

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco

other names/site number: Metropolitan Club

2. Location

street & number 640 Sutter Street not for publication N/A  
city or town San Francisco vicinity N/A  
State California code CA county San Francisco code 075 zip code 94102

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 28 JUL 2004  
Signature of certifying official Date

California Office of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is

- entered in the National Register [Signature] 9/10/04  
See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

[Signature] \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

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**5. Classification**

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Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> sites
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> structures
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> objects
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Social</u>	Sub: <u>Clubhouse</u>
<u>Recreation and Culture</u>	<u>Sports facility</u>
<u>Domestic</u>	<u>Hotel</u>

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>Social</u>	Sub: <u>Clubhouse</u>
<u>Recreation and Culture</u>	<u>Sports facility</u>
<u>Domestic</u>	<u>Hotel</u>

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Italian Renaissance

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete  
roof asphalt  
roof ceramic tile  
walls brick  
other terra cotta

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- X A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- a owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
b removed from its original location.
c a birthplace or a grave.
d a cemetery.
e a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
f a commemorative property.
g less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

- Architecture
Social History

Period of Significance 1917-1954

Significant Dates 1917, 1923

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Bliss (Walter D.) & Faville (William B.)

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
x Other

Name of repository: Metropolitan Club

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing
xx xxx xxxx

X See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Michael R. Corbett, Architectural Historian
organization date 23 July 2004
street & number 2054 University Avenue, Room 505 telephone 510-548-4123
city or town Berkeley state CA zip code 94704

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

- Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name
street & number telephone
city or town state zip code

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**SUMMARY**

The Metropolitan Club (formerly the Woman's Athletic Club), designed by Bliss & Faville, is a six-story women's club built in two phases completed in 1917 and 1923, but provided with a unified interior and a single unified design on the front. The building is in a U-plan above a generally rectangular ground floor on a dense, urban midblock site at 640 Sutter Street in the principal commercial district of San Francisco near Union Square. This building and most of its neighbors (excepting the surface parking lot next door) are built to the sidewalk and to the side property lines. As a women's athletic club, the building contains interior spaces and features characteristic of athletic clubs on the one hand and women's social clubs on the other, including a swimming pool, a tennis court, over 80 hotel rooms, and several dining rooms, lounges, and meeting rooms. The original 1917 east wing of the building is a steel frame structure with brick walls; the 1923 L-plan addition — the west wing — is a reinforced concrete structure. The ornamental street facade is clad in brick with terra cotta and iron trim. The building is in the Italian Renaissance Style, modeled after a type of early Renaissance palazzo characteristic of Florence and after an interpretation of that type in a New York library by McKim, Mead, and White. The principal decorative features are the two-story terra cotta and marble arched entryway, high arched windows across the fourth floor reflecting the location of the principle rooms, a two-story colonnade at the fifth and sixth floors, corbelled balconies with wrought iron railings at the third, fourth, and fifth floors, a pair of terra cotta escutcheons with the WAC logo of the Woman's Athletic Club in the spandrels of the fourth floor, and a red-tiled gable roof with overhanging eaves. The interior includes several highly decorated spaces including the ground floor entrance lobby and swimming pool; the fourth floor main dining room, tapestry room, and

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lounge; and the fifth floor director's room. Except for the removal of portions of the balconies and railings and minor interior alterations, the building retains a high degree of integrity.

## DESCRIPTION

### SITE

In 2004, the Metropolitan Club building occupies a square parcel (Block 283 Lot 22) at 640 Sutter Street in San Francisco. The parcel is on the north side of Sutter Street in a rectangular block oriented to the cardinal directions and bound by Sutter Street (south), Taylor Street (west), Bush Street (north), and Mason Street (east). The site has frontage of 137.5 feet along Sutter Street and is 137.5 feet deep. The west side of the parcel is 137.5 feet from Taylor Street; the rear (north) edge of the parcel is 137.5 feet from Bush Street; and the east side of the parcel is 137.5 feet from Mason Street.

On the west side of the building the Metropolitan Club owns a nearly rectangular lot which is operated as a parking lot. This lot has frontage of 51.063 feet and is 137.5 feet deep. The lot is paved with asphalt. This lot is not within the boundaries of the National Register property.

### BUILDING

#### Structure

The Metropolitan Club is a six-story structure built in two phases completed in 1917 and 1923. The original 1917 building, seen as the three east bays on the Sutter Street facade, is a steel frame structure on concrete foundations; the exterior walls are reinforced brick laid in common bond according to both the building permit and Sanborn maps (San Francisco Department of Public Works 1915; Sanborn Map Company 1986); floor joists are wood. The rear of this wing is covered by a gabled roof on a steel truss over the high fifth floor tennis court. The 1923 addition, seen as the four west bays on the Sutter Street facade, is a reinforced concrete structure with exposed concrete side and rear walls. The front wing of this building is clad in the same burned red brick used on the front of the east wing. A gable roof across both parts of the front of the building is clad in red tile.

The rear of this wing is covered by a tar and gravel flat roof — previously an outdoor tennis court with a "Mastipave" surface. A reinforced concrete bridge between the rears of the two wings was added in 1923 as the Persian Room. Windows throughout the building are double

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hung made of wood. Except for more elaborate multipaned arched windows on the fourth floor, windows throughout the building contain one pane of glass in each sash. Most glazing is clear except for textured wireglass in the side windows of the east wing.

**Plan**

At the ground level, the Metropolitan Club covers most of its square site. Small, one-story wings at the ends of the street facade provide a continuous building wall along the street while establishing permanent setbacks from the side property lines for light and air. The building is also set back in an irregular line from the rear property line, in part so that skylights can light the swimming pool in the basement below. At one time, sidewalk lights lit an extension of basement space under the front sidewalk; these were removed at an unknown time.

Above the ground level, the Metropolitan Club is a U-plan, created by the joining of the rectangular 1917 east wing to the slightly larger L-plan 1923 west wing. The windows in the sides of each wing are exposed to light and air because of the setbacks along the side property line and because of a light court between the two wings.

The internal organization of the building — which now functions as a single interior — follows from a combination of rational planning and the symbolic references to a Renaissance palazzo intended by the architects. Each floor is organized in three parts corresponding to the three sections of the building — the section along Sutter Street under the gable roof, and the east and west wings of the building perpendicular to Sutter Street. On each upper floor the Sutter Street wing has rooms along the front, a corridor running behind the rooms on an east–west axis, and elevators and service rooms behind. The principal staircase is at the west end of the Sutter Street wing. The principle elevators are at the rear of the center of the Sutter Street wing. The service elevator and stairs are at the east end of the Sutter Street wing. In the west wing on the hotel floors, there is a central corridor with rooms on either side.

The single entrance controls access — as in any private club. From the ground floor lobby, elevators and a staircase lead to upper and lower levels. Inside the front door, a short vestibule leads straight to the lobby and also opens to the right to a handicapped ramp in a space occupied as telephone rooms and offices until 1983. Off the lobby, the hotel desk is at the east end with offices behind it and the library is in the southwest corner in spaces originally designed as a cloakroom and strangers room, and remodeled in 1938 as a lounge. For structural reasons, the swimming pool is entered on the ground floor and is dug into the basement. Located at the rear of the ground floor, the pool is connected to the lockers, shower rooms, spa rooms, and the

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hairdressing department between the pool and the lobby, down one floor to the basement level cabanas, and up one floor to the original gymnasium (now meeting room).

The second floor contains offices at the front and in the west wing (originally fourteen bedrooms and one maid's room), and a large meeting room (the gymnasium until the ceiling was lowered and the room remodeled in 1965) measuring 50 by 75 feet in the east wing.

The third floor contains hotel rooms, some occupied as offices, and the upper part of the meeting room (originally gymnasium) on the second floor. There were originally ten guest bedrooms, five maid's rooms, a housekeeping room, and a hairdressing room on this floor.

