

LPC February, 2025

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BACKGROUND FOR PLACING WEST BERKELEY BANK ON POTENTIAL INITIATION LIST



To: Members of the LPC
From: Commissioner Steven Finacom

January 27, 2025

I am writing to propose placing the West Berkeley Bank on the LPC's list of Potential Initiations. This follows on correspondence and public testimony received at the January, 2025 LPC meeting from community members, and some follow-up research I have conducted since that meeting. Below is a summary of the history and potential significance of this building. This is not the entire history or description and further research is warranted, but there is enough information available to justify inclusion on the Potential Initiation list.

Property APN: 57-2088-9.

Parcel and Building Size: lot appears to be about 50 x 100 feet. Confirmation needed. City records show taxable building area (two floors and possible basement) is 11,246 square feet.

Historic Name: West Berkeley Bank. Most recent name was West Berkeley branch of Wells Fargo Bank.

Address(es): 1095 University Avenue (main banking hall). 1976 San Pablo Avenue (separate entry to, and address for, second floor offices).

Architect: Charles W. Dickey, of Dickey and Reed.

Age and Construction Date: 119 years old. 1905/1906. Permits received in August and October, 1905, for construction work, including excavation, foundation, vault and bank fittings. Completion was probably in early 1906. Expanded to rear, circa 1925. Exterior remodeled, mid 1930s.

Contractor for original construction: B.O. Johnson.

Past Uses: continuous use from 1906 to circa 2022 as a banking facility on the ground floor, facing University Avenue. Offices upstairs, reached by their own separate entrance / staircase from San Pablo Avenue.

Current Use and Condition: downstairs vacant, upstairs possibly vacant. Condition appears good, although some windows have been boarded over during vacancy.

Description: two story masonry building with raised parapet, currently with cement plaster exterior veneer on street facing facades. Ground floor, continuously used for banking purposes from completion in 1906 until 2022, features a large, columned, banking hall facing University Avenue. Upstairs used for offices, at least some of which were rented in the past to non-banking tenants. The original building had a symmetrical, neoclassical, design with large downstairs and upstairs windows separated by columns expressed on the facade, and a monumental main entrance placed symmetrically in the south facing main elevation. The building was expanded to the north (rear) along San Pablo Avenue in the 1920s, and in the 1930s the facade was "Moderne-ized", apparently covering the original exposed stone exterior with what appears to be a cement plaster and removing some ornamental detail, but retaining the same basic arrangement of spaces and major exterior features (location and arrangement of columns, doors and windows). The building may retain some of its pre-modernization window sashes on the second floor.

Identified Aspects of Potential Significance:

- One of the major commercial designs in Berkeley of prominent architect Charles William Dickey, designer of several local designated landmark structures including the Claremont Hotel and the Morse Block on Shattuck Avenue.
- Original home of one of Berkeley's four to five early banking establishments, and one of the four early bank buildings in Berkeley to survive to the present (two of the others, both in South Berkeley, are already designated landmarks).
- Building in Berkeley that has been in longest / continuous use for a bank. (1906 through 2022, approximately). It may well be the oldest building in the region with this continuous use distinction, although further research is needed. Its history tracks with the development of financial services in California and the United States. It was, first, a one-location neighborhood bank, was later made part of a regional bank, and finally became one of hundreds of branch bank locations of the national/international Wells Fargo Bank system.
- First bank established in West Berkeley, in an era before national / branch banking had developed. The establishment of the bank formed a key part of the economic growth of the western / industrial part of Berkeley and was celebrated as such at the time of its creation.
- First masonry building in its vicinity, and possibly one of the first (and only surviving) West Berkeley commercial building constructed with a stone veneer.
- Located at West Berkeley's major intersection (University and San Pablo Avenues), and the oldest surviving building at that intersection. Another corner of the intersection contains a designated Berkeley Landmark building.
- Closely associated with Francis Ferrier, who served as President of the Board of Trustees when Berkeley was a town. Ferrier was the lead founder, and first president, of the West Berkeley Bank, as well as a real estate agent, developer, and businessman.
- Long-term location of the law offices of Walter Arthur Gordon (1894-1976), a pioneering African-American attorney and civic leader of local, California, and national significance. Gordon was the first African American on the Berkeley police force and earned undergraduate and law degrees from the University of California. He lived in South Berkeley on Acton Street, and maintained his law and business office upstairs at the West Berkeley Bank Building from as early as 1928 to as late as 1951. This would include the period when he served on the California Adult Authority, was branch president of the Berkeley NAACP (in the 1930s), and was appointed by Governor Earl Warren to investigate the "Zoot Suit Riots" in Los Angeles in 1943. He later served as Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- One time location of the offices of the Berkeley Manufacturer's Association, representing leaders of the primary economic industries of West Berkeley.

Photographs: January, 2025, Steven Finacom. COB Parcel map shows site at upper left corner of intersection.

