

HISTORY

# SAN DIEGO CITY PARKS

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GEORGE W. HANSTON

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by George W. Hanston, Editor

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of

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GEORGE W. MARSTON

From "History of San Diego County"  
by courtesy of Carl H. Heilbron, Editor

## SAN DIEGO CITY PARKS

THERE are 60 parks, large and small within the city area and the total acreage of 59 of them just equals the acreage of our great Balboa Park, which covers 1400 acres, less the small sections set apart for schools and hospital. A large part of this article will therefore be devoted to the history and description of this central park. But let us first mention our two oldest park places, one of Old Town and one of New Town.

### *Washington Square*

The Old Town plaza was certainly not much of a park, but for forty years before modern San Diego began it was the only public place set apart for celebrations, fiestas and sports. This was the "civic center" of the little pueblo and here the holy day festivals and general community gatherings took place. Here too were the horse racing, bull fights, and bear baiting of the times. In 1849, the plaza was christened "Washington Square," which shows that the American spirit was beginning to dominate in this little Spanish-Mexican village. Within the past seven years our city park commission has made the old plaza into a modern city square and it is today an attractive walled pleasance of broad walks and well-planted parterres. Trees, shrubs, flowers and historical landmarks are harmoniously combined in this charming Old Town center.

### *Plaza de Pantoja*

The oldest park of our modern city is the square between the general post office and the waterfront, variously called the F Street Park, New Town Plaza, Pantoja Park, and Plaza de Pantoja. It was dedicated to public use by William Heath Davis and his associates in 1850, but was not laid out and planted until

the settlers brought here by A. E. Horton in '68 to '70 became interested in its improvement. The euclaypts and rubber trees that they planted then are the pioneers of New San Diego's plant life. It is said by old residents that the ladies who lived in the aristocratic part of the city between Front and India used to water these trees in the evening. No sprinkler system then, hand service with tin pails when water cost ten cents a bucket.

The name Pantoja is historical and distinctive. Don Juan Pantoja de Arriaga, a pilot of a Spanish fleet, sailed into the harbor of San Diego in 1782. While here he made the first survey of the harbor and his map may be seen on page 456 of Bancroft's History of California.

### *Balboa Park*

Our great park, Balboa, has also a significant name and quite a history. Its pueblo lots became a park by resolution of the city trustees in May, 1868, just a year after Mr. Horton founded New Town. A more quaint and simple resolution probably never inaugurated such an important civic act. These are the exact words: "Moved and seconded that lots 1131, 1130, 1129, 1135, 1136, 1137, vacant part of 1144, 1143, 1142, be for a park." And notwithstanding many assaults afterwards upon the integrity of this act these pueblo lots have "been for a park" for all the sixty-eight years following this informal dedication.

In the year 1928, when the writer was a park commissioner, it was his privilege to recommend that a bronze tablet be put up in the park to commemorate the action of the city trustees of 1868, with the inscription that follows:

To commemorate the foresight and wisdom of the Founders of Balboa Park, this tablet is erected by the people of San Diego.

May 26, 1868, on the petition of Alonzo E. Horton and Ephraim W. Morse, these 1400 acres of pueblo lands

were dedicated by the trustees of the city,

JOSE ESTUDILLO, MARCUS SCHILLER, JOSHUA SLOANE  
to be forever a public park.

In the year 1928 the city gratefully honors the memory of these citizens and officials of 1868.

Mr. Horton's liberality in donations of land for community use has given a widespread impression that Balboa Park was also his contribution. The historical fact is that the city created the park from its own original pueblo land. Records also show that Mr. Morse was the leader in the park movement, that Mr. Horton was his most influential supporter, and that Joseph S. Manasse and Thomas Bush gave valuable assistance.

In 1870 and '71 when opponents were seeking legislative action against the park, Horton and Morse continued their work and were supported very heartily by such men as Daniel Cleveland, George N. Hitchcock, Charles S. Hamilton, Dr. Robert J. Gregg, Matthew Sherman and Aaron Pauly. A petition of 353 signers was sent to the state legislature asking for confirmation of the action of the city trustees in making a reservation of 1400 acres.

