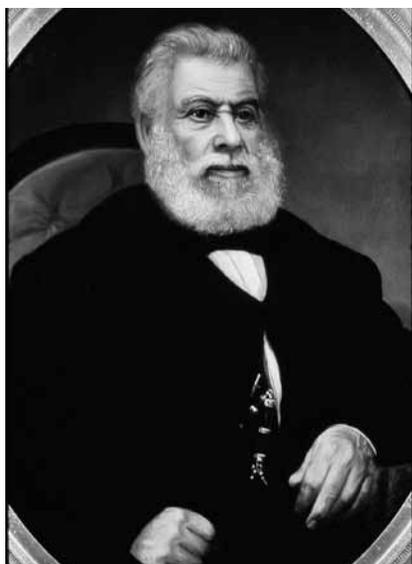


The Origins of Balboa Park: A Prelude to the 1915 Exposition

By

Iris Engstrand

A significant key to San Diego's development has been its Spanish legal heritage—not because of its mission, presidio, or ranchos, but because of its pueblo lands.¹ When San Diego's Chamber of Commerce was formed by a small group of citizens in January 1870, it could point with pride to some eleven square leagues or 47,324 acres of municipally-owned lands—its inheritance from Spain's practice of preserving ample lands for city purposes and the common benefit of all settlers. Fortunately, certain Old Town residents and the Chamber's first treasurer, Alonzo Horton, promoter of San Diego's New Town, knew what they had. With a farsightedness hardly equaled by today's most ardent planners, they set aside 1,400 acres for a public park.²

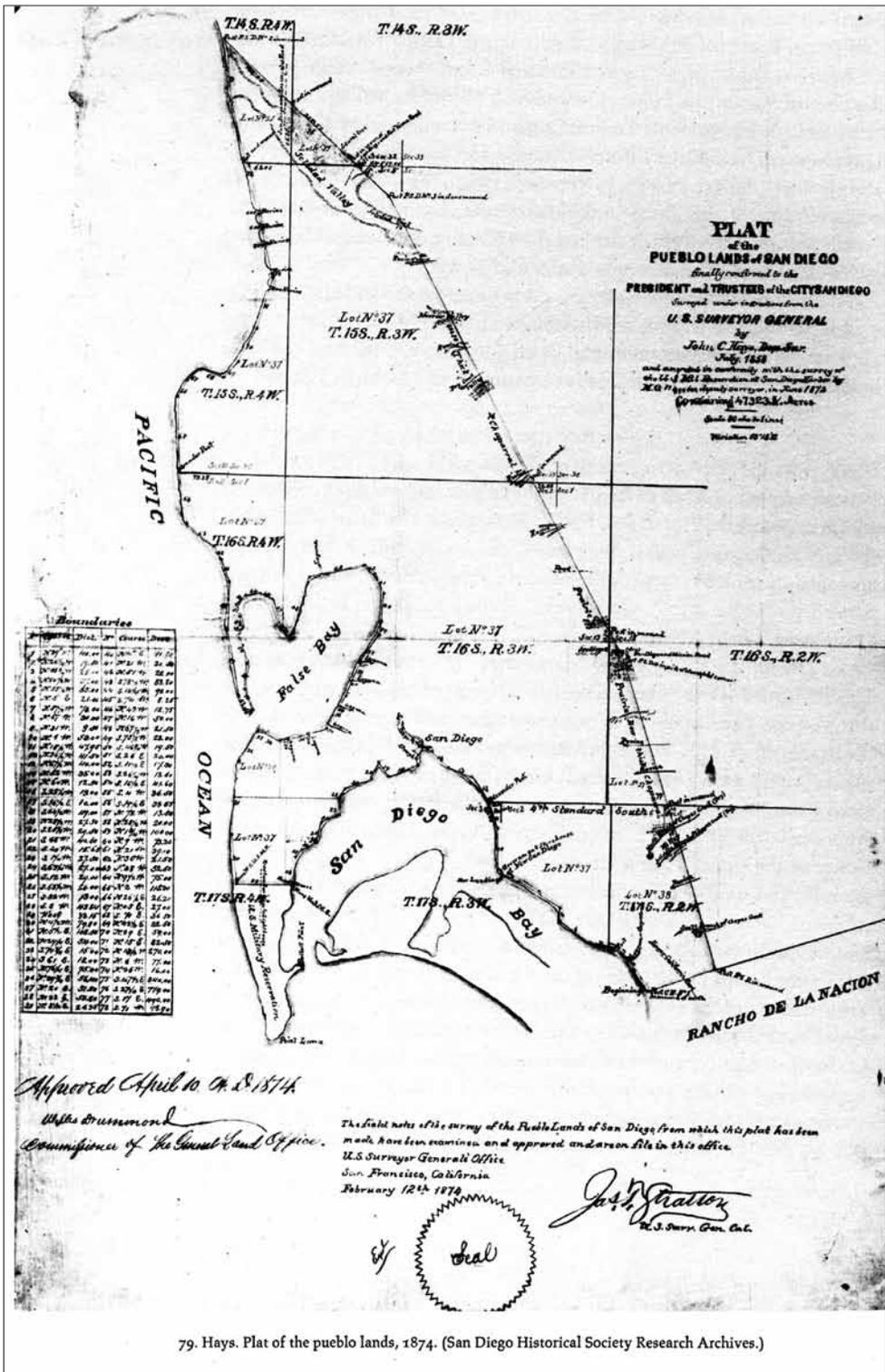


*Pio Pico, Last Mexican Governor of California.
Photo courtesy Natural History Museum of Los
Angeles County.*

