City Hall
Civic Center
San Francisco, San Francisco County
California

HABS No. CAL-1881

ADDENDUM FOLLOWS...

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
450 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California

CITY HALL

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

ADDRESS: Civic Center

OWNER: City of San Francisco

OCCUPANT: Same

USE: Various City Offices and Courts

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The City Hall of San Francisco is one of the most elegant civic buildings in the United States. It was designed by Arthur Brown, Jr., and his executive partner, John Bakewell, Jr., after a competition held in 1912. The building was effectively begun in 1913 and completed in December of 1915. Its immediate genesis was the need for more satisfactory civic structures, after the scandalous collapse of the "old" City Hall in 1906, and especially during the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915. The present Auditorium was the first building completed and the City Hall, the second. The latter was excellently constructed of steel with a veneer of granite and fine stone on exterior and interior. Although a very conservative building, for its time, the City Hall is a modish and highly successful attempt to join the main current of Baroque Classicism in American civic architecture. Because of its superb detailing and splendid materials, and notably because of its equally fine maintenance, it has continued to be the distinguished focal point of one of America's most attractive civic complexes.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The history of San Francisco's City Halls is one of the principal threads on which the City's architectural development can be traced. The oldest was in the Custom House on Portsmouth Square, occupied as a City Hall in 1849. The Graham House was the Hall in 1850, and the handsome Italianate Jenny Lind Theater, completed in 1851, was occupied later that year as the third City Hall. This building was enlarged in 1861 to contain the thriving new town's municipal officers and offices.[1] The architecturally more ambitious "old" City Hall (to distinguish it from the present City Hall) was begun in 1872; the cornerstone was laid on February 22 of that year. It was constructed very slowly, due to innumerable delays and constant dishonesty in high municipal office; the principal building years were in the 1890's (essentially 1892 to 1895). It was "completed" in 1897, after scandalous increases in cost due to even more scandalous graft. This was one of very few buildings in San Francisco to collapse in the earthquake of 1906. Its gaunt metal skeleton and pathetic tatters of surface covering were among the most poignant evidences of a period of municipal corruption, rather than natural disaster. Like most American civic structures it had a strongly classicist Baroque flavor, although individual details betrayed its Victorian setting. Somewhat awkwardly proportioned in its main building, with a lofty tower and dome embarrassedly set on the tower's top, it occupied an area more or less corresponding with the location of the present San Francisco Public Library. The old buildings occupied a large triangle of land on McAllister south to Market Street and east of Larkin. The architect of the "old" City Hall was Augustus Laver, but numerous profiteering "builders""improved and modified" his scheme, which was published in a Britton and Rey lithograph of 1871.[2] The final cost of the "old" City Hall was $5,723,000.

After the earthquake and fire in 1906, a City Hall was temporarily located at 1231 Market Street, in the building which has since become the Whitcomb Hotel.[3] Numerous plans already had been submitted for a splendid new Civic Center. Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, had included one in his monumental plan for revision of San Francisco which he had delivered to the Board of Supervisors on September 27, 1905. After the fire, he submitted revisions to that plan to suit the new emergency. On April 14, 1909, the Board of Supervisors asked Burnham to provide

more definite proposals. (The actual design of this "new" Civic Center was by Willis Polk, Burnham's agent in San Francisco.) The Board proposed a bond issue of $8,480,000 on April 19th; but it was defeated by the voters that year. (It would have occupied an area bound by Franklin, Fell and Market Streets.)

In the enthusiastic planning for the Panama-Pacific Exposition for 1915, a new Civic Center was paramount in the minds of the Exposition Committee. Mayor James Rolph appointed Willis Polk to the Committee, to revive the Burnham project. Initially the Committee felt that the Civic Center should be built in stages, with the Auditorium as first phase. A bond issue of $8,800,000[4] was approved on March 28, 1912, and a competition for the selection of architects was called on April 6th.[5] Seventy three designs were submitted, and judged on June 20th; of this number twenty received prizes of $1000.[6] The winners of the competition were the firm of John Bakewell, Jr. and Arthur Brown, Jr: Brown was the gifted designer, and Bakewell was the executive supervising architect. The competition commission was headed by John Galen Howard, Frederick Meyer and John Reid (Reid was City Architect and brother-in-law to James Rolph. These three men had the titles of consulting architects and were paid a fee of $2500, and $25 for each day of service). The area designated for the Civic Center was north of Burnham and Polk's proposed site - essentially in the area bounded by Market, Golden Gate, Van Ness and Hayes Street.

