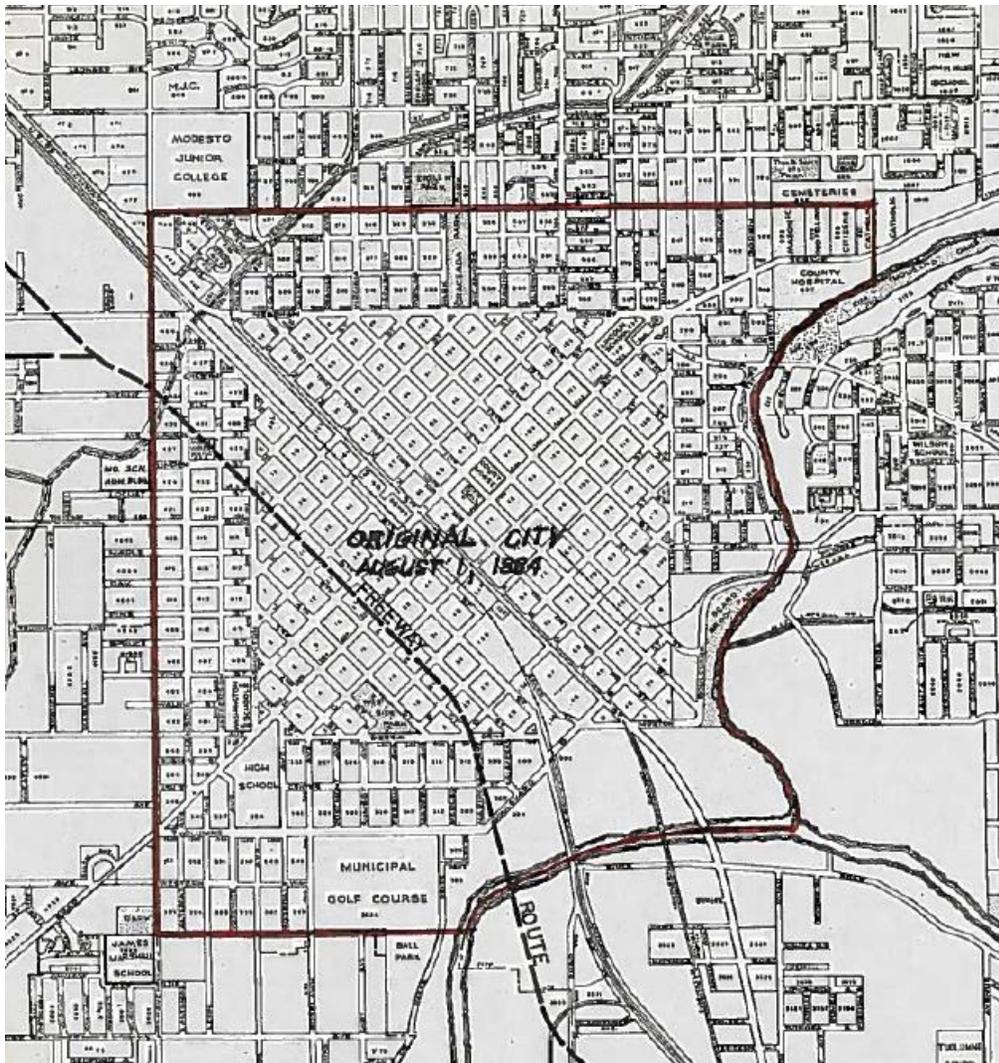


Founding and Settlement, 1870 - 1900

Modesto was founded as one of the San Joaquin Valley's railroad towns. In the late 1860s, Collis Huntington, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker (the "Big Four") announced plans to construct a railroad down the San Joaquin Valley to connect the northern and southern portions of the state. They decided to extend the Central Pacific Railroad, but were unable to secure land grants to finance construction, as they had for the recently-completed Transcontinental Railroad. Instead, land was purchased, then subdivided and sold. Modesto's original town layout is still visible today: downtown is an approximately 640-acre tract with numbered streets oriented parallel to what is now the Union Pacific Railroad and lettered streets oriented to the perpendicular (Section 29, Township 3 South, Range 9 East Mount Diablo Meridian). The first Central Pacific train reached Modesto on October 11, 1870, allowing local farmers to transport their dryland wheat to the Bay Area and providing passenger service. (The Central Pacific Railroad merged with Southern Pacific Railroad in 1959, shortly after Congress relieved land-grant railroads of the requirement to provide passenger service in 1958.) Modesto's first post office was established in November of 1870 on 9th Street (then called Front Street) and the *Tuolumne City News* moved to 11th and I Streets and was renamed *Stanislaus County News*.

