

SOHO Lesson Plan - 19th Century Education in Old Town San Diego



Mason Street school. Photo courtesy classicsandiego.com

The Mason Street school was built in 1865. It was the first public school in San Diego. Located on Mason Street in Old Town, it was a wood-frame structure consisting of a large main room heated by a cast iron pot-bellied stove. There was one instructor for up to eight grades, all taught in the same room. The students sat upon benches, the youngest in the front rows and the eldest in the back rows. There were no desks, and the students used slate boards with chalk or slate pencils instead of paper. A rag was used as an eraser.

With no plumbing or running water, a small single seat outhouse or privy served as a restroom facility shared by the students and the teacher, and a bucket of water with a dipper served as an early version of a drinking fountain. The school day was from 9:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon. Recess took place in the small yard, where the students also ate the meals they brought with them each morning in small tins, pails or buckets.

Having arrived in San Diego in the summer of 1865, Mary Chase Walker was the first teacher to instruct students at the newly opened schoolhouse. Miss Walker taught up to 35 students at a time ranging in age from 4 to 17 years old.

Thomas Whaley was displeased with the cramped conditions of the school his 5 children attended. In 1873 he designed a new, two-story building to replace the one-room schoolhouse (which was moved to Taylor and Whitman Streets and eventually became a tamale factory).

Thomas Whaley donated the design and the materials to build the spacious new school, which taught girls on the first floor, and boys on the second floor; Mr. Echols taught the boys, and Mrs. Bush taught the girls. Mr. Echols, who Thomas Whaley felt was not an effective teacher and too extreme in his discipline of the boys, was eventually fired due to Mr. Whaley's complaints.

The two-story Mason Street school designed by Mr. Whaley was eventually torn down, and in 1955, the original one-story schoolhouse was restored and returned to its original location, appearing as it did when Frank, Annie, George, Violet, and Lillie Whaley first sat on its benches learning the three “R’s” - readin’, ritin’ and ‘rithmetic.



What are the features of a modern, 21st century school?

- Classrooms used for specific grades
- Classrooms used for specific subjects
- Teachers for different grades and subjects
- Library
- Vast range of subjects taught
 1. Literature/reading
 2. Mathematics
 3. Sciences
 4. Languages
 5. History
 6. Social studies
 7. Music/band
 8. Singing/choir
 9. Art
 10. Sports
- Clubs/organizations
- School paper/journalism
- Programs for special needs students
- Gender separated restrooms (boys/girls)



Mason Street school, 2019

- Electric power which provides:
 1. Light
 2. Heat
 3. Air conditioning
 4. Audio/Visual capabilities
 5. Computer usage
 6. Power to charge phones/laptops/iPads
- Cafeteria which provides
 1. Hot/cold meals
 2. Discounted or free meals for those in need
 3. Snack vending machines
 4. Gathering place to sit and dine upon tables and benches
- Auditorium which provides:
 1. Gathering place for meetings and presentations
 2. Theater
 3. Place to play indoor sports
- Playground with equipment
- Sports field
- Swimming pool
- Locker rooms
- Parking lot

How did the 19th century educational experience children had in Old Town at the Mason Street School differ from your own?

- One classroom
- One privy/outhouse for everyone
- Community bucket of water to drink from
- Light provided by sunlight and oil lamps on dreary, rainy days
- Wood-fueled cast iron pot-bellied stove for heat
- All grades/ages in the same classroom
- One teacher
- Limited subjects
 1. Reading
 2. Writing
 3. Arithmetic
 4. History
 5. Geography
 6. Calisthenics (exercise)
- Families were responsible for providing meals for students
- Physical discipline was generally permitted (however, teachers deemed excessive or abusive in their discipline of pupils could be removed from their position)
- Children walked to school, rain or shine, even those who lived a few miles away

What benefits that we enjoy in today's modern schools did kids miss out on at the Mason Street school?

- Electric/gas power
- Plumbing/running water
 - Separate restrooms
 - Arts (often taught in the home)
 - Sciences (often taught in the home)
 - Organized sports
 - Playground/equipment
 - Audio/Visual learning
 - Computers