

Nesmith-Greely Building
825 Fifth Avenue
San Diego
San Diego County
California

HABS No. CA-1971

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

NESMITH-GREELY BUILDING

Location: 825 Fifth Avenue, San Diego, San Diego County, California.

USGS Point Loma Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 11.485100.3619440.

Present Owner: Miranda Properties, 5445 Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood, California 90027 (1979).

Present Occupant: Clark Hotel and Seaport Traders and Surplus Store.

Present Use: Hotel and shop.

Significance: The Nesmith-Greely Building, built in 1888, was designed by N. A. Comstock and Carl Trotsche, a leading architectural firm during San Diego's boom years. The structure with its Romanesque details, makes a notable contribution to the downtown streetscape.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. History of structure: The Nesmith-Greely Building was designed by N. A. Comstock and Carl Trotsche. The structure was constructed in 1888 at a cost of \$32,000. The firm designed several buildings during San Diego's boom years of the 1880s including the Villa Montezuma (HABS No. CA-432; 1887), the Grand Hotel (1888), and the Henry H. Timkin House (1888). The building housed the San Diego Illustrated for several years, and is now a hotel.
2. Alterations and additions: The ground level has been completely altered to accommodate modern storefronts. The interior spaces have been refurbished, and somewhat altered on the ground level.

B. Bibliography:

- American Institute of Architects. AIA Guide to San Diego. San Diego: San Diego Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, 1977.
- Stepner, Michael. "San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter." The Journal of San Diego History 23:22-35.

Prepared by Mary Beth Betts
Historic American Buildings
Survey
January 1979

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Nesmith-Greely Building, designed by N. A. Comstock and Carl Trotsche, was built in 1888. Its four-story facade with Romanesque details, contrasts sharply with the ornate Bank of Commerce Building (HABS No. CA-1961) adjacent to it. The asymmetrical three-bay facade was constructed of brick with stone, patterned brick, and sheet metal embellishments. Within, a skylighted shaft allowed light to penetrate to the second level.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in good condition, however, there are some areas of deterioration on the exterior surfaces. The interior has been refurbished (1971).

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The four story (three-bay front) building has a rectangular plan, and measures 50' x 100'. It is locked into mid-block and has exterior exposures on the front and rear elevations.
2. Foundations: Inaccessible for observation.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The walls are of brick with a front surface of patterned brick and stone decoration. The brick is a burnst sienna color. Three attached round shafts punctuate the bays. These shafts rise from the second story to the top of the facade. Their terminations, a sheet metal cone of a foliated pattern, rise above the roof line. The shafts are decorated by a carved strigil motif which occurs at the top of the facade, and between the third and fourth stories. A fourth shaft appears above the fourth story windows on the southern end of the structure; below it is a flat brick pilaster. The southernmost (entrance) bay has a three-sided stone projection stretching from the second through fourth floors. At the top of this projection there is a cornice with a fascia of projecting triangular blocks. The projection is inset into a recessed brick panel which terminates in a trefoil pattern. The first story

storefront has been altered and is covered with signs. Originally there were fluted pilasters punctuating the bays and flanking the entrance. Above the storefront there was a cornice containing a pellet frieze (part of which is still visible). Between the second and third stories there are recessed panels; between the third and fourth stories there is decorative brickwork in a basketweave pattern.

4. Structural system, framing: The structure has loadbearing brick walls with wooden joists. The central light shaft is surrounded by a cement block wall penetrated with windows. The wall serves as structural support.
5. Chimneys: The chimneys are located along the side walls.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The doors are of steel and glass on the first story. There are wooden doors leading onto the fire escape on the second through fourth stories. These doors are set into the center of the three-sided projection on the south bay. The doors terminate in a segmental arch on the second story; a flat arch on the third story, and a trefoil arch on the fourth.
 - b. Windows: All windows are double-hung, and grouped in threes, one group to each bay. The windows are separated by stone colonetts (paired at the fourth floor) with ball-flower capitals, and terminate in a block of quarry-faced stone. All windows are topped with transoms (except on the fourth floor). The window compositions on the second and fourth stories terminate in a straight stone lintel; those on the third story in a single segmental arch of stone. The transoms on the southern bay projection are rectangular. The windows on the east (rear) elevation are set in pairs, and are double-hung.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The composition roof is basically flat with provision for drainage in the slight slope. There is a brick parapet around the building. A large skylight provides light into the center of the building.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The outside face of the parapet is decorated by two rows of projecting brick squares. Below this is a cornice with a pellet molding and a frieze of corbeled blocks. The southern bay is topped by a pediment containing the date and name of the building surrounded by decorative brickwork.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The main floor has two shops in the two major bays. The bay to the right (now the hotel entrance) was the original entrance to the building.
- b. Upper floors: The upper floors are essentially similar in plan. There is a hallway encircling the central light well. Guest rooms and public toilet rooms are located off this hall.

2. Stairways: The main stairway, situated against the southern wall, only provides access to the second floor. Access between the second, third, and fourth floors is provided by a stairway situated near the center of the north wall. An elevator, located against the southern wall just east of the main entry stairway, connects all levels. Access to the roof is via a stairway at the rear of the fourth floor.

3. Flooring: Wooden board floors covered with carpet are in all the public areas.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Lath and plaster, painted in various colors.

5. Doorways and doors: The doors are paneled, generally in four vertical panels (two over two). The door trim is of molded wooden board.

6. Decorative features and trim: Nothing of significance remains of the interior trim and decorative motifs.

7. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: The heating is furnished by hot water or steam radiators.
- b. Lighting: Electrical lighting is used.

- c. Plumbing: Relatively modern fixtures are used in the public toilet rooms.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces west on the east side of Fifth Avenue, between E and F Streets. It is locked into the block with structures on either side. The Bank of Commerce Building (HABS No. CA-1961) is to the north. Buildings are also situated to the south and to the east (rear). The building is in an urban environment.

Prepared by Robert C. Giebner
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the San Diego Historical Society, the San Diego Historic Sites Board, the County of San Diego, and the American Institute of Architects. The recording project was completed under the direction of James C. Massey. The Nesmith-Greely Building was measured and drawn the summer of 1971, by Professor Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, with student assistant architects Jashina A. Tarr (University of California at Berkeley), Ronald J. Lake (Ball State University), and Phillip P. Wisley (Ball State University), at the San Diego, California field office. The drawing was edited by William Klein in the HABS office. The architectural written data was prepared by Robert C. Giebner in August 1971. The historical written data was prepared and the material edited in the HABS office by Mary Beth Betts in January 1979. Photographs were taken in August 1971 by Marvin Rand.