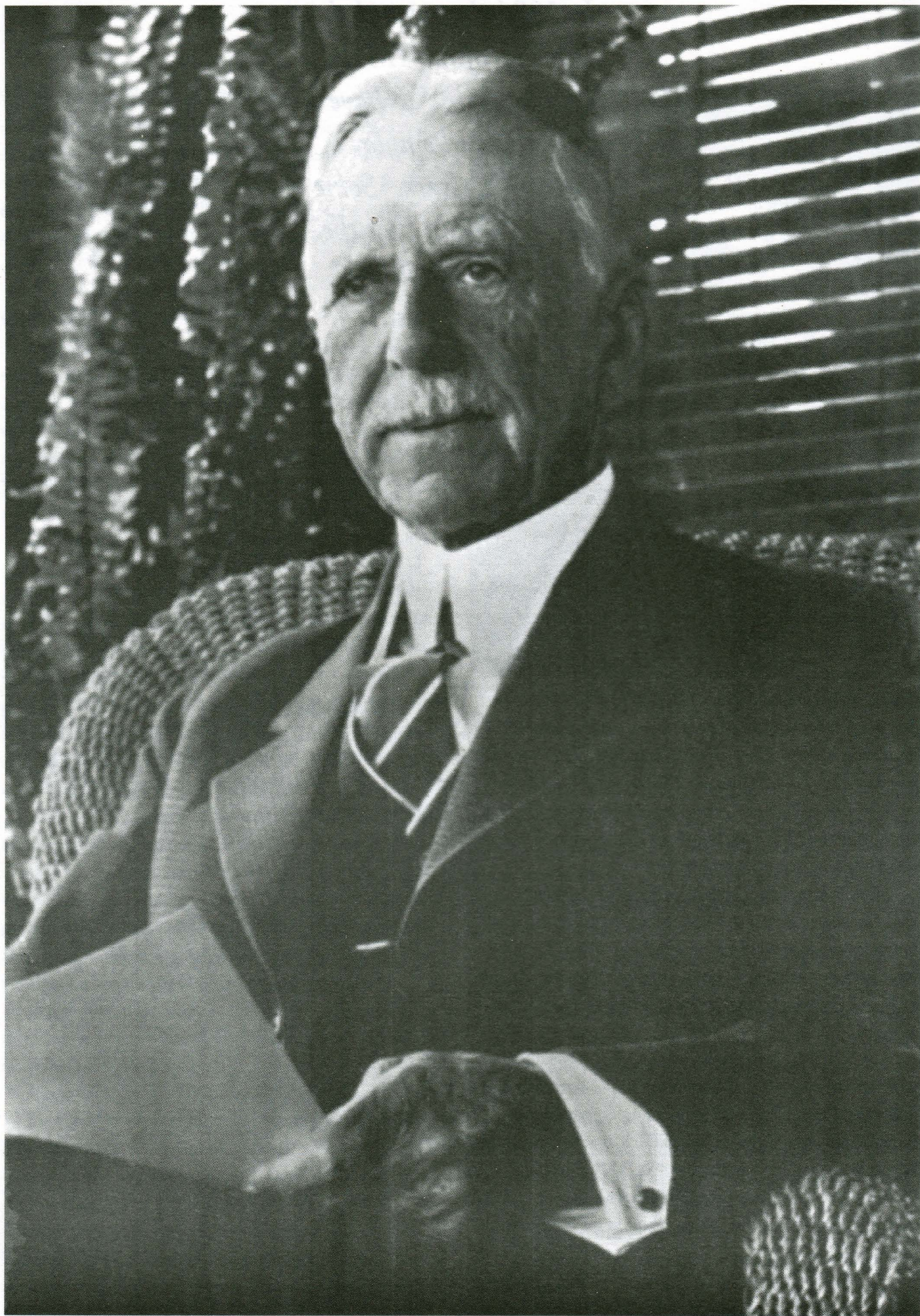


THE HISTORY OF THE  
*Y*MCA OF  
SAN DIEGO *C*OUNTY

BY MYRON H. LEWIS

*Retired General Director  
YMCA of San Diego County*







# 2 GEORGE MARSTON ORGANIZES THE SAN DIEGO YMCA - (1882-1889)

## THE BEGINNING - A HISTORICAL SKETCH

The name George W. Marston is indelibly etched in the history of the San Diego Young Men's Christian Association. It was March 17, 1882 when Marston, J. Winchester, A. C. Dolyus, F. Ridley and Charles H. Hubbell first met and decided to organize the San Diego YMCA. As a committed Christian, prominent local merchant and owner of the Marston Stores, Marston was familiar with several California YMCAs, including the San Francisco YMCA. The second meeting was April 20, 1882 when the original five were joined by F. N. Pauley, H. A. Chase, K. J. Ware, and W. E. Williams. Marston and Winchester were asked to prepare a constitution to be submitted at the next meeting.

During this time, Marston was invited to become a member of the California State Committee of YMCAs and was well fortified with YMCA literature.

He convened a group of eleven other citizens on the evening of April 27, 1882 in the Marston store office at Fifth Avenue and F Street in downtown San Diego. At that meeting the group was joined by W. W. Terry, E. F. Maxfield and R. V. Dodge, Jr. The constitution and by-laws presented by Winchester were adopted. Those present became the first members. Marston was elected President; Terry, Vice President; Hubbell, Secretary; and Ware, Treasurer.

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Struggling, the YMCA at first was only a Sunday gospel meeting organization which met in quarters secured in Hubbell Hall on Fifth Avenue near G Street. The constitution prohibited incurring a debt. Therefore, \$18,000 was raised and spent in carrying on the work for about six months, after which the YMCA was suspended on September 23, 1882, due to loss of interest.

