

Mission Hills Library: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

In 1921, San Diego was a sleepy little Navy town with 74,361 permanent residents spread among several small communities. One of those communities, Mission Hills, was populated primarily by wealthy businessmen and their families. At the same time, the Mission Hills Branch Library was a dream about to come true. The Marston Store in downtown San Diego had contained a library since 1916, and in 1921 needed the space occupied by books. So the books were transferred to Mission Hills, and made up the library's first collection.

The new library occupied one room in the Ulysses S. Grant Elementary School, at 1426 Washington Street on land sold to the city schools by Kate Sessions. Miss Sessions is known as the mother of Balboa Park, but she also was responsible for much of Mission Hills' overall botanical beauty.

Mission Hills had never had a branch library before. Joann Hayward, nee Hawkins, was a page at the library, and remembered fondly the first librarian, Mrs. Meiniffee. Joann said her work at the library gave her a good start in her professional life. She recalled that some organization, possibly the WPA, gathered up magazines and cut the monthly serials out of them. They bound them together and put a cover on them to give the appearance of a book; they then donated them to the library. In fact, most of the books were donated by ladies' clubs or private citizens.

Leaving Grant School in 1950, the branch consolidated with the Hillcrest Library, which had been located in a Florence School schoolroom. The new branch, now named the Hillcrest-Mission Hills Branch Library, moved to 908 W. Washington at the corner of Goldfinch, which is now occupied by the Harley Gray restaurant. When the branch lost its lease in 1956, it moved two doors east to 914, which now houses retail.

It stayed there until 1961, when the new branch, renamed the Mission Hills Branch Library, opened. Barbara Tuthill was the first Branch Librarian to serve in the new library. She and Amelia Higdon, clerk, and Bill Weigand, Children's Librarian, loaded the book carts with desk items and files, and walked them across Washington Street to the new location. The city moved the books and furniture by truck. When Bill Weigand left after 2 years, the City Librarian, Clara Breed, arranged a librarian exchange program with the Copenhagen Library in Denmark. This gave Barbara a Danish Children's Librarian for a year.

The building Barbara and her staff moved into encompassed 3,850 square feet and

had 10 parking spaces. Today, despite the growth of Mission Hills and surrounding communities, there still are 3,850 square feet and only 9 parking spaces, one designated for disabled patrons.

In 1983 a group of Mission Hills residents organized “The Friends of the Mission Hills Library.” Its main focus was to provide books and other materials for the library. Today the Friends continues to raise funds that provide needed materials to the library. They also support the library's programs, from children's story times and Summer Reading Program to evening talks by local authors who sign and sell their books. They have also underwritten several projects to refresh and enhance the interior of the branch, such as painting, new carpeting, and furniture refinishing.

Despite its small size, the library provides many activities for the community, such as two book discussion groups, a children's craft program, many weekly story times, such as pajama story time, bilingual story time, and signing story time. Other programs include Lego playtime, signings by local authors, a variety of musical programs, and many season-specific programs.

A new Branch facility, the Mission Hills/Hillcrest-Harley & Bessie Knox Branch Library (named after a former mayor of San Diego and his wife), is now under construction at Washington and Front Streets. The building, which has been in the planning stages since 2003, will allow the Library staff to more readily serve all of the communities that depend on it: Mission Hills, Hillcrest, Old Town, Middletown, Park West, and Banker’s Hill.

The Friends have long advocated for a new library building to better meet the needs of our community, but the road to the new facility has been a long one.

In September 2003, the city purchased the old IBEW building at the southwest corner of Washington and Front streets to replace the current 3,850-square-foot Mission Hills Branch Library with a new state-of-the-art 15,000 square foot facility. In the Fall of 2004, a series of workshops was held at various locations in Hillcrest and Mission Hills to solicit input from members of the community as to their vision of the new branch.

On July 25, 2005, the City Council passed the new Mission Hills branch funding authorization of approximately \$19,000,000. It allocated the initial funding to engage the architectural firm of Mosher, Drew, Watson & Ferguson (now Architects Mosher Drew) to begin design work. In November 2005, the community workshop series continued. At these gatherings attendees identified major functions, critical needs, and design considerations for the library. They also chose (from three ideas presented by

the architect) an interior concept featuring a library on the first floor with two levels of underground parking. The architect suggested using historical materials and details in contemporary design. Because of the City's budget uncertainties the final community meeting scheduled for the summer of 2006 was never held.

In the Fall of 2009, a town hall, hosted by then City Council members Todd Gloria (now California Assembly Member for District 78) and Kevin Faulconer (now Mayor of San Diego), was held in Bankers Hill to resurrect interest in obtaining community support and city funding for the construction. For the next five years the San Diego Library Foundation and the Friends of Mission Hills-Hillcrest Branch Library continued their advocacy efforts to secure funding for the project.

By 2014, the San Diego Library Foundation had secured commitments toward the building of \$5,000,000 each from the Hervey family and an anonymous donor, covering approximately half of the then-projected cost of \$20,300,000. Mosher Drew began to refine the earlier plans for the facility and once again a series of town hall meetings was held in June and July of 2014.

In 2016, the City selected Manuel Oncina Architects and Ferguson Pape Baldwin Architects as architects for the design-build phase of the project, with C.W. Driver in charge of the construction. The architecture is Craftsman-inspired and the building will be LEED-certified. Janet Zweig, LCC, was awarded a \$280,000 contract to design, fabricate, and install public art in the new branch. Final construction costs are estimated at \$17,800,000.

On May 8, 2017, crews began to demolish the IBEW building as the construction phase of the project finally got underway. After many years of waiting, the Mission Hills/Hillcrest-Harley & Bessie Knox Branch Library is projected to open by January 2019.

Sources: Breed, Clara. Turning the Pages; Mike McLaughlin, The History of Mission Hills, 1992 and 1997; San Diego Public Library records.