Ground breaking for the City Hall took place on April 5, 1913; the site was Van Ness and Fulton Streets. Participating were Mayor James Rolph, Jr. and former Mayor Edward Robeson Taylor; eighteen members of the Board of Supervisors fell to digging after Rolph had turned the first spadeful with a silver spade. At the ceremonies, John Bakewell, Jr., told the audience of the splendors ahead; it would be a building 300 feet high, with public corridors totalling 4000 feet in length, and a grand weight of about 100,000 tons. The contents of the copper box, 12x12x21 inches, placed in the cornerstone reveals the curious mixture of fact and fancy which invests most public ceremonies of this kind. There was a copy of the last Municipal Report (1912), a 1913 City Directory, and a reprint of the first Directory (1850), a copy of a summons and complaint in Eminent Domain to acquire the land for the Civic Center, plans, elevations and other architectural material, copies of drawings of projects for the Panama-Pacific Exposition and photographs of its organizers, copies of San Francisco newspapers,

copies of the speeches made and the personal calling cards of all persons present at the laying of the cornerstone.[7] It must be remembered that the cornerstone of the City Hall was a symbolic beginning of the whole Civic Center, and thus reflected a wider architectural future than of one building only.[8] The City Hall was completed late in 1915, and occupied in December of that year. (Its final cost was $3,996,163.20 - gracefully within the allotted $4,000,000.) Dedication ceremonies were held on December 28, 1915. Among the more lugubrious events connected with City Hall were the funeral of Warren Harding in 1923 and the lying in state of James Rolph's body after his death in 1934 (when he was Governor of California). Festivities made a more cheerful note after the armistice of 1918 and at the end of the second World War. Numerous dignitaries have come and gone in the elegant halls and chambers of this coldly handsome building.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. Recapitulated in O'Brien, "Riptides" (San Francisco Chronicle, May 3, 1948), H. Kirker, California's Architectural Frontier, pp. 71, 72 discusses the Jenny Lind Theater-City Hall of 1851 at some length. (He calls it the second City Hall.)

2. See Baird, Time's Wondrous Changes, plate 37; Kirker, op.cit., pp. 97, 98, has the best architectural history of the "old" City Hall.

3. The legend, City Hall, can still be read over the main entrance to the Hotel.

4. Of this amount, $4,000,000 was for the City Hall; $300,000 was for furnishings for that City Hall. $4,500,000 was planned for the acquisition of the necessary land. See San Francisco Chronicle, November 24, 1912.

5. One source says the competition began January 1, but this is unlikely.

6. Letter from Jack Devit to Charles S. Pope, January 17, 1958.

7. James Rolph papers at the California Historical Society Library.

8. The present City Hall was actually the second building completed of the Civic Center group; the Auditorium preceded it in time.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

Books:

Baird, Joseph A., Jr., Time's Wondrous Changes: San Francisco Architecture, 1776-1915, San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1962, pp. 41, 47; plates 39, 40.
Benet, James, A Guide to San Francisco and the Bay Region, New York, Random House, 1963, pp. 46-47.
Guilfoyle, Merlin J., San Francisco: No Mean City, Fresno, Academy Library Guild, 1954, pp. 117-120 (dome of City Hall).
Kirker, Harold, California's Architectural Frontier, San Marino, Huntington Library, 1960, pp. 71-72, 97-98.
Potter, Elizabeth Gray, The San Francisco Skyline, New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1939, pp. 149-150.
Warshaw, Stephen, et al., The City of Gold, San Francisco, Crown Zellerbach Corporation, 1960, pp. 19-24 (note illustrations of the "old" City Hall in ruins, and various schemes for the "new").
Woodbridge, John and Sally, et al., Buildings of the Bay Area, New York, Grove Press, 1960, unpaginated (under Civic Center, section 18SF).
Writers' Program (WPA), San Francisco (American Guide Series), New York, Hasting House, 1947 (second, revised edition), pp. 165-167.

