



# Curating the City: Wilshire Blvd.

## Lesson 6: Ambassador Hotel (3400 Wilshire Blvd.)

### What You Need to Know:

- Grade Level: All Levels
- Curriculum Connections: English—Language Arts, History—Social Science
- Kids' Guide Correlation: Use this lesson in conjunction with pages 10-11 of the Guide. As students explore Wilshire Center, use this primary source activity to give students a perspective on recreation in Los Angeles over time and an understanding of some of the complicated issues surrounding preservation and adaptive reuse.
- Website Correlation: Go to [laconservancy.org/wilshire](http://laconservancy.org/wilshire). Under "Explore Wilshire Blvd.," use the keyword search to find the page for Ambassador Hotel for photos and background information. You can find other hotels on Wilshire by selecting "Hotel" under "Property Type."

### Focus Questions:

- What was it like to stay at the Ambassador Hotel?
- How can we use primary sources to gather informative details about historic buildings?

### Expected Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to explain what the Ambassador Hotel was like from roughly the 1920s through 1950s.
- Students will be able to reflect on how primary sources provide unique information about life during other times in history.

### Assessment:

Write a postcard/letter describing an imaginary stay at the Ambassador Hotel.

### Essential Vocabulary:

- Primary Source
- Historical Fiction

### Materials:

- Lesson 6 worksheet
- primary source reproducibles
- pencils
- paper (for letter assignment)
- 5 X 7 index cards (for postcard assignment)



## Procedure

### Motivation:

Distribute paper and pencils to students. Ask them to write freely for five minutes, and direct them to describe their dream vacations. Encourage them to include details about the “perfect” hotel where they would stay, as well as the recreational activities that they would enjoy most. Have students share their dream vacations and discuss what makes them similar and different. Tell students that they will be learning more about what it might have been like to stay at the Ambassador Hotel, one of the most famous luxury hotels in Los Angeles from its opening in 1921 until the 1980s.

### Making Connections:

What do students already know about popular culture and recreation during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s? Invite students to share their knowledge of early Hollywood celebrities, popular music, and fads and trends of different decades.

### Guided Instruction:

1. Distribute the Lesson 6 worksheet, and have students read the passage about the Ambassador Hotel. Invite them to share their responses: what details stood out as particularly interesting or unusual? What information was surprising to them?
2. Define the term primary source. Help students see that a primary source is any document that is directly from a historical period. Primary sources can include letters, journal entries, photographs, musical recordings, newspaper articles, even film footage. Invite students to speculate why primary sources might be more useful to historians than other sources, such as a history textbook written in the modern day.
3. Distribute copies of the primary sources. Help students to identify what they are looking at – photographs, advertisements, and brochures – and direct them to look at each document closely for “clues” about the Ambassador Hotel. Remind students that their close observations can reveal a great deal of information about what it might have been like to stay at the Ambassador. Have students take notes on what they see.
4. Define the term historical fiction. Help students understand that historical fiction uses true facts from a historical period in a new, fictional context. Encourage students to offer examples of historical fiction from current books, movies, or television shows.
5. Challenge students to use their primary source observations to create their own historical fiction about the Ambassador. Direct students to write a detailed letter to a friend describing an imaginary stay at the hotel during its early decades. Depending on the age and ability of your students, you can modify the length and complexity of this assignment. Younger students can write short postcard notes and illustrate the opposite sides with drawings depicting their imaginary vacations; older students can write longer letters.



**Assessment:**

Have students write letters or postcards describing an imaginary stay at the Ambassador Hotel during its early decades.

**Reflection/Critical Thinking:**

1. What were the features of the Ambassador Hotel—its buildings, the grounds, the kinds of recreation offered there—that made it special? Why do you think it became famous?
2. How might a stay at the Ambassador have been similar to a stay at a modern-day hotel? How might it have been different?
3. The Los Angeles Unified School District bought the Ambassador Hotel and tore it down in 2006 for the construction of a new school. Some people, including preservationists, wanted to reuse the historic buildings instead of tearing them down. Can you imagine how the Ambassador Hotel might have been used as a school? Suggest ways that you might have reused some of the original spaces for a school.
4. What else can you imagine a historic hotel being used for, besides a school?
5. What do the Ambassador's primary sources tell us about life in Los Angeles during the first part of the twentieth century?

