

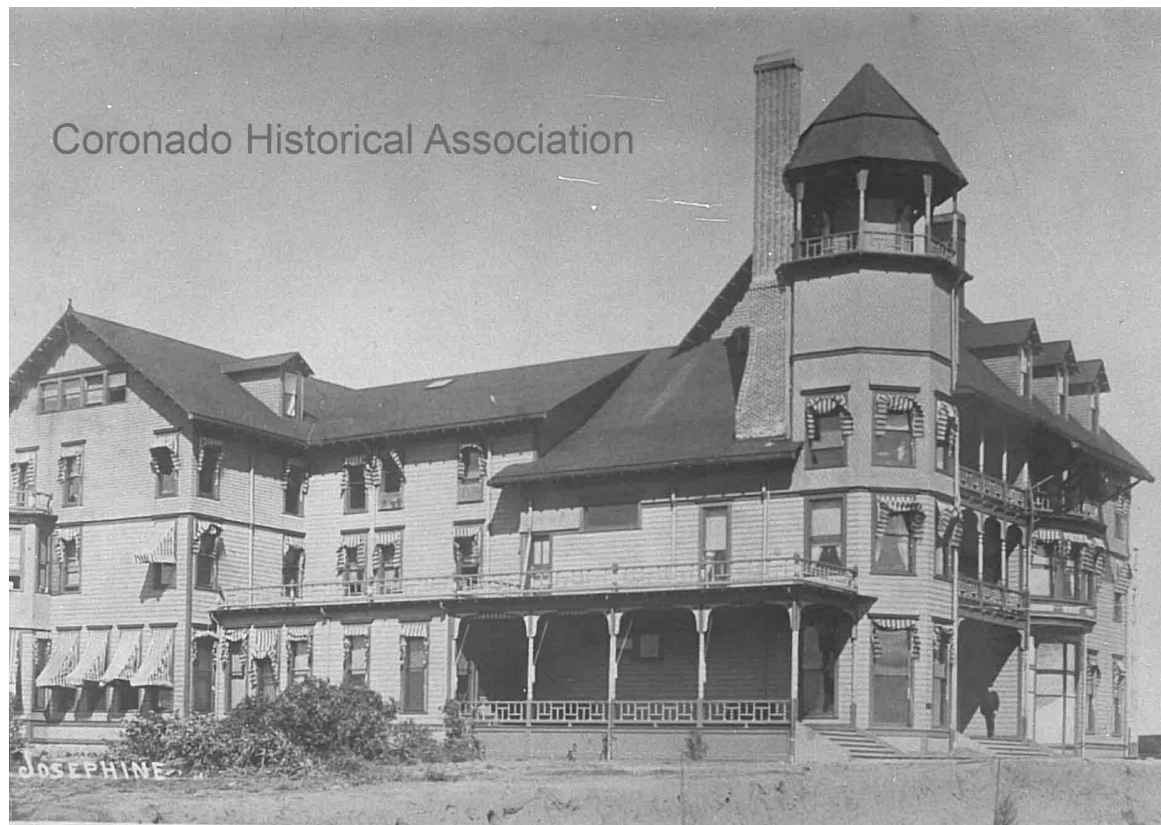
Field Guide to Coronado History: Coronado's OTHER Grand Hotel

Fascinating, intriguing, or thoughtful tales about people and places in Coronado history -- presented by your Coronado Historical Association

By Bruce Linder

It was eminent, dramatic, and – in its own evocative way – a landmark. But it was also the Coronado hotel that you've probably never heard of.

It was built at the same time as the Hotel del Coronado – by the same architect. It offered dazzling views, soaring towers and stylish balconies ... and a fresh-swept tidiness with none of that pesky beach sand.



The Hotel Josephine was stirring and conspicuous – as sure to catch the eye in 1887 as it would today. Built of the “Eastlake” architectural style, the hotel rose three-stories high with offices, shops and 64 rooms (and with a fourth half-story for servants and staff). It stood on the highest point in Coronado on Orange Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets.

Hotel Josephine was the handsome big building you saw when you looked across the bay from San Diego or gazed up from the breezy deck of a Coronado ferry ... not the better-known “big hotel on the beach.”

From Josephine’s top floors you could look out toward Point Loma with unobstructed views or peer down on ferries coming and going. The hotel featured a large ballroom, many uncluttered meeting rooms, and large comfortable porches designed specifically to “catch the airs.”

If Hotel Josephine lived today it would be the center of spirited and, undoubtedly, popular campaigns celebrating a triumph of historical preservation.

To differentiate itself, Josephine advertised its value as a “First Class Family Hotel.” Businessmen, house builders and long-term residents were just as likely to be seen on Josephine’s wide and comfortable verandas as vacationers.

As conspicuous as it was, Josephine also benefited from a quirk involving its frontage on Orange Avenue. When the first trolley tracks were laid on Orange from the ferry to the Hotel Del, the grade was considered excessive between Third and Fourth Streets so that area was excavated several feet lower. The result (that can still be seen today) was that buildings on either side of Orange look higher and more prominent.

The first meeting of the newly constituted Board of Trustees of the Coronado Beach Company (Coronado’s City Council of the day) was held at Hotel Josephine on 15 December 1890. For sixteen years, the hotel acted as the city’s first city hall with scheduled meetings of

the Board and city committees devoted to Finance, Streets and Sewers, Fire and Water, Parks and Shade Trees, and Waterfront & Public Buildings. The city relocated its city hall to the Coronado Beach Company offices at First and Orange in 1906.

Exuberant as it was, by 1899, Hotel Josephine was suffering. Expensive overhead costs complicated its business model as a “family hotel” and, we all know, any competition against the Del is a difficult proposition.

Mr. and Mrs. A. L. Reed took over the hotel that year for renovation but sold it in 1901 to Karl Lamb who renamed it Hotel Iturbide (after the palace in Mexico city and a famous hotel in Ensenada). His opening advertising promised miracles: “Hotel Iturbide is the only hotel on Coronado Beach besides the big hotel. It is situated on the highest point of land several blocks from the ocean. Tourists will find in this family hotel the most sunny rooms and offices of any hotel in Southern California. I have the BEST COOK in Southern California and you never yet saw a man so willing and anxious to please his guests.”

Despite this obvious enthusiasm, the hotel continued its gradual decline with economics not on its side. The local economy gyrated from peaks to valleys and then there was the sudden added cost of converting the hotel to electric lighting. It was difficult for Mr. Lamb to fill enough of the sixty Iturbide rooms to make a consistent profit.

By 1908 the Coronado Beach Company had assumed title to the hotel and in November of that year leased it to an organization that relocated the California Military Institute from Santa Monica to Coronado. A superintendent led the academy that was described as a “first class military school for boys,” with an attendance goal of fifty cadets ages 12-18. Interestingly, cavalry training was part of the curriculum with the academy’s horses kept at the Coronado Polo Field.

Promising as this academy might have been, a fire damaged the building early in 1909 and the military school closed shortly thereafter.

In 1913 or 1914, Coronado empaneled a New School Board to plan for a major expansion of the community's school facilities. While awaiting funding or bonds, the Board held its meetings at the old hotel and considered it for public classrooms.

When even this modest use of the building fell by the wayside, it proved the last straw for the grand Hotel Iturbide nee Josephine. The building was finally torn down in 1915; but its recoverable wood, siding, fixtures, and mementoes – a sizeable treasure – did not disappear. For years, bits and pieces of the grand hotel showed up everywhere, stimulating growth and providing added richness to architectural designs across an expanding community.

Come visit the Coronado Museum and the archives of the Coronado Historical Association for this story and others.

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