Brochures:

An Introductory Plan for the Civic Center, San Francisco, Department of City Planning, June 1953, p. 7; Map 1 is a 1911 plan for the Civic Center (general plan for revising existing use of Civic Center and its physical linkage is outlined in this report of 1954).
Mimeographed Items of Information, available at City Hall.

Interviews:

J. A. Baird interview with George Wagner, July 1963. (Contractor on job)

Newspapers and Periodicals:

Architect and Engineer, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July 1912), pp. 47-78 (plans of all the competition drawings).
San Francisco Call, April 6, 1913.
San Francisco Chronicle, November 24, 1912.
San Francisco Chronicle, May 3, 1948 (article by Robert O'Brien in "Riptides").
San Francisco Chronicle, March 1, 1959 (photographic essay).

Original Papers:

James Rolph papers, California Historical Society Library (for contents of the copper box in the cornerstone of the "new" City Hall).

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The exterior dimensions of the City Hall are 390 feet on Van Ness Avenue and the same on Polk Street (the main entrance facade) and 273 feet, 3 inches on Grove and McAllister Streets. The dome rises 301 feet, $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the curb on Polk Street - making it 13 feet, 7 and 3/4 inches higher than the dome of the Capitol in Washington, D. C. This dome rests upon four 50 ton and four 20 ton girders, 9 feet deep and 60 feet long - which are supported on four groups of five columns each, "latticed together from the second story to the top". The diameter of the dome is 86 feet, at its springing line - 191 feet from the ground.[1]

Due to the fact that there were no single contractors capable of handling a commission of this magnitude in 1913, a supervisor (George Wagner) of twenty-five individual contracts was decided upon. Mr. Wagner worked from the middle of 1913 to the end of 1915, bringing the designs of Arthur Brown, Jr., and his general executive partner, John Bakewell, Jr., into reality. Approximately 7,900 tons of structural steel, from the American Bridge Company near Pittsburgh, Pa.,

went into the skeleton. The exterior finish was of granite from Raymond in Madera County; it was similar to Folsom granite, but slightly superior in quality. (This exterior stone finish varies in depth from six inches to two or three feet, depending on the kind of ornamental enrichment of the exterior.) The interior was finished in fine Indiana sandstone.[2] The cost of these materials was about $1,000,000 for the granite and $250,000 for the sandstone. In addition, marbles from Colorado, Alabama, Vermont and Italy were used to enrich the interior in various areas. (The marble from Alabama has held up with least satisfaction.) The final total weight of the building was about 90,000 tons. It was said to have been one of the least expensive projects per square foot, for a building of this quality in the United States of its time.

Water had flowed all through the Western Addition, down to the Bay. At the site of the City Hall the sub-surface water was about six feet below the basement level. However, the foundation of wet sand proved entirely satisfactory, and the actual foundations of the building proper were placed slightly above the water level. Christopher H. Snyder, structural engineer of the City Hall, estimated that the foundations costs (approximately $40,000) were among the lowest in his experience, in their relation to the final total cost of the building. Numerous construction photographs show the completely modern steel skeleton of this building gradually being covered with its period sheathing. Finally, a great dome of copper with a lead coating, was placed over the whole complex structure.[3]

The principal design feature of the building is the dome, with its magnificent and monumental stair below. Although often called a "Rotunda", the stair hall is rectilinear in its interior shape, up to the pendentives of the dome. The principal architectural definition comes from a two storied loggia on the north and south sides of the open stair well, extending from the second to the top of the third story. Giant Corinthian half columns articulate this loggia. Great urns, under the arched space below the dome, cap the cornice sections above each of the major half columns. Between the piers and facing half-columns, the third story is carried as a balcony-loggia - apparently supported by Tuscan half-columns on the inner faces of the main piers. To the east, arches flank the principal piers of the dome. A squared space, leading to the principal north-south corridor on the east side, opens off the balcony-like promenade area connecting the north and south arches. On the north, similar sub-space,

with a dome, is in front of the Board of Supervisors' chambers. A row of Corinthian columns seem to support the dome. The main staircase, with its convex lower treads and straight run to the second floor have subordinate steps leading to the Board of Supervisors' principal chamber. Interior spaces are fascinatingly inviting, and the necessary supports and screening sections are handled with consummate skill. Ornamental details are beautifully carved or molded, with Corinthian being the basic order used in the main stair hall. A Modified Tuscan order is used in the east and west entrance halls.