The high fourth floor with the principal ceremonial and decorated spaces in the building, is raised above the street level like the traditional piano nobile in a Renaissance palazzo. Across the front is a series of three lounges. In the west wing is the main dining room. In the east wing are two dining rooms — the front room was the main dining room in 1915 and the rear room, called the Tapestry Room, is a private dining room. The kitchen is behind these rooms. A small dining room called the Persian Room is located in a bridge across the lightcourt between the Tapestry Room and the current main dining room. Along the east side of the building there is a small dining room.

At the fourth floor mezzanine level, there is a garden club room (a small gym until 1965) accessible from the staircase at the west end. At the east end mezzanine there are employee restrooms installed in 1983.

The fifth floor contains the director's room (converted from a handball court in 1928) and a card room in the front of the 1915 part of the building. The rest of the front of the floor and the west wing are occupied by hotel rooms — originally fourteen bedrooms and one maid's room. The tennis court is in the east wing.

The sixth floor contains three card rooms across the front of the 1923 part of the building and eleven bedrooms and one maid's room in the west wing. The east wing is occupied by the upper part of the fifth floor tennis court.

The roof of the 1923 building has a mechanical and elevator penthouse and a flat tar and gravel surface that originally functioned as a tennis court. The chain link fence on the parapet around the perimeter of the tennis court was removed in 1980.



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## Architecture

### Exterior

The design of the Sutter Street facade of the Metropolitan club is based on St. Gabriel's Branch of the New York Public Library of 1907, designed by McKim, Mead & White. Both buildings are derived from early Renaissance palaces, or palazzi, in Florence. The Metropolitan Club has a character distinct from its models in part because of its materials — rough burned red brick walls laid in common bond, refined cream colored terra cotta decorative trim, black wrought iron railings, and a red-tile roof.

Like Renaissance palazzi, which were working buildings at the base and housed the families of successful merchants above, the three lower floors of the Metropolitan Club are treated plainly except for the grand central entranceway. The seven bays of the three lower floors are treated in a straightforward manner with groups of three double-hung windows above a rusticated terra cotta base. Groups of three bays are united by simple terra cotta string courses. The two-story arched terra cotta entranceway is set in a rectangular frame with marble spandrels. The entranceway is surmounted by a corbelled balcony whose railing was removed in 1980.

Like Renaissance palazzi, above the plain base is the piano nobile — this is the fourth floor of the Metropolitan Club. The high floor, arched windows, and lavish decoration signify the location of the principal decorated and ceremonial rooms. The seven arches are framed in a zipper-like brick pattern with a terra cotta keystone and a corbelled terra cotta balcony with a wrought iron railing. The terra cotta floor of each balcony was replaced with concrete in 1980. On either side of the central arch is a large decorative escutcheon with a logo of the superimposed initials of the Woman's Athletic Club — WAC.

The fifth and sixth floors are articulated by a giant Corinthian order in antis in front of a recessed brick wall. The colonnade is enclosed by a wrought iron railing at the base, which rests on a terra cotta belt course. Above the central arch and escutcheons of the floor below, a corbelled balcony was replaced in 1980 by a concrete band.

The facade is terminated by the overhanging eaves of a red-tile gable roof. At either end of the eaves is a curvilinear copper downspout from the gutter to a pipe inside the wall.

The decorative treatment of the Sutter Street facade is carried around the sides, extending only as far as the area covered by the gable roof over the front wing of the building. The two ends are treated differently because the east end survives from the original 1915 building and the west

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end was added in 1923. On both ends of the building, the brick wall is unadorned up to the fifth floor level. At the east end of the building, hard to see because of its proximity to the YWCA next door, from the fifth story into the gable there is a palladian motif composed of terra cotta belt courses at the base and the spring of the arch that each wrap around from the base of the colonnade and from the eaves at the front. Supporting the central arch is a brick Corinthian pilaster order with terra cotta capitals. The belt course at the spring of the central arch and the projecting eaves of the gable above form a pediment. The west end of the building is treated more simply than the east end. At the west end there is no palladian motif — only a brick pilaster order and the suggestion of a pediment.

The sides and rear walls of the east wing are plain brick, with double-hung windows. The sides and rear walls of the west wing are rough reinforced concrete showing marks of the horizontal form boards, also with double hung windows.

On the roof, the mechanical and elevator penthouse is clad in brick and embellished with a pilaster order.

Interior

The character of most of the public interior spaces has been little altered since the spaces were built. The character of a few was altered within the period of significance but has not been altered since the end of the period of significance. Most of the substantial alterations since the end of the period of significance have been behind-the-scenes spaces — on the first floor office, locker room, and spa areas; and in the fourth floor kitchen areas. The alterations to one of these behind-the-scenes spaces created a new interior that is visible from the old — the 1983 handicapped ramp which is visible from the lobby. The most conspicuous interior alteration is in the second floor meeting room which was converted from a gymnasium in 1965 by dropping the ceiling.

Among the surviving spaces that convey the historic character of the building, some are highly decorated and others are finished in ordinary ways, as described below.

The basement contains 115 wood cubicles, sometimes referred to as cabanas. Each cabana is a changing room, rented to one or two club members. Each cabana is a small unroofed square or rectangular space enclosed by tongue-and-groove walls and entered by a door that does not reach the ground. These are built in rows with a grid of passageways providing access.

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On the ground floor, the lobby is a long, rectangular space parallel to the street. It is decorated with an ionic order of paired columns and pilasters that support beams treated as an entablature. The black and white checkerboard floor (probably of marble or terrazo) present in 1962 (Wilson 1962:photo) has been covered or replaced by a wood floor since that time. This checkerboard floor extended from the lobby to the pool room and along the sides of the pool.

In the southwest corner, the library has a shallow vaulted ceiling, Japanese style window screens, book cases lining the walls, and a Japanese color scheme of light walls and dark wood. This room retains much of the character it had in 1938 when it opened as the Kakemono Lounge. In 1953 it became the library.

Across the rear of the first floor is the swimming pool, parallel to Sutter Street. Similar to the lobby, this space is decorated with an order of columns and pilasters that carry beams treated as an entablature. The capitals of the order includes figures of mermaids. The space is lit by ceiling fixtures in cast plaster rosettes, sconces attached to pilasters, and a large central skylight. While these main features are intact, a number of details, subject to deterioration from water, have been replaced — tile flooring, pool rim, and column bases.

On the second, third, fifth, and sixth floors, the hotel rooms and the central corridors that provide access to them, are treated in a generally uniform manner. The corridors are finished with plaster walls and cove moldings, baseboards, and chandeliers with a shell motif. The light fixtures in the hallways and perhaps elsewhere are replacements, created by Western Art Stone in the 1960s. Single-panel wood doors with transoms lead into the hotel rooms. The rooms, most with baths, have baseboards and cove moldings. At least one room was altered by its permanent resident — Mrs. Boggs installed a marble mantelpiece at the fireplace in room 500.

Although converted to a meeting room in 1965, the old gymnasium on the second floor retains some of its original feel. It is a wide space, well lit by large windows on both sides. As a meeting room it has a lowered ceiling of acoustical tile and a platform for speakers at the north end.

Across the front of the fourth floor, lit by large arched windows, are three decorated rooms with vaulted ceilings. At the southeast corner is a lounge with a stone fireplace and Latin inscriptions at one end, chandeliers with plaster rosettes, and decorative plaster arches. In the center is a smaller room with stenciled ribs that spring from bosses, and a plaster chandelier. At the southwest corner is the bar with walnut paneling, decorative tympanums, plaster chandeliers, and a stone fireplace. In the east wing is the original main dining room with a vaulted ceiling,

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decorative pilasters and arches, and a central chandelier. Behind this room is the Tapestry Room with a coffered ceiling, decorative ceiling panels, and plaster chandeliers. In the west wing is the main dining room. This is a large, high space with two rows of columns and a large stone fireplace on axis with the entrance. The room is decorated with an order of columns and pilasters, a shallow suggestion of coffering in relief, relief panels above each chandelier, and relief panels in the clerestories. Between this dining room and the Tapestry Room is a bridge over the light court occupied by the Persian Room, so named because of its vaulted ceiling and Moorish arches on the south side.

