Welcome to A Deep Dive, I'm Reggie.

In this episode, the life and times of a San Francisco building and the push to educate all of the city's children equally before and after the 1906 earthquake.

Thanks for joining me for, earthquakes and consequences.

Music

When putting together this episode I knew that I wanted to share my affection and some might say obsession with the Newton J. Tharp Commercial School in San Francisco. This all but abandoned, beautifully austere brick and steel building was constructed in the 1900s as a symbol of educational excellence but nature had other plans.

I wanted to avoid telling you with yet another account of the events surrounding the 1906 earthquake so I went searching for other stories and what I found challenges the idea of California as an eternally progressive leader of new ideas.

One more thing, if you hear echoes in some of the things we're grappling with today I'd refer to the quote often attributed to Mark Twain,

History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

music

The aftermath of a disaster can signal a time of more considered renewal but it can also be a time of settling scores, land grabs, and the displacement of people along economic, ethnic and racial lines and these changes can permanently alter the character of a city, town or village. San Francisco's Newton J Tharp Commercial School is a perfect example of all of the above.

In 1880 San Francisco had two public high schools a Boy's school and a Girls school in 1883 a decision was made to add commercial training to the Boy's School curriculum. The next year the board of education gave the commerce department a 2-year charter and a separate campus near the Boy's School at Powell near Clay street in San Francisco.

Students could learn everything from bookkeeping, typing, stenography, penmanship and economic allowing them to leave school with certified training and skills in two years, not in the four years required by traditional high schools. Classes were also available at night.

The new campus became one of three high schools in the USA to admit girls and this edition proved so popular that in 1900 the school moved again to downtown near the San Francisco Emporium on Market streets.

After six prosperous years at the new location, nature would, and not for the last time, assert its power when the earthquake of 1906 would bring the city of San Francisco to its knees.

Music

In 1906 the idea of a high school public education was still fairly new. In 1910 the high school movement started with an idea of creating a standard curriculum for older children. So the opportunity to learn a skill in two years was fairly novel for its time but this training was only

available to white children. Children of color in San Francisco were prohibited from attending school with white children because of the Board of Education's policy of separate but equal and were relegated to attending Chinese, Colored, Mexican, or Indian Schools and most of these schools only provided an education of up grade school.

Even though Californians had approved the abolishment of slavery in 1849 and even though the black population only accounted for 1% of the states' population, California had assembled a dizzying array of discriminatory laws against black people.

Mixed race marriages were illegal, black people were prohibited from holding public office or testifying in court against white people. California's first elected governor Peter Burnett even considered banning free persons of color from moving to California. He also decreed that the Indian population would have to "wiped out" before any real progress could be made for the state overall.

While Native American children were discriminated against those living in San Francisco faired a bit better because there were no reeducation schools modeled on the Schools founded by Richard Pratt whose idea was, "Native people would not succeed unless their traditions, habits,

and beliefs were eradicated. It was Pratt who coined the famous adage, "kill the Indian in him

and save the man." The Carlisle school became a national model but not in San Francisco.

In 1863, the board of education cobbled together a ruling that allowed for the creation of separate schools for "Negros, Mongolians, and Indians." 10 or more parents had to request a school. Children living in areas with less than 10 "colored children" would be allowed to attend "white schools." Providing none of the white parents objected in writing. Often things never got that far because school administrators would step in to prevent a child of color from enrolling in most "all-white schools."

It is into this environment, in 1872, a small group of black parents met to discuss the future of their children's education. Prior to this African American children attended one of San Francisco's two "Colored Schools." These schools were often nothing more than poorly lit church basements.

The tipping point came when Mrs. Harriet Ward had attempted to enroll her daughter Mary Frances at a public school near their home only to have the school's principal Mr. Flood prevent the child from being. This failed attempt resulted in the state's first legal challenge to discrimination in schooling.

The case, Ward vs. Flood came down in favor of Principal Flood and the Board of Education upholding the practice and establishing the principle of separate but equal twenty-two years before the Supreme Court adopted it as the law of the land in Plessy v. Ferguson.

