

Adams and Co. Building
101 1/2 Second Street
Sacramento, Sacramento County

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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PHOTOGRAPH DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

CAL-1883
Page 1

ADAMS & COMPANY BUILDING

Sacramento County, Sacramento, California

ADDRESS: 101 1/2 Second Street
OWNER: James & Ruth Langdon (an estate)
OCCUPANT: Various Tenants
USE: Rooming House and Store

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Adams & Co. Building, Express and Banking House, built in 1853, was the center of a compact group of fire-proof brick structures in Sacramento, California's old "West End." This was Sacramento City's business center during the "Golden Age" of the pioneer period after the fire of November 2, 1852. The area, located in the block facing Second Street between J and K Streets, superseded the ephemeral center of activity along Front Street facing the river. It was this business area that attracted outstanding pioneer representatives of business, finance, communications and transportation. The Adams & Co. Building was the first express and banking house to represent a large eastern firm on the Pacific Coast and for almost three decades, 1853 to 1883, was the center of pioneer communications and transportation.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

Physical History: The Adams & Co. Building is a three-story fire-proof brick edifice built from September 15 to December 10, 1853. It was occupied by Adams & Company, Express and Banking House from 1853 to 1855. This building, now 107 years old, is still striking in appearance. The structural frame and exterior lines of the original edifice remain essentially the same. Some of the architectural details have been obscured but not entirely effaced.

Adams & Co. moved into its three-story brick and granite building on Second Street on December 10, 1853. Contemporary writer of the period said of it: "This building is so elegant in

CAL-1883
Page 2

its massive construction, so thoroughly fire-proof and perfect in its parts, that it surpassed all previous efforts at grandeur and fully sustained the reputation of Adams & Co. for advancement and indefatigable enterprise."¹

The building had fine chiseled granite from Granite City near Folsom, California,² native marble, and brick walls that were faced with plaster on the facade of the upper stories. The Sacramento Union of October 14, 1853, commented: "When completed, this structure will add much to the beautification of the city of whose prosperity it will continue to be an enduring monument." The cost was estimated at from \$40,000 to \$70,000.

Not only was the Adams & Co. the first to represent an eastern firm on the Pacific Coast, it was the first with state-wide branches in California, preceding Wells, Fargo & Co. by more than two years. Adams & Co. came to San Francisco as early as 1849 when it was the first to offer services from California to the Atlantic States. From 1850 to 1852, its agent in Sacramento was Freeman & Co. Express. The Adams & Co. building was erected next door to the site of its first location in Sacramento.

Adams & Co. superseded Freeman in the summer of 1852 when it established itself entirely under its own name at No. 7 J Street. This brick structure was one of the few structures to escape the fire of November 2, 1852. A news item stated that the vault of Adams & Co. had gone through the fire unscathed and that none of its contents had been damaged.

In the summer of 1853 the company began to plan for a new fireproof building adequate to take care of its expanding express business. The company now had numerous branches operating in the central and northern mining areas. Construction on the new house was begun in September 1853 and in December of the same year it was readied for occupancy.³

In a lithograph of 1854 the name of "Adams & Co." is the only ornament above the six granite columns that "guard the entrance to the new granite building." The name is repeated in the pediment with the addition of "Express and Banking House." The other two names appearing on this lithograph are "Alta Telephone Co." and "Cal. State Telegraph Co.", seen across the entablature which is above the five arched windows of the second story. These two pioneers of telegraphy had offices on the second floor of the Adams & Co. building from 1854 to 1855. They consolidated as the State Telegraph Co. in 1860; forerunner of Western Union in 1868.

CAL-1883
Page 3

Adams & Co. was the center of expressing and banking in Sacramento until the financial crash in February, 1855 when the banking house, Page, Bacon & Co., failed in California. Former employees of Adams & Co. then organized the Pacific Express Co. in March 1855 and occupied part of the building until 1857.

