

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections



1. Name

historic Chamber of Commerce Building

and/or common Wells Fargo Building

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OHP

2. Location

street & number 2140-14 Shattuck Avenue/2071-89 Center Street *N/A* not for publication

city, town Berkeley 94704 *N/A* vicinity of congressional district 8th

state Calif. code 06 county Alameda code 001

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<i>N/A</i> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<i>N/A</i> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Westcap Financial Group in escrow from: ATC Building Co.

street & number 165 Octavia Street 464 California Street

city, town San Francisco 94102 *N/A* vicinity of San Francisco 94104 state Calif.

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Alameda County Courthouse

street & number 1225 Fallon Street

city, town Oakland 94612 state CA

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

1. State Historic Resources Inventory title 2. Berkeley Urban Conservation Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

3. Berkeley Design Advocates Historic Buildings Survey: Downtown date 1. Oct. 1978 2. Aug. 1978 3. Sep. 1983 federal state county 2,3 local

depository for survey records 1. State Office of Historic Preservation, Box 2390, 2. Berkeley Architectural Heritage Assn., Box 1137, 3. BDA, 315 14th Street

city, town 1. Sacramento 95811 2. Berkeley 94701 3. Oakland 94612 state CA

7. Description

Condition excellent deteriorated unaltered original site
 good ruins altered moved date N/A
 exposed unexposed

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Chamber of Commerce Building occupies an L-shaped 64-to-150' x 160' northwest corner lot at the center of downtown Berkeley, with a 12-story, 149' office tower approximately 64' square on the corner portion, and a 2-story gable-roofed wing about 100' x 150' extending behind it along Center Street. Following the line of Shattuck Avenue, the two street frontages form a slightly oblique angle, and the office tower is trapezoidal in plan. Construction is steel frame and concrete (fireproof, in Sanborn map terms) with brick and terra cotta facing; the Center Street wing is described as having 12" brick curtain walls.

The 12-story portion is architecturally finished on all four sides as a point tower, the 2-story wing only on its street side. Wall surfaces are dark red-brown rough face brick on the 9-story shaft of the tower, cream terra cotta on the top story and cornice, and granite-finish terra cotta in a pattern of large masonry blocks on the 2-story base and wing. Facades are articulated into approximately 20' bays: the base of the tower has three massive 2-story arched openings on each street frontage, and the wing has 5 bays with large rectangular openings the height and pattern of the first floor portion of the arches, the western two being a raised and inset rear entrance to the banking hall, and a metal rollup door to the basement garage. Both frontages have a granite base at grade, varying in height with the slope of the lot from about 1' along Shattuck to about 3' at the garage end. The 2-story wing has a low sloping roof of Spanish tiles, whose 24' peak is even with the top of the tower portion's base. The tower's base is topped with a narrow terra cotta molding and plain frieze. The shaft continues the 3-bay division, 6 windows wide grouped in twos by alternating wide and narrow 9-story uninterrupted pilasters of unusually elaborate brickwork. The slightly projecting pilasters are horizontal stack bond at their outer edges, framing columns one stretcher wide in which every other brick projects an inch or two; the wider main pilasters have panels of plain stretcher bond between two of these toothed columns. Spandrel panels above and below the windows are outlined by somewhat larger bricks set on end. The capital is terra cotta clad for more than the height of its single story: the shallow belt cornice slightly overlaps the tops of the 11th story windows, with a simple molding and plain frieze, and there is a 4½' parapet above. The pattern of pilasters continues up from the shaft; the terra cotta pilasters have capitals formed by a wave-patterned frieze, and frame panels in low relief with elongated urns and garlands. The recessed window surrounds are brick, and frame terra cotta panels above the windows as well, again adding to the height of the capital. The main cornice is a single course of molding, more ornate than the belt cornice, having a floral frieze, but only slightly deeper, not breaking the smooth vertical line of the building. Over the center bay of the north facade is a small terra cotta clad penthouse, ornamented with classical motifs, which houses the elevator machinery.

