

William Wharff: Architect, Civil War Vet and Freemason

Daniella Thompson



The Berkeley Masonic Temple, 2105 Bancroft Way at Shattuck Avenue, was completed in April 1907. (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2008)

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Of all the architects who resided in Berkeley during the first four decades of the 20th century, the one who received the most coverage in the local press was not John Galen Howard or Bernard Maybeck but William Hatch Wharff. And only occasionally was the press coverage related to his profession.

Neither a classicist nor an innovator, Wharff was a practical builder who incorporated the prevailing idiom of the day into his designs. His four designated Berkeley landmarks—Carlson's Block (1903) at 3228 Adeline Street in Lorin Station; the Masonic Temple (1905–06) at 2105 Bancroft Way and Shattuck Avenue; the [J.J. Pfister Co. Knitting Mill](#) (1906) at 8th and Parker Streets; and the F.D. Chase Building (1909) at 2107 Shattuck—blend into their surroundings

rather than making individual statements.



Carlson's Block, Lorin Station (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2004)

Born in Guilford, Maine, Wharff (1836–1936) did not study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. In fact, he doesn't appear to have attended any architectural school, although in 1932, at the age of 96, he would tell the *Gettysburg Times* that he “studied architecture in Maine and Massachusetts in his earlier years.”

Wharff's obituary in the *Berkeley Gazette* of 1 January 1936, tells a different story. A farmer's son, he disliked farming and from the age of 18 spent his summers learning the carpenter's trade from his maternal uncle, Hiram Hatch. In 1857 he graduated from the [Foxcroft Academy](#) and began teaching school during the winters.



F.D. Chase Building, 2107 Shattuck Avenue (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2004)

By 1860, Wharff had become a master carpenter and his uncle's partner. In the spring and summer of that year, they constructed a new building for the Foxcroft Academy. While in Foxcroft, Wharff married Lydia J. Paul (1840–1929), and the following year their first son, Frank, was born.

In 1864, Wharff enlisted in the Union Army as a private in Company C of the [11th Regiment, Maine Volunteer Infantry](#). His Civil War engagements included the siege of Petersburg, the battle of Chaffin's Farm, the siege of Richmond, Hatcher's Run, and Appomattox.

He saw Lincoln on 26 March 1865, when the President came to rally the troops before the march on Richmond. That night, Private Wharff wrote in his diary, "This day I have seen Lincoln—I can never forget the care-worn face of the noble President as he rode past, while the band played Hail to the Chief."

At Appomattox on 9 April Wharff wrote, "Grant and Lee met under an apple tree, later going to the McLane [McLean] house where the terms of surrender were discussed." Sixty-seven years later, the *Portland Press Herald* of Portland, Maine, would quote from

Wharff's diary and note, "Filled with many other notations, now of historic value, the yellow diary is Private Wharff's most prized possession."

Mustered out of service on 12 June 1865, Wharff returned to Guilford, eventually settling in Bangor, Maine, where in 1870 the U.S. census listed his occupation as carpenter. The Wharffs' second son, Frederick, was born in 1867, and eight years later, the family sailed to California, entering San Francisco Bay through the Golden Gate.

They were not the only Wharffs migrating west. William's younger brothers—John Fairfield Wharff, a blacksmith and veteran of the [First Maine Cavalry](#), and Joseph Hiram Wharff, a carpenter—also made their home in San Francisco.

Charting Wharff's architectural career in San Francisco is not an easy task, since more than 100 buildings he designed there are said to have perished in the 1906 earthquake and fire. While he called himself an architect in the 1880 U.S. census, the San Francisco directory of 1889 listed him as a draftsman with an office at 330 Pine St., room 11. The following year, still in the same office, he was listed as contractor and builder.



San Francisco Call, 23 August 1906

At some point, Wharff joined the American Institute of Architects' San Francisco chapter. He was present at the chapter's meeting of May 7, 1904, when famed Chicago architect and city planner [Daniel H. Burnham](#) addressed that body on the task of beautifying the city. Among the 20 AIA members gathered to hear Burnham were Seth Babson, Ernest Coxhead, Charles W. Dickey, William Baker Faville, John Galen Howard, William Knowles, and Willis Polk.

Burnham had been invited by the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco, headed by [James D. Phelan](#), to create plans for beautifying the city. "I don't know if I can do it," said Burnham to the assembled AIA members, "but I will do what I can. [...] Take your own city conditions. Miles of wooden houses built as cheaply as possible. It is not saying anything against San Francisco to say that it is very ugly. [...] There is not much hope of altering the downtown portion of the city." His immediate solution was, "improve rather than ruthlessly destroy the houses. Plant shrubs, bowers, etc."

The following year, Burnham's extensive plan for San Francisco was presented to the Board of Supervisors. The 1906 earthquake and fire presented a unique opportunity to implement the plan, but it was opposed by business interests led by Michael H. de Young and his newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Within three years, the downtown was rebuilt along the old lines.

Seven years before the earthquake, William and Lydia Wharff moved to Berkeley, apparently following their son Fred, who had obtained a position as language instructor at the university. At the time, the architect was 63, an age when most other people would be contemplating retirement. Wharff, however, launched into a fruitful period of building activity that would last another decade and a half. When he finally retired at the age of 79, he took up insurance, which he practiced well into his 90s.

