

San Mateo County Courthouse
Middlefield, Hamilton, Broadway
and Marshall
Redwood City
San Mateo County
California

HABS No. CA-2143

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SAN MATEO COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. CA-2143

Location: Bounded by Middlefield, Hamilton, Broadway, and Marshall, Redwood City, San Mateo County, California.

Present Owner: San Mateo County.

Present Use: Courthouse.

Significance: The San Mateo County Courthouse has the largest stained-glass dome in the county. Although most of the building was rebuilt following the 1906 earthquake, the dome remains from the original 1904 structure. The front facade dates from 1933, but the rich interior from the 1906 structure survives.

PART 1. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1904-1910. Cornerstone laid May 1904. Construction was just completed when most of the structure was destroyed by the earthquake in 1906. The rebuilding was finished in 1910.
2. Architect: 1904-George A. Dodge and J. W. Dolliver, San Francisco 1907 reconstruction-Glenn Allen, San Francisco; 1933 and 1941 alterations-W. H. Toepke
3. Original and subsequent owners:

1858 March 30 Deed Book 1, page 335
Soledad O. de Arguellos, Jose Ramon de Arguellos, and
S. M. Mezes
to
John B. Weller, Governor of the State of California
Block 3, Range B, for \$1. Done under an act "establishing
seat of justice in Redwood City."
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

1904 - American-Hawaiian Engineering and Construction Company
was awarded contract for \$132,845. Actual cost was
\$240,000.

1908 - J. J. O'Brien Construction Company Limited, general
contractors, San Francisco. Rainey and Phillips,
stonework, San Francisco, per marble plaque in rotunda.
Cost \$500,000.
5. Original plans and construction: No original drawings are extant, except for competition drawings by Martens and Coffey for the 1907 reconstruction. This scheme was not selected.

The Redwood City Democrat of April 9, 1903, described the planned courthouse: "The design is Italian Renaissance, and the principal approach is enriched by a broad flight of stairs leading to a portico, extending with massive columns the full height of the front. Rising from this is a graceful dome, which brings all the features of the design into a harmonious whole."

6. Alterations and additions: The building was about to be occupied when the April 18, 1906, earthquake struck. Much of the stone facing of the building peeled off, but the featured 116-1/2 foot steel ribbed dome and its art glass remained intact.

"Monday the Board of Supervisors made an inspection of the courthouse building accompanied by Architect Dodge and Mr. Amwig of the American-Hawaiian Construction Company. The building was carefully examined from the basement up and while the outside walls present a badly wrecked appearance a great portion of the interior was found to be intact. The dome stands as true as when first raised, the woodwork is to a great extent unharmed and the basement escaped any injury. While some of the stone facing is broken, the greater portion is as good as ever and can be used again. It is the opinion of the architect and builder that the building can be restored, with a steel frame, at a very reasonable cost..." (Redwood City Democrat, May 21, 1906).

During the reconstruction it was discovered that the dome's steel cage had not been bolted to the foundation. Much of the building's structural damage was accounted for by an inverted pendulum effect of the great weight of the dome. Today the same dome is supported by lattice rivet steel work with direct independent supports to the ground.

It was concluded that the building could be restored at a "reasonable cost." On the advice of architect A. I. Coffey the third floor was to be omitted in the re-building. A competition was set up for submission of plans, requiring the same general appearance as the original structure. The original foundation was to be used except for an additional wing at the rear. The second time more attention was to be paid to steel framing and fireproofing. In January 1907, Glen Allen won the commission and since he was to be paid as the superintendent of construction he was given a token of one dollar. Joseph J. O'Brien Construction Company's bid for \$160,000 was accepted with a completion deadline of November 1908.

In January 1908, the Grand Jury filed charges against the Board of Supervisors for a fraudulent contract. By May 1908, it was recognized that Allen had made costly "oversights" in his specifications, and Donald McKenzie replaced him as superintendent.

After three years of construction, changes, overpayments, discrepancies, and scandals the courthouse was officially occupied on June 23, 1910. In contrast to the estimated \$175,000, the second edition cost one-half million dollars.

It had a two-story portico with corinthian columns paired at the corners. The three second-level windows behind the portico were round-arched.

In 1933, architect W. H. Toepke designed a poorly planned addition to the front facade. This Neo-Classical front, which is pedimented and has pilasters between the windows, replaced the 1907-10 main entrance. It was built with Public Works Administration funds and cost \$236,310.

In 1941 the same architect built a one-story addition to the rear of the courthouse, which was constructed at a cost of \$50,000.

Prepared by: R. Patrick Christopher
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
August 1974

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Brick with sandstone facing, cross-shaped, two stories, flat roof with balustraded parapet, glass dome with octagonal cupola, pedimented entrance bay has two-story pilasters, small doorway with pediment-rotunda lit by stained-glass dome, marble pilasters, mosaic tile floors.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Recorder's Office, Hall of Records, Redwood City.

B. Old views:

The following photographs are in the collection of Richard Schellens, Redwood City:

Fourth of July ceremonies on south facade, statue of Blind Justice, 1905.

South facade, 1905.

Courthouse from southeast showing new construction, including framework for dome, 1905-6.

Courthouse from southwest after earthquake, April 1906.

Courthouse remains after clearing earthquake debris, dome on iron rotunda framework, May 1906.

Four views of courthouse with PWA additions, and photos of the additions alone, ca. 1960.

A ca. 1915 photograph of the south facade is in the San Mateo County Historical Museum.

C. Secondary sources:

Century 67, Redwood City Historical Trail, City of Redwood City Publication, 1967, Historical Site No. 16.

Cloud, Roy W., History of San Mateo County. Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1928.

Redwood City Democrat: 4-9-1903, 4-16-03, 9-24-03, 10-29-03, 11-5-03, 4-28-1904, 6-2-04, 12-8-04, 6-8-1905, 7-20-05, 12-21-05, 1-4-1906, 3-29-06, 4-5-06, 5-10-06, 5-24-06, 7-5-06, 5-30-1907, 11-18-1909, 6-30-1910.

Redwood City Tribune, August 11, 1927.

Regnery, Dorothy F. An Enduring Heritage. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.

San Francisco Call, November 18, 1908, January 4, 1909.

Stanger, Frank, South From San Francisco San Mateo: San Mateo County Historical Association, 1967.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored jointly by the National Park Service and the Junior League of Palo Alto. Recorded under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1974 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office at the Latham-Hopkins Gatehouse, Menlo Park, California. Project supervisor was Kim Spurgeon (Assistant Professor of Architecture, Kansas State University); the project historian was R. Patrick Christopher (Columbia University); and the student architects were Stephen Farneth (Carnegie Mellon University), Robert Randall (University of Houston), Aino Vieira da Rosa (University of Oregon), and Amy Weinstein (University of Pennsylvania). The written data were edited by Dorothy F. Regnery in San Mateo County in 1975 and by Alison K. Hoagland, HABS Historian, in February 1983.

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