

San Diego History Center Research Archive

THE SAN DIEGO HISTORY CENTER is one of the oldest historical organizations on the West Coast dedicated to preserving and conserving the heritage of a major North American city. It was established in 1928 by local businessman and civic leader George W. Marston, who purchased the land encompassing the site of San Diego's original settlement known as Presidio Hill. Marston had the Junípero Serra Museum constructed on Presidio Hill, and it became the home of the newly created San Diego Historical Society and Research Archive. In 1929 Marston gifted the Serra Museum and adjacent land to the City of San Diego, which continues to manage Presidio Park and the Serra Museum grounds to this day.

In 1982 the San Diego Historical Society relocated to the Casa de Balboa building in the city's 1,200-acre cultural greenspace Balboa Park. Over twenty museums and cultural organizations reside in Balboa Park, including several theaters and the world-renowned San Diego Zoo. The city park is conveniently located northeast of the downtown city center and is a major arts and cultural center for the citizens of the city of San Diego and greater San Diego County. The History Center continues to serve and maintain the Junípero Serra Museum at Presidio Park as an auxiliary museum and education center.

The History Center museum is located on the main floor of the Casa de Balboa building, while the Research Archive is located on the basement level, next door to the Model Railroad Museum. It can be difficult to find for a first-time visitor, but it teems with researchers three days a week. The San Diego History Center Research Archive is open to the public weekly, Wednesday to Friday from 9:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. History Center archivists are also available for off-hour remote research requests and one-on-one appointments. It is important that we make our collections accessible to researchers by as many avenues as possible, and remote research and copy requests is one way of making this happen for those researchers who cannot physically visit us in San Diego. Welcoming researchers three days a week allows us to

work and collaborate with people and their projects on a personal level, making for fruitful discoveries and relationships.

Walking into the environmentally controlled Research Archive, one will be met with the familiar scent of old books, historical maps, and vintage photographs. The public reading or research room houses a large collection of accessible photo books, subject files, and biographical files. Organized by subject, these resources include photographs, newspaper clippings, journal articles, and secondary resources regarding specific subjects like “schools,” “public organizations,” and “communities,” to name a few. Biographical files are resources devoted to the movers and shakers of San Diego history, from precolonial inhabitants to contemporary war heroes, civic superstars, and famous athletes. The biographical files allow family historians and researchers to pore over binders containing news articles, obituaries, family trees, and histories of early pioneers and settlers like Josefa Carrillo, Henry Fitch, and the Bandini family as well as more historic figures like Ellen Browning Scripps, Alonzo Horton, and Abraham Klauber and contemporary citizens like baseball legend Ted Williams and muralist Victor Ochoa.

The San Diego History Center Research Archive is composed of three primary collections: the Object Collection, the Photo Archive, and the Documents Archive.

The Object Collection is made up of all items three-dimensional, from turn-of-the-century toys to pioneer-era dresses to contemporary fine art and sculptures. The 17,000+ item collection continues to grow and highlights San Diego’s rich and diverse history. Items in the Object Collection include regional historical artifacts from everyday life, precontact items from the region’s original inhabitants, pop culture artifacts, and items encompassing the history of San Diego County, spanning the four major eras: precontact, Spanish Colonial, Mexican, and American.

The History Center’s Object Collection is a unique repository of items and plays a major role in our exhibitions and galleries. Researchers find the items invaluable, whether they are studying a painter or sculptor or researching period clothing while writing a novel set in turn-of-the-century San Diego. Selections of the museum’s fine art can be seen daily in the “Exquisite Views” gallery on the main floor. This gallery highlights art created in San Diego since 1880 that has rarely if ever been seen or exhibited. Selections include Works Progress Administration murals salvaged from destruction and demolition, landscapes by well-known Southern California plein air artists, and artwork donated by generous San Diego citizens.

The Photograph Collection is likely the History Center’s most popular and well-known collection. This archive consists of over 2.5 million images in all formats, including daguerreotypes, glass lantern slides, cyanotypes, and traditional negatives and prints. It is one of the largest regional photography collections in the United States and documents the people, history, culture, and evolution of San Diego from a remote and dusty colonial outpost along the San Diego River to an internationally renowned coastal city of nearly 1.5 million residents.

