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San Francisco

A cultural and literary history

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INTRODUCTION

Navigating San Francisco

San Francisco occupies the seven-mile-wide northern tip of the San Francisco peninsula. Without room to expand, the city is characterized by a compact patchwork of neighborhoods set around hills, valleys, and flatlands, and occupied by a population never able to grow much beyond 750,000.

Historical Geography

Around 10,000 Native Americans are thought to have inhabited the peninsula immediately prior to the eighteenth-century Spanish arrival although few are believed to have occupied the site of the future San Francisco, then an unprepossessing mixture of rugged hills and sand dunes.

The Spanish established a *presidio*, or garrison, overlooking the Golden Gate on the peninsula's northwest corner. The site, and the surrounding 1,500 acres, are still known today as the Presidio and form a largely wooded area that served for many years as a US military base. The mission that the original *presidio* ostensibly protected was located inland, three miles south, its chapel the only surviving element in the area now known as the Mission District. The Mission District's growth was not triggered by the mission—both it and the Presidio became neglected after the collapse of the Spanish empire—but by the much later westward expansion of what became San Francisco.

The city grew from Yerba Buena, a small trading post sited on San Francisco Bay (from which Yerba Buena would take a new name) on the eastern side of the peninsula. Through the crucial years of the 1848-52 gold rush when San Francisco's population exploded beyond the wildest dreams of its early settlers, the crescent-shaped shoreline of Yerba Buena was filled-in, creating land that evolved into a commercial center and seeded the present Financial District. From this point, and

from the former social hub of Portsmouth Square just north, the American city (California switched from Mexican to US ownership in 1848) began to grow, expanding north and south, and west across the peninsula towards the Pacific Ocean.

Growth was far from steady, however, characterized by economic booms and busts and occasional earthquakes, notably the 1906 earthquake and fire that left much of the city in ruins and erased most evidence of the nineteenth century from areas adjacent to the bay.

The Modern City

Easily spotted by its high-rise offices—including the unmistakable Transamerica Pyramid—the Financial District forms a major part of what is commonly referred to as "Downtown" Although no hard and fast boundaries exist, Downtown is generally regarded as including the area around the Ferry Building, on the eastern waterfront, Union Square, traditionally a prime area for shopping and tourist hotels, as well as, from the 1990s, the adjacent area immediately south of Market Street (see next page). To the west, Downtown touches the tawdry but improving Tenderloin area, beyond which lies UN Plaza and the resplendent City Hall.

Within the shadow of the Financial District's towers lies Chinatown whose northern boundaries have pressed into the once predominately Italian area of North Beach. Despite many cafés and restaurants of Italian origin (or affection), North Beach lost its distinctive ethnic population as it had earlier lost its beach, consumed by landfill as the city pushed its northern waterfront out to what is now Fisherman's Wharf. Once genuinely populated by a working fishing fleet, Fisherman's Wharf is the only section of San Francisco where tourists and tourists services are more prevalent than locals, although the dockside does provide the ferry service to Alcatraz Island, a one-time military installation that found great infamy as a prison, easily spotted from most high vantage points.

Rising between North Beach and Fisherman's Wharf, Telegraph Hill is cloaked by expensive homes and topped by the distinctive concrete erection of Coit Tower. On the other side of North Beach, west of Columbus Avenue, lies Russian Hill while, further west beyond the broad thoroughfare of Van Ness Avenue, are the serial humps of

expensive Pacific Heights. Another landfill episode created the flatlands north of Pacific Heights initially to hold the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition but since consumed by the affluent Marina District which retains the landmark Expo relic, the Palace of Fine Arts.

Previously the site of the city's most extravagant private homes, Nob Hill forms a steep western wall to Chinatown, and beyond it lie areas that were created as separate entities from the city proper but which became engulfed by San Francisco's relentless expansion. They include the strongly African-American Western Addition (within which is the Fillmore District) and Haight-Ashbury, the cradle of 1960s hippiedom, both with many of their original Victorian and Edwardian homes intact. Further west are younger neighborhoods, such as the Richmond, south of the Presidio and north of Golden Gate Park (a three-mile long, one-mile-wide green rectangle reaching almost to the ocean), which retain a sense of suburban serenity despite their closeness (by the standards of most urban areas) to the heart of the city.

Increasingly taking overspill from the Financial District and, during the 1990s, the hub of the city's mushrooming cyberspace economy, the area immediately south of Market Street and close to the bay has been known since the 1980s as "SoMa" (an informal abbreviation derived from SOuth of MArket Street or, as some suggest, an acronym for "South of Market Area"). Within SoMa, its wide blocks originally providing jobs and housing for a blue collar workforce, is the growing modern cultural complex of Yerba Buena Center and the much less celebrated loft apartments that attracted non-San Franciscan dotcom beneficiaries, much to the disgust and detriment of the established community.

Parallel to Market Street, Mission Street is SoMa's prime east-west route, which, in a rare link with pre-US times, follows the course of the original Mission trail that linked the declining Mission Dolores with Yerba Buena. The Mission District is a changing but long Latino-dominated area, its continuity threatened like neighboring SoMa as the 1990s dotcom explosion made landlords and property speculators hungry for bigger profits. As Mission Street swings south, the land to the west is consumed by the predominantly gay Castro area, divided by a series of hills from Haight-Ashbury, immediately north.

Up and Down in San Francisco

Two-dimensional maps do little to prepare first-timers for San Francisco's harshest reality: the city's 43 (some say 44) hills and the fact that streets often pass right over them. A 1970s airline advertising campaign offered: "When you are tired of walking around San Francisco you can always lean against it." What looks like an easily-walked route on paper can involve a strength-sapping gradient, the most severe being a Russian Hill section of Filbert Street which reaches a 31.5-degree angle. The most photographed slope, however, is another part of Russian Hill where zigzagging herbaceous borders were added to a part of Lombard Street during the 1920s, causing traffic to weave slowly along its course while descending towards North Beach.

Maritime Navigation

As essential to San Francisco's character as neighborhoods and hills are the offshore areas, of which there are three. To the east is the broad and placid San Francisco Bay, fed by fresh water rivers from California's mountains. Providing safe anchorage for ocean-going vessels, the sheltered bay—on the east side of which lie Oakland and the university community of Berkeley—enabled the trading post of Yerba Buena to take root.

To reach Yerba Buena, ships passed through the Golden Gate, the strait defining the northern waterfront of the city and from which the famous bridge takes its name. Despite what many assume, the strait itself was named in 1846, before the discovery of California's gold. Unlike the bay, the Golden Gate's waters are deep and choppy and its span usually assaulted by strong winds. The Golden Gate gives access to the Pacific Ocean, filling the gap between San Francisco and Asia and providing the kind of sunsets that conclude romantic comedies and add several thousand dollars to the value of ocean-view properties in San Francisco's most westerly reaches.

Part One

The Instant City

In January 1847, when the population of the United States was approaching 23 million and the city of New York held almost 500,000 people, a few hundred souls living on the tip of a hilly, windswept peninsula on the California coast decided to change their settlement's name from Yerba Buena to San Francisco. They hoped to benefit from the good reputation among seafarers, particularly whalers who knew it as a supply stop, of San Francisco Bay on which the settlement sat. Whatever its name, prospects seemed limited for a place settled by long-departed Spanish, governed for decades without interest by Mexico, and recently described by a local rancher, Rincón de la Salinas, as "having a population of less than 400, with no commerce, no wealth, no power and without a name, save as a small trading post and mission."

What nobody could have predicted was the discovery of California gold in January 1848 (the same year that California came under US control), which triggered the biggest population movement the world had ever seen to a place, San Francisco, very few had previously heard of. The remote settlement, where tents outnumbered buildings and streets were rutted tracks, would be transformed at unprecedented pace into the US's tenth biggest city by 1870 and gain commercial importance as a conduit for gold rush fortunes and the country's major Pacific port.

A Great and Magnificent Port

Spanish navigators discovered Alta California (today's state of California) in 1542, believing the coastline to be that of a peninsula or island. At a site thought to be today's Point Reyes, the British seafarer Sir Francis Drake berthed in 1579 to make repairs to his ship, the *Golden Hind*. Yet there were no attempts to settle California until 1769,

when the Spanish launched the Sacred Expedition, commanded by Gaspar de Portolá and under the religious leadership of Junípero Serra. Traveling overland, the expedition's main base was at San Diego, where the first of what, by 1823, would be 21 California missions (and several branch missions) reaching over 400 miles north to Sonoma, was built.

The excellent natural harborage afforded by San Francisco Bay had been missed in the 1542 voyage as its entrance, the Golden Gate, was concealed by cliffs and difficult to spot from the ocean. Instead, the bay was accidentally discovered in 1769 by the Portolá party seeking a route to Monterey. The leading missionary of the party, Juan Crespi, observed: "without any doubt this is a very great and magnificent port."

Not until March 1775 did another overland party, led by Juan Bautista de Anza, reach the area, planting a cross at the northern tip of the San Francisco peninsula to mark the future site of a *presidio*, a defensive fortification above the Golden Gate. Three miles south in a more sheltered location, the mission of San Francisco de Asís (later known as Mission Dolores) was founded. In August of that year, Juan Manuel de Ayala captained the first ship to pass through the Golden Gate and into the bay, mapping the region and giving its features their enduring Spanish names. Chaplain and cartographer on the Anza expedition was Pedro Font, whose diaries, written in 1777 and published in 1930, record: "although in all my travels I saw very good sites and beautiful country, I saw none which pleased me as much as this. And I think that if it could be well settled... there would not be anything more beautiful in the world."

Extending and supposedly strengthening the Spanish empire (though California's remoteness and lack of obvious material wealth caused many Spaniards to regard it as an unnecessary burden), the mission system forcibly housed natives on mission compounds, converted them to Catholicism, and exploited their labor. Isolated from other settlements, each mission had to be largely self-sufficient and, to this end, natives might be trained in masonry, milling, shoemaking, saddlery, pottery, and weaving. The harsh working conditions and a lack of immunity to European diseases would devastate California's native population and destroy its cultures.

Despite the arrival of a British ship under George Vancouver in 1792 and, from 1812, the establishment of a Russian fur trapping

settlement sixty miles north of San Francisco, anticipated encroachments from rival European powers failed to materialize. Instead, the Spanish empire itself collapsed and in 1822 control of California passed to the newly independent nation of Mexico.

With scant interest in and little ability to exploit the distant and barely populated region, the Mexican government permitted large sections of California to pass into the ownership of the Californios (California-born of Spanish or Mexican descent) and rewarded foreigners who wished to settle with large land grants. The fertile valleys and mild climate proved ideal for raising cattle and crops. In *The Beginnings of San Francisco*, Zoeth Skinner Eldredge described the outlook around San Francisco Bay in 1835 as: "a vast solitude through whose bordering groves ranged the red deer, the elk, and the antelope, while bears, and panthers, and other ferocious beasts frequented the hills and often descended upon the scattered farm yards."

A bay-side settlement on the eastern side of the San Francisco peninsula developed as a trading post for hides and tallow, and for servicing whaling ships taking advantage of the sheltered anchorage to stock up on supplies. The post was named Yerba Buena (or "good herb") for the wild mint-flavored plant that grew there. Settlers typically took Mexican citizenship, adopted Catholicism, and married into the local population. One who followed this path was English whaler William A. Richardson (1795-1858) who left his ship in San Francisco Bay, married the daughter of the Presidio's *comandante*, and in 1835 erected what would be regarded as Yerba Buena's first house (see pp.23-4).

