

COVER PHOTO CREDIT: DON COX

NEW HELVETIA HISTORIC DISTRICT PLAN

August 2025

Physical Description & Boundaries

The New Helvetia Historic District is located within the Alder Grove housing complex between Broadway, Muir Way, Kit Carson Streets, and Kemble Streets in Sacramento.

The district is an example of mid-20th century public housing design that showcases elements of Georgian and Tudor revival. The district which lies south of the downtown Sacramento central core contains 62 buildings. The one- and two-story buildings are narrow and long, wood framed with gabled roofs, clipped eaves, brick cladding, clinker brick, and metal framed windows. The buildings are set in a 26-acre rectilinear pattern of organized blocks, asphalt paved streets, concrete sidewalks, with pathways separated by lawn and containing trees, bushes, and shrubs within a defined landscape.

There is ample open space within the block layout and parking lots surrounded by lawn.

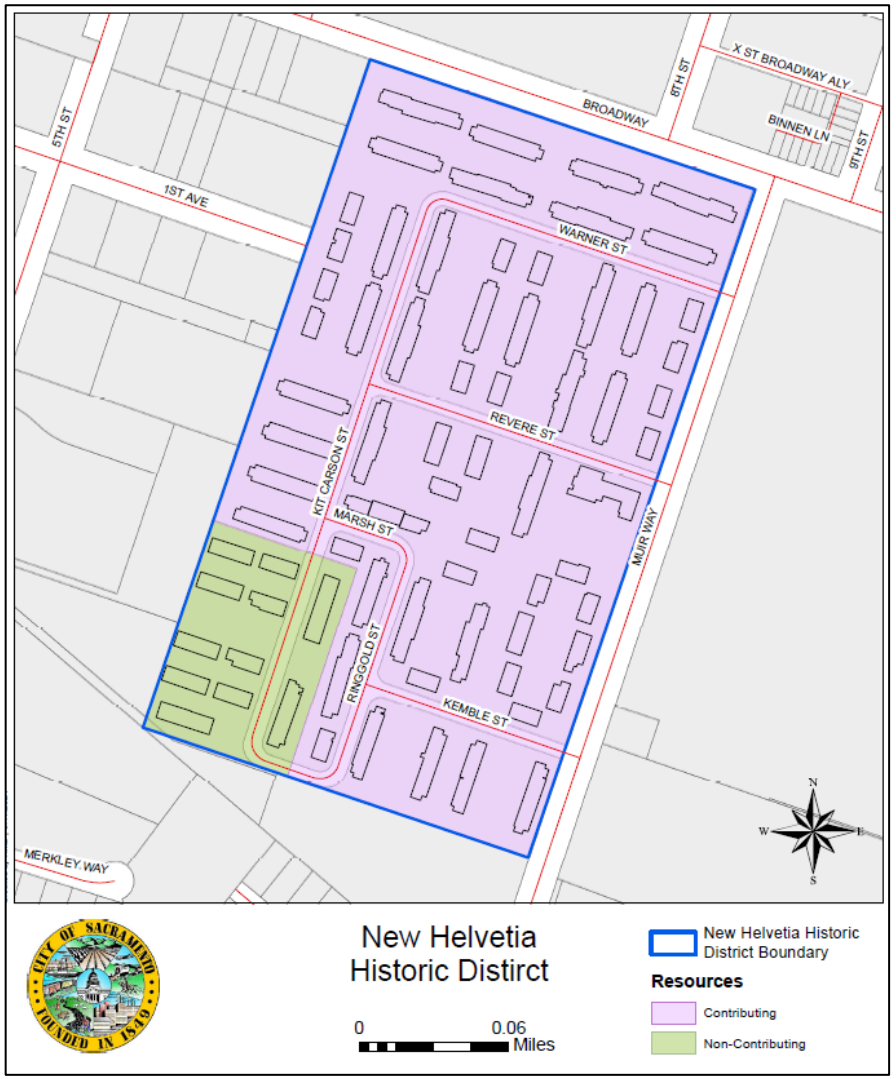


FIGURE 1: HISTORIC DISTRICT BOUNDARY MAP

A Brief Historic Context

The New Helvetia historic district represents an early interaction between the federal government and local community to eliminate slums and to improve housing available to the urban poor. [1]



FIGURE 2: HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH OF NEW HELVETIA

The site selected for the development was a vacant tract owned by the Southern Pacific Company located south of Broadway and west of Ninth Street (now Muir Way).

