
Willis Polk Collection, 1890-1937

Processed by the Environmental Design Archives staff

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Note

Arts and Humanities--ArchitectureHistory--California History--Bay Area HistoryHistory--California HistoryGeographical (By Place)--CaliforniaGeographical (By Place)--California--Bay Area

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Collection Number: 1934-1

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Date Completed:

August 1998

Encoded by:

Campbell J. Crabtree

Funding:

Arrangement and description of this collection was funded by a grant from the Getty Foundation.

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Descriptive Summary

Collection Title: Willis Polk Collection,

Date (inclusive): 1890-1937

Collection Number: 1934-1

Creator: Polk, Willis, 1867-1937

Extent: 1 box, 2 flat boxes, 5 flat file drawers, ca. 10 tubes

Repository: Environmental Design Archives. College of Environmental Design. University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, California

Language: English.

Access

Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights

All requests for permission to publish, reproduce, or quote from materials in the collection should be discussed with the Director.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Willis Polk Collection, (1934-1), Environmental Design Archives. College of Environmental Design. University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, California

Access Points

Architects--California.

Architecture--California.

Buildings--California--San Francisco

Burnham, Daniel Hudson, 1846-1912

Architect-designed furniture.

San Francisco (Calif.)--Buildings, structures, etc.

Biography

Born in Jacksonville, Illinois, Willis Polk was the son of carpenter Willis Webb Polk. He began working with a local contractor at the age of eight, and within five years had become office boy in the firm of architect Jerome B. Legg. By 1885, Polk and his father had established a partnership in Kansas City under the name W. W. Polk & Son. The company's projects were primarily for small suburban homes or row houses, and the younger Polk was responsible for the design of some of these commissions.

Polk's shift from the realm of tradesman to that of the professional architect came in 1887. At that time Polk left the partnership with his father to become a draftsman for the firm of Van Brunt & Howe, a pair of Boston architects who were moving their practice to Kansas City. The architectural theories of Henry Van Brunt influenced Polk's designs and prompted him to pursue an informal education in the theory and practice of architecture. Within two years Polk worked for at least five different architects across the United States, gaining exposure to a variety of design ideas, and attended architecture classes given by William Robert Ware at Columbia University. In 1889, Polk joined the office of A. Page Brown, and moved with Brown's firm to San Francisco.

Although Polk was a talented designer, his lack of business sense and volatile, demanding personality hindered many of his professional endeavors. His first partnership, with Fritz Maurice Gamble, lasted just over a year. Polk then entered into partnership with his father and brother, opening the office of Polk & Polk in 1892. With Polk designing, his brother Daniel serving as draftsman, and his father overseeing technical matters and field operations, they attained moderate success, primarily with residential commissions. After Polk's father retired in 1896, he attempted his own practice. He took over the Ferry Building project after A. Page Brown's death, but even with this major project couldn't sustain the office on his own. Polk filed for bankruptcy in 1897.

Though his own career was inconsistent during these years, Polk became an active and outspoken advocate for the architectural profession and the standards of good design. During 1890-91 he published three issues of the *Architectural News*, conceived as an alternative to the conservative *California Architect and Building News*. In addition to Polk, John Galen Howard, Ernest Coxhead, and Bertram Goodhue were contributors to the *News*. In 1894, Polk led the Guild of Arts and Crafts, an organization of artists and architects, in an effort to create a Board of Public Works that would approve the design of all municipal projects. Polk also wrote a series of short critiques for *The Wave*, a San Francisco weekly review, between 1892 and 1899. At times harsh in his criticisms, Polk often alienated colleagues and former associates with his comments.

Polk married Christina Barreda Moore in 1899, and the couple moved to Chicago in 1901 so that Polk could work with Daniel H. Burnham. Burnham was an early city planning expert, and his firm was well-known for the design of large commercial buildings. At Burnham's office Polk entered the upper ranks, taking responsibility for several major projects in his two years with the firm. Burnham, and his interest in city planning, would influence Polk's career even after he returned to San Francisco. Upon Polk's return to the city in 1903, he entered into partnership with George Alexander Wright, an association that continued until 1906.

When Burnham was commissioned in 1904 to develop a master plan for the city of San Francisco, Polk assisted in the plan's preparation. Presented in 1906, the Burnham Plan was never realized due to issues of property ownership and the need for quick rebuilding after the 1906 fire. Understanding the money-making potential offered by the reconstruction, Burnham opened a West Coast office with Polk in charge. Among Polk's commissions for D. H. Burnham & Co. were the renovation of the Pacific Union Club, reconstruction of the Mills Building, and numerous projects for the Spring Valley Water Company, including the Water Temple at Sunol. William Bourn, president of the Spring Valley Water Company and a friend and supporter of Polk's, also commissioned the architect for residential projects, including Empire Cottage (1897-98) and Filoli (1914-15).

