

“San Diego State’s First Year”

We shall not wait until the new building on University Heights is finished before opening the normal school. We have decided to open it in temporary quarters on November 1, with a corps of perhaps five teachers.

--Wilfred R. Guy, Chairman, Board of Trustees, San Diego State Normal School

On November 1, 1898, the first classes of the future San Diego State University began. In leased rooms above a downtown novelty shop, eighty-one students appeared for the formal opening of the new San Diego State Normal School.



Hill Building at Sixth and F, 1898.

San Diegans had clamored for a state-funded teachers training college for years. Called “normal schools” because they instilled teaching *norms*, the institutions had already been established in San Jose, Los Angeles, and Chico. Local boosters lobbied hard in Sacramento to secure a San Diego college—essential, they believed, for the growth of the region’s elementary and high schools.

Real estate promoters were also keen on securing a college that would anchor and encourage new development. A College of Arts and Sciences was proposed in 1887 for a new subdivision--optimistically called “University Heights.” As a branch of the University of Southern California, classes were held for a short time in a downtown church while construction started at Park Blvd. but the college soon failed.

In 1894, school promoters got a second chance when sixteen acres of land and buildings in Pacific Beach was offered to the state by a developer in exchange for a school. With the proposed gift as an incentive, San Diego representatives secured state funding for a new Normal School for the “training and educating of teachers.” The bill was signed by Governor James Budd on March 13, 1897.

As part of the legislation, the school bill authorized a board of trustees who would select the permanent site for the school. Besides the original Pacific Beach offer, there were now competing choices. John D. Spreckels offered a site in his Spreckels Heights development above Old Town, and Escondido proposed the property and buildings of its own high school.

But the trustees were most impressed by University Heights at Park and El Cajon Boulevards. The site of the abortive College of Arts was the unanimous choice of the trustees on June 3, 1897. The architects Hebbard and Gill were selected to design and build the first buildings for a cost not to exceed \$100,000. Ground was broken on August 1, 1898.

As Irving Gill's classic Beaux Arts structure began to rise on Park Blvd., the Normal School trustees eagerly announced their intention to open school as soon as possible in a temporary location yet to be found. Board chairman Wilfred Guy suggested it might be the Marshal-Higgins Block at Fourth and C Streets, or possibly rooms at the Y.M.C.A. at Sixth and D. Chairman Guy would only say, "We want to get the school in good running order as soon as possible and nothing stands in the way of accomplishing that objective."

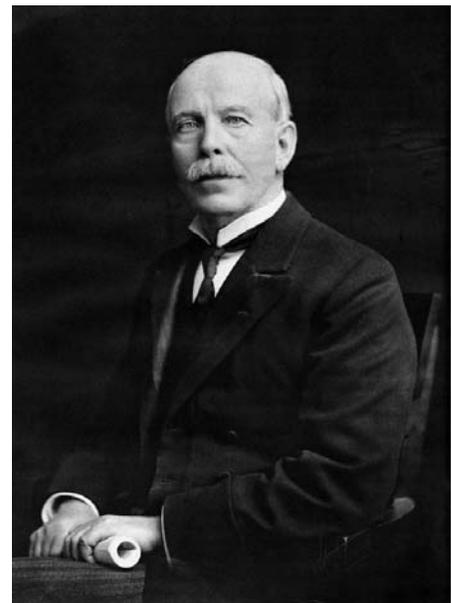
The trustees published notice in the newspapers inviting potential students to enroll at a downtown law office in the Keating Block for the two-year program. Applicants were expected to "be of good moral character" with at least a grammar school education. They were required to file a declaration that they were entering the college "for the purpose of fitting themselves to teach" in public schools.

The Normal School would offer only three classes at first: English, algebra, and history. The trustees apologized that a science class could not be offered owing to the lack of laboratory space and equipment.

The first notice of a site came on October 8, only three weeks before the start of classes. The school's new president, Samuel T. Black, the former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, announced he would establish his office in the Hill Block at Sixth and F Streets where "the third floor and three rooms on the second floor will be fitted up for a temporary normal school."

The school rooms were "fitted up in fine style" according to the *San Diego Union*. "A notable feature will be the use of tables instead of desks for the students, and is President Black's innovation."

A faculty of five teachers was announced—all well-qualified, experienced instructors. Miss Emma Way accepted the lead job as *preceptress*, which paid an annual salary of \$1,600. As "the moral instructor of the young ladies" Miss Way was expected to dictate "what proper entertainments shall be attended" and also to designate a curfew time for the lady students.



Samuel T. Black

On the first day of classes the students gathered in the assembly room and began their day with the singing of "America." The invocation followed, delivered by Rev. A. E. Knapp. After addresses by President Black and Chairman Guy, the 75 ladies and 6 men were assigned rooms and their studies began.

Each day began in similar fashion: a gathering in the assembly room where the students chanted the Lord's Prayer and sang hymns. The teachers would then take turns reading from the Scriptures before the students went to class.

Additional pupils were admitted in February "on account of the crowded conditions of the original classes." With more than one hundred students enrolled, President Black judged the institution in "a very flourishing condition." The lady students greeted the spring with the organization of a rowing club--the school's first sports team.

San Diego State's first year came to a close on June 29, 1899. With 135 students completing classes, the year had "far exceeded the expectations of everyone," President Black declared. "While we have had only eight months' school in which to do a full year's work . . . work was accomplished in every line, but with one exception." Algebra, the president noted regretfully, had not been finished "because the study requires more time than we could give it."

In the fall of 1899, the San Diego State Normal School began the year at its permanent home on Park Blvd. The school would graduate its first students that spring: 23 women and three men. In 1921, the growing school became the four-year San Diego State Teachers College, and in February 1931, the college would move to its current home on Montezuma Mesa in east San Diego.



San Diego State Normal School on Park Blvd. in 1904.

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