

Berkeley's City Hall Was Inspired by a Mairie on the Loire

Civic Center Historic District, Berkeley, CA

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Photo: Daniella Thompson, 2004

On 27 June 1908, at the laying of the cornerstone for Berkeley's new City Hall, University of California president Benjamin Ide Wheeler delivered the keynote address. His was no florid speech politely suitable to the occasion. On the contrary. Wheeler seized the moment to "flay the politicians," as the *San Francisco Call* reported the following day, and "then asked citizens to take a more active part in municipal affairs."

One can't imagine the current U.C. president saying, as Wheeler did, "A people cannot have the consciousness of being self-governed unless they attend themselves to the things over against their own doors. The real imperialism, the real oppression, the real political

slavery, is the intrusion of power from without into a local condition.”

The cornerstone was laid almost four years after a fire consumed Berkeley’s previous Town Hall. That building, erected in 1884, was designed by San Francisco architects Samuel and Joseph Cather Newsom, who the same year also created America’s most notorious Victorian house—the [Carson Mansion](#) in Eureka.

Having previously worked for their elder brother John, Samuel and Joseph established their own office in 1879, the year in which they designed the first school house in East Berkeley, Kellogg Grammar School. The lot on which the school was to be built—between Oxford Street, Center Street, and Allston Way—was traversed diagonally by Strawberry Creek. The Town Trustees had a culvert built to submerge the creek under the school site. This is the very same creek section that present-day advocates hope to see daylighted along Center Street.

Although the Newsoms are best known for their elaborate Victorian architecture, Berkeley’s strict budget dictated an austere design for the Town Hall, which contractor C.R. Lord built for \$3,000.



Built in 1884, Berkeley’s first Town Hall was moved in 1899 from University Ave. at Sacramento St. to Grove St. at Allston Way. (Berkeley: The Town & Gown of It)

The location of this civic edifice was a hotly debated issue whose outcome, born of compromise, satisfied no one. The story was best told by John E. Boyd, in a letter to the editor of the *Berkeley World-Gazette* dated 29 September 1899:

On the incorporation of the Town of Berkeley in 1878, the first meetings of the Board of Trustees and School Directors were held in the store which J. R. Little now occupies as a real estate office [in the Francis K. Shattuck Building, 2108 Shattuck Avenue]. Complaints were made by the residents of West Berkeley about the meetings being held away up in Soupbone town, as the Eastern end was called, and to satisfy the West Berkeley people the Town Board held its meetings the second year in one of the stores in the Sisterna Block. After being there a year or two the place of meeting was changed to the east end and held in the store under Pythian Hall [formerly Clapp's Hall, on the northwest corner of Shattuck Avenue and Berkeley Way], where Moorhead's grocery now is.

About that time the question of building a Town Hall was agitated, and the only question was: "Where shall it be located?" The East Enders said that Jack Brennan, who was a member of the Board, wanted it located back of his livery stable on the bay shore, while the West Enders argued that F. K. Shattuck and other large property owners were bound to place it on the summit of Grizzly Peak. No agreement that would satisfy both parties could be reached until some one proposed to buy a lot midway between the East and West End, and locate it there. This agreement proved satisfactory to both parties, and the lot on the corner of University Avenue and Sacramento Street was bought from the Shaw estate and the building commenced in the spring of '84.

Some people thought that the location of the Town Hall would boom the neighborhood property and induce building. It never induced anything except the erection of a "goat milk factory" by a man named Casey, who while he did not get rich by it, got a term in the county jail for being 150 feet inside the "mile limit."

In addition to Clapp's/Pythian Hall, George A. Pettitt, author of *Berkeley: the Town and Gown of It*, listed [Workingman's Hall](#), on Sixth and Delaware streets, as one of the Trustees' temporary meeting places.

The Town Hall's location being equally inconvenient to all, it came as no surprise when the *San Francisco Call* noted on 18 July 1897, "It is proposed to have the entire building moved to the east end, intact, rather than build a new one, as has been under consideration for some time. Strenuous opposition to the removal is anticipated from the people at the west end, but the east end members of the board are greatly in the majority."

On 10 August, the *Call* reported, “A number of East Berkeley citizens have proposed the purchase of the entire block on Stanford place [the east branch of Shattuck Ave.], from Center to Addison street, as a site for the Town Hall and a public park.” The money was to be raised by subscription.

Two week later, the Town Board decided in principle on the move and appointed Trustee William H. Marston of North Berkeley and Trustee Reginald T. Guard of Lorin as the site selection committee. Meanwhile, the West Berkeley contingent didn't sit idle. At a mass meeting held on 27 August at the Beacon fire station on Sixth Street near University Avenue, Trustees Christian Hoff and Cornelius D. Maloney, as well as County Recorder Charles Spear, vowed to oppose the move. By then, Marston had already secured bids on moving the building.

Berkeley being Berkeley, nothing further was done for over two years. Not until 16 September 1899 did the Board of Trustees pass a resolution to lease six lots from James McGee with an option to buy at \$3,000. The parcel was bounded by Grove Street, Allston Way, Mary [now McKinley] Street, and Strawberry Creek, which bisected the block. The Sanborn Fire Insurance map of 1903 noted that the creek was “dry in summer.” A footbridge crossed the creek on the west side of Mary Street.



Berkeley City Hall, designed by Bakewell & Brown, shortly after its completion in 1909. (BAHA archives)

Bids were solicited for moving Town Hall, and contractor W.P. Grant was the only bidder. He was given a contract to move the building within thirty days and set it up on a foundation in as good as its current condition for the sum of \$999. “The town officials were given permission to hold office hours as they saw fit while the hall was in motion,” reported the *World-Gazette* on 26 September, adding, “For the next thirty days it will be a common sight to see a town official looking for his office with a telescope, and when he does find it climbing into the window by means of a rope ladder.”