On the fifth floor, the Director's Room has a vaulted ceiling, an artificial travertine fireplace, two iron chandeliers, three iron sconces, a Renaissance doorway, and a heavy, 15-paneled wood door. Also on the fifth floor is the indoor tennis court, a wide space lit by windows on each side with an exposed steel truss.

In 1984 and 1985, smoke barriers were built on the main staircase at the west end of the building and "a glazed partition wall" was built "at the 3rd floor corridor" (San Francisco Board of Public Works 18 April 1984 and 2 August 1985).

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### SUMMARY

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco is eligible for the National Register under criteria A and C at the local level of significance. Under criterion A the club is significant in the area of Social History as the first women's athletic club west of Chicago when it opened in 1917 and as the largest such club in the country after its expansion in 1923. The development of women's athletic clubs was an important aspect of the Women's Club Movement (1860s to 1920s). It is also significant as the catalyst for the development of a women's club district in San Francisco in the 1920s, an expression of the emerging presence of women in civic life after suffrage. Under criterion C the building, designed by Bliss & Faville, is significant as an example of its style

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based on a late fourteenth century type of early Renaissance palazzo in Florence and as an interpretation of that type in the St. Gabriel's Branch of the New York Public Library of 1906 by McKim, Mead & White, former employers and teachers of Bliss & Faville. The period of significance is 1916 to 1954, covering the years from the beginning of construction to fifty years ago, with the club continuing after that date for many years as the largest and most active women's athletic club in northern California.

#### CRITERION A: SOCIAL HISTORY

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HISTORY OF THE WOMAN'S ATHLETIC CLUB OF SAN FRANCISCO

##### History of the Club

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco emerged from the conversations and experiences of a small group of socially prominent women in 1912. Primary sources on the genesis of the club are scarce and incomplete. According to Carol Green Wilson's *The First 50 Years of the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco*, which was based in part on interviews with founders and other early members, the idea of the club was first suggested to a small group of friends by Elizabeth Taylor Pillsbury after she had visited the recently completed building of the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago (Wilson 1962:3).

From 1912 to mid 1914, the small group of friends spread the idea to a network of friends and acquaintances in San Francisco, Piedmont, Marin County, Hillsborough and other San Francisco Peninsula communities (Wilson 1962:3). Most of the earliest organizers of the club (defined here as the 26 women who served on the Board of Directors in 1914-1916) were listed in the *Social Register*. Most were members of elite social clubs, especially the Francisca Club and to a lesser extent, the Town and Country Club. Many were also affiliated through the memberships of their husbands, with the exclusive San Francisco Golf Club and the Burlingame Country Club where women participated in golf, tennis, and horseback riding. Only two are known to have been college graduates (Stanford University 1921; Sibley 1936; Mills Quarterly 1942); none were members of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (California Federation of Women's Clubs 1916). Most of the women were married. Their husbands and fathers were members of the elite men's clubs, the Pacific Union, Bohemian, Olympic, and University clubs (Social Register Association, 1921). Despite the overwhelming role of women in the organization of the club (only outside consultants, the lawyer and the architects were men) the members were almost

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always referred to in the press and in other records by their husband's names, i.e., Elizabeth Pillsbury was Mrs. Horace D. Pillsbury.

Many of the founders were active in other social causes and civic efforts as well. In the same years that efforts to organize the Woman's Athletic Club were underway several of its founders were involved in the establishment of clubs for working class women and girls that also incorporated physical activity in their programs. Elizabeth Pillsbury, who would become the first president of the Woman's Athletic Club, and five others were on the Board of Directors of the Recreation Club for Girls Who Work at 507 Harrison Street: "its aim is the betterment of the conditions of the working girls, especially those who must work down in the manufacturing districts and have no place to rest during the noon hours" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1914). A *San Francisco Examiner* columnist praised this board of directors: "The particular coterie of young women who are backing the Girl's Recreation Club are the wives or sisters of men interested in the busy industrial section where this club is located. These enthusiastic young women are endowed with high spirits of the same do-and-dare quality that make their men folks leaders. They never attempt anything that it is not successfully carried through. Whenever they take hold their friends come in . . ." (Francisco 1914). Five other founders of the Woman's Athletic Club served on the Board of Directors of the similarly named Girl's Recreation and Home Club at 557 South Van Ness Avenue: "In addition to serving as a home, classes in gymnasium work, folk dancing, and games are held . . ." (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1921). The one founding member who was not listed in the Social Register, Ethel Moore, was a member of the first Playyard Commission in Oakland (Gutman 2000:334).

Some of the founders were leading members of other types of women's charities, including the San Francisco Ladies Protection and Relief Society (*San Francisco Ladies Protection and Relief Society* 1915); The San Francisco Protestant Orphanage Society (*San Francisco Protestant Orphanage Society* 1932); and the Juvenile Protective Association (*Juvenile Protective Association* 1924).

In another arena, eight of the founders of the Women's Athletic Club were active on the Woman's Board of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (P-P.I.E.). The Woman's Board was in charge of "that part of the California Building which served as the host building of the Exposition . . . Representing the women of California, the members were the official hostesses of the Exposition. They not only took charge of the reception and entertainment portion of the California Building devoted to the Exposition hospitalities . . . but they controlled and managed it with rare executive ability." (Todd 1921: vol. 2, p. 324). Elizabeth Pillsbury served on two committees, one to furnish and equip the California Building and one on entertainment. Edith

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Grant served on several committees including finance and entertaining distinguished women. Others, including Edna Black, the second president of the Woman's Athletic Club, were stockholders of the Woman's Board.

Thus, among the founders and first leaders of the Woman's Athletic Club were several women with both a demonstrated interest in women's civic and social causes and practical experience in financing, furnishing, and operating institutional buildings.

In addition to spreading the word, by mid 1914, the organizers of the club consulted with directors of men's clubs — "Pacific Union, Bohemian, Olympic, Union League. The names of their wives were put on the prospective list. Heads of firms employing large numbers of women were asked for advice. Teachers and professional women were approached. A lawyer — Mr. Lloyd Baldwin of Oakland — was retained. The architectural firm of Bliss and Faville was engaged to draw up preliminary plans. A lot on Sutter Street above Mason was found." (Wilson 1962:4). (Lloyd Baldwin appears to have been the son of Mrs. Lloyd Baldwin, a prominent California suffragist [Davis 1967:138]).

In June 1914, the organization of the club became a public effort. Letters were sent to prospective members and articles appeared in the newspapers. To finance its building, the club sought 1,000 members who would each pay a \$25.00 initiation fee and dues of \$5.00 per month when the building opened.

The club's membership is to be recruited largely from among the ranks of the young women identified with such clubs as the Francisca Club [and] the Town and Country, the present directors all being from these two organizations. Its aim is educational first and for recreation and pleasure afterwards. As many of the women interested have young families growing up, an important department of the club will be devoted to the physical training of children. Otherwise the club will correspond essentially to women what any athletic club is to men, modified, naturally, to a feminine standard. It is to be no more of an altruistic or philanthropic enterprise than a man's athletic club is, many other organizations being maintained and supported by these women for whatever altruistic work they may care to engage in. (Francisco 1914).

While the core of the membership was expected to come from the Social Register, efforts were made to recruit others as well: "Women musicians, literary women, artists and art students and women from the other professions are among those to whom were sent invitations to become



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members" (Francisco 1914). In addition, in the spirit of the clubs for "working girls" that were supported by several of the founding members: "The club is not to be only for the women who have leisure to take part in out-door sports. While society is represented in its first directorate the initiation fee and dues will be placed within the reach of girls who work for a living and the club will be entirely democratic in its activities." (*San Francisco Examiner* 1914).

When the Woman's Athletic Club announced its plans to the public, the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated that, "the club hopes to open its doors on May 1, 1915, in time for the Exposition" (Francisco 1914). As was the case with many other undertakings in San Francisco at that time, the Woman's Athletic Club was formed amid the excitement surrounding the P-P.I.E. and was in part inspired by it. For several reasons, however, involving financial, programmatic, and administrative issues, the construction and opening of the club was delayed. While the recruitment of members went well — 710 had signed up by February 1915 — many had not actually paid and money was not available to begin work. To increase funds, in June, "it was decided to offer Life Memberships to sixty women who would pay \$300.00 plus initiation fees of \$25.00." (Wilson 1962:4). During the delay, the Board of Directors reconsidered the earlier idea that the club building would provide space to rent to other women's organizations, resulting in the redesign of the building to accommodate only the Woman's Athletic Club (*San Francisco Examiner* 1915a).

