

The Horton House Hotel

The great need of this town is about to be supplied by A. E. Horton, Esq., who will immediately erect, on the northwest corner of Fourth and D Streets, a palatial brick edifice, for hotel purposes. It is to contain a hundred rooms and to be fitted up with elegant furniture and all modern improvements.

--The San Diego Bulletin, December 18, 1869

San Diego in 1869 was on the verge of a boom. A railroad connection to the east, which would make San Diego the terminus of the first transcontinental railroad, seemed likely. Anticipating the link, real estate sales boomed. The *Bulletin* declared, "From a place of no importance, the home of a squirrel a few months back, we now have a city of three thousand inhabitants."

Only two years earlier, a businessman from San Francisco--Alonzo Erastus Horton, had started it all by buying San Diego pueblo land near the port—not far from the failed town site of William H. Davis, whose 1850s venture was already known as "Davis' Folly." Horton succeeded by selling off lots of "Horton's Addition" at bargain prices to attract settlers and businesses. For many investors, the impending arrival of the railroad, clinched the deal.



Alonzo E. Horton

On New Year's Day, 1870, Horton broke ground for a first-class hotel that would be the centerpiece of the rising city. A shipload of rough lumber was "promiscuously dumped" around a brush-covered site on D Street and "nearly all" the carpenters and bricklayers in town set to work. Horton's brother-in-law, W. W. Bowers, supervised the construction of the hotel, working from a crude sketch of San Francisco's famed Russ House as a model. The two and half story, 100-room hotel was finished in only nine months, at the cost of \$150,000.

The Horton House opened on October 10, 1870 to rave public reviews. Calling itself "the largest and finest hotel in California south of San Francisco," it featured gas lighting and rich carpeting throughout the building; rooms with steam heaters and marble washstands filled with "pure soft water" conveyed by pipes (from a well); and bathrooms running both hot and cold water. Perhaps the hotel's proudest achievement was "an electrical bell apparatus, with wires," which ran to the office from every room.

The hotel soon operated at capacity and brought new business to San Diego. Hotel guests paid \$2.50 for a room, meals included. The San Diego *Union* declared: "Horton has met the great need of our young city. He did it by building and keeping a first class hotel . . . the Horton House has done more for San Diego than all other improvements combined."

Horton kept the ownership of the hotel for several years but only with difficulty. In 1873, the railroad syndicate that had promised a terminus in San Diego, collapsed. San Diego's boom faltered and Horton found himself in financial trouble. He leased the Horton House and looked,

unsuccessfully, for a buyer of the hotel. He also borrowed money, using his hotel as collateral. When Horton defaulted on a loan from a local businessman he almost lost the property.



In “M. S. Patrick vs. A. E. Horton,” it was alleged that \$4,107 was owed to Mr. Patrick. To satisfy the debt, the District Court issued a writ of attachment, which demanded Horton surrender all the furnishings of the hotel. Horton survived the crisis but the court case file, which contained a room by room inventory of the Horton House, provided lavish evidence of the “best style” the hotel was known for.

The attachment papers listed the contents of every room: hotel office, sleeping rooms, bar, library, billiard room, and dining room. The most minimal bedroom contained a bedstead with sheets, pillows and blankets; also towel racks, chamber pot, spittoon, and chair. More sumptuous quarters added loungers and rocking chairs. Some rooms boasted pianos, marble center tables, and oil paintings on the wall. The hotel bar was well-stocked with nearly a hundred varieties of liquor and several thousand cigars.

For several more years Horton leased out the hotel while he struggled with mortgage payments. But foreclosure loomed. Finally, in August 1881, the *Union* politely reported: “We take pleasure in announcing that the Horton House has passed into the hands of W. E. Hadley, who took charge yesterday evening.”

William Hadley would run the Horton House for the next two decades, occasionally making renovations and small additions. In March 1886 the hotel would boast the “first private electric

light in the city. As the hotel's premier status was gradually eclipsed by newer hostelries, Hadley promoted his "moderate" prices with "special rates to families."

On August 12, 1895, a headline in the San Diego *Union* blared, "Horton House Is Sold." The buyer was the family of U. S. Grant, Jr. who paid \$52,251 for the property. "It is understood," the newspaper said, that Grant will eventually build "a grand hotel building" on the site of the Horton House.

Years of rumors followed about a possible new hotel. In 1903, the *Union* reported that architects Hebbard and Gill had drawn preliminary plans for the site. The plans were never used. More time would pass before U. S. Grant, Jr. decided to tear down the Horton House and build a new hotel as a monument to his father, President Grant.

On July 12, 1905, a large crowd watched as Alonzo Horton, age 91, ceremoniously removed a brick from the hotel he had built thirty-five years earlier. Turning to the crowd, Horton said it was his wish that the brick be used "in the principal wall of the new structure."

Construction of the new hotel, designed by Harrison Albright, began then stopped--delayed by the San Francisco earthquake and funding difficulties. Five more years would go by before the U. S. Grant Hotel officially opened on October 15, 1910.

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), p. 7-10.