By 1935, housing for low income people in Sacramento had been affected by three trends: 1) the expansion of the city to the east and south, sometimes causing a decline in older areas, 2) dramatic growth and development of agriculture; and 3) the large influx of population into California from the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. Sacramento areas with lower land value; land that was swampy and undesirable for general public use, attracted low income residents and sub-standard housing. Slums developed and had become a health hazard by the early 1940s. All of these circumstances generated a need for low income housing in Sacramento. [2]

The public housing movement was sparked by the passage of the United States Housing Act of 1937. The Act established a permanent low-rent public housing program between the federal government, local communities, and a new federal agency: the United States Housing Authority

[1] *The Sacramento Bee,* "Slum Clearance Committee asks Action by County," September 2, 1939; Sacramento Housing Authority (SHA), *First Annual Repo1t,* May 8, 1942, Preface, 1.
[2] NPS, *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949,* Appendix IV, 42-53

(USHA), which would administer the program. The USHA required that communities requesting federal assistance must first establish a local Public Housing Authority (PHA) since the USHA was not authorized to directly build or manage public housing. [3]

To address the problem of sub-standard housing in Sacramento neighborhoods, activists in the city formed the Sacramento Citizens Committee on Slum Clearance and Low Cost Housing. In February of 1939 they petitioned the City Council to establish a local housing authority. Support for this action was broad based and led the Council to authorize the establishment of the Sacramento City Housing Authority on July 7, 1939. [4]

In August 1939, the agency submitted an application to the USHA for a $1.5 million loan to finance the New Helvetia development. USHA approved the project in January 1940. [5]

A Board of Architects was created for the project and its members consisted of a highly regarded group of local architecture firms including: Dean & Dean, Harry Devine, and Starks & Flanders.[6] On May 17, 1940 their preliminary plans for the New Helvetia project were sent to Washington, D.C for review and approval.[7] Construction of New Helvetia was handled by Walter Campbell Construction Co. of Sacramento.[8] The New Helvetia site plan submitted to USHA for approval featured elements common to other federally-sponsored public housing throughout the country between 1933 and 1949. Common planning layouts included grouping of multi-family, low-scale residential buildings arranged in a pattern according to circulation needs within large open spaces. Modern amenities such as parking areas, service driveways, and individual concrete walkways to apartment units were included. [9]

A rent schedule for the project was published in The Sacramento Bee September 8, 1941. In that article it was noted that the project was experiencing some difficulty in obtaining materials, due to the pre-war build-up. The original Housing Act of 1937 was not funded beyond 1940. The 1940-41 fiscal year Congress increased funding for public and private housing construction through the passage of The National Defense Act also known as Public Law 671, in June 1940. The act authorized the USHA to assist local housing authorities to work with the Navy and War Departments to make "necessary housing available for persons engaged in national defense activities."[10]

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[3] Ibid
[4] *The Sacramento Bee,* "Slum Clearance Committee Asks Action by County," September 2, 1939.
[5] *The Sacramento Bee,* August 9, 1939; NPS, 42-53.
[6] *The Sacramento Bee,* "U.S. Earmarks Fund for City Housing Plan," January 22, 1940.
[7] *The Sacramento Bee,* "Plans for Local Housing Project Go To Washington," May 17, 1940.
[8] Ibid
[9] *The Sacramento Bee,* "Plans for Local Housing Project Go To Washington," May 17, 1940; NPS, 70.
[10] NPS, E53-63.