Numbering a few hundred, Yerba Buena's population was an ethnic mixture that included English, Scots, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Pacific Islanders, and what would be a growing number of arrivals from the US. One of the latter was Massachusetts-born William Sturges Hinckley (1807-46), who arrived in California in 1829, adopted Mexican citizenship and in 1844 was appointed Yerba Buena's *alcalde* (a civic leadership role that combined the duties of mayor, sheriff, and judge). Among Hinckley's achievements was overseeing the construction of a small bridge crossing a saltwater lagoon that filled with the incoming tide and made travel through the settlement difficult. Such was its success that another settler, William Heath Davis, recalled "people came from far and near to look at and

admire it, especially the native Californians, who arrived from the mission and elsewhere, with their wives and children, to contemplate the remarkable structure."

Californios were renowned for their horse skills and hospitality but displayed little appetite for business or the economic development of the region. California trade became dominated by foreigners, particularly the entrepreneurial Americans who would buy hides from the Californios to manufacture leather goods that would then be sold back to the Californios.

Advised to spend time outdoors to improve his eyesight which had been damaged by measles, a Harvard student, Richard Henry Dana, spent 16 months at sea working on a ship trading between the US and California. Published in 1840, his *Two Years Before the Mast* provided a detailed account of his time and became an important source of knowledge of the Californio era. In one section he describes "the remote and almost unknown coast of California" along which his ship sailed to enter the Golden Gate in the winter of 1835–6:

> *[The ship] floated into the vast solitude of the Bay of San Francisco. All around was the stillness of nature. One vessel, a Russian, lay at anchor there, but during our whole stay not a sail came or went. Our trade was with remote Missions, which sent hides to us in launches manned by their Indians. Our anchorage was between a small island, called Yerba Buena, and a gravel beach in a little bight or cove of the same name, formed by two small, projecting points. Beyond, to the westward of the landing-place, were dreary sand-hills, with little grass to be seen, and few trees, and beyond them higher hills, steep and barren, their sides gullied by the rains. Some five or six miles beyond the landing-place, to the right, was a ruinous Presidio, and some three or four miles to the left was the Mission of Dolores, as ruinous as the Presidio, almost deserted, with but few Indians attached to it, and but little property in cattle. Over a region far beyond our sight there were no other human habitations, except that an enterprising Yankee, years in advance of his time, had put up, on the rising ground above the landing, a shanty of rough boards, where he carried on a very small retail trade between the hide ships and the Indians.*

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, driving the expansion of the US, brought uncertainty over the future of California, even after Mexico rejected the US's offer in 1835 of $500,000 for San Francisco Bay. Looking fretfully ahead to 1846, a Yerba Buena merchant commented: "I am afraid we shall see a great deal of trouble in California this year. There are 7 or 8,000 emigrants from the USA expected."

The US-Mexico War that began in 1846 saw the brief creation of the independent Bear Flag Republic (the origin of the bear on California's state flag) and the arrival of a US warship, the *Portsmouth*, in San Francisco Bay. After several days at anchor, US troops rowed ashore on July 9, 1846, and hoisted the Stars and Stripes above Yerba Buena's central plaza as the ship's band played *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. Martial law was declared and the plaza was re-named Portsmouth Square. Born in Hawaii to a Bostonian father and a Polynesian mother, William Heath Davis (1822-1909) had married into one of the major land-owning Californio families. He would later be remembered for his valuable memoirs, *Seventy Five Years in California*, a section of which recalled the less-than-tense martial law period:

> *We were out on a visit one evening, and were crossing Portsmouth Square, on the way home, about eleven o'clock, when we were hailed by the guard on duty: 'Halt! who goes there?' 'Friends, we answered. 'Advance and give the countersign!' commanded the sentry. We advanced, but both Howard and myself had forgotten it. We explained our position. The guard said he was obliged to take us to the guardhouse, which he accordingly did, armed with his musket, one of us on each side of him. Fortunately, Captain Watson was still up, and, on seeing us approach under arrest, burst out laughing.*

The US-Mexico War ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, under which Mexico accepted a payment of $15 million from the US in return for Texas, New Mexico, and California. As a US city renamed San Francisco, the former Yerba Buena could expect slow and uneventful growth in trade as a minor Pacific port. Gertrude Atherton wrote: "the only excitement was the arrival of mail from the East, and an occasional fight or fandango."

Any prospect of sudden wealth was stymied by the isolation and distance from the eastern US. Travel overland entailed a covered wagon trek of six months across mountain passes liable to become blocked by snow (the grisly fate of the Donner Party, of which 40 out of 87 trapped travelers died and survivors resorted to cannibalism, was a recent memory). The alternative was a ship via Cape Horn, a 17,000-mi journey from New York that might take eight months and involve poor food, terrible weather, rough seas, and unpredictable captains. The more adventurous might shorten the journey by crossing the isthmus of Panama, an arduous horseback journey through malarial rainforest (the Panama Canal would not open until 1915) followed by a struggle to find a ship continuing to San Francisco.

Gold: Half the Size of a Pea

On January 28, 1848, John Marshall, a wheelwright from New Jersey who had traveled west, was building a sawmill on John Sutter's ranch, near the site of present-day Sacramento, when something a foot deep in the clear water of the American River caught his eye: "I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold. The piece was about half the size and shape of a pea. Then I saw another."

That night, Marshall and Sutter (1803-80, a German-born settler who had acquired 48,000 acres and had dreams of a vast agricultural empire reaching to the Pacific coast), with the aid of *Encyclopedia Americana*, conducted tests on the metal and concluded it was indeed gold. Sutter hoped to keep the discovery quiet to ensure his work force would remain and his land would not be overrun. But as word spread among Sutter's workers, it reached the ears of Sam Brannan, a larger-than-life figure who was a supply store partner and proprietor of the *California Star* newspaper. In San Francisco, news of the discovery was largely dismissed (as were earlier extravagant claims, such as the discovery of California coal) until May 12, when Sam Brannan, allegedly having equipped his supply store with all the pre-requisites of gold prospecting, marched through Portsmouth Square holding aloft a gold-filled quinine bottle yelling "Gold! Gold in the American River!"

Almost immediately San Francisco's stores were divested of lamps, pickaxes, shovels, food and clothing as its population (like those of

other California settlements) headed toward what became known as the "diggings" By the end of May, there were two thousand men "scratching like hens in the sand and gravel of the Sacramento Valley" and they were soon joined by many more from Mexico and Central and South America. On May 29, 1848, the San Francisco-based journal, *The Californian*, carried the following:

> *The whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevada, resounds with the sordid cry of gold! GOLD!! GOLD!!!—while the field is left half planted, the house half built, and every thing neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes, and the means of transportation to the spot where one man obtained one hundred and twenty-eight dollars' worth of the real stuff in one day's washing, and the average for all concerned is twenty dollars per diem!*

That would be the last issue of the paper for some months. The next day its entire staff departed for the diggings. According to Gertrude Atherton: "Even the editor was on the highroad, a pick over one shoulder, a shovel over the other, and a pan under his arm."

On the US East Coast, where the population was used to wild claims from the frontier lands, there was widespread skepticism over the validity of the discovery. This changed in December 1848 when President Polk announced the claim was true and put 230 ounces of California gold on display. The *New York Tribune* trumpeted: "Fortune lies upon the surface of the earth as plentiful as the mud in our streets." And with that, the gold rush began.

The World Rushes in

The mass exodus from San Francisco during May 1848 raised doubts about the city's very survival as land values briefly plummeted and demand for services fell. As California's major port, however, San Francisco was the gateway to the diggings and during 1849 its population rocketed from 812 to 20,000.

As a plot of land costing $16 in 1847 sold for $45,000 eighteen months later, fears of economic collapse quickly disappeared and prices, compared with the rest of the US, reached astronomical heights.

With fresh fruit and farm produce in heavy demand, apples sold for $5 each; eggs reached $50 a dozen, and a loaf of bread would cost ten or twenty times its New York equivalent. Of tools, a shovel could be $25, a metal pan $5; while a decent blanket could cost $40 and a strong pair of boots $100, the same price as a gallon of whisky.

Accommodation was similarly expensive. A hotel room might be infested with rats, lice, and fleas but human occupants could still be charged $150 for a week's stay; a cheaper option was a bunk on the outside porch of a house for $20. Profits made by shopkeepers were offset by spiraling rents: a small shop cost perhaps $4,000 a month; the annual rent for a popular gambling venue, the El Dorado, was $40,000, and that was just a canvas tent.

At a time when the average national wage for unskilled labor was a dollar a day, even menial jobs in San Francisco became lucrative. Domestic servants could command $200 a month, almost matching the $8 per day paid to members of Congress. Zoeth Skinner Eldredge described how: "Sailors, cooks, or day laborers, frequently became heads of profitable establishments, while doctors, lawyers, and other professional men, worked for wages, even as waiters and shoeblacks." Van Wyck Brockes's *In the Times of Melville and Whitman* portrayed a socially chaotic San Francisco: "There were ex-doctors sweeping the streets, ex-ministers who were gamblers, bankers and Sicilian bandits who were waiters in cafés, lawyers washing the decks of ships and penniless counts and marquises who were lightermen or fishermen or porters."

With only around 2,000 women in a city of almost 30,000 people, traditionally female occupations such as washing, ironing and cooking, too, became highly paid. Some miners realized they could save money by shipping their clothing to China or Hawaii to be cleaned; others simply wore what they had until it disintegrated, then bought new. Women were such a rare sight that an auction house on Montgomery Street would suspend trading when a female was spotted, allowing the traders to watch her pass by. Children were even rarer. In *Roughing It*, Mark Twain described dining in the post-gold rush days with a San Francisco woman who remembered a story her father told her of her arrival in the city as a small child being carried by servant:

A huge miner, bearded, belted, spurred, and bristling with deadly weapons—just down from a long campaign in the mountains, evidently—barred the way, stopped the servant, and stood gazing, with a face all alive with gratification and astonishment. Then he said, reverently: 'Well, if it ain't a child!' And then he snatched a little leather sack out of his pocket and said to the servant: 'There's a hundred and fifty dollars in dust, there, and I'll give it to you to let me kiss the child!'

Few arrivals planned to stay long in San Francisco, however, and most made for the diggings the instant they landed. As their crews deserted, ships were abandoned in the bay even before passengers and cargo had been unloaded, leaving both to the mercy of thieves. Some ships rotted, others were put to practical use: the *Niantic* was converted into a hotel; the *Euphemia* was used as a jail. Many more provided the landfill that extended San Francisco eastwards, filling-in the crescent-shaped bay of old Yerba Buena and forming the foundations of the present-day Financial District.

In *Life by Land and Sea*, Prentice Mulford recalled the scene that greeted him on his arrival in the mid-1850s and the methods of a scrap prospector called Hare:

Rows of old hulks were moored off Market street wharf, maritime relics of '49. That was "Rotten Row." One by one they fell victims to Hare.