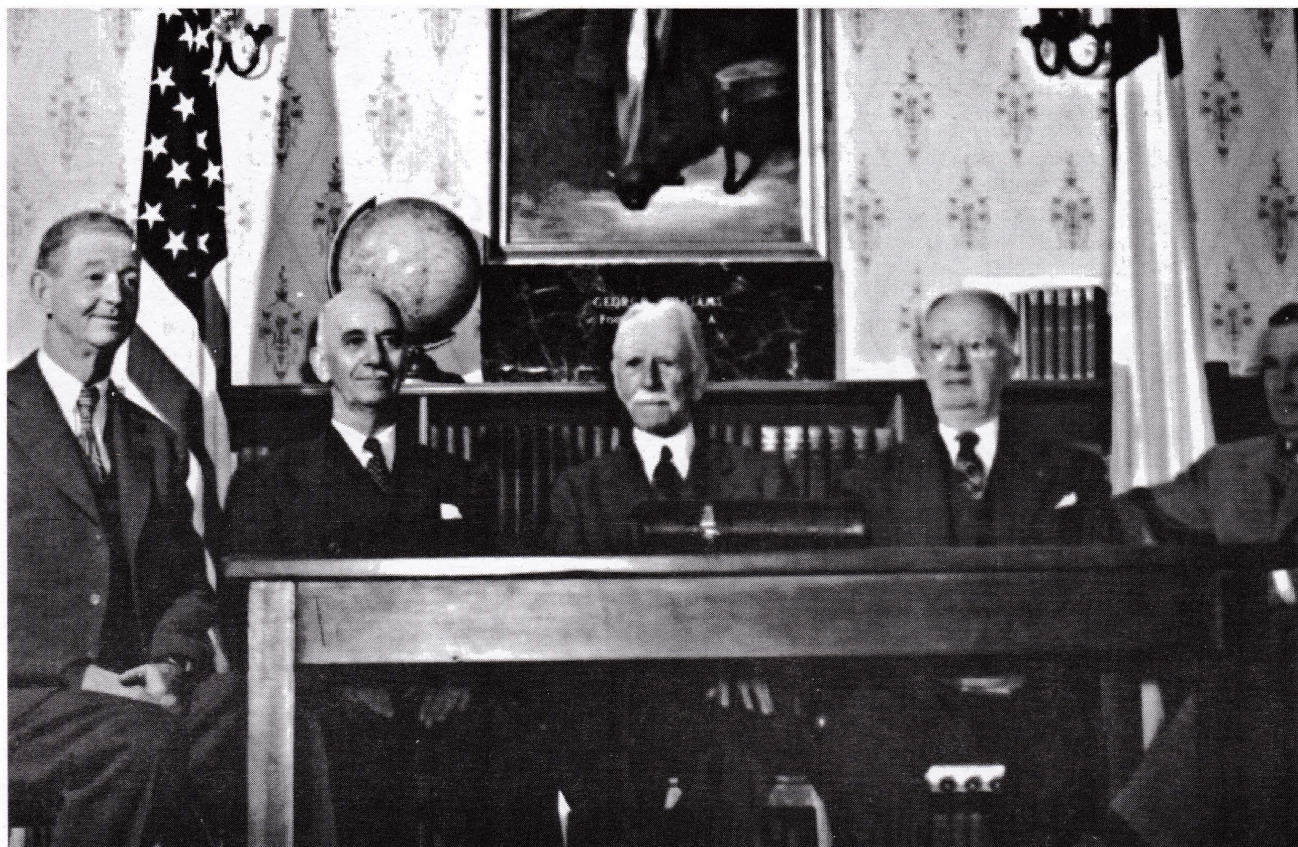
## SAN DIEGO IN THE LATE 1800'S

George Marston had arrived in 1870, only three years after "Father" Alonzo Horton had planned much of the present downtown and developed a city district from the old settlement huddled around the Mexican Plaza in Old Town. In 1873 Marston and Charles Hamilton purchased a mercantile business for \$10,000 from

Joseph Nash. They remained partners for five years. In 1878 Marston opened his first store at the Northwest corner of Fifth and D. However, he soon realized that he was too far uptown and after two moves located at Fifth and F.

In the city, business was limited to the service traders, hotels, rooming houses, grocery stores, lumber yards, building supplies, general merchandise stores, harness and blacksmith shops, Chinese laundries and the ubiquitous saloons. All the lumber, goods and merchandise had to be brought in by ship. The census of 1871 listed eighty-five different occupations including farmers, miners, 22 physicians, 20 saloon keepers, 33 lawyers, 1 gentle-





*YMCA Leaders meet in Downtown YMCA - George Williams room L to R -  
Fred Heilberon, W.E. Kier, George W. Marston, Dr. Leland D. Jones and Roscoe Hazard*

man, 1 capitalist (Wyatt Earp) and 1 windmill builder.<sup>1</sup>

There was a steady but slow growth of population during the late seventies. The population rose to about 2,000. People were still coming and remaining because of the climate, reputed to be the best in the world and conducive to health and longevity.

A major effort was given to securing the railroad from the east. The trickle of newcomers that began with the promise of a railroad in 1880 gained momentum each year and became a flood in 1886. The population which in 1885 was around 5,000 reached 35,000 by 1887 and rose to a peak of 40,000 at the height of the boom in early 1888. It was impossible to build hotels and houses fast enough to accommodate the thousands who were now arriving each month with all their household goods by rail, boat, stagecoach and wagon.<sup>2</sup>

There was no question that San Diego was booming. Many

thought that this would go on forever and that San Diego would become a great city, perhaps the largest in California. Truly this was a climate rush to escape eastern weather. Real estate prices rose to astronomical heights with lots doubling or tripling in price with each successive sale.

*Such were the conditions during the birth and early days of the YMCA. A time when there were 64 places where one could buy groceries and 71 saloons.*

Such were the conditions during the birth and early days of the YMCA. A time when there were 64 places where one could buy groceries and 71 saloons. Also at the height of the boom, there were allegedly 120 bawdy houses. In the daytime the "girls" paraded through the streets, often in expensive carriages.<sup>3</sup> Early in 1888 rumors of a financial crash circulated and by April the boom was over. People left in droves. Many lost

everything. Within a few months the population dropped to 16,000. Those who survived the financial storm and liked San Diego remained, committed to gradually building and improving their city.



