

Pacific Heights Architects #11 - John S. Bolles



The focus of this series has been Pacific Heights architects and homes they designed for themselves in the area. The property at 2201 Lyon is an excellent example of a reinforced concrete home designed in a modernist style by Bolles for himself and his family.

John Savage Bolles was born on June 25, 1905 in Berkeley, California. His father Edward Grosvenor Bolles was also a prominent San Francisco architect who had moved out to San Francisco in 1893 and worked as an architect for over forty years, until he died in 1939 at the age of 68. John obtained his Bachelor's degree in Engineering from the University of Oklahoma in 1926 and graduated from Harvard with a Masters degree in Architecture in 1932. He worked as a structural engineer in Oklahoma and as an archeologist for the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago on the excavations at Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia, 400 miles south of modern-day Teheran, and also for Washington's Carnegie Institute on a comprehensive study of one of the most important Mayan sites in the Yucatan. Many years later he found time to assemble that work in a book titled "Las Monjas, A Major Pre-Mexican Architectural Complex at Chichen Itza", published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1977.

In March 1935 John married Mary Piper, a Radcliffe alumna and daughter of the aircraft manufacturer, and after living and working abroad for almost a year they moved out to San Francisco in 1936 with John joining his father's architectural practice. Together they designed the Temple of Religion and the Christian Science Monitor building for the Golden Gate International Exposition held on Treasure Island in 1939.

Bolles passed his State Architectural license examination in 1941 (license number C379) and in 1942 linked up with Joseph Francis Ward (1898-1970). Ward, a New Zealander, had been associated with architect Albert Farr (1869-1945) since 1922. Ward & Bolles collaborated on two wartime housing projects, one in Marin City and one in Oakland. After the war, they formed a partnership. One of their house designs, built in 1946, is located on an L-shaped lot at the end of Pacific Avenue, overlooking the Presidio, with its entry at 16 Spruce Street. Designed for Richard Walberg of construction company Swinerton & Walberg, it was featured as 'Tomorrow's House Today!' in an article published in Architect & Engineer magazine. Many conveniences were noted including no fewer than 213 electrical outlets, fluorescent kitchen lighting, a garbage disposal, and an automatic garage door. Other notable San Francisco residential designs by the firm include 1047-49 Lombard (1949, 2 flats), 1025 Lombard (1950, built as 6 apartments, now condominiums), and 17 Presidio Terrace (1951).

In May 1951, after living in Marin County since they moved to the Bay Area, John and Mary Bolles bought a 34' x 127' parcel on the northwest corner of Jackson and Lyon. The original Victorian house there, 3100 Jackson, designed by J. Cather Newsom in 1892, had burned down a year later, to be replaced in 1898 by a second one, designed by Samuel Newsom and Frederick Meyer. This house was demolished circa 1940 and the lot sat vacant until Bolles began construction of the house which is the subject of this article - 2201 Lyon.



A view of 2201 Lyon taken from the south garden

Perhaps mindful that two previous wood-frame houses on the lot had not survived, Bolles designed this one to last and to require little maintenance. It is a fine example of Bay Region Modernism, of reinforced concrete construction with six-inch thick pre-colored concrete floors. The wood beam ceilings and wood paneling, along with the floors, all remain intact and largely unpainted today. Even the original Hoyt copper water heater continues to serve the house!

The west wall of the dining area on the main level has a spectacular original San Francisco Cityscape painted by artist Jose Moya del Pino (1891-1969), with whom Bolles had collaborated on the murals for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. Along with Treasure Island, the Bay Bridge, Alcatraz, the Ferry Building, Coit Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge are just a few of the San Francisco landmarks easily identifiable in the mural. A triangular deck accessed from the dining area overlooks the level south garden, which is built up as the lot slopes down to Jackson Street, where there was a 3 car-wide carport (since enclosed).

The second level has a master suite on the west side and a flexible arrangement of additional bedrooms (four small, or two large ones) with an additional bathroom. A 7' 6" square skylight above the staircase brings a lot of natural light into the house. The present owners have rectified the only original deficiency (no powder room on the main level) with a sympathetic extension to the north which also allowed for a larger breakfast area off the kitchen. A full basement provides ample storage, another bedroom and bath, and a family room opening to the garden.

After Ward & Bolles separated in July 1954, Bolles focused on commercial, industrial and major residential projects, most with an adventurous incorporation of modern art and sculpture. Some of his major clients included IBM (33 buildings at their San Jose campus), Macy's (17 department stores and 3 distribution centers in Northern California), General Motors (the Fremont plant), and Gallo and Paul Masson wineries.

Active in the local architectural community, Bolles was Secretary of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects for 2 years, 1945-46, and was honored as a Fellow of the AIA in 1963. He was influential in the public housing arena in the 1960's, chairing San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) Association committees on housing and redevelopment, and designing a number of buildings for the San Francisco Housing Authority, including a dramatic 1964 curved high-rise for senior housing in the Fillmore neighborhood - the JFK Towers at 2451 Sacramento. As a patron of the arts and Board member of the San Francisco Art Institute from 1958-1966, his major projects, such as Ping Yuen in Chinatown, would always include a large mural or other significant artistic component. In 1956 he opened an art gallery in the same Jackson Square building as his office (14 Gold St. at Sansome) and 1965-70 he also owned a gallery in New York promoting California artists.

Bolles is best known, however, for the design of Candlestick Park, on which construction began in August 1958. The stadium opened on April 12, 1960 as the new home of the former New York Giants. Then Vice-President Richard Nixon threw out the ceremonial first pitch and the Giants beat the Cardinals 3-1. The 43,000 seat stadium at first was open in the outfield, allowing icy winds to whip in from the Bay, which often dropped temperatures 15 to 20 degrees during the course of a night game. In the ninth inning of the 1961 All-Star Game, Giants pitcher Stu Miller was actually blown off the pitching mound by a strong gust, forcing a balk which took the game into extra innings (the National League eventually won 5-4).

A decade later, the stadium was enlarged and the open end enclosed. Retractable seats were added

in right field to allow the conversion to a football field for the 49'ers, who played their first game there on October 10, 1971. The expansion to 58,000 capacity made Candlestick the National League's largest ballpark at the time and reduced the wind problem somewhat, but it remained an uncomfortable place during most night games. Bolles' boomerang-shaped concrete shell baffle behind the upper tier's last row of seats, intended to protect the park from the wind and cold, just couldn't combat the natural elements. Under the new ownership led by Peter Magowan, which saved the Giants from being moved to Florida in 1992, a downtown stadium was finally built and the team opened the 2000 season in Pacific Bell Park.

John and Mary Bolles sold 2201 Lyon in August 1973, moving to 1250 Jones, combining two units on the 15th floor to create what is still the only full-floor apartment in the Clay-Jones condominiums. After Bolles retired in 1978, his eldest son, Peter P. Bolles, continued the practice, eventually moving it to Las Vegas, where it remains today. John Bolles died on March 5, 1983 at his home in Santa Rosa.

David Parry is grateful for information provided by Jane Grimm, John Bolles' daughter, and to the owners of 2201 Lyon for prompting the article.

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