

Placing the Past in the Present: The Creation of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

by Matthew G. Schiff

Old Town State Historic Park, dubbed the “Birthplace of California,” recreates for its visitors San Diego’s Mexican and early-American period from 1821 to 1872. Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 marks the beginning of this period when a small village sprang up at the base of what is today Presidio Hill, just below the original Spanish presidio.¹ In 1872 a fire damaged several buildings in what



Entrance to Old Town San Diego State Historic Park. Photo by Matthew Schiff.

is today considered the area of Old Town—the main center of commerce and government in the settlement that went from a Spanish missionary and military outpost to small American city in just over fifty years—prompting the relocation of county and city records south to Alonzo Horton’s “New Town.”² This story of San

Diego’s birth is told to several million people each year through reconstruction and preservation of various period buildings as well as the re-enactments of individuals. It provides a glimpse at the social landscape during a time of transition between the Mexican and early American time periods. But Old Town San Diego State Historic Park can tell us something of the time period in which it

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James R. Mills, author of The Gospel According to Pontius Pilate ©SDHC #OP 17133-1783.

was created as well, and that story is just as compelling.

Research for this topic repeatedly led to one person, Senator James R. Mills.³ At Old Town's conception as a park, Mills was assemblyman for the 79th district that included downtown San Diego, North Park, and East San Diego. Because of his abiding love for making history available to everyone, he was considered by other local legislators to be the best person to push the passage of a particular bond issue. Mills stated:

In 1964 a measure had been put on the ballot at the request of the State Division of Beaches and Parks, under the Pat Brown administration, for a major bond issue to finance park development and acquisition. California was expanding its park system at this time and was planning to use tax-payer funds to finance it. California too it seems was beginning to realize the opportunities that existed by targeting the American tourist. The Pat Brown administration went to most of the members of the Legislature, and asked them to introduce resolutions calling for a study of a new state park, or expansion of the state park within their areas. So they came to me—they knew that I'd been the curator of the Junípero Serra Museum in Old Town—and they thought I would be a good person to put in that resolution to create a state park with bond funds in Old Town to preserve that part of San Diego that existed from Mexican times to now; at least elements of it.⁴

The idea was to sell this idea to voters by writing the measure in such a way that they would look at the resolution and consider the benefits that this project would bring to the region: state funds, tourist dollars and civic pride. Essentially it was "a piece of promotion for the bond issue," as Mills pointed out, and was presented to voters as such. Many resolutions were also submitted for sites throughout California at this time. Mills introduced the resolution in his district, suggesting that the



James R. Mills, Curator, (left) with Jerry MacMullen, Director of the Serra Museum. c. 1956. ©SDHC # 12504-1.



George Romney with Clair Burgener (left) and Hale Ashcraft (right) 1965 ©SDHC #UT 85:e9012.

site should be for Old Town San Diego. It passed along with others throughout the state. Of note also is that another San Diego area assemblyman, Hale Ashcraft, submitted his recommendation, which passed, for expansion of Torrey Pines State Park in his assembly district. Those two resolutions represented the only ones submitted from San Diego County.

According to Mills, once the resolution passed and before any monies could be appropriated, the administration had the burden of submitting results of the due diligence they conducted on all of the

sites that passed. The idea was to ensure that the acquisition of property and everything that went into creating or expanding a state park would be financially feasible. Those findings would then be submitted to a subcommittee of the state's Ways & Means committee, the entity that approves government expenditures. The Brown administration had "about thirty or so" proposed site recommendations and submitted them to this subcommittee. Neither Old Town nor Torrey Pines were on the list.

