

Pacific Heights Architects #31 - Reid Brothers

The focus of this series is architects who had an influence over the way Pacific Heights looks today. Although some of the more spectacular mansions designed by this firm were lost in the 1906 fire or since, several fine houses remain.



James W. Reid



Merritt J. Reid

James William Reid (1851-1943) and his brother Merritt J. Reid (1855-1932) were both born in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, two of the sons of William J. and Lucinda (Robinson) Reid. After graduating, (James from MIT and the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris), they lived and worked in Evansville, Indiana, at first for the architectural firm of Boyd and Brickley, then purchasing the contracts of that firm in 1879 and opening their own business. They soon established a solid reputation, designing buildings for the Evansville and Terre Haute railroad, among other local clients.

A fine example of their work, the Willard Library in Evansville, was designed by the Reid Brothers in 1885 in the Victorian Gothic style, and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. Two of the firm's even earlier commissions, dating from 1880, had been for banker Aaron Guard Cloud in McLeansboro, Illinois, 60 miles from Evansville. One was a bank building, designed in classic Second Empire French Baroque style, and the other was a more restrained private home close by. Both buildings were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. The Cloud State Bank building is now a branch of Peoples National Bank, and the private home is now the McCoy Memorial Library, left to the city of McLeansboro, along with an endowment for its upkeep, by Cloud's daughter Mary Ellen McCoy, who died in 1921.



The McCoy Library and the Cloud State Bank in McLeansboro



Hotel Del Coronado

The Reid Brothers were invited out to San Diego in 1886 by the founders of the Coronado Beach Company to design the Hotel Del Coronado. The hotel opened its doors in 1888 and one year later John D. Spreckels, who was investing heavily in San Diego, bought a one-third interest in the company. Spreckels eventually took over as owner of the hotel when the builders were unable to repay a loan to him. The 'Del', as it is affectionately known, was added to the National Register of Historic Places

in 1971 and further designated a National Historic Landmark in 1977, one of only 2300 nationwide.

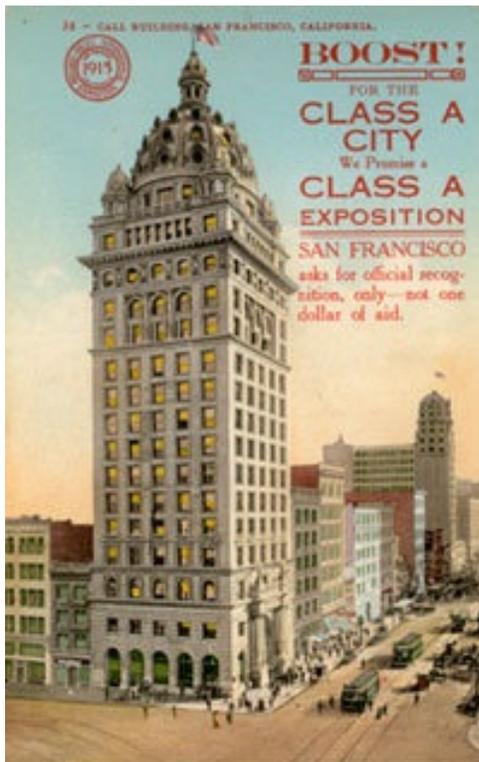
In 1889, both James and Merritt were made Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, the highest honor that body bestows. Merritt moved north that year to open an office in San Francisco, soon to be joined by James, leaving their younger brother Watson Elkinah Reid (1858-1944) running the San Diego office. Watson was joined there in 1891 by talented Chicago-trained architect William Sterling Hebbard (1863-1930), who gradually assumed responsibility for the work in San Diego. Watson returned to New Brunswick in 1899 and played no further part in the Reid Brothers firm.

From their San Francisco office, in 1892, the firm designed the first steel-frame building west of Chicago, for the *Portland Oregonian* newspaper.