Hare purchased them, set Chinamen to picking their bones, broke them up, put the shattered timbers in one pile, the iron bolts in another, the copper in another, the cordage in another, and so in a short time all that remained of these bluff-bowed, old-fashioned ships and brigs, that had so often doubled the stormy corner of Cape Horn or smoked their try-pots in the Arctic ocean was so many ghastly heaps of marine debris.

Mulford's schoolboy belief, shared by many in the eastern US, was of California as a "fearfully hot country and full of snakes." But the prospect of a quick and easy fortune at the diggings outweighed ignorance of the region, and tens of thousands took the chance and traveled west, as did many more from around the globe. In January 1849, the *New York Herald* reported: "Everyday men of property and means are advertising their possessions for sale on order to furnish themselves with means to reach that golden land... Poets, philosophers, lawyers, brokers, bankers, merchants, farmers, clergymen, all are feeling the impulse." Sent by the *New York Tribune* to cover the gold rush, journalist Bayard Taylor wrote: "The very air is pregnant with the magnetism of bold, spirited, unwearied action, and he who but ventures into the outer circle of the whirlpool, is spinning... in its dizzy vortex."

With a third of the gold rush population arriving from outside the US, San Francisco's small polyglot population suddenly became a large and frenzied melting pot. Taylor wrote of the city in September 1849: "Yankees of every possible variety, native Californians in sarapes and sombreros, Chileans, Sonorans, Kanaks from Hawaii, Chinese with long tails, Malays armed with their everlasting creeses, and others in whom embronzed and beared visages it was impossible to recognise any especial nationality."

For a short time, the rivers of the mother lode (as the gold bearing area became known, based on the erroneous assumption that there was a single vein of gold off which all others branched) yielded their precious cargo to anyone who stood in a river and panned for it. Early arrivals reported finding up to five pounds of gold a day. Very soon, the gold became harder to extract and the industry became dominated by well-financed companies with the means to blast rock and build mines. Work at the diggings was tough and life in the new mining camps no

less so. Place names echoed the rambunctious mood: Hangtown, Rough and Ready, Whisky Bay, Brandy Gulch, Humbug Hill, Hell's Delight.

San Francisco, by contrast, promised plentiful pleasures, including what Herbert Asbury described as "the roaring temptations of the brothel, the gambling houses, and the other fascinating flesh-pots of the city" where miners "squandered their hard-earned fortunes on harlots, liquor, and games of chance; they paid hundreds of dollars for fruit, vegetables, and game out of season; they met without a murmur of protest the extraordinary expenses of common food and lodging." In addition, miners arriving in San Francisco typically indulged in elaborate personal displays, wearing huge gold rings and using diamonds to fasten their shorts; those who could stand the pain had their teeth removed and replaced with gold plates. In *Gold Dust: The California Gold Rush and the Forty-niners*, Donald Hale Jackson wrote: "San Francisco was the most exciting city in the world in the summer of 1849. Life telescoped there: a man lived a year in a month." A *New York Evening Post* correspondent on the spot reported more succinctly: "The people of San Francisco are mad, stark mad."

On the proceeds of the gold rush San Francisco was beginning to look like an American city. Tents were replaced by wooden buildings, and while fires were frequent a lawyer of the time commented: "We burn down a city in a night and rebuild it in a day. Contracts for new buildings are signed by the light that is consuming the old." In 1853, the main streets were still paved with wooden planks but they were newly illuminated at night by street lamps fueled with kerosene from whale oil.

Returning in 1859, Richard Henry Dana found a place very different from the Yerba Buena he had seen 24 years earlier:

When I awoke in the morning, and looked from my windows over the city of San Francisco, with its storehouses, towers, and steeples; its court-houses, theatres, and hospitals; its daily journals; its well-filled learned professions; its fortresses and light-houses; its wharves and harbor, with their thousand-ton clipper ships, more in number than London or Liver-pool sheltered that day, itself one of the capitals of the American Repub-lic... when I saw all these things, and reflected on what I once was and

saw here, and what now surrounded me, I could scarcely keep my hold on reality at all.

Winners, Losers—and Emperor Norton

The gold rush made San Francisco a city, made California a rich and independently-minded state, and made fortunes of unimagined enormity for some individuals. The enduring riches, however, went not to those who panned or mined for gold but to the suppliers of provisions and services. Of the figures brought to prominence by the gold rush, some were loved, some were loathed, some founded octopus-like business empires whose tentacles reached into every facet of life, and some died poor and embittered. But only one was accepted on the streets of San Francisco as an emperor.

If there was one man for whom the gold rush should have earned a fortune it was John Sutter, on whose land the initial discovery was made. Sutter's holdings included 13,000 head of cattle, a flour mill, a ten-acre orchard, two acres of roses, and the large adobe structure of Sutter's Fort serving as ranch headquarters and a reception point for overland travelers which seeded the modern-day state capital, Sacramento. Sutter's dreams of an even bigger agricultural domain were ended as his laborers gave up farm work for gold panning and thousands of squatters trampled over his land, slaughtering cattle and raiding food supplies.

In an 1857 magazine article, Sutter lamented: "By this sudden discovery of the gold, all my great plans were destroyed. Had I succeeded for a few years before the gold was discovered, I would have been the richest citizen on the Pacific shore; but it had to be different. Instead of being rich, I am ruined..." Sutter acquired a pension from the state government but lost it when he sought compensation from the US government, a fight which continued to his death in 1880 and which was continued after it by his descendants. Intriguingly, Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, during his brief stay in Hollywood, hoped to make a biopic, *Sutter's Gold: An American Tragedy*, but his screenplay was rejected for its anti-capitalist sentiment.

Initially at least, one who fared better than Sutter was Sam Brannan. Brannan (1819-89) arrived in San Francisco in 1846 aboard the *Brooklyn*, part of a group of 238 Mormons seeking a new life free

of the religious intolerance of the US, only to find their destination had, during the course of their voyage, become part of the US. Brannan was an unlikely Mormon (he was excommunicated from the church for diverting its funds into his own pockets, and he survived San Francisco's first jury trial for land sale irregularities) but was a perfect gold-rush millionaire. By selling prospecting equipment at extortionate prices, Brannan made $36,000 in nine weeks and became the richest person in California. His interests expanded into banking and transport, and he looked beyond San Francisco to develop the natural springs at what he named Calistoga (combining the names of California and the spa resort of Saratoga in New York State). His downfall was a high-risk investment in Mexico and a propensity for alcohol that had caused his wife to file for divorce on account of his "notorious intemperance" In 1889, Brannan died in a rural boarding house impoverished, due in part to the divorce settlement; his body lay in a vault for a year until burial costs could be raised.

A German-born tailor, Levi Strauss (1830-1902) landed in San Francisco in 1850 equipped not with gold panning utensils, but with the canvas he hoped to fashion into tents and wagon covers. Yet instead of making these, Strauss found the material suitable for making strong, loose-fitting trousers, ideal for the needs of a gold miner. In 1873, the canvas was replaced with blue denim and, thanks to the idea of a partner, its strength was increased by the use of copper rivets giving birth to the "jean" (said to derive from the use of Genoese cloth). Steadily, demand for Levi clothing spread to cowboys and lumberjacks, and anyone needing hard-wearing work clothing. Strauss died in 1902, his descendants continuing the business which evolved into today's global brand with its headquarters within the architecturally elegant 1980s Levi Plaza, not far from Strauss's original site at 99 Battery Street. Manufacturing continues from a factory in the Mission District.

Also from Germany, Claus Spreckels (1820-1908) worked his way across the US before settling in San Francisco in 1856 and opening a grocery store. Aware that the price of imported sugar supplies could be undercut by local production, Spreckels founded what became the world's largest sugar refinery in the Salinas Valley. By crafting deals with rival suppliers on the East Coast and controlling sugar cultivation in Hawaii, Spreckels gained a monopoly on California sugar. To avoid

dependence on the Big Four's railroads, Spreckels constructed his own rail line and in San Francisco competed against monopolies in street lighting and power.

After his death, Spreckels' sons feuded among themselves while continuing to be a pre-eminent California family. Adolph Spreckels (1857-1924) took over the sugar business and erected the French Renaissance mansion (one of several Spreckels-family mansions nicknamed "sugar palaces"), which still overlooks Lafayette Park, before founding with his wife, Alma, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. The eldest son, John (1853-1926), founded several newspapers, among them the *San Francisco Call*, and built a business empire in San Diego. Rudolph, the youngest son, shunned the family business and even competed against it, creating his own fortune and becoming a political reformer—most notably challenging San Francisco's corrupt administration—before losing his money in the Depression.

In terms of wealth, power and political influence, the biggest beneficiaries of the gold rush were four Sacramento merchants, Charles Crocker (1822-88), Mark Hopkins (1813-78), Collis P. Huntington (1821-1900), and Leland Stanford (1824-93). Each made a tidy fortune through gold rush supplies and each made a much larger one by pooling their resources into the Central Pacific Railroad. Based on dubiously obtained government subsidies and low-paid labor, the Central Pacific Railroad cut through the northern California mountains completing the western section of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

The railroad gave the Big Four, as they became known, ownership of enormous tracts of land and control of transportation into and out of northern California, enabling them to decide the fates of entire communities. Already wielding influence on its workings, the Big Four cemented their grip on the state legislature in 1861 when Stanford became governor. Twenty years later, by merging their company with the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Big Four extended their power across the whole state and would dominate California life for decades.

In San Francisco, the Big Four flaunted their wealth with lavish Nob Hill mansions (see pp.29-32). These became the focus of anti-capitalist rallies in the 1870s as the economic boom expected on the railroad's completion instead became a bust, as cheaply manufactured

eastern goods undercut local prices and put traders out of business. Yet despite the widespread hostility towards them, the Big Four retained their grip on power and even, in 1899, forced through a law forbidding political cartoons, displeased as they were at being caricatured in the press. The mansions disappeared with the 1906 fire by which time each of the four had died; their monopolies were broken up during the 1910s.

William Ralston (1826-75) had the business acumen of the Big Four but none of the ruthlessness and greed. His wealth financed businesses large and small throughout the Bay Area in furtherance of his dream of San Francisco becoming one of the world's greatest cities. Ralston co-founded the Bank of California and became its president, insisting on the title of "cashier" Similarly, when it was proposed to name a central California town in his honor, Ralston declined the invitation and the town instead became Modesto, the Spanish word for modest.

Ralston directed the bank's major investments into shipping and factories, using profits from mining shares in the silver-bearing comstock lode of Nevada. In San Francisco, he financed the California Theater in 1869 and later surpassed his own Grand Hotel with the even grander Palace Hotel, intended to outshine anything its rich guests might have experienced in New York or Boston, or indeed in London or Paris.

With his propensity to lend to any business, Ralston won the favor of small businessmen. In a 1937 biography, *Ralston's Ring*, George Lyman wrote "No one was ever turned away from Ralston's office who had something to contribute to California welfare or who needed help or a word of encouragement." Completing the picture of the kind-hearted capitalist, Ralston personally gave generously to widows, orphans, and beggars.

By 1875, however, San Francisco's economic downturn, which Ralston had failed to anticipate, coupled to financial uncertainties in the eastern US and losses in the comstock lode, suddenly placed a massive burden on the bank's resources. As rumors spread about the bank's predicament, "Black Friday" August 26, brought withdrawals totaling $1.4 million, draining the bank of its cash reserves and forcing its closure. That evening, having resigned as the bank's president,

Ralston took his customary after-work swim in the bay. Witnesses claimed to have seen the banker in difficulties although some regarded his drowning as a suicide. Ralston's funeral was attended by 50,000 people.