During the conceptualization process, there were certain conditions without which the creation of Old Town State Park would have been impossible. Both Mills and Ashcraft, as luck would have it, sat on the subcommittee that was going to evaluate which sites showed the most promise and eventually appropriated the funds for them. Moreover, the chair of the committee was a person Mills called, "a good friend of mine, John Williamson."⁵ Upon receiving the site recommendation from the Brown Administration and seeing that their sites had not even been considered, Mills and Ashcraft "raised hell about it."⁶ Once the resolutions passed in the legislature, the Brown administration was supposed to provide a full consideration of each site. But that didn't happen. Rather than investigate every site approved by



Old Town plans for historic park 1968. William Penn Mott Jr., (right) Director of California State Department of Parks and Recreation and Robert Kesler (left) president of the Old Town Chamber of Commerce, March 28, 1968. ©SDHC #UT 85:g8265-4.

the voters, they had only conducted feasibility studies on a sample of them and in doing so had failed to consider Old Town San Diego as well as others throughout the state.

Sitting at the junction of his own proposed project and the committee that appropriated the funds, Mills wielded considerable power. He reminded the administration that they “were supposed to consider all of the sites in the resolution and provide full disclosure of how and why projects were feasible or not



William Penn Mott Jr., (right) and Robert Kesler (left) look at the proposed Old Town park, March 28, 1968. ©SDHC #UT 85:g8265.

and to leave it to the subcommittee to decide” and that “appropriation of the funds would not be completed until the following year anyways.”⁸ Jockeying for position, the administration countered by claiming that, “it would be cheaper to act on certain projects this year due to rising costs.”⁹ That claim made by the administration, however, went against the subcommittee’s policy by not leaving the final “yay” or “nay” votes to them. Mills claimed that without all of the data necessary, they would not be able to make financial decisions and therefore would not approve any of the projects on the list. The Brown administration “got hysterical” about having to resurvey the sites but this worked out to be another specific condition that allowed for the creation of the park.

During this time, Mills was able to solicit the City of San Diego to “contribute to the acquisition of the plan for the state park.”¹⁰ Going before the city council after the bond issue was approved in November 1964, Mills asked the city to contribute funds and property to supplement the budgetary shortfall the project was experiencing. He stated that “it is important for San Diegans to remember our heritage, important for us to preserve our heritage, and then in addition I said, ‘this will be a major tourist attraction, this will attract people, this will be a good thing for tourism, tourism is an important source of income for San Diego.’”¹¹ Before even going to the San Diego City Council, however, Mills had first approached the San Diego Chamber of Commerce asking them for their support of the project. The City of San Diego was in favor, since it would increase city revenue in the form of occupancy and sales tax receipts.

As one can imagine, the chamber was also enthusiastic at the prospect of bringing in new businesses into its network. Lucille Mortimer, a staff member with the chamber who was on the board to consider whether or not this issue



Homes were removed from Congress and Mason Streets in 1968.
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was viable also voiced her enthusiasm. According to Mills, Mortimer “thought it was a great idea and single-handedly persuaded the board to go along with the proposal and asked them to submit it to the city council with full support of the Greater San Diego Chamber of Commerce.” To this, Mills stated that “I have always been of the opinion that [they]

had a decisive role in convincing the city council to go along with it” and the city accepted their new role in the project.¹²

Old Town State Park was not created in empty space. While both of these entities may have been in favor, many residents of the area were predictably not enthusiastic about having their homes and businesses relocated. One man in particular was James H. Cardwell, owner of the Casa de Pico and Casa Bandini. In 1964, the Casa de Pico was operating as an upscale tourist motel—one of the only businesses of note in the area. Cardwell had gone so far as to accuse Mills “of being paid off.”¹³ Another opponent was the president of the Carpenters Union who managed to “get the entire union to oppose it.”¹⁴ Ordinary citizens were expected to be upset about the situation; however when one of the residents managed to get an entire union to band against the project, the mayor of San Diego at the time, Frank Curran, called Mills to discuss the issue saying “Jim, I wish to God you’d drop this. This is a hot potato, it’s very controversial and it’s very hard to go along with and you would do everyone a favor if you’d just forget this.”¹⁵ In short, the prospect of creating the Old Town San Diego State Historic Park at this time was heavily in question.

