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History Comes Alive at The US Grant Hotel

by Sandy Bornstein / Oct 05, 2018 /



San Diego visitors can see history come alive at **The US Grant Hotel**. This magnificent property, designed by Harrison Albright, took five years to build. On **October 15, 1910**, the hotel opened with a final price tag of 1.9 million dollars. After a handful of renovations in the last century, the hotel still maintains its grandeur and commemorates its remarkable history by showcasing images and artifacts throughout the property. Guests wanting to know more about the hotel's past can participate in an organized tour or pick up a pamphlet at the reception desk and take a self-guided tour.



Early History

In the mid 19th century, Alonzo Horton transformed the area adjacent to San Diego Bay and built Horton House (1870-1905), the city's first major hotel. Fannie Chaffee Grant, the daughter of Colorado's first senator and the wife of Ulysses S. Grant, Jr., purchased this property and later deeded it to her husband. President Grant's son leveled the original hotel and began building a new luxury hotel to honor the memory of his father, America's 18th president. The hotel's white marble staircase capped by a carved alabaster railing remains the lobby's focal point to this day.



Time Capsule

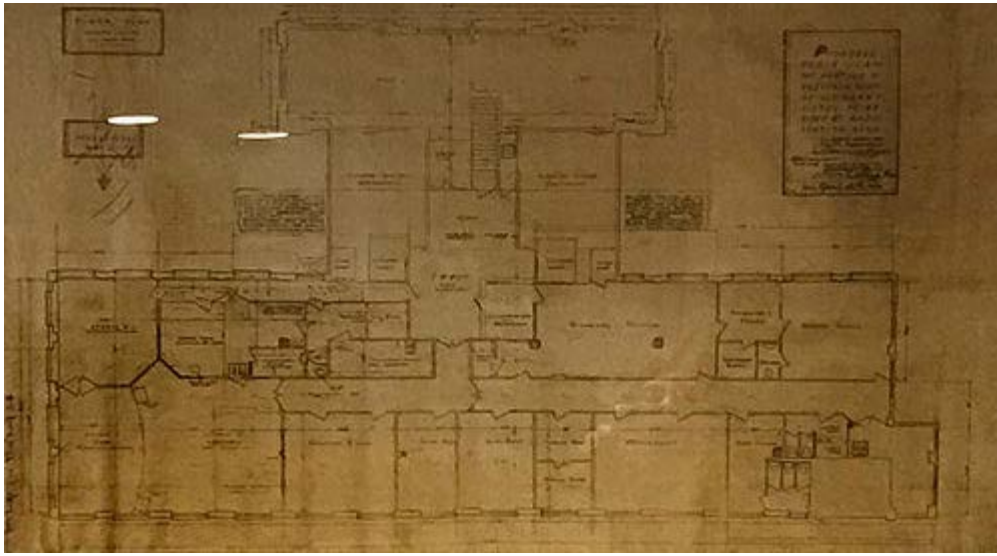
While the building was being constructed a time capsule filled with memorabilia was placed above the Broadway entryway. A few years later, items commemorating the opening of the hotel were added. When the hotel was renovated decades later, the whereabouts of the time capsule became unknown. A local resident miraculously retrieved the contents in 2005. Visitors to the hotel should look for the stone medallion on the lobby's floor near the elevators. This marks the spot where the time capsule was placed in 2006. The capsule includes the returned contents, along with items from the Sycuan Tribe and Kumeyaay craftsmen. In 2010, items commemorating the 100th anniversary were placed inside the capsule.



Grant Medallion for Time Capsule

20th Century

Historic events didn't adversely affect the property. Unlike many hotel restaurants that suffered during the restrictive period of Prohibition, The US Grant Hotel thrived. The Bivouac Grill was converted into a moneymaking speakeasy. With an overabundance of revenue, the hotel flourished and improvements were made to enhance the property.



US Grant Hotel Blueprints

The decrease in hotel occupancy caused by the Great Depression was offset by rental income from Radio Station KFVW. Their radio tower was installed on the roof and their offices were on the 11th floor.