The club was incorporated on 25 October 1915. The incorporation process required a legal description of the purposes of the club — officially the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco. The primary purposes were: "To foster and encourage physical exercises, physical culture and athletics and to promote social intercourse among its members; [and] to maintain a club-house, gymnasium, general athletic equipment, and all accommodations of every description for the use of its members." (California Secretary of State 1915:1). During this period, the Board of Directors met first at the Francisca Club, then located at 550-556 Sutter Street, and later in room 640 of the Mills Building, the office of the attorney, Lloyd Baldwin.

As a corporation, the Woman's Athletic Club arranged to lease the clubhouse from the owner of the property, C.T. Ryland, who would be responsible for building it. "The owner agrees to construct upon said premises a building in accordance with the plans and specifications therefore prepared by Messrs. Bliss & Faville, architects." (Woman's Athletic Club Board of Directors 1915). The club agreed to pay Ryland \$15,000 when the agreement was signed and \$18,000 when the building was completed.

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After construction began in December 1915 (Doyle 1915) or January 1916 (Building and Engineering News 12 January 1916), the energies of the club organizers refocused on financing and furnishing the building. In February 1916, the initiation fee was raised to \$50 for new members after 1,000 had signed up (there were 878 members in March 1916). Individuals and committees were assigned to address numerous issues including gymnasium furnishing, house furnishing, "the matter of burning oil versus gas," "the matter of buying linens for the club rooms and restaurant," the design and color of bathing suits, and the design and color of maids uniforms. In addition to the members, the architect Walter Bliss was added to the house furnishing committee (Woman's Athletic Club. Board of Directors 1916:43, 44, 49, 51, ff).

The clubhouse was completed early in 1917 at a cost of \$160,000. By that time there were 1,000 members (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917a). The first board meeting held at the club was on 15 January 1917. The club opened on 4 February 1917 with a reception to which were invited the mayor of San Francisco, officers and directors of clubs around the bay, heads of the athletic departments at the University of California, and Stanford, the president and regents of the University of California, and the president of the YMCA (Woman's Athletic Club. Board of Directors 1917:74, 77). At a second reception for members the next day, the society writer Cholly Francisco reported in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "What women can do when they combine their resources is forcibly shown in the Woman's Athletic Club . . . As probably everyone of the thousand members has invited at least one man to the housewarming, masculine San Francisco will doubtless agree that the women of San Francisco have a just cause for being elated over this latest achievement" (Francisco 1917a). "The Olympic Club sent two massive baskets of American Beauty roses over with their compliments" (Francisco 1917b). The *San Francisco Chronicle* called the clubhouse "the finest, best equipped, and most beautiful of its kind in the United States" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917a).

Once the building was complete, the club was open for business from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily, and the focus of the energies of the club leaders shifted to problems of adjusting to the new building and running the club. The club signed a contract with the Olympic Salt Water Company for water pumped to the swimming pool from Ocean Beach (WAC Board 1917). Plans were made to create a library. A monthly *Club Bulletin* of activities was inaugurated, listing classes and lessons, lectures, holiday celebrations, and special events. The March 1917 *Bulletin* had entries for the dining room, hydro-therapeutic department, natatorium, gymnasium, basketball, tennis, and the hairdressing department. When the building had just opened, the directors ordered interior photographs, "picture post cards and views of the club" (the images hanging in the hallways in 2004 were taken later, in 1922; no early post cards have been found). Because more room was needed for card playing, the balcony of the gymnasium was closed.

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Proposals for new activities, such as indoor golf, were investigated (Woman's Athletic Club. Board of Directors 1917:passim).

For members, for husbands of members, and for the public at large, the ability of women to succeed in creating and running as large and complex an operation as the Woman's Athletic Club was an ongoing issue. Women were eager to prove that they could do just as well as men. Representing male skepticism, one member's husband was cited by the club's historian, Carol Green Wilson, as saying "such a Club could never be a success run by women" (Wilson 1962:5). The press pushed both points of view — the woman society writers, Cholly Francisco for the *Examiner* and Grace Armistead Doyle for the *Chronicle*, frankly admired the achievements of the women who created the club and freely quoted their officers taking pride in their accomplishments. On the other hand, unsigned news articles in both papers insinuated that women were not up to the task. Seven months after the club opened, the *San Francisco Examiner* reported an internal controversy over "the employing of a man efficiency expert named F. Baudisson. The rumor is that the club management was distressed by a monthly deficit, and the size of that deficit was on the increase. Baudisson was called in and established a new system of economy. It was suggested that men replace other women employees and then the dissension began. A number of the professional women members are saying that there is no need of employing a man to attend to the reorganization of the business staff . . . there are those who say a women's club is not a women's club with a male efficiency expert in the office." (*San Francisco Examiner* 1917b).

By the fall of 1917, these problems were past. The re-election of the club's officers was described by the *Chronicle* as "a vote of thanks for the successful management of the club." The officers themselves described the condition of the club: "The treasurer, Mrs. James A. Black, reported the club on a financially sound basis, that it is now fully paying the operating expenses, and that the only period of financial loss was during the first three months after the club opened in its own quarters." The president, Elizabeth Pillsbury, stated "The Woman's Athletic Club already has proved successful. Our membership continues to increase, we are financially sound and earning our way, and altogether it has proved the most successful venture of the kind ever undertaken here." (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917b). In September 1918, less than a year later, the club celebrated a milestone in its development: "The club was opened not quite two years ago, handsomely equipped in every way, and the fact that the entire cost of furnishing the club is now paid created much rejoicing." At the same time, the club was confident about its future: "The next effort now will be to purchase the property on which the club stands and to own the building. This project is to be financed after the war." (*San Francisco Examiner* 1918).

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Five years after the club opened, its short history was described in glowing terms (perhaps by the club itself) in *Who's Who Among the Women of California*:

The story of the building of the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, the strength and value of the club in the community, the pleasure and comfort accorded members, the respect the club commands from both men and women in the commonwealth, form the nucleus for a story of courage, valor, determination, business ability, integrity, optimism and romance. Furthermore, the story of the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco is a story of feminine foresight.

When the small group of representative San Francisco women first planned to have a club, and a club building, something after the manner of a men's club—a club which should be all that the name implies—many husbands of the women who had dreamed of such a plan, many business men who admired the business audacity displayed, gallantly withheld smiles. Some women who were, originally, among the doubters, as whether such a thing as a Woman's Athletic Club were feasible or even possible, were finally stirred to profound respect when the dauntless women made their "dream" a firm realization.

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco is a success, in every sense of the word—financially, socially—a convincing argument in favor of women who build. (Lyons 1922:47)

By the end of the war it was clear that the clubhouse was too small and lacked facilities that the membership, by this time 1,500, wanted:

Every section of the Club was inadequate. Lobby, reception room, cloak room, office, dressing room, Turkish baths, showers and pool, all crowded onto the first floor, were each too small. "Silence Rooms"—so designated for members who wanted to rest—were no longer "silent" due to the newly opened YWCA swimming pool adjoining the east side of the building.

There were only four "guest bedrooms," located on the second floor opposite the gymnasium. These were for transient use only, in constant demand by the 132 out-of-town members, who thought that they were entitled to a place to stay when overnighing in the city. Cots were sometimes put into these rooms; "silence

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rooms" were rented; there was a long list of members wanting to make the Club their permanent home. (Wilson 1962:8).