At this point another event crucial to the development of the park occurred. Mills pointed out that the City of San Diego offered Old Town property owners trades instead of cash to compensate their loss. Property owners would acquire land that the city would offer from various properties it owned, in exchange for the property the state was going to take, as a way to defray costs from the project. By providing property trades, the city was not decreasing its liquidity, but merely unloading unproductive properties. That would in turn free up monies from the bond issue to be appropriated for the development of the site, not the property acquisition. Suddenly, the project became financially possible. Mills



Old Town Playhouse - 1968©SDHC #84:14939-2

collaboratively with University of San Diego history professor Ray Brandes to draw up plans for structures that fit the period from 1821-1872.¹⁹ For example, to recreate the public square that had been in the center of Old Town during the Mexican-American period, the state needed to move

the Mission Playhouse (currently Old Town Theatre) to another location within the park.²⁰ In addition, in order for the theater to continue operation, the building in question needed to be restored to a historically accurate structure. In much the way a log cabin, for instance, would look out of place in Disneyland's "World of Tomorrow" section of the park, so too would putting a modern playhouse in the Old Town State Historic Park. Researching historic documents, maps and photographs, Sturgeon's team surmised that a barn had existed on or near the new playhouse location and thought that might be an appropriate structure in which to situate the new playhouse.

Traveling to nearby Julian in east county where late nineteenth-century barns were still standing, the team sought inspiration from those structures and sketched plans that would be used to rebuild the Mission Playhouse. Sturgeon noted that the key to creating the past in the present was to "engineer it to modern standards."²¹

Nevertheless this same approach was utilized throughout the 1970s as the park's restoration process evolved, making it look more and more like the Mexican-American period in San Diego. Soon, "Living History" projects in the park delighted visitors by giving them a look into what life was like in nineteenth-century San



Old Town Theatre (formerly Mission Playhouse). Photo by Matthew Schiff.

Diego.²² When the Economic Research Bureau of San Diego originally published its report in 1966 lauding the potential for capturing tourist dollars in the area, it assumed Old Town's attendance would fall somewhere within the attendance levels of its competitors. It stated that "The Columbia State Historic Park has recorded attendance during 1966 of approximately 800,000, the Monterey State Historic Monument 242,927, and a restoration project in St. Augustine, Florida, averaged from 400,000 to 500,000 annually."²³ By 1977, San Diego had more visitors to the site "where California began" than where the United States of America began. Old Town State Park had 1,844,739 visitors compared to Philadelphia's Independence Hall of 1,258,789.²⁴

The fire that tore through Old Town in 1872 is not commemorated in the park, despite the fact that it was an important part of the park's creation.²⁵ There had been some debate prior to this time at the city-planning level about where the city center should formally be—its present location at the base of Presidio Hill or Horton's "New Town" just to the south. Some county and city records had already been moved as early as 1870, but the fire effectively ended any additional debate over this matter. As

Old Town was, for the most part, devastated, present-day downtown San Diego began as the center of city government.²⁶ From 1872 on, Old Town San Diego as a commercial zone went into decline as the city center shifted to its present-day location. By the



Old Mission Olive Factory 1928. ©SDHC #6716-A.

1950s, Old Town had become what Senator Mills called "an economic wasteland" with no businesses to speak of except for an olive cannery called Mission Olives.²⁷

While the fire had destroyed many structures, it preserved the opportunity to, at a later time, develop a relatively untouched slice of San Diego's history. The fire, while completing the move of vital offices of government to another location, preserved the city's ability to turn the area into the Old Town of today. Mills concedes this fact saying:

San Diego is the only place in California where you can take the beginnings of a major city, and preserve something of what it was

like. You can do that in San Diego, you cannot do it in Los Angeles or San Francisco or San Jose or anywhere else because the major developments are in the same place but in San Diego we had the opportunity to preserve Old Town as it was, and preserve our Hispanic heritage particularly.²⁸

Old Town San Diego would in fact thrive after some ninety years of neglect. Had that area of town been a more productive economic center, perhaps Mills' vision would not have been achieved as fully as it was. Mills' involvement as a passionate historian, his delay of the appropriation of funds and his behind-the-scenes efforts to enlist support were integral in the creation of the park and certainly without his contributions, the project would not have reached fruition. But one cannot help but wonder, had the story of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park not unfolded as it did, would we have a state park today?