Through the persistence of African American parents by 1872 there were cracks in the wall of segregation. Oakland California's board of ed supported legislation abolishing separate schools. It read, "All children of African descent who may apply for admission to the Oakland public school shall be received."

In 1884 a motion to close "colored schools" in San Francisco lost by just one vote and the following year 1885 the full board of ed passed a recommendation that all segregated schools

close effectively ending the established practice of segregation for black, Native, and Hispanic children in San Francisco.

While this was progress of a kind it did not have the weight of laws meaning, any principal or teacher could still deny a child access to their school whenever they felt like it. Perhaps more importantly, none of this applied to Chinese and other Asian American children. That would take an international incident and a few more decades of concerted effort. Music

Part of the Commerce school lure is after the earthquake and before the Ham and Egg fire the school's principal Colonel Murphy, who sounds like quite a character in his own right, rescued the school's 93 typewriters from the damaged building. Shortly after the rescue of the school was completely destroyed by fire.

Music

In fact, the earthquake destroyed 28,000 buildings and 498 city blocks. practically all of the schools east of Van Ness Ave and south as far out as the outskirts of the Mission district were destroyed. At first, authorities claimed that only 300 people had died, it took decades of research by the city's archivist Gladys Hansen, to prove that more than 3,000 had died. We won't ever really know how many people died because the city didn't keep accurate records of the city's Chinese population.

You might be wondering why this particular animus towards the Chinese. In the 1850s, Chinese workers migrated to the United States, first to work in the gold mines, but also to take agricultural jobs, and factory work, especially in the garment industry. Chinese immigrants were instrumental in building railroads in the American West.

As the numbers of Chinese laborers grow, so did the vitriol towards them on the part of other white workers afraid that their jobs would be taken by a Chinese workforce. In an effort to stop immigration of Chinese workers the exclusion act of 1882 was introduced. This threatened to sour diplomatic relations between the United States and China and soon this diplomatic crisis would grow to include Japan.

In 1885, a Special Committee of the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco argued that Chinese children were ‘‘born and nurtured in such conditions of immorality and degradation.’’ According to the board, ‘‘the laws of morality, and the law of self-protection, must compel our own people to sternly prohibit them from mingling with our children in the public schools, or as companions and playmates.’’

The Chinese Primary School that Chinese children were forced to attend took six months to rebuild. When the school reopened in October of 1906, it was only at half capacity as many of the Chinese families had left San Francisco.

San Francisco's superintendent decided that the 93 vacancies could be used for 93 Japanese students and the few Korean students. With cooperation from the Board of Education, a school policy was quickly adopted on October 11, 1906. As part of the new policy, the Chinese Primary School was renamed The Oriental Public School to extend the school's rules of separate but equal to include Japanese, Korean and all other Asian students.

On October 22, 1906, the American Ambassador in Tokyo informed Washington officials that a potential crisis was at hand. Three days later, the Japanese Ambassador in Washington met with

the Secretary of State to discuss the situation. Apparently, news of the separate but equal policy had reached Japan and had caused great offense.

At the time President Roosevelt was serving as a mediator between Japan and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and he was determined to keep things friendly between all parties. President Roosevelt immediately began exerting pressure on the San Francisco School Board to rescind the school policy for Japanese students. In an unprecedented move, Roosevelt sent the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, to investigate the treatment of the Japanese in San Francisco firsthand and exert some pressure on the school board to change course.

Amazingly, the Secretary of Commerce and Labor couldn't get school officials to budge. Mind you there were only 93 Japanese students involved but such was the pressure from anti-Japanese groups the board refused to change their policy.

Roosevelt gave a speech condemning the San Francisco School Board of Ed. Roosevelt even threatened to take legal action but that wasn't enough to persuade the San Francisco board of ed to withdraw the policy. Apparently, San Francisco's Mayor and the Governor of California were both receiving intense pressure from labor unions and political supporters to stand firm. For many of these groups that larger plan was complete exclusion of Japanese people from the United States along with the Chinese.

