Finding Aid to the Willis Polk Scrapbooks, 1908-1924MS Vault 89

Finding aid prepared by California Historical Society staff; revised by David Krah.
California Historical Society
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2001, revised 2009
Title: Willis Polk scrapbooks
Date (inclusive): 1908-1924
Collection Number: MS Vault 89
creator: Polk, Willis, 1867-1924
Contributing Institution: California Historical Society
678 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA, 94105
415-357-1848
reference@calhist.org
Language of Material: Collection materials are in English
Physical Description: 5 volumes (3.5 Linear feet)
Physical Location: Collection is stored onsite.
Abstract: Five volumes of scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings documenting the reconstruction of San Francisco, California after the 1906 earthquake and fire, and subsequent city and architectural development. Commercial and public buildings represented include: the Civic Center, the Hobart Building, the Hallidie Building, and others. Includes two folders of miscellaneous clippings and photocopies of articles.
Access Restrictions
Fragile originals; use microfilm only.
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Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Willis Polk Scrapbooks, MS 89. California Historical Society.
Alternative Form Available
Available on microfilm: Reel 238 (NEG 63)
Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.
Architecture, American--California--San Francisco.
City Planning--California--San Francisco.
Earthquakes--California--San Francisco.
Fires--California--San Francisco.
San Francisco (Calif.)--Buildings, structures, etc.
San Francisco earthquake, Calif., 1906.
Scrapbooks.
Acquisition Information
Source unknown.
Accruals
No accruals are expected.
Processing Information
Collection processed by CHS staff.
Biography
Variously labelled brilliant, temperamental, flamboyant and eccentric, Willis Jefferson Polk was born in 1867 in Jacksonville, Illinois. Receiving no formal education, Polk grew up learning the building trades from his father Willis Webb Polk (1833-1906) an itinerant carpenter. In a 1921 interview for The Chronicle, Polk recalled having worked as a hat boy, a water boy for a St. Louis contractor; a lemonade stand seller; a handy boy, sticker and bench boy at a planing mill; and as an office boy for St. Louis architect J.B. Legg by the age of thirteen. Proudly he related the story of how, at the age of fifteen, he had shocked the town of Hope, Arkansas by having his drawings for the design of their new schoolhouse accepted as the
By the time he was twenty, he had completed two years as a partner in the general contracting firm of W.W. Polk and Son. This experience had given him a solid foundation of practical contractor's skills, and although many of the homes built by the firm were based on standard formulas and designs, Polk had helped to draw up the plans for many of these projects. In 1887, a turning point occurred in Polk's career. He decided to leave the family business in order to go to work for Van Brunt and Howe, a prominent Boston architectural firm recently moved to Kansas City. This new position provided Polk with the opportunity to develop an awareness of abstract concepts of aesthetics and design as well as a familiarity with formal architectural procedures.

Driven by his desire to learn the prominent architectural theories and cultural philosophies of his time, Polk began an odyssey of self-education. This quest for knowledge and exposure to style took him to Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Chicago. During these travels he worked with nationally recognized architects Ernest Coxhead, A. Page Brown, Charles McKim, Stanford White and Daniel Burnham. Polk's work reflected his belief in the eastern based aesthetics with which he became acquainted during these two years. He remained closely allied to Academic Eclecticism, a movement which expressed an overall approach to architecture rather than a specific style. The motivating precepts behind Academic Eclecticism were a commitment to an academic understanding of historical periods, a formal knowledge of design and a recognition of architecture as a fine art.

Arriving in 1889, Polk's first San Francisco period was spent in a remarkable number of professional, cultural and social endeavors. He assisted A. Page Brown with the design of the Ferry Building and subsequently, established his own office within the year. Polk was appalled by the Victorian devotion to newness, clutter and conformity which contrasted so strongly with his belief in classical simplicity and the creative use of building materials. Along with Bernard Maybeck, Julia Morgan and others, he became one of the pioneer proponents of the Bay Region Style, which combined eastern design concepts with an emerging indigenous western aesthetic. Polk founded the Architectural News in 1890 as a response to the regional prejudice in eastern journals. It was in this journal that he first expressed his favor toward the newly evolved Mission Revival Style.

In fact, Polk was one of the local leaders in the new wave of late 19th century artists, architects and city planners. These men and women were steeped in classical traditions yet they were daring and creative enough to experiment with new forms and to utilize recent technological advances in their work. Polk and his contemporaries played a major role in the growth of that aesthetic movement now referred to as the American Renaissance. Dedicated to the idea that architectural creations must be beautiful as well as useful, Polk's writings in The Wave between 1892 and 1899, reflected his commitment to Academic Eclecticism and the ideals of the City Beautiful Movement. In a number of essays, he expressed his belief that art was beauty and that architecture, as a mean of expression, could effect the development of civilization.

Living life to its fullest, Polk joined with Gelett Burgess, Bruce Porter and other San Franciscan bohemians to form Les Jeunes, a group of the elite cultural figures of their time. A popular subject of the local press, their notoriety was increased by the publication of a unique literary magazine, The Lark, which is best known for a poem about a purple cow. It was during this period that Polk met and married Christine Barreda Moore, whose son Austin would later become a leading architect and president of the newly formed Architectural League of the Pacific Coast. During the next fifteen years, Polk's work reflected his belief in the eastern based architectural procedures.

