San Francisco is a city built on shifting sand



Before major development in the mid-1800s, San Francisco's coastal sand dunes extended all the way to the present-day Financial District, with some dunes reaching as high as 80-100 feet. The land west of Divisadero Street was called "the Outside Lands."

An exhibit by

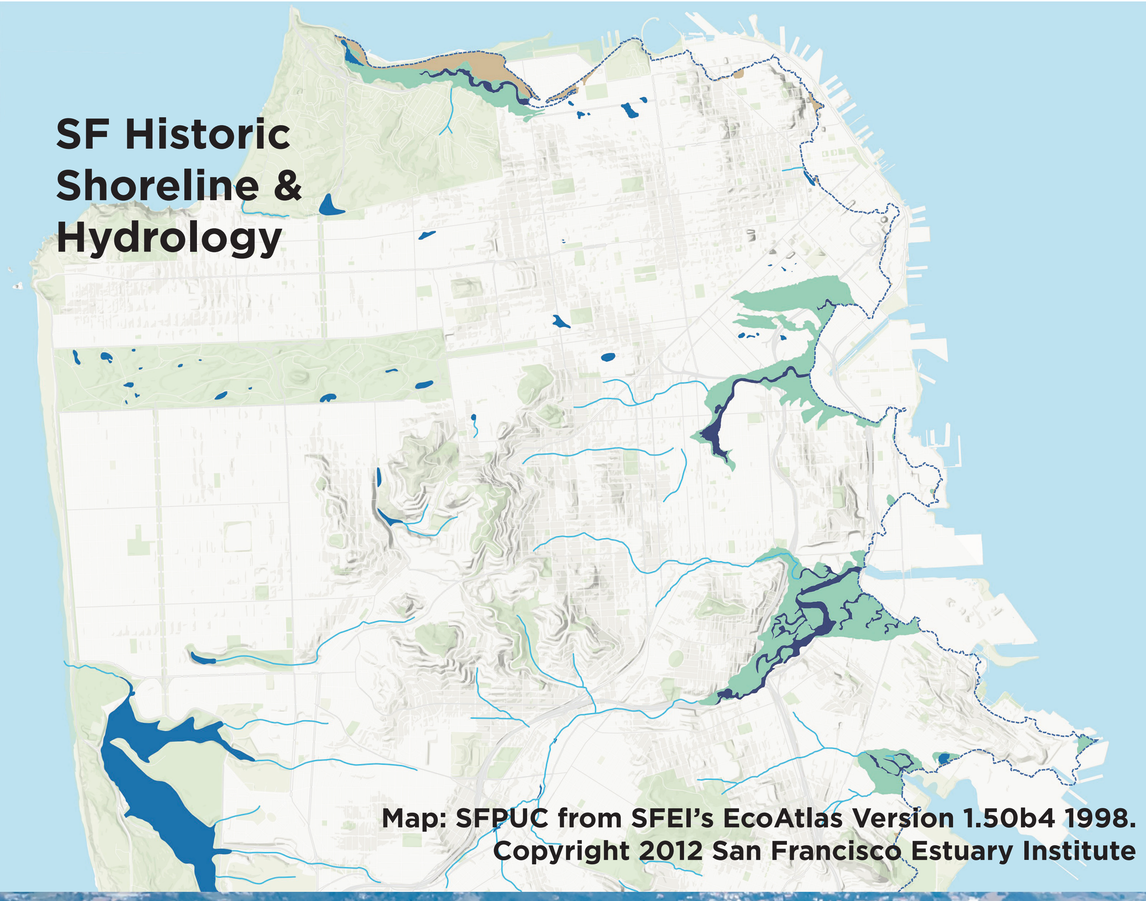
SPUR

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Special thanks to:
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Photo: Marlene Sanchez @mars.photo