New Helvetia was originally intended to assist low income citizens, but was converted to defense housing during World War II. [11] Sacramento was a center for military-industrial activity with McClellan and Mather airfields, and the Army Depot. The project was completed in August 1942 and dedicated on November 27, 1942. The National Defense Act of June 1940, also known as Public Law 671 endured until President Truman ordered the defense housing to revert to low income housing in 1947. Post war New Helvetia was reconvertered back to low income housing which helped support the post war real estate market in Sacramento. [12]



FIGURE 3: HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPH OF NEW HELVETIA

[12] Ibid E65

Nathaniel Colley and Non-Discrimination in Housing

Nathaniel Sextus Colley was born, raised, and educated in the state of Alabama. He was a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute and the Yale School of Law. After completing law school in 1948 he moved to Sacramento-his wife's hometown. He passed the California State Bar on his first try and opened the first African American law practice in the city. His brilliant legal career began with his fight against a de facto (unwritten) segregation policy for African Americans in the New Helvetia public housing complex. Colley was the first to discover that the Sacramento Housing Authority was isolating African Americans into 16 units (two buildings) merely because of their skin color.[13]

Colley joined the Sacramento Branch of the NAACP and became its legal counsel. He began advising the group to proactively fight segregation in public housing. Colley and other NAACP members soon realized they needed a community-wide effort needed to win. Colley helped create and organize the Sacramento Committee Against Segregation in Public Housing, a collaboration of twenty-five churches, political groups, unions, charities and labor unions. Colley personally recruited organizations to join the Committee.

After multiple attempts to address the public housing segregation practices through talks with City government officials and Housing Authority commissioners,[14] on February 1, 1952, Colley filed a complaint with the Sacramento County Superior Court.

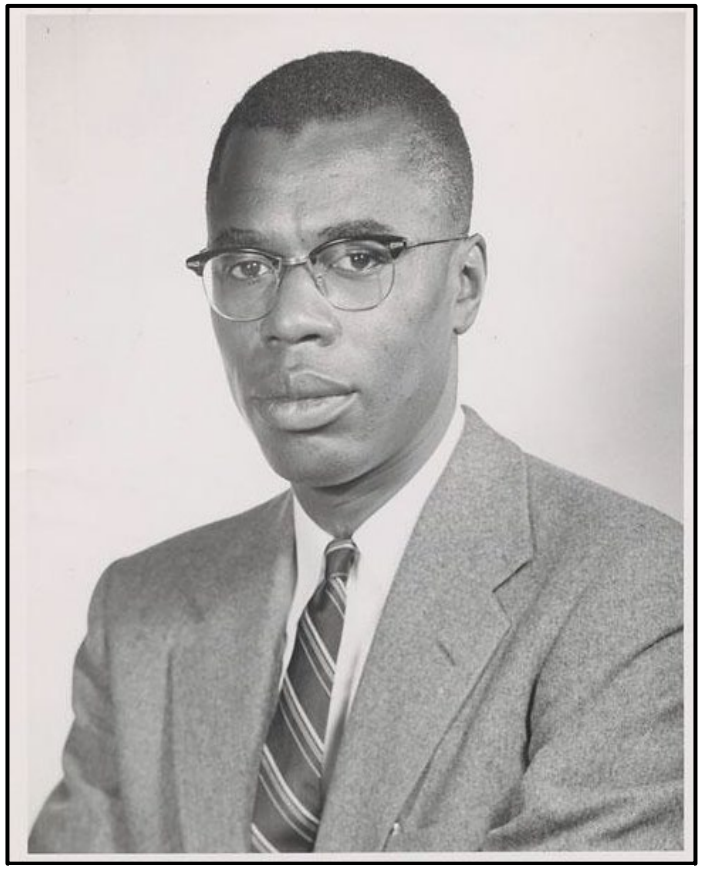


FIGURE 3: NATHANIEL COLLEY

[13] KVIE, Public Television Channel 6 Sacramento and the Center for Sacramento History, "The Time is Now: Nathaniel Colley." August 28, 2006.
[14] William Mayer, "Sacramento's Fight for Integration in Public Housing," *The* Crisis, January 1953, 26-33.