## GEORGE W. MARSTON



*When George Marston was 32, he called together in his mercantile establishment, as had George Williams 38 years before, a group of men to organize a Young Men's Christian Association. His little store in a town of 2,700 people was more than a hundred miles and four years yet from a railroad:*

*Picture kerosene lamps sending a yellow light from house windows and from a few corner lamp posts as a dozen men walked cautiously on rattling board walks, in semi-darkness, to the Marston store. Perhaps a half dozen, square rigged ships were alongside wharves that reached out from shore to the bay's deep water. The ships' bells struck the hour, breaking the heavy quiet of a foggy evening.*

*For over 60 years he served as a member of the Young Men's Christian Association Board of Directors, its president at different times for a total of 28 years, Chairman of the State of California YMCA Committee for 7 years, and a member of the International Committee of the YMCA.*

*He was often described by YMCA leaders as one of America's half dozen most useful laymen. He gave liberally of his money and of himself.*

*He was a visionary in many activities of the community. He was instrumental in the shaping of Balboa Park, Presidio Park and the Borrego Desert Park. George Marston had a leadership role in the development of railroads and highways in San Diego. He was a guiding force behind the Panama-California Exposition in 1915. He helped plan the waterfront area of San Diego and the beautiful City-County Administration building.*

*Pomona College was very dear to Mr. Marston's heart and he served on the Board of Trustees for over 50 years and was president of the Board for 26 years.*

*In 1905, the Association became the owner for the first*

*time of a home of its own. The San Diego YMCA site at Eighth and C was purchased from Dr. and Mrs. F. R. Burnham. The property was occupied by a fine old residence which had been their home for several years and previously had been occupied by the parents of George Marston. Alterations in the residence made it appropriate for Y work and a large gymnasium was built in the rear. A building campaign was later organized by Mr. Marston, raising \$150,000 in the spring of 1911. The Eighth and C Street building was dedicated in March 1913.*

*World War I and the many special demands it brought to the San Diego Association deserve special attention. The Y participated locally and nationally to support the war effort. Mr. Marston, while Association President, was also Chairman of the State YMCA Committee of the War Work Council. He and others spent considerable time organizing the work of the Young Men's Christian Association with official Catholic and Jewish organizations of the state sharing in the fraternal spirit of the work.*

*Mr. Marston served as temporary chairman of the organizational meeting of the San Diego Army and Navy YMCA Committee of Management held on April 22, 1921. The following year he became chairman of a successful campaign raising \$157,000 on a goal of \$150,000 to purchase a site for the new building (the National YMCA Armed Services Department provided \$500,000 for construction of the facilities). The new building was dedicated on November 7, 1924 on Broadway.*

*On March 17, 1942 the YMCA Area Executive carried an article on Mr. Marston stating, "What a friend he has been and how much we owe to him as a friend and leader in our movement."*

*Author Unknown*



By 1889 all the streets had been paved. Police and fire departments were organized. Also, thanks to the boom, the first sewer system was built. The boom, short as it was, left many benefits to the city.

## RE-ORGANIZATION

Nearly two years elapsed until June 3, 1884 when President Marston called a re-organization meeting at the offices of Arnold and Jones. Work was resumed in Old Masonic Hall at Fifth Avenue near F Street, rented for its use at \$5 per month. On August 10, 1885 a meeting was called to decide a plan of action for future work; the experience of the past having shown that effective work could not be done without someone to give it personal supervision. A committee was appointed to secure a General Secretary and their efforts resulted in employing Rev. C. L. Sturges who commenced work at once.

As reported in the first YMCA Annual Report, the hall of the Association was a long room with dark walls and standing bolt upright in the middle of the room were eight or ten wooden benches. The effect was to give one a chill that froze any warmth of heart he might have had upon entering the room. Under Sturges' supervision, the old benches were removed, the straw matting replaced by a bright carpet and the walls made fresh by a beautiful tinted calcimine. Together with contributions from the YWCA, the room provided an attractive setting for the future success of the Association. Despite the fact that Sturges was Secretary for less than a year, he succeeded in transforming the Association quarters and reviving the social, religious and educational activities.

Although the YWCA organized in 1885 was a separate institution, it became almost an auxiliary of the YMCA, joining in prayer meetings, periodic socials and keeping fresh flowers in the YMCA hall. Activities began to accelerate. The YMCA hall was brightly furnished and opened to the public. Membership increased and a Spanish class was organized. The YWCA supplied



*C.L. Sturges, First General Secretary of the San Diego YMCA, 1883-1884*

pictures, windows shades, curtains and a piano for the YMCA facilities during the renovation.

