
Thoughts on the Naming of a Park

The two emails reproduced here are from a recent digital conversation with Rasheed Shabazz about the original name and current renaming of the former “Jackson Park.” He initiated the exchange by reaching out to me (on Sept 29) with questions about the name “Alameda Park.” I have also been following online commentary concerning this name. Since some comments make reference to the *Park Avenue Heritage Area* (1988) and *Alameda at Play* (2001), my history of the park system commissioned by the Alameda Recreation and Park Department, I felt compelled to provide some clarification.

I asked my correspondent if he would consent to posting our exchange online, but his conditions were such that I decided to go ahead and post my emails alone. Thus his emails—his half of the dialogue—are not included here. My texts are pasted into this document exactly as written, with the following exceptions: greetings and signoffs are deleted; one instance in which I quote my correspondent is redacted [*like this*]; and typos have been corrected. Graphic changes have also been made to fonts, line spacing, and paragraph formatting for readability and consistency. The attached black-and-white Sanborn maps (1897 and 1948) have headings not found in the original transmission. The 1987 Sanborn maps have been omitted because they are redundant; the park names on those maps are the same as those on the 1948 maps. Examples of full-color Sanborn maps (including the 1897 Alameda maps) are available online.

Anyone interested in this issue should check out the recording of the community forum held on November 23, which can be accessed on the ARPD website. I post this document not as an advocate for the “Alameda Park” name, which will become clear as you read on, but as a historian offering his perspective.

—Woody Minor

29 November 2020

6 October 2020

I went through my old files on Jackson Park and came up with some items that may help clarify the naming history. Let me begin by recounting a bit of the historical backdrop.

As you know from the history in *Alameda at Play*, the park's name derived from the 1867 Alameda Park tract, which in turn derived its name from Alameda Park, opened by the San Francisco & Alameda Railroad in 1865. This was the city's first resort, giving birth to a dynamic and long-lasting tradition. It was also the first major development in the vicinity of the main train station, at Park and Lincoln, and as such marked the beginning of the modern city, that is, the post-gold rush, rail-oriented, suburban city. Park Street derived its name from the resort as did Park Avenue.

The resort included a hotel north of Central Avenue and 60 wooded acres south of Central to the bay. The hotel became an insane asylum in 1867 and burned in 1871; its redeveloped site is not discernible today. The wooded acreage was subdivided by railroad directors in 1867 as the Alameda Park tract, which included an oval green for the use of the homeowners. The tract was renamed Alameda Park Homestead in 1874 under new owners. When the oval became a city-owned park, perpetuating the original layout and name, the new public park preserved an important piece of Alameda's earliest rail-era rebirth.

That said, let me note some items I came across wherein the name "Alameda Park" seems to have been applied formally to (or identified with) the new public park, as it came into being in the years 1889-1894, to wit:

[1] Ordinance No. 109 [17 June 1889] - "Determining that certain land in the City of Alameda, known as Alameda Park, is necessary for a public park, and directing that proceedings be instituted to condemn the same."

[2] “Alameda Park: Our Trustees Seem to Favor Its Improvement” [*Alameda Argus*, 16 Aug 1889]. “At the close of the meeting of the Board of City Trustees, Monday evening, Trustee Hammond desired some information as to the program of gaining title to Alameda Park ... Mr Hammond thought that ‘if we are to beautify Alameda Park, we ought to get at it.’”

[3] Ordinance No. 165 [25 May 1891] - “Defining width and location of roadways of Park Avenue around Alameda Park.”

[4] “Alameda Park: Further Legal Action Necessary to Secure It” [*Alameda Argus*, 8 March 1893]. “While Alameda has become noted for its beautiful homes and park-like appearance, it has never had a park which it could call its own and point to with the finger of pride.”

[5] “To Improve the Park: Plans Adopted for the Desirable Improvement” [*Alameda Argus*, 2 Dec 1893] - “The Board of Trustees met last night to consider ... several plans for the beautification of Alameda Park ...”