The building reveals one of the most sumptuous imaginable examples of a great Baroque stair-hall wedded to the democratic affairs of city government. It might seem more appropriate that this staircase should lead symbolically to the Mayor's Office (and perhaps James Rolph would have wished it so). However, its measured rise leads rather to that more republican body, the Board of Supervisors' chamber. The City Hall is a superb essay in correct Period styling. The principal stylistic guide-post is classicist Baroque.

On the exterior, with its grand portico in the center of the main facades, and its corner porticoes on each facade, there is that breaking forward so beloved of the Baroque rhythmic masters. Arthur Brown has seen fit to express that Baroque quality of the "mouvemente" in a severely chaste classicizing mode. Although the general feeling is Baroque, both inside and out, the details are generally Classical, with a generous addition of French Baroque ornamental features.

A suavely rusticated ground or first story is simply articulated with tall, rectangular window openings at the sides and arched door openings in the center of the main facades. (The rectangular window openings continue on the subordinate facades.) Above this exterior "basement" is a second and third story treated as a single unit, with giant columns linking the two levels. This is, of course, an old device with the Roman Baroque designers (notably Bernini), and is seen in a variant form in the east facade of the Louvre, which the San Francisco City Hall facade resembles in certain details and in its general spirit. The main porticoes, east and west, are grouped about six giant columns of granite, with two together flanking the sides and two more widely spaced in the center - again typically Baroque in use of lesser and greater space for rhythm and accent. The order is a modified Doric, with columnar capitals in the Tuscan manner and an entablature in a more correctly Doric manner.

The main portico pediments, east and west, contain large numbers of sculptured figures - unfortunately none of which are of any special artistic merit, nor is their "program" particularly interesting. (The Polk Street pediment represnets San Francisco as a female goddess in the center, with other figures for Commerce and Navigation, etc.; in the Van Ness Avenue pediment, Wisdom occupies the center, flanked by figures representing the Arts, Learning, Truth, on one side, and Industry and Labor on the other.) Above the giant order of the upper stories of this main block of building is a fourth or attic story, somewhat concealed by its recession from the main face of the building and by a granite balustrade.

Although the dome has been much praised and compared with the great domes of Europe, it is not essentially more than a clever pastiche of St. Peter's, Les Invalides, the Val de Grace and St. Paul's.[4] That it is a most effective summation of the European dome from the later 16th to the 18th century is indicative of Arthur Brown's architectural historical scholarship and taste. No one would call Arthur Brown a "modern" architect. By temperament and training he belonged to the age that Maybeck embraced only half-heartedly. Both could provide remarkable "essays" in Period styling for some specific "modern" purpose. The City Hall is basically a rather pompous building on the outside, albeit in the highest echelon of 20th century Period design. It is the magnificent quality of the ornamental enrichments in iron which relieve the exterior from over-whelming coldness. In the interior Arthur Brown shows his true genius - for this is an interior worthy of comparison with the best of the late Baroque, and superior in design to the Paris Opera with which it might be generally evaluated.

The architectural decoration was by Neuman and Evans; the pedimental sculpture by Henri Crenier (Grenier?).

INTERIOR

Aside from the exalted sweep of the grand staircase under the great dome, the interior has a number of other fine features. The interior details were designed by Jean Louis Bourgeois, with sculpture again by Henri Crenier (Grenier?). James Rolph, Jr., is immortalized with an inscription over the east side of the stair hall, and a bust inside the Polk Street entrance. Busts of Mayors James D. Phelan and Angelo Rossi also are here; and a bust of General Funston, who served

San Francisco during the fire of 1906, is located inside the Van Ness Avenue entrance. The superb balustrades and light fixtures are of cast iron (blue and gold; the exterior iron work is black and gold); the banister of the grand staircase is of bronze. Fine marbles cover the three acres of floors; Manchurian oak is the principal material for the finest woodwork.[5]

Arthur Brown's original plans for the City Hall are at the Society of California Pioneers' Library, 456 McAllister Street, San Francisco. There is a duplicate set at the Public Library, on loan to the architectural office at the City Hall (c/o Mr. Griffith). Complete coverage of all competition drawings can be found in Architect and Engineer, Vol. XXIX No. 3, July 1912, pp. 47-78. The elevations and plans of Bakewell and Brown's designs occur on pp. 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, and 52.

