
Local Bay Area historian Nancy Olmsted has produced an informative and nostalgic tribute to San Francisco’s landmark Ferry Building. Though originally conceived as a “picture book” (p. 230) to commemorate the Ferry Building’s centennial, Olmsted’s work is much more than the history of a single structure. Instead, Olmsted focuses on the Ferry Building in order to provide a fascinating and entertaining overview of public transportation in San Francisco between 1875 and 1998.

The chief strengths and appeal of Olmsted’s book derive from the fabulous collection of visual images she has assembled. Attractively presented in a handsome nine-by-twelve-inch format, *The Ferry Building* contains over two hundred delightful and well chosen photographs showing horse-drawn wagons, cable cars, trolleys, buses, and ferryboats carrying Bay Area commuters to and from the bustling Ferry Building, whose prominent clock tower is almost always visible somewhere in each picture. These wonderful photographs are supplemented by a wealth of additional images that include a map, three newspaper cartoons, seven paintings and artists’ sketches, eleven newspaper illustrations, and twelve architectural drawings.

Many of these images, of course, focus on the Ferry Building itself. Built to replace the outmoded wooden Ferry House constructed in 1875, the Ferry Building was intended by the state Board of Harbor Commissioners to adorn San Francisco with a new and imposing entrance suitable to a rising imperial city. Entrusted with the task of realizing the commissioners’ vision of grandeur was the thirty-four-year old A. Page Brown, a prominent local architect and elder partner of Willis Jefferson Polk. Brown did not disappoint. Indeed, the plans he rendered shortly before his tragic death in January 1896 gave San Francisco one of its greatest architectural monuments.

Completed in July 1898 following two years of construction, the new Union Depot and Ferry House thoroughly dominated its strategic location at the foot of Market Street. Running north-south between the bay shore and East Street (renamed the Embarcadero in 1909), the massive steel-framed and stone-clad structure extended 660 feet along the waterfront. Its 160-foot width was divided by four longitudinal bays that ran the entire length of the two-story structure. The East Street façade featured two long double arcades that flanked a central entrance pavilion projecting thirty feet outward to the street. Along with two side bays, the pavilion consisted of five arched entryways bracketed by six pairs of Corinthian columns supporting the overhead entablature and parapet. Meanwhile, facing the water, four enclosed Y-shaped gangways extended from the building to transfer passengers back and forth from the bay ferries docked in any one of five available slips. Supported by a massive foundation of concrete piers placed atop wooden piles driven deep into the bay mud, the Ferry Building defied the great earthquakes that shook San Francisco in 1906 and 1989.

Despite its many aesthetic qualities, most photographs of the Ferry Building understandably center upon its most arresting and defining feature. Modeled after the Giralda campanile in Seville, Brown’s magnificent four-faced clock tower rose up from behind the pavilion to stand 240 feet above the waterfront and Market Street.

From 1898 to 1936, the Ferry Building served as San Francisco’s grand portal. Except for those travelling up the peninsula from the South, almost all Bay Area commuters and out-of-town visitors entered San Francisco through the Ferry Building archways. This included all transcontinental railroad passengers who left the trains at their
East Bay terminals before boarding Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, or Western Pacific ferries bound for "the City." For most of the period, the railroad boats faced stiff competition from independent lines that helped maintain the popular and affordable nickel fares across the bay. Once delivered to the Ferry Building, passengers proceeded to the streetcar loop in front of the pavilion or, if choosing to remain on foot, crossed the crowded Embarcadero via the ornate cast iron pedestrian bridge built in 1918.

The glory days of the Ferry Building came to a sudden end following the completion of the San Francisco Bay (1936) and Golden Gate (1937) bridges. Soon emptied of traffic, the forlorn building became little more than a grandiose office complex. The crowning indignity came in 1957 with the construction of the controversial Embarcadero Freeway. Cutting directly across the face of the Ferry Building, the freeway separated the structure from the rest of the city and obscured all but the tower from public view for the next thirty-five years, a period Olmsted calls "The Dark Age of the Ferry Building" (p. 144).

Ironically, light was restored by the violent earthquake of 1989. The quake's destructive tremors severely damaged the unpopular freeway, which was condemned and completely razed by 1992. Suddenly reconnected to the community, the Ferry Building has been rediscovered by San Franciscans, and Olmsted's historic photo album makes an important contribution to that rediscovery.

Regrettably, serious historians will find the utility of Olmsted's book limited by several shortcomings that are typical of the "picture book" genre, such as the lack of an index or list of illustrations. Though she does at least share some brief lists of key sources used in each of her seven chapters, Olmsted offers no footnotes or bibliography. Most disappointing is the antiquarian preoccupation of her text, which is rich in loosely connected details but devoid of critical analysis or sustained connections to larger historic themes and events.

Nevertheless, Olmsted's lavishly illustrated book offers an enjoyable introduction to the colorful period of urban and public transportation history that preceded the triumph of the automobile. In so doing, The Ferry Building provides a fitting salute to one of San Francisco's most splendid and enduring landmarks.

Michael Magliari, California State University, Chico