacular: A History of Las Vegas Neon*. Las Vegas: Neon Museum, 2012.

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Hess, Alan. *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986.

Whitely, Joan Burkhart. *Young Las Vegas: Before The Future Found Us, 1905-1931*. Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2005.

Zike, Dinah. *Foldables*. (Series)



Sahara sign (Neon Museum collection)