Colley knew that prohibiting the rental of new public housing units would put pressure on the Housing Authority to end segregation not only in new developments, but in New Helvetia as well, and therefore de facto segregation would be eliminated in all of Sacramento's public housing.[15] On April 18, 1952, the court also granted a permanent injunction barring separation in housing.[16]

Nathaniel Colley gained local, regional, and national recognition as one of the leaders in the struggle to end segregation in public housing for African Americans. Expanding on his success and experience in Sacramento, Colley took the segregation fight to other California and western cities that operated public housing, working with branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in California and other western states.

Colley continued to fight for fair housing for African Americans and in 1954 filed the landmark legal case of Ming vs. Horgan. The lawsuit claimed that a real estate developer who was receiving federal funds for a housing project could not engage in racial discrimination against African Americans, who were qualified, and wanted to purchase a home. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with Colley and found that these discriminatory practices were illegal for the sale of any housing that used federal funds. This eliminated discrimination against African Americans who were barred from purchasing residential homes in specific areas of a community because of restrictions written into the original deeds.

New Helvetia is the most pertinent remaining location associated with Colley's initial segregation work in public housing in Sacramento beginning in 1951. The two legal offices he successively occupied during this period have been demolished due to downtown redevelopment efforts. In 1951, Colley's law office was located at 421 ½ L Street, according to the City of Sacramento's 1951 Phone Book (there is no 1951 City Directory). The 1952 City Directory lists Colley's law office at the same location. 421 ½ L Street is now a parking lot for the 455 Capitol Mall office building. The 1953-1956 City Directories list Colley's office at 621 P Street, currently the location of the Capitol Towers apartment complex.

[15] Franklin, Reynolds, Johnson, plaintiffs, vs. Housing Authority of Sacramento, Complaint No. 89018, filed February 1, 1952, Sacramento County Superior Court.

[16] *The Courier,* "Deal Death Blow to Housing Bias," April 19, 1952, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Region 1 Records, Bancroft Library BANC MSS 78/180 c; Carton 73, Folder 54.

Period of Significance

The district's period of significance begins in 1941 and ends in 1952. This period includes the New Helvetia development period of construction, as well as the conversion of the district from low-income housing to defense housing for Sacramento based on National defense legislation. The period also encompasses the reconversion of New Helvetia to low-income housing after WWII and the end of de facto segregation of public housing in Sacramento County associated with the activities of Nathaniel Colley.



FIGURES 4-7: PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON COX OF NEW HELVETIA HISTORIC DISTRICT 2014

Character-Defining Features

The character-defining features are the essential physical elements from the period of significance that enable a historic district and its contributing resources to convey their collective historic identity and the historic district's significance. They must be evident for a historic district and its contributing resources to retain their status on the Sacramento Register.

Feature	Character of Historic District
Use	Historically used for multi-family dwellings for the defense housing project and federal public housing. Presently used for multi-family dwellings for federal public housing and commercial office space. Original design and construction included a clubhouse for social gatherings but has been converted into an Education (Daycare) center.
Mass & Form	Wood framed buildings. Multi-family homes are low scale, one and two story, narrow buildings with linear ground plans. The Clubhouse is low scale, one story and narrow, on an L shaped plan with one large and irregular shaped wing, one smaller wing that is long and narrow.
Cladding	All contributing buildings within the district include brick veneer surfaces over plastered walls.
Roofs	Side gabled roofs with shingles and clipped eaves, shallow roof overhangs.
Entries & Doors	Building doors have been replaced with wood 6-paneled doors. Originally small shed-roofed porch canopies supported by wood posts covered all the entrances. Some canopies have been replaced with flat roofs. A few units have been fitted with unobtrusive ramped concrete path entries from the sidewalk to near the front doors to accommodate accessibility needs.

