

THE STORY.

“Schoolhouses are the republican line of fortifications.”

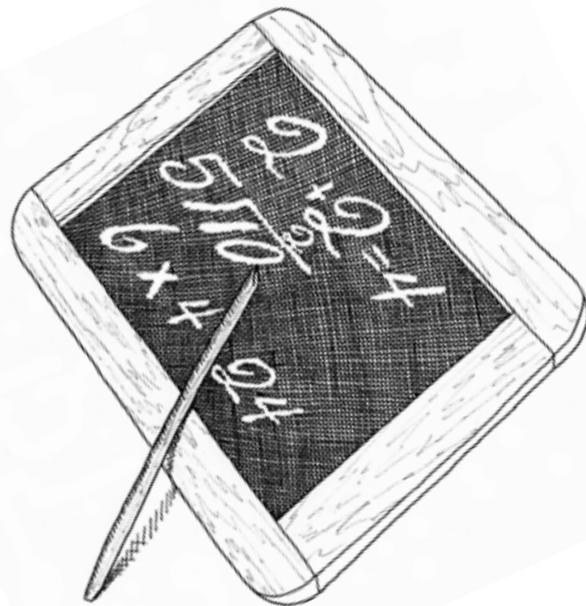
—Horace Mann 1796-1836



The story of the Mason Street School is part of the uniquely American story of progress and democracy. A solid republic can only stand on the foundation of literate and educated citizens. Education in San Diego began where it has always begun: in the family. Communities train their children with the best that is available; be that the right way to feather an arrow or working out a calculus problem. Starting in 1795, the community and its government struggled to educate its children beyond the fundamentals of horsemanship, duty, soldiering and making a life on the frontier. The second book to be printed in California was a child's textbook, *Tablas Para los Niños que Empiezan a Contar* (*Tables for Children Who Are Learning to Count*, 1836). This was printed by a sometime resident of San Diego, Agustin Zamorano. Finances, the needs of ranching, and a largely oral tradition meant that a formal, classroom education for more than a few months at a time was unusual for *Californio* children. In fact, public education in San Diego was nearly non-existent from 1834 until 1851.

Progress in American public education was given a huge boost by the reformer, congressman, and educator, Horace Mann. His work in Massachusetts included free

public education; tax financed secular schools, and a series of Normal Schools to train fully professional teachers. A maturing California accepted many of these ideas and slowly began to get serious about formal education. It wasn't easy. Money was always a problem. All of the teachers were untrained until 1865. Curriculum, philosophy, and tolerance were hot items of debate in the School Board. William B. Toler was giving bilingual instruction to his students in 1851. The response of the Board of Education was to fire him and suspend all education for two years. Challenges were many including a school district of 14,800 square miles. It included what are now the counties of San Diego, Riverside, and Imperial—bigger than the combined area of Massachusetts and Connecticut. A change came to San Diego in 1865 with the construction of the first publically owned schoolhouse and the hiring of the first professionally trained teacher, Mary Chase Walker.



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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Illustrations by Megan Curtis.
February 6, 2014.



THE SCHOOLHOUSE MUSEUM.

The Mason Street School.

Date Built: **1865.**
Interpretive Period: **American.**
Restored in **1952.**

THE BUILDING.