San Diego Becomes a Pueblo

San Diego was established as a military post in May 1769 and as a mission on July 16, 1769. It received official status as a presidio on January 1, 1774, and the mission was moved six miles inland in December of that year. San Diego remained a part of the Spanish empire until Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821.³ It replaced Monterey as the Mexican capital of the combined provinces of Baja and Alta California from 1825 to 1833, when those from the northern area renewed their efforts to regain their former status. San Diegans fought to keep the capital in the south, but as political fortunes vacillated between centralists and federalists

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79. Hays. Plat of the pueblo lands, 1874. (San Diego Historical Society Research Archives.)



Family of Henry Delano Fitch and Josefa Carrillo.
Author's collection.

Osuna, first *alcalde* (mayor); Juan Bautista Alvarado and Juan María Marrón, councilmen, and Henry Delano Fitch, city attorney. They were installed by presidio commandant Santiago Argüello who agreed to supply Osuna with an inventory of documents in the archives of San Diego. Henry Fitch, who had married Josefa Carrillo of the prominent Carrillo family, drew the map outlining the lands that belonged to the newly formed Pueblo. According to the Laws of the Indies, pueblos were generally allotted 4 square leagues or approximately 17,740 acres. Fitch's boundaries extended well beyond that, including today's Torrey Pines reserve, but no government official challenged his accuracy.⁶

Horton's Addition

Alonzo Horton, who arrived by steamship from San Francisco on April 15, 1867, made his famous downtown land purchase of 960 acres the next month on May 10. He first talked about the idea of a public park later that year when he asked trustees Joseph S. Mannassee, Thomas H. Bush and Ephraim Morse to consider two 160-acre

in Mexico, repercussions were felt in California.⁴

San Diego resident Pío Pico and others supported southern Californian Carlos Carrillo for governor, and Pico himself actually served twenty days in the post in 1832. Nevertheless, the southern group lost. When Brigadier General José Figueroa arrived as governor of California in January 1833, the capital was officially returned to Monterey. Residents of San Diego—then numbering 432—appealed to the legislature assembled there that San Diego be granted official *pueblo* or town status, complete with municipal officers.⁵

Approval of a new civilian government was granted on June 4, 1834, and put into effect on January 1, 1835. Elected officials were Juan María



Alonzo Horton ca. 1867. ©SDHC #3517.



José Guadalupe Estudillo. Author's collection.

tracts as park sites. Some thought a 320-acre park more than sufficient for a town of 2,310 people. Later, when Morse, along with Horton, actually looked at the vacant, brush-covered land and realized that the city had some 40,000 acres (190 km²) available, they agreed that they should reserve nine tracts or 1,440 acres (5.7 km²). Morse suggested the land bounded by Sixth, 28th, Ash and Upas.⁷

Before the final resolution was passed by new trustees, José Guadalupe Estudillo, Marcus Schiller, and Joshua Sloane in May 1868, 40 acres to the south (lot 1144) between Ash and Date were sold to Isabella Carruthers, wife of Mannassee's lumberyard manager Matthew Carruthers, for \$175 on February 13, 1868.⁸ Strenuous attempts were made to reduce the amount of park land, but trustees Estudillo, Bush, and Morse, joined by James McCoy and Matthew Sherman, requested that the state legislature approve the transfer of nine lots east of Horton's Addition to be set aside for park purposes. According to Neal Harlow, "on August 29, 1868, a newly elected board reserved lots 1129, 1130, 1131, 1135, 1136, 1137, 1142, 1143, and what was left of 1144."⁹

The California legislature confirmed the plan

effective February 4, 1870, the properties to be held in trust forever for "a free and public park... and for no other or different purpose."¹⁰ As Roger Showley pointed out, "Unlike New York, which bought \$5 million worth of land in the 1850s on which to build Central Park, San Diego got what at first was called "City Park" for free."¹¹

City Park As Open Space

The final amended federal survey of San Diego's pueblo grant was not completed until 1872, but the 47,324 acres of the Fitch survey was confirmed by the United States in 1874.¹² Eighteen years later, in 1890, 83 percent of the land was gone, having been conveyed by the city to private interests. The park (a portion of the 8,000 acres still owned by the city) remained a wilderness area covered by dense chaparral and a few patches of yellow, white and blue flowers of wild adenostema, sagebrush, Spanish violets, shooting stars,



Joseph Mannassee. ©SDHC #17621.



64. Pascoe. Lands of the San Diego Property Union, [1870?]. [The Bancroft Library.]

Map showing City Park, 1870. The Bancroft Library, Berkeley.