The office floors are arranged around a central elevator shaft and stairwell, each floor containing 11 rooms, all with outside light. The 6th, 7th, and 8th floors were originally planned--and to some extent are still used--as dentists' offices, "with plumbing to fit any apparatus." Interior finish of office floors was originally described as oak; baseboards and some other portions remain, though prevailing finishes are now suspended acoustic tile ceilings (1963) and vinyl wallcovering, and wooden louvers replacing the original transoms. The office floors are reached from a lobby occupying the northeast corner of the ground floor (northernmost bay on Shattuck), where stairwell, elevators, a front stairway to the second floor and basement vault area (marked fallout shelter), and a side door to the banking hall all meet. This lobby has a deeply coffered polychrome gilt plaster ceiling, walls of polished marble slabs, and floor of pink-gray marble in a basketweave pattern. It is now divided by a firewall into inner and outer lobbies.

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Chamber of Commerce Bldg.

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The banking hall occupies the remainder of the ground floor of the tower, and the west wing. It is punctuated at the bay divisions by square columns faced with beige marble, with egg and dart and cornucopia capitals. The same marble faces the low walls of the tellers' windows (on the south) and officers' area (north). The tellers' area has dark wood work enclosures; the windows close with panes of feather-chip glass in brass-colored sash shaped like miniature saloon doors. The main entrance from the center bay on Shattuck Avenue is through a brass-colored metal and glass vestibule (like those found in post offices), free-standing with its own transom, double doors, and sidelights. The side door to the building lobby is also brass-colored with glass, and is topped by a large marble classical pediment and shield. Floors are beige travertine in 1' squares, with black stone edge and baseboards. Ceiling is coffered, with foliate moldings, floral bosses, and paneled beams; it is now painted brown and beige, with acoustic tiles and modern plastic light fixtures inserted. Wall surfaces are scored as large masonry blocks, now painted white. The ceiling is at first floor level, not the two stories implied by the arches of the facade: the arched upper parts of the openings are in fact the windows of the second-floor offices. The rear (west) area of the banking hall is two stories high, sunken 8 steps from the tower section, and surrounded on its west and north sides by an office mezzanine which looks out through groups of metal-grilled windows with round arched tops, hinged brass-colored sash, and little Corinthian columns, resting on a belt course of egg-and-dart molding. The stairway doubles back under the tower section to the vault area, which also has marble walls, hanging brass signs, and oak and metal filigree stair railings.

The building's major alteration was to its ground floors, in the first year of its existence: it was originally designed and built with nonspecific commercial space on the first two floors, creating an unusual variation of the high glass base store and loft building, with what looked like a triple clerestory over the street-level plate glass storefronts, framed by "terra cotta of a buff color with bright colored inserts in decorative motives." Soon after completion (1927) the ground floor was leased for banking use and altered to the present monumental arches. Since then the building has been virtually unchanged. Original wood window sash was replaced in 1977-8 with (fairly unobtrusive) dark bronze anodized aluminum, generally replicating the original shapes. Automatic teller machines and their canopies were inserted in the three corner bays (one on Shattuck, two on Center) between 1980 and 1983. Metal pediments over the street doors to the lobby and rear banking hall are partly hidden by casings for roll-up security grilles (1971), and a neon roof sign was removed about 1962, probably when the bank changed its name to Wells Fargo. Elevators were automated in 1967. Permits for office alterations on the upper floors, mostly piecemeal, are especially frequent in the 1950s and 1960s. "Architectural work for high-rise safety code" was done in 1980.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1925-27

Builder/Architect Walter H. Ratcliff Jr.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph) The Chamber of Commerce Building, completed in 1927, was Berkeley's first true skyscraper, and remained the only one, marking Berkeley's "100% corner," for over 40 years. It was designed by Walter H. Ratcliff, Jr., leading Berkeley architect of the prosperous '20s, and commemorated the civic importance of the Chamber of Commerce in that period. It is still occupied by its original ground floor tenant, American Trust Company/Wells Fargo Bank, and alterations have largely been done by the original architectural firm. It is an unusual and especially fine example of the early 20th century classically-derived brick and terra cotta skyscraper.

