

THE STORY.

Before James McCoy built his house, this was a plot of land and buildings associated with the Silvas Family. José Manuel Silvas, a soldier, may have built an adobe home with a garden in the early 1820s for his wife María Gertrudes Camacho and ten children. After his wife died, he married a Kumeyaay woman named Tecla Regalado and may have lived on this site. During reconstruction at the Silvas site, archaeologists exposed the foundations of earlier adobe buildings and artifacts dating back to the 1830s and 1840s. Silvas' daughter, María Eugenia inherited the property and lived there until she sold the land in 1851.

The reconstructed McCoy House Museum has exhibits that tell these stories of early San Diego.

- **The Parlor.** The McCoy's entertained guests in their parlor, a sitting room set apart for the entertainment of visitors. This room is furnished in the fashion of a typical Victorian parlor.
- **The Village of Kosa'aay.** Passing out of the Parlor, one goes back in time to the Kumeyaay village of Kosa'aay that once stood near this site. It is believed that the First Peoples have lived in this vicinity for over 10,000 years.
- **Missions, Presidios and Ranchos.** With the arrival of the Spanish soldiers, Franciscan missionaries, and settlers, this region became a distant outpost of the Spanish Empire. After 1821, San Diego became a *pueblo* (town) with outlying ranches as part of the Mexican Territory of Alta California. The missions and the *presidios* often became the centers of California's oldest historic towns that grew up around them.



- **A New England Hide & Tallow Merchant Ship.** The early wealth of California was based on trading cowhides, tallow, and horn. Merchant ships traded goods and provisions from all over the world with the Mexican community. Cowhides were sometimes jokingly called, "California Banknotes."
- **The U.S.–Mexico War.** San Diego changed forever with the U.S.–Mexico War of 1846–1848. With the raising of the Stars and Stripes, the Mexican *pueblo* of San Diego began the transition to an American town.
- **A Grog Shop.** San Diego was a port town and drinking establishments were common. At the grog shop sailors and locals could find entertainment, get news, buy food and some supplies in addition to rum, brandy, and whisky.
- **Express Office.** Transportation and communication advances helped tie California to the rest of the United States.
- **Second Floor.** Changing exhibits, meeting space, and displays of archaeological and historical materials from 1872 to the present day.

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.

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Date Built: **Circa 1869.**
Interpretive Period: **American.**
Rebuilt in 2000.

Illustrations by Megan Curtis.

THE BUILDING.

The site of this building may have been part of the original Kumeyaay Indian village of Kosa'aay. While serving as sheriff in 1866, McCoy purchased a lot in San Diego on the north side of Garden Street. In 1869, he married Miss Winifred (Winnie) Kearney and began building his home. D.B. Kurtz and Company, builders of several houses in San Diego, rushed to complete McCoy's home. The two-story house proved to be one of the larger and more impressive structures in Old Town. The *San Diego Union* wrote at the time that the McCoy home, "...loomed up over the rest of the houses in the neighborhood in about the same proportion that its owner did over his late competitor in the race for sheriff."

The house had a number of amenities befitting McCoy's station in the community; first as town sheriff, later as State

Assemblyman. Shutters were on either side of the numerous windows, stately columns supported an upstairs balcony, and a white picket fence set off the property from nearby lots. Shrubs and trees gave shade to anyone who rested on the large front porch. The home included a parlor, sitting room, library, kitchen, dining room, and bedrooms. A one-story annex in the rear could have been McCoy's office, since recollections suggest he had his office in his home. A windmill on the east side of the house provided water and chickens created a commotion whenever the McCoy's two dogs came near them.

The house was demolished in the early 20th century and reconstructed in 2000 as a museum.

THE PEOPLE.

James McCoy (1821-1895) was born in county Antrim, Ireland and immigrated to Maryland in 1842. In 1850, he joined the army and was transferred to California with Captain John Bankhead Magruder's Battalion. Within a few years this six-foot, versatile, energetic, and sometimes volatile man would become an important figure in the growth and development of Southern California. He gathered warm friends and passionate enemies. His attempt to acquire San Diego tidelands gave rise to a jingle in 1871: "They grab and they plunder, and give to their friends..."

In 1853, McCoy received an honorable discharge from the United States Army and settled in San Diego near Cuyamaca.

By 1861, McCoy decided to broaden his role in local politics and ran for the office



of sheriff. He held that job for the next ten years, patrolling nearly 15,000 square miles that stretched to the Colorado River. He was known for occasional shootouts, including one at the Jolly Boy Saloon in 1857 and another at O'Neill's in 1882 at the age of 61!

McCoy married Winifred (Winnie) Kearney (1844-1916) of Los Angeles in 1869. McCoy built this house as a wedding present. In addition to being the wife of a prominent politician, Winifred wrote poetry.

Wherever You dwell, May content be Your lot,
And friendship like Ivy, encircle Your cot,
May each rosy Morn dressed in Mantle of peace
Shed health oe'r, Your dwelling,
Your Blessings Increase.

James and Winifred never had children of their own, though, Mrs. McCoy raised a child by the name of Manuel Silvas, a local altar boy. In 1871, McCoy became a California State assemblyman until his retirement in 1874. James McCoy died in 1895 in the home he had built for himself and his wife.

MYSTERIES.

- In the back yard of the McCoy, you may see the foundations of an earlier adobe building belonging to the Silvas family. What are their stories?
- Was McCoy shrewd or devious in his election escapades, land deals, and sale of prisoner labor?

DID YOU KNOW?

- James McCoy was said to be one of two men in San Diego who never got drunk.
- Sheriff McCoy and his deputy would have a boxing match every morning. Loser had to cook the breakfast steaks.
- The San Diego River once ran by the McCoy House until it was diverted into its present course.
- Winnifred McCoy was a devout Catholic. If you look carefully at one of the stained glass windows at Immaculate Conception Church, you will see her name.

CAN YOU FIND?

- Rats (**Hint:** in the hold of the ship).
- A jar of pickled eggs.