After Sturges' resignation he was succeeded by J. A. Rogers who continued for six years. Mr. Rogers had remarkable success in building up the Association. His character was an interesting and noble one. Although not over sixty years, his white hair and partial blindness gave him an older appearance; yet he was a fresh, vigorous, cheerful man with power to please and inspire boys and young men. He had been a locomotive engineer in New York City. Without technical training he was admirably fitted for the peculiar work of the YMCA in the exciting times of 1887 and 1888. Hundreds of

young men came under his friendly Christian influence.<sup>4</sup>

As reported in the 50th anniversary report in 1932, "This was the hey-day of the pioneer period." The first Annual Report shows that classes were formed in Spanish, German, geometry, bookkeeping, writing and education. Monthly socials were supported by the YWCA which secured the best literary and musical talent of the city. The members were active in the care of the sick and also paid regular visits to the county jail, ministering to the inmates.

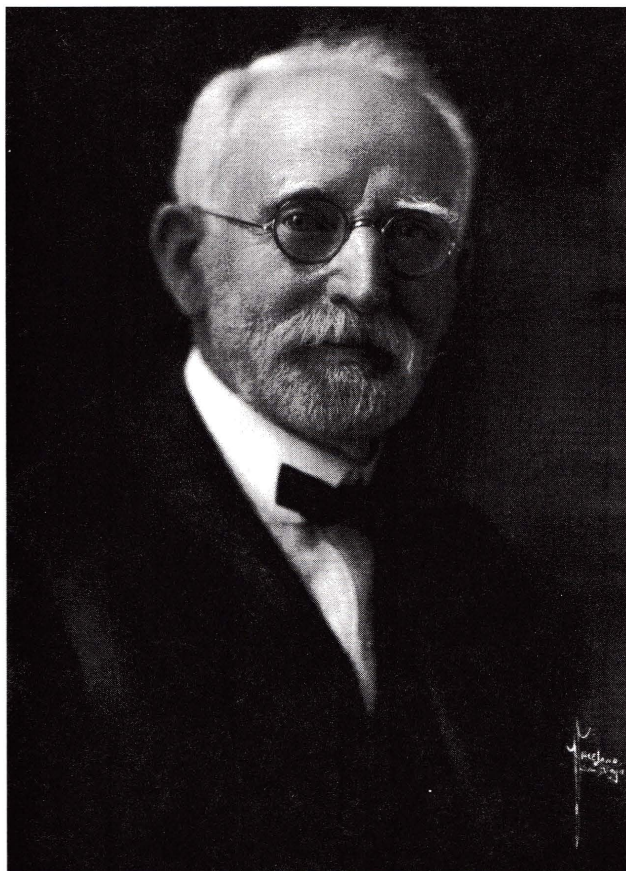
## CONSTITUTION

A new constitution and by-laws were adopted on May 1, 1885. Article 1, SECTION 1 stated: The name of this Society shall be Young Men's Christian Association of San Diego. SECTION 2 said: Its object shall be the improvement of the spiritual, mental, social and physical condition of men. Article II Membership was written as follows:

SECTION I. The membership of this Association shall consist of three kinds: ACTIVE, ASSOCIATE AND SUSTAINING.

SECTION 2. Any man who is a member in good standing of an Evangelical Church may become an active member. Active members, and they only, shall have the right to vote and hold





T.M. Gilmore, Charter Member 1882

office. They shall have the privilege of taking books from the library and the use of the rooms.

SECTION 3. Any person of good moral character may become an Associate Member, and have the same privileges as an Active member, except that of voting and holding office.

SECTION 4. Under the qualifications and restrictions of sections 2 and 3 any person may become an Active, Associate or Sustaining Member. They shall have the privilege of taking books from the library, the use of the rooms and the gymnasium, attendance upon classes, admission to the regular Association course of lectures, musical entertainments, receptions, etc., with a lady (or if a lady, with a gentleman).

SECTION 5. Each application for membership shall be placed in the hands of the Committee on Membership, which committee shall examine into the character of the applicant, and shall report to the Association, when a vote may be taken upon their admission. A one-third negative vote of those voting shall defeat any applicant.