SF Historic Shoreline & Hydrology



Map: SFPUC from SFEI's EcoAtlas Version 1.50b4 1998.
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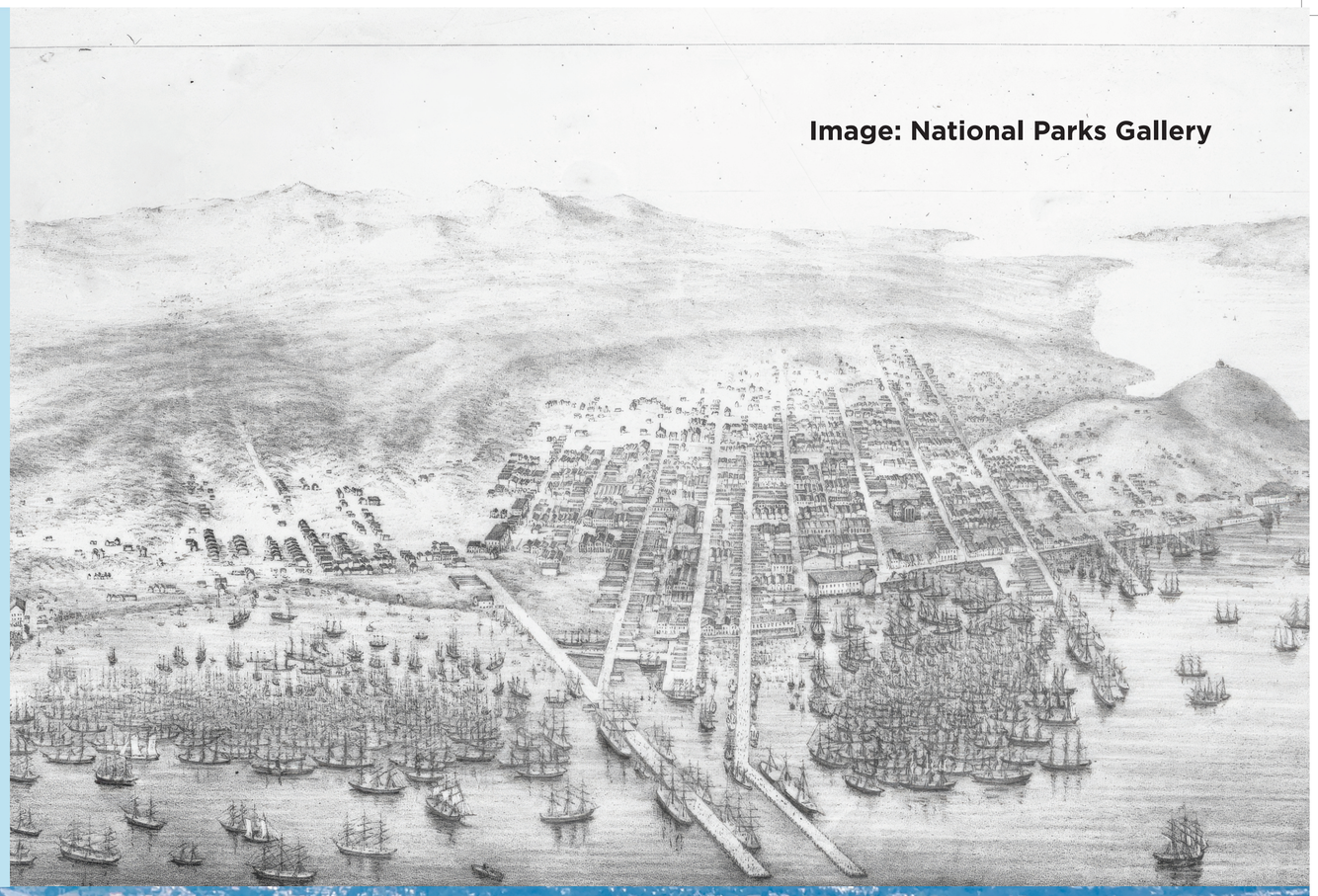


Image: National Parks Gallery

We have a long history of reshaping our sandy shorelines

Downtown SF's original shoreline extended to as far inland as Montgomery St. As the Gold Rush exploded, the city filled in Yerba Buena Cove, burying dozens of ships to make the financial district.

Photo: Sergio Ruiz

As San Francisco's population grew, the city built a promenade along Ocean Beach.

Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory, wnp15.745

Windswept sand dunes naturally created a walking path that brought adventurous San Franciscans from the domesticated downtown to the undeveloped "Outside Lands."

The area was so popular they constructed a play structure among other establishments to cater to visitors.

Early attempts to build a road were unpopular throughout the 19th century, but all that would change with the rising popularity of cars in the 20th century.



Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory, wnp36.02989

Between 1916 and 1929, San Francisco constructed the O’Shaughnessy Seawall to stop the sands from drifting inland.