The arrival of the Central Pacific Railroad increased Modesto's importance and the county seat was moved from Knights Ferry in an election on September 6, 1871. The county seat had been moved several times before transportation made Modesto the most important place in the county. Empire, too, had served as county seat at one time, as had Adamsville, a town that no longer exists. County records were moved to a temporary courthouse at 8th and I Streets and a permanent building was completed in 1873 on the site of the current courthouse, on the block bounded by 11th, 12th, H, and I Streets.

From 1879 to 1884, Modesto was a prosperous frontier town with a lively nightlife. It was so lively, in fact, that a secret vigilante group called the San Joaquin Regulators was formed in an attempt to establish some order. The San Joaquin Regulators raided various businesses. A number of offending characters were invited to leave town and at least one was killed when he refused to leave. The violence and chaos associated with the San Joaquin Regulators and their targets, combined with a major fire that destroyed much of downtown Modesto due to a lack of organized firefighting efforts, apparently convinced Modestans of the need for government. The City of Modesto was incorporated on August 6, 1884. At that time, the original city limits consisted of the area we think of today as downtown and some additional tracts of land, as shown below.



During the middle to late 1880s, many civic organizations were established as Modesto became a more established, organized city. These include the Masonic Lodge, International Order of Odd Fellows, Native Sons of the Golden West, Order of the Eastern Star, Women's Christian Temperance Union, and Society of California Pioneers. Several of the organizations established during that time continue to exist today. Community baseball was organized in 1872, becoming the (independent) minor league Modesto Reds in the 1890s. Theater, dancing, and music were also popular with Modestans. In 1886, Modesto's first graduating high school class held commencement ceremonies to celebrate the completion of basic studies of 10 young people, seven young women and three young men.

Modesto was a commercial and transportation center during California's wheat boom, from the early 1860s to the Panic of 1893. The San Joaquin Valley's climate of hot dry summers and wet winters, combined with a lack of irrigation made reliance on dryland farming necessary. Wheat, an important dryland crop, was important during this period because of wheat crop failures in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, Modesto was seriously affected and experienced a 15 percent population loss between the censuses of 1890 and 1900 [California Department of Finance].

Electric lights illuminated Modesto for the first time in early 1891. The city's first sewer system was built in 1892, with a main on 9th Street draining laterals into the Tuolumne River. The city's first public

water system was also established in 1892, on 10th Street near G Street, on a property first operated by the Rogers family as a water plant in 1876. The first hospital in Modesto was built in 1891 across from cemetery on the site of the existing County Hospital. All of these advances allowed Modesto's economy to grow and diversify and caused Modesto to grow in importance. During this time, ice deliveries began. Ice was shipped by train from the Sierra Nevada and delivered by horse and wagon until the 1920s to keep food fresh in household iceboxes. After the turn of the century, Modesto Creamery began manufacturing ice locally.

By the late 1880s, the Southern Pacific Railroad had a virtual monopoly on goods movement in the San Joaquin Valley, resulting in rising prices for San Joaquin Valley farmers. The San Francisco Traffic Association was formed in 1891 to break the SPRR's monopoly and lower shipping rates in the region by developing a second railroad through the Central Valley. The association established the San Francisco & San Joaquin Valley Railroad in 1893, financed by Claus Spreckels. The Stockton to Bakersfield line, built through Empire between 1895 and 1897, broke the Southern Pacific monopoly. The San Francisco Traffic Association sold the railroad line to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in 1898. Railroad transportation opportunities were further increased in 1909 when the Modesto Interurban Railway was completed by the young city. The five-mile passenger electric railroad connected Modesto with Empire, making a connection between the Southern Pacific and Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroads, originally connecting in downtown at H and 9th Streets. This connection was later moved to C and 7th Streets in the 1980s. The Modesto Interurban Railway was little used, however, and was sold to T.K. Beard, who renamed it Modesto & Empire Traction in 1911. The Beard family owned significant property near the railroad, and began to develop that land in the 1910s. Modesto & Empire Traction shifted from primarily passenger to primarily freight traffic and ran the last passenger train in 1917.

The passage of the Wright Irrigation Act in 1887, named for Assemblymember from Modesto C.C. Wright, allowed the formation of publicly-owned irrigation districts. The Modesto Irrigation District was the second district formed (July 9, 1887) and Robert McHenry was elected board president. The board subsequently authorized the sale of bonds to finance the building of the LaGrange Dam on the Tuolumne River, completed in 1893. Completion of the canal system was delayed until the early 20th century by lawsuits filed by anti-taxation farmers. The eventual establishment of a reliable irrigation system allowed the variety of agricultural crops to diversify substantially and wheat farming quickly declined. With the conclusion of the final lawsuit, canals began delivering water to dry farms in 1904.