Dues were set at two dollars per year for either Active or Associate Membership. The dues for Sustaining Membership were five dollars. All dues were to be paid annually in advance. A total of 134 members, of whom 84 were Associate members were reported by General Secretary Rogers. The Treasurer's Report stated receipts of \$1,437.33, expenditures of \$1,398.38

with cash on hand of \$38.95.

## NEED FOR FACILITIES

This first Annual Report concluded with an outline of needs stressing the demands for larger facilities. Rogers concluding report stated:

### OUR NEEDS:

*We need more room. We now have over 150 members, enough to pack our hall without the increase of the attendance by visitors. And the number of visitors registered has increased from 1,767, the third quarter, to 4,030, the last quarter, a gain of 2,263. Without making any extra effort, our rooms are filled on Sunday PM. With soliciting of attendance, customary in like Associations, we could easily double the size of these meetings. The same thing is true of our socials. The coming winter we intend to have lectures. But our hall will not hold the Young Men's and Young Women's Associations. Other cities have awakened to the occasion, and fine large buildings, suitable to the needs of the work, have been erected. They are so constructed that the rental of stores and offices endows the institution for its future support, thus putting it above all possibility of failure in times of business depression. We have already secured a fine lot on the corner of Fourth Avenue and E Street, for the erection of a building. In our opinion*

