

The People.

JAMES W. ROBINSON (1790-1857)

SARAH SNYDER ROBINSON (1808-1894)

WILLIAM ROBINSON (1840-1878)

In 1828, Sara Snyder eloped with her future husband, James Robinson, after a prayer meeting in Ohio. Because he was her schoolteacher, and already married with several children, they fled at night and broke most ties with their respective families for a number of years. James, a self-taught attorney, became acting governor of Texas in 1836 and a judge after resigning that position. Mexican authorities captured him in 1844 and his negotiated release to propose a settlement of the Texas problem created a great deal of resentment among his fellow Texans, despite his efforts for the admission of Texas to the United States. The Robinsons removed themselves to San Diego, California in 1850. Sarah was abducted by Indians along the way, possibly in the Cuyamaca Mountains and returned to her family under mysterious circumstances. Judge Robinson became a deeply respected investor, promoter, and citizen of San Diego. He set himself up in law practice with a focus and expertise on litigating Mexican land grants in American courts. He built a grand house on the Plaza, established the San Diego and Gila Railroad, and served as district attorney and trustee of the school board. He died in 1857, leaving behind Sarah and their 17-year-old son, William. He went on to serve the Confederacy during the Civil War, but returned to San Diego and was elected to the California Assembly. After losing an election by a mere 14 votes he had a mental breakdown and died just a few

years later, leaving his mother alone in 1878. In 1890, Sarah decided to return to Ohio where many of her secrets were uncovered and litigation ensued over real property transactions in San Diego. Judge Benjamin Hayes described her as "witty and intelligent." Some of her letters are still extant and make tart reading about the doings of small town San Diego in the 1850s and 1860s.



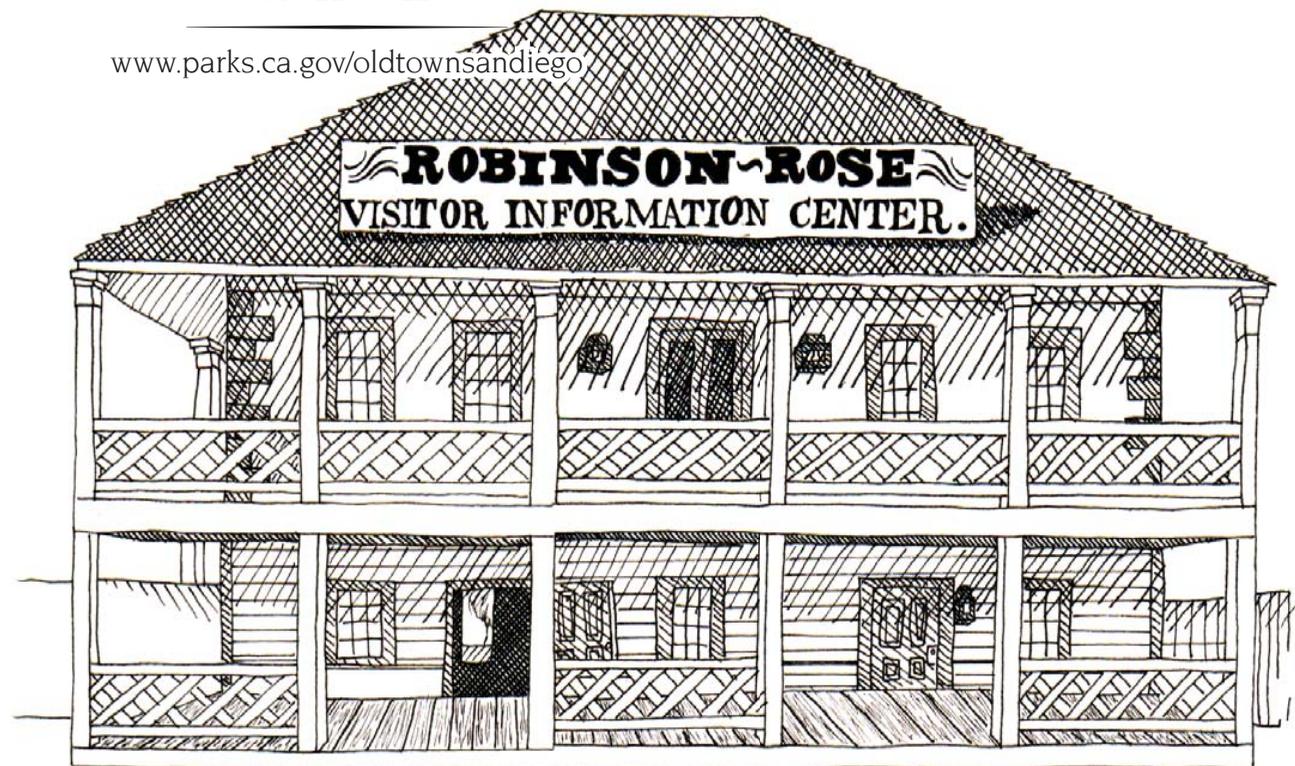
LOUIS ROSE (1807-1888)

