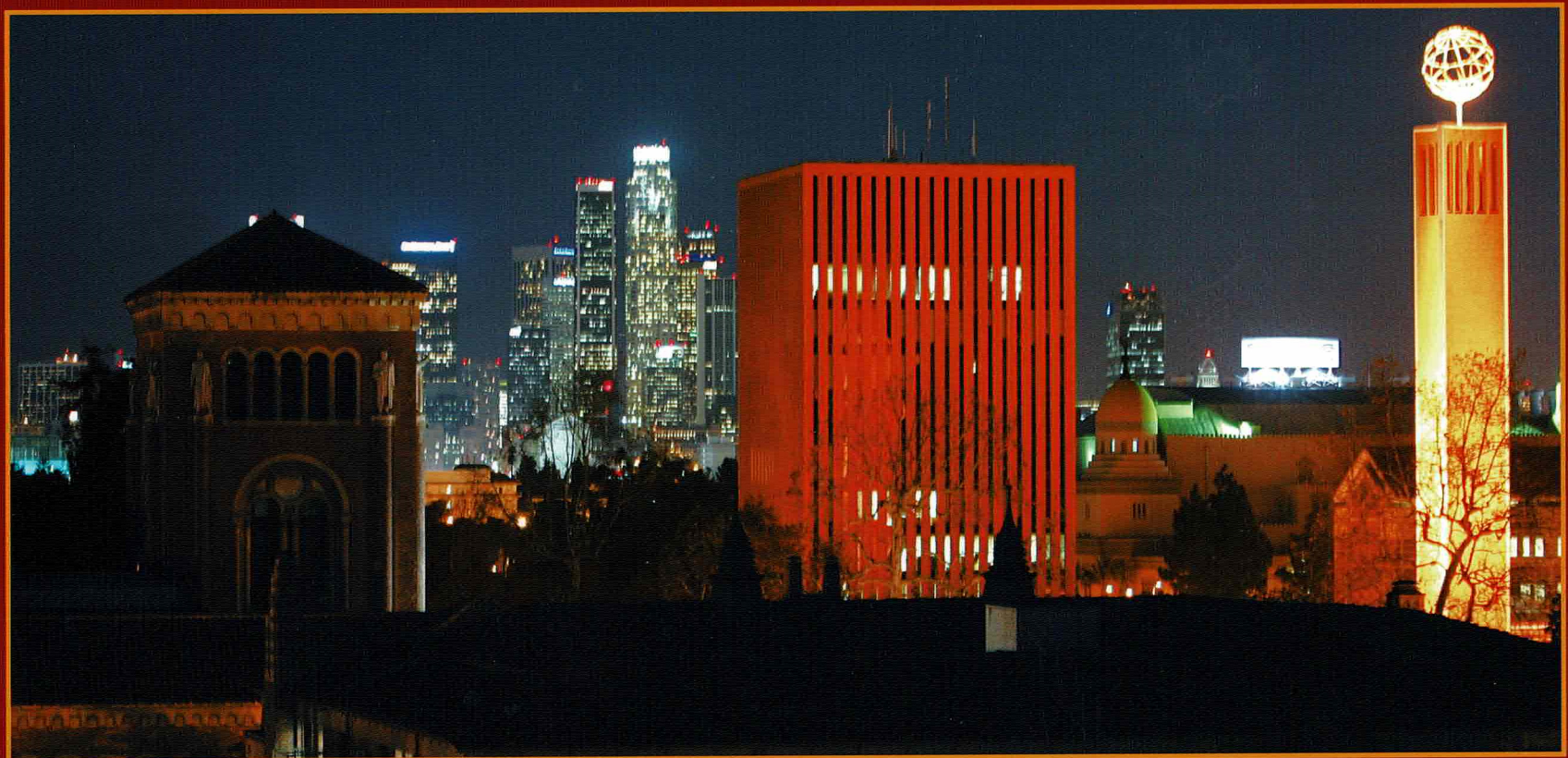