On September 21, 1855, James E. Birch, California's pioneer stage man became the owner of the Adams & Co. building, having bought it at a liquidation sale for \$20,000. James Birch, California's pre-eminent pioneer in staging activities, was the most important of all the people associated with the Adams & Co. building. Birch had come to Sacramento to mine gold in 1849. His interests developed however in the demands for transportation to the mines, and by November 1851 he had established several lines into the central and northern mining districts. He married Julia Chase in Swansea, Massachusetts on September 14, 1852, and returned to California the fall of 1853. In 1854 he established the California Stage Company which soon became the largest and richest staging company in the world. From 1855 to his untimely death on September 12, 1857 in the crash of the ship, Central America, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, Birch's interests were centered about establishing the first through mail and passenger line to the Pacific Coast from San Antonio, Texas, to San Diego, California. During his attempts to secure the United States Overland Mail contract, Birch's agents purchased the splendid Adams Building as the Sacramento headquarters for his operations.

The Adams Building, however, never housed the office of James Birch, nor his stage company. It did house the successor to Adams & Co., the Pacific Express for at least two years. John M. Rhodes, "pioneer of legitimate banking" in Sacramento, had his "Sacramento City Bank" there for one year, 1856.

The "Birch Building" (see lithograph dated 1857) was owned by James E. Birch from September 1855 until his death in 1857. It continued in the ownership of the Birch Estate until 1868.

Wells, Fargo & Co. moved from the Hastings Building at No. 40 Second Street into Nos. 46 and 48 (now 1014 Second Street) in 1858, and remained there 24 years until 1882.

It linked another famous name with that of the Adams Building in March, 1861, when it became the agent for the Pony Express after the California State Telegraph Company, located in the Hastings Building, ceased to be the agent.⁴ Wells, Fargo & Co. continued in the capacity of agent for the Pony Express from March 1861 until October 26, 1861, when the telegraph line across the continent was completed.⁵

The chain of occupancy in the Adams Building was continued in 1868 by Dr. Harvey W. Harkness, well known early day physician of Sacramento. Dr. Harkness owned the building in 1900, and rented it to the Earl Fruit Company of California from 1894 to 1914.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

Exterior: The Adams & Co. Building is 37½ feet wide and 75 feet deep. The exterior walls are common 8" red brick. The facade is brick plastered. There are three stories with a basement.

The facade, although defaced, has the Doric pilasters on the second and third floors, but the ten windows have been replaced and are no longer deeply recessed. The elaborate cornice remains and accentuates the entablature and the false front parapet of the roof. The second floor has the five revealed arches springing from the Doric pilasters. The iron balustrade remains on the third floor, but it has been replaced by a fire escape on the second floor. The portico on the street floor with its previous granite columns of Doric design has been replaced by a common store front and not considered significant.

SITE:

The building is oriented with the Second Street facade facing east. The boundaries of the site plan are totally covered by the building and a service road, and no indication is left of the existing site development.

REFERENCES:

¹ Colville, Sacramento Directory, 1856, pp. 11, 13.

- ²The Adams building was the first in which native California granite was used, granite taken from Meredith's quarry near Granite City. The "Adams & Co. New Granite Building" was the proud boast of Early advertisement.
- ³An excellent engraving and printed description of the Adams Building after its completion, appeared in the Sacramento Pictorial Union, January 1, 1854. The interior of the building was a model of comfort and convenience. The private consultation room was elegantly carpeted. The express and banking departments were separated "from the front to the rear by upright bronzed iron columns." The ceiling, fourteen and a half feet high, was "finished in white marble stucco." The walls "were of buff-colored mastic." The banking department to the left on entering was furnished with two long parallel solid mahogany counters with convex fronts. Suspended from the ceiling were three beautiful chandeliers with four burners each. Two rooms at the rear of the first floor were tastefully furnished for company employees, while a commodious suite on the second floor was for Superintendent A. G. Richardson. At the rear of the building was a yard 35' x 43' with brick walls seven feet high and an artesian well sixty feet deep. A second story balcony with an iron balustrade overlooked the yard.
- ⁴The Sacramento Directory, 1861-1862 reads: "Pony Express leaves the office of Wells, Fargo and Company's Express every Thursday and Sunday morning at half-past six o'clock."
- ⁵An advertisement in the Sacramento Pictorial Union October 26, 1861: "Pony Express will be discontinued from date, Wells, Fargo, Agents."
- ⁶The interior plan has been drastically altered, and with the possible exception of the encased wooden columns on the first and second floor, it is no longer considered significant.

CAL-1883
Page 6

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL:

Hall, Carroll D. and Rensch, Hero E., Old Sacramento,
Sacramento, California, 1958.

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