In November 1919, a letter to the membership presented ideas for "re-financing and expansion" to be discussed at a special meeting in December. Among other things, the Board of Directors believed that if the Woman's Athletic Club did not expand, another club would be formed in competition with it. At that time the club had assets of \$89,000 and paid its \$1,500 monthly rent out of the \$33,000 deposit previously given to the owner during planning and construction of the building. The club had "an option to buy the property for about \$190,000 . . ." In addition, the vacant lot west of the club was available for \$45,000. The letter proposed purchase of this lot, and the erection of a building to be unified with the present clubhouse, "at a cost not to exceed \$225,000.00," plus \$50,000 for furnishings and equipment. All of this would be financed with "\$500,000 of 6% bonds." An advisory board consisting of the president of the Olympic Club; Lloyd Baldwin, the lawyer; and Walter D. Bliss, the architect, recommended the plan which was unanimously approved by the membership (Wilson 1962:8-9). The effort to promote and build this addition was led by the second president of the club, Edna Black.

Construction of the addition was delayed for several reasons. The bonds were not issued until after receipt of a court authorization on 20 November 1920. To fortify the financial strength of the club, the initiation fee for new members was raised to \$150. By 17 May 1921, \$325,000 worth of bonds "had been subscribed." However, as the club wrote to the membership, the "inflated cost of materials and the almost certain prospect of a marked decline in the future, makes it advisable to postpone for a time the commencement of the actual building." (Wilson 1962:9).

In addition:

The situation was further complicated by the refusal of the owners to let them cut through the walls so as to unite the two buildings. Thus, the Board was reversing the original planned procedure. They would propose to purchase the present building under terms of the lease; to purchase the lot next door, which "has been so generously held for us by the Anglo-London-Paris National Bank"; and to proceed later with the construction of an addition to the existing building on this lot as soon as funds were available. Subscriptions for an additional \$100,000.00 of bonds were deemed "imperative." With a membership of 1734, of which 740 had already subscribed, the Board was confident that by the first of the year they

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would be "well on the way to the fulfillment of the plans which have been so long delayed." (Wilson 1962:9)

When plans were ready for the expanded building, the *Examiner* called it "the largest club of its kind in America" (*San Francisco Examiner* 1920). Construction on the addition began in September 1922. The contractor was MacDonald & Kahn (BEN 21 April 1923).

The club was closed for a month when the original building and the addition were connected, during which time the Francisca and the Town and Country clubs opened their dining rooms to Woman's Athletic Club members. "And the National League of Women's Service, organized for war work during World War I, offered use of all its facilities at 333 Kearney Street." (Wilson 1962:9-10).

Within a week before the expanded club reopened on 26 December 1923, the *Chronicle* described it: "The Woman's Athletic Club, as it will stand when completed, will be a structure and an institution unlike anything in the United States maintained for and by women." The expanded club had a new outdoor tennis court on the roof, a new squash court, card rooms, "greatly increased catering facilities," a larger hairdressing department, waiting rooms off the larger lobby, a larger swimming pool, a new dining room, new lounges, and many new hotel rooms. (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1923a).

A month after the club opened, an article in the *Wasp* characterized the membership at that time: "The nearly 2,000 members are drawn from several classes, including society women, business women, professionals in the arts, and just housewives and young girls who love the athletic features offered." The *Wasp* concluded by asking, "Is not this the realization of a dream of the perfect clubhouse for women? What more could any woman wish?" (*Wasp* 1924).

Like other mainstream institutions of the period, the club's members appear to have been all white during the early years, although sources generally do not address this subject. The 1930 census, the only publicly available census after the club was expanded to include rooms for permanent residents, listed thirty-five people living in the club, all of whom, including three servants and one male, were white. It may be that non-white women were granted at least temporary admittance during the 1940s, perhaps when women in the armed services were invited during World War II, or during the United Nations Conference when women delegates, delegate's wives, and women journalists were given temporary membership cards.

The club flourished in its expanded quarters in the 1920s. Membership rose to nearly 2,400 members where it stayed through the decade. Revenues made it possible to maintain and

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remodel facilities as needed. "In 1925, the lot to the west of the Club was purchased for . . . \$78,788.17"; it remained vacant except for a billboard (WAC Report 1935-1936). This was accomplished after assessing the members \$60.00 each (Wilson 1962:17). In 1927-1928, the fifth floor handball court was converted to a meeting room for the Board of Directors, and the decorative terra cotta ornament on the exterior was "washed and thoroughly cleaned." In 1928-1929, terra cotta benches were removed, radiator covers were added, and new light fixtures were installed in the lounge; the kitchen was enlarged and a cooling tower was built on the roof for a new refrigerator room; and new sidewalk lights were installed in front. In 1929-1930, three radiators were moved from the front of the windows to the sides in the Games Room and radiator covers were installed and the roof top tennis court was given "a new Mastipave surface," (WAC Report 1926-1930).

In the early years of the Depression, the membership dropped — to 2,109 — in 1931-1932 (WAC Report 1931-1932). For four years culminating in 1934 when the club operated at a loss of \$2,100 a month from May to November, decreased revenues led to "drastic curtailment in Repairs and Maintenance." Reorganization of operations resulted in a substantial financial improvement in 1935-1936, and made possible "extensive repainting and redecorating" including the kitchen and roof. After discussing various proposals including miniature golf and putting greens, in 1935-1936 for the first time, the club's empty lot next door was leased for operation as a parking lot (WAC Report 1935-1936). The *San Francisco Chronicle* described the Woman's Athletic Club at that time as "perhaps the only" San Francisco club "now operating its club house at a profit" (Estcourt 1935b).

The club's troubles were not over however. Membership continued to drop — to 1,889 — in 1937-1938. The club spent money to refurbish the building "in looking forward to the opening of the Golden Gate International Exposition," hoping for increased business. Instead, in 1938-1939, the club reported that "the dining room revenue has been disappointing, and this may be attributed to the Exposition." The club continued to invest in remodeling with the Kakemono Lounge opening on the first floor 15 December 1938. The year 1939-1940, including the end of the Exposition, produced "a successful year" and sound finances. (WAC Report 1937-1940).

The club endured the war years of the 1940s like everyone else — with shortages of everything. In December 1942, the manager wrote, "the cooperation of the members in fully accepting the food limitations which we all face today is greatly appreciated. We will continue to endeavor to maintain the highest possible standards that the government curtailments will allow." (WAC *Bulletin* December 1942). The Annual Report of 1942-1943 noted "restricted services throughout the club" (WAC Annual Report 1942-1943).

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After the war, many years of deferred maintenance and changing times had left the club's facilities in need of attention. In 1947-1948, the board created a Long Range Planning Committee, assisted by Joseph Esherick, architect. In 1950, the Beauty Salon was closed. In 1953, newspaper columnist Herb Caen reported that the pool room windows were painted black to accommodate nude swimmers; the first television set was installed in the club — in a card room on the sixth floor; the main lobby was renovated; the library and the Rendezvous Cocktail Lounge switched places; and the club took over operation of its parking lot. In 1956-1957, membership was at a new low of 1,644. The board of directors reported that "The greater percentage of our membership live on a fixed income." (WAC Annual Report 1946-1957).

Faced with continuing expensive repairs during the 1950s, the club debated its future: "Should the club continue to function at its present address, with the constantly increasing costs which this seemed to entail? Or should they sell the valuable property and build a modern structure which would minimize maintenance and probably reduce taxes at some outlying location?" In 1956, the club decided to stay (Wilson 1962:18). Again, the club developed a long-range plan for maintenance and renovation.

After the original 50-year incorporation of the Woman's Athletic Club expired 27 October 1965, the club was reincorporated, this time to have "perpetual existence." Although the articles of incorporation including the purposes of the club were otherwise the same as in 1915, the name was changed. The new name, the Metropolitan Club, was effective 6 December 1966. At the time of the election to change the name, there were 1,066 members. Of the 892 members who voted, 688 voted in favor of the change, 184 voted against, and 20 voted for a name change but favored other, unspecified names (California Secretary of State 1966).

Since 1966, the club has continued in operation as the Metropolitan Club.

### Club Life

Although the word "athletic" was part of the club's name, from the beginning the Woman's Athletic Club served members with other interests as well. Indeed, according to a 1926 *Bulletin*, "there are still many members who do not appreciate the beneficial advantages of the gymnasium classes and the daily swim because they have never tried them." (WAC *Bulletin* October 1926). The expanded club provided a setting that increased the relative presence of members with interests outside of athletics.