Their first residential commission in San Francisco dates from April 1894, a connected group of six houses for Mrs. M. L. Selfridge on the southwest corner of California and Pierce. The property was subdivided into individual lots in 1948, but five of the six houses (2603 through 2611 California) were accumulated in 1962-63 by John Papa, who sold them as a group in 1999 to local development company, Historic Homes. They performed a fine renovation, adding garages to each and opening up the floor plans to take full advantage of all four levels, and the properties are now individually owned once again.



The remodeled houses at 2603-11 California St., built in 1894



The Call Building, featured on a postcard promoting San Francisco as host of the 1915 Exposition

In 1895 Claus Spreckels hired the Reid Brothers to build a new headquarters for his rapidly growing newspaper, the *San Francisco Call*. The 315 ft. high steel-frame Call Building was, when it was completed in 1897, the tallest building west of Chicago, almost doubling the height of San Francisco's first 'skyscraper' (Burnham & Root's 160 ft. tall Chronicle Building of 1889). The Call Building was topped by a spectacular 4-story dome in which the Reid Brothers set up their offices, on the 18th floor. Local architect and writer B. J. S. Cahill called it the 'handsomest tall office building in the world'. It immediately became the most recognizable San Francisco landmark, dominating the City's skyline, and it was featured in many postcards of the day. The building interior burned in the fire which raged out of control following the April 18, 1906 earthquake, but the steel structure survived and it was rebuilt.

In 1938 the building was remodeled by architect Albert Roller in an Art Deco Moderne style and is now known as the Central Tower (703 Market). Tragically, the beautiful dome was replaced by six floors of offices, set back from the base.

The Reid Brothers essentially became the Spreckels family architects, designing several mansions and the Spreckels Car House (2301 San Jose, 1899, now San Francisco Landmark #180, known today as the Geneva Car Barn). Surviving examples of their earlier residential work in the City can be seen in Pacific Heights at 1919 Sacramento (1895), 2770 Broadway (1904), 2083 and 2099 Pacific (1904-05), two houses which were built by John D. Spreckels as wedding gifts for his only son.

The Reid Brothers became very well known for their classical revival mansions, an example being the Irwin mansion at 2190 Washington (1901), designed in the Italian Renaissance style, which burnt down in 1956. Only the lions flanking the driveway remain as a reminder of what preceded the apartment building on the site now. This property will be featured in next month's *New Fillmore*.

In 1902 the firm was commissioned to design the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill. The building was close to opening at the time of the 1906 earthquake, but it was badly damaged by the fire. Julia Morgan supervised its repair and the Fairmont finally opened on April 18, 1907, exactly one year after the earthquake.

Other surviving examples of the Reid Brothers work include two department stores for the Hale Brothers (989 Market, 1902 and 901 Market, 1912), the W. & J. Sloane Building (222 Sutter, 1908), the First Congregational Church (S/E corner Post and Mason, 1913, now S. F. Landmark #177), and many theaters, including the Coliseum (745 Clement, 1918), the Alexandria (5400 Geary, 1923), the Metro(politan) (2055 Union, 1924) and the Balboa (3630 Balboa, 1926) in San Francisco, and the Grand Lake Theater in Oakland (1926). The firm had also designed the third Cliff House which opened in 1909 after the ornate second one had burned down in 1907.

The Reid Brothers continued to design fine homes and apartments, including, in Pacific Heights, 2770 Broadway (1908) and 2646 Vallejo (1917), and in Presidio Terrace, number 26, for Marshall Hale in 1909. On Russian Hill they designed the 20-unit cooperative apartment building at 1100 Union Street in 1929 and James moved into the building when it was completed.

The prolific Reid Brothers partnership ended in 1932 with the death of Merritt Reid on February 4th. James Reid retired from active practice at that time, turning to his hobbies of oil painting and music. He was a founder of the San Francisco Opera Company. James died on September 22, 1943 in his apartment in 1100 Union.

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January 2006