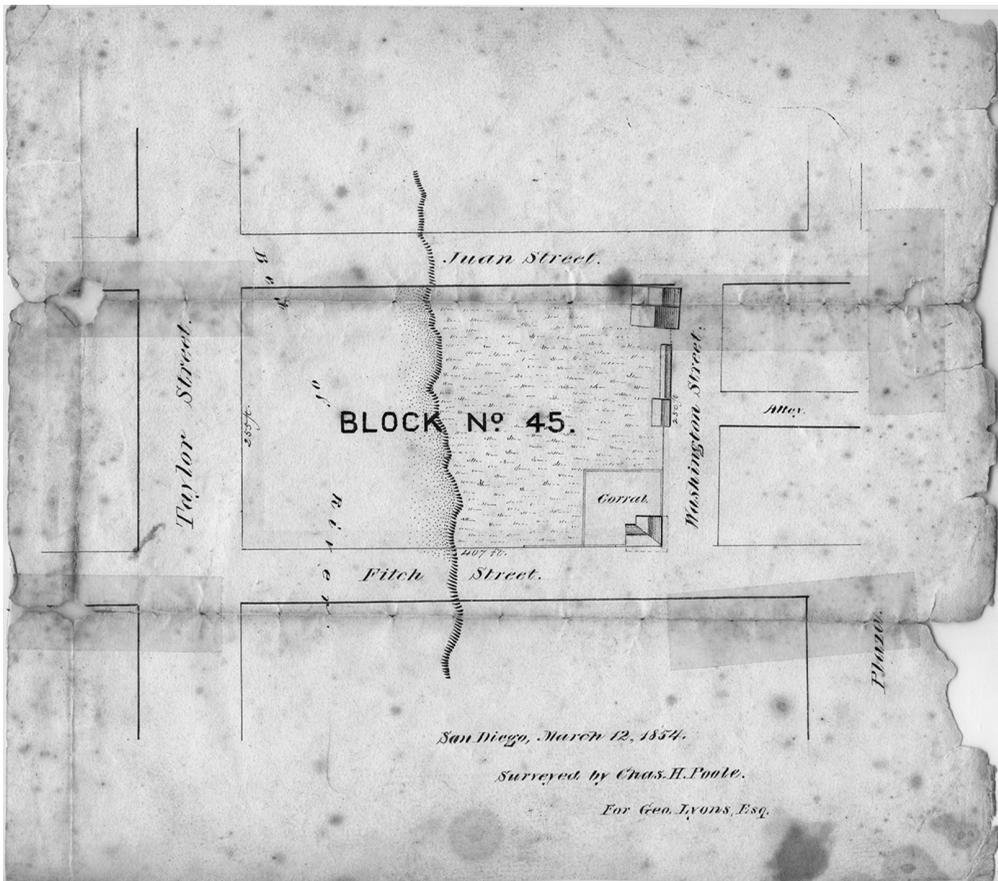
The size and depth of the Photography Collection allows researchers to delve into the changing cultural values of San Diego over time through the use of this visual medium. San Diego is the birthplace of California, and the earliest photographs in the collection reflect this unique and multilayered history. The nucleus of the collection is contained in the work of several commercial photographers from 1870 to 1940. In 1979 the photography collection of the Union Title and Trust Insurance Company was transferred to the History Center. In the

early 1980s, the entire photography collection of the *San Diego Union* newspaper up to 1981 was transferred to the History Center, greatly expanding the collection. A portion of the History Center Photography Collection can be seen online with photos available for licensing and purchase. Highlights include the Edward H. Davis Collection of Indian Photographs and Drawings, the Norman Baynard Photograph Collection, photos of the complete works of Donal Hord, and the earliest known photograph of San Diego (c. 1870s).