Claus Spreckels cornered the sugar market and Joshua Norton (1819-80) looked to do the same with rice. But instead of making a fortune, Norton made himself an emperor. Born in London, Norton traveled to San Francisco carrying $40,000, a legacy from his recently deceased father, arriving in 1849 to open a general store. Benefiting from the gold rush, Norton made $250,000 in four years and looked to buy up the city's rice supplies. His plan backfired when the price of rice fell and the shortage he had hoped to exploit turned out to be a glut.

After fading from public view (it is thought he suffered a nervous breakdown), Norton reappeared in September 1859 when he delivered a proclamation to the *San Francisco Bulletin*, which the paper duly printed on the following day's front page. It announced Norton as "Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico", the identity by which Norton would be known throughout the remainder of his life. Far from merely being tolerated as yet another eccentric, Norton was celebrated in San Francisco. Attired in a cockaded hat, gold-plated epaulettes and carrying a ceremonial saber, Norton (always with his two dogs, Lazarus and Bummer; Mark Twain would write an obituary for the latter) became a familiar figure, dining free in restaurants that would be rewarded with the right to post a "By Appointment To His Imperial Majesty" sign; riding without payment on street cars; enjoying a complementary seat at theatrical productions (where the audience would rise to acknowledge his entry), and issuing promissory notes which were accepted by many businesses and by some banks. On the street, passers-by would bow or curtsy and police saluted, particularly after an incident in 1867 when a novice officer, unversed in San Francisco ways, detained Norton for "involuntary treatment for mental disorder" This slight led to a public apology from the police chief and the city granting Norton free board and lodging for life by way of amends.

The 1870 US census formally recorded his occupation as "emperor" and Norton lived up to his role by inspecting sewers and

drains, and discussing crime statistics with police. He campaigned for civic improvements, not least a bridge that would link San Francisco with Oakland, and each week attended a different religious service to avoid any accusation of bias.

On the evening of January 8, 1880, on his way to lecture at the Academy of Sciences, Norton dropped dead on California Street. Next day, the *San Francisco Chronicle* recorded:

> *On the reeking pavement, in the darkness of a moonless night under the dripping rain, and surrounded by a hastily gathered crowd of wondering strangers, Norton I, by the grace of God, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, departed this life. Other sovereigns have died with no more of kindly care—other sovereigns have died as they have lived with all the pomp of earthly majesty, but death having touched them, Norton I rises up the exact peer of the haughtiest King or Kaiser that ever wore a crown.*

With city flags at half-mast, a two-mile funeral cortege carried Norton to his burial watched by upwards of 10,000 mourners. In June 1934, as part of the city's program of relocating its dead to Colma, Norton was reburied, with the mayor in attendance and music from the municipal band, and a military salute from an infantry battalion. Completed two years later, the Bay Bridge, foreseen by Norton half a century earlier, bears a plaque acknowledging the emperor's "prophetic wisdom"

Part Two

Shaping San Francisco

San Francisco had 812 residents in March 1848. By 1852, its population was 36,151 and four years later reached 56,000. With newspapers, hotels, restaurants, shops, banks, well-filled warehouses and the steady stream of ships that made it the US's "emporium of the Pacific" San Francisco was functioning as a city but could not hide its true self: a tiny trading post that had burst at the seams. Many businesses operated from tents and most domestic homes were improvised on land of which ownership was disputed. Even the shoreline changed as uprooted trees, assorted debris and abandoned ships were utilized as landfill, pushing back the waterfront to create new wharves and commercial spaces.

Among those drawn to California by the gold rush were the architects, developers and builders who failed to find a fortune at the diggings but in San Francisco found a city urgently needing to be built. As land ownership issues were resolved, San Francisco swiftly acquired a style commensurate with its size and importance. Aided by street plans which made no concessions to the city's hills, and by changing fashions in residential building fueled by consumer magazines and mechanized carpentry, a San Francisco emerged bearing some of the US's most distinctive homes: among them the Stick, Italianate and Queen Anne houses (many of which remain today) of the moderately well-off, and the over-sized and often over-bearing mansions of the rich and powerful.

The office of Wells Fargo, one of the first trusted financial institutions to appear in San Francisco during the gold rush, was the city's first brick-built structure. Through the 1860s, the Financial District became established on land created from the bay and sprouted steadily upwards with the advent of steel framed-buildings during the 1880s. Ninety years later, San Francisco's attempts to invigorate its

declining economy saw the Financial District gain the vertical growth dubbed "Manhattization" a word spat as much as spoken among San Franciscans fearful of the city losing its individuality and joined in the 1990s in the local lexicon of hate by "gentrification" a process accelerated by a booming technology economy and a massive influx of high-earning dotcom employees. As established populations were uprooted and low-rent homes became luxury apartments, the cyberspace explosion threatened to change the face, and the character, of San Francisco faster than any event since the gold rush.

Rubbish and Bones

An Englishman who arrived in 1822 as first mate on a whaling ship, William A. Richardson became Yerba Buena's first recorded settler and set the tone for its early domestic architecture: his first home comprised a ship's sail stretched across wooden posts. Adopting the Catholic faith and acquiring Mexican citizenship, Richardson married the daughter of the Presidio's *comandante,* gained a 19,500-acre land grant and was

appointed Captain of the Port, making him responsible for collecting duties and enforcing trade bans on behalf of the Mexican government. He graduated to a wooden house (in June 1835, cited as Yerba Buena's first building on a site in today's Grant Avenue) and a year later attained the comparative luxury of an adobe house: its thick mudbrick walls retaining heat during the winter and remaining cool during hot spells.

By the 1840s, Mission Dolores and the Presidio were in advanced states of neglect (the latter described as "little better than a heap of rubbish and bones, on which jackals, dogs, and other vultures were constantly preying") but the complex of buildings they comprised were still by far the most substantial structures in the area, which otherwise comprised a few adobe homes such as Richardson's and many more dwellings and stores occupying ramshackle wooden huts or temporary canvas shelters. These were arranged haphazardly along "streets" composed of little more than mud and frequently needing wooden boards to be laid across them to become passable. The sight of a horse-drawn cart and its owner sinking into the mire was common. Herbert Asbury states: "Several times during the rainy season of 1849-50 horses, mules, and carts were sucked down into the mud, and the animals were drowned; and many men, trying to cross the streets while drunk, narrowly escaped similar deaths."

At the request of the Mexican governor, Richardson made informal plans of Yerba Buena but there was a need for a more detailed survey to properly divide the settlement into saleable land lots. In 1839, Jean-Jacques Vioget (1799-1855), a Swiss-born former soldier and engineer who had arrived as a trader in 1837 was commissioned by Francisco de Haro, the first *alcalde*, to survey and plan the settlement. The result was an eight-block area bordered by what became Montgomery (then marking the waterfront), Sacramento, Grant and Pacific streets. While Vioget's plan suited the settlement of the time, it would later attract great derision and it was widely suggested that he got the job solely because he owned the only set of surveyor's tools in Yerba Buena. In the *Overland Monthly* of 1869, M.G. Upton mocked the urban plan:

> *To the serene Gallic (Vioget was regarded as French) mind it made but very little difference that some of the streets which he had laid out followed the lines of a dromedary's back, or that others described semi-*

> *circles—some up, some down—up Telegraph Hill from the eastern front of the city—up a grade, which a goat could not travel—then down on the other side—then up Russian Hill, and then down sloping toward the Presidio. And this crossed with equally rigid lines, leaving grades for the description of which pen and ink are totally inadequate.*

Vioget's plan had taken account of the current level of occupation in Yerba Buena and matched this to a Spanish-style system of parallel streets leading out from a central plaza, the open space that became Portsmouth Square, close to the sandy cove where ships docked. But Vioget's "right angled" intersections were 2.5 degrees off true and the subsequent correction caused some buildings to jut into the street.

The O'Farrell Plan

Shortly after Yerba Buena became San Francisco, the *alcalde* commissioned Irish-born Jaspar O'Farrell (1817-75, a widely traveled civil engineer described by Upton as "an explosive Celt, but of much determination and skill in his profession") to improve and extend Vioget's work. O'Farrell widened and straightened streets laid out by Vioget and created the 120-foot-wide Market Street to form a direct route to the mission (parallel to the extant trail that became Mission Street) with new streets branching off to the south. To the north, however, Vioget's streets met Market Street at a 36-degree angle. Though O'Farrell could not have foreseen the future implications, this fact contributed to the frustrations of San Francisco motorists, creating intensely complicated junctions along much of the north side of Market Street.

Like his predecessor, O'Farrell divided the new parts of the city into lots for sale. Some, however, were "water" and "beach" lots on the bay that were either fully underwater or at least submerged at high tide. Using mud, sand and assorted debris as fill, these lots evolved into the streets that pushed the waterfront east and now form the Financial District.

One facet of both plans, and the subsequent extension of the city by William Eddy in 1849, was their disregard for topography. Streets either did, or subsequently would, run directly up and down hills rather than navigating courses around them. Some of the highest

points, such as Nob Hill, remained barely populated until the cable car made their steep approach accessible, and there evolved the rule-of-thumb guide that living high equaled wealth; living low equaled poverty. The quirks of the eventual cityscape did at least provide a fruitful option for film directors, notably Peter Yates with the fabled car chase in the 1968 movie *Bullitt*, shot on the steep residential streets of Pacific Heights and Potrero Hill.

Elegant and Handsomely-furnished Homes

With proper accommodation scarce and expensive, the transient population of the gold rush did most of its sleeping on plain bunks without mattresses, or on bare planks laid across chairs, for which impromptu landlords charged a tidy sum. Inadequate sanitation contributed to an outbreak of cholera in October 1850, introduced by a steamship arriving from Panama, which killed up to 300 people.

Describing San Francisco in 1849, *The Annals of San Francisco*, published in 1885, recorded: "There was no such thing as a *home* to be found. Scarcely even a proper *house* could be seen. Both dwellings and places of business were either common canvas tents, or small rough board shanties, or frame buildings of one story. Only the great gambling saloons, the hotels, restaurants, and a few public buildings and stores had any pretensions to size, comfort or elegance." But in its records for the following year the publication gleefully notes: "The tents and shanties of last year had totally disappeared from the centre of the town, while many of the old frame buildings that had not been destroyed by fire were replaced by others of a larger and stronger kind, if not by extensive fire-proof brick structures." And by 1854, the *Annals* confidently concluded: "San Franciscans can now ask for nothing more on the score of domestic comforts. Their streets and houses are well lighted by a beautiful gas-light; they dwell in elegant and handsomely-furnished houses; their tables are largely supplied with fish, flesh, and fowl from the mountains, rivers and valleys of their teeming land..."

Due to the uncertain boundaries of Mexican land grants and the claims of squatters and others, ownership of San Francisco's increasingly valuable land was a confused issue. After many courtroom arguments, the 1860s saw the advent of homestead associations permitted to buy large sections of land, divide it into lots and sell the

lots for a fee usually collected as a monthly repayment. Buyers ranged from individuals seeking a plot on which to raise their own home to developers who would purchase a large tract and build speculatively, hoping to profit from rising property values.