**Enrichment Opportunities:**

1. Challenge students to do biographical research on some of the celebrities who performed or stayed at the Ambassador Hotel, including Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Walt Disney. Have students write short reports describing the individual's life and his or her impact.
2. Senator Robert F. Kennedy's assassination at the Ambassador Hotel in 1968 was a pivotal event in American history. Use the story of his campaign and assassination as a starting point for exploring the key figures and turbulent events of the 1960s.
3. Challenge students to do their own primary source explorations by interviewing a parent or grandparent. Work with students to develop a list of questions to ask an adult about popular culture during that adult's childhood. Questions can include: What clothes were fashionable? What movie stars were popular? What music did kids listen to? Where did you go for a fun night out? Have students write up their findings and reflect on the power of primary sources in historical research.

**Worksheet Answers:**

Responses will vary.

**California Standards:**

English—Language Arts (Writing):

- 2.2.0 Students write compositions that describe and explain familiar objects, events, and experiences.
- 2.1 Write brief narratives based on their experiences:
  - a. Move through a logical sequence of events.
  - b. Describe the setting, characters, objects, and events in detail.



- 2.2 Write a friendly letter complete with the date, salutation, body, closing, and signature.
- 3.2.0 Students write compositions that describe and explain familiar objects, events, and experiences.
- 3.2.1 Write narratives:
  - a. Provide a context within which an action takes place.
  - b. Include well-chosen details to develop the plot.
  - c. Provide insight into why the selected incident is memorable.
- 3.2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.
- 3.2.3 Write personal and formal letters, thank-you notes, and invitations:
  - a. Show awareness of the knowledge and interests of the audience and establish a purpose and context.
  - b. Include the date, proper salutation, body, closing, and signature.
- 4.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph compositions:
  - c. Include supporting paragraphs with simple facts, details, and explanations.
- 5.1.1 Create multiple-paragraph narrative compositions:
  - a. Establish and develop a situation or plot.
  - b. Describe the setting.
  - c. Present an ending.
- 5.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions:
  - a. Establish a topic, important ideas, or events in sequence or chronological order.
  - b. Provide details and transitional expressions that link one paragraph to another in a clear line of thought.
- 6.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions:
  - a. Engage the interest of the reader and state a clear purpose.
  - b. Develop the topic with supporting details and precise verbs, nouns, and adjectives to paint a visual image in the mind of the reader.
  - c. Conclude with a detailed summary linked to the purpose of the composition.
- 6.1.3 Use a variety of effective and coherent organizational patterns, including comparison and contrast; organization by categories; and arrangement



by spatial order, order of importance, or climactic order.

7.1.0 Students write clear, coherent, and focused essays. The writing exhibits students' awareness of the audience and purpose. Essays contain formal introductions, supporting evidence, and conclusions.

7.1.2 Support all statements and claims with anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples.

7.2.4 Write persuasive compositions:

- a. State a clear position or perspective in support of a proposition or proposal.
- b. Describe the points in support of the proposition, employing well-articulated evidence.
- c. Anticipate and address reader concerns and counterarguments.

8.1.1 Create compositions that establish a controlling impression, have a coherent thesis, and end with a clear and well-supported conclusion.

8.1.5 Achieve an effective balance between researched information and original ideas.

8.2.4 Write persuasive compositions:

- a. Include a well-defined thesis (i.e., one that makes a clear and knowledgeable judgment).
- b. Present detailed evidence, examples, and reasoning to support arguments, differentiating between facts and opinion.
- c. Provide details, reasons, and examples, arranging them effectively by anticipating and answering reader concerns and counterarguments.