While the Photography Collection is the History Center's most popular, the largest collection in the Research Archive is the Documents Archive. This collection is as robust as they come and includes all documents and ephemera that are not three-dimensional objects or photographs. Long-term agreements with the City of San Diego and San Diego County have allowed for the archiving and storage of thousands upon thousands of public records. These records are a boon to family historians and genealogists who delve into their family histories by researching county marriage records, Superior Court records, declaration of homestead records, and articles of incorporation records, to name some examples. As the lone documents archivist, I receive a healthy volume of research queries through direct telephone calls and emails. I thoroughly enjoy helping researchers find new and exciting information about their subjects and families. I also enjoy working collaboratively with a wide array of researchers. Graduate and PhD students visit regularly while working on their dissertations and reports, as do high school students working on senior projects, local teachers and educators researching topics for their curricula, or novelists writing books set in San Diego around the turn of the century. All these folks have visited the Research Archive and come away with information and resources that could only be found here at the San Diego History Center.

Public records are a small yet important portion of the Documents Archive. Other major collections in the Documents Archive are architectural drawings, archival collections, over 1,500 oral histories and transcripts, scrapbooks, maps, ephemera, and primary source documents, some of which go back to pre-statehood. This immense collection tells the history and evolution of San Diego through the historical context of the documents and records that shaped it. Public records tell one story while architectural drawings and restrictive housing covenants tell another. San Diego's multilayered history is incredibly interesting, inspiring, sad, and noteworthy. As the birthplace of California, San Diego's history is told through the items, artifacts, and voices representing all the diverse cultures and eras that make San Diego the colorful and inspiring place it is today. These items reflect its multilayered history and help tell the history of Alta California.

I've been asked on several occasions to name my favorite item in the Documents Archive. That's a very difficult question for me to answer. It's like asking a Deadhead what their favorite Grateful Dead song is. I have always enjoyed history in its various forms, but maps have always held my keen interest. The San Diego History Center has an extensive map collection featuring some of the earliest known maps of Southern California, the city of San Diego, and greater San Diego County. As mentioned before, I've had the opportunity to work with a number of people and organizations on their projects, and I especially enjoy projects that involve maps. One organization I've had the pleasure of working with is the California State Parks, Southern Service Center. They are revitalizing Block 45 of old or "original" San Diego, commonly known as "Old Town." Block 45 is one of the original blocks of the early settlement of Old Town. It is one block from the central plaza bordered by Washington Street



(now Wallace Street), Taylor Street, Juan Street, and Fitch Street (now Calhoun Street). Henry Delano Fitch and his wife Josefa Carrillo de Fitch once owned this block, known informally as “Fitch’s Block.”

Nancy Mendez, a regional interpretive specialist for California State Parks, approached me one day with a query regarding Block 45. She had a copy of an old report with a worn photocopy of a photocopy of the original hand-drawn map for Block 45. This map features the Fitch house, the Fitch corral, and a since burned-to-the-ground saloon and bowling alley. Fitch’s map of Block 45 apparently is the only known map to feature the saloon and bowling alley. Nancy Mendez asked if we had this map in our collection. Researching all the period maps of Old Town from this time, I could not find a single map or even a reference to the saloon and bowling alley. Although the map was cited as an item residing at the “San Diego Historical Society,” I went on a quest to find this map to no avail. Finally, I pored over an archival collection in our stacks, MS 25—Fitch Family Papers. With Nancy’s bad photocopy in hand I delved into this collection, and lo and behold: there it was, in box 1, file 6—the original hand-drawn plan of Block 45, the Fitch lot in San Diego, March 12, 1854. It was resting quietly in an acid-free mylar sleeve, just smaller than an 8.5 by 11 inch sheet of copy paper. Constructed between the Fitch corral and the Fitch house on Washington Street is the saloon and bowling alley in all its hand-drawn glory.

Although the artifacts inspire my curiosity, my favorite moments in the archives are when I'm working with researchers: the moments of discovery, of connecting familial dots, watching people cover their mouths in surprise when they read about or discover information that drives home a family legend or debunks grandpa's tall tale. Helping people and organizations fill in the gaps of their lives, heritage, and community through our primary and historical resources is very rewarding.

Our mission reads: *The San Diego History Center tells the diverse story of our region—past, present and future—educates and enriches our community, preserves our history, and fosters civic pride.* The History Center Research Archive strives to meet these goals daily, taking pride in the management of important historical collections while preserving the unique multilayered history of this city. We value working with community leaders to educate our citizens in the unique role San Diego plays as the birthplace of the state of California.