In an era when women did not routinely attend college, the club had an educational role. From the beginning, the club sponsored lectures and lecture series on a frequent, if irregular, basis. A



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sampling of early lecture titles including Bolshevism and Americanism (1917); Hindu Hygiene (1919); applied psychology (1920); travel (1923); and Japan: Friend or Foe (1923) suggests both the range of topics presented and the role that the club played in the lives of members. A library was established on the fourth floor when the club opened in 1917 and grew continuously. In 1927, it had 5,500 books; in 1947 it had 6,567 books; in 1957 it had 10,640 books (WAC Report 1926-1927; Annual Report 1946-1947, 1956-1957).

While the club did not ordinarily become directly involved in social causes, it did so in at least several instances around the times of the World Wars. In 1920, a benefit was held for the Hoover Campaign for the Relief of Starving Children in Europe (Driscoll 1920:61). In 1941, the Red Cross Motor Corps girls were given dining privileges (Woman's Athletic Club 1940-1941). Benefits were held for the Infant Shelter Auxiliary during World War II (Boggs 1942-1951). Most extensively, the club assisted at the conference for the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. As the club *Bulletin* explained:

Members will be glad to know that our club will have an important part in San Francisco's welcome to the United Nations Conference . . . Mrs. Earl Warren [wife of the governor], Mrs. Roger Lapham [wife of the mayor], the wives of the commanding officers of the local military establishment, and Dr. Virginia Gildersleeve have been elected to honorary membership for a period of three months, beginning with the opening of the Conference. In compliance with the request of the Mayor's Committee to all women's clubs, we are issuing guest cards to women delegates and the wives of delegates. At the request of the United Nations Press and Radio Aid Committee, and by arrangement with the San Francisco Press and Radio Women's Committee, our club will be unofficial headquarters for the visiting women of the press, and special guest cards are being issued to them so that they may enjoy the facilities of the club during their stay in our midst." (WAC *Bulletin* May 1945).

Because of this contribution, in 1948 the Woman's Athletic Club was "the only local club" represented at "the first Western meeting of UNESCO." (Wilson 1962:16).

Most of all the club provided a social community for its members. Over the years, the club has held dinners for major holidays and special events, usually open to men and families. Among special events were receptions, fashion shows, dances, and athletic events. Routine service in the dining room, bar, and lounge; card games; and teas provided a social atmosphere frequently referred to in club literature as "homelike." In 1955, on its 40th anniversary, the club "celebrated

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the occasion with a luncheon and fashion show — the first large style parade incidentally ever given at the club” (Robbins 1955). Private events such as weddings, debutante balls, luncheons, and dinners made the club a setting for personal celebrations that were too large or difficult for home. Likewise, hotel rooms provided a place for out-of-town members and guests to stay.

For a few members, the club actually was a home. One of the forces that supported the expansion in 1920-1923 was a group of members who wanted to live in the club. According to a longtime resident, Mae Helene Bacon Boggs, “Dr. Agnes Walker was the first member to reserve a room, selecting #600, so I reserved #500 . . . Besides Mrs. Kalde’s suite on the second floor [Mrs. Kalde was the manager], there were three special rooms considered for certain members: Miss Hope Bliss, sister of the architect . . .; Mrs. Kurt, a friend of the Bliss family, had room #64 . . .; and #500 for me, in which I had a fireplace, with California travertine marble, a wall bed, and my private telephone.” These residents paid for alterations to their rooms; Mrs. Boggs ordered her mantle piece from Stephen Mileton at the Sculptor’s Work Shop in San Francisco, and probably bought her “Portal Wall Bed” from Marshall & Stearns Company. The number of resident members fluctuated. In 1927 there were 22 residents; in 1937 there were 37 residents (Boggs 1923).

While the purpose of the club was to serve its members, it could not function without its managers and staff. Somewhat like a mansion with servants, the club was designed to accommodate the staff in various ways, many of them hidden from public view. Dining room employees worked from the kitchen and pantry areas. Maids and janitors operated in part from stairways at the rear of the building and from closets on the hotel floors. When the clubhouse was expanded in the 1920s, twenty bedrooms were expected to be used by employees. At that time the club was in competition for scarce labor and paid employees extra for a housing allowance. (Driscoll 1919:53). This need diminished after World War II; in 1947, only four employees lived at the club (WAC Annual Report 1947). When the expansion was realized, maids rooms were at the rear and scattered among guest rooms on each hotel floor. The manager lived on the second floor. When the club opened it had 57 employees and a \$3,900 monthly payroll. At the peak of its prosperity, in 1927, it had 106 employees and a \$10,000 monthly payroll (WAC Report 1926-1927). In 1927, a ventilator was installed in the basement linen room “in order to make working conditions more agreeable for the women who work below stairs,” the servant’s dining room was improved, and a small maid’s lounge was furnished (WAC Report 1927-1928:2-3).

The brief annual reports generally included a statement of thanks, such as “to our able manager and staff of employees who have done so much to make this year one of achievement and

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pleasure" (WAC Report 1929-1930:4). While the relationship between the club and the staff appears to have been generally amicable over the years, there were periods of stress as well. In 1934, a year when the club struggled financially because of the Depression, and a year of extreme labor-management conflict in San Francisco culminating in a general strike, the only reference to employees in the minutes of the board was a motion that "the employees be requested to take two weeks vacation without pay this year" (WAC Minutes 1934). Less than two years later, the annual report noted, "the operating personnel is efficient, the esprit de corps is excellent" (WAC Report 1935-1936). A low point came during the 1940s when a general meeting was held to discuss "certain demands being made by Labor Unions" (WAC Report 1940-1941). In 1944, the manager sent a letter to resident members noting that because of the war it was hard to hold or replace employees and asking "To refrain from commenting either to or about any employee as to his or her work" (Bennett 1944). In 1956, after "Unions threatened to picket the Club and stop all supplies and services," the staff became unionized, "the last of the downtown clubs" to do so (Wilson 1962:18); in the 1980s, the affiliation with the union ended.

The key employee was the manager who was responsible for hiring and managing the staff. Although a newspaper reported that Mrs. Ida Foster Cronk was hired away as manager from the Women's Athletic Club of Chicago (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917a) — the original inspiration for this club — Mrs. Cronk either never arrived or did not stay long. From 1917, the opening year, to 1935 the manager was Anne Kalde. While Mrs. Kalde was highly-praised in club reports over the years, she was fired in a controversial Depression-era reorganization (Estcourt 1935a, 1935b, 1935c). Mrs. Kalde was succeeded by Miss Wright in 1937; and by Mr. V.R. Frazee, the first in a succession of male managers, from 1940-1941 to at least 1953 (WAC Report 1937-1953).

The staff was divided into departments — kitchen and dining room workers, including, at first, a male bartender who was the subject of newspaper jokes (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917a); house workers including housekeeper, maids, janitors and a male doorman; a chief engineer; personal service employees including hairdressers, masseuses, and attendants; and athletic instructors. "There are instructors of all kinds and a special instructor to teach women the uses of the various health-building devices to make one plump or lissome, as the desire may be" (Francisco 1917a).

The club proudly advertised its athletic instructors, many of whom were highly trained and accomplished. The first Physical Director, Miss Meta Skov "is a graduate of the Paul Peterson Institute of Copenhagen and won the Paris Medal of 1912 for gymnasium and dancing, also a life saving medal" (WAC *Bulletin* March 1917). In 1921, Mrs. Gourlay Dunn-Webb, "the one woman in the United States who has made a signal success as a golf tutor" was hired; she was

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“the originator of special Home Exercises for women which greatly increase their hitting power, thus enabling them to drive a long ball.” (WAC *Bulletin* November 1921). These people came at a cost, however; the club reported in the 1920s that “Athletic instructors . . . are high salaried people” (WAC Report 1926-1927).

