



## Notes From the Archive

### FALL 2024

This is a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department. If you are interested by what you read here, please share it with a friend or colleague.

# Contemplating One Hundred Years Ago

L.A.'s population doubled in the 1920s to 1.24 million. It was a bounteous, inventive time that rallied the city's reputation. This newsletter points to development in earlier times that set the stage for the decade and which have help define the city - the growth of aviation, a natural history museum, a gateway for trade, and automobiles.

## Around the World in 175 Days

### by John Cahoon

On March 17, 1924, four aircraft of the U.S. Army Air Service took off from Santa Monica's Clover Field for Seattle on what was the first leg of the first successful flight around the world. Several countries had been vying to be the first but without success starting with the British in 1922, followed by the French a year later. And from March to July of 1924, flyers from the U.S., Portugal, France, Italy and Argentina -- plus a second British team -- sought to become the first to circumnavigate the globe. Only the Americans successfully completed the journey.

### **A Donation from the U.S. War Department**

The two planes that completed the historic first flight around the world were the *New Orleans*, now at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles, and the *Chicago* at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

### **Planning the Round the World Flight**

In 1923, the U.S. Army Air Service (later the U.S. Air Force) sent Lieutenant Erik Henning Nelson to California to meet with aircraft designer and builder Donald Douglas to work out details on what became the Douglas World Cruiser, a sturdy aircraft with interchangeable wheeled landing gear as well as pontoons for water landings. (Nelson would eventually pilot the *New Orleans* on the historic flight.)

Four aircraft were built for the flight - the *Seattle*, *Chicago*, *Boston*, and *New Orleans* and each with a two-man crew. In addition to the four planes, spare parts included 15 extra Liberty engines, 14 extra sets of pontoons, and enough replacement airframe parts for two more aircraft. These spare parts were sent ahead to locations along the route the aircraft planned to follow to be available in case of emergencies. The U.S. Navy had several destroyers along the route for support as well. The aircraft were equipped with no radios or electronic systems, so the crews had to rely entirely on estimating direction and distance traveled by using visual landmarks and astronomical observations.

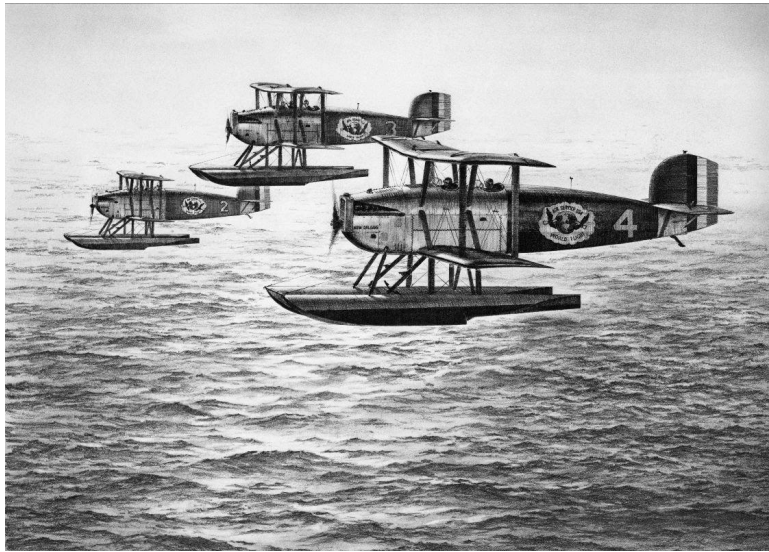


The *New Orleans* leads the planes being inspected before take-off

### **Disaster Strikes**

Their route was east to west, flying across the northern Pacific, then south along the east coast of Asia, then northwest over India to Europe, then across the North Atlantic to Canada and the United States. The world flight officially started at Seattle where four planes left U.S. territory on April 6 heading for Alaska. Disaster hit almost immediately. The *Seattle* blew a hole in the crankcase and was forced down barely inside Alaska territory. They resumed the flight with a replacement engine ten days later only to crash into a mountainside. The plane was destroyed but the crew survived.