The move lasted three weeks, and the Board of Trustees continued to meet in the building en route. Such meeting took place on 9 October 1899. The *World-Gazette* noted that a large crowd had attended, concluding, “Meeting in the middle of University avenue in a building tilted to the grade of the street seemed to agree with the Board for it did a great deal of business last evening.” When the building reached its destination, it was necessary to place it on an 8-foot basement to avoid the Grove Street façade being 18 inches below grade.

For five years, Town Hall stood by the bank of Strawberry Creek. Behind it were a buggy shed and a six-foot iron bell tower, which served for alarms. But no alarm helped the wooden building on the afternoon of 22 October 1904, when defective electric wires in the

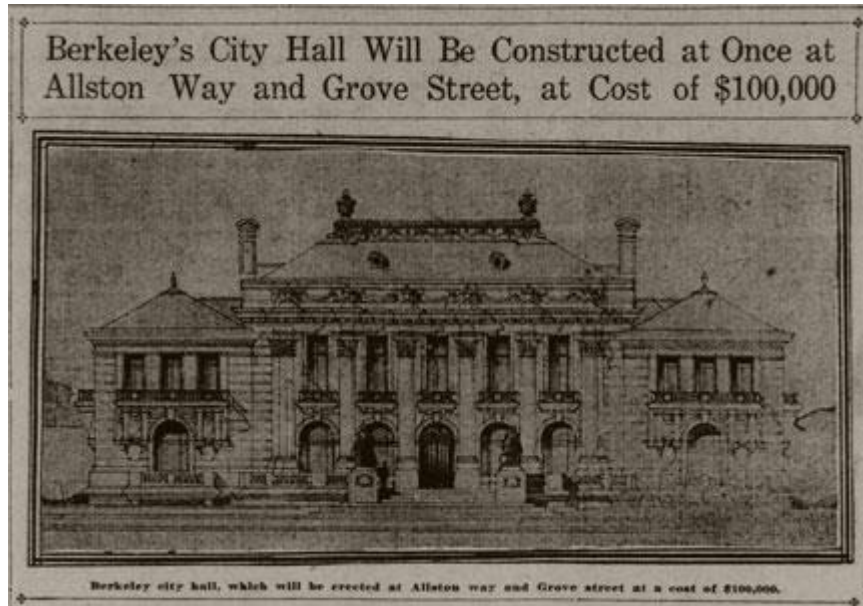
attic sparked a blaze that burned the entire structure to the ground within an hour.



The Hôtel de Ville of Tours served as inspiration in the design of our City Hall. (photo: [Willtron](#))

The *San Francisco Call* reported that a scanty water supply rendered the firemen's work ineffective, and within ten minutes they gave up hope of saving any part of the building, concentrating a lone stream of water on the City Clerk's vault to save the records stored in it. Other city employees had sufficient warning to evacuate their documents, and with the exception of a few survey books, all the city records emerged unharmed. Business continued without interruption in rented space at the Francis K. Shattuck Building.

Trustee Hoff, who had been opposed to moving the old Town Hall, wasted no time in calling for a new building. On 14 November 1904, he introduced a resolution to allocate \$100,000 for a new Town Hall in the next bond issue. Nevertheless, the Trustees did not solicit architectural plans until 1907. Eleven competing designs were submitted in May and went on exhibit on 3 July. John Galen Howard volunteered to help the Trustees select the winning design, and together they picked the plan by John Bakewell, Jr. and Arthur M. Brown, Jr. of San Francisco, both Cal alumni and Beta Theta Pi members.



The winning design, without tower (San Francisco Call, 4 July 1907)

The Bakewell & Brown design, described as “French renaissance” by the *Oakland Tribune*, drew heavily upon the Hôtel de Ville (1896–1904) of Tours on the Loire, designed by Victor Laloux, a major exponent of the Beaux-Arts style and Arthur M. Brown’s professor in Paris. Like its far more elaborate French precedent, the Berkeley design included an ornamental tower on top of the roof, but the Trustees rejected this feature for budgetary reasons. The citizenry, however, desired a tower, and it was twice added to and removed from the plans before the final decision was made to spend an additional \$2,400 to erect it. No money was available to place a large clock in the round medallion under the tower, and the building remains clockless to this day.

In August 1909, a month before the new City Hall was completed, the *Oakland Enquirer* announced that the interior was poorly designed, with space too generously allocated to the hallways while the offices were cramped. Still, after inspection by city officials and the architects, the building was accepted and final payment authorized.

Substantially larger than the first Town Hall, the new structure used up more of the property and required the culverting of Strawberry Creek on the parcel and under McKinley Street, although the creek continued for some years to meander freely on blocks to the west. By 1925, City Hall was joined by an annex in the rear, and houses replaced the creek on the adjacent blocks.



Civic Center Park (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2004)

The city administration worked in the building until 1977, when it became the administrative home of the Berkeley Unified School District. Long known as Old City Hall, it was officially renamed the Maudelle Shirek Building on 22 March 2007. **As of 2011, the building's future was uncertain.** The school district plans to vacate it when renovation of its new [Central Office Administration building](#) at the West Campus is complete. In May 2011, it was revealed that the City Council was planning to [follow suit](#). Old City Hall requires a seismic retrofit, which City Manager Phil Kamlarz estimated would cost between \$30 million and \$40 million.

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Berkeley City Hall was one of the first eight buildings to be designated City of Berkeley Landmarks, all named on 15 December 1975. It is part of the Civic Center Historic District, #81000142 on the National Register of Historic Places (added 1998).