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ATHLETICS AND WOMEN'S ATHLETIC CLUBS**

The development of athletic clubs for women is, first of all, a function of the participation of women in athletic activities. The history of women's participation in athletics in the United States includes changing views of the necessity or desirability of athletics for women, changing views of appropriate activities, and a general, if uneven, increase in participation over time.

A majority of American women in the 18th and 19th centuries lived lives of hard physical work. Women who lived on farms or in many other circumstances had no need for or interest in athletics. However, already there was a lack of physical activity among some women in the 18th century. In the urban “trading centers of the eastern coast . . . many of the women lived a life of comparative ease . . . the delicate, fragile and dependent woman was much admired.” (Ainsworth 1930:2). In the eighteenth and for most of the nineteenth century, dancing was the most popular form of physical exercise for women, and it was prescribed for that purpose.

At girl's schools beginning in the 1820s, established by “pioneers in the advancement of education for women,” dancing, calisthenics, and domestic chores were parts of the curriculum (Ainsworth 1930: 4). These schools educated limited numbers of girls but they indicate the persisting recognition of the need for physical activity.

With industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, society in general underwent enormous changes. By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was widespread concern that the health of Americans, especially American women, was in decline. In 1860, *Godey's Ladies Book*, one of the leading women's periodicals of the time, “claimed that American women as a general class were fragile, delicate, and incapable of enduring any hardship.” (Stanley 1996:25). In 1873, Dr. Edward Clarke of Harvard Medical School explained the roots of this problem: he published an influential book, *Sex in Education; or a Fair Chance for the Girls*, in which he argued that women were innately weaker in body and mind; girls should not be educated after puberty; and because they could not endure physical and mental activity at once, their education should not include physical activity (Stanley 1996:30).

In the same period, other writers, mostly women, argued that women were not frail and that they simply needed more exercise — albeit of a restricted kind, such as running up and down stairs —

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with the mouth closed to prevent overexertion (Stanley 1996:42-43). In 1881, Dr. Mary T. Bissell said that "chronic ill health would end" for women who were physically active. She blamed the problems on idleness, restrictive dress, and lack of exercise. Those who promoted physical exercise for women first advocated dress reform — corsets and heavy layered clothing that dragged on the ground made most physical activity beyond walking difficult if not impossible. (Stanley 1996:44-47).

In the 1860s and 1870s, several women's colleges including Mills College in Oakland were established incorporating programs for physical training in their curriculums. Women were required to take gymnastics, calisthenics, dancing, or domestic science. Because the women flourished with exercise, "with remarkable speed, women's colleges brought about a startling reversal in popular thought." By the mid 1880s, it was clear that exercise improved women's health (Stanley 1996:50). Women at the University of California organized their own sports activities as early as 1876; they were not required to participate in an exercise program until 1901 (Howell 1982:406).

In the context of these developments, the first known gymnasium for women outside of women's colleges was Miss Allen's Gymnasium for Ladies, established in Boston about 1879 (F.J.G. 1879) in an existing building. In 1886, the first known purpose-built athletic club building for women — the Allen Gymnasium — was opened (Dubrow 1991:492-496). The YWCA also built gymnasiums for women in the last twenty years of the 19th century. Women were also accommodated in other places. In San Francisco, "women associates had an exercise class" at the Olympic Club in the 1870s (Muscatine 1975:350).

In the 1890s, it became fashionable for wealthy women to engage in certain sports — golf, tennis, yachting, and horseback riding. Women could sometimes participate in these activities at country clubs and yacht clubs, although not often as full members. In the San Francisco area, women participated during the 1890s in various ways at the fashionable Burlingame Country Club where at least nine of the husbands of the founding members of the Woman's Athletic Club were members. In 1900, women were first admitted as "special golf members" and by 1910 "women were involved in most Club activities" (Postel 1982:84). Although women could play golf at the clubs, the different speeds and styles of play resulted in separate days for men and women on the course at many clubs (Mayo 1998:99). In the 1880s and increasingly in the 1890s, women participated in some yacht club activities on San Francisco Bay, although not as full members (Minor 2004).

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For all the progress that had occurred, at the turn of the century, women's participation in athletics was still limited to a few, mostly college educated or socially elite women, due largely to conservative "assumptions about the role of women in society" (Stanley 1996:65). Much of the literature about women and physical activity still warned against exercise after the age of college graduation. After that time women were expected to conserve their strength for child bearing.

Perhaps a more persuasive constraint on athletic participation was the prevailing view of beauty. An 1878 book title, *How to be Plump*, suggests the dominant view for much of the last half of the 19th century. This began to change in the 1890s among elite women, following the lead of the British actress, Lily Lantry and other European celebrities. When Lantry, who was lean and muscular as a result of daily exercise, first toured the United States in 1882, she was considered freakish. By the turn of the century she was "the most famous professional beauty in the world," (Stanley 1996:72-73) an example to women attracted by golf, tennis, and other activities. In 1901, *Colliers*, magazine published an article representing the new ideal — "The Perils of Obesity" (Stanley 1996:82). Society columns in newspapers covered the outdoor activities of women in rich summer resorts like Newport, Rhode Island and Monterey, California, helping to make physically active women appear desirable and establishing an association of sports with elite society (Stanley 1996:75-76). In 1899, *Physical Culture*, a long-lived popular periodical began publication, with its core message for women: "Exercise would produce not just strength but also health, vigor, suppleness, and above all beauty." (Stanley 1996:79).

Public attitudes toward athletics for women began to change by 1900: "Sport for wealthy women entered a new era when prominent society women founded the Chicago Women's Athletic Club" and the Berkeley Ladies Athletic Club in New York between 1899 and 1901. (Cahn 1994:17; Stanley 1996:77). Unlike the Allen Gymnasium in Boston and the YWCAs, these were the prototypes for a new type of athletic club for women, combining athletic facilities with the comforts and amenities of an elite women's social club.

The idea for an athletic club for women in San Francisco came when Elizabeth Pillsbury of San Francisco returned home inspired by a 1912 visit to the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago. Judging from a 1903 article in *Good Housekeeping*, California was fertile ground for such a club: "if any American girl needed a role model, she should look to California. On average the West Coast girl grew to be taller, heavier, stronger, and prettier than the Eastern girl. The reason for this superiority was readily apparent to [the author]. The warm climate enabled the California girl to ride, swim, walk, or golf all year in clean, fresh air. These activities led to greater health which in turn produced greater beauty." (Stanley 1996:64). According to the *San*

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*Francisco Chronicle*, referring to the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, "the desire of its builders is to afford, not a retreat from California outdoor life, but a supplement to it (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1917a).

About the time construction began on the clubhouse, Grace Armistead Doyle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, "Perhaps nothing that has taken place within the past few years gives one a better idea of the change of views of the world at large toward its feminine contingent or of femininities change of views toward the old-time scheme of things, than the establishment of women's athletic clubs."(Doyle 1915).

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco opened in 1917, the first women's athletic club west of Chicago. Following its doubling in size in 1923, the *San Francisco Examiner* called it "the largest of its kind in America (*San Francisco Examiner* 1923). The slightly smaller Woman's Athletic Club of Los Angeles opened in 1925 (Dubrow 1991:220). The Woman's Athletic Club of Oakland (now the Bellview Club) opened in 1929 (Marvin 2003). That the desire for women's athletic facilities was greater than these elite women's clubs is evident in the presence of an employee's gymnasium and promenade roof at San Francisco's Lord and Taylor store that opened in 1914 (Benson 1986:144), in the proliferation of YWCAs, and in places like the new Girls' Recreation and Home Club of 1921 in San Francisco (Lyons 1922:128).

"The Athletic Club Idea" continued to spread outside of California as well. In 1927, the Illinois Women's Athletic Club opened a new building — "the largest clubhouse for women in the world" (Foster 1926:22).