[6] “Now Has a Park: City Attorney’s Good News to the Trustees: Review of the Litigation Concerning Alameda Park” [*Alameda Argus*, 12 June 1894] - “In the action City of Alameda vs. EB Mastick, Trustee, et al., judgment has been rendered in favor the city condemning Alameda Park for public use, as a public park, without damages.”

I hope this information proves helpful in the city’s deliberations. While it is true that prior to 1909 Alameda Park was sometimes referred to informally in newspaper articles as “the city park” or simply “the park,” since there was no other, it seems evident from the record that the private park’s historic name morphed naturally into the public park’s official name. I for one would like to see the park’s name revert to “Alameda Park,” invoking not only the origins of the park but of the entire resort tradition and of the modern city itself.

12 November 2020

I intended to write sooner but the complexity of the issues gave me pause, leading to a fair amount of reflection, and then I got caught up in the national election. 😊 Since the “Creating Our Future” event is happening this weekend, I want to get this to you without further delay. As before, please forward this email to ARPD staff et al in the loop.

I would like to start with the “Alameda Park” name and then move on to broader issues. I was startled by your assertion, in your last email, that [redacted]. How can you be so sure? Have you followed every path to its source? I persist in seeing the original naming process as somewhat shrouded, though the likelihood is “Alameda Park” was the first official name.

The most compelling piece of new evidence for the “Alameda Park” name was so obvious that I failed to see it. I’m referring to the nomenclature found in the local Sanborn maps. As you know, these maps were prepared by the Sanborn-Perris Map Co of New York under contract with municipalities for fire insurance purposes. The survey crews worked closely with local officials, property owners, businesses, and organizations to ensure accuracy. In addition to meticulously measured footprints of structures, the maps include precise names for business, churches, and public facilities like schools, libraries, and parks. The maps are authoritative sources for urban historians tracking the evolution of the built environment and its nomenclature.

The 1897 Alameda Sanborn—the oldest edition in the Library of Congress collection—clearly identifies the park as “Alameda Park.” Since Sanborn maps do not include tract names or “unofficial” popular names in their labeling of buildings and places, this would indicate that the official name at the outset was “Alameda Park.” Occasionally surveyors missed something or failed to update a name. Thus, as you can see in the attached maps, the park is identified as “Alameda Park” on both sheets in 1897 and as “Jackson Park” on one sheet in 1948. The name as it appears on the 1897

map cannot be an anachronism, however, since that first map was the baseline for all that followed. The most recent maps (1987) are also included to show how the maps look in color, with the colors referring to structural systems. The 1897 and 1948 maps included here are black-and-white pdfs of the original color maps.

Moving on to the current process of renaming the park, I believe the complexity of the issue calls for a nuanced, multi-layered approach. As you noted in your last email, interpretive plaques would be helpful. Whatever the name ends up being, I see three narratives at work, each warranting an interpretive plaque. (The other day I took a walk in the park and noted that the three east-facing sides of the bandstand would make ideal backdrops for three standing plaques mounted on posts.) These narratives are informed by intensive research over the past several years as I have delved into the “deep history” of Alameda, trying to grasp its natural and human dimensions over many millennia.