At various subsequent times more or less vigorous objections were raised by some citizens to the reservation of so large an area, but public sentiment was gradually established in favor of maintaining the tract in its original acreage. Hence, in the *Union* issue of January 1, 1903, Mrs. Coulston wrote: "In recent years a growing realization of the unusual beauty of the site, its special and unique features for a great park, its value to the city in large and far-reaching ways, together with the conclusive action of the state legislature, have all operated to preserve the park from attack and division."

For twenty years after its dedication this park remained a "natural park," and many persons living here now remember the happy holidays of their childhood that were spent in roving through its deep canyons and over its broad mesas. It was quite a wilderness and in the 70's there was an Indian rancheria not far from the corner of Date Street and Eighth Avenue. Coyotes and wildcats were common then as well as rabbits and squirrels. In the springtime there were abundant flowers, shooting stars, Spanish violets, lupins, mimulus, mallows, penstemons and hyacinths, with large patches of white popcorn flowers. In most

parts the chaparral was dense and the native cactus flourished. We have some other things now instead of cactus and coyotes, but how much civilization has destroyed!

In the ten years from '89 to '99 there was quite an uprising of the people for park improvements. "The Ladies Annex" (annexed to Chamber of Commerce) raised \$500 and planted a narrow strip along Sixth Avenue from Juniper to Palm. City Council leased to Miss Kate O. Sessions 36 acres at the northwest corner of Sixth and Upas. Miss Sessions made extensive plantings on this tract and the finest old trees of the park are there today in vigorous health and beauty. The notable ones are Monterey cypress, Torrey pines, Cork oaks, pepper trees and eucalypts.

The "Howard Tract" of 100 acres became the site of an orphan school. Quite a large building was erected by Bryant Howard and his associates, but as orphans were scarce in those days the project was given up and the land reverted to the city. Many trees and shrubs planted by the school promoters remained however. A part of this tract was afterwards granted to the U. S. Government for the great Naval Hospital.

In the years '89 and '90, the section known as Golden Hill park was developed by the community living between 16th and 28th streets, on the southern margin. For a long time this was the choicest part of the whole 1400 acres and the Golden Hill neighborhood was entitled to great praise for their civic spirit and for their skill and good taste in making a lovely public garden adjoining their homes. Their prominent leaders were Leroy A. Wright and Mathias F. Heller.

In the next decade a drought of seven years prostrated the city and county of San Diego. Without sufficient water for orchards and gardens the people couldn't spare any for parks. Golden Hill section was fairly well maintained but the west side deteriorated. Not until 1902 was there any strong and comprehensive park planning.

In August of that year, in a Chamber of Commerce meeting, Mr. Julius Wangenheim proposed that park improvements

should be started on the hill above Sixth Avenue and Date Street where the flagstaff now stands. This led to the organization of the Park Improvement Committee: Julius Wangenheim, chairman, U. S. Grant, Jr., William Clayton, G. W. Marston, D. F. Garrettson, Capt. W. R. Maize, H. P. Wood and W. L. Frevert; also a special Park Plans Committee: George W. Marston, chairman, Miss Kate O. Sessions and Ernest E. White.

The general committee, assisted ably by an auxiliary committee of ladies, conducted a stirring campaign for money. It was considered then that success was assured when the sum of \$21,000 was raised. Before the end of the year organization was completed by securing the services of Mrs. Mary B. Coulston as executive secretary and Samuel Parsons, Jr., of New York City, as landscape architect.

Mrs. Coulston, an accomplished woman, an excellent press writer and an authority on gardens, commenced her work in October and was of invaluable assistance in the early stages of the park enterprise. Miss Sessions and George Marston unite in saying that she not only gave a powerful impetus to park enthusiasm but also very wisely directed the committees in their initial work.