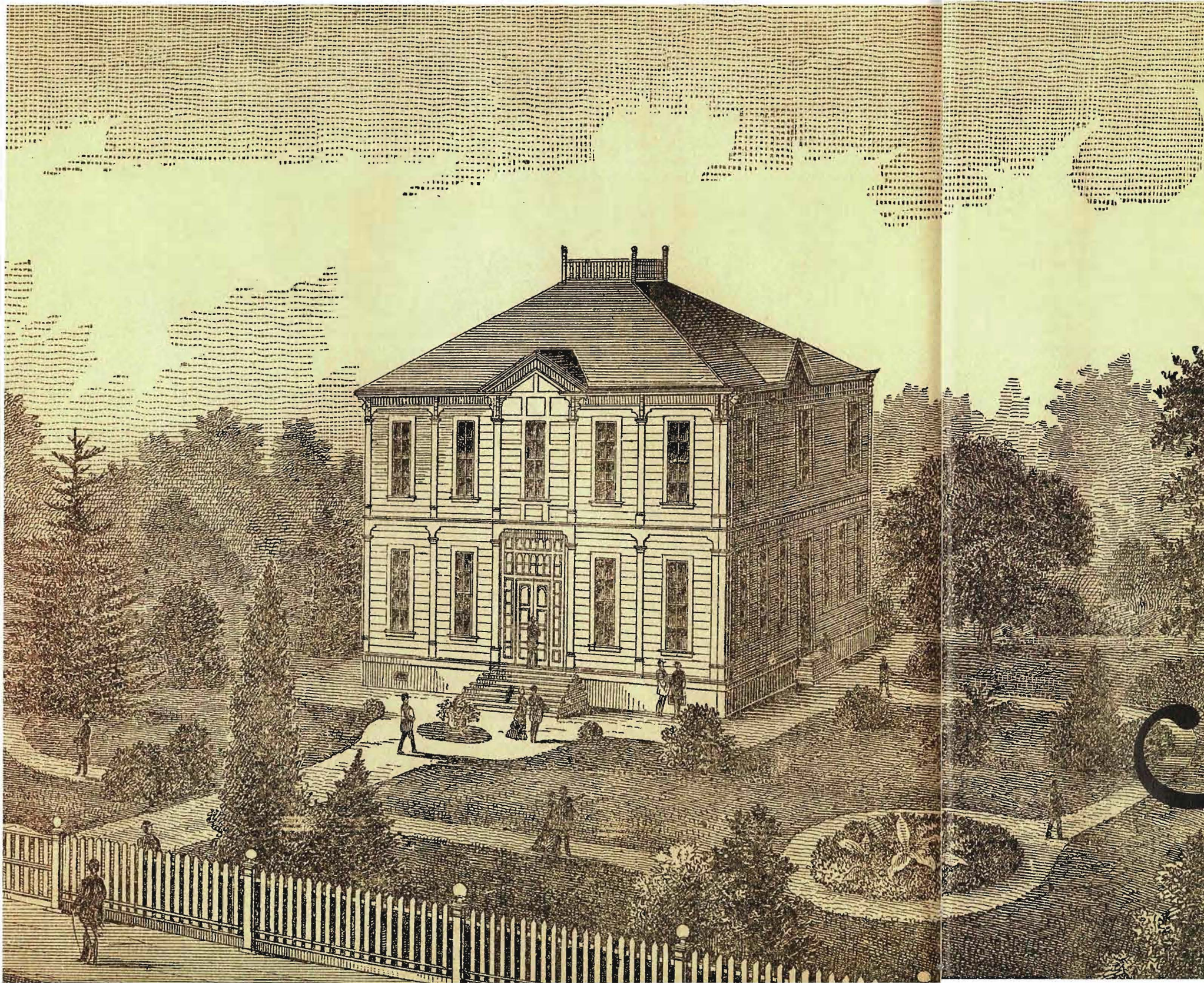


THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: 1880 TO 2005

Sarah Lifton and Annette Moore





BIRTH OF A UNIVERSITY

On the edge of a dusty California frontier town in the 1880s, a group of visionaries and real estate developers created the future.

BY SARAH LIFTON

At 9 p.m. on Friday, September 3, 1880, a group of men gathered at a large, densely landscaped home on Hill Street in Los Angeles. Their meeting, which included a number of the dusty frontier town's most prominent citizens, was similar to many others that had taken place over the previous 18 months, but this time, there was a special sense of urgency. The order of business – to complete the legal foundation for the region's first full-fledged university – was the culmination of many years of hope, disappointment and perseverance for the evening's host, Judge Robert Maclay Widney. Now, nearly a decade after Widney first began to pursue the idea of establishing a university, his dream was about to assume concrete form: In less than 24 hours, the physical foundation of the institution would become a reality, its cornerstone laid amid considerable publicity and fanfare.

An idealized rendering of the university building as pictured in the 1880-81 Prospectus of the University of Southern California. The two-story wood frame structure, completed in October 1880, cost approximately \$5,060, plus \$1,200 for furnishings.

In attendance that evening were most of the fledgling university's board members – S. C. Hubbell, E. F. Spence, Esq., and the reverends A. M. Hough, E. S. Chase, J. A. Van Anda, J. S. Woodcock, and Charles Shelling. Also present were two young Methodist ministers, Marion McKinley Bovard and his brother Freeman D. Bovard, who had been tapped to become the university's first president and vice president. Unacknowledged but present in spirit was the late Reverend John R. Tansey, presiding elder of the Los Angeles District of the Methodist Episcopal Conference from 1871 to 1875. Tansey, like Widney, had been a visionary and an optimist who anticipated a great future for Los Angeles, even though the rough little town still lacked paved streets, electric lights, telephones and a reliable fire alarm system. Both men understood that an institution of higher education was essential if Los Angeles was to mature into a city of culture and refinement, and each had made earlier, tentative steps to advance the cause.

In 1871, Widney asked one of his clients, pioneer landowner and civic leader Don Abel Stearns, to donate his 11,000-acre Laguna Rancho, located southeast of Los

Angeles, as a building and endowment fund for a university. Stearns, who owned 176,000 acres of some of the choicest lands between San Pedro and San Bernardino, took some time to consider the proposition, but before departing for a business trip to San Francisco, he assured Widney that they would complete the agreement upon his return. Unfortunately, he died in San Francisco, and the project was abandoned. Deteriorating economic conditions, including a financial panic that began to sweep the country in 1873, further undermined the plans as land values plummeted and a depression set in, exacerbated by a severe drought in 1877.

But even those setbacks failed to extinguish the embers of hope within the community. During Tansey's tenure as head of the Los Angeles District, local Methodists held several meetings to discuss the need for educational facilities, and committees were appointed to consider different locations for a university. In 1875, Tansey proposed to donate 200 acres of his own land to the project. He even approached Marion McKinley Bovard, then pastor of the Methodist church in Riverside, to lead the enterprise. Unfortunately, death again put

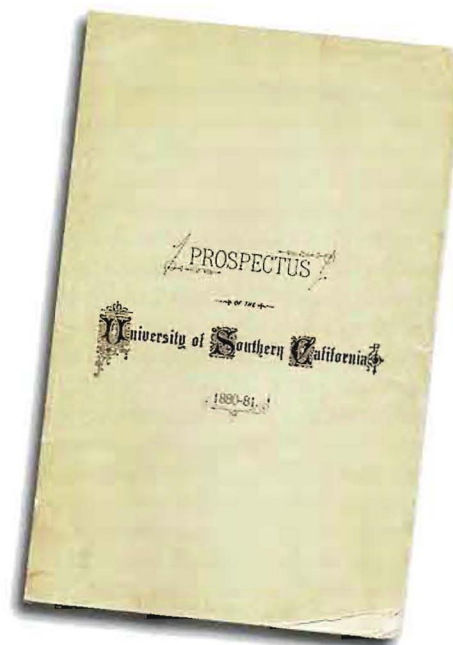
an end to the plans. Citing his failing health, Tansey stepped down in fall 1875, and he died the following June.

Making Progress

Although a university was not looming on the near horizon, other members of the Methodist Church set their sights on a more attainable goal: secondary education. In May 1875, at Tansey's instigation, a meeting was held at the Fort Street Methodist Church to discuss the feasibility of founding a preparatory school. Those in attendance enthusiastically endorsed the idea, and a committee was appointed to pursue it. Through their efforts, the Los Angeles Academy opened on August 28, 1876, with 15 students. Led by the Reverend O. S. Frambes and his wife, the academy was officially brought under the control of the Methodist Church a month later, becoming its first educational enterprise in Southern California. Despite some initial setbacks, the school's excellent reputation attracted more and more students, and in 1879, the first class, numbering 11, graduated.