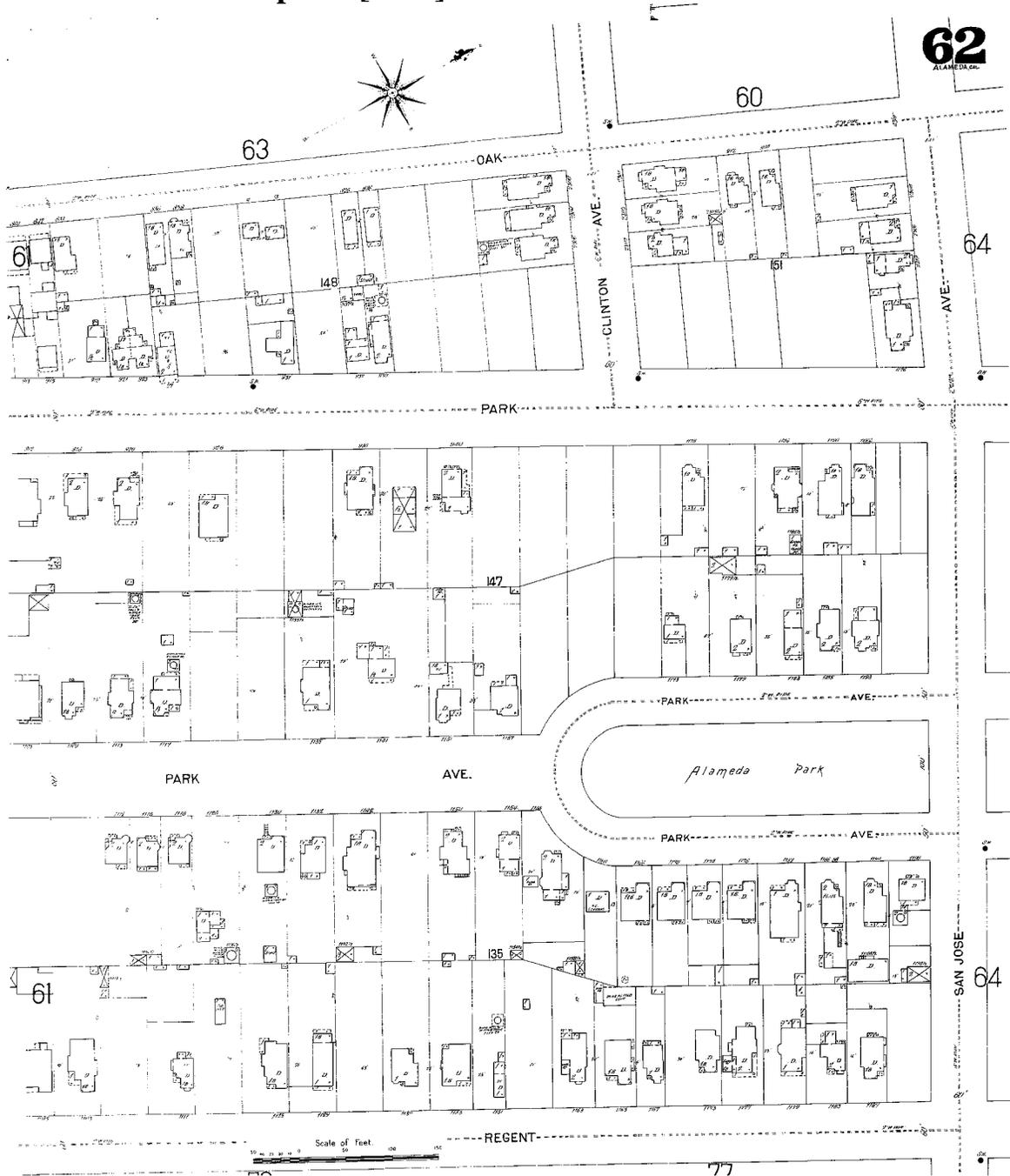
[1] The ancestral Diaspora out of Africa some 100,000 years ago into Europe, Asia, and the Americas, the likely settlement of California some 15,000 years ago at the close of the last Ice Age, and the likely continuous habitation of the place we now call Alameda for at least 7,500 years by the descendents of the original migrants and by later migrants. The natural history of the place since the last Ice Age could be summarized, e.g., the establishment of the oak forest and the creation of the peninsula as sea levels rose. It was a fine place for people to live, quite beautiful, with food and freshwater at hand.

[2] The counter-narrative out of Africa, addressing the brutal irony of slavers regarding the human homeland as a hunting ground for people brought to America against their will and treated as property. And the other counter-narrative in America, wherein the ancient inhabitants, the First People, were killed by germs and guns and then corralled, their land appropriated. Andrew Jackson’s military and political career is embedded in this narrative. In California, it began decades earlier with the Spanish.