Louis Rose was born in Hannover, Germany. He came to America in the 1840s and after initially residing in New Orleans, he settled in Texas. Later he joined with James Robinson's family to come to San Diego in 1850 by wagon train over the Gila Trail. His civic duties included serving on the first Grand Jury, City Trustee, charter member of Masonic Lodge 35, Treasurer of the San Diego & Gila Railroad, volunteer militiaman in the Garra uprising, Postmaster for ten years, and founder of Roseville in San Diego. His business enterprises included a butcher shop, a tannery that equaled "the best article in the markets of Philadelphia and Boston," mattress manufacturer and real estate investor. Judge Benjamin Hayes called Rose in 1856 "a stupendous speculator of the 'make or break' order." His daughter Henrietta remembered her father as a modest man and yet "in a way, singularly proud." She reported that she never heard her father swear or boast. "He was generous to a fault...very good to the Mexican people of Old Town...[who] were very fond of him." He was one of San Diego's first Jewish settlers and a noted benefactor.

Thank you for your interest in Old Town San Diego State Historic Park, part of the California State Parks system. Inquire at the Robinson-Rose Visitor Information Center or visit our website to find additional ways to experience California's history.

4002 Wallace St.
San Diego, CA 92110
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www.parks.ca.gov/oldtownsandiego



The Robinson-Rose House.

The Visitor Information Center.



Date Built: **Circa 1853.**
Interpretive Period: **American.**
Rebuilt in 1989.

Illustrations by Megan Curtis.

The Building.

The original structure was erected in 1853 by James Robinson. It had an adobe first floor and wood-frame second floor. Oddly, the first floor was painted and plastered to look like wood siding while the second floor was painted to look like adobe. Over time, the building served as law and medical offices, jail cell, schoolroom, newspaper office, store, residential apartments, and the County Clerk's office. It was variously called, "Judge Robinson's Building," "Railroad Building," and the "Herald Building."

Mary Chase Walker was a tenant at the Robinson House in 1865. She wrote:

"At the end of a week Mrs. Robinson kindly offered me two unoccupied rooms in the second story of her

house on the plaza at \$2.00 per month. There were no furniture or stove shops in Old Town at that time. But the people were kind. One lent me a lounge, another rocking chair. The bed came with the room. An old stove that smoked badly was procured somewhere. Thus, I commenced house keeping. Each room was about 10 by 12 feet in size. Two large glass doors opened on a veranda, from which I witnessed many amusing scenes. Wild Indians naked with the exception of a cloth about the loins stalked majestically across the plaza, their long hair streaming in the wind, or if in mourning, plastered up with a paste made of grease and ashes. The rings in their noses were equally as useful & ornamental as the rings in the ears of white ladies."

Sarah Snyder Robinson and her son, William Robinson, sold all of their real estate holdings, including the house, to Louis Rose in 1868 for \$10,000 in gold coin.

Apparently by 1900, the Robinson-Rose House was demolished. California State Parks constructed the existing replica in 1989. Joseph Toigo built the diorama depicting San Diego as it appeared in 1872. The restroom building next to the Robinson-Rose House is a recreation of the shed Judge Robinson built as a schoolhouse in 1856.

The Story.

San Diego seemed ready to begin an unparalleled period of expansion and prosperity in the 1850s. Central to the program was the building of a railroad to connect San Diego to the rest of the continent. The *San Diego Herald*, published at the Robinson House, was advocating acquisition of Hawaii and Baja California with San Diego as its capital. Roads were being planned and built, transportation was improving, land prices were looking good for investments, the local economy was moving away from almost absolute dependence on the cattle industry, and agriculture was expanding.

James Robinson and Louis Rose were involved with nearly all of those schemes and plans. In order to promote the projected expansion of commerce, Robinson built his house to be a kind of World Trade Center for 1850s San Diego. With great confidence, he named the building "The Railroad Block" and worked to make it the terminus, or at least headquarters, of a transcontinental railroad. Sadly, the Civil War, cycles of boom and bust, drought and flood, and the removal of San Diego's government and commercial center to New Town, dashed those hopes. When the railroad finally came to San Diego in 1882, it was merely a spur line connecting to the transcontinental railroad that had been built in Los Angeles.

Mysteries.

- James Robinson was a charter member of San Diego's first Masonic lodge, which met at his house.
- James Robinson and Sarah Snyder had a mysterious past with secrets they kept from friends and neighbors for forty years. Had Robinson ever actually divorced his first wife and did Robinson and Snyder actually marry legally?
- Was the Robinson House built to resemble the old Capitol Building in Austin, Texas?

Did You Know?

- James Robinson died in 1857. Because of litigation, his probate was not finally settled until 1913.
- Although owning a large house and much real estate, the Robinsons only occupied two rooms.
- In the 1860s, there was a jail on the second floor of the Robinson House. A Candle was put in the window if a prisoner was being held overnight.

Can You Find?

- A camel in the diorama. Haji Ali, a Turkish immigrant, worked for the U.S. Army in an experiment to utilize camels in the Far West in 1856.
- A Jewish mezuzah by one of the doors. This is to honor Louis Rose, a Jewish settler.