The three remaining planes flew on to Tokyo where they learned that the British - flying in the opposite direction - had crashed in Burma. They responded by shipping one of their spare planes allowing the British to continue. In Indochina the *Chicago* was forced down at sea with engine problems. Three paddle-powered sampans towed the aircraft for 10 hours to the mainland where the engine was replaced with a spare shipped from Saigon. The planes' pontoons were replaced with landing wheels before taking off for the flight over India.



Three Douglas World Cruisers in flight over the ocean with the *New Orleans* in the foreground

### And Then There Were Only Two

The *New Orleans*' engine failed entering Karachi, Pakistan where all three remaining planes had their engines replaced before flying on to Europe, arriving in Paris on July 14, Bastille Day. In northern England they re-installed pontoons and changed engines again in preparation for crossing the North Atlantic. But shortly after taking off for Iceland the *Boston*'s fuel pump failed and it sank - but the crew was rescued.

The *Chicago* and *New Orleans* flew on to Iceland where they happened to meet the Italian team as the flyers prepared for the longest leg of the entire journey over open water to Greenland. It was this chance meeting which ultimately saved their lives as the Americans raised the alarm when the Italians failed to arrive in Greenland. The U.S. Navy's USS *Richmond* found them after a search 120 miles short of Greenland.

Taking off from Greenland with new engines, the *New Orleans* and the *Chicago* reached North America when they landed in Labrador -- the *Chicago*'s fuel-pump failure having been overcome by four hours of hand pumping. As they flew into Boston, the two planes were joined by the *Boston II* - a prototype of the original plane and flown by the *Boston*'s original two-man crew for what would become a celebratory multi-city tour. President Calvin Coolidge personally inspected the planes when they arrived in Washington, D.C., and in Santa Monica a crowd of 100,000 people welcomed them when they landed. The flight officially ended when they reached Seattle on September 28 having flown 26,345 miles in 175 days.

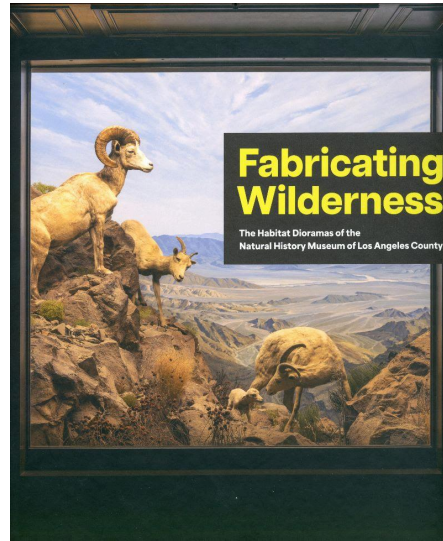
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### New Books

#### ***Fabricating Wilderness* (Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 2024)**

This is [the first book](#) to explore the art, history, and impact of dioramas on the West Coast. Edited by NHM Exhibition Developer Matt Davis, the book includes chapters by NHM Curators and Staff, as well as professors from around the country. This publication is part of a large diorama research project funded by Getty. Over the last four years, NHM has held incubators, invited in scholars, and processed and digitized hundreds of linear feet of documents from the Institutional Archives—all to build a better understanding of the 100 year

history, and future, of dioramas at NHM. The Seaver Center's collection of old museum maps and blueprints was essential to the creation of the book; the original blueprints for the Museum's diorama halls are actually reproduced as endpapers.



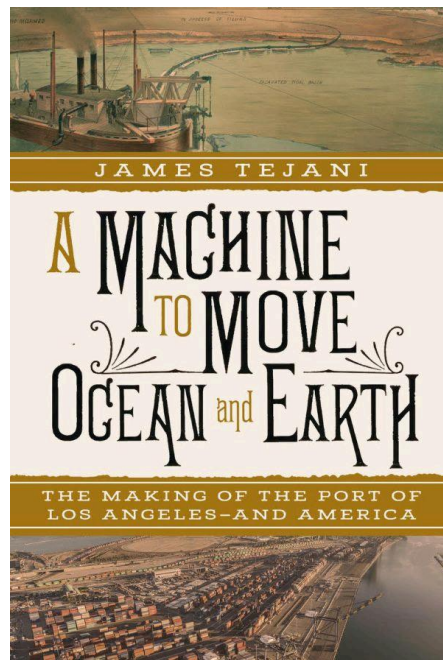
Along with the publication, NHM installed updated labels on all the dioramas for the September 15 opening of the exhibition [Reframing Dioramas: the Art of Preserving Wilderness](#). Reframing Dioramas is among more than 70 exhibitions and programs presented as part of PST ART. This landmark regional event that opened in September explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information, please visit [pst.art](#).