Samuel Parsons arrived in San Diego December 21, 1902, and spent ten days in intensive study of our park problem. As he was at that time the landscape architect of Greater New York, controlling the designs of over a hundred parks, our committee had the utmost confidence in his capacity and supported him in all his recommendations notwithstanding the opposition of a number of critics and dissatisfied observers. On the first day of his visit Mr. Parsons grasped the essential features of our park and immediately gave a statement of 1500 words to the *San Diego Union*. The first part of his interview is such a good general description that it deserves a place in this article. Mr. Parsons said:

“San Diego park tract is a revelation of an altogether new type of landscape to me, and my first impression is of profound regard for the distinct natural beauty of the site and the magnificent

outlook. As the park is now, in its natural state, the whole effect is most impressive. Every park has its own peculiar and more or less distinct characteristics, but this great area of spreading mesa and rugged picturesque canyons is markedly different from all other parks I have seen in Europe and America. There is nothing else like it among the parks of the world. The whole landscape is different from any other I know anywhere, and the regions which are suggested to my mind by some details of this tract, stand out in contrast rather than in comparison with it.

“View counts tremendously in the special value of this park site, and the mountains and sea enter into the whole picture even more impressively than the park itself. One of the first principles of landscape gardening is to preserve views. From the ridges of the park the landscape spreads out in varied beauty in all directions, to all points of the compass. The horizon line is clearly seen in a great circle defined by Point of Rocks promontory and mountains in Mexico, successive ranges and peaks to the east, snow-covered summits of the San Jacinto range with an elevation of 10,000 feet, seventy miles to the northeast; more mountains to the north, and, toward the west, Point Loma, jutting far out into the Pacific, points to the distant huge precipitous Coronado islands, one of the most impressive features in this great natural picture.

“The setting of the park between a vast mountain system on one hand and the broad ocean on the other, is unique. Harbor, bay, islands, sea, promontories, mountains and miles of open country, each with its own unusual and distinct character, are all incorporated in the park scheme and form an inseparable and vital part of it; hundreds of square miles of land and sea are thereby added to the territory of the park.”

In the six months following Mr. Parson's arrival, preliminary work of the surveys, making of contour maps, working plans, etc., was carried on continuously, and the City Board of Public Works co-operated with the citizen committees. In July, 1903, Mr. George Cooke, a partner in the Parsons firm, arrived and

actual construction work commenced at the corner of Sixth and Date. This was probably the hardest job ever undertaken on the park because the surface soil of several acres had been scraped off to fill the Fifth Avenue canyon. So our park gardening began, not with the planting of trees and sowing of flower seeds, but with blasting, hard-pan shooting, digging, shoveling and grading, men and mules in a revelry of sweat and dirt. One day, when the writer was looking on, a friend in passing said: "Marston, you better give this up. It's a natural home for cactus, coyotes, and jack-rabbits. It ain't no park and never will be." A greater prophet in Israel said: "The desert shall bloom as the rose."

Thus 1903 was the pioneer year of the "City Park," as it was then called. In the next seven years the main roadways were built, a partial water pipe system installed, the west side planted from Date to Upas and the Golden Hill section further developed. It was a brave beginning for a great park. Mr. Parsons said he never had seen anything to equal it in a city of 20,000 people. He had praised the terrain and the views, but when he got acquainted with the hard-pan and the long dry seasons he understood why we had been short of parks in previous times. Besides natural difficulties there was downright opposition by a minority group of citizens, a shortage of money all the time, and much popular impatience that the trees didn't grow faster. But notwithstanding everything, by 1910 the foundations of a real park were laid and it was chosen then as the site for the Exposition of 1915.

It is not in the scope of this article to trace in detail the growth of Balboa Park in the last 25 years. Only its outstanding features can be touched.

In preparation for the Exposition heavy appropriations of money were authorized by the city for landscape treatment; competent engineers, architects, and gardeners were engaged and an intensive development of nearly two-thirds of the whole 1400 acres was steadily carried on for four years. The park as it

is today was mainly built in that time. The great bridge over Cabrillo canyon, the California building and quadrangle, the Prado and central plaza, the Spreckels outdoor organ, the stadium, and most of the fine structures on the Prado are monuments of the 1915 Exposition. Especially fine are the splendid examples of the building genius of Bertram G. Goodhue, the foremost American architect of his day. The museums, art gallery and zoological garden had their beginnings in the Exposition period and thus founded on the park a kind of university of art and science.