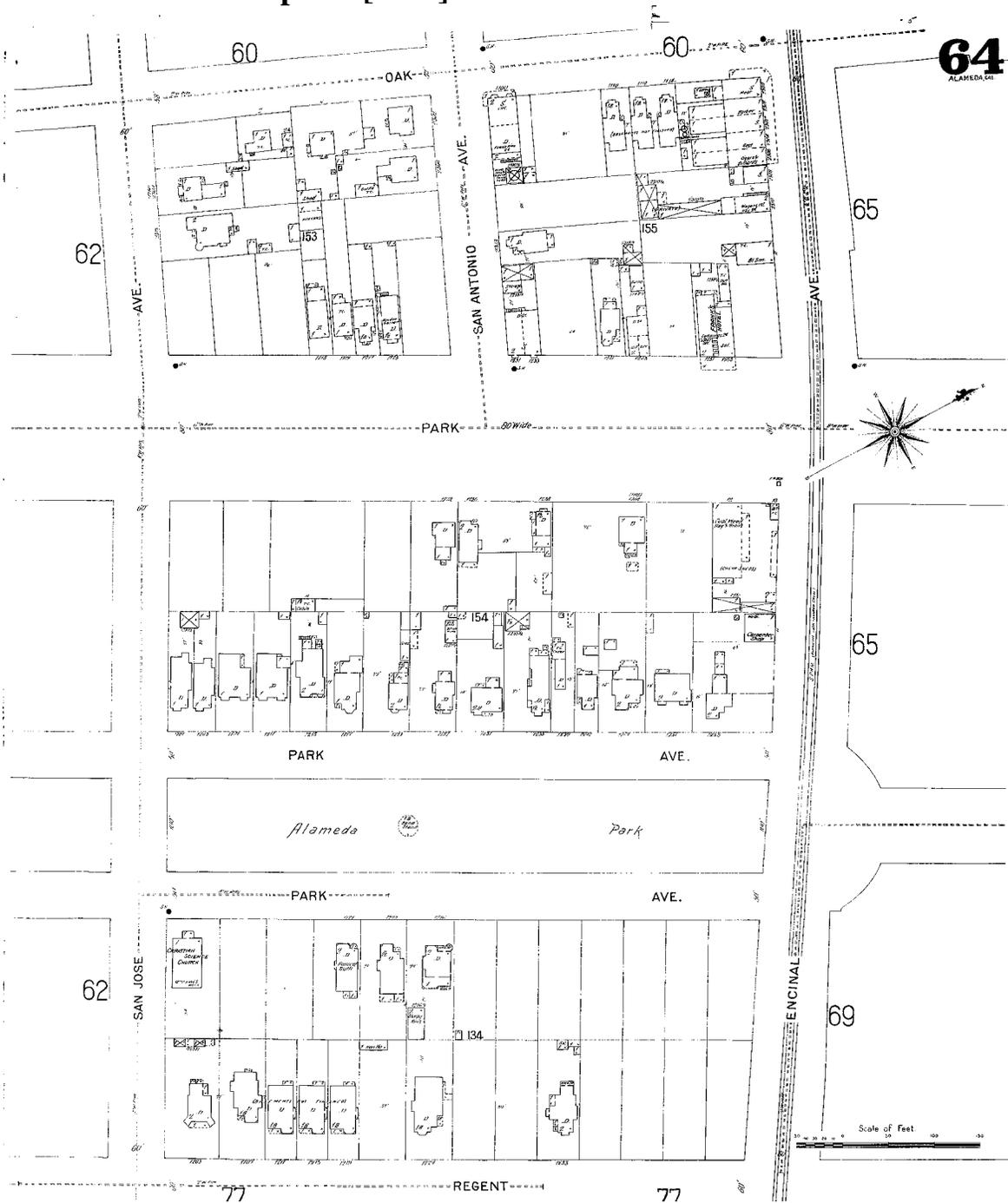
[3] Finally, the place called Alameda—the modern city—from its settlement during the gold rush to the advent of rail and the consequent creation of the Alameda Park resort and the Alameda Park tract. How did the public park come into being, how was it named, and why was it renamed to honor Jackson? The local narrative provides an important balance to the global, national, and regional narratives, returning the plaque-reader to a particular place in time—perhaps with a better understanding of a California city whose history accounts for roughly one percent of the total time people have lived here.