Early 20th Century, 1900 - 1917

The boom in irrigated farming caused Modesto's population not only to rebound from the losses of the 1890s, but to nearly double to 4,034 by 1910. Irrigation brought tremendous prosperity and new buildings rose all over Modesto and phone service reached 466 addresses in 1906. A stable water supply also made farmland much more valuable and prices rose five- to ten-fold. No longer dry wheat, the most important crop in Stanislaus County had become thirsty alfalfa, which was used to feed dairy cattle. Wine grapes and nuts were also planted at that time and orchard crops such as almonds, peaches, and apricots were planted and cultivated. Large ranches were subdivided, as less farmland was now needed to make a good living as a farmer.

In support of the sudden boom in agriculture, processing businesses such as Modesto Creamery, Modesto Canning Company, and J.S. West and Company, grew, along with financing companies. Vigorous growth demanded an updated city structure and a new city charter was adopted in 1910, including the mayor-council structure. New residents to the thriving city focused on quality of life improvements, through civic and social institutions, such as the Women's Improvement Club, which was inspired by the City Beautiful movement. The Women's Improvement Club planted trees throughout the city, helped establish new parks, and provided assistance to those in need.

The City Beautiful movement was a reaction to the rapid development of towns and cities that occurred during the nineteenth century. Architects and planners designed public parks and structures as civic monuments. Some of the most prominent additions to Modesto during this period were Graceada Park (1906), the McHenry Library (1911) Modesto Arch (1912) bearing the motto “Water Wealth Contentment Health,” the new Southern Pacific Railroad depot (1915) and the 7th Street Bridge (1917), which replaced two earlier bridges and the Whitmore Ferry on the same site.

Graceada Park was created in 1906 due to the interest of the Women’s Improvement Club in creating a public park and land gift from T.K. Beard and T.P. Wisecarver, who donated three blocks in the Beard-Wisecarver Tract. The park was designed by John McLaren with plans and improvements paid for by the Club. Its name, “Graceada,” is a combination of the wives of the land donors, Grace Beard and Ada Wisecarver.

The advent of the automobile and the expansion of roadways and highways was a major contributor to the development of Modesto during the first decades of the 20th century. In 1910 the state legislature passed the State Highways Act, which allotted millions of dollars in bonds for a state highway system. The Golden State Highway (later State Route 99) was one of the earliest highways built in California, in 1915, following existing thoroughfares through urban centers. Golden State Highway entered Modesto from the north on Ninth Street, crossing over the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks at I and G streets, and leaving the southern end of the city by way of 7th Street. Shortly after the opening of Golden State Highway, the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors approved construction for a new bridge over the Tuolumne River on the south edge of Modesto, and the 7th Street Bridge opened to traffic in March 1917 to great fanfare and was soon established as part of the Golden State Highway.

Interests in the arts and social affairs continued to grow and by the early 20th century, Modesto was home to several movie theaters on 10th Street, some of which also hosted vaudeville shows. Music and theater stages and dance halls had been important to Modesto from its earliest days and the increasingly prosperous city continued its interest in such urbane pursuits. Organizations established in this period included the Chamber of Commerce, Women’s Improvement Club, the Modesto Shakespeare Club, Daughters of the American Revolution, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the American Legion, Chataqua Circle, and numerous music, reading, and hobby clubs.

World War I to World War II, 1917 - 1945

World War I began in 1914 and ended in 1918. In response Germany’s sinking of seven merchant ships in the Atlantic, as well as Germany’s profession of support for Mexico to recover Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. Modesto’s citizens responded by organizing a Red Cross auxiliary, and holding benefits and patriotic parades. When the United States asked men to join the military, 872 young Modestans joined, from a total population of about 8,000. When the war ended, Modesto was equally exuberant in its support, honoring 1,000 returning Army and Navy veterans and the 85 who did not return at a celebration in Graceada Park in October of 1919.

In January of 1918, the Spanish flu arrived in Stanislaus County and sickened 2,000 people countywide, including 600 in Modesto. The magnitude of the epidemic overwhelmed local hospitals and the Elks Hall was converted into a temporary hospital to accommodate the great need. Almost 200 people died.

Soon after the U.S. joined World War I in 1917, Congress began a new attempt to pass a law prohibiting the sale of alcohol. The Eighteenth Amendment became law in 1919, making it illegal to grow wine grapes, which had begun with the advent of irrigation in 1904. Despite the hardship posed by the loss of a market for wine grapes, the city survived in part through the growth of the revived alcohol industry

following the end to Prohibition with passage of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933. The E&J Gallo winery opened immediately after Prohibition ended.