In January of 1907, President Roosevelt invited, a polite term I think, San Francisco's Superintendent of schools, the school's Board President and the members of the Board of Education, along with San Francisco's Mayor Schmitz to Washington D.C. for a little chat.

On February 10, 1907, the parties announced a settlement: San Francisco schools would admit Japanese students under the age of 16 to public schools in exchange for cutting off immigration of Japanese laborers into the United States.

This agreement, not law, was followed by the San Francisco School Board's formal withdrawal of the school segregation order for Japanese students on March 13, 1907. Japanese students were again allowed to attend their neighborhood schools but the situation continued for Chinese children.

By the way, this "Gentleman's Agreement" like the Exclusion Act before it was meant to be a short term fix stayed in place until 1965. The Chinese Exclusion Acts were not repealed until

1943, and then only to pacify a wartime ally during World War II.

On May 11, 1908, a bond issue was voted on to rebuild the Commerce school. The school would be one of the largest schools in San Francisco. A three-story steel structure with 31 classrooms, elevators, and a beautiful brick exterior. The price tag was $262,872.37, $7,400,000 today.

The city's recovery architect in charge of designing many of the public buildings lost in the earthquake, Newton J. Tharp would never see school completed. Though the school was nearly completed Tharp would never see his project fully realized. On May 12, 1909 while in New York looking at state of the art hospital buildings for San Francisco Tharp collapsed and died on a New York city street of pneumonia. Tharp was accompanied on the trip by his 13-year-old son Laurence who was cared for by family friends until he could be reunited with his mother in San Francisco.

By the end of 1910, the Commerce School renamed Newton J. Tharp Commercial School was open for business. This new, imposingly elegant school built in the Palazzo style with rows of windows had pride of place in the shadow of what was to be a newly rebuilt City Hall which had also been destroyed in the earthquake and fire. Three years into the return of students the newly opened state of the art Newton J. Tharp School Commercial was once again at risk.

On February 15, 1911, President Taft signed a resolution designating San Francisco as the official

home of the 1914 World's Fair. The Panama Pacific Exposition was to celebrate the formal

opening of the Panama canal.

On Jan 12, 1912, an article about the world's fair in the San Francisco Chronicle noted. "One of the problems to be solved is the disposition to be made of the Commercial High School." City leaders decided to take advantage of the cities increased international profile by adding a plaza to the grandeur of the newly built Beaux-Arts style City Hall. The new plaza would stretch two blocks which meant the newly built Newton J Tharp School was smack dab in the middle of planned grandeur and so it was decreed the school had to be moved.

It might blow your mind as it did mine that in spite of the effort and risk involved, Americans have been moving buildings successfully since the early 18th century. One of the earliest illustrations to be found of house moving in America shows a small frame building being moved by teams of horses in 1799. At the time, the most common reasons to move a building was to widen a street or highway. Occasionally, it was done to accommodate a change in a county's seat, or to retreat from a rising tideline, or the discovery of a sizable vein of iron ore or coal could cause an entire town to be moved.

The city of San Francisco offered the Board of Education the city's library on the corner of Fell and Franklin Streets about five city blocks away at a cost of $151,000.00 (about $4,072,000.00 today) and the deal was made that this would be the school's newest location.

On February 15th, 1913, the firm of Sound Construction and Engineering of Seattle was awarded the contract to move the 8,000-ton building across five city blocks to its final location. As a

condition of the contract the company agreed to rebuild the school "from the ground up" if the structure should fall apart in the move.

Subcontractors Nicholas & Handley Co. were paid $90,000 putting down a bond of $170,000 to cover any mishaps during the journey.

On May 1st, 1914, the Newton J. Tharp Commercial School was installed at 170 Fell St. where it has remained for over 100 years. Having succeeded in moving the school the city also tried to get the school to give up its block-long athletics field located on Van Ness Ave where the San Francisco symphony now resides but the students banded to defeat the proposal.

By the way, in addition to moving the school a building was added to the Civic Center directly across from the plaza to accommodate events taking place during the World's Fair. Today many of you might recognize that building as the Bill Graham Auditorium.

