

## A Brief History of Watts, California - Contributor - Oshea Luja

While traveling through Los Angeles, you will notice a district nestled on LA's south-eastern side of the border, named Watts. Stretching only 2.1 square miles, this fertile, magical district has given birth to some of the most extraordinary people, monuments, and cultures in the world.

Watts is located on Rancho La Tajauta, a 3,560-acre Mexican land grant given to Anastasio Avila, by Governor Manuel Micheltorena, in 1843. The grant was subsequently patented to Anastasio's son, Enrique Avila, in 1873. Enrique raised sheep in Watts during the Civil War, at the time of the wool boom. The area was predominantly farmland until 1902, when the Pacific Electric Railway opened. Watts's primary trade was grazing and beef manufacturing. With the influx of European-American settlers into Southern California in the 1870s after the California Gold Rush, Rancho La Tajauta's land was sold off and subdivided for smaller farms and homes. In 1907, Watts was incorporated as a separate city, and named after the first railroad station built in the town, The Watts Station. This historical landmark is still one of the oldest buildings that remains in the city today.



**(Watts 1906) View of the Pacific Electric right-of-way, looking south from 103rd Street, with the station on the left.**

**Watts 1906–1926:** In the early 1900s, blacks were confined to a small section of Watts, nicknamed Charcoal Alley, and slowly began to move into the central parts of the city. The white population increasingly grew uncomfortable with the rapid growth of blacks, especially since it was predicted that the town would have a black mayor in the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was openly against this notion, and in 1926 influenced the white majority voters to merge Watts with the city of Los Angeles in an effort to circumvent a black-operated city with black officials and counsel. Records indicate that in 1914, a black realtor, Charles C. Leake, was doing business in the area.



**Watts (1916):** A group of men and women, all wearing hats, pose next to a convertible parked on a street in Watts.

**Watts Historic Music & Arts Scene:** Watts has a long-standing legacy regarding the contribution to music, arts, and culture in America. Acclaimed musicians The Woodman Brothers, Buddy Collette, Charles Mingus, and Cecil "Big Jay" McNeely all grew up in Watts, CA. Watts was one of the only places in Los Angeles where all cultures lived together in harmony. The schools were integrated, jobs were shared, and families did not lock their front doors. Many families groomed their children for the arts, such as music, dance, and literature. The culture of artistry was encouraged, taught, and practiced religiously. By the late 1920s, nearly 85 percent of homes in Watts had a guitar, and piano lessons were mandatory, which laid the foundation to play other instruments.

**Watts Night Life:** There were clubs beginning at 120th and Central Avenue, and heading north to 108th and Central Avenue where Baron Long's Tavern (later renamed Jazzland, and finally The Plantation Club) resided. The Watts Country Club, Leak's Lake (later renamed Wayside Park), and at least by the 1920s, The Chateau, The Little Harlem, and Villa Venice were all thriving in Watts. And if you kept north, up Central Avenue, there were black-owned clubs and businesses all the way to Washington Boulevard.

**Watts 1940s–1960s:** After The Great Depression of the 1930s, several manufacturing plants were built in Watts to aid in the development of weapons and machinery for World War II, (1939–1945). The war introduced new and unique economic opportunities while creating a population boom that affected the city's racial, social, and political climate.

**Watts Revolt 1965:** With World War II over, the 1950s brought reinforced racial covenants to Watts. Aged bitterness by the Watts working-class community over discriminatory treatment by police and inadequate public services (especially schools and hospitals) exploded on August 11, 1965, into what were commonly known as the Watts Riots. The revolt lasted for several days and resulted in more than forty million dollars' worth of property damage. It was both the largest and most costly urban rebellion of the Civil Rights era.

**The Watts Writers Workshop, 1965:** After the rebellion, creativity began to soar again in Watts, and gave way to one of the most notable literary success stories in American history, The Watts Writers Workshop. This idea was developed after the Watts Revolt as an outlet to creatively express and release tension directly related to years of mistreatment and alienation of blacks in Watts. Well-known writers emerged from the workshop including Quincy Troupe, Jane Cortez, Johnnie Scott, Eric Priestley, Raspoet Ojenke, Wanda Coleman, The Watts Prophets (Father Amde, Richard Dedeaux, and Otis O'Solomon), Jimmie Sherman, Oddie Hawkins, and Kamau Daaood.