I always thought it a shame the park commissioners renamed the park back in 1909. They should have left it alone. To have the name revert to “Alameda Park” at this point makes sense from the perspective of the third narrative. In the context of the first and second narratives, however, other names come to mind. I wonder if there’s one out there that might resonate with all three narratives.

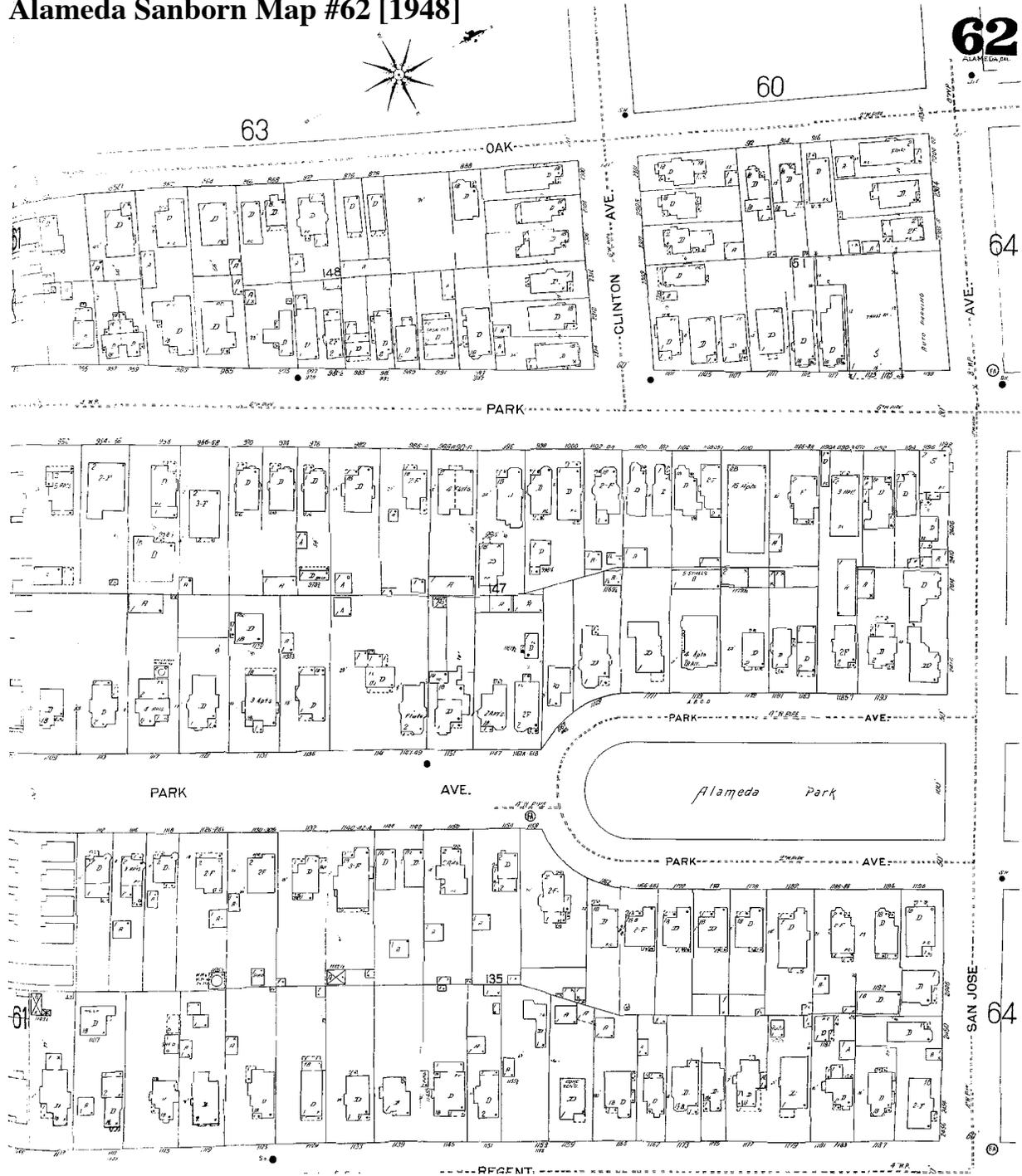
Alameda Sanborn Map #62 [1897]