After World War II, a restaurant, the Grant Grill, was added to the lobby. This eatery became a popular lunch spot for the movers and shakers of San Diego. After a group of women protested in 1969, the restaurant rescinded its mens only restriction until 3 PM.

Before undergoing an \$80 million renovation in the 1980s, the hotel was placed on the **National Register of Historic Sites**. The end result was a spectacular hotel in a less than desirable location. After the surrounding area was redeveloped and restored, The U.S. Grant once again became a popular destination that was close to the Gaslamp Quarter, the heart of historic San Diego.



US Grant Foyer artwork

Connection to the Kumeyaay People

In 2003, the **Sycuan Tribal Development Corporation** (STDC) purchased the hotel for \$45 million dollars and then chose to renovate the property for an addition \$56 million. Fourteen years later, the hotel was once again revitalized.

History buffs will be intrigued by the fact that STDC is a business entity tied to the **Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation**, an indigenous Native American tribe that has lived in the San Diego area for more than 10,000 years. Their traditional life has always been centered on clans called Sh'mull. Kwaaypaay, or chairmen, are the leaders of each clan

The Kumeyaay Native Americans were one of 18 tribes that were unsuccessful in negotiating land treaties in the mid 19th century. During President Grant's tenure (1869-1877), new policies were introduced to protect Native Americans. In 1875, President Grant passed an executive order that provided over 600 acres of land for the Kumeyaay Tribes in East San Diego County.

To this day, the Kumeyaay Tribes single out President Grant as one of the few government officials who respected their sovereignty. Frederick Douglass once wrote the following about President Ulysses S. Grant, “ In him the negro found a protector, the Indian a friend, a vanquished foe a brother, an imperiled nation a savior.”



One of the tribal leaders

Inside the Hotel

After leaving our rental car with the doorman, we entered the hotel and were immediately welcomed by an oversized painting of President Grant. This picture has greeted visitors since the hotel's opening day.



Photo courtesy US Grant Hotel

History came alive in the lobby as we strolled back in time by viewing the historic photos on the walls. One area recognizes numerous Kwaaypaay. On another lobby wall, we saw the original Horton House while another section showcased the grand opening of the hotel.

Hints of Kumeyaay culture are found throughout the common areas. Each time I walked through the Broadway entrance, I was intrigued by the bronze sculpture called sweet dreams. The sculpture captures the image of a woman exiting a pool of water while holding three intertwined stems of primroses.

A plaque outside the Grant Grill draws attention to a bygone era when women were restricted during lunchtime. Inside the doorway to the restaurant, I passed a barrel that made me pause. It showcases the bar's innovative 100-day aged Centennial Manhattan. I ate several meals at the Grant Grill and was pleased with its diverse menu and outstanding service.



On the second floor, I viewed the photo collection of the fifteen U.S. Presidents and five First Ladies who have visited the hotel. On the lower level, I found additional evidence of the hotel's remarkable history. This Marriott hotel doubles as a luxury class property and as a repository of local and national history.



General Dwight D Eisenhower Presidential Campaign motorcade 1952



First Lady Gallery

Location

The US Grant Hotel, a Luxury Collection Hotel, is adjacent to the historic district of San Diego. In the evening, the Gaslamp Quarter's restaurants, bars, and shops are filled with people. I recommend making reservations at the popular establishments, especially when large conferences are in town. The Convention Center and the San

Diego shoreline are within walking distance. Horton Plaza and its colorful fountain are across the street from the hotel. Many of San Diego's popular tourist attractions are a short drive away.

The US Grant Hotel is an excellent choice for travelers heading to San Diego who are looking for deluxe accommodations in a convenient location with the bonus feature of a fascinating history.



Hotel Exterior. Photo courtesy US Grant Hotel

Sandy Bornstein, the *History Comes Alive Through Travel Editor* for Wandering Educators, has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life](#), is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about Jewish culture and history, historical sites, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

Note: Sandy Bornstein received a complimentary two-night stay at the US Grant Hotel in September.

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