Plans by Walter Ratcliff Jr. for this building for the Central Berkeley Building Company are dated May 22, 1925, and according to the Chamber of Commerce's Courier (Aug. 15, 1925) ground was broken August 10. The same article reports that "segregated contracts have been let to more than twenty different companies for erecting the building," which was expected to take ten months and cost \$500,000. In June (Courier, 6/20/25), the Company had decided to name the building the Chamber of Commerce Building "in recognition of the place which the Chamber of Commerce has established in the upbuilding of the community," and in recognition of the Chamber's intent to occupy the top floor "where visitors can be shown the view from the heart of the city over all the surrounding territory." The Central Berkeley Building Committee's officers were leading names in Berkeley business and real estate--William E. Woolsey, John W. Havens, Linden Naylor, and Frank Thatcher. Thatcher was vice-president of Mercantile (soon to become American) Trust Company and past president of the Chamber of Commerce, and other members similarly overlapped. Walter Ratcliff's business partner C.L. McFarland owned or had owned the corner portion of the building site.

A year and a half later--January 29, 1927--the Courier reported the dedication of this "monument of Berkeley's business growth and...confidence of its financial institutions. ...'The Chamber of Commerce is "on top of the world,"' Mayor Stringham said.'...Berkeley has shown such a rate of progress and improvement that I fear sometimes that we cannot maintain the pace.'" Two past Chamber secretaries were present and honored--Wells Drury, whose life's ambition was said to be a worthy home for the organization, and Charles Keeler, aesthete and tie to the Maybeck circle: like the Courier itself, these men's promotional writings have become important sources for early 20th c. Berkeley business history.

Also at the dedication, Frank Thatcher--now "president of the Berkeley branches"--announced American Trust's plan to occupy the entire ground floor "as an expression of confidence and esteem." In earlier descriptions of the building, and as originally built, "the first story (was) laid out to accommodate one tenant over the entire area or can be subdivided into six stores....The second floor will also be arranged for stores, with display windows." American Trust's occupancy meant that this arcade-like innovation was not put into use; nor was the provision for a future 12 stories on top of the 2-story west wing. Notable features as built were the basement garage "for the use of tenants who can drive down and park their cars free from the parking restrictions on the street" and take "express elevators" to their offices; the point-lower form with natural light to all offices; the provision of compressed air and special plumbing and electrical service on three floors for dentists' offices. Twice the height of John Galen Howard's turn of the century "skyscraper" banks on two other corners of the same intersection (demolished 1969-71), this was Berkeley's tallest building (except the 307' University Campanile) and "one

9. Major Bibliographical References

1926 photo at Bancroft Library showing original ground floor

City of Berkeley, Codes & Inspection Dept., property file, plans & permits; Sanborn maps. Berkeley Chamber of Commerce Courier, June 20, 1925; Aug. 15, 1925; Jan. 29, 1927. Nicholas Hanson, "Residential Work...of Walter H. Ratcliff," Berk.Arch.Heritage, 1980. Berkeley Gazette, Ap. 2, 1980, "Wells Fargo Building was first skyscraper," A.Bruce. architect & address files, Berkeley Architectural Heritage office. Block books; directories.

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 0.33

Quadrangle name Oakland West

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

A

1	0	5	6	4	4	3	0	4	1	9	1	5	0	0
Zone		Easting						Northing						

B

Zone		Easting						Northing						

C

Zone		Easting						Northing						

D

Zone		Easting						Northing						

E

Zone		Easting						Northing						

F

Zone		Easting						Northing						

G

Zone		Easting						Northing						

H

Zone		Easting						Northing						

Verbal boundary description and justification

Book 57, Block 2023, Parcel 4; formerly Lots 29 & 30 & east 8' of Lot 31, Shattuck Tract #1. From NW corner of Shattuck Avenue and Center Street, approx. 165.7' west, 124.6' north, 65' east, 62' south, 109' east, and 64' south back to corner. Boundaries encompass the building on its historic city lot.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	n/a	code	county	n/a	code

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Betty Marvin

organization Berkeley Architectural Heritage Assn.

date Oct. 31, 1984

street & number Box 1137, Main Post Office

telephone (415) 845-6591

city or town Berkeley 94701

state CA

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Kathryn Gualteri

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date July 8, 1985

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

[Signature]
Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date 8-29-85

Attest:

Chief of Registration

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of the few Class A structures of the city." (At the dedication, Vice-President Sproul of the University mentioned "those who opposed the erection of this building, saying that it obstructed the University's view of the Golden Gate and was not a wise thing for the city.")

American Trust, recently formed from Mercantile Trust and the American Bank of Oakland, was formerly located across Center Street in John Galen Howard's First National Bank building (the clock on the present building is said to come from there), and in addition to improving its downtown Berkeley office, had recently begun expanding into neighborhood commercial areas, e.g. with a College Avenue branch, also designed by Ratcliff (1925).