***A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth:  
The Making of the Port of Los Angeles and  
America (W. W. Norton, July 2024)***

**by James Tejani**

This first-of-its-kind book tells how America's global gateway – the busiest container port in the Western Hemisphere – came to be, from an estuary of mud and salt marsh. The tale spans from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, New York City, the Pacific Northwest, Civil War Richmond, Southwest deserts, and even overseas to Europe, Hawaii, and Asia as it follows Mexican ranchers, U.S. coast and railroad explorers, imperialist politicians like Jefferson Davis and Theodore Roosevelt, land speculators (among them Phineas Banning and Civil War General Edward Ord), and railroad titans like Collis Huntington and Edward H. Harriman. All fought for control of San Pedro Bay and shaped its transformation into a highly engineered symbol of the modern, globalized United States.





James Tejani grew up in Long Beach and studied history at U.C. San Diego and Columbia University. *A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth* is his debut book and draws upon collections maintained by the Seaver Center and Natural History Museum. He is associate professor at California Polytechnic State University. See <https://jamestejani.com> for more information.

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#### Researcher Highlight

#### Genevieve Carpio

I am one of those people who believes deeply in the power place, what urban historian Dolores Hayden describes as the “power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizen’s public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory.” It is this belief that drew me to the history of Felix Chevrolet, the iconic dealership which greets motorists and pedestrians traveling near the 110 freeway in Los Angeles. Felix Chevrolet is a cherished icon of Black and Brown automotive culture, with the vintage-style chrome license plate holder recognized as a marker of cultural belonging and pride. Founded by Mexican American Winslow B. Felix, it has been in continuous operation for over 100 years. While the story of its founder is not widely known, within his biography lies a century of urban history that highlights the rise of the automobile, the mobilities of people of color, and the nuances of Mexican racialization at the beginning of the twentieth century.



Photo by G. Carpio

This past summer, I returned to the Seaver Center to revisit the Greater Los Angeles New Car Dealers Association Historical Records. This association was the professional organization of the automotive retail industry which Felix was elected Vice-President shortly before his death. Also of great value have been the Los Angeles County Incorporation Records containing explicit missions and operations of organizations like the Authorized Chevrolet Dealers and Winslow B. Felix Co. Also useful have been bounded copies of *Touring Topics*, the publication of the Automobile Club of Southern California, which gives a bird's-eye-view of automotive happenings across the Southland.



My time at the Seaver Center contributes to my larger research trajectory, which focuses on the ways communities of color engage place-making practices and spatial movement. My first book, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race*, examines how diverse settler and migrant groups negotiated racial hierarchies through their movement in Southern California's Inland Empire from 1870-1990. In my newest work, supported by the Ford Senior Fellowship, I am concerned with the ways companies, government agencies, community activists, and everyday drivers have navigated automotive insurance and their varying visions of safety when on the move. The history of Felix Chevrolet and its founder fits into this larger trajectory, as I aim to bridge ethnic history, geographic frameworks, and what has been called the "new mobilities paradigm" to argue that in California, mobility is a key modality through which people live and contest race.

# ***The Street Names of Los Angeles - A 4K Resolution Video Upgrade***

Wes Oakley, Video Content Creator at NHM, spent nearly an entire year painstakingly converting a popular History video viewable on NHM's YouTube channel. The [4k resolution version](#) was released in early September. Credit also extends to Edgar Chamorro, Senior Media Producer, and Maxwell Fong, Graphic Production Artist.

Here are some comparisons showing the improved resolution quality:



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## **The Collections**

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## Digitized Collections

The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

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The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.



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