In 1926, the number of students continued to climb a new addition to the Newton J. Tharp School was built next to the Newton J. Tharp School on Fell street taking up the rest of the city block on Van Ness and Hayes streets. The price tag for this new addition was 1,047,292.82, $14,699,135.03. That number just doesn't seem right. If you have a better 1926 in today's money calculator please let me know.

By 1920, the policy of segregating Chinese children was beginning to show signs of wear. Two years earlier the parents of a seven-year Chinese boy tried to enroll him in a "mixed " school but were turned away. The next year, without any drama he was enrolled. Children of wealthy Chinese merchants living across San Francisco in upscale areas suddenly found that they were allowed to enroll their children in mixed schools with opposition.

By the early 1930s, there were nearly 2000 Chinese students still attending segregated "Chinese Schools" and the exclusion act was still in place but things were slowly shifting.

China's role as an Allied power during World War II helped recast Chinese Americans in a slightly more favorable light.

Returning Chinese American veterans took advantage of the GI Bill to pursue higher education and professional careers and with this, they began to move out and away from Chinatown to the suburbs. Not without objections of course.

White neighbors resisted the ''invasion'' filing lawsuits to prevent the integration of their neighborhoods.

Segregation began to crumble, however, with the Supreme Court's 1948 Shelley v. Kraemer decision invalidating racially restrictive covenants.

This shifting tide for Chinese families and their children was not the case for Mexican American and Mexican migrant children. Even though the Board of Education had allowed Mexican American parents to enroll their children in schools they quickly changed their minds prompted by anti-Mexican immigration advocates alarmed by the increasing Mexican American population in California the Board of Education and city governments across California used immigration, culture, and language as a reason to segregated children of Mexican descent.

Hispanic people, they were given the designation of white as an ethnic identity. This designation made it easier to absent them from public accommodations. Counted as white in the census but treated as a minority everywhere else

It is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution and takes place every 10 years. The data collected by the decennial census determine the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives and is also used to distribute billions in federal funds to local communities.

Latinos weren't represented in the census until 1930 and then disappeared again not to be counted until1970 when the question was included in long-form with other ethnic designations.

Throughout the United States during the same period as Jim Crow, it's easy to find cases of separate Mexican and White water fountains, restaurant signs that said no Mexicans allowed and incidences of Mexican men, women, and children being lynched.

The general feeling was Mexican American children were dirty, had lower IQ's because they came from Spanish speaking homes and possessed "different" cultural values from white children.

In 1947, Soledad Vidaurri attempted to enroll her children and her brother Gonzola Mendez's children in the Westminster School. Mrs. Viduarri was told that her children could be admitted Viduarri's children had light complexions and Basque surnames but her brother's children could not because they had discernable Hispanic surname and they were too brown to be white.

Gonzalo Mendez was furious that his children were being segregated of but it was worse than that. His daughter Sylvia told her father that the only education they were receiving was how to clean, sew, and quilt, how to be good maids.

The Mendez family decided to form a class-action lawsuit with 4 other fathers sued Orange County over the practice of segregated Mexican schools in the case of Mendez, v. Westminster.

In its ruling, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, held that the forced segregation of Mexican American students into separate "Mexican schools" was unconstitutional and unlawful, not because Mexicans were "white," as attorneys for the plaintiffs argued, but because as US District Court Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled,

"The equal protection of the laws pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, textbooks and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to the other public school children regardless of their ancestry. A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage."

McCormick went on "The evidence clearly shows that Spanish-speaking children are retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use because of segregation, and that commingling of the entire student body instills and develops a common cultural attitude among the school children which is imperative for the perpetuation of American institutions and ideals."

In the aftermath of this decision, California Governor Earl Warren signed a state law outlawing segregation where it was not already being practiced under Plessy v. Ferguson.

It is not widely appreciated that Mendez v Westminster was the precursor to Brown v. Board of Education. Including the involvement of former California Governor now Chief Justice for the Supreme Court, Earl Warren, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP, and the Japanese American Citizens League to name a few.