**The Watts Prophets:** The Watts Prophets were the first to use the word *rap* in their 1971 album and title composition *Rappin' Black in a White World*, and their hard-hitting 1969 album *Black Voices: On the Streets of Watts* was named one of the top 40 groundbreaking albums of all-time by *Rolling Stone* magazine. The Watts Prophets have collaborated with many of the world's greatest artists: master producer Quincy Jones, Don Cherry, Billy Higgins, Horace Tapscott, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and Richard Pryor, just to name some. The Watts Prophets are a breathing link from the Civil Rights Movement to the hip-hop generation of today. These legends have been sampled by countless hip-hop artists and are accredited with being the forerunners to what is called rap today. **(Watts – the birthplace of rap)**



Pictured L to R: Father Amde Hamilton, Otis O'Solomon, and Richard Dedeaux of the legendary Watts Prophets (credited with defining and developing the art form rap).

**The Watts Summer Festival, 1968:** Another event that developed after the revolt was The Watts Summer Festival, the oldest African-American cultural festival in the United States. The festival was born in 1966 and incorporated in 1968. The purpose of the festival was to turn the rebellious energies into tangible, positive solutions by developing community pride, cultural awareness, and political consciousness.

**Gangs in Watts–1970s:** The 1970s ushered in street gangs to Watts. With the Black Panther Party dismantled, a new type of energy swept through the city. Watts gangs were first developed to protect the community from police brutality and systemic oppression. This idea was short-lived, considering when the country’s drug epidemic hit Watts and began to produce profits, and clearly started to define territory and boundaries. The 1980s saw a huge increase in the number of gangs in Watts. The crack explosion worsened the effect, and the number of gangs increased dramatically and spread throughout the country. Between 1989 and 2005, police reported more than 500 homicides in Watts, most of them gang related.

**1992 Watts Peace Treaty:** On April 28, 1992, one day before the '92 LA Revolt, came what was called the biggest agreement ever signed to cease gang violence in Watts and across the nation. With over 16 countywide organizations, many active gang members vowed to work in unison to stop the atrocities that had been occurring in Watts and Los Angeles for decades. The treaty was supported by a community-based education initiative and private-funding efforts from prominent members of the community. This monumental achievement still contributes to the decrease in gang-related deaths in Watts and across the country to date.



**1992 Los Angeles Revolt:** The LA Revolt of '92 was sparked on April 29, 1992, when a jury acquitted three white officers and one Hispanic officer of the LAPD for the videotaped beating of Rodney King, following a high-speed chase. Thousands rebelled for over six days following the verdict.

Today, Watts is nearly 75% Latino, 24% black, and 34% of Watts's current residents were born in another city. Watts's culture ratio has flipped in roughly 30 years: in 1988, Watts was 86% black and 13% Latino. The turning of the ratio has taken its toll on Watts's social, economic, and political climate.

Watts's history is both magical and complicated. The fabric of this historic community has withstood massive deconstruction efforts. The people are resilient, the land is sacred, and the future looks brighter than ever. For the past 27 years, Watts has been working its way back to prominence with the aid of grassroots community organizations. Watts's past, present, and future are dependent on re-imagining the narrative of this historic district.

Some of Watts's notable natives are legendary musicians Charles Mingus, Buddy Collette, Cecil "Big J" McNeely, Horace Tapscott, Billy Higgins, and Don Cherry. Renowned writers and poets include Arna Bontemps, Dr. Johnnie Scott, The Watts Prophets, Jayne Cortez, Raspoet Ojenke, Wanda Coleman, and Eric Priestley. Olympic gold medalists include Florence Griffith-Joyner (Flo-Jo), Kevin Young, and Hayes Edward "Big Ed" Sanders.