Mr. Brown was assisted in the design of the City Hall by Jean Louis Bourgeois (Killed in Action 1914 in the service of France). Edward Frick worked on the cupola; Ernest Weike worked on the elevations and details. Joseph Gould, Lawrence Krueze, Carl Warneke, Clarence Tantau and Gèrald Cramer were draftsmen who later became San Francisco architects with their own offices. Mr. Brown, Mr. Bakewell, and Mr. Bourgeois were students and graduates of the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris in the late 90's. Mr. Brown's patron had been Victor La Laux.

NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. See the mimeographed Items of Information, available from the Mayor's Office, San Francisco City Hall. A height of 308 feet above ground level is also noted in the Writers' Program Guide to San Francisco, p. 165 - or 16 feet, 2 and 5/8 inches higher than the Capitol dome in Washington D. C. The overall lateral dimensions are often given as 308 feet (10 inches) by 408 feet (4½ inches), or even roughly 300 x 400 feet. It depends on how exact one measures, and from what point to what point of extension.

2. Most of the Indiana limestone in the interior was set with an air space behind it, to avoid staining - an unusual procedure at the time.

3. Mr. Brown wanted the color of lead for the dome, but consented to lead-coated copper instead of sheet lead as a

saving in cost (Interview by Charles S. Pope with Mr. Brown in mid 1950's.). The lead surface has gradually disintegrated; and the copper leaching through has produced the characteristic green patina of copper salts.

4. The general profile of the dome is like St. Peter's as revised by della Porta. The use of isolated columns, advanced from the drum with broken entablature sections above, reflects Les Invalides (where paired columns are used). The lantern is also inspired by Les Invalides, with certain details from the Val de Grace. Wind loads from 30 to 50 pounds per square foot were used in construction calculations.

5. Benet, A Guide to San Francisco and the Bay Region, pp. 46-47, has a succinct summary of the interior with information about both interior and exterior statuary (including the Lincoln and Hall McAllister near the outside of the building). Benet naively assumes that the bucrania in the exterior metopes are suggestive of western steers; they are obviously an ancient Roman ornamental detail that co-incidentally happens to be on a "western" building. For details not mentioned in Benet, see the mimeographed Items of Information (note 1 above). An older mimeographed sheet, entitled San Francisco's City Hall, also available from the Assistant Public Service Director in the Mayor's Office, has some building facts at variance with those in the Items of Information. It does, however, give useful information about the sculptural program: "The figures over the clock on the east wall of the Rotunda represent Father Time flanked by...History, and on the other side by figures representing the future generation carrying the torch of Progress, with figures in the background...representing the Fleeing Hours of Day. The cartouche over the grand staircase is a composition based on the Seal of the City. The medallions in the pendentives of the dome represent Liberty, Equality, Learning and Strength." The disposition of city offices within the building has varied somewhat since 1915, but in general is as follows: basement, Fire Department and Weights and Measures Department, plus store and utility rooms; first floor, Assessor, Tax Collector, Recorder, Registrar of Voters, Treasurer, Comptroller and Civil Service Commission; second floor, Board of Supervisors, Department of Public Works, Mayor's Office, Offices of Chief Administrative Officer, Public Utilities Commission, City Attorney, Purchasing

Department; third and fourth floors, County Clerk, Public Administrator, Sheriff, City Engineer and the Municipal and Superior Courts. There are two banks of three elevators to serve the upper floors.

Prepared by,

Joseph A. Baird Jr.

Joseph A. Baird, Jr., PHD
University of California

June 1964

APPROVED: Charles S Pope DATE: November 1964

Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

Addendum to:

City Hall
Civic Center
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San Francisco County
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P H O T O G R A P H S

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

Addendum to
City Hall
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HABS
CAL,
38-SANFRA,
71-

PHOTOGRAPHS

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

ADDENDUM TO:
CITY HALL
1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake Damage Survey
Civic Center
San Francisco
San Francisco County
California

HABS CA-1881
CAL,38-SANFRA,71-

HABS
CA-
38-SANFRA,
71-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CITY HALL

HABS No. CA-1881

In October and November of 1989, the National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey, completed a photographic survey of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damage of the San Francisco Bay Area. The photographs and negatives from that project have been deposited in the field notes for this survey.

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