Later on ample recreation grounds were established, such as the municipal golf course, tennis and roque courts, baseball and quoit pitching grounds, bowling greens, pepper tree picnic grove and, finally, the extensive recreational facilities in the northeast section. A garden of aloes and various succulents of the desert type has recently been founded in honor of Miss Kate O. Sessions, the dean of our horticulturists.

The Exposition of 1935-36 has still further developed the central part of the park. More decorative features have been added, formal gardens with statuary and fountains, grass plots, parterres of flowers and displays of succulents. New pathways lead into forested canyons and carry one across picturesque bridges. A refining process of new designs, artistic composition and heightened color pictures has given the park new beauty. The stimulating effect of two more exposition years is also seen in the enhancement of the science and art museums, the wonderful zoo and all the minor organizations that use the fair buildings. The new outdoor theater, the bowl, adds another fine place for plays and concerts. Music in the park is coming to be one of its permanent attractions.

All in all, the wilderness of the naked mesas and canyons of cactus and coyotes has in some magical way become a fairy city of palaces and playgrounds, a public school of the arts and a splendid pleasure ground of gardens, lawns, forested spaces and charming driveways. It is today one of the notable parks of the country.

For nearly 25 years Mr. John G. Morley has been the superintendent of Balboa Park and all other city parks. His devotion to this great task and his ability in management of men and in the great art of gardening deserve the constant appreciation of this community. In the preparatory years of the 1915 Exposition Mr. Frank P. Allen, Jr., was in charge of building and landscape work on the fair grounds and made a great contribution to the whole development. Since 1927 the general landscape treatment has been in substantial accordance with plans furnished by John Nolen, the author of the City Plan for San Diego.

Until the year 1910, our 1400 acre tract was called "City Park." On November 1 of that year, at the request of many citizens, the city administration gave it the name of "Balboa Park," in honor of the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean.

### *Presidio Hill*

The park named Presidio Hill lies in Old Town, four miles northwest of the central part of the city. There are 32 acres in the tract but so much of it lies on steep hillsides that it equals 40 acres on the level. There are two outstanding heights, the hill that rises sharply above San Diego river on the north and the hill Fort Stockton on the south. The terrain is wonderfully moulded by nature and remarkable for scenic beauty and picturesque quality. This has been greatly enhanced by fine landscape treatment.

The historic interest of the place is its chief characteristic and gives the park its great significance. In July, 1769, Junipero Serra founded here the Mission San Diego de Alcalá. On this hill the soldiers, sailors, priests and artisans of Spanish blood lived for over sixty years, and the ruins of their habitations are still visible. There are also traces of adobe walls, defense stations, store houses, burial grounds and gardens.

In 1821 the Mexican government took possession and Mexico in turn surrendered to the United States in 1846. The presidio was abandoned in 1835. Some olive trees were planted afterwards

on the west slope and a graveyard was maintained there before the modern city was established. But for nearly a hundred years Presidio Hill was a desolate place.

In 1907 a few citizens, namely Charles Kelly, John D. Spreckels, E. W. Scripps, A. G. Spalding and George W. Marston conferred with each other and deplored the fact that the site of California's birthplace was so utterly neglected. Investigation showed that the presidio lands were in possession of various private owners and that the restitution of the property to public ownership would be a long and tedious process. In brief, the central ground where the cross stands was immediately purchased and in the course of 25 years 20 acres more were acquired. In 1930 this land was conveyed to the city for public park purposes and with 10 acres of adjoining land that had been municipally-owned for a long time, the combined area was dedicated by the City Council of 1930 as a public park. The Council resolution is of date January 13, 1930.