They all played an important role in the 1957 case Brown v Board of Education which finally made racial segregation in public schools and educational facilities unconstitutional. Of course, the reaction in the deep south was to come up with a plan to keep segregation alive called Massive Resistance but that's for another podcast episode.

I want to underline the connection between these two cases. The Mendez v. Westminster case is often left out of the larger civil rights conversation because the Mexican Am plaintiffs were seen as white while Brown v Board of ed was focused on the treatment of African American children but that separation is a misreading of segregationist policy and intent, history, and the facts as relayed by the participates.

So, with the Brown decision, public schools were finally integrated by law meaning Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian Americans, as well as Native and African American children, had access to the public school system by law for the first in the nation's history.

In light of San Francisco's Board of Education's history of promoting segregation looking at the 1947 High School of Commerce yearbook the student body is fairly racially integrated. Though predominately white the yearbook is full of pictures of African American, Latino and Asian students and the surnames that had been used to ban them earlier.

So it must have come as a crushing blow for students and staff to find that the Board of Education had decided to close both schools due to dwindling student numbers. As San Francisco continued to grow and neighbors became firmly established with their own school's many parents preferred their children attend school closer to home. It was decided that the Newton J Tharp School and the Van Ness street campuses would become home to school district staff and administration.

So it would remain until once again a natural disaster would once again assert itself. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake did far less damage to the city of San Francisco than its 1906 cousin but for the Newton J Tharp School, it proved calamitous. When assessed for damage it was found the school had suffered catastrophic damage to its overall structural integrity and had to be closed immediately. FEMA funding allowed for major repairs making the 135 Van Ness campus habitable. Today it is still home to the SF school district staff and administration.

In an effort to protect both buildings the Newton J Tharp School and school on Van Ness were placed on the national register of historic buildings giving them special protections and prohibition before they could be worn down. It goes something like this. If a percentage of the overall building is salvageable then efforts to restore it outweigh the savings in tearing it down. This restoration was put in place in part because the 1980s saw sweeping demolition of historic buildings in large American cities without any consideration for their historical value.

In the case of the Newton J Tharp School this preservation has placed it in a state of limbo. There have long been plans to make the Newton J Tharp School the home of the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts but in spite of successful bond issues placed on the ballot to fund the repair and renovations the building remains empty and costs go up and up with each passing year.

One bright spot for the building is that its neighbor San Francisco Jazz, which is just across the street has adopted the school. The windows of the school are decked out in the enormous and sumptuous jazz photographs of William Gotlieb.

Living in earthquake country involves a certain amount of whistling past the graveyard. You prepare as much as you can of course but the event itself is out of your hands.

Then again, maybe whistling past the graveyard is part of the human experience. We seem to do when things are too cumbersome or seemingly outside of our control.

For me the Newton J Tharp Commercial school is a daily reminder to get on with it, to face the tough decisions that need to be made.

You'd think the history of the discrimination and cruelty meted out to children merely because of their race or ethnicity would redouble our commitment to ending it in all its forms.

Yet, in 2019 residential segregation and the lack of vigorous federal oversight means many poor children of color continue to attend school with inferior resources when compared to more affluent mostly white school districts.

If the judge in the Mendez case was right when he wrote, one of the priorities of public education is social equality regardless of lineage, it seems we could be doing a better job.

Ever the optimist I think the more we know about our collective history the better equipped we'll be when we hear history starting to rhyme so we can change the tune Music If you'd like to take a look at the Newton J. Tharp Commercial School, and I really hope you do, you can see some beautiful photos taken before and after the move thanks to the folks at the opensfhistory website. If you'd like to read more about the NJTS you can read an article I wrote a few years ago.

There are two books that were fundamental to my deeper understanding of the lives of children of color in San Francisco. The Children of Chinatown by Wendy Rouse Jorae, All Deliberate Speed by Charles Wollenberg, and Black San Francisco by Albert S. Broussard. You can find links to these books, photographs, and other research details on the deep dive website.

Please like and leave a positive review for the podcast it helps other people find it.

Thanks to Joshua Rich for the theme song Rain.

Earthquakes and Consequences was researched and written by me Reggie.

See ya next time.