At the same time the fortunes of the Los Angeles Academy were waxing, circumstances were improving for the university plan. In May 1879, Widney invited the Reverend A. M. Hough, Tansey's successor as presiding elder of the Los Angeles District, to his home to discuss the possibility of resuming the effort to establish a university. Widney was convinced that the long period of real estate depression was about to end, and in the near future, he believed, land values were likely to rise. Now was a suitable time to secure a land endowment for a university, as land owners were eager to sell and would be willing to donate to anything that would make their holdings more saleable. After a lengthy discussion, Hough and Widney decided to proceed. In a series of meetings over the next few evenings, the two invited Marion McKinley Bovard, by then pastor of the Fort Street

Los Angeles was still a rustic frontier town in the 1880s. This 1884 view of "downtown," showing Main Street north of Temple, would have been a familiar sight to the members of USC's first graduating class.



The 1880-81 Prospectus of the University of Southern California touted the new institution's solid financial foundation as well as the fact "that the evenness of the climate gives to the studious mind great advantages."

Methodist Episcopal Church, to join the effort, as well as Widney's brother, Joseph P. Widney; Edward F. Spence, a local businessman who went on to serve as mayor of Los Angeles; and G. D. Compton. All were enthusiastic, and at the last of these meetings, Widney presented a deed of trust he had drawn up with J. S. Griffin, who offered to donate land in East Los Angeles for a university campus and endowment fund. The group – the university's first Board of Trustees – decided to continue soliciting additional donations of land in order to select the most advantageous.

After considering various offers – on Temple Street, in Boyle Heights and in what was then called West Los Angeles – the board accepted the West Los Angeles proposal. In a vote of confidence for the region's future and a display of bravado about their fledgling enterprise, they named the institution, rather grandiosely, the University of Southern California.

On July 29, 1879, a deed of trust was executed between land donors Ozro W. Childs, a Protestant; John G. Downey, a Catholic; and Isaias W. Hellman, a Jew; and Methodists A. M. Hough, R. M. and J. P. Widney, E. F. Spence, M. M. Bovard and G. D. Compton as trustees. According to the terms of the document, the trustees were to hold 308

lots. Some were to be reserved for the university campus, while the balance would be sold to create an endowment. The lots were to be sold for a minimum of \$100 each, and no encumbrance was to be placed on the endowment fund. The first \$5,000 net from the sales was to be used to erect a university building, to be completed within three years. Since the sponsors of the enterprise were all Methodists, the majority of trustees were to be Methodists as well, and control of the university was to fall to the Southern California Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Gathering Momentum

Childs, Downey and Hellman's gift, which was widely covered in the local newspapers, quickly inspired generosity among the owners of adjacent properties, who made additional contributions that expanded the tract by approximately 40 acres. Although the lots were worth about \$50 each, Widney felt strongly that they should be priced at \$200 apiece – a staggering sum that some of his colleagues opposed.

"There was quite a disagreement as to the price at which we should sell the lots," he wrote some years later. "...The general opinion was that the lots were not saleable

the building without charge. Lumber dealers and building suppliers provided materials at cost. In May 1880, the *Evening Express* gushed:

...The college campus has been tastily laid out and most of the trees planted.... [N]ear the center of the campus [plans call for] four college buildings, which are to be erected, one after another as the necessities of the University require.... Along the outer edge of the campus, on the four sides, has been planted a row of eucalyptus, and an inside row of the same, fourteen feet from the first, leaving space for a broad walk.... The endowment of the University by the noble gift of Messrs. Childs, Downey and Hellman is ample...to ultimately afford a steady yearly income sufficient to keep it out of debt and enable the institution to accomplish all that its projectors hope for. The founding of a grand educational institution like this in Los Angeles will not only contribute to the fame of our city as a centre of learning and refinement, but add to our material attractions, which will draw to our locality families of wealth and culture....

The momentum behind the university also led the trustees of the Los Angeles Academy to rethink their enterprise. In June 1880, they voted to close the school

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at that price." So confident was Widney, however, that he offered to sell the first batch of lots, variously described as 26 or 30, to friends and business acquaintances for \$200 each.

"In a short time, I had sold the entire allotment of lots and had the money in the bank to put up the first building," he noted.

