

## San Diego Attempts a Public Library

*Mr. A. E. Horton yesterday donated to the San Diego Free Reading Room Association his fine library. It will be remembered by old residents that this library was bought as the nucleus for a public institution some time ago—Mr. Horton having paid a large sum of money for it.*

--San Diego Union, May 21, 1873

Alonzo Horton's "New Town" on the shore of San Diego Bay was growing. Since his purchase of nearly one thousand acres of vacant land in 1867, homes, buildings, and institutions had sprouted quickly. But attempts to open one basic civic institution, a public library, would prove difficult.



Alonzo E. Horton in about 1868.  
*Special Collections, San Diego Public Library*

In the spring of 1869, Horton struck a deal with San Francisco book dealer Hubert Howe Bancroft. The city founder gave Bancroft several lots of downtown property in exchange for about one thousand assorted books. Mindful of every possible inducement for families to settle in San Diego, Horton intended the books for a public library.

In January 1870, library enthusiasts met at the First Baptist Church near Seventh and F Streets, and agreed to form the "Horton Library Association." "We are glad to learn that this great want of our community is likely to be soon supplied," reported the *San Diego Union*. The newspaper noted that sixty-four members of "this praiseworthy institution" had paid \$2.50 each as an initiation fee and for three months of dues. "Many more members will soon be obtained, and by means of lectures, calico parties, etc., a fine library can and will be established."

The newspaper's optimism was premature. When the association's "Committee on Books and Subscriptions" met with Horton the next week to discuss the transfer of his books, the "father of San Diego" stunned the committee with a surprising demand. Setting the value of his books at \$2000, Horton offered to donate only half of his books. The other half he would sell to the association for \$1000 in cash. Horton helpfully suggested the association could raise the money by selling ten life memberships at \$100 each.

Horton's string-attached "donation" was declined. Instead, the members dissolved the "Horton Library Association" and reorganized under as the "San Diego Library Association." The original bylaws and officers were retained. Horton, however, was dismissed as a trustee.

The *Union* put a happy face on the debacle: "The Library is a fixed fact without the aid of Mr. Horton's name. A course of lectures will shortly be delivered, and a calico masquerade held in

aid of the institution. Books will be contributed by several citizens, and in a very short time the rooms will be opened.”

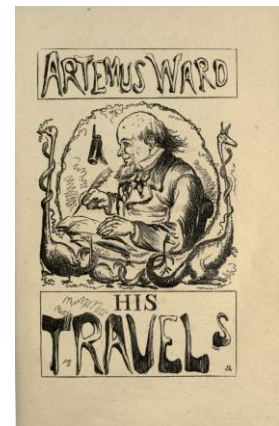
But once again, the library hopes were dashed. Interest in the Library Association faded and Horton’s book collection was deposited in a room on Third Street and D (Broadway) Streets, next to the Horton Bank Building. “Mr. Horton has thrown open his library to the public,” the *Union* announced in May 1870. But the collection was seldom used.

A new library association began in May 1872. With about twenty members, “The San Diego Free Reading Room Association” was established as “a place where citizens could read periodicals until a regularly appointed library building or rooms could be had.” In a small room on Fifth Street the library was open daily from 10:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. Alonzo Horton decided to offer his book collection to the new effort—this time, with no strings attached.

A librarian was appointed to supervise the collection, but, as library patron Philip Morse remembered, “He was not in attendance at all hours of the day, and it came to be the custom of patrons to help themselves to some extent, and return the books at their leisure.” When collection thefts got out of hand, the association advertised in the newspapers, once offering a reward of \$1 for the return of a missing issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

The library was strong in the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne, recalled Morse, with “a good many school text books, such as English grammars, and readers, and some copies of the *Congressional Record*. A popular book by humorist Charles Farrar Browne was *Artemus Ward, His Travels*.”

Aided by sporadic fundraising efforts, the Free Reading Room struggled on for several years and moved to new quarters by the downtown post office on F Street. It closed in 1879 after several failed efforts to secure government funding for a permanent, publically-funded institution. The city’s first successful library would come in May 1882, when the San Diego Public Library opened in rent-free rooms on the second floor of the Commercial Bank Building at Fifth and G Streets.



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