Among the professionals attracted to the gold rush were the architects who found San Francisco in need of their skills. Along with a ready supply of designers, developers and builders, San Francisco also had access to supplies of wood, particularly redwood, which became a favored construction material by dint of being easily worked and resistant to damp, termites and fire. Some even believed, erroneously, that wood-built homes would be sufficiently flexible to withstand earthquakes.

From the late 1860s, the family homes that arose on the tidily-arranged land lots were predominantly Italianate, a style loosely inspired by the rural architecture of northern Italy. While always bearing low-pitched protruding roofs and emphasizing the vertical, early Italianate dwellings were relatively plain-fronted. Later, the style became more ornate, with five-sided bay windows (which also boosted the amount of light reaching the interior) and front doors on raised porches framed by porticoes. The front door itself typically boasted indented rectangular wooden panels while the window frames were arched or indented and further elaborated by a prominent sill below and a shield above: the glass and its surround being carefully proportionate to the house.

Rising levels of ornamentation evolved from the practical need for light, from the increased daring of architects, and from the advances in carpentry that enabled wood to be worked into forms previously existing only in the imaginations of the most artistically-minded carpenters. The idea of wood as a building material in its own right gave rise to the San Francisco Stick style.

Prevalent from the 1880s, this architectural fashion (so-named for the rows of identically vertically-accented homes that some thought resembled a bunch of sticks) developed the Italianate emphasis on the vertical into something close to religious devotion. Mechanized carpentry enabled long, thin strips of wood to accentuate the straight lines of the house, expressed in rigorously right-angled bay windows. The Stick style ended the tradition of making wood imitate stone and eschewed the rounded decorative features of Italianate homes. Machine chisels and lathes increased wood's viability as a decorative material and aided the advent of a form of Stick commonly referred to as Eastlake, in a misappropriation of the ideas of British design writer Charles Eastlake. With his 1865 book, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details*, Eastlake had popularized the William Morris-led Arts and Crafts movement. In the US, however, the book was taken as a cue to overload basic designs with extraneous embellishments and decoration.

Simultaneously, building decorations were being cheaply mass produced for the first time and made available in department stores and through mail-order catalogs. Such frills were sold on the premise that what was right for the fashionable addresses of London, Paris or New York must be right (albeit in cheap imitation form and for an entirely different form of house) for San Francisco. Eastlake himself was appalled by what he discovered was bearing his name in San Francisco, commenting that the city's "Eastlakes" were "a phase of taste in architecture and industrial arts with which I can have no real sympathy and which by all accounts seems to be extravagant and bizarre."

By the late 1880s, the move away from the straight-line purity of the early Stick style toward greater elaboration was proceeding apace as Queen Anne homes sprouted in San Francisco's wealthier quarters. Marked by corner towers, turrets, witches' caps, steeply-gabled roofs, and stained glass windows, the Queen Anne style also swapped vertical accentuation for the horizontal. A particular home's diversity of features and aura of bulkiness was viewed as symbolizing the owner's wealth and social standing. Despite its name, the Queen Anne style bore little resemblance to the English architecture of that monarch's reign (1702–1714) and resulted instead from a misinterpretation of the work of English architect Richard Norman Shaw.

Never using one material where two, or preferably more, were possible, the most elaborate Queen Annes were coated with shingles, tiles and bricks, and liberally dotted with windows that might be long, short, flat or bay, with at least one being a porthole, while the roofline, made irregular by chimneys, dormers, and variable-sized gables, resembled a relief map of the Himalayas.

The Nobs of Nob Hill

San Francisco has 43 hills but since the late 1800s no single one has been more synonymous with wealth and prestige than Nob Hill, rising sharply above Chinatown and the Financial District. Elegant, expensive hotels and pricey high-rise apartments line its streets today, but previously Nob Hill held some of the most spectacular homes ever seen in California.

Proximity to the increasingly important Financial District encouraged a colony of moderately well-off merchants to settle the hill through the 1860s but it was the invention of the cable car in 1873 that made San Francisco's steepest slopes accessible. A cable car route linking the Financial District with Nob Hill's 338-ft summit was laid out along California Street in 1878, paid for by railroad baron Leland Stanford who erected the first of the neighborhood's mansions.

Stanford's extravagant Italianate abode featured the largest private dining room in the west, an Indian parlor, a Pompeiian drawing room, and twenty-five bedrooms. Within its walls, Stanford led "a life of conspicuous consumption as squire of a medieval fortress" while the house fulfilled its owner's desire to create, according to the *Daily Alta California*, "a comfortable home for himself and family for the remainder of his life, and a worthy place for the entertainment of such friends as he desires to have immediately about him."

Stanford had judiciously purchased plots of land adjacent to the cable car line that he sold to his millionaire peers eager to relocate from Rincon Hill as Nob Hill became the city's social benchmark. In 1882, Robert Louis Stevenson described Nob Hill as "the Hill of palaces... it is here that millionaires are gathered together vying with each other for display." And vie they did. Charles Crocker's $2.3-million mansion was fitted with a million-dollar art collection, a library, a billiard room, a working theater, and a 76-foot-high tower from which he could gaze

smugly across the city. For sheer expense and architectural eccentricity, however, the race for the most ostentatious Nob Hill home was won by Mark Hopkins who, despite envisioning something far plainer and cheaper, spent $3 million on a forty-room home designed (one description suggests "hallucinated") by his wife in a mind-boggling pseudo-Gothic hotchpotch of towers, spires and turrets. In *The Fantastic City* socialite Amelia Ransome Neville remembers visiting the Hopkins mansion: "Within, the house was a mess of anachronisms. One entered portals of a feudal castle to pass into the court of a doge's palace, all carved Italian walnut with a gallery around the second story where murals of Venetian scenes were set between the arches."

While they might have reveled in their splendor, the Nobs of Nob Hill, already widely despised for their wealth and the questionable business practices that underpinned it, earned more opprobrium from the public as their showy mansions loomed above the city. In an act seen as typically arrogant, Charles Crocker erected a forty-foot-high "spite fence" around the modest home of a neighbor, German-born undertaker Nicholas Yung who had arrived before the cable car line and refused to sell his land to Crocker. Said Crocker: "From my tower you can survey the entire City as it washes up and down the hills just like it's one big job, and you can supervise the construction of it, and all while standing *over* the shoulders of Stanford, Hopkins, and everyone else! I would have been happier than a condor in the sky—except for that crazy undertaker Nicholas Yung."

Yung's daughter would later write: "How gloomy our house became, how sad. All we could see out our windows was the blank wood of the rich man's fury The flowers in our garden all died, and our lawn turned brown, while inside the house everything felt perpetually damp." Eventually Yung (who Crocker called "the little weasel") transported his house to a new site in the Mission District but still refused to sell his Nob Hill land, leaving the Crocker fence enclosing an empty plot. Yung died in 1880 but the feud continued and the fence remained. Only after Crocker's death in 1888 and the sale of the mansion to a new owner was the conflict resolved.

The mansions brought little luck to their owners. Hopkins died before his was completed (his widow married the interior designer) and the death at fifteen of the son of Leland Stanford prompted the

distraught parents to found the educational institution that evolved into Stanford University. All but one of the mansions perished in the fire of 1906. Thanks to sandstone walls that withstood the flames, the sole survivor was the 1886 James Flood mansion. New York-born Flood (1826-89) had been running a city restaurant dispensing fish stew lunches to stockbrokers. Through eavesdropping and a good deal of cunning, Flood and his partners were able to manipulate stock, eventually controlling the Nevada silver mines that struck "the most stupendous treasure trove of precious metals ever to dazzle the eye of man." Flood's income rose to $250,000 a month and he "retired without delay" from the fish stew business.

With the 42-rm mansion, Flood had fortuitously chosen to reflect his origins by forsaking wood for Connecticut River Valley sandstone, the material used in the brownstone townhouses of New York. Remodeled by Willis Polk following the fire and occupied since 1911 by the exclusive Pacific Union Club, the mansion also retains some of its original ironwork fence, which cost $30,000 and for which Flood employed a full-time polisher. Amelia Ransome Neville recalled: "The beautifully wrought metal flashed for the entire length of two blocks on the square where the brownstone mansion stood, and it was the sole task of one retainer to keep it bright. Passing any hour of the day one discovered him polishing away at some section of it."

Even before 1906, there were indications of a new direction for Nob Hill. From 1902, the daughter of silver-mine beneficiary James "Bonanza Jim" Graham Fair began pouring money into the construction of what would become the 600-rm Fairmont Hotel on land owned by her father. Aided by the work of Julia Morgan, best known as the architect of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon mansion, the hotel emerged from the destruction of the fire to set new standards in luxury. A rival appeared in 1911 when the Stanford Court Hotel opened on the site of the Stanford mansion, and another in the 1920s when the Mark Hopkins Hotel arose where once stood the Hopkins mansion. All three still provide comfortable accommodation and attentive service for those who can afford it: those who can't, can at least experience Nob Hill's height by riding the glass-fronted elevator that brings vertiginous views from the Fairmont's 22-story tower.

On the site of Charles Crocker's home is Grace Cathedral, its Episcopal services well-attended each Sunday by a congregation whose immaculate appearance suggests it might well include the modern peers of the original Nobs. Facing the cathedral, the small and pleasurable Huntington Park is bordered by the granite walls that once marked the grounds of the David Colton mansion. A junior partner of the Big Four, Colton died in 1878 and his widow used his correspondence with Collis Huntington to reveal the corruption of the railroad barons, not least their influencing of elections and bribing of politicians, in a court case that rocked California in the late 1800s.

In 1944, John Dos Passos wrote of Nob Hill for *Harper's Magazine*: "I remember it years ago when there were still gardens on it and big broken-paned mansions of brown stone, and even, if I remember right, a few wind-bleached frame houses with turrets and scalelike shingles imitating stone and scrollsaw woodwork round the porches. Now it's all hotels and apartment houses, but their massive banality is made up for by the freakishness of the terrain. At the top, in front of the last of the old General-Grant-style houses, I stop a second to get my breath and to mop the sweat off my eyebrows."

Pacific Heights

Be they Queen Anne, Italianate, imitation New York brownstone or clinker brick, Pacific Heights mansions appear in more styles and in

greater numbers than in any other district of San Francisco. Like Nob Hill, Pacific Heights benefited from a cable car line making its slopes navigable. Unlike Nob Hill, however, Pacific Heights comprises much more than a single hill: streets flow over crests and sweep through valleys, promising ample land for ample homes with the most prized plots bringing scintillating views over the city and the bay.

During the 1850s, much of Pacific Heights was Cow Hollow, a place of dairy farms and laundries set around a lagoon, close to today's Union Street. The smells and sounds of cows had little appeal for rich settlers who by the 1890s had raised mansions along Van Ness Avenue and succeeded in having the animals removed and the lagoon filled in. The avenue's width, at 125 feet the widest thoroughfare in the city, made it the obvious choice for a cable car route and for dynamiting in a vain attempt to halt the 1906 fire. The mansions were lost and the street instead became, and remains, a commercial strip dominated by restaurants, shops, and offices. Mansions west of Van Ness Avenue survived 1906 and the arrival of the stucco-fronted low-rise apartment blocks which now consume seemingly every gap between them.

