

## Field Guide to Coronado History:

### When First Street wasn't First Street

By Bruce Linder

During the early 1920s a bit of madness swept through little Coronado. Our famously regular grid of residential streets – alphabetical north and south, numerical east and west – came under intense fire. Politicians and newspapers fanned the flames of revolt. Many considered the existing uninspired design to be at best

“pedestrian,” at worse, “a reminder of large Eastern center cities.”



One written opinion in the Coronado Journal had it that, “it shows a poverty of thought and paucity of ideas to have a street in Coronado, under California skies with California architecture, called the “Corner of 3rd & I.”

The City Planning Commission delved into this burning issue and released findings that founding father Elias Babcock originally intended, way back in 1887, to name everything with Spanish names. He had only reluctantly agreed to an alphabetical/numerical array because he was desperate to sell house lots to recoup investments. Lots would be easier to locate for potential buyers if streets held a letters and numbers logic.

In the end, he only named our curvy streets in the Spanish mold (think of Isabella and Alameda) while saving Orange, Palm and Olive for the trees he planned to plant along them. Everything else, to heck with it, would help cross-fix house sales.

In studying the issue in the early 1920s, several new schemes were suggested to the City Planning Commission and Board of Trustees to finally do away with letters and numbers.

One of the most promising was to rename lettered streets with Spanish names beginning with that letter (A Avenue might become Alicia for instance – a practice we are familiar with in San Diego) and numbered street would take on a Spanish equivalent (Octava for 8th Street for example).

Luckily, calmer heads prevailed when it was voiced that 6th Street could become Sexta or G Avenue could be changed to Gustavito – probably not names you would want on your return address.

On January 7, 1924 the Board of Trustees did take some limited action by unanimously passing a resolution to rename First Street as “Cabrillo Esplanade.” A double win for the Spanish-sobriquet faction, honoring a Spanish explorer and adding a Spanish-sounding term akin to “promenade.”

Alas, the name only lasted three years, reversed by public petition.

“Most people cannot spell Cabrillo much less pronounce it,” read the petition. “The name is confusing and incomprehensible to eastern correspondents, no one can locate First Street, and it is impossible to telephone!”

Local history is full of stories like this of the collision of politics and common sense ... and this nice story makes you a bit more streetwise about Those Times in Coronado.

Oh, and why don't we have Orange trees along Orange Avenue? They all died, either gnawed by jackrabbits after planting or disturbed by the wind and smoke from passing Orange Avenue trolleys.

*Come visit the Coronado Museum of History & Art and the archives of the Coronado Historical Association for this story and others.*

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