

## **HISTORY OF CESAR CHAVEZ PARK**

Cesar Chavez Park, historically called *City Plaza* or *Plaza Park*, was dedicated in 1848–1849, by John Sutter Jr. during his designation of 12 public squares as part of Sacramento’s original urban plan. It is one of the oldest parks in Sacramento. The park site occupies a full city block (2.5 acres) in downtown Sacramento (between I & J Streets and 9th & 10th Streets). It was intended as a central civic space for the growing Gold Rush-era city. In the 1850s, there was a proposal to build the California State Capitol on the site, but the plan was ultimately abandoned as it was proven to be unconstitutional (deed restrictions). During its earliest years, the Plaza Park remained largely undeveloped and was described as an informal gathering space rather than a landscaped park. It was a visual focal point for the downtown area. The plaza functioned as an early community park that functioned as a gathering place for community activities and development. Notably, it served as a place where emigrants were dropped off, and a settlement for circus workers and their wagons during performances in Sacramento. The site is also important in the records of Sacramento Valley’s human habitation, as the general location of Native American settlement that has been documented as a long as 8,000 years ago.

The first formal design plan was introduced in 1872 to shape the informal plaza into a landscaped park. The park site was raised to match the high-raised street borders to bypass flood concerns. The Street Commissioner at the time, John Rider, who worked on the redevelopment of Plaza Park hired developer and landscaper John Keating to create the park design plans, which became the park’s overall appearance. The landscape plan was the first introduction of structured walkways and prominent features; the establishment of the plaza as a civic and social hub; and increasing the use for public gatherings, markets, and events. Notable features of the park included circular and cross-axial walkways, large trees and grassy open areas, the Coleman Fountain, the A.J. Stevens Statue, a 1932 marker by the Native Daughters of the Golden West, a bandstand, a comfort station, and a flagpole (removed). By the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, the park had become a central gathering place for Sacramento residents (including livestock auctions and farmers markets), reinforcing its role as the city’s “front yard” and an important setting for the city’s major civic building.

In 1966, Landscape Architect Philip Schaff, Jr., designed and worked on the redevelopment of Plaza Park. The design and look of the park were altered to add support amenities and infrastructure improvements, but a majority of its plaza has remained unchanged. A small building was constructed in 1991-92 to house public restrooms and a restaurant/café, which is visible today. Another feature/marker added to the plaza was a historical marker

commemorating the Pony Express' centennial and significance in Sacramento history. Sacramento was one of many U.S. cities used as stops along the Pony Express.

Recent improvements to the park reflect downtown revitalization efforts of the 1980s: Comprehensive redesign based on the park's historic layout; fountain restoration, cafe and seating areas, performance stage and event infrastructure, and the introduction of public-private partnerships to help fund improvements and programming. These efforts restored the park's role as an active urban space.

In the 1990s, the park was renamed Cesar Chavez Plaza in honor of labor leader César Chávez. A statue commemorating Cesar E. Chavez was erected in the early 2000s on the plaza grounds and small renovations were made. A concrete stage was built on the north lawn to serve as a concert venue and a continued site for a farmer's market. Over 148 new trees were planted to replace older trees and follow an almost circular design of trees at the center of the plaza.

Cesar Chavez Plaza plays an important, even central, role in Sacramento's downtown business community. Today the park occupies an adopted historic district, called [Cesar Chavez] Plaza Park/Central Business District. The historic district includes such structures as the Central Public Library, City Hall, and the United States Postal Service building. Much of the buildings within the district reflect the early twentieth century period of Sacramento's history. Other structures within the district were constructed prior to the twentieth century. Some structures have their original foundations from the era Sacramento's streets were raised. Currently, there is an effort to revise the name of the Plaza Park/Central Business Historic District. During Sacramento's touchstone historical markers, the park continues to function as what it was intended for, a symbolic central civic space reflecting Sacramento's cultural and political life.