A rare reminder of the days of Cow Hollow is the Casebolt House, 2727 Pierce Street, its handsome Italianate style gaining a dignity that befits its age by being set back from the street, its bright white exterior peering out from behind a melange of shrubbery and two towering palms. Its original owner Henry Casebolt was a blacksmith whose skills earned him a fortune during the gold rush; the apparent grandeur obscures the fact that nothing more exotic than salvaged wood provided the main building material. Also pre-dating the 1906 fire, the 1886 Haas-Lilienthal House, 2007 Franklin Street, is one of the few Pacific Heights homes to be open to the public. An entertaining example of flamboyant Queen Anne style, the house was occupied by a descendant of its original owners until 1972. Many early fixtures and fittings remain, proudly displayed on tours organized by the Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage which now own the building.

The grandest Pacific Heights home occupies, appropriately, the highest ground, overlooking Lafayatte Park and bringing (apparently) views of six counties from its second-floor windows. The 55-rm Spreckels Mansion, 2080 Washington Street, was completed in 1913

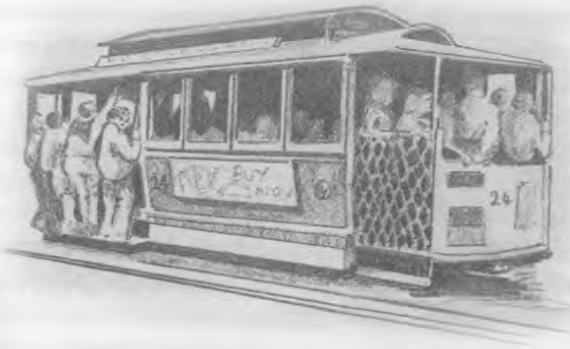
for Adolph Spreckels (son of sugar-mogul Claus) and his wife, Alma de Bretteville. Architect George Applegate impressed his benefactors sufficiently for him to be subsequently chosen to construct their art museum, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. Twenty-four years Adolph's junior, Alma outlived her husband by forty years, becoming "a salty grand dame" of San Francisco society before dying in 1968. The white limestone mansion subsequently fell into neglect before being purchased in 1990, reputedly for $8 million, by best-selling romance author Danielle Steele.

Taming the Hills: Andrew Hallidie's Cable Cars

Invented by London-born Andrew Smith Hallidie (1836-1900), cable cars made San Francisco's steepest hills accessible and consequently shaped the city's social geography, most spectacularly so with Nob Hill. Legend has it that Hallidie was inspired to develop his revolutionary technology after seeing several horses die as they attempted to carry a load up one of the city's slopes (the more likely reason is that he intended to profit from his patent on wire rope).

Hallidie arrived in California in 1852, developed wire rope as means of transporting heavy loads in gold mining areas, and oversaw its successful use with a suspension bridge. His cable car concept became reality at 5am on August 2, 1873 (some accounts say August 1), when the first car was tested along Clay Street. As the name suggests, cable cars run by gripping a constantly moving—at 9.5mph—underground cable and stop by releasing the grip and applying a brake. All cables converge on a gigantic steel drum at the Cable Car Barn (now open as a museum) at the corner of Washington and Mason streets.

While they became an emblem of the city—and their clanging bells a feature in San Francisco-set fiction and films—and were formally recognized as a National Historical Landmark in 1964, cable cars looked likely to be phased out of operation in the early 1980s but were saved by popular demand and a two-year $60 million restoration. Where once there were eight, now only three routes operate, two between Union Square and Fisherman's Wharf and a third between the Financial District and Van Ness Avenue following California Street over the summit of Nob Hill.



Away From the Hills

A stroll through Pacific Heights might seduce the visitor into thinking that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century San Francisco was a place where even the humblest lived as lords. In reality, of course, this was far from true. Ordinary San Franciscans lived at best modestly and worked long hours. In 1860 laborers went on strike for a reduction in their working day from twelve to ten hours. As workers organized through the following decades, employers sought to undermine their demands by importing cheap labor from the eastern US on the transcontinental railroad.

While working people occupied side streets and alleys throughout the city, a "working-class ghetto" developed amid the crowded wooden tenements raised on the flat land south of Market Street. The weakness of the ground and the flammability of the buildings caused the neighborhood to be among the worst affected by the 1906 earthquake and fire. The post-1906 rebuilding brought the factories and freight yards that helped keep the south of Market Street area a blue-collar stronghold, its militancy fueling a series of strikes during 1907 and 1908, first by electrical workers seeking a pay rise from $5 to $6 a day and subsequently by thousands demanding the eight-hour day in effect elsewhere in the US.

Of rents, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in 1904 that $7–17 a week was typically charged for a small three- or four-bedroom

apartment, "some with, some without bathroom" where "plumbing was good but not the most modern" and found rents to be double the US average, although food was cheaper than the national norm. Deducing that it was possible for a family of four to live in San Francisco on $14 a week, the reporter nonetheless noted that she was unable to explain how.

As the city expanded to absorb areas previously considered peripheral, once affluent family homes were divided into apartments, particularly in Haight-Ashbury and the Western Addition, where houses that had been the height of middle-class domestic sophistication underwent cheap alterations and suffered decades of neglect from absentee landlords. By the 1970s, however, such homes were being snapped up at modest prices by a new breed of settler: restoration-minded owner-occupiers charmed by Victorian and Edwardian architectural styles. A prime example are the six "painted ladies" on the east side of Alamo Square which have become the most photographed row of houses in San Francisco (aided by the juxtaposition provided by the Financial District rising in the background). Built by developer Mathew Kavanagh in the mid-1890s and sold for $3,500 each, the houses today are resplendent with what seem perennially fresh coats of paint and not a blemish defacing their carpentry. Prospective buyers should expect a long wait and little change from $2 million.

San Francisco in Ruins

Despite the best efforts of architects, engineers, and city planners, the single most cityscape-defining event in San Francisco history came in 1906 and owed nothing to humans but everything to geology. On average, an earthquake strong enough to be felt occurs three times a week somewhere in California and of dozens of major fault lines, the longest is the 650-mi San Andreas which passes directly through the San Francisco peninsula. Six years before it reached San Francisco, Spain's Sacred Expedition recorded the first European experience of a California earthquake. Later the *Annals of San Francisco* noted:

> *In September, 1829, several very severe shocks of an earthquake were experienced in San Francisco, which forced open lock-fast doors and windows. In 1839, an equally severe earthquake took place. In 1812, however, a much more serious convulsion had been felt over all California, which shook down houses and some churches in several parts of the country, and killed a considerable number of human beings... It may be mentioned, when on this subject, that since these dates, no serious occurrences of this nature have happened at San Francisco; though almost every year slight shocks, and occasionally smarter ones have been felt. God help the city if any great catastrophe of this nature should ever take place!*

In October 1865 what at the time was considered a great catastrophe did take place. One who experienced it while walking along Third Street and turning a corner by a frame house was Mark Twain, who wrote in *Roughin' It:*

> *I fell up against the frame house and hurt my elbow. I knew what it was, now, and from mere reportorial instinct, nothing else, took out my watch and noted the time of day; at that moment a third and still severer shock came, and as I reeled about on the pavement trying to keep my footing, I saw a sight! The entire front of a tall four-story brick building in Third Street sprung outward like a door and fell sprawling across the street, raising a dust like a great volume of smoke! ... (A) street car had stopped, the horses were rearing and plunging, the passengers were pouring out at both ends, and one fat man had crashed half way through a glass window on one side of the car, got wedged fast and was squirming and screaming like an impaled madman.*

Three years later another large earthquake left four people dead as chimneys toppled and fissures opened in the streets. The *San Francisco Call* responded by offering rudimentary earthquake preparedness tips, suggesting residents were safer indoors than rushing onto the streets where they might be struck by falling masonry.

April 18, 1906

Shortly after 5am on Wednesday April 18, 1906, an earthquake now estimated at 7.9 on the Richter scale struck northern California. In San Francisco, walls fell from buildings, chimneys collapsed, cable car lines buckled as streets contorted, windows and dishes smashed, and

residents were tossed from their beds. An eyewitness described ground that "rose and fell like an ocean at ebb tide." Built on marsh and on land reclaimed from the bay, North Beach and the Financial District were devastated by the initial quake, which lasted around a minute, while liquefaction of the ground south of Market Street caused densely-inhabited tenements to fall and catch fire. Many buildings that survived the first shock collapsed as over a hundred aftershocks followed.

The editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*, who had just left his office recalled: "I saw for an instant the big buildings in what looked like a crazy dance. Then it seemed as though my head were split with the roar that crashed into my ears. Big buildings were crumbling as one might crush a biscuit in one's hand. Great gray clouds of dust shot up with flying timbers, and storms of masonry rained into the street. Wild, high jangles of smashing glass cut a sharp note into the frightful roaring." The celebrated landscape photographer Ansel Adams, then three years old and living in the family home some miles from what was then considered the city amid the sand dunes overlooking the Golden Gate, remembered when the earthquake struck, describing in his autobiography: "Our west window gave way in a shower of glass, and the handsome brick chimney passed by the north window, slicing through the greenhouse my father had just completed." Adams's sister, Nelly, lost a chunk of her bedroom wall and awoke "to a broad view of the Golden Gate and the cold morning breeze." Shortly after, Ansel was enjoying the aftershocks in the garden when one knocked him against a brick wall and he acquired the broken septum that would be a feature of his face for the rest of his life.

Remaining upright, the St. Francis Hotel offered a free breakfast of bread, fruit and hot coffee. Wearing a fur coat over his pajamas, Enrico Caruso was among those at the hotel. The famed Italian tenor had performed as Don Jose in *Carmen* the previous evening at the Mission Opera House and had stayed at the Palace Hotel from which he allegedly fled "carrying a portrait of Theodore Roosevelt and a towel around his throat, shouting 'Give me Vesuvius!'" In his own account of the morning, Caruso described waking up and:

feeling my bed rocking as though I am in a ship on the ocean, and for a moment I think I am dreaming that I am crossing the water on my way to my beautiful country... as the rocking continues, I get up and go to the window, raise the shade and look out. And what I see makes me tremble with fear. I see the buildings toppling over, big pieces of masonry falling, and from the street below I hear the cries and screams of men and women and children. I remain speechless, thinking I am in some dreadful nightmare, and for something like forty seconds I stand there, while the buildings fall and my room still rocks like a boat on the sea.

Broken gas mains, short-circuiting electrical cables (one witness described overhead power cables snapping and hitting the ground "writhing and hissing like reptiles"), overturned stoves and lanterns, and the fact that ninety percent of the city's buildings were made of wood, enabled fires to ignite quickly around the city. Separate fires grew larger and joined together into ever bigger blazes that spread street by street. With water mains destroyed, fire-fighting potential was minimal and further hindered by the destruction of several fire stations and the fatal wounding of the chief fire officer when the dome of the California Hotel crashed into the Bush Street station.

