

## “The Davis Folly”

*Of the new town of San Diego, now the city of San Diego, I can say that I was its founder.*

--William Heath Davis, interview with *San Diego Sun*, December 1887.

Often forgotten in San Diego history is the pioneer some historians regard as the true founder of the City of San Diego. William Heath Davis certainly believed he deserved credit for his attempt of 1850—an effort that failed but paved the way for a later city builder named Alonzo E. Horton.



Davis, the son of a Boston trader, was born in Hawaii in 1822. At age sixteen he settled in California to learn business with his uncle. In San Francisco he grew wealthy as a successful merchant and ship-owner. Davis was a frequent visitor to the Mexican pueblo of San Diego, where, in 1847, he married into the prominent Californio family of Estudillo. His wife, María de Jesus, was the niece of José Antonio Estudillo, alcalde of San Diego (whose home, La Casa de Estudillo is preserved today in Old Town).

During a visit to San Diego in February 1850, the chief surveyor for the U. S. Boundary Commission, Andrew Belcher Gray, introduced himself to Davis. Gray pointed out to Davis what many San Diegans thought was obvious—the future of the town lay near the port, not inland at Old Town below Presidio Hill. The surveyor recognized Davis as a man with capital and suggested a partnership to establish a new town site. The two men brought in San Diegans José Antonio Aguirre, Miguel de Pedronena, and William C. Farrell, and the local U.S. Army quartermaster, Lt. Thomas D. Johns, as associates in their city building scheme.

Twenty-eight-year-old William Heath Davis, “being flush, and having a large income,” was the principal investor in the plan and supervised the first purchase of pueblo land: \$2,304 for 160 acres bounded by the waterfront and today’s Front Street and Broadway. Davis invested \$60,000 for construction of a wharf and warehouse to attract ships to the new site. Land donated to the military for an Army barracks completed the nucleus of “New Town” San Diego.

Davis’ New Town or “New San Diego” showed promise. A small community grew around the plaza of Pantoja Park, at Fourth (G Street) and India. The nearby San Diego Barracks gave the town a steady population of soldiers, who happily patronized the billiard room and saloon at Davis’ new hotel, the Pantoja House. The arrival of newspaper publisher John Judson Ames was a coup for Davis; Ames’ *Herald*, San Diego’s first newspaper, began from an office above a store in New Town in May 1851.

While New Town seemed ideally situated at the port, the location had flaws. Lack of fresh water was a major problem. With no local streams or artesian wells, the soldiers at the Barracks were forced to make daily “water-train” excursions to the San Diego River, miles away near Old Town. Davis spent considerable money boring wells before good water was found.

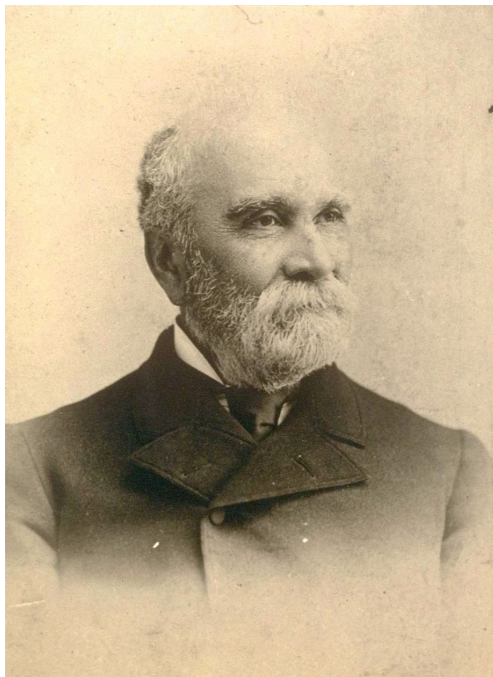
What New Town needed most was settlers and homes. Davis ordered thousands of feet of lumber, redwood pilings, bricks, girders—all the materials necessary to construct a town. Davis even ordered a shipment of prefabricated frame houses from Portland, Maine. (San Diego's oldest surviving wooden building—intended as Davis' own home, though he never lived there—was such a house, shipped around the Horn from the East Coast.)

Andrew Gray, now on the east coast, encouraged Davis. “Ten years—and you will still be young—and will be surrounded by a delightful population,” Gray wrote. He also advised the young city builder, “attach to your wharf—where it passes over the sand spit—a bathing house for ladies and gentlemen... this would be a great attraction and profitable also.”

But most San Diegans were slow to embrace the new site. The county seat and center of the population was still Old Town, where suspicious residents showed no interest in supporting a rival town. San Francisco's leading newspaper, *Alta California*, predicted failure for the Davis venture, declaring in September 1851, “the establishment of the new town at the head of the bay was certainly a most disastrous speculation, an immense amount having been sunk in the operation.”

To pay for his speculation, Davis increasingly drew upon his San Francisco investments. Debts piled up. In July 1850—only months after his initial purchase of San Diego land—Davis expressed his frustration to a friend:

*All the funds that I have drawn from the store and other sources have been eaten up in the expenses of the town . . . without me God only know what they would do here—it has taken an enormous sum to meet all their demands. We meet with much opposition from the inhabitants of the old town and beach—they make every effort in the world to crush us . . . I am on my back and unwell.*



William Heath Davis (1822–1909)

At its peak, New Town held perhaps two hundred residents. Most drifted to Old Town in 1851-52. When Ames moved his *Herald* there in 1853 local businesses followed. Davis gave up also and returned to San Francisco, still hopeful at the end that his venture would eventually succeed.

John Russell Bartlett, a U. S. surveyor like Andrew Gray, summarized the experiment that would be called “Davis' Folly” in February 1852:

*A large and fine wharf was built here at great expense; but there is no business to bring vessels here, except an occasional one with government stores. There is no water nearer than the San Diego River, three miles distant . . . wood has to be brought some eight or ten miles; nor is there any arable land within four miles. Without wood, water, or arable land this place can never rise to importance.*

Ultimately, Bartlett would be proved wrong. Fifteen years later a new city builder, Alonzo Horton, arrived from San Francisco. The businessman gazed at the site of New Town and called it “Heaven on Earth . . . the best spot for building a city I ever saw.” Horton successfully renewed the project that failed for Davis and began the city we know today.

Ironically, Horton and his wife Sarah lived for a time in the “William Heath Davis House” at Market and State Streets. San Diego’s oldest frame house still stands today, preserved by the Gaslamp Quarter Historical Foundation, at its current location, 410 Island Avenue.



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