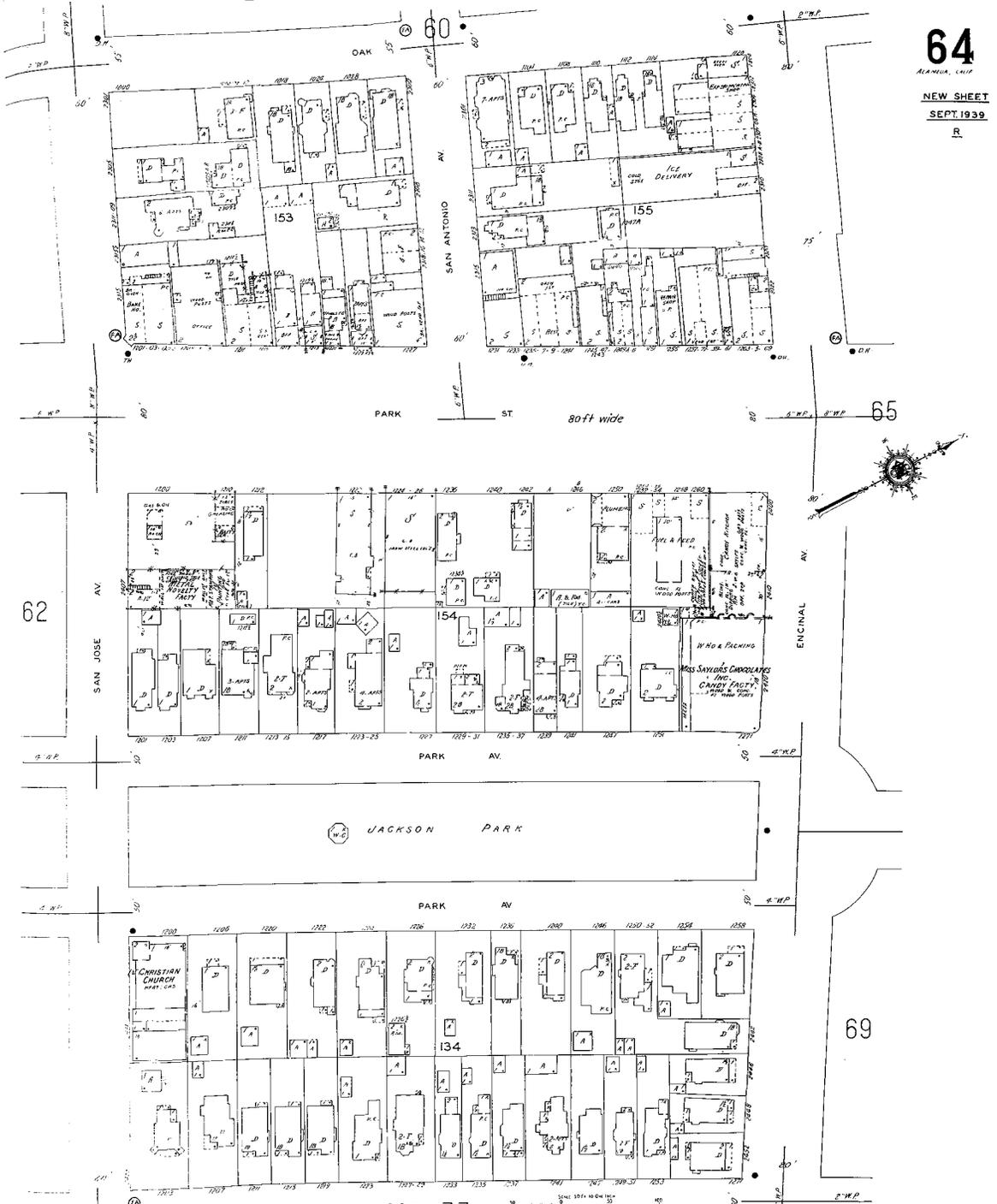
Alameda Sanborn Map #64 [1897]



Alameda Sanborn Map #62 [1948]



Alameda Sanborn Map #64 [1948]



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 ALAMEDA, CALIF.
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