9&10.1.0 Writing Strategies

Students write coherent and focused essays that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument. The writing demonstrates students' awareness of the audience and purpose.

9&10.1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.

9&10.1.2 Use precise language, action verbs, sensory details, appropriate modifiers, and the active rather than the passive voice.

9.1.3 Use clear research questions and suitable research methods (e.g., library, electronic media, personal interview) to elicit and present evidence from primary and secondary sources.

9.1.4 Develop the main ideas within the body of the composition through



supporting evidence.

9&10.1.5 Synthesize information from multiple sources and identify complexities and discrepancies in the information and the different perspectives found in each medium.

9&10.2.3 Write expository compositions, including analytical essays and research reports:

- a. Marshal evidence in support of a thesis and related claims, including information on all relevant perspectives.
- b. Convey information and ideas from primary and secondary sources accurately and coherently.

11&12.1.3 Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained, persuasive, and sophisticated way and support them with precise and relevant examples.

11&12.1.6 Develop presentations by using clear research questions and creative and critical research strategies.

History—Social Science:

2.1.0 Students differentiate between things that happened long ago and things that happened yesterday. Trace the history of a family through the use of primary and secondary sources, including artifacts, photographs, interviews, and documents.

2.1.3 Compare and contrast their daily lives with those of their parents, grandparents, and/or guardians.

2.5.0 Students understand the importance of individual action and character and explain how heroes from long ago and the recent past have made a difference in others' lives.

3.3.0 Students draw from historical and community resources to organize the sequence of local historical events and describe how each period of settlement left its mark on the land.

3.3.3 Trace why their community was established, how individuals and families contributed to its founding and development, and how the community has changed over time, drawing on maps, photographs, oral histories, letters, newspapers, and other primary sources.

3.5.0 Students demonstrate basic economic reasoning skills and an understanding of the economy of the local region.

3.5.2 Describe the ways in which local producers have used and are using natural resources, human resources, and capital resources to produce goods and services in the past and the present.

4.1.0 Students demonstrate an understanding of the physical and human



geographic features that define places and regions in California.

- 4.1.3 Identify the state capital and describe the various regions of California, including how their characteristics and physical environments affect human activity.
- 4.1.5 Use maps, charts, and pictures to describe how communities in California vary in land use, vegetation, wildlife, climate, population density, architecture, services, and transportation.
- 4.4.0 Students explain how California became an agricultural and industrial power, tracing the transformation of the California economy and its political and cultural development since the 1850s.
- 4.4.4 Describe rapid American immigration, internal migration, settlement, and the growth of towns and cities (e.g., Los Angeles).
- 4.4.5 Discuss the effects of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and World War II on California.
- 4.4.9 Analyze the impact of twentieth-century Californians on the nation's artistic and cultural development, including the rise of the entertainment industry.
- 8.12.1 Discuss entrepreneurs, industrialists, and bankers in politics, commerce, and industry.
- 8.12.2 Examine the location and effects of urbanization, renewed immigration, and industrialization.
- 11.2.2 Describe the changing landscape, including the growth of cities linked by industry and trade, and the development of cities divided according to race, ethnicity, and class.
- 11.2.6 Trace the economic development of the United States and its emergence as a major industrial power, including its gains from trade and the advantages of its physical geography.
- 11.5.0 Students analyze the major political, social, economic, technological, and cultural developments of the 1920s.
- 11.5.3 Examine the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the Volstead Act (Prohibition).
- 11.5.6 Trace the growth and effects of radio and movies and their role in the worldwide diffusion of popular culture.
- 11.5.7 Discuss the rise of mass production techniques, the growth of cities, the impact of new technologies (e.g., the automobile, electricity), and the resulting prosperity and effect on the American landscape.
- 11.8.0 Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America.