Modesto's Municipal Aviation Field was constructed in 1920, funded in part by a \$50,000 bond for the purchase of 74 acres. While not the first municipal airport built, Modesto was the first city in the country to plan for an airport in its 1910 charter. The original site of the air field was near downtown on property that eventually became the Modesto Municipal Golf Course. In celebration of the city's 50th anniversary and Armistice Day (now known as Veterans' Day), the air field was used for aerial displays and ball games, including one between the California State League Class D Modesto Reds (1914-1915) and Casey Stengel's National League All Stars. Harold "Bud" Coffee was killed in 1921 at the airport along with several passengers and the airport was renamed "Coffee Field" in his honor. The airport was moved to its current location in 1929 due to an approach that was too short for safety.

During the 1920s, growth continued and new schools and social organizations were founded, including Modesto Rotary (1920), Modesto Parent-Teacher Association (1923), the Modesto Garden Club (1924, Frederick Knorr), the largest garden club in the United States, and American Association of University Women (1925). The Old Fisherman's Club on Maze Boulevard (State Route 132) by the Tuolumne River was also established in 1920, frequented by local politicians and businessmen, and is still in existence today. The Elks built a new hall in 1927, replacing the old hall on 10th Street, and a new state-of-the-art fire station was built in 1939 on 10th Street. The Great Depression, which began in 1929, slowed Modesto's growth and brought widespread unemployment (25 percent nationally), but brought with it immigrants fleeing the dust bowl conditions brought on by drought in the Midwest in the 1930s.

Most important among the new schools established during this period was Modesto Junior College. Sixty-one students registered for school in 1921. The second junior college in California, it was the first to be chartered in a junior college district. South Hall was the first building, occupied in 1923. Howard Gilky designed the campus. A great many notable Modestans studied at Modesto Junior College before achieving distinction.

Music had always been important to Modesto, but Frank Mancini refined it by creating the Modesto Symphony Orchestra in 1930. The Symphony Orchestra added to the variety provided by the music program at Modesto High School and the Modesto Band, both directed by Mancini, and numerous music clubs and community organizations.

The Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts cooperated to construct Don Pedro Dam and reservoir in 1923, expanding water storage capacity, and establishing municipal water and hydroelectric power services, all of which have been central to the development of the county's agriculture and food packing and processing industries. The first electricity meter was installed in late 1923 with Modesto City Schools and Modesto Junior College as early customers and the first schools in California heated by electricity. The agriculture and food processing industries were the keys to growth and prosperity in the middle decades of the 20th century and their diversity of products helped Modesto weather the Great Depression. Some of Modesto's largest packing and processing companies were established in the middle 1930s. The E & J Gallo Winery also opened in this same period, as did Foster Farms.

The city continued to prosper despite the Great Depression and built a new dam on the Tuolumne River, Dennett Dam, to create a lake adjacent to downtown. The dam was named for Lincoln L. Dennett, a former mayor. Legion Park on the Tuolumne River was donated to the city by the American Legion and the park was a good location from which to enjoy water sports on the new Lake Modesto. The dam was destroyed by flooding in 1935, rebuilt in 1937, and damaged again in the 1940s. Tuolumne River Regional Park is planned to once again to take advantage of Modesto's proximity to the river, but without the dam and lake.

Modesto needed a new post office and the property that had formerly been the home of Elihu Beard on the north corner of 12th and I Streets was purchased for it. The community raised funds to construct a new building in 1923 which was used until that building was replaced by El Viejo Post Office in 1933. In 1924, Modesto's two competing newspapers, the Stanislaus News and Morning Herald, merged to create the Modesto News-Herald. This paper was purchased by the McClatchy Newspaper Corporation in 1927 and the name changed to The Modesto Bee in 1933. Other Modesto papers have existed over the years, but The Modesto Bee is the only one published today.

Modesto's population had grown to more than 16,000 by 1940. World War II had an impact on the population. Hundreds of citizens left to work on the war effort, leaving Modesto with a labor shortage, which was particularly hard on farmers, who needed a substantial labor force to harvest crops. Local food processing plants were pressed into service to provide canned goods for the war effort. The military closed all west coast airports including Modesto's, except for military service. New construction ceased. Meanwhile, Americans were issued ration and coupon books for many household goods, also to assist the war effort. Modesto Junior College hosted the first annual Northern California Relays (now Modesto Relays), at which the world pole vault record was broken, setting the stage for many future world records to be broken at the stadium.