Burnham closed his San Francisco branch in 1910, and Polk opened his own firm, named Polk & Co. In 1911 he was named supervising architect of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and became active in the effort to save the Exposition's Palace of Fine Arts when the fair closed in 1915. This was one of many opportunities taken by Polk to challenge city officials on architectural and building issues. The most well-publicized of these was the Hobart Building controversy when Polk challenged the building inspector and the mayor over what he felt were outdated building codes. Polk took his battle to the public by publishing advertisements in the newspapers and hanging a series of 18 x 20 foot signs from the building.

Despite these conflicts, Polk & Co. completed more than one hundred major commercial buildings and domestic residences in the Bay Area. Of these, the Hallidie Building is perhaps the most well-known. Completed in 1917 for the Regents of the

University of California, it was the first glass curtain-walled building constructed. The 1920 restoration of Mission Dolores was another project to come out of Polk's firm during this time. The firm continued as Willis Polk & Co. even after Polk's death in 1924. It was managed by his nephew Austin Moore with architects Angus McSweeney and John H. Mitchell. This firm continued in practice until 1934.

Sources:

Longstreth, Richard. "On the Edge of the World: Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century." Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983.

Longstreth, Richard. "A Matter of Taste: Willis Polk's Writings on Architecture in the Wave." San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1979.

Scope and Content

The Willis Polk collection documents Polk's architectural career, his involvement in the profession, and his interest in the civic improvement of San Francisco. Architectural drawings form the bulk of the collection, though some textual records exist. The collection is arranged into four series: Professional Papers, Office Records, Art and Artifacts, and Additional Donations.

Polk's professional papers include records about the Architectural News, the Arts and Crafts Guild of San Francisco, the controversy surrounding the construction of the Hobart Building, and the effort to preserve the Palace of Fine Arts. This series also contains records created or collected by Polk's widow, Christina Barreda Polk.

Polk's office records consist primarily of project-related records. Architectural drawings form the bulk of this series, but photographs, correspondence, and clippings are also included. The collection also contains art, artifacts, and furniture created by Polk or kept in his office.

The majority of the collection was donated in 1934 by Polk's widow in conjunction with the Friends of Willis Polk. Materials donated separately are part of Series IV. Additional Donations.

Title: Willis Polk Scrapbooks,

Contributing Institution: California Historical Society

Title: Filoli Collection,

Contributing Institution: Filoli

Boxes 1-3

I. Professional Papers, 1890-1937

Scope and Content Note

Arrangement

Arranged hierarchically.

Contains correspondence, professional writings, news clippings, scrapbooks, and photographs. Includes documentation of Polk's involvement with the Architectural News and the Arts and Crafts Guild of San Francisco, his conflict with Mayor Rolf over the Hobart Building, and the effort to preserve the Palace of Fine Arts. Photographs include portraits of Polk, and a group photograph of he and his colleagues. This series also contains some records created or collected by Polk's widow, Christina Barreda Polk.

Boxes 1-2, Flat
Files

II. Project Records, 1890-1924

Scope and Content Note

Arrangement

Arranged alphabetically by project.

Consists of correspondence, drawings, cashbook, and photographs related to Polk's projects. The bulk of the series consists of architectural drawings, which can be accessed through the card file index. Correspondence and other written documentation exists only three projects: The Spring Valley Water Company Mason Street Building, The Women's City Club of San Francisco, and an uncompleted San Francisco War Memorial.

Box 4

III. Art and Artifacts, ca. 1890-1924

Scope and Content Note

Contains Polk's office furniture as well as sculptures, etchings, sketches, and paintings created or collected by Polk. Includes a portrait of Polk by William Keith and two bookcases designed by Polk.

Box 1, Flat Files

IV. Additional Donations, ca. 1890-1924

Scope and Content Note

Series contains drawings, reproductions of drawings, and a portrait, donated separately from the original donation. Drawings in this series include: William Bourn, Jr. residence, San Francisco; Mrs. William Bourn residence, St. Helena; Charles Webb Howard residence, Oakland; Examiner Building, San Francisco; an unidentified residence; proposed casino for the Hotel Arcadia, Santa Monica; Admission Day Monument; proposed Administration Building, California Midwinter International Exposition; and the Merchants Exchange Building.

A. Portrait of Willis Polk, by Bruce Porter

B. F. Bourn Hayne Collection, drawings for Bourn residences (excluding Filoli)

C. Drawings

D. Merchants Exchange Building Drawings

E. Microfiche reproductions of drawings for Charles Templeton Crocker residence, Uplands