Park development had been carried on by private means for three years before this official action. In 1927 Dr. John Nolen prepared preliminary plans and in 1928 the first park work was done, mainly the building of the central roadway and the removal of a city reservoir. The memorial building in honor of Junipero Serra was built in the first six months of 1929 and dedicated on July 16, of that year, the 160th anniversary of the founding of the Mission of San Diego. This notable occasion was graced by the presence of the Spanish Ambassador to the United States, Senor Don Alejandro Padilla y Bell, by order of the King of Spain. The literary, musical and dramatic features of the historical celebration were of a high order. The exercises were opened with the glorious chant, Alabado, rendered by the chorus of the Franciscan Choir from Santa Barbara Mission.

In the seven years since 1929 the park has been steadily built up and will be substantially completed by July, 1937. Mr. Percy C. Broell has been the competent superintendent of the park for the past four years. The main features of this park are the pre-

sidio ruins; the red cross made of tiles taken from these ruins; the bastion and connecting walls; the Franciscan garden; the old date palm, the oldest in California; the Fort Stockton earthworks and "El Jupiter," the Manila cannon; the Bowl, a place for pageants; the mass plantations of pines and eucalypts on the two higher points; the Arthur Putnam statues, the Priest and the Indian; and the Serra Museum, home of the San Diego Historical and Pioneer Societies.

Historian Smythe called this ground of the presidio, the pueblo, and the church, the Plymouth Rock of the Pacific. Presidio Hill is indeed a sacred place and belongs by historic birth to the city, the state, and the nation.

### *Torrey Pines Park*

This is a natural park of 1000 acres lying on the coast at the extreme north limit of the city, about 15 miles from Old Town. The first reservation of 369 acres was made by city ordinance in 1899; subsequent ordinances have added about 600 acres. Besides these dedications of pueblo land a tract of 200 acres or more, containing the choicest of the Torrey pines, was bequeathed to the city by the will of Miss Ellen B. Scripps and will become a part of the park in due time. For several years Miss Scripps maintained a caretaker on her own and the city land. The attractive lodge house is also her benefaction.

The unique and extraordinary feature of this park is the large group of conifers botanically named *Pinus Torreyana*, a species of pine trees growing nowhere else in the world except on this coast land between San Diego and Del Mar, and on Santa Rosa island, in the Pacific not very far distant.

In 1922, Mr. Ralph D. Cornell was engaged by Miss Scripps to report on the landscape treatment necessary for the Torrey Pines Tract. Mr. Cornell's characterization of the place and his advice of "Restraint" are taken bodily from his exceedingly valuable report:

“In thinking about the development of this tract, I believe there is one impression that stands out eminently above all others,—that is the distinctiveness of this one spot and its difference from any other spot that one may have visited in his world wandering. Torrey Pines is not a place of typical scenery; it is not representative of the primitive, natural landscape of San Diego County, or of any other place in the world. It is itself, alone, unimitated,—with precipitous cliffs carved and sculptured by the erosions of time; it is picturesque, unique, colorful and beautiful, with a combination of nearby sea and distant mountains that delights the eye and soothes the soul; it bears as adornment botanical species of plants that occur nowhere else as indigenous species. I think all agree that it should be so kept,—true to itself, typical of nothing, for it requires many more than one of a thing to establish a type.

“If Torrey Pines is to be preserved and held in trust for the generations which will follow ours, and if the tract is to escape the commonplace appearance, the exploitations and the encroachments that become the heritage of so many public lands, it must be very zealously guarded. As a watchword to guide in its development; I feel that one cannot too loudly state nor too often repeat the slogan of ‘RESTRAINT.’ Do not forget that this is ‘TORREY PINES,’—*not* typical scenery. Do not permit the love of plants and the zeal of the collector to make this into a botanical garden or plant museum which will leave no semblance to the original landscape. Do not introduce features nor plants foreign to the spirit and feeling of this area as it now exists. Do not permit acts of forestation to clothe the slopes densely with pines to the exclusion and concealment of the open spaces of yellow earth against which the gray-green pines now show so beautifully. Remember that open spaces are necessary for the proper sight and enjoyment of the vegetation which shows in relief against the ground forms. Remember that Torrey Pines’ fame was won without man’s creative aid, and that preservation rather than change should be sought.