Three major fires that blazed during the afternoon had, by evening, combined into a single firestorm raging between the waterfront and Van Ness Avenue. One account told how being in the street "was like looking in the door of a furnace. Flames and smoke rolled with the draught created by the intense heat, rolling up the street with a roar, then up hundreds of feet. It was an awful sight." Temperatures rose high enough to twist metal and melt glass; smoke carried five miles high. The mayor ordered power supplies to be switched off, imposed a dusk to dawn curfew and issued a shoot-to-kill order to army and police to prevent looting (of several apparent looters shot, some were later found to be residents seeking to retrieve their possessions). Many thousands made their way to the open spaces of Golden Gate Park or the Presidio, some crossed by ferry to the safety of Oakland or Marin County.

Of the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, an eyewitness wrote: "Each and every person I saw was temporarily insane. Laughing idiots commented on the fun they were having. Terror marked their

faces, and yet their voices indicated a certain enjoyment that maniacs have when they kill and gloat over their prey. Women, hysterical to an extreme point, cried and raved for those they loved when they were standing at their elbow. Mothers searched madly for their children who had strayed, while little ones wailed for their protectors... Strong men bellowed like babies in their furor(e)." Photographer Arnold Genthe, whose home and studio on Sutter Street were destroyed in the fire and who took some of the most haunting images of the disaster, remembered calmer but no less strange scenes:

> *The streets presented a weird appearance, mother and children in their nightgowns, men in pyjamas and dinner coats, women scantily dressed with evening wraps hastily thrown over them. Many ludicrous sights met the eye: an old lady carrying a large bird cage with four kittens inside, while the original occupant, the parrot, perched on her hand; a man tenderly holding a pot of calla lilies, muttering to himself; a scrub woman, in one hand a new broom and in the other a large black hat with ostrich plumes; a man in an old-fashioned nightshirt and swallow tails, being startled when a friendly policeman spoke to him, 'Say, Mister, I guess you better put on some pants.*

On Thursday, for the first and only time, the *Call*, *Chronicle*, and *Examiner* published a combined edition (using the presses of the *Oakland Herald*, their own having been destroyed) headlined: "Earthquake and Fire: San Francisco In Ruins." The report continued: "Downtown everything is in ruins. Not a business house stands. Theatres are crumpled into heaps. Factories and Commission houses lie smouldering on their former sites." And it concluded with the fatalistic assertion: "Everyone in San Francisco is prepared to leave the city. For the firm belief is that San Francisco will be totally destroyed."

Attempts by the army to halt the flames by dynamiting buildings to create a firebreak failed, the sound of constant explosions adding to the sense of unreality. Eventually it was a change in wind direction, the unusual easterly breeze that fanned the flames giving way to the more common westerly, that caused the fire to burn itself out without crossing the wide Van Ness Avenue to threaten the remainder of the city.

The official death toll was 300, but estimates subsequently put the number far higher, suggesting that 3-4,000 may have perished. Certainly 250,000 (of a population of 400,000) were left homeless, some occupying tents and later the 5,000 shed-like refugee cottages that filled the city's open spaces. For some weeks cooking was allowed only on outdoor stoves. Anticipating a food shortage, the harbor had been blockaded (and remained so until food supplies arrived by train) and several ships fully laden with food that were about to leave were boarded by police and ordered to remain, their cargo unloaded and distributed. Across ten square miles, the calamity had claimed 28,000 buildings including City Hall in which San Francisco's official records had been destroyed.

The good humor and cooperative spirit of the homeless—evinced by hand-written notices such as "Eat Drink and Be Merry for tomorrow we may have to go to Oakland"—was one response to the disaster. Less heart-warming were many re-settlement problems, not least the racism and greed that underpinned a scheme to reconstruct Chinatown on the fringes of the city (see p.156).

A city in need of rebuilding brought an economic boom: first an army of debris shifters and later 60,000 construction workers were able to charge high rates for their labor. In three years following the fire, new construction valued at $150 million was completed, many structures fitted with fire-resistant materials. The rebuilding also provided a chance to create a planned city quite unlike the entity that had grown in the frenzy of the gold rush.

The sense of a new beginning was strengthened by the anti-graft trials that ended widespread corruption in the city administration, symbolized by the imprisonment of political fixer Abe Ruef. Even an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1907 that claimed 77 lives did little to hamper the pervading upbeat mood, while the 1911 election of James "Sunny Jim" Rolph to the first of what would be five mayoral terms, found an amiable and widely-liked politician at the city's head. It was Rolph who presided over the re-shaping of the city including the monumental project that created a new City Hall at the heart of a Civic Center complex.

San Francisco's recovery from the fire (since the major damage was caused by the fire rather than the earthquake, the disaster of 1906 is

officially described as a fire) was signaled to the outside world with staging of the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in what became the Marina District.

All Tomorrow's Parties

Geology has no respect for rebuilt cities and earthquakes were, of course, as common a feature of San Francisco after the fire as they were before it. Increased use of fire-resistant building materials and the steady advance of earthquake-safe building technology ensured much greater stability, however, and the belief that even an earthquake of the size of 1906 would cause considerably less damage than it had then. Such belief received its severest test on October 17 1989, when the 6.9 magnitude Loma Prieta earthquake (so-named for its epicenter, 56 miles south of San Francisco) rocked the city. The event was seen live by a nationwide TV audience, occurring as a World Series baseball game between the San Francisco Giants and Oakland A's was about to begin at Candlestick Park.

Much of the damage occurred in the Marina District, where the ground—composed of sand and debris from the bay—underwent liquefaction and apartment blocks began sinking. Meanwhile, an upper section of the double-tiered Bay Bridge collapsed onto the span

beneath. Overall, deaths numbered a relatively low 65 but property damage was estimated at $6–10 billion. The temporary closure of the Bay Bridge underlined the importance of traffic arteries into and out of the city and raised general concerns over bridge safety. Little comfort came from the revised predictions of the US Geological Survey, which declared a 67 percent probability of an earthquake of magnitude 7 or higher striking the Bay Area by 2020.

The prospect of another major earthquake underpins William Gibson's future-set novels *Virtual Light* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*. After a tumultuous quake nicknamed Little Big One, the Bay Bridge is permanently closed and becomes "a world within a world" as its span is squatted by "tattoo parlours, gaming arcades, dimly-lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars" and a displaced community who fashion ingenious dwellings amid the towers and cables, an "intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and zones of more private fantasy." Read with a knowledge of local history, the bridge appears as a futuristic replay of a bygone San Francisco while the rest of the city—confirming the worst fears of real life present-day San Franciscans—is rebuilt to a global corporate template, eradicating every trace of its individuality and selling its prized public assets; not least Golden Gate Park, which has been purchased by filmmaker George Lucas, walled, and renamed Skywalker Park.

Citadels of Commerce

As San Francisco grew at lightning pace from a sleepy Mexican outpost to the US's major Pacific port, an ad-hoc business quarter evolved along Montgomery Street, then adjacent to the bay and convenient for the commercial wharves. Canvas and wood were soon replaced by stone and brick as building materials, and two- and three-story offices (the few that remain line Jackson Street, their ground floors predominantly occupied by pricey antique stores) arose. Pushing the shoreline east, landfill created new streets that became and remain the city's Financial District, informally inaugurated by the opening of the Bank of California on the corner of California and Sansome streets in 1866. By the 1880s, San Francisco was at its peak as a port, with its wharves

servicing over 500 vessels annually, creating a salty dog's dream vista of schooners, square riggers, clippers, and steamers. Gaining its first outlet on the Pacific enabled the US to sharply increase its trade with Asia, but equally salient was the fact that New York was no further from San Francisco by ship than was Europe. The latter became a major market for grain from northern California's farms, while incoming cargo typically included food and manufactured goods. The city also became an important whaling center, providing access to the Arctic Ocean hunting grounds at a time when whale oil was in high demand for lamps and whale bone a prerequisite of ladies' corsetry.

While the view over the bay may have revealed ships, masts, and constant maritime activity, the city's skyline was dominated by church spires and factory chimneys until the Chicago architectural firm of Daniel Burnham and John Root created a ten-story home for the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the junction of Market and Kearney streets in 1889 and two years later completed the Mills Building at 220 Montgomery Street. Both structures used the new steel-frame construction method and pneumatic elevators to carry people between floors.

The 1906 earthquake and fire razed the Financial District's masonry structures but, while stripped of their skin, many steel-framed buildings survived and some remained strong enough to be rebuilt. The reconstruction typically saw steel skeletons being covered with lightweight terra cotta (valued for its decorative and fire-retardant qualities) rather than brick, creating a commercial neighborhood of remarkable aesthetic cohesion. A major influence on the new look was the Beaux Arts-inspired City Beautiful movement, encouraged particularly by Daniel Burnham and Willis Polk and popularized by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Yet the movement had, it was true, been pre-empted in San Francisco by Albert Pissis, who completed the landmark Hibernia Bank, at the junction of Jones and Market streets, in 1892. The bank's granite facade and rows of columns imposed a sense of harmony and order into a haphazard streetscape of brick and wood while inviting customers to be awestruck as they passed through the two-story, copper-domed entrance. Despite the acclaim heaped upon the bank and its designer, Pissis had fallen from favor by the time of his death in

1962 but the bank remained and is now again acknowledged as a rare gem on Market Street, despite its fall into disuse and disrepair.

Willis Polk: Architect, Visionary, Drunkard

When Willis Polk (1865-1924) described the Hibernia Bank as the most beautiful building in San Francisco it was praise indeed. Polk is remembered for his many architectural contributions to the city but during his life was equally renowned for his acerbic criticism of buildings and their builders, much of which was published in the weekly magazine *The Wave*. The 1898 City Hall, for example, was dismissed as representing "the last degenerate epoch of architecture", while Polk's outspoken style helped make him a prominent member of Russian Hill bohemia.

Born in Illinois, Polk had worked as an eight-year-old carrying tools and nails to roofers on new constructions and by the age of thirteen had become an architect's apprentice. After a string of jobs with architects across the US (including with Daniel Burnham in Chicago), Polk arrived in San Francisco in 1889. Through the next decade he made a mark with ingenious mixings and re-workings of traditional styles, best revealed by the fusing of medieval, Mediterranean and classical ideas brought to several shingle-fronted homes on Vallejo and Florence streets. Through the 1900s Polk increasingly designed classically-inspired commercial buildings, including the Merchants Exchange Building at 465 California Street. In creating a new home for the exchange, where ship-owners, warehousemen and traders would all gather awaiting news of arriving ships to be announced by a rooftop look-out with a view over the bay, Polk employed a doubled-column entrance and a sky-lit atrium to create a suitably portentous approach to the Grain Trading Hall, the building's hub, where San Francisco's prominent place in Pacific trade was emphasized by William Coulter's epic maritime paintings.

From 1905 Polk headed the San Francisco office of Burnham & Root, overseeing post-fire rebuilding and assisting with the plans for a grand Civic Center complex. After 1910 he reverted to working for himself and in 1917 unveiled the landmark Hallidie Building (130-150 Sutter Street). The use of a curtain wall suspended in front of a building's exterior had become widespread in San Francisco following

Polk's deployment of the feature in the Merchant's Exchange Building. But where most curtains were disguised as masonry walls, Polk gave the Hallidie Building the world's first glass curtain, boldly hung several feet in front of the building's reinforced concrete wall.