- 11.8.8 Discuss forms of popular culture, with emphasis on their origins and geographic diffusion (e.g., jazz and other forms of popular music, professional sports, architectural and artistic styles).
- 12.3.0 Students evaluate and take and defend positions on what the fundamental values and principles of civil society are (i.e., the autonomous sphere of voluntary personal, social, and economic relations that are not part of government), their interdependence, and the meaning and importance of those values and principles for a free society.
- 12.3.2 Explain how civil society makes it possible for people, individually or in association with others, to bring their influence to bear on government in ways other than voting and elections.
- 12.6.4 Describe the means that citizens use to participate in the political process (e.g., voting, campaigning, lobbying, filing a legal challenge, demonstrating, petitioning, picketing, running for political office).



## Student Worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

The Ambassador Hotel opened in 1921 to great fanfare. An enormous, glamorous series of buildings set on nearly 24 acres, this luxury hotel provided visitors with access to everything they needed: restaurants, a nightclub, a swimming pool, hair salons, even a post office!

The Ambassador soon became a favorite spot for the rich and famous. Celebrities like Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Howard Hughes, and Marilyn Monroe came to stay. Six Academy Award ceremonies were held here. And the Coconut Grove, the Ambassador's fashionable nightclub, hosted many famous performers, including Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, and Barbara Streisand.

Tragedies also occurred at the Ambassador. In 1968, Senator Robert Kennedy, the brother of John F. Kennedy, visited the Ambassador to give a speech in the ballroom as part of his presidential campaign. As he walked through the kitchen afterwards, he was shot and killed.

Over the years, the rich and famous moved farther west along Wilshire to the luxury hotels in Beverly Hills. The Ambassador Hotel declined in popularity. Eventually, its doors closed in 1989.

After that, the fate of the Ambassador Hotel was uncertain. The Los Angeles Unified School District purchased the property and tore it down to build a new school. Many people believed that the Ambassador could have been preserved and adapted for schools, or used for other purposes. What do you think? Can you suggest ways that the Ambassador Hotel might have been reused—as a school or for something else?





## Work with Primary Sources

A *primary source* is an original document from a period in history. It can be a letter, a photograph, a diary entry, a newspaper article, even a movie clip or a sound recording! Primary sources give us valuable first-hand information about what life was like during different periods in history.

Take a close look at the primary sources on the pages that follow that relate to the Ambassador Hotel. Use the space below to take notes on the “clues” that you can gather.

Source #1. Ambassador advertisement from 1921:

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Source #2. Ambassador matchbook:

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Source #3. Entry in a guidebook published by the All-Year Club:

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Source #4. Swimming pool photograph:

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Source #5. Coconut Grove postcard:

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## Write Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is any made-up story that is based in historical fact. Use the information that you have gathered to write your own piece of historical fiction.

Imagine that you are a visitor to Los Angeles during the Ambassador's heyday. Write a letter to a friend describing your stay at this incredible hotel. Be sure to use specific facts and details to make your letter historically accurate and believable. Here are some guiding questions to get you started:

- What does the hotel look like?
- What activities can you do there?
- What celebrities have you spotted?
- What do you do for fun in the evenings?
- How much does your stay cost?



*The Ambassador Los Angeles  
Midway Between Sierras and Pacific*

BUILT within its own private park of twenty-one acres, The Ambassador, Southern California's newest and most distinctive hotel, crowns a rolling mesa in the very heart of the beautiful residential district of Los Angeles—a veritable castle in Spain come true. Every room frames a glorious picture of the Sierras, and the tang of the Pacific nearby assures wondrous nights of peaceful sleep. Within a few minutes ride is the Ambassador's splendid 18-hole golf course and country club occupying 187 acres, and on the spacious grounds of the hotel are a riding academy and tennis courts, while within are bowling alleys, a billiard room, theatre and other diversions for guests. All this is enhanced by the individualized service, cuisine, sumptuous furnishings and delightful hospitality which distinguishes and has made famous