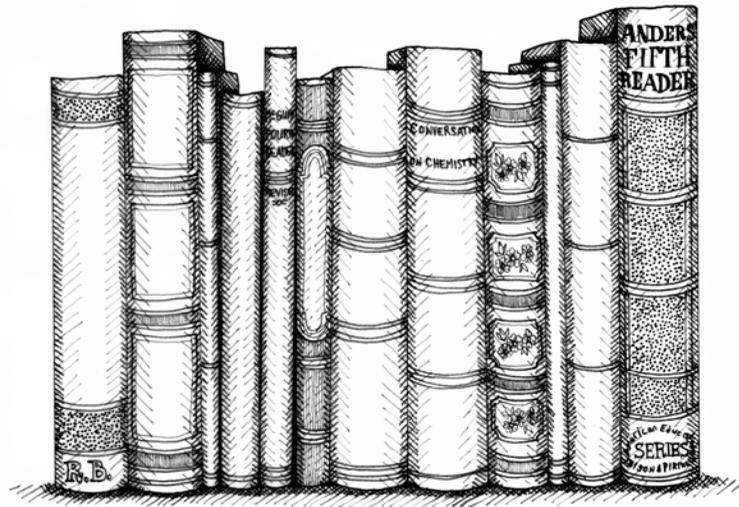
It took about a century for the people of San Diego to find the resources and commitment to establishing a permanent schoolhouse that was owned by the community for educating its children. Just like a child, this schoolhouse has had its birth, grew, moved on, found its roots, and changed its purpose. San Diego's finances, at the time, dictated that it be furnished simply and without a library. The original size of the school house was about 24x30 feet with a 10 foot ceiling. After construction of the new school in 1872, the original building was taken apart, moved, and served as a family home and later a tamale restaurant.

In 1952 a dedicated group of volunteers, the San Diego County Historical Days Association, were able to stop further demolition of the building. They then arranged to have some remaining portions of the building dismantled and reassembled (with portions of another 1865 building) at its present site as a typical 19th century, one room schoolhouse. The organization maintained the building as a labor of love until 2013 when it was transferred to the people of California and is now a treasured part of California State Parks. The building is a California State Landmark and one of the contributing elements to the Old Town historic district listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

THE PEOPLE.

Off duty soldiers and chaplains would spare a few hours to teach basic reading and writing in the Spanish and Mexican eras. María Eustaquia Gutiérrez de Pico, the mother of future Governor Pio Pico and General Andres Pico, taught adult soldiers how to read so that they could get a promotion and thus better the lives of themselves and their families. Mothers, such as Ana Tebbetts, stepped in because there was no one else able to take on the responsibility. Some teachers lasted only a few weeks, such as the eccentric Joshua Sloane who was fired in 1856 for disciplining unruly children by placing his smelly socks under their noses!

An important story in the history of the building is that of Mary Chase Walker's one year at the Mason Street School. During the Civil War many women entered the teaching profession after so many male teachers went off to military service. Walker



had been teaching since the age of 14 in her native Massachusetts. At the rather advanced age of 33 she went back to school and became an accredited, professionally trained, primary school teacher. Finding teaching opportunities somewhat limited in New England, she paid the enormous amount of \$375 to sail from the East Coast to Panama, taking the new railroad across the isthmus and then taking a steamer to San Francisco. The teaching position in San Francisco did not materialize and she accepted an offer from San Diego at the impressive salary of \$65 per month. Her career ended after one year due to controversy surrounding her racial tolerance. A few months after her termination, she married the school board president, Ephraim Morse.

The original Mason Street School building was only in operation from 1865 to 1872. It had to have been challenging to educate some forty children in one room of all ages, but life on the frontier was full of challenges, shortages, and making do. Curriculum was very simple: "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmatic," but probably not taught to the "tune of a hickory stick!" Students mostly came from Old Town and attendance records show at least 1/3 of the students were absent on any one day. A rodeo or circus in town, an important fiesta, or sudden needs for extra help at the family ranch or farm took priority over education.

Individuals, and the community as a whole, have worked to improve education and keep alive the story of brave and resourceful pioneers. How will you educate yourself to make a difference to your community?

DID YOU KNOW?

- In 1865 the school had no library.
- The school year in 1865 was July through May.
- The average number of students enrolled in 1866 was 42. About 1/3 of the students were absent on any given day.
- The popular recess activities for the class of 1866: smoking tobacco and roping anything that moved.
- There were no California Indian children enrolled in the first Mason Street School class of 1866.



CAN YOU FIND?

- A recitation bench
- A lunch of cheese and crackers
- An eagle holding a peace pipe