

The History of the Pedestrian Tunnel System

The pedestrian tunnels surrounding the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park are part of a historic system of pedestrian access that have allowed park visitors to walk throughout the Park without confronting the city traffic that fills its roadways. The oldest remaining pedestrian underpass in Golden Gate Park was constructed in 1889 on the eastern edge of the Park near Alvord Lake and was the design of engineer Ernest Lesley Ransome. Using his new invention of twisted square reinforcing steel bars, this structure is recognized by the American Society of Civil Engineers as the first steel reinforced concrete bridge in the United States.

To separate pedestrians from Middle Drive, a steel suspension bridge built by J. A. Roeblings and Sons was constructed in 1891 and the tunnel under JFK, or the Main Road, serving the Conservatory of Flowers. Roeblings and Sons were the design firm that created the Brooklyn Bridge. In the early 1920's the suspension bridge fell into disrepair and was replaced by the current tunnel passing under Middle Drive at the tennis courts.

After the conclusion of the Mid-Winters Fair in 1894, work began to convert the Court of Honor for the fair into what is now the Music Concourse. In 1896 pedestrian tunnels were added under JFK at 9th Ave. An article in the February 6th, 1896 Examiner quoted Superintendent John McLaren;

“You see, when we have the band stand located in this section of the Park there will naturally be a great many people here during concert days. Of course the teams (carriages) will take up the main drive, just as much as they do at present. It would be out of the question they have only the one inlet to the bandstand. If the people had to cross the main drive there would certainly be a great many accidents, owing to the number of teams and wheelmen (bicyclists). When the tunnels are complete, pedestrians can walk under the main drive without any fear or disturbance whatever and reach the music place in perfect safety.”

The 31st Annual Report of the Park commission noted; “The increase attendance at the concerts in Concert Valley necessitated the building of a concrete subway at the southwest corner of the Music Court. The walls are 2 feet thick at the base, tapering to 8 inches at the crown.” . . . “another concrete subway or tunnel of similar dimensions was constructed . . . to provide a safe and convenient means of entrance and exit for pedestrians from the north side of the Park.”

After the completion of the Polo Field in 1906, or Park Stadium as it was known, tunnels were added under the horse track on the north and south sides. In 1936, when Crossover Drive was cut across the Park, a bridge was added over JFK to serve both pedestrians and roadway traffic. One additional bridge was replaced near the Beach Chalet at the far west end under JFK. This right of way had originally served the Park and Ocean Railroad, which ran from Geary Blvd. to the Ocean Beach from 1883 until the early 1900's. Today it is a pedestrian path.

The Golden Gate Park Master Plan notes; “The Park is designed and managed to afford opportunities for all to experience beauty and tranquility, recreation, and relief from urban pressures.” The pedestrian tunnel system has afforded park users just such relief for over 100 years.