

Pacific Heights Architects #23 - Albert Farr

The focus of this series is architects who had an influence over the way Pacific Heights looks today. Albert Farr's long career, primarily focused on residential design work, has left us with some fine examples in Pacific Heights of the prevailing styles of the first half of the 20th century.



Albert L. Farr was born in Omaha, Nebraska, but spent most of his childhood in Yokohama, Japan where his father had been assigned by the U.S. Government to assist the Japanese in the installation of a modern postal system. The family returned to the United States and moved to the Bay Area in 1891. Farr received his early training as a draftsman in the office of architect Clinton Day, beginning in 1893. After a brief spell as a furniture designer, he returned to architecture as a draftsman for the Reid Brothers. In 1897 he opened his own practice and he obtained one of the first State architectural licenses issued (A180) in August 1901. Like his contemporary Edgar Mathews, Farr is often associated with the craftsman style of rustic city house, with its exterior typically covered with brown shingles. The work of Ernest Coxhead and Willis Polk was initially influential to Farr, but he was not afraid to experiment and extend the genre.

Several examples of Farr's earliest single-family homes remain in Pacific Heights, including 2714 Broadway and 2714 Divisadero (both from 1900), and the subject of this month's article 2660 Scott, on the corner of Vallejo, which was designed in 1901. That same year he also designed 2858 Vallejo; followed in 1902 by 2419 Vallejo and 2175-81 Pacific (4 flats, now converted to condominiums); 2801 Broadway, 2737 Vallejo, and a remodel of a Victorian house at 2310 Steiner in 1903; the adjoining houses at 2881 and 2891 Vallejo in 1904; and 2400 Vallejo in 1905. Across the Presidio Avenue dividing line between Pacific Heights and Presidio Heights are two of his most famous shingled Craftsman houses, next to each other at 3333 and 3343 Pacific, dating from 1902.

2660 Scott is characteristic of a classically designed Georgian-style home with a lot of elaboration. The entrance, which is recessed within the body of the building, is framed by a classical order composed of a segmental arch pediment, a frieze, and an architrave supported by Corinthian columns. To the right of the entrance is an extension of the house displaying a 12 ft. tall window with an arched top and a modillion in the keystone position. Corinthian pilasters frame this window and curved, interlaced muntins hold the individual panes of glass. This window, along with a triptych of similar windows on the south side, illuminates the gracious entry hall and the staircase which connects the first two levels. The main level of the home features a library, a formal living room, and a very impressive formal dining room with a grand terra cotta marble fireplace and a ceiling with a distinctive scroll molding.



The first owners of 2660 Scott were Harry Babcock and his wife, Katharine Roosevelt Babcock. She was a cousin of President Theodore Roosevelt and he was the son of Massachusetts-born William F. Babcock (1820-1885), one of San Francisco's earliest millionaires and a president of the Spring Valley Water Company. Katharine Babcock died in 1926 and, after Harry died in 1930, the house was left to Helena Stoney Brown and Katharine Duer Stoney, Harry Babcock's sisters. It was sold to the parents of the present

owners in late 1937, so, in essence it has been in the ownership of just two families in its 100+ year history! Some of Albert Farr's original plans are still in the house.

In 1909 Farr moved his office to 68 Post, where it remained for the rest of his career. He lived at 2528 Union in San Francisco and also in Berkeley, Piedmont and Oakland, with his wife Margaret and daughter Marion.

By 1910 Farr's work owed less to the local precedent of Coxhead and Polk than to the English arts and crafts movement popularized in the Bay Area by Bernard Maybeck. Some of his post-earthquake work in Pacific Heights includes 2950 Pacific (1907), 2659-61 Green (1911) and 2649 Green (1916).

Spacious public rooms and high ceilings are a common element of Farr's homes. Less obvious is that he made the third level of a house very usable. In many homes of the vintage designed by his contemporaries the third level was generally an undeveloped attic, to be finished off later by subsequent owners, often with limited success.

In addition to San Francisco, Farr's work can be seen in many Bay Area communities, especially Belvedere and Piedmont. His most famous project was Wolf House - a rustic fantasy (including redwood logs with the bark still intact) for author Jack London and his wife Charmian in Glen Ellen, Sonoma County. Two years of planning and a lot of construction work went into this 15,000 square foot house, but tragically it burned down before completion on a hot August night in 1913. Arson was suspected at the time, although a 1995 forensic examination of the ruins, a study of the plans, and a careful reading of contemporary accounts of the work which had been completed to that point, concluded that the fire more likely resulted from the spontaneous combustion of linseed-oil soaked rags which had been left in the house. Unfortunately, it was under-insured and London could not afford to rebuild it. The ruins can still be seen in Jack London State Historic Park.

In 1922 Farr took on a New Zealander, Joseph Francis Ward, as associate architect, ultimately making him a partner in the firm of Farr & Ward. They designed a number of houses in Russian Hill, Sea Cliff and St. Francis Wood. Some of their significant Pacific Heights work from their long association includes 2570 Jackson (1923, now the residence of the French Consul-General), 2310 Broadway (1927), 2520 Pacific, (a 1930 rebuild of a 1905 Bliss & Faville design and the 1997 University High School Decorator Showcase house), 2574 Broadway (1932), and 2550 Pierce (1941). Farr & Ward were also responsible for other modernizations of older houses, including 2699 Filbert and 2130 Vallejo (both in 1936).

Albert Farr died on July 12, 1947 at his Piedmont home after a long and distinguished career.

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