By 1901, Polk had moved his family to Chicago and joined the firm of prominent architect D.H. Burnham, “father of the skyscraper,” noted for his ideas on city planning. Returning to San Francisco four years later, Polk was with Burnham on April 17, 1906 when he presented his ill-fated plan to the Board of Supervisors. Following the destruction of the city, Polk was put in charge of Burnham's local office. They hoped that he could take advantage of the building boom and at the same time, effect the implementation of all or part of the Burnham Plan. Some of Polk's early responsibilities in this position included the reconstruction of the Mills Building, the Pacific Union Club and the Chronicle Building. Although continuing to accept domestic commissions, the majority of Polk’s time was devoted to the design and construction of commercial buildings.

Willis Polk and Company was formed in 1910 when D.H. Burnham turned over his San Francisco office to its managing architect and president of the newly formed Architectural League of the Pacific Coast. During the next fifteen years, Polk's company completed well over one hundred major commercial buildings and domestic residences in San Francisco and the Bay Area. His commissions included construction of churches, auto showrooms, hospitals, town houses, banks, warehouses, recreational facilities, mansions, PG&E substations, stores, clubs and office buildings. In addition to basic building construction and in accordance with his artistic beliefs, Polk applied his eclectic talents to diverse architectural projects. He designed the Water Temple at Sunol for his friend and patron William Bourn; the street lamp columns for both the Market Street Path of Gold and the financial district beautification project; the Vallejo Street connecting ramp; and, the bases and columns for Douglas Tilden's Donahue Foundation and Admissions Day Statue.
Concurrent with his successful professional career, Polk was involved in a myriad of related endeavors. In 1911, his architectural talents and commitment to civic improvement were rewarded by his election to the position of Chairman of the Architects Commission for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. As a Portola Commissioner, two years later, Polk returned from visiting Europe as an unofficial envoy of Spain's King Alfonso. He was involved in trying to save the Palace of Fine Arts from destruction and in submitting plans for a new stadium for the San Francisco Seals.

Following the first World War, Polk devoted his time to nationally promoting San Francisco as a Dream City. Sensitive to trends in construction, he was acutely aware of the rapid development of Los Angeles and the threat it posed to the city he loved. He joined forces with the San Francisco Realty Board in trying to attract investors and residents to the Bay Area by praising the city and its future. To this end he predicted that by 1971, the population of San Francisco would number five million and the city limits would extend as far as Palo Alto. Expressing his annoyance with the people from the south, he stated that "when I'm talking about California, I talk about every inch of ground here - even Los Angeles. When they talk about God's fair land, they leave San Francisco out."

Toward the end of his life, Polk was receiving noticeably fewer commissions. Although greatly admired and respected by his peers, perhaps his infamous political involvement and temperamental nature had affected his practice. Never an idle man, Polk went to Washington, D.C. as a dollar-a-year man to serve as a consultant on post-war construction in the United States. He was responsible for the restoration of the Mission Dolores in 1920 and spent a great deal of his time promoting civic improvement and grand architectural schemes, such as bridges across the bay and the Golden Gate; a shore line railway from Sutro Heights to Fort Funston; and, a major renovation and landscaping of Sutro Heights. But it was also during this period that he designed and constructed his masterpiece, the Hallidie Building. Commissioned by the University of California Regents, the Hallidie Building (1917) was the first glass curtain walled building ever constructed. It was this building that had given Willis Polk his place in the annals of modern architecture when he died prematurely at the age of 59 in 1924.

**Scope and Contents**

The Willis Polk Scrapbooks consist almost entirely of newspaper clippings which document the public life and work of one of San Francisco's leading architects, covering the years between 1908 and 1924. These scrapbooks provide a comprehensive overview of the reconstruction of San Francisco; the architectural, technical and aesthetic development of commercial, domestic and public building design, construction and materials; and the political, social and cultural activities taking place during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

**Arrangement**

The scrapbooks in the collection are arranged chronologically, with two folders of subject specific clippings also arranged chronologically.

- Box 1, Folder 1: **Panama Pacific International Exposition 1909-1910**
  - 1908 January-1911 July
  - General Physical Description note: pp. 1-114
    - 1st National Bank Building
    - Burnham, Daniel, 1846-1912
    - Great Highway-Beach railroad (proposed)
    - Pacific Union Club
    - San Francisco Civic Center
    - Skyscrapers
    - St. Mary's Hospital
    - Tilden, Douglas, 1860-1935 (page 29)
Box 2, Volume 2  
**1911 August-1917 June**

- General Physical Description note: pp. 115-281
- Burnham, Daniel, 1846-1912 (pages 140-146)
- Crocker, Charles T., home in Hillsborough
- Howard, John Galen, 1864-1931 (page 190)
- Hobart Building
- Insurance Exchange Building
- Palace of Fine Arts
- Panama Pacific International Exposition
- Polk, Daisy
- Rolph, James, 1869-1934
- Russian Hill-Vallejo St. ramp
- San Francisco City Hall
- San Francisco Civic Center

Box 3, Volume 3  
**1917 July-1921 June**

- Giannini, Amadeo Peter, 1870-1949 (letter June 1921)
- Hallidie Building
- Mission Dolores restoration
- Polk, Daisy
- Putnam, Arthur (June 1921)
- San Francisco Civic Center
- San Francisco's Popular Hero Medal
- Sutro Heights

Box 4, Volume 4  
**1921 November-1924 September**

- Exhibition of California artists at the St. Francis Hotel
- Obituaries
- Spring Valley Water Co.

Box 4, Volume 5  
**1920 April-May**

- San Francisco War Memorial