

Charlene Duval, Executive Secretary

[cduval@sourisseauacademy.org](mailto:cduval@sourisseauacademy.org)

Leilani Marshall, Archivist

[lmarshall@sourisseauacademy.org](mailto:lmarshall@sourisseauacademy.org)

Phone: 408 808-2064

# *Sourisseau Academy*

*Smith-Layton Archive presents:*

# Fire!

## San Jose Fire Department

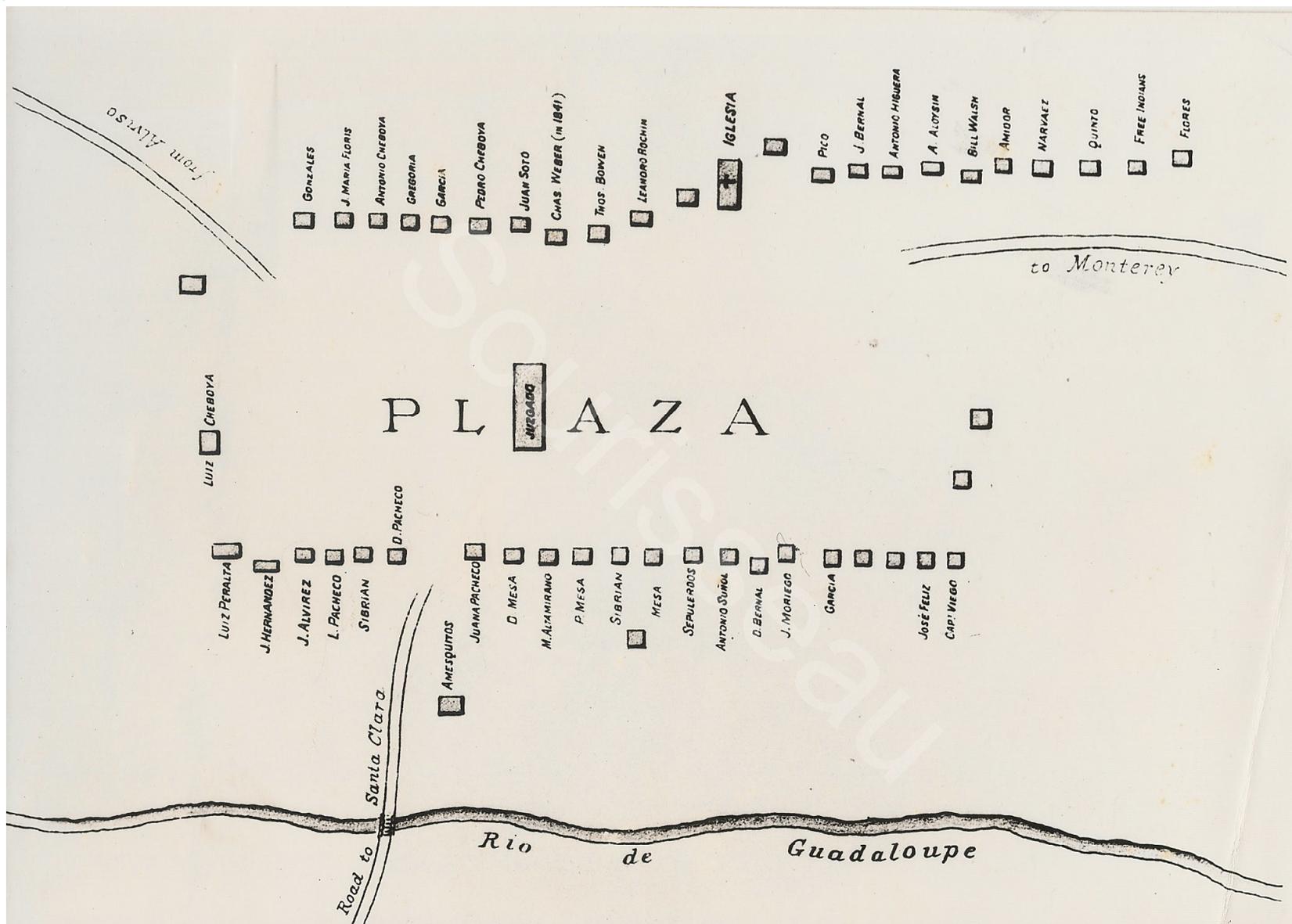
by April Halberstadt

*Les Amis (The Friends)*

*January 2016*

*Your donations help us purchase historic photos. Thank you!*

<http://www.sourisseauacademy.org/>

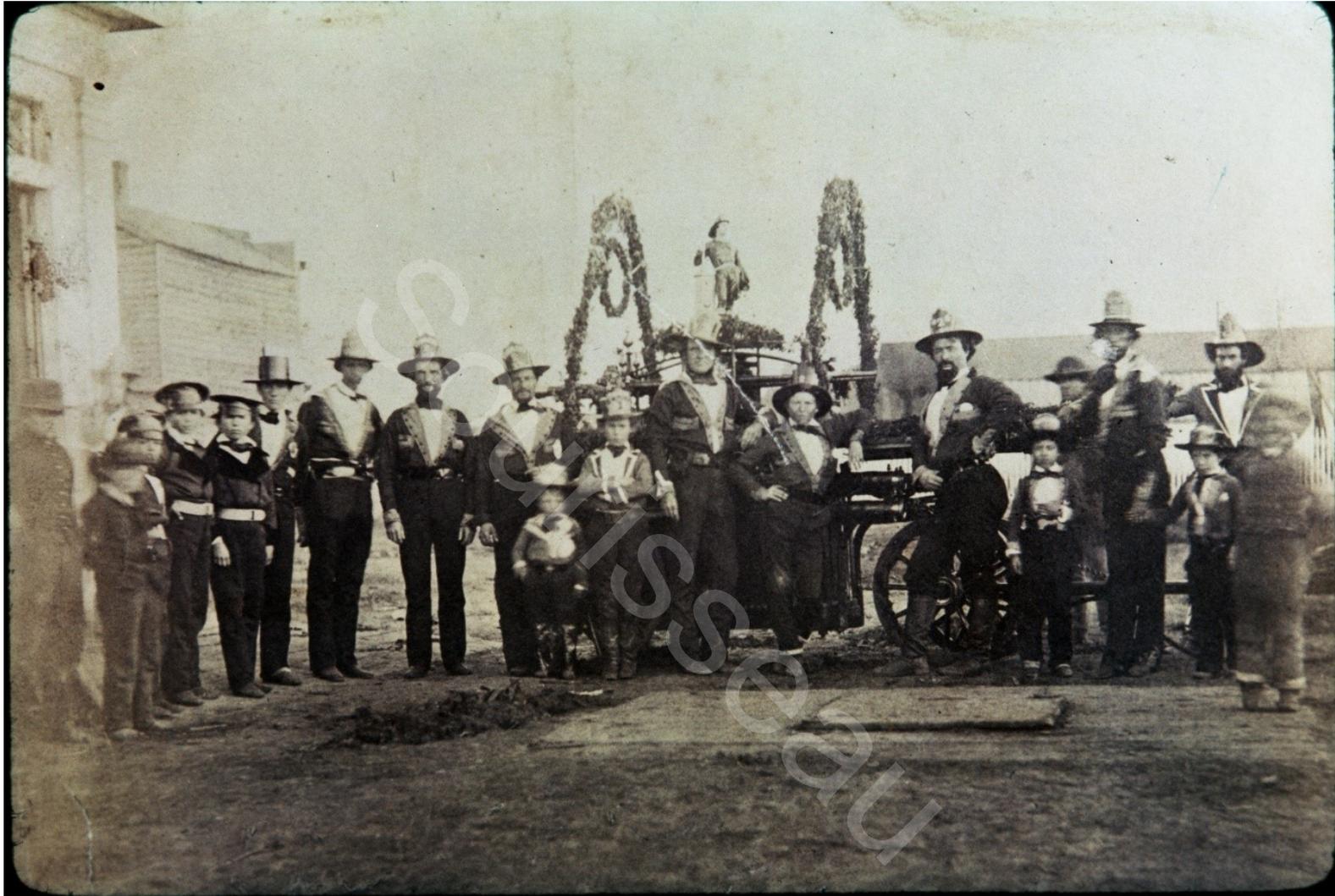


[1] Houses were widely separated in Pueblo San José. Fire safety was a concern from the earliest days of the pueblo. Although adobe buildings were set far apart, there were many rules even in the early times. Cooking was done away from the house. A bucket of water had to be kept filled at all times. Haystacks were kept far away from any houses. The first ordinances translated from Spanish to English in 1850 were related to fire safety.

Images on file at the Smith-Layton Archive, Sourisseau Academy for State and Local History  
Janu-



[2] **San Jose had water! Market Street showing cisterns and windmills.