

## Phoenix from 1867 to 1888: Community Networks Shape Development

By Carol A. Poore, Ph.D.

Arizona State University faculty, School of Public Affairs

Modern-day Phoenix was founded in 1867 when Jack Swilling reconstructed ancient Hohokam Indian canals, enabling the Salt River Valley to be farmed. From the post-Civil War years to the



**Jack Swilling**

1920s, Phoenix was established primarily through government policies and influential businessmen from other places who saw great potential to become wealthy through acquisition of cheap land and start-up commerce. The development of early Phoenix was the result of federal policies and the important local actions by a few business leaders who came to Phoenix with wealth and experience from communities elsewhere. These business leaders had both great impact and enjoyed significant economic return through developing downtown Phoenix. Decisions often favored self interest, profitability, and “utility of function” over aesthetic downtown form (Larson & Alameddin, 2007).

With the ability to acquire large amounts of inexpensive land through the Desert Land Act of 1877 and National Reclamation Act of 1902, land speculation became an important economic driver within the Valley. Land in this desert environment was valuable for either farming or development only if it could be supplied with water.

Notable Phoenix leaders invested in building a downtown because of personal commitment beyond self interest, using their established networks and social capital for the good of the community. When Dwight and Maie Heard moved from Chicago to Phoenix in 1895, they brought with them an extensive network of wealth that continues to benefit downtown Phoenix today. The Heards’ extensive collection of Native American art became the focus of the Heard Museum. The Phoenix Civic Center was built on downtown land from the Heards’ estate, as was the City of Phoenix Burton Barr public library and the Phoenix Art Museum (Larson and Alameddin, 2007).

Benjamin Fowler was extremely active in persuading the federal government to invest in dam building leading to the creation of Salt River Project (SRP) in 1902. SRP, a water and power company, exemplifies the impact of early farming networks on developing trust and social networks based on mutual interests of survival and agricultural sustainability. An acreage-based voting system was initiated than 100 years ago when Phoenix landowners came together and realized that the issue of ensuring a steady supply of water was too big for one individual or group to solve alone.

Collectively as a community, farmers organized as a groups and pledged their land, about 200,000 acres, as collateral for the federal government to build the \$3 million Roosevelt Dam in 1912, one of the first projects built through the federal Reclamation Act. This makes many who

own land in SRP territory shareholders today, although few realize it or actively participate in elections (The Arizona Republic, 2011).

Phoenix leaders in the late 1800s tapped relationships external to their networks in Arizona in order to secure financial capital to purchase land and build local influence. For example, W. J. Murphy's need to finance the Arizona Canal Company required that he travel extensively to solicit possible investors, and he established a network of associations with wealthy individuals in different areas of the country.

Moses Sherman was active in the promoting of early Phoenix but left the city in 1890 and operated the trolley system and water company from headquarters in Los Angeles. This permitted some economies of scale beneficial to both cities; as older trolleys from Los Angeles were sent to service Phoenix.



Early Phoenix was a walking city from the 1860s through early 1900s, when everything within the town was within two miles. The town of Phoenix was built upon a grid street pattern which cannot develop spontaneously; it requires specific planning. However, a Phoenix streetscapes history report states that planning was not a notable activity in the early years of downtown Phoenix development (City of Phoenix, 2010). Land was being sold faster than a plan could be developed:

[t]here are no records describing what Phoenix founders intended to do as far as sidewalk street lamps or other amenities. It may be that they did not think that far ahead. In fact, the town was laid out and *lots were proposed for sale before the half-square mile rectangle that later became the city's downtown was taken out of the public domain.*

Land acquisition and the start-up of new businesses followed expansion beyond the initial town center with the introduction of streetcars, railroad transportation, and canal expansion. A mindset and culture of "land as an unlimited economic opportunity and natural resource" became the forerunner of urban sprawl, driven by the desire to maximize profits.

Once the Arizona Canal was completed in 1886, early Phoenix records show that tens of thousands of acres were developed for agricultural development by investors and speculators from California, the Midwest, and East Coast of the United States (City of Phoenix, 2010).

## References

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