Widney's success clearly emboldened his colleagues, for the university's *Prospectus*, published before the campus opened, noted that 243 lots were now offered for sale at \$300 each and were expected to generate more than \$60,000 for the endowment fund.

Because the progress of the university was of great interest to the burgeoning city, many members of the community came forward to help in different ways. Architects Kyser and Morgan furnished the plans for

and transfer "the assets, patronage, goodwill, and denominational enthusiasm to the University of Southern California." It became the "academic department" of the new institution, providing a college-preparatory education for young men and women.

On August 5, in accordance with California law, the articles of incorporation for the university were executed and filed. The document established an 11-member Board of Directors (distinct from the Board of Trustees of the endowment fund), including A. M. Hough, Charles Shelling, E. F. Spence, P. Y. Cool, S. C. Hubbell, E. S. Chase, P. M. Green, John G. Downey and R. M. Widney of Los Angeles County, and J. A. Van Anda of Ventura and F. S. Woodcock of Santa Barbara. It also noted that their successors would be elected by the



Southern California Methodist Episcopal Conference.

The first meeting of the university's Board of Directors was held September 3, at 4 p.m. in Widney's law office, where a committee on bylaws was appointed. That evening, the meeting continued at Widney's home, where the Bovards presented the terms under which they would accept the positions of president and vice president. After considerable discussion, the parties agreed upon the conditions, and the board ordered a contract to be drawn up and executed. The Bovards were to have complete responsibility for organizing and managing the university and were to select the faculty and set the curriculum. They were to receive all funds from tuition toward an annual salary of \$1,500 apiece, with additional moneys from the endowment fund and other sources to make up the difference—unless the funds were inadequate, in which case the deficit would run from year to year. The board

would spend all conference educational collections to outfit the university. The term of the contract was one year, renewable on an annual basis for four additional years.

Undoubtedly reflecting the limited number of faculty, Marion McKinley Bovard was named president of the university and professor of mental and moral philosophy and natural sciences. Freeman D. Bovard was elected professor of mathematics and ancient languages.

The board also selected officers that long night, electing Widney president. After midnight, the group voted to attend the cornerstone ceremony the following afternoon, and at 1:30 a.m., the meeting was adjourned.

Laying the Foundation

The next day dawned unusually hot, even for late summer Southern California, but the relentless sun, dust and limited transportation did not prevent some 1,000 people

— nearly a tenth of the city's population — from converging on the campus, still primarily a field of wild mustard with a partly finished building in its midst. The date was significant beyond the ceremony at hand: 99 years earlier to the day, a band of pioneers had reached the site of the civic center and founded "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles."

According to the September 5 *Daily Herald*, "An immense throng gathered on Wesley Avenue, West Los Angeles, yesterday afternoon, to witness the ceremony of laying the cornerstone of the new building thereafter to be known as the University of Southern California. Nearly two hundred vehicles were on the grounds, while many came on foot, on horseback and by street cars...."

A temporary platform had been erected for the occasion, and the ceremony, which commenced promptly at 2:30 p.m., included hymns, a scripture lesson and prayers as

well as addresses by Hough, Bishop I. W. Wiley, and Senior Bishop Matthew Simpson, a renowned figure in Methodism and a favorite with the audience. Downey was also present and made a brief, cordial speech.

Inside the cornerstone, the university's founders placed various documents, including a copy of the deed of trust, the articles of incorporation, a history of the enterprise to date, copies of 10 newspapers, copies of deeds and contracts used by the trustees of the endowment fund, a map of West Los Angeles showing the lots sold to date, the invitation to the cornerstone ceremony, the *Prospectus* of the university and business cards, among other items.

"The Board of Directors announce to the public that the organization of the University in all its various departments has been fully consummated," reported the minutes of the Southern California Methodist Episcopal Conference. "The University has been most fortunate in its beginning in securing the services of two of the most thorough and accomplished

scholars — Rev. M. M. Bovard and his brother Rev. F. D. Bovard. With these two able instructors, chosen from this Conference, thoroughly imbued with the love and enthusiasm of this work, to head the list of instructors, the University gives good promise of becoming one of the most

hall and smaller classrooms on the second. On October 5, the assembly hall saw its first official function. It was there that Marion McKinley Bovard was inaugurated as the first president of the University of Southern California. Widney, as president of the Board of Directors, presided over the ceremony

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desirable educational institutions on this Coast. We most heartily recommend it to your fullest confidence, patronage, and financial support."