**The Ambassador Hotels System**

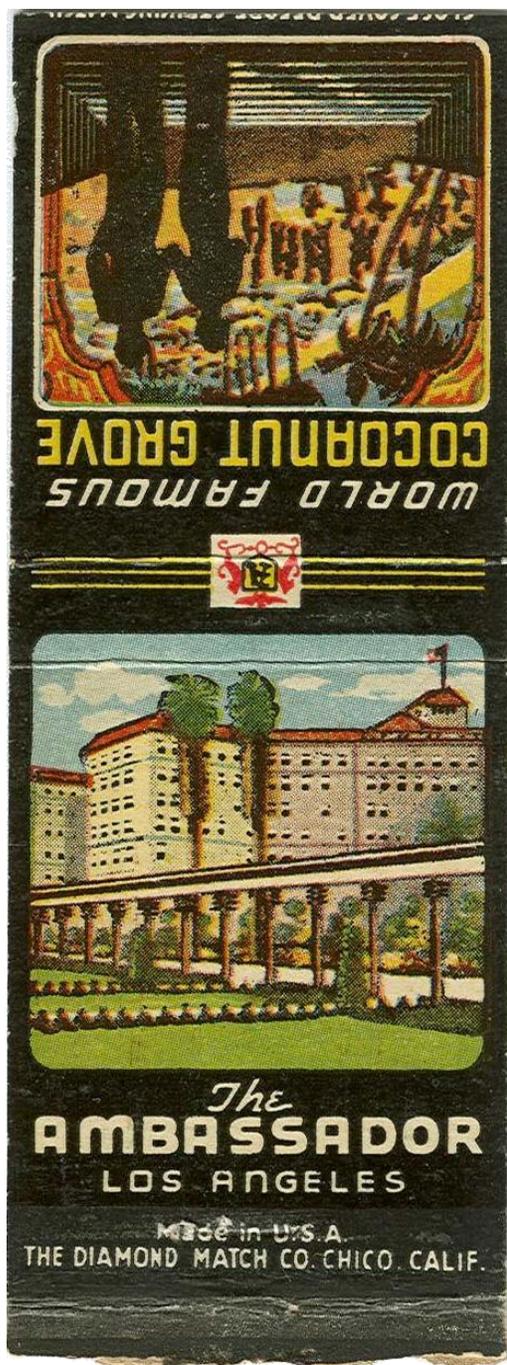
THE AMBASSADOR, *Santa Barbara*  
 THE ALEXANDRIA, *Los Angeles*  
 THE AMBASSADOR, *Los Angeles*  
 THE AMBASSADOR, *New York*  
 THE AMBASSADOR, *Atlantic City*

Delightful bungalows. American and European plan. Moderate tariff.

**The AMBASSADOR**  
*Santa Barbara*

Here, where it's always June, you will find a delightful atmosphere of ease in an old-world setting—a bit of Spain set down between the mountains and the sea.

Source #1. Ambassador advertisement from 1921  
(Tom Zimmerman Collection)



Source #2. Ambassador matchbook  
(Tom Zimmerman Collection)



# Los Angeles

## THE AMBASSADOR

3400 Wilshire Boulevard

### EUROPEAN PLAN

**One Person — without bath: 3.00 and up; with bath: \$5.00 and up.  
Two Persons — without bath: \$5.00 and up; with bath: \$7.00 and up.**  
No hotel in the world offers more varied social and entertainment features than the Los Angeles Ambassador, situated in its own 22-acre park in the heart of the fashionable Wilshire district. Attractions include a new sun-tan bathing beach with outdoor plunge and complete recreational center, including baths of all kinds, massage and physical conditioning for men and women. All sports, 18-hole Rancho Golf Club, 19-hole Pitch and Putt Golf Course, Tennis Courts, Archery, all-talking Motion Picture Theatre, 35 smart shops and the incomparable "Cocoanut Grove" for dancing nightly.



Source #3. Entry from guidebook published by the All-Year Club  
(Tom Zimmerman Collection)



Source #4. Swimming pool photograph  
(Photo by Maynard Parker. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA)



Source #5. Cocoanut Grove postcard  
(Los Angeles Conservancy Archives)