Cabrillo Canyon looking south toward downtown, ca. 1910. ©SDHC #1560.



Balboa Park open land before development, ca. 1911. ©SDHC #91: 18564-2552.



Balboa Park undeveloped land before Exposition groundbreaking, ca. 1912. ©SDHC OP #10614.



Ephraim W. Morse. ©SDHC #3514.

mimulus and white popcorn.¹³

From 1868 to 1889 the park essentially remained as unoccupied open space although certain inroads were made. A water company was organized in 1873 that drilled a well at Palm Canyon and tapped into a subterranean stream to produce 54,000 gallons of water per hour. Two reservoirs were constructed and an animal pound was located in Palm Canyon to house stray horses and cattle that were caught wandering through city streets. Some building included Russ High School (later San Diego High School) and an orphanage.

According to local historian Gregory E. Montes, contemporary accounts of those involved in park development indicate that Ephraim W. Morse was

apparently the most important person and, in fact, could be named as the founder of City Park, although the roles of the other key figures cannot be totally verified nor discounted. Morse, a native of Massachusetts, left Boston in 1849 for the California gold mines and came to San Diego in 1850. In addition to his service as a City Trustee in 1866-68, he was a merchant and realtor, helping to arrange the Horton land sale.¹⁴

Early park benefactor George W. Marston wrote "... it was Morse's brain and heart that conceived the park" and to counteract the claim by some that Alonzo Horton was the actual founder, Marston wrote that "Morse was much more interested in plants and gardening than was Horton. Morse later gave equal if not superior credit to Horton in the park founding even though others said that Morse had been the main proponent.¹⁵ Nevertheless, all those involved in the park's establishment, including Horton, Estudillo, and the others, deserve credit for having the foresight to set aside 1,400 acres as a public park.

Efforts were made to plant flowers and trees but little was well organized until Kate Sessions, often referred to as the "Mother of Balboa Park," leased 30 acres of the park land in the



Kate Sessions, ca. 1897. ©SDHC #98: 19763-1.

area of Sixth and Upas. She agreed to plant 100 trees each year in lieu of rent.

By the turn of the century, city pioneers such as George Marston, Julius Wangerheim, G. Aubrey Davidson, and others including Mary Coulston, former editor of *Garden and Forest* magazine, proposed a number of plans for park development.¹⁴ These would culminate in a concentrated effort to have as beautiful a park as possible, and provided the opportunity for San Diego to host the Panama-California Exposition in 1915-1916.

NOTES

1. See Iris Engstrand, "The Legal Heritage of Spanish California," *Southern California Quarterly*, 75 (Fall/Winter 1993): 205-236.
2. Iris Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1980, 47; rev. edition [San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005]), 90. The sometimes forgotten founder of New Town was William Heath Davis who first subdivided lots fronting on San Diego harbor in 1850. Alonzo Horton, a true Yankee who arrived in 1867, was born in Connecticut and grew up in New York. See Elizabeth MacPhail, *The Story of New San Diego and of its Founder Alonzo E. Horton*, 2nd ed. revised (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1979).
3. Engstrand, *San Diego*, rev. ed., 2005, 43-56.
4. For a complete look at San Diego's pueblo founding and status see Clare B. Crane, "The Pueblo Lands: San Diego's Hispanic Heritage," *The Journal of San Diego History (JSDH)*, 37 (Spring 1991): 104-127; Lucy Killea, "The Political History of a Mexican Pueblo," *JSDH*, 12 (July 1966): 5-35 and Engstrand, *San Diego*, rev. ed., 57-62.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Florence Christman, *The Romance of Balboa Park*, 4th edition rev. San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1988; Gregory Montes, "San Diego's City Park, 1868-1902: an Early Debate on Environment and Profit," *JSDH*, 23 (Spring 1977): 40-59; Roger Showley, *Balboa Park: A Millennium History* (Carlsbad: Heritage Media Corp., 1999); and Richard Amero, *History of Balboa Park*, at <http://www.balboaparkhistory.net/>.
8. Showley, *A Millennium History*, 17. This property is now the site of the El Cortez Apartment Hotel on an area known as Cortez Hill.
9. Neal Harlow, *Maps of the Pueblo Lands of San Diego, 1602-1874* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1987), 47.
10. Harlow, *Pueblo Lands*, 47, citing City Park, the Trustees action, *Proceedings*, Feb. 15, 1868, Aug. 29, 1868. Legislative approval, *California Statutes*, 18th sess., 1869-1870, 92: 49.
11. Showley, *A Millennium History*, 16.
12. Harlow, *Pueblo Lands*, Map 7.
13. Engstrand, *San Diego*, 90-91.
14. Montes, "San Diego's City Park, 1868-1902," *JSDH*, 23 (Spring 1977): 43.
15. Montes quoting Mary Gilman Marston, *George White Marston: A Family Chronicle*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Pres, 1956), vol. 2, 10.
16. Christman, *Romance of Balboa Park*, 16-18.