

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Coronado's First Schools

By Bruce Linder



Coronado's first purpose-built public school. Opened January 1888

It was a simple step, actually. All communities need schools and, in 1886, with a rush of lot sales and new homes, Coronado was beginning to look and feel like a fresh new community.

It was also pretty simple to intuitively visualize what is needed to establish schooling: a building, some teachers, and various accoutrements (desks, blackboards, chalk ... and don't forget books).

But it quickly became evident in 1886 Coronado that such things were not at all simple. For instance, in California, you had to have a school district if you wanted public schools. Was Coronado to be an extension of a preexisting district in San Diego or its own? If its own, would Coronado residents vote for such a thing? And could they even "legally" vote, as it wasn't clear Coronadans were "legal" residents of an independent municipality that had not yet been formed?

And then there were more sensible issues, little things like where to establish the school, and where to find money for property, construction and hiring?

At this moment of flux, one of Coronado's founders, Elisha Babcock, entered the discussion. His perspective was much different from others. Babcock and his partners were not just in the business of constructing a hotel in 1886, their goal was nothing less than developing the largest resort property on the West Coast. It was a risky venture, very expensive, and with results in no way assured. To Babcock, it quickly became clear that the success of this scheme depended on a consistent stream of revenue raised through vigorous lot sales from the

surrounding community.

The buyers of Coronado residential lots, who would fuel the building of the big hotel, would naturally require a solid school system, and property owners within an “upscale” community would typically demand a school system with significant quality.

To Babcock this formula was obvious and his voice was quickly heard advocating these clear and concise goals for Coronado schools. One of his first steps was to press for the creation of a three-member board of Coronado school trustees. The trustees would hold public meetings, establish a strategy for raising money, and begin planning for school structures.

Babcock then backed up his talk with bucks, promising that his Coronado Beach Company would provide a large block in Coronado at below market prices for a public school.

It was at this point that the magic of Coronado schooling actually began because Babcock specified that the block of land for schools be located at the exact geographic center of the city at Block 91 between Sixth and Seventh Streets and E and F Avenues. School children could now walk or bike conveniently from any point in Coronado directly to a centrally-located school building.

It was Babcock's vision, energy, and subtle guidance — coming at exactly the right moment — that began to clearly frame a basis for the city's public schools. Coronado schools would be shaped for quality, they would be developed and managed from scratch by local residents (not out-of-town developers and not controlled by a distant bureaucracy), and they would stand at the center of the community, both geographically and figuratively.

The very first Coronado public school building opened for business in January 1887. The building was a one room wood-floored tent provided (apparently gratis) by the Coronado Beach Company and was located near the corner of D Avenue and Seventh Street. On the first day of instruction, seven pupils showed up but, by the end of the first school term, attendance had grown to 50 students in eight grades — how they fit everyone into a single tent is a detail missing in history.

The San Diego County Board of Supervisors approved Coronado's own public school district in June of 1887 and actions by the school board quickly accelerated. To relieve overcrowding at the Public School Tent, a small one-story framed building opened at the corner of E Avenue and Seventh Street (some sources say the corner of D and Seventh). In addition, the school board sponsored a school bond of \$40,000 for construction of a two-story school building. That measure passed by a

public vote of 8-0 and construction began immediately on that new permanent schoolhouse also in Block 91, this time on Sixth Street between E and F Avenues.

Minutes from school trustee meetings throughout this period were replete with references to developing the “best schools in the state,” “of top quality,” and “first class;” all “as a great inducement to those to whom we desire to become residents of Coronado.” Clearly, Elisha Babcock’s original stated vision was alive and would continue to frame successes in Coronado schooling for years to come.

On 31 January 1888, the Coronado Evening Mercury described the opening of “the elegant new school-house north of the Plaza” for its first batch of 86 students. This was the first permanent school building purpose-built for Coronado schooling.

The two-story structure featured four classrooms, washrooms, closets, “a number of large blackboards,” verandas and porches. Professor W. J. McLain acted as principal and teacher with two other teachers assigned, Miss Lizzie Armstrong and Miss Mabel Cassiday. It stood about where the BBMAC pool is today on Sixth Street and would operate continuously until the 1930s.

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