*there never has been, or will there be, a more propitious*

*time for the citizens of San Diego to*

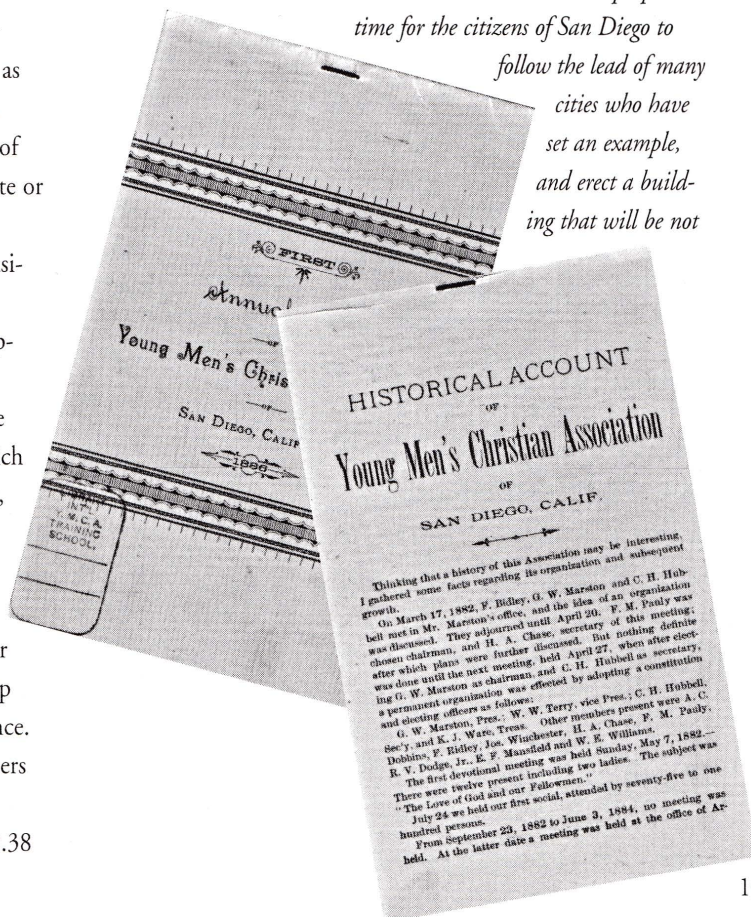
*follow the lead of many*

*cities who have*

*set an example,*

*and erect a build-*

*ing that will be not*



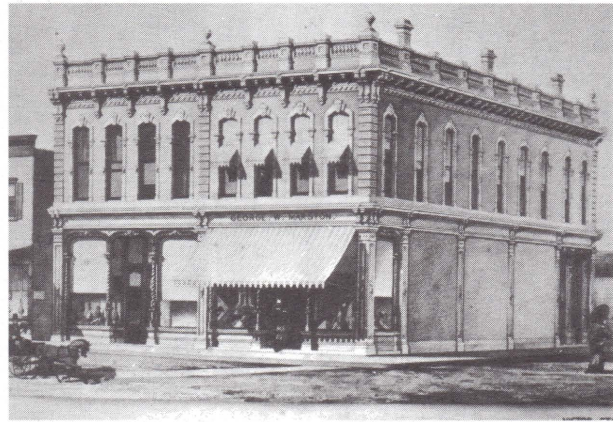


## GEORGE WHITE MARSTON

- Born in October 24, 1850 at Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin
- Came to San Diego in 1870 with his family
- Employed as a clerk at the Horton House
- In 1873 bought Nash mercantile business with partner Charles Hamilton
- Opened Marston Department Store in 1878
- One of the organizers of Congregational Church in 1886
- Organized San Diego YMCA on April 27, 1882
- Served for 64 years as member of YMCA Board of Directors
- Was president of San Diego YMCA for 28 years
- Chairman of the YMCA State Committee for seven years
- Instrumental in development of San Diego's library, Balboa Park, Presidio Park and Serra Mesa
- Served in a leadership role in our railroads and highways
- Organized and chaired the Army and Navy YMCA in 1921 and chaired the fund drive which raised \$156,662 for the new building
- Served on Board of Trustees of Pomona College for over 50 years and was president of the Board for 26 years
- Became a guiding force behind the Panama - California Exposition in 1915
- Helped plan the waterfront area and the beautiful city - county administration building
- Died June 1, 1946

*"Cordial congratulations upon a lifetime of effective and unselfish labor in the field of public usefulness."*

*Telegram from President of the United States  
Herbert Hoover  
April 27, 1932, Sixtieth Anniversary of San Diego YMCA*



*Marston Store, N.E. corner of 5th and F Streets. circa 1878.*

*only an ornament to the city, but a monument to the liberality of the donors.*

*In the centuries long past the question was asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Some day we shall have to answer for our influence over our brothers. Then shall we hear his voice say, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Come and receive your reward." We leave this matter with you, hoping and expecting that our next annual report will be from the rooms of our new Association building.<sup>5</sup>*

*J. A. Rogers, General Secretary*