"Some few oaks have already been planted on this and adjoining city property. I begrudge them the very space they occupy even in their juvenile state. Nothing is finer or more majestic than our natural live oaks, but they do not belong here. We have many reserves particularly for the oak. Here it is inappropriate. Let Torrey Pines Park be a monument to all that is characteristically beautiful, let its present feeling be preserved, and leave the extraneous, outside things to other uses."

Torrey Pines Park needs constant and watchful care in order to preserve its primitive beauty. Being on the highway from Los Angeles there is danger of its being overrun with automobiles and tramped into sand wastes. To keep it open and free and yet guarded against spoliation is our civic duty.

### *La Jolla Park*

This is one of the many small parks in San Diego, only about five acres, but a very important one. With great foresight and good sense the real estate company that laid out town lots for sale in 1887 dedicated this picturesque strip of the coast line to park purposes. It was always beautiful and the favorite place for picnics fifty and sixty years ago. The writer remembers going there with a party in about 1874. No cottages or inns there then, scarcely a road. The only structure built by man was a row of three or four hitching posts with connecting bars. We "hitched" there and then went to the caves.

In 1904 George Cooke, under the auspices of the Park Improvement Committee, planned and planted La Jolla Park. In general design and composition of trees and shrubs the park retains today his plan and work. Long and desperate were the struggles of the early park commissioners and the village residents over the first "bath house." This was many years before La Jolla became a fashionable summer resort and before Miss Scripps, the lady bountiful, built the fine swimming pool.

La Jolla is a charming suburban city, choicest of all California's coast resorts, although Monterey is most interesting and

historical. But it had better keep clear of railroads, factories, sky scrapers and "Coney Island" improvements. Its two parks, the one on the shore, and the other on the mountain above are lovely features of this city by the sea.

### *Soledad Park*

The fog is sometimes very foggy in that little city at the foot of Mt. Soledad. Happy La Jollans to have sunny Soledad so near. These 120 acres of park land on a high hill top, overlook to the west the Pacific Ocean and to the south, north and east present a glorious panorama of hills, valleys and mountains. The outlook is probably the finest of all our town or suburban view points. Perhaps Soledad cannot be improved but it must be preserved.

### *The Plaza*

This tiny park is in the heart of the city and is seen by more people than any other park. It might well be called Plaza de Horton or Horton Plaza, because it was set aside for public use in the map of Horton's Addition. In early days it was an open space for outdoor meetings and was decorated with a showy band stand.

Its two fine features today are the handsome Wilde fountain and the lofty Cocos Plumosa palms on the four sides. There are also two commemorating stones in the middle walk from Third to Fourth Avenue. On the east side, the Pacific Milestone, to mark San Diego's connection with the Southern Transcontinental Highway and Col. El Fletcher's distinguished service in promoting road building from coast to coast. On the west side a rough hewn stone that marks the first Pacific terminal of the Jefferson Highway from Savannah to San Diego.

### *The Minor Parks*

There are about 40 small park places in San Diego, most of them entirely undeveloped. They will all have their use in time

and their dedication to the public is a wise provision for the future. Except in the south section of the city our preparation for park places has been very liberal. Besides these forty small ones there are several others of more present interest.

The largest of these is Collier Park on Point Loma, as yet undeveloped. Sunset Cliffs and Spaulding Park, between Point Loma and Ocean Beach, are partly developed and the Cliffs are notable. There are two small parks in Mission Hills, one of which has a group of California live oaks. Slight improvements have been made in Mountain View Park at 40th and Woolman Streets. There are several small parks in East San Diego, one of which, Park de la Cruz, 4½ acres, has been partially developed and is becoming attractive. Further landscape work on the east side of Balboa Park should be made for the benefit of the large population living in that section.

### *San Diego Preeminent for Parks*

The size, treatment and beauty of San Diego's parks compare favorably with those of older and larger cities. But there is yet much to be done. Chicago and Minneapolis have a "park system," the high feature of which is their connecting roadways. With the growth of the city our little neighborhood parks require more attention. We have built Balboa in 25 years. The remaining 1400 acres of smaller parks can also be built in the next twenty-five.