** Fire protection in early San Jose came from large public cisterns like this one in the middle of Market Street. Shortly after 1850 San Jose had four large public water tanks in downtown, ready for any emergency. The San Jose Common Council established fire districts and in 1850, just after statehood, citizens had formed a volunteer company named Eureka Fire Company No. 1. These volunteers provided their own equipment but their efforts proved inadequate when the State House burned in April of 1853.



[4] **Volunteer companies are formally organized.** To support an expanded volunteer fire effort, in 1854 the San Jose Common Council authorized spending \$2,000 for hooks, ladders and a pumper. Volunteer Frank Lightson donated a site and the City built a small fire station to house the equipment. Citizens donated \$400 for a fire bell. At the sound of the bell, volunteers rushed to the fire station and dragged the pumpers and the ladder truck to the fire. Empire Engine Company No.1, a group of volunteers who pulled the first pumper, was organized in June of 1854. A second pumper was purchased in 1856 and served by Torrent Engine Company No. 2. Torrent Engine Company No. 2 was known as the "German" company while the Empire Company was called the "Irish" Company. Then, as now, a "Fire Company" is a group of firefighters who are dedicated to a single piece of apparatus, either a ladder truck or an engine. Volunteers trained on their apparatus and worked together as a team, sometime over many years, developing strong personal bonds.