Old Town State Historic Park's beginnings were as tenuous as the settlement created by the Spaniards in 1769, always under attack from various entrenched interests of the day. The need to diversify the City of San Diego's asset mix and siphon significant investment into the infrastructure of the tourism industry was what ultimately brought the park into being and helped eventually to assuage public resistance. Many times the park's creation hinged on the personal relationships between some with a love for history and preservation with those who had the foresight to see that tourism can work alongside those interests. There is an untold story of the back room planning and strategy that is often used to move legislation forward whatever it is. The political atmosphere is a vital ingredient to any public project. In the case of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park, the process of hearing how this resolution came to pass is an important look at a political process and a story that needed to be told.

NOTES

1. Iris Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005), 56.
2. Lucinda Eddy, "Visions of Paradise: The selling of San Diego," *The Journal of San Diego History* 41 (Summer, 1995): 162-163.
3. Senator Mills made himself available to me during my research. His narrative has been relied upon heavily as, at the time of writing, was one of the last living people directly associated with the formation of Old Town. His insight as a state legislator provided an invaluable record of what went on behind closed doors to make Old Town San Diego State Historic Park a reality. I am truly grateful to him for his availability during my research.

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4. James Mills, Interviewed by author November 17, 2010.
5. John C. Williamson was a Kern County Assemblyman and authored the California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) in 1965; Alvin Sokolow, "Outlook: Budget Cuts Threaten The Williamson Act, California's Longstanding Farmland Protection Program," *California Agriculture* 64, no. 3:118-120.
6. Mills, Interview.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. The Brown administration, in an effort to stretch the bond money further, asked for contributions by the City of San Diego for the project.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Susan G. Davis, "Landscapes of Imagination: Tourism in Southern California" *Pacific Historical Review*, 68 (May, 1999): 174.
18. Ruby Sexton, "Old Town's Past Blueprints Future," *San Diego Union*, September 7, 1975.
19. The buildings proposed for historic renovation were outlined in the state's *Resource Management Plan*.
20. Frank Sturgeon, telephone interview by author, April 28, 2011.
21. Sturgeon, Interview. What is somewhat ironic to note is that in 1957, due to lead poisoning and old age, the city removed perhaps one of the earliest records of European settlement in Old Town. "The Serra Palm." This palm was named as it was thought to have been planted by Father Junípero Serra in 1769; Joey Seymour and Heidi Trent, "Examining California's First Palm Tree: The Serra Palm," *The Journal of San Diego History* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 105.
22. Jennifer Williamson, "Old Town Plan Wins Approval," *San Diego Union*, March 12, 1972.
23. Economic Research Bureau of San Diego, *Economic Potential of the Old Town Community* (San Diego, 1967), 2.
24. Glenn A. Rick, *San Diego 1927-1955: Recollections of a City Planner* (San Diego: Glenn A. Rick), 102.
25. Reference to the condition of the pueblo (town) is attributed to an historian-journalist Carey McWilliams, cited in State Park Historian Victor Walsh's article on Old Town; Victor Walsh, "Old Town San Diego: What was really there," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, August 9, 2007.
26. Engstrand, *California's Cornerstone*, 78-79 and 89-94. William Heath Davis laid out a "32-square block area between present-day Broadway and Market streets" and when he was unable to attract settlers to the area, his project failed. Alonzo Horton purchased "960 acres for \$265" in 1867 and revived the idea of a "New Town." His improvements along with the fire of 1872 provided the impetus for settlement in the area.
27. Mills, interview, November 17, 2010; Mission Olives was located at the present north side of the Caltrans building in Old Town.
28. Mills, Interview.