One month later, the building was completed. Erected at a cost of approximately \$5,060, plus \$1,200 for furnishings, it was a two-story wood frame structure, with classrooms on the ground floor and an assembly

and delivered a speech. At the close of his remarks, he handed Bovard the keys to the university and the future. ●

Sarah Lifton is co-author with Annette Moore of The University of Southern California: 1880 to 2005, published in May by Figueroa Press, available through USC's Trojan Bookstores www.uscbookstore.com or 213-740-0066.

A UNIVERSITY AND A NEIGHBORHOOD

The history of USC is inextricably bound with the history of its surrounding neighborhoods. Here is a glimpse of Los Angeles as it appeared in the late 1800s when a small number of visionaries were able to conceive the notion of a new university that would grow up along with a new city.

Beginnings

Having begun as a Spanish pueblo 99 years earlier, Los Angeles was still a small town of 11,000 people when the University of Southern California was established in 1880. Los Angeles was growing, however, its population having increased from 5,000 in 1870 to over 50,000 in 1890. Some of that growth had come with the arrival of the Southern Pacific railroad in 1876, which connected Los Angeles by rail to San Francisco and the rest of the United States. More growth was stimulated with the arrival of the Santa Fe in 1885, which began a local real estate boom that benefited from two competing railroads extending to the Midwest and East.

They Called it Grasshopper Street

In the early 1870s, Figueroa Street was identified as *El Camino Real* and *Calle de las Chapules*, or Grasshopper Street. It was the westernmost street in Los Angeles for several decades in the 19th

century, running through an agricultural area. In some years, especially those experiencing drought, grasshopper plagues would decimate crops here.

A Mustard Field that Wasn't

The area surrounding the eventual location of USC, called West Los Angeles at the time, was occupied by cattle ranches, farms and orchards of varying sizes. Among these was a Chinese produce farm at the current location of the Shrine Auditorium. The plot of land on which USC would be founded in 1880 was part of a vacant mustard field that had not been successfully cultivated.

Ozro William Childs, one of the landowners, had attempted to raise tobacco in part of the area, but failed. Alverda Brode, in her 1922 MA thesis, describes the area as follows: "The land lay vacant, covered with tall mustard, and the neighboring ranchers pastured their cows on this section. In the evening children could be seen riding horseback or

walking, listening to the bells on their cows that were roaming over what is now the University Section."

The Trojan Family Steps Up

The first 30 lots were sold in the summer of 1880 to fund the construction of the first building, now known as Widney Alumni House. Although the market value of the lots was \$50, friends of the university purchased them for \$200 each. In addition to the lots, owners of adjoining property donated 37.5 acres to the future university.

Horse-drawn Cars from Downtown

A map drawn at the time shows a "street railway" that used horse-drawn cars. Originating in downtown Los Angeles, it passed the campus on Wesley Avenue and extended to Agricultural Park (later Exposition Park) south of the campus. The railway was owned by Childs and John Gately Downey (one of the original three owners of the land that is now the University Park campus), along with John M. Baldwin. Within a decade, virtually all horse-drawn cars would be replaced by electric trolleys.

A Well-Traveled Building

Widney Hall opened on Oct. 6, 1880. It cost approximately \$5,060 to con-

struct, with \$1,200 spent on furnishings. The building was moved in 1907, 1955 and 1997, and is now called Widney Alumni House. In the 1930s, Lawrence Test made it into a "colonial style" building by painting the building white and adding green shutters. In 1976, the architecture firm Gin D. Wong Associates restored the building. In the original building, classrooms were on the first floor and a chapel on the second. There community church services were held for four years before the University Methodist Episcopal Church was completed nearby. The building has been the home of the School of Fine Arts, the School of Music and now houses the USC Alumni Association offices and boardrooms.

