

Pacific Heights Architects #25 - Nathaniel Blaisdell

The focus of this series is architects who had an influence over the way Pacific Heights looks today. Nathaniel Blaisdell is not well known and his work is sometimes mis-attributed to other architects, notably Ernest Coxhead or Albert Farr.



Nathaniel Blaisdell was born in July 1862 in Providence, Rhode Island and graduated from that city's renowned Ivy League school, Brown University. He moved out to San Francisco in 1884 and went to work for established architect Clinton Day as a draftsman. He has been credited with making a major contribution to the original design of the City of Paris building, at the southeast corner of Geary and Stockton, designed by Day in 1896. The building was reconstructed after the 1906 earthquake by Bakewell & Brown, at which time the four-story rotunda was installed. In 1983 it was completely rebuilt for Neiman Marcus to a design by New York architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee. Only the rotunda was saved.

Blaisdell went into practice for himself in 1897, opening an office at 222 Sansome. He was one of the initial group of architects to obtain a State architectural license (A90) when they were first issued in 1901. Some of his earliest residential structures from 1897 can still be seen in Presidio Heights at 3218-20 Jackson and in Cow Hollow at 2526 Union. In Pacific Heights he designed 2412 Gough in 1899; 2120 Lyon, 2224 Sacramento and 2636 Vallejo in 1900; 2730 Vallejo in 1902; 2535 Laguna in 1903; and 2118 Vallejo in 1905.

Following the 1906 earthquake and fire, Blaisdell reestablished his office at 255 California. His practice, like the majority of architects at the time, was typically mixed. Surviving commercial buildings that he designed include the Oscar Luning Building (45-47 Kearny at Maiden Lane in 1907) and the St. Clair Building (2-16 California at Drumm in 1908).

Examples of his post-earthquake residential work in San Francisco include a 1909 three-unit building on Nob Hill at 1266-70 Sacramento and another three-unit building he designed for himself in 1912 on Russian Hill at 1132-34 Green.

In Pacific Heights, he designed three magnificent houses on Pacific Avenue, all in 1910. They are 2606, 2810 and 2830 Pacific, the subject of this month's article. Blaisdell's designs at 2810 and 2830 Pacific are both substantial houses on extra wide lots and appear at first glance to be adjacent to each other, because the property in between them, 2820 Pacific, is narrow by comparison at only 30 feet wide. That lot is 265 feet deep, however, extending all the way through to Broadway, which allowed Willis Polk to set the house he designed for it in 1912 way back, closer to Broadway than to Pacific.



2830 Pacific

2830 Pacific is a formal and elegant four-level Georgian mansion. On this prime Pacific Heights block bounded by Divisadero, Broderick and Broadway, this lot is the largest on the block at over 63 feet in width and over 147 feet in depth. A side driveway leads to a large garage at the rear. The main level includes an elegant music salon at the front of the home, as well as the living room, formal dining room and kitchen. The dining room has French doors leading out to a private landscaped garden terrace. The basement level has an original ballroom. The

penthouse level has panoramic Bay views and a terrace which wraps around it. An elevator, included in the original design, serves all levels. The house was built for George L. Payne, owner of Payne's Bolt Works. George Payne had been one of Blaisdell's first clients back in 1897 for substantial alterations to his residence at the time, on Howard Street in the Mission district. Blaisdell also designed a manufacturing plant for Payne at 201 Main on the corner of Howard, since demolished.

Payne bought the vacant lot on Pacific in January 1910 from Daisy and Clemens Horst, who were in England at the time. Their signatures on the deed transferring ownership were notarized by a Vice-Consul of the United States accredited to London. The McEnerney judgment establishing that title did belong to Daisy B. Horst had been recorded in August 1909. The Horst's had opted to build a house in Presidio Terrace, #31, which is prominently positioned opposite the entrance, using another little-known architect Frederic Nickerson.



2830 Pacific entry door and lobby



View from the terrace of 2830 Pacific

After George Payne died in 1935, the distribution of his estate left his widow Barbara M. Payne with sole ownership of 2830 Pacific and she continued to live there until she sold it in 1954. After two more changes of ownership in the 1960's, the present owners bought the home in 1994.

Two more of Blaisdell's classic Georgian houses with brick exteriors are to be found in the Lake Street area at 2160 Lake, built in 1913, and 2050 Lake, from 1915.

Blaisdell was a member of the University Club, living there from 1909 to 1911 and serving as its Vice-President 1932-33. He was also a member of the Pacific Union Club, the Merchants Exchange Club, the English Speaking Union, the Mechanics Institute, the California Historical Society, and the California Academy of Sciences. He was a very keen tennis player and a founder of the California Tennis Club on Scott Street at Bush. He served as its President 1917-18, he was a signatory to its Articles of Incorporation in 1924, and served as President for a second term from 1931 until 1937. He left an enduring legacy at the Tennis Club by designing their new clubhouse in 1926.

Blaisdell retired just before his 65th birthday in 1927 by turning over his practice and office at 255 California to his associate architect, Edward B. Seely. According to newspaper accounts, he enjoyed

his retirement by traveling and playing tennis until he was well into his 80's. Since it was built in 1912 he had lived in his Bay view apartment at 1134 Green on Russian Hill. His wife Lillian died in 1948 and Nat, as he was known to his friends, died on September 13, 1956 at the age of 94.

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