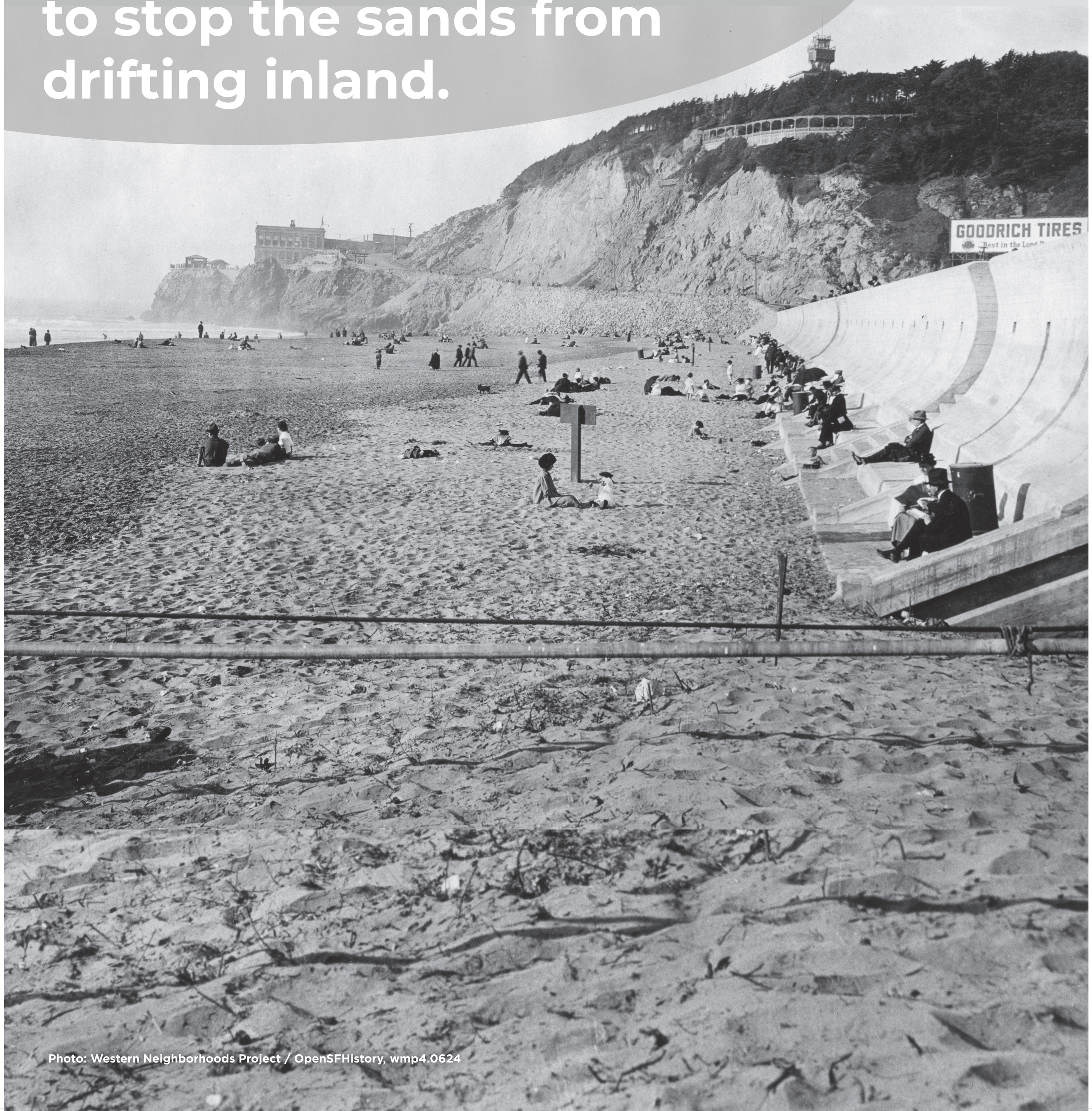


Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory, wmp4.0624

Then, we made a road along this stretch of coast.

The Great Highway first opened to cars in 1929 to connect the SF Zoo to the former Playland-at-the-Beach amusement park. In the decades that followed, the road primarily facilitated trips between the Richmond and Peninsula. Sand and severe coastal erosion frequently closed stretches of the road, leading to approval for permanent closure of the road south of Sloat in 2024.