An Ingenious Invention from Mexico

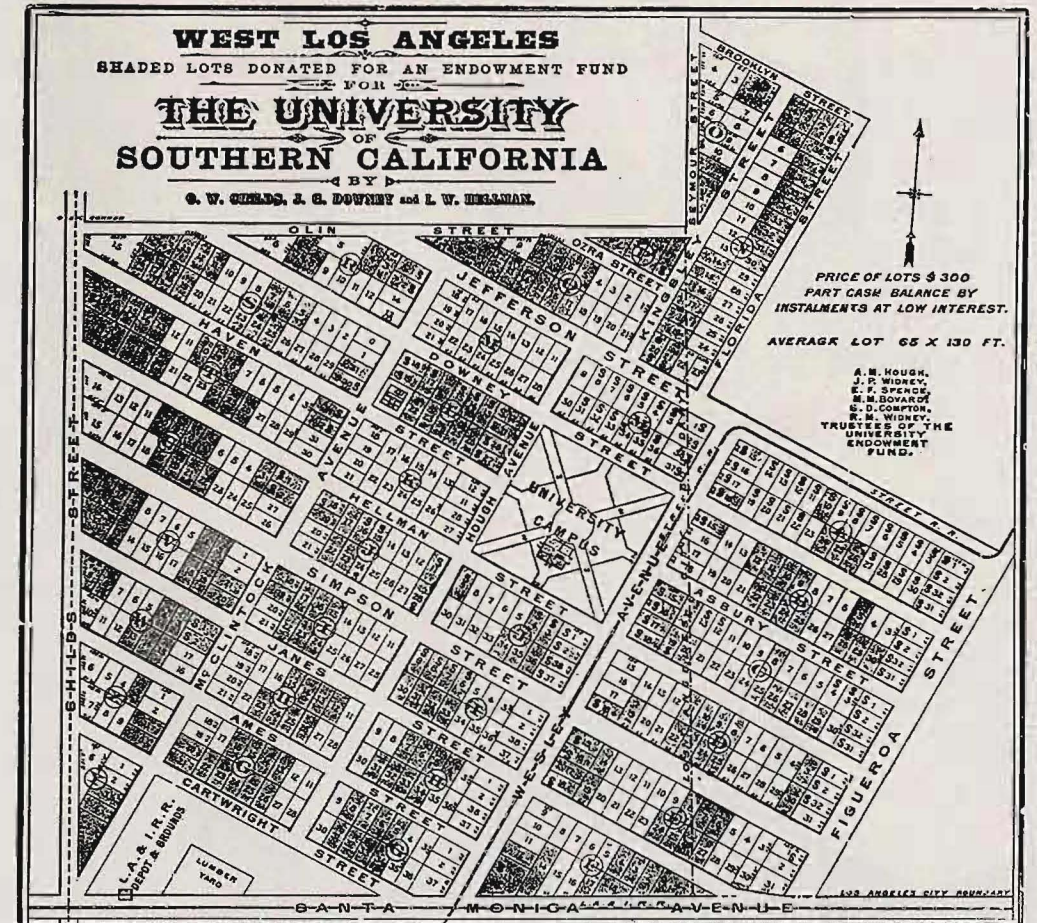
An 1890s photo shows the Zanja ditch running parallel to the sidewalk on the west side of Figueroa, looking south from 23rd Street toward the Stimson House (now part of Mount St. Mary's College), which is obscured by vegetation. A network of Zanjias comprised an irrigation system created in Mexican Los Angeles to distribute water from the Los Angeles River. American planners later expanded

the system outward from downtown, including this extension south along Figueroa.

Blending Old and New

The Forthmann House at Hoover and 28th Streets is said to be the sixth oldest house in Los Angeles. Originally constructed at 629 West 18th Street, where today's Los Angeles Convention Center is located, it was built in 1889 by John A. Forthmann, a German immigrant who became president of the Los Angeles Soap Company. After Forthmann's death in 1922, the house was converted into an apartment building. To accommodate the expansion of the convention center, the building was donated to USC in 1987, and then moved to the Hoover location, just north of the University Park campus. Today it is called the USC Community House, home to USC Civic and Community Relations, which coordinates and documents a variety of programs that link the university to its surrounding neighborhoods. ●

Excerpted from *A University and a Neighborhood: University of Southern California in Los Angeles, 1880-1984* by Curtis C. Roseman, Ruth Wallach, Dace Taube, Linda McCann, Geoffrey DeVerteuil and Claude Zachary (2006, Figueroa Press).



This early map of "West Los Angeles" shows the location of the original lots donated to provide USC's campus.