[5] **Empire Engine House.** San Jose's second fire house was the magnificent Empire Fire Station, built on South Second Street in 1869. The Jose Theatre is now on the site. It was a two-story brick home for the "Irish" company. There is no image of our first firehouse, home for three groups of San Jose's first volunteers, located on tiny Lightston Street. Note the proximity of Krumb's Brewery next door to the firehouse.



[6] **Torrent No. 2 housed in City Hall.** Torrent No. 2. was housed in the old City Hall building on North Market. When a new City Hall was built in 1885, the Fire Department took over the entire structure. This location was home to the San Jose Fire Department for the next 82 years. The structure was demolished during the 1906 earthquake, as shown here, but it was rebuilt in the Mission Revival style in 1908.



[7] **A Professional Fire Department - Men and Horses.** In 1876 the San Jose City Council created a paid fire department with 29 men. J. Chris Gerdes, the very experienced leader of Torrent Engine Company No. 2, was the first chief. The Council also authorized the use of horses to pull the heavy steam-driven pumps. For ten years the steamers had been pulled by man-power.



[8] **Volunteers were still important.** Although San Jose now had a paid fire department, volunteers continued to provide fire protection for many parts of San Jose. A firehouse was built at 386 North Eighth Street in 1876, and the volunteer Eureka Hose Company (which later became Chemical No. 2) remained at this site for the next 73 years.



[9] **West San Jose Hose Company.** Many men missed the excitement and fellowship of belonging to a Volunteer Fire Company. Although the City of San Jose had a paid department, volunteers from some of San Jose's unincorporated neighborhoods continued to meet. Volunteer crews, bonded though years of fellowship, continued to operate in other unincorporated areas — such as the Gardner neighborhood, whose hose cart was housed at William Street and Martin Avenue.



[10] **Earthquake and Fire.** The 1906 Earthquake destroyed or damaged many Downtown buildings. Although the fire stations collapsed, firemen were able to pull the steamers out of the rubble and connect them to hydrants. Franklin Engine No. 3, an 1890 Amoskeag pumper, became known as "the engine that saved San Jose." Dented but undaunted, the pumper stood in the middle of First Street and ran for three days, stopping the fire and saving the Downtown from complete destruction. Now completely restored, the Amoskeag pumper is one of the crown jewels in the collection of the San Jose Fire Museum.



[11] **A new Fire Department.** The 1906 Earthquake left the fire Department in shambles. Rigs were all in pretty sorry condition. It took several more serious fires before a bond issue was passed to rebuild the department. The new Market Street building, complete with a billiard room, was designed by Wolfe & McKenzie in the popular Mission Revival Style, and cost \$27,000. The station became home to Engine No.1, Chemical No. 2. and Truck No. 1 and the companies that manned them.



[12] **Almost, out-to-pasture!** Within four years of this 1911 photo, the San Jose Fire Department would become completely motorized. Here, Dick, Bob and Prince pose with Will Tennant at the reins of a magnificent steam pumper in front of Raley & Company on North Market Street.



[13] **Engine No. 1 San Jose's first completely motorized rig testing its pumps on San Pedro Street.** San Jose bought its first motorized fire engine in 1914, which became the new Engine No. 1. After the 1906 earthquake, San Jose began a modernization program and replaced all of its fire vehicles with motorized units. San Jose purchased only two Seagraves engines. Here is one testing its pumps outside the Farmer's Union building on San Pedro Street



[15] **Bickur Cholim 1940.** Destruction of a beloved landmark is always emotional. Deciding how and where to rebuild is part of the agony. San Jose's first synagogue, Bickur Cholim, was located at the corner of Third and San Antonio Streets, and was dedicated in 1870. After the fire, the congregation divided. One of the groups then built Temple Emanu-El on University Avenue near the Rose Garden.



[14] **County Courthouse 1931.** The fire had already gutted the interior of the County Courthouse when this picture was made. Just a few minutes later, the front of the building collapsed. The courthouse was rebuilt in 1936, but without its magnificent dome. The lost records could never be replaced.



[16] **Cheim Lumber Company 1951.** Many of San Jose's old-timers recall the Cheim Lumber Company fire when the company was located near the corner of Lenzen Avenue and The Alameda. This location was an industrial area during the era of San Jose's canneries and was outside the formal city limits. When residential development began to surround the area, fires like this became a tremendous danger to nearby homes and businesses.



[17] **Central Fire Station.** San Jose's new and completely modern Central Fire Station, opened in 1951, was proof that San Jose was embracing new technology and planning for their rapidly growing urban population.



[18] **The Renaissance of Old Station One - As a Museum!** Through the generosity of Lee and Diane Brandenburg, the old Central Fire Station will become San Jose's new Fire Museum, a testament to more than 150 years of fire protection for San Jose.