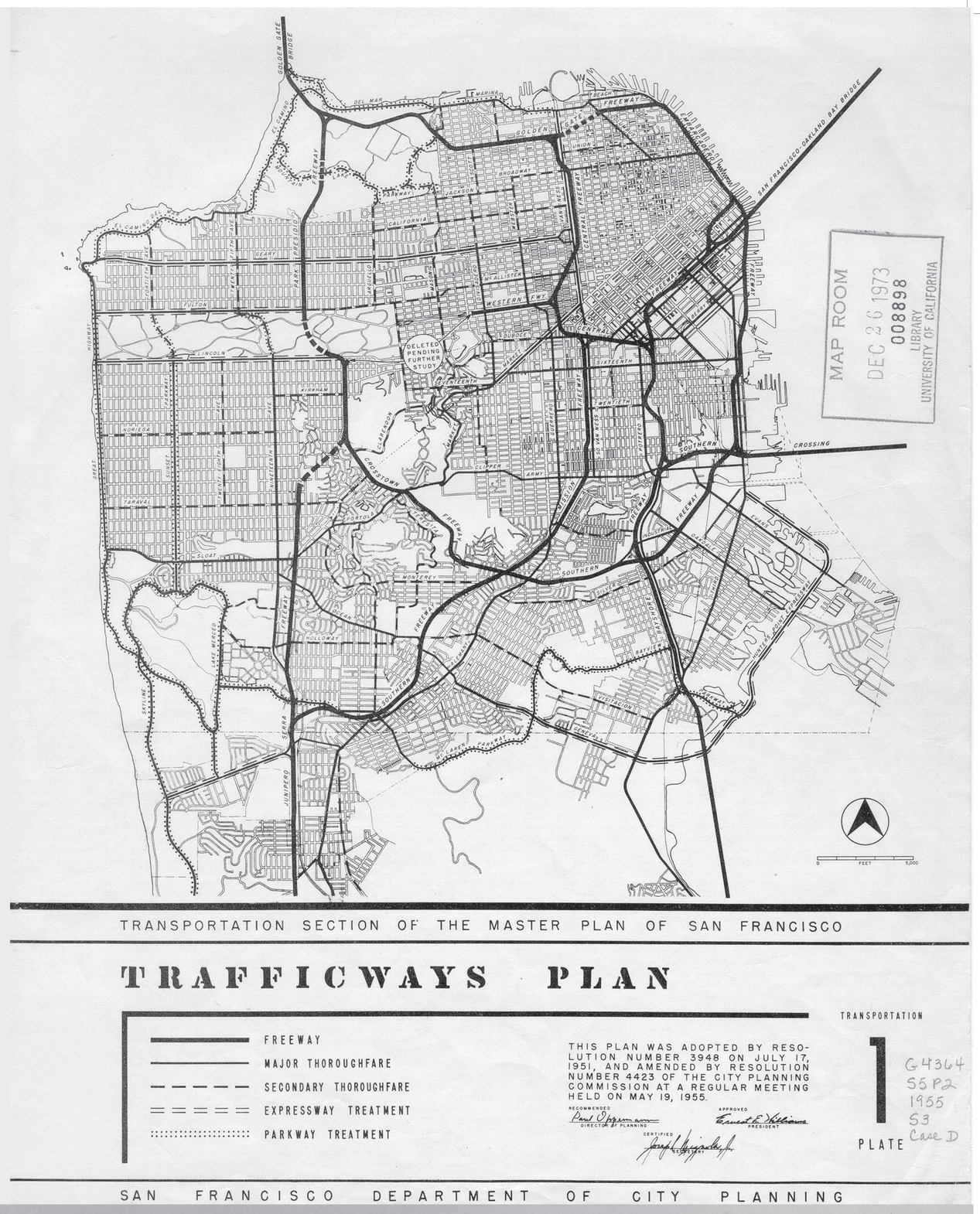


Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory, wnp4.0822

Image: SPUR

In the 1950s, we tried to blanket the city with highways

The 1948 Comprehensive Trafficways Plan imagined a city laced with freeways and massive parking structures. This, among other plans, played a role in catalyzing the Freeway Revolt that began in the 1950s.



Map: Wikimedia Commons



Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory, wnp27.5219

But neighbors fought back:

From the Embarcadero, to Glen Park, to Hayes Valley, to the Sunset, San Franciscans took action to protest the construction of new freeways, and advocated for removing existing ones.

Photo: The Chronicle

Photo: Sergio Ruiz

When the ground shifted again, we fixed our mistakes.

The debate over freeways continued until the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, after which the city removed some highways due to structural instability and public demand. The Embarcadero Freeway came down in 1991, and the Central Freeway followed in 2003, replaced by tree-lined Octavia Boulevard.

Photo: Western Neighborhoods Project / OpenSFHistory,wnp4.1340

Sunset Dunes Today

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a section of the Great Highway closed to cars so that people could use it for safe recreation.

Photos: Marlene Sanchez @mars.photo

Since the initial closure, San Franciscans have debated the best use of the space. In 2024, the measure to close part of the Great Highway to create Sunset Dunes passed.

Today, an average of 4,600 people visit the park daily.

Today, we are a city with a proud history of turning our freeways into parks.

When the roads came down, San Francisco replaced them with parks. Above is Patricia's Green in Hayes Valley, built on the former site of the Central Freeway, which was torn down after being damage in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Below: Presidio Tunnel Tops, opened over the 101 highway in 2022.

Photos: Marlene Sanchez @mars.photo

Sunset Dunes is just the latest example of San Franciscans choosing parks over roadways.



Photo: Marlene Sanchez @mars.photo

Embarcadero (1991)

Tunnel Tops (2022)

JFK Dr (2022)

Octavia Blvd (2003)

Sunset Dunes (2024)

Panhandle (1966)

Glen Park (1967)

Image: OpenStreetMap