As news of the end of World War II broke, Modestans flooded downtown to celebrate. An estimated 7,500 people jammed the streets, dancing, sounding horns, and lighting fireworks.

Postwar Modesto

Modesto experienced rapid growth in the decades after World War II. Modesto's population of about 16,000 residents in 1940 rose to more than 36,000 by 1960. New housing construction was stimulated by the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the "G.I. Bill"), which provided many benefits to war veterans including low-cost mortgages and business loans. These loans resulted in massive residential and commercial development and caused the spread of new development far beyond the city limits, mostly to the north, but also to the east and south, as large numbers of people were now able to afford a single family house. By 1970, Modesto was home to nearly 62,000 people.

Once again, the Modesto Reds baseball team was organized, this time in 1946, as a Class C team in the California League. By 1948, the team had affiliated with the major league St. Louis Browns. A series of affiliations followed. In 1975, the team was renamed the A's to coincide with its affiliation with the Oakland Athletics. The team was again renamed in 2005 as the Modesto Nuts when it affiliated with the Colorado Rockies. In 1963, the team was regraded as single A and has been A+ since 1990.

The G.I. Bill and prosperity that followed the end of World War II ushered in a period of youthful exuberance. Automobile ownership increased to higher levels than before the war resulting in falling train ridership and prompting Congress to eliminate the requirement of railroads to run passenger trains, which further stimulated automobile ownership. In the late 1950s and 1960s, children of World War II veterans followed a growing pastime of "cruising" up and down city streets to demonstrate possession of a driver license and access to a car. George Lucas memorialized cruising in his movie "American Graffiti." He was present for the local premier of the film at the Briggsmore Theater on November 21, 1973. Drive-in restaurants similar to "Mel's Drive-In" depicted in the film were popular hangouts for teenagers of that period.

Businesses followed their customers toward the edges of the city, converting residential streets, such as McHenry Avenue, into commercial streets and drawing businesses and customers away from downtown. McHenry Village, which opened at the north edge of Modesto in 1953, was typical.

Several city and county government facilities were replaced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the Modesto City Hall, Modesto Police and Communications facility, Stanislaus County Courthouse, and Stanislaus County Jail. The post-war boom was a period of investment in modern facilities and architecture. The construction of State Route 99 as a freeway in 1965 (begun in 1955) divided Modesto's downtown and facilitated the further spread of development away from downtown. Thriving commercial areas along the former Golden State Highway near the Tuolumne River were converted to automobile salvage and wrecking yards.

Beginning in the 1960s, the 2,000-acre Beard Industrial District—owned by the Beard family, which also owns and operates Modesto & Empire Traction railroad—east of downtown along the north side of the Tuolumne River became the area's largest industrial area. Modesto & Empire Traction's connections to both the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad and Union Pacific Railroad (formerly the Southern Pacific Railroad) positioned Beard properties to take advantage of both interregional railroads.

The draining away of economic activity from downtown that had begun following World War II had become so severe by the 1970s, that efforts were made to revitalize downtown that were similar to efforts elsewhere in the country. Older buildings were demolished to make way for new buildings, including the Stanislaus County Library (1971), the former offices of Stanislaus County (1976), and many parking lots. Redevelopment efforts were formalized in the middle 1980s with the establishment of Modesto's Redevelopment Agency. Projects funded in part or full through the Redevelopment Agency included the construction of a downtown hotel and convention complex at 9th and K Streets (1988) and the expansion of government offices. Despite these efforts, the city continued to expand outward, with the 83-acre Vintage Faire mall (1977) almost four miles from downtown. Several businesses that had been located in downtown moved to the new mall.

By 1980, Modesto had grown to 107,000 residents. The rapid pace of growth concerned Modestans, who elected Peggy Mensinger mayor in 1978 on a slow growth platform. Mensinger worked to refocus development on downtown and on infill development.

Modesto's arts community continued to thrive with several performing groups and events, although it seems a smaller proportion of the community participates in such events than did in past decades, when Modesto was much smaller. Frank Mancini's Modesto Symphony Orchestra performs regularly and the volunteer Modesto Band (known as "MoBand") gives free summer concerts in the Mancini Bowl at Graceada Park. Modesto Performing Arts was founded in 1967 by Modesto High School drama teacher Paul Tischer and the Townsend Opera Players has entertained audiences since 1982. Several dance studios continue to teach Modestans how to cut a rug and the Central West Ballet (1987) performs throughout the year. The new Gallo Center for the Arts, funded by generous gifts from members of the Gallo family and the public, opened in 2007 with two theaters totaling almost 1,700 seats on the former site of Crocker Bank.

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