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Windows	The original multi-paned casement windows were steel framed, painted white, and located both on the facade elevations and on the comers of the ground floor portions. Original windows have been replaced with bronze colored metal sash containing dual pane windows in fixed, sliding, single and double hung styles.
Ornament/Design Features	Visual interest is provided by brick soldier courses around windows and the top of doorways and randomly added clinker bricks that add minor color variations and texture to the brick veneer walls. Emphasis on simplicity of exterior ornamentation illustrates the design priorities of the period of significance: Modern architecture movement and wartime economic constraints. Focus is purely on functionality of building.
Landscape Characteristics	Large focus on open space. Attractive garden-like landscaping: Plantings and open yards without fences, buildings are flanked by lawn and plants.
Streetscape	A 26-acre rectilinear pattern of organized blocks, asphalt paved streets, concrete sidewalks, with pathways separated by lawn and containing trees, bushes and shrubs within a defined landscape accessible from major city streets. The district includes parking areas, service driveways, and individual concrete walkways to home units. Street parking along Muir Way is available.

District-Specific Standards & Criteria

Design Principle: *Preserve and enhance original public housing design aesthetic while allowing for modernization and new construction to create a welcoming residential neighborhood-scale community.*

Rationale: *The New Helvetia (Alder Grove) Housing Community is one of the City's best examples of WWII-era public housing. Minimal infill has taken place in the historic district, preserving the cohesive pattern of public housing units in a garden-like setting from the WWII era. This development deserves recognition and preservation not only for its architecture but for the role it played in ending racial segregation in public housing thanks in part to significant civil rights attorney and activist Nathaniel Colley.*

1.0 Review of Non-Contributing Resources

Non-contributing resources are those buildings that were included in the original development but construed after the period of significance. According to City Code, only historic landmarks, contributing resources, and historic districts are listed in the Sacramento Register of Historic and Cultural Resources. Therefore, since non-contributing resources are not listed historic buildings, they will be treated differently than contributing resources. Typically, historic preservation review for non-contributing resources will be less restrictive than the current zoning and design regulations although some level of review will be necessary because Sacramento has a City-wide design review process.

2.0 Additions & Accessory Buildings for Contributing Resources

The following design guidelines allow for ongoing maintenance and operation in ways that accommodate reasonable changes while also preserving key design features that account for the property's significance. Projects proposed for a contributing resource in Sacramento's historic districts may involve the construction of additions and accessory buildings. Additions shall be planned sensitively in order to have a minimal impact on the historic district's character- defining features.

2.1 Additions

a. Design additions to existing contributing buildings to preserve the linear footprint of the building.
b. Avoid removing or obscuring decorative venting on mechanical rooms to accommodate additions.
c. Construct additions so that if removed in the future the original buildign cladding and details will not be affected.
d. Do not alter the gable roof form to accommodate additions.
e. Additions should be no taller than 200% of the original building's historic height.

f. Do not remove or alter corner windows to accommodate new additions.

3.0 Detached Dwelling Units, Garages, & Storage Structures (Accessory Buildings)

This section addresses detached dwelling units, accessory buildings, and infill projects (does not apply to existing accessory buildings).

a. Locate detached accessory buildings a minimum of 100 feet back from the property line abutting Broadway to preserve the road and landscape pattern at the center of the development.
b. Located detached accessory buildings no greater than 100 feet back from east or west property lines to preserve the road and landscape pattern at the center of the development.
c. Do not remove healthy mature trees to accommodate new accessory structures.
d. Accessory structures shall have a shed or gable roof form with a pitch that matches the pitch of the contributing resources, and the roof shall be clad in composite shingles.

4.0 New (Infill) Construction & Alterations to Contributing Resources

This section provides objective standards and criteria for construction of infill development.