The permit for American Trust's \$97,500 alterations to the Chamber of Commerce Building was issued April 8, 1927, with American Trust as contractor, C.R. Collupy--- whose name also appears on American Trust plans in Oakland---as superintendent of construction, and Walter Ratcliff again as architect. For the bank Ratcliff designed facades of three monumental arches, a theme he had used on the College Avenue bank and his own Fidelity Savings (2323 Shattuck, 1925). On these two-story buildings, however, the inspiration was Romanesque---marble columns with carved or cast stone capitals. This strongly vertical, curtain-walled building on a Renaissance palace base was a new and much more urban departure for Berkeley (a city of 75,000 by the end of the 1920s). With its new base the building closely resembles the Oakland P.G. & E. Building (1625 Clay Street, C.W. Dickey, 1922), but the upper portion is more sleek, vertical and modern. The remodeled base was more solid and enclosed than the original show-window version, as befitting a financial institution: it may also be that the two-story glass base looked aesthetically too insubstantial for Berkeley's largest building. Though the only one of its kind in Berkeley, this brick and terra cotta skyscraper in Beaux-Arts-derived three-part composition represents a well-established early 20th century building type: downtown Oakland has a large number of fine examples, with which this one compares favorably for design interest by virtue of such features as the brickwork, the upward sweep of the pilasters, the terra cotta penthouse and elongated capital, and the basement garage.

Walter Ratcliff (1881-1973) was one of Berkeley's most prolific and prominent architects from about 1910 to 1930, and founded a firm now in its third generation as The Ratcliff Architects and said to be the oldest in the East Bay. He was born in England, studied chemistry at the University of California, began designing houses while in college, traveled and studied architecture in Europe 1904-06, and worked for John Galen Howard before opening his own practice in 1908.

As Berkeley City Architect from 1913, he designed firehouses (one of which survives: these also used the monumental arches) and Hillside School and the West Berkeley Day Nursery (both on the National Register). He was also an early Berkeley planning commissioner and proponent of zoning. From 1923 he was supervising architect for Mills College, and studied Spanish Colonial buildings in Mexico for the project.

His interest in banks was not only as commissions: in 1921 he and his architectural partner Charles Louis McFarland founded Fidelity Guaranty Building and Loan, a not unusual instance of the building and financial industries supporting each other in the boom years

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before the Depression. After the Crash, the scarcity of commissions, McFarland's failing health, and the need to look after Fidelity combined to withdraw Ratcliff from active architectural practice; he did not officially retire until 1955 but **remains** best known for his houses, apartments, civic and commercial buildings of the 1920s, and his distinctive interpretations of the Spanish Colonial and Tudor Revival styles then prevailing. The Chamber of Commerce Building has features that can be loosely tied to Spanish Colonial—the mezzanine balcony and the tile roof along Center Street—but its importance in Ratcliff's Berkeley work is more the uniqueness of its metropolitan style and scale, and the truly distinguished architectural expression it gave to the sometimes shaky financial boosterism of the Twenties. The building's integrity is notable: it has had neither the piecemeal alterations of retail commercial buildings, nor the sweeping modernizations practiced by some banks.

American Trust became the owner of the building in 1927 (it is not clear whether the Central Berkeley Building Co. collapsed, or had always planned to sell the building), and appears as contractor on alteration permits from then on. They seem to have retained the Ratcliff firm for most of the major architectural changes, including the 1980 highrise safety work. The Chamber of Commerce was hard hit by the Depression: their Progress and Courier withered as publications during the Thirties, and by the end of the decade their office moved from the "top of the world" to an upstairs room in the new Greyhound station. Other occupants of the building seem always to have been a mix of professional offices: dentists, lawyers, real estate, and, as the building has become older, an assortment of small services and developing businesses—counseling, editing, graphic artists, and the like. The location at Shattuck and Center has retained its primacy: counting an island block formerly occupied by the Southern Pacific station, Berkeley's leading financial intersection currently has banks on all five of its corners. The Great Western Building, constructed in 1969 on the site of American Trust's old John Galen Howard quarters, appears to deliberately match the historic skyscraper in height, composition, and bulk, giving Ratcliff's building a remarkable continuing influence on Berkeley's skyline.