Despite his achievement with the Hallidie Building, Polk's commissions declined and his architectural practice frequently faced bankruptcy. Polk's one-time apprentice, Addison Mizner, later to create the millionaires' Florida playground of Palm Beach, was made a partner to avoid paying him wages. Some attributed the lack of money to Polk's efforts to keep pace with San Francisco high society and his appetite for strong drink. Payment for the Filoli mansion, William Bourn's sumptuous country retreat (used during the 1980s as the setting for TV's *Dynasty*) was made as a stipend to Polk's wife, apparently out of fear that the architect would drink the proceeds. Between the Hallidie Building and his death in 1924, Polk's only construction of note was the 1921 Beach Chalet on the western edge of Golden Gate Park. Unoccupied and neglected for many years until re-opening in the 1990s with a restaurant on the upper level and a park visitor center on the ground floor, the Beach Chalet is lined by Lucien Labaudt's evocative 1930s murals of San Franciscans at play.

Perhaps the strongest testament to Polk came from Bernard Maybeck, to whom Polk, overseeing the 915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, had passed the commission for the Palace of Fine Arts: "You have put up a monument to your ideals through me and made a sacrifice for them. there is in you a yearning for the highest ideals."

Polk's Merchant Exchange Building defined the Financial District's style until the mid-1920s, when San Francisco acquired several landmark buildings whose cutbacks, vertical accentuation and art deco terra-cotta decoration echoed the office towers of New York and Chicago. Inspired by Eliel Saarinen's design for Chicago's Tribune Tower, Thomas Pflueger's 1924 Pacific Telephone Building at 140 New Montgomery Street gave San Francisco its first skyscraper, which still rises with graceful aplomb above the low-rise south of Market Street (SoMa) area. Soon after, the Financial District gained George Kelham's Russ Building (235 Montgomery Street), its heavily Gothic ornamentation suggestive of a European cathedral and its 32 stories making it the tallest building in the city until 1964. By contrast, Pflueger brought a Mayan influence to bear on the terra cotta-clad 450 Sutter Street.

Manhattanization and Urban Renewal

Economic depression, world war, and a post-war slump all contributed to a lack of major new commercial building in San Francisco between the early 1930s and the mid-1960s. By the time large-scale construction recommenced, the city's building regulations were outdated and unable to exert control over the new breed of high-rises. The result was San Francisco's first experience of what would be a lasting terror: "Manhattanization" The term was inspired by a June 1968 issue of the *Bay Guardian* whose front page yelled "Manhattan Madness" and predicted "San Francisco will duplicate the crushing problems... that have made Manhattan Island virtually unlivable."

San Francisco had already been experiencing several years of "urban renewal", controversial initiatives that razed established and predominately low-income neighborhoods to create new commercial space, notably the Fillmore District which had been the heart of African-American San Francisco. By the early 1970s, city authorities had devised the Urban Design Plan, a complex set of regulations

intended to placate public protest while giving a conditional green light to high-rise developers. Their hope was that San Francisco could solve its economic problems (the city had long since lost its commercial prominence in California as power shifted to the south of the state) by becoming a regional hub for banking and financial firms, staffed by an army of Bay Area commuters carried to work aboard BART. This was the Bay Area Rapid Transit, a then state-of-the-art rail-based underground public transport system linking San Francisco with other Bay Area communities, including a section beneath San Francisco Bay reaching Berkeley and Oakland, the first part of which opened in 1972.

Completed in 1969, the Bank of America World Headquarters (now Bank of America Center) at 555 California Street carried 52 floors to a height of 779 feet and suggested that high-rise architecture could bring something more aesthetically appealing than mere office space to San Francisco. Partly a reference to Pflueger's 450 Sutter Street, the California Street building's zigzagged exterior of dark red carnelian granite reacts with sunlight in different ways throughout the day, at times making the potentially overbearing structure seem almost transparent—though never almost transparent enough to those San Franciscans who failed to warm to it. Shortly after, the Transamerica Pyramid was an initially despised but subsequently admired addition. As if to bless the new-look San Francisco, the four 190-foot-high hyperbolic paraboloids of St. Mary's Cathedral appeared on a Geary Street hill in 1971

The Ultimate High Rise

Despite individual architectural successes, the argument that commuting office workers would contribute significantly to the city's economy was undermined by *The Ultimate High Rise*, a detailed study carried out by the *Bay Guardian*. Its findings included: "Demographic impact-high-rise office growth in the city has driven 100,000 middle class residents to the suburbs, caused the loss of 14,000 blue collar jobs, and tripled welfare costs. New jobs in high-rises go to suburbanites, while jobs lost were held by city residents... Environmental impact-high-rise office growth causes air and water pollution that cost the city $1 billion to clean up, and imposed an additional $5 billion in region-wide costs to alleviate traffic congestion."

By 1985, however, Paul Goldberger, writing in the *New York Times* of San Francisco's new and more stringent Downtown Plan, suggested that the city enjoyed "the finest downtown plan in the nation" one that "tames the madness of overbuilding (more) than any other city has even come close to doing."

Yerba Buena Center

When the $60-million San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA) opened its doors in 1995, it gave the city its first purpose-built art museum of significant size and became a major component in the development of an 87-acre South of Market Street culture-and-commerce plot known as Yerba Buena Center.

Thirty years in the making, Yerba Buena Center was initially conceived as a sports venue that it was hoped would stimulate the regeneration of a declining neighborhood dominated by run-down hotels and industrial spaces within walking distance of Downtown's shops, offices and tourist accommodation. The Moscone Convention Center opened between Third and Fourth streets in 1981 and, subject to the ups and downs of local and national economies (nearly all projects depended on private financing), the scheme took shape through the 1990s, gaining impetus by the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway, damaged beyond reasonable repair by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Yerba Buena Center is announced by SFMoMA's immense black-and-white truncated cylinder emerging periscope-like from a red brick exterior. The privately funded, Mario Botta-designed museum carries San Francisco's dreams of joining the top ranks of art-exhibiting cities. Across Third Street, the Center for the Arts provides a publicly financed home for smaller-scale avant-garde theater, dance and visual arts, described by the *Washington Post* as having "the look of a elegant, precision-tuned factory... just right for a building devoted to experimental art." Both buildings sit alongside the five-acre green splash of The Esplanade, an amiable if sleep-inducing rendition of an urban park with benches and whimsical sculptures: a bronze businessman here, a sinking ship there. Off the walkway, a waterfall-in-a-grotto serves as a tribute to Martin Luther King with selected quotes from the civil rights leader inscribed onto twelve glass-and-granite panels behind a twenty-foot-high cascade.

Amid Yerba Buena Center's post-post-modern architecture is the unlikely sight of a 1916 carousel. Previously a feature of Playland-At-The-Beach, an amusement park close to the Cliff House that closed in the early 1970s, the carousel forms a low-tech approach to the Children's Block. At the core of the Children's Block the high-tech Zeum (the name was picked from a kid-tested short-list, with rejected possibilities including the Rolling Hamster Studio), is a $56-million educational center packed with computers, multimedia, video and other things—not least workshops on underwater film-making—intended to encourage the use of "technology as a creative tool"

To conventioneers, Financial District workers, and tourists reticent to venture far beyond their hotels, Yerba Buena Center promises to deliver the cream of San Francisco culture in one handy dollop. As a result, during the 1990s, seemingly every cultural institution in the city strived to find a new home within its confines: the Jewish Museum, the Mexican Museum, the Cartoon Art Museum, and the California Historical Society among them. Ironically in 2001, escalating rents forced the Ansel Adams Center for Photography, based here for many years, to close. Reflecting the area's rising profile, several international chain hotels loom, or are intending to loom, over the district, while Fourth Street holds the block-long, five-story-high gray box of the Metreon, a shopping, dining and leisure complex owned by the Sony

corporation. To lessen public protest, Sony rents some ground floor space to local independent retailers.

Possibly the only local building still serving its original purpose is the 1872 St. Patrick's Church, its once dominant tower barely registering on the new skyline. Erected to serve SoMa's then substantial Irish population, the church adapted to the changing ethnic nature of its congregation and by the early 1960s was probably one of the world's few churches to be bedecked with the colors of the Irish tricolor while conducting Mass in Tagalog.

One effect of the development of Yerba Buena Center was to make SoMa a very popular place to live. During the 1980s, some of the neighborhood's disused warehouses were converted to "live-work" spaces under city initiatives intended to enable artists, already drawn to the spacious, well-lit interiors, to stay in the district. By the 1990s, however, landlords were happy to see the artists priced out in favor of high-earning multimedia and dotcom professionals, many employed in local firms or reverse commuting to jobs in Silicon Valley. New loft-style apartments tailored to the needs of the young and affluent appeared and by the late 1990s, SoMa was being targeted by New York-based developers and investors looking to create residential towers for high-rise living.

Another contributor to soaring property values was the development of China Basin and South Beach, former industrial districts on SoMa's southeastern edge. After controversies over funding and the forcible removal of local homeless, the area evolved into what the city planning department described with fearless blandness as: "vibrant mixed use residential and commercial neighborhoods." The most prominent feature, Pacific Bell Park, is a $255-million, 41,000-seat new home for baseball's San Francisco Giants which opened in 2000 with the promise that impecunious fans could watch at least part of the matches for free from standing-room only pens accessed from the Waterfront Promenade on the stadium's east side.

An anniversary issue of the *Bay Guardian* warned in October 1998: "in a few short years San Francisco will be the first fully gentrified city in American history... It will be a nasty little place, filled with frustrated wealthy people who once thought it would be hip to live in a city that now no longer can offer the cutting edges of culture

that brought them here. It will be a parody of itself, a wax museum that once had the chance to define the future of urban civilization... if we don't take emergency steps, now, today, there won't be much left to save of San Francisco tomorrow." That San Francisco has not yet become a "nasty little place" might be largely due to the dotcom crash of 2000 and the subsequent wider economic downturn, putting many new developments on hold and forcing previously high-spending residents to re-think their priorities—and in some cases look for a new job or leave the city.

The future shape of San Francisco is uncertain: as it always has been.

Part Three

Crime and Culture, Punishment and Pleasure

Gold rush San Francisco was a place of excitement and opportunity, a boom town like no other that offered people of sufficient guile and daring a multitude of ways—by fair means or foul—to get very rich very fast. With a police force barely worthy of the name, crime flourished and much of it was organized by gangs acting with the connivance of politicians, most of whom acquired their civil roles with a view to lining their own pockets. Such a cauldron of corruption prompted legitimate businessmen to twice take matters into their own hands, forming vigilance committees to dispense populist justice with the aid of a hangman's noose, and overseeing an armed volunteer militia—in itself completely illegal—to patrol the city's streets.

With little else to pass the time, gambling became San Francisco's most popular and lucrative form of entertainment, a magnet for gold-bearing miners arriving from the diggings. Hundreds of drinking dens, legal and otherwise, also flourished as did a multinational population of prostitutes. By the 1860s, such vices had coalesced into the Barbary Coast, a section of the waterfront that charted new lows in debauchery and in which a customer, assuming he was not simply murdered or robbed, risked being knocked unconscious and ferried out to a waiting ship to become an unwilling crew member, the process that became known as Shanghaiing.

From such origins emerged more "respectable" forms of entertainment and a series of grand theaters catering to post-gold rush audiences increasingly composed of working-class families as well as the upper social strata of bankers, financiers, and prosperous merchants. These venues provided a steady diet of quality drama, dance, and opera, including the US's first full-length performance of *Swan Lake*