4.1 Setbacks, Setting, Location, & Site Layout

Alterations to existing buildings and new construction must be within the ranges of the existing setbacks and site layout of the historic district in which it is located.

a. Do not visually block the primary front façade of a contributing resources as seen from Broadway.
b. Infill buildings shall be setback a minimum of 200 feet from Broadway to preserve the historic viewshed from the public right of way.
c. Locate new infill construction greater than 100 feet from the east property line to ensure the original appearance from Muir Way is preserved.

4.2 Building Massing, Scale, & Form

Buildings that reflect the massing, scale, and form of the historic built fabric reinforce and enhance the visual continuity and quality of the historic districts.

a. Infill construction shall be no greater than 200% of the height of the tallest contributing resource found in the district.
b. Infill construction shall have a rectangular footprint consistent with the range of buildings footprints found in the district.

4.3 Architectural Character

The WWII public housing architecture of the New Helvetia Historic District is one of the key physical attributes that contribute to the visual character and appealing quality of the area.

4.4 Windows & Doors

Windows and doors are primary features that help to define the connection between the street and the building, as well as depth, scale and rhythm of a building. These openings provide articulation and transparency to a façade.

a. White vinyl windows are not allowed on new construction or when installing new windows on contributing resources.
b. New windows shall be black aluminum windows or replica rolled steel windows.

4.5 Mechanical Systems

a. Design of new buildings should strive to include passive cooling features such as high ceilings and operable windows.
b. Infill construction shall have no visible mechanical equipment. Ground mounted condensers should be screened from view by security screening or landscaping. Roof-top mechanical equipment shall be screened from view.
c. Solar panels should be installed parallel with the roof so they are minimally visible from the street or adjacent properties.
d. When exposed piping is abandoned, the unused raceway shall be removed.
e. When exposed piping or conduit is unavoidable, anchors shall be installed through the grout joint and not through the brick face.

4.6 Site Features and Landscaping

Site features, streetscape, and landscaping are critical components in forming the character of a historic district. Everything from the overall streetscape, street pattern, and relationships between buildings and open spaces contribute to the historic district's character and sense of place.

a. Avoid introduction of new or expanded surface parking.
b. Retain existing pedestrian paths and road pattern, when consistent with city's building requirements.

4.7 Fencing and Screening

Fences are a character-defining feature of many of Sacramento's historic districts, particularly those that are primarily residential in nature, however, New Helvetia is defined by the lack of fencing and screening features.

a. Avoid introduction of new privacy fencing on the primary façade of contributing buildings.
b. Chain link fencing within the district is prohibited.

4.8 Landscape and Planting

Landscape design is an important feature that ties together the built environment of Sacramento's historic districts. It affects the pedestrian experience in front of all types of properties, creates or softens the public-private transition between the street and individual properties, and enhances the character of a historic district's overall streetscape.

a. All new infill development shall incorporate additional shade trees consistent with the city's tree shading requirements.
b. Do not interrupt the open landscape design with privacy fencing or walls.
c. Maintain the parklike turf between contributing buildings. Maintain the parklike turf between contributing buildings. Alternatively, replace non-native grass with grasses and flowers native to the Sacramento region that will grow to a height no more than 2-1/2'.
d. When hedges or trees require replacement, replace them with a variety native to the Sacramento region.

4.9 Lighting

Lighting is important for public safety and for the security of a property, facilitates the movement of people and creates an attractive and inviting atmosphere.

a. If new lighting is attached directly to the brick façades of contributing resources, fixtures should be no larger than 2 square feet.
b. Attach new lighting to poles, accessory structures, or within landscaping.

4.9.1 Utilities

Utilities are essential to modern-day living but can visually interrupt the character and cohesiveness of a historic district when they are prevalent.

a. Do not place above-ground power transformers along primary streets. Use below-grade vaults or locate within secondary streets, alleys, or landscaped areas whenever feasible.