The steady demand for Wharff's architectural services can be chalked up to his enduring personal popularity and a vast circle of connections. A lifelong Mason, in 1870 he joined the Rising Virtue Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons in Bangor, Maine. In San Francisco he was a member of the King Solomon Lodge, and after coming to Berkeley he joined the local Durant Lodge. It's no wonder, then, that when the Berkeley Masons wished to build a new temple, they entrusted the design to Wharff, giving him *carte blanche*.



The Masonic Temple under construction, 12 September 1906 ([Berkeley Public Library](#))

Both Wharff and his wife were high-ranking charter members of the Harmony Lodge, [Order of the Eastern Star](#) in San Francisco. Wharff was also a prominent member of the [Grand Army of the Republic](#) (G.A.R.), a fraternal organization of Union Army veterans who had served in the Civil War. At one time he was commander of Lincoln Post No. 1 in San Francisco, while Mrs. Wharff served as president of the city's Lincoln Relief Corps (the women's auxiliary to the G.A.R.).

On several occasions, the Wharffs were delegates to the G.A.R. national encampment and the concurrent Women's Relief Corps national convention. In 1904, they traveled to Boston for this purpose. "Having been chosen the official architect of the Masonic Temple Association," informed the *Oakland Tribune* on 8 August, "Mr. Wharff will visit a number of temples in the East before presenting designs for the new temple that is to be erected in Berkeley."



Wharff (4th from r) and the real masons who built the Masonic Temple, 1906. Note the granite pillars, later removed. (BAHA archives)

As the temple neared completion in August 1906, the *San Francisco Call* provided this description:

It is four stories high, with facings of cream-colored brick and granite trimmings. The lower floor is to be devoted to stores. On the second floor will be found the supper room, ladies hall, banquet hall and armory of the Masonic lodges.

The main lodgeroom will be on the third floor, 47 x 62 feet, elaborately finished, with Corinthian pilasters and ornamental frieze work extending around the entire room. The ceiling will be 42 feet high. This lodgeroom, with others on the same floor, are to be available Sundays for church purposes or uses of similar character.

On the fourth floor will be a small lodgeroom, which with the anteroom and hall will be used for smaller lodges and societies requiring moderate accommodations.



The completed Masonic Temple in April 1907 ([Berkeley Public Library](#))

The temple's most talked-about features were the twin pairs of granite pillars flanking the entrance on Bancroft Way. These were financed by Rosa Shattuck in memory of her late husband, Francis Kittredge Shattuck. A few years later, the pillars were removed and the portico set back when the city enacted an ordinance designed to rid the downtown of overhanging wooden awnings.



Photo: Daniella Thompson, 2008

When dealing with the City of Berkeley, Wharff had his share of professional frustrations. In December 1905, the Board of Education adopted his plans for a new 16-room stone and brick school building on Bancroft Way between Milvia and Grove Streets, to replace the Longfellow School (which had been moved to Ward Street) and to cost \$50,000. “The Bancroft way school will be one of the finest in the country, according to the plans of Wharff,” announced the *Oakland Tribune* on 1 January 1906. “The building will contain sixteen rooms besides an assembly hall and teachers’ room.”

The school board modified the architect’s plans before instructing the town clerk to advertise for bids. When all the competing contractors’ bids came in above budget, Wharff offered to build the school himself for \$50,000 on condition that his original plans be adopted. This did not sit well with the directors, resulting in a heated argument and the scrapping of Wharff’s plans. The school that was built in 1906—named Washington School— was based on plans by architects [Stone & Smith](#), who had designed the Franklin School and Berkeley High School’s main building in 1901. Washington School came in at \$45,000. This must have pleased the school board, for they entrusted the design of three additional High School buildings to the firm.



l to r: Frank Durgin, William Wharff, Mr. Jory, Muriel Durgin & Victoria at [Berkeley Camp](#), south fork of Tuolumne River, 1920s (BAHA archives)

Far more pleasant times were had by Wharff in the company of his fellow Maine natives. The State of Maine Association, of which he was a director and officer, held an annual June picnic at Shell Mound

Park, where the Downeasters partook of traditional fare such as baked beans, brown bread, and coffee. One of Wharff's many friends in this society was Frank W. Durgin, head of Durgin & Bleakley Furniture Co. and of Pioneer Funeral Directors and Embalmers, both located on Shattuck Avenue. Durgin would later ally himself with Walter A. Gompertz and eventually move his undertaking business to University Avenue. Later yet, after such enterprises were banned from the avenue, he would establish the Hull & Durgin mortuary on Adeline Street.



The Wharff residence at 2000 Delaware Street (photo: Daniella Thompson, 2008)

The Wharffs lived in a large Colonial Revival house, built at 2000 Delaware Street shortly after their arrival in Berkeley. Here they frequently entertained their large circle of friends. Their card parties were famous—especially those for the Busy Bees Whist Club.

Each Wharff wedding anniversary witnessed a gathering of the tribes from near and far. The couple's 64th anniversary in 1924 even drew in Hiram W. Ricker, owner of the celebrated Poland Spring resort in Maine.



Berkeley Daily Gazette, 23 April 1924

Toward the end of his life, as the ranks of Civil War veterans dwindled, William Wharff would become a national figure. He was president of the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship, an organization composed of those who knew or saw the Great Emancipator. Newspapers would refer to him as “Berkeley’s Grand Old Man” and mark every birthday and anniversary of his.

In 1933, at the age of 97, he was feted as the YMCA’s oldest member. On his 99th and final birthday, Wharff was believed to be the nation’s oldest living Mason and Civil War veteran. He died in his 100th year, having seen Berkeley grow sevenfold over the course of 36 years.

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