In the second Annual Report, dated 1887, it was reported

*A proud city, mushrooming  
up at a breathless speed,  
was to have a great edifice.*

that the lot (50' by 100') at the corner of Fourth Avenue and E Street was purchased for \$5,800 in April 1886. However, in July 1887, after the General Secretary began to divulge plans based on information he had gathered at the Secretaries' Conference in Oakland, it was determined that a larger lot was needed. Subsequently a 100 sq. ft. lot was purchased for \$30,000 at the corner of Seventh Avenue and G Street. The other lot was placed on the market for \$35,000. Architect plans were drawn calling for a building of imposing dimensions to cost about \$80,000.

A proud city, mushrooming up at a breathless speed, was to have a great edifice. But the collapse of the boom staggered the YMCA as it did every organization in town, and the lot sold for





*San Diego in the 1870's. San Diego Historical Society*

\$10,000. The YMCA somehow survived the post-boom sickness that disturbed the city's economic system.

Early in 1888 the Association moved to rooms on Seventh Avenue, just north of G Street where it was proposed to build, and a large reading room was fitted up on the first floor. The membership at that time was 200. Later in the year, owing to high rent (\$150 per month), another move was made, to the two-story residence on the northwest corner of Eighth Avenue and G Street. The whole house was occupied, and here the Association had, for the first time, a number of convenient classrooms. But the lack of finances compelled another move in a few months, and the Association then took its quarters in a one-story building on the west side of Sixth Avenue between E and F Streets, where it remained for about a year.<sup>6</sup>

There were, however, a succession of new presidents, two in 1889 and 1890, when Marston was succeeded by Dr. J. E. Hall and C. D. Todd, each serving six months. W. E. Howard served four months in late 1890 and was succeeded by George Marston, who served his second term as president for the next ten years. Also, General Secretaries changed with John McTaggart succeeding Rogers in 1890. ▼



*Looking south on Fifth from Broadway, San Diego circ. 1888  
San Diego Historical Society*