

Field Guide to Coronado History: The Lost Harbor

Fascinating, intriguing, or thoughtful tales about people and places in Coronado history -- presented by your Coronado Historical Association

By Bruce Linder



Not long ago, the Coronado Visitor Center fielded the question: “Why are there rocks on the Hotel Del beach?” We know that a modest breakwater protected the hotel in the 1890s but a weather-worn concrete wall stands on the beach today, suggesting another story.

This interesting tale began in 1924 when the Navy suggested a “landing base” in Coronado “to provide a means for the officers and men of the ships to get a suitable landing on the ocean side.” Large battleships of the day could not enter the bay but anchored instead off

the beach in Coronado Roads. Sending launches to Coronado rather than around North Island to San Diego held big advantages.

At the time, San Diego was keen to win the economic benefits from these huge ships. A protected boat landing for Fleet sailors on the beachfront– to be called a “harborette” – would be a huge attraction.

In the quaint practice of the times, such public works projects were not funded by the federal government but by bonds underwritten by local taxpayers. San Diego and Coronado quickly reached an agreement to evenly split costs of \$150,000 – a necessary investment to lure a dozen battleships, each with crews of 3,000 sailors, permanently to San Diego.

The proposed design featured two curving arms, one of breakwater rocks and concrete and a second of concrete strengthened by lumber pilings. Boats would enter the “C-shaped” harbor, moor to six floating slips, and sailors would cross the beach on a paved promenade to catch a trolley to the Coronado ferry. Local realty advertisements trumpeted “Big Increase in Land Value,” and the need for 750 new Coronado homes for the expected flood of navy men.

Events proceeded rapidly. Committees formed, Coronado businesses barnstormed, excitement grew. On September 10, 1924 Coronado voters approved a property tax levy by a stunning 810-74 majority. Little was heard of ruining what later would be ranked as the nation’s #1 beach.

Following a timeline that would be impossible today, the city approved final plans on September 29, bids were accepted, and building began on October 27.

Construction proceeded at a similarly fast clip spurred by visions of impending private and civic wealth and the worthy goal of impressing the Navy. The Hotel Del enthusiastically planned yachting excursions from its doorstep. In March 1925, the Fleet anchored in Coronado Roads and tested the partially completed harbor. Smiles reigned.

The first whiff of problems surfaced in June 1925. San Diego funding dried up, bills for dredging the small harbor went unpaid, and work

“temporarily” ceased. In October, three battleships anchored offshore and Coronado headlines optimistically read, “New Landing and Harbor Now in Use.” Yet, San Diego funds still lagged and the harbor’s protective walls lay unfinished as fall turned ominously toward winter.

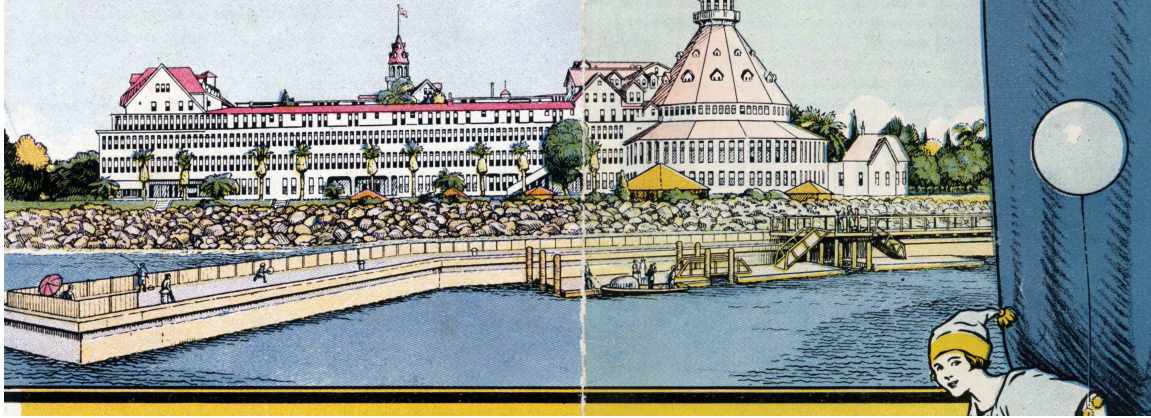
Beginning just before New Year’s of 1926, three consecutive Pacific storms battered Coronado beaches. Waves pounded the harborette’s concrete walls. Damage mounted but calls to San Diego for emergency funds fell on deaf ears. February brought even more furious drama as waves tore protective pilings from the north wall and sand rushed in to fill the dredged portions of the harborette. Coronado triaged its emergency efforts toward Ocean Avenue’s breakwater to save homes and ignored the harbor.

So close to completion, the money needed to finish the harborette now ballooned to over \$50,000, well beyond Coronado’s ability or the patience of its taxpayers.

Most tried to simply ignore the unusable harbor (now too expensive to even dismantle) and its huge scar on Coronado’s pristine beach. In a final ironic twist, Coronado floated a routine bond issue in July 1926 for breakwater repairs along Ocean Avenue that fell to voter’s ire and the slogan: “Voters! Remember the Harborette and Vote No!”

***HOTEL del
CORONADO***
Coronado Beach, Cal.

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