In announcing the formation of the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, Cholly Francisco, the society page writer for the *San Francisco Examiner*, wrote about the role of "the Renaissance of the Greek ideal" of beauty and strength in inspiring its members. "The ancient desire of making the body a finer instrument more readily obedient to the mind, is insistently apparent in the activities of the dominating class of society to-day. Above all is this time of the world wherein women express themselves. The simplicity, directness, and strength, elemental in Greek art, are forces which are opening new worlds for women today." In other words, there is a direct relationship between women's physical condition and the growing role of women in modern society. "If it is true that motion liberates thought, then the hand ball court and the gymnasium must bear their responsibility for woman's growing importance in the world's affairs." For anyone reading these words, "woman's growing importance in the worlds' affairs" was most of all a function of suffrage. California women obtained the right to vote in 1911; the struggle for women's right to vote in federal elections was still going on, not to be won until 1919.

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(Francisco 1914a). The Greek ideal was still alive at the club six years later after it had opened when Mrs. Diana Watts of the American School of Archeology lectured on "The Reconstruction of Physical Training According to the Principles of Ancient Greek Development" (WAC *Bulletin* January 1920).

When the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco was in its planning stages, the newspaper reported in 1914 that its activities would including fencing, gymnastics, swimming, tennis, handball, and boxing. (*San Francisco Examiner* 1914). In 1915, as the plans developed, gymnastics; dancing; swimming; chiropody (for foot ailments); a bathing department including Turkish baths, hydro-therapeutics, massage, and oil rub; shoe shine; and hairdressing were all projected (Driscoll 1915:25) — for the twin goals of fitness and beauty. When the club opened in 1917, gymnastics, swimming, dancing, basketball, fencing, hockey, volleyball, and tennis were all offered (WAC *Bulletin* 1917). The athletic activities and facilities of the club were similar to those in the earlier Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago and the later Woman's Athletic Club of Los Angeles.

In 1923, the year that the addition to the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco was completed, the widespread acceptance of the importance of athletics for women was recognized in a White House conference on women's athletics (Zophy 1990:49). In the 1920s, "the sportswoman became a dominant cultural symbol," widely recognized in the press and pictured in advertisements (Stanley 1996:88-89, 95).

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco flourished during this period. In 1929, there were active basketball, swimming, and tennis teams, which played against outside teams including the YWCA, Castilleja School, Beresford Country Club, and Burlingame Country Club (WAC *Bulletin* April-September 1929). In addition, there was a more explicit availability of weight-reducing activities with Health and Reducing Classes and Clogging Lessons — "an excellent reducing exercise. It is simple to learn and keeps one young and agile." While the athletic facilities were actively used, the club remained primarily a place for non-competitive exercise. An article in the Woman's Athletic Club concluded, "If doubts are sometimes expressed as to whether women take athletics seriously, as to whether they wish to keep fit or just get thin, as to whether they appreciate and enjoy straight sport, the answer seems to be as varied as the questions, for there are all kinds and ages of women joining the modern athletic club with all kinds of motives." (Maddux 1928:34).

In 1928, the *Woman's Journal*, originally a suffragist magazine, reported with reference to women's athletic clubs on "the successful results of such ventures all over the country, among



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which there is no more signal success than the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco"— "its example may be of use to other communities." (Maddux 1928:32).

Public attitudes toward women in athletics changed radically and abruptly in the late 1920s and 1930s. While there was no retreat on the importance of physical exercise for women, the idea of intense athletic competition for women was rejected by many, perhaps crystallized by a perception of harsh experiences at the 1928 Olympics — the first Olympics in which women competed in track and field. Efforts arose to reduce team competition in basketball and track and field in particular. In the late 1920s, most women's colleges gave up intercollegiate sports after twenty or thirty years of competition (Stanley 1996:106-115).

Athletic activities continued at the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco during the 1930s at a reduced level reflecting the smaller membership during the Depression. In the 1940s, the athletic program of the club appears to have gathered new energy, perhaps in part due to the influx of military servicewomen in that period. In 1941, the club staged its first of many Aquacades, inspired by a show at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. In April 1941, there was a diving exhibition by the women's national champion (WAC Bulletin April 1941). In that year, hula dancing and badminton were popular activities. In 1945, Barbara Jensen, a junior member, set the American record in the 100 meter backstroke (WAC Bulletin October 1945). In 1948, five members of the United States Olympic swimming team were made honorary members of the club. The pool "attracted many swimmers and divers of national and international reputation, both as participants and instructors." (Wilson 1962:12). In 1951, the interscholastic Swimming Meet of private Bay Area girl's schools was held at the club (WAC Bulletin November 1951). In 1953 and 1955, Woman's Athletic Club swimmers competed in east coast competitions (Wilson 1962:12).

With demographic changes after World War II associated with the movement of many of those who could afford it to the suburbs, the role of the club in many member's lives changed. In the 1950s and 1960s, many clubmembers who had lived in the city moved out. Some members left the club or became less active. The programs for children and teenagers in particular declined as new kinds of clubs and activities were available in the suburbs. The change of the club name in 1966 from Woman's Athletic Club to Metropolitan Club reflected the diminished attraction of the athletic facilities for many members. At the same time, until 1966, if not later, the club continued to function as the largest and most active women's athletic club in northern California.

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### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SAN FRANCISCO WOMEN'S CLUBS

The history of women's clubs in San Francisco is related to a larger development, often referred to as the Women's Club Movement. (Dubrow 1991:185). The Women's Club Movement began in the 1860s and 1870s when women's clubs were established throughout the United States by women who had been active in social causes such as better education for women, emancipation, human rights, and women's rights. Two of the best-known of these early clubs were the New England Woman's Club in Boston and the Sorosis Club of New York, both established in 1868. Clubs with both names were subsequently established in other cities, including San Francisco. The Sorosis Club was formed after one prominent woman, Jennie June Croly, was banned from hearing Charles Dickens speak at the Press Club of New York. (Croly 1898:11, passim). Writing about this early period, Mrs. Croly said, "When the history of the nineteenth century comes to be written, women will appear as organizers and leaders of great organized movements among their own sex for the first time in the history of the world" (Croly 1898:1).

Women's clubs were formed in large numbers for changing reasons through the 1920s. By 1933, Sophonisba Breckinridge, a professor at the University of Chicago, wrote that women had formed "a bewildering number of organizations" for every conceivable purpose (Breckinridge 1933:11).

According to the 1942 *Handbook for Clubwomen*, "Every city, town, and village in the country has its quota of women's clubs. In some cities the number of women's organizations runs into hundreds. Nobody knows the total number of clubwomen, but the figure is well over three million. (Munro 1942:3).

The reaction of men and the press to the existence of women's clubs changed over time. *The Woman Citizen* reported that in 1905, ex-President Grover Cleveland "gravely pointed out the menace of the women's clubs" — they threatened home life and those who advocated suffrage were subversive. By 1925, however, "it would be hard to find a President or Vice-President or other highly placed official . . . who doesn't know and realize and acknowledge that this great aggregation of women is primarily concerned with making a better world, and that its influence is beneficial." (*Woman Citizen* 1925:17).

One of the principal changes within the Women's Club Movement was a shift of status: "Around the turn of the century, memberships in women's clubs became a symbol of elite status. Newspapers made lists of the 'fashionable clubs.' By definition these clubs were filled with

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affluent women, but the term *fashionable* implied something more: popularity and desirability.”  
(Gullett 2000:117-118).

In the pattern of other cities in the United States, San Francisco women first organized groups with social purposes and political goals. When women were still a distinct minority of the population, the California Woman Suffrage Society held its first annual meeting in 1871 and the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) began meeting about 1880. (Hansen 1975:45).

Beginning in 1885, many new organizations were formed in San Francisco for a wider range of purposes, including the Pacific Coast Association of Collegiate Alumnae (1885), the Laurel Hall Club (1886), Associated Charities of San Francisco (1887), the Century Club (1888), the Mills Club (1889), the Pacific Coast Woman's Press Association (1890), the Sorosis Club (1893), the Town and Country Club (1893), the Philomath Club (1894), the Forum Club (1895), the California Club (1897), the Corona Club (1898), the Clionian Club (1898), the Daughters of California Pioneers (1900), the Association of Pioneer Women of California (1901), the Francisca Club (1903), the Cap and Bells Club (1904), the San Francisco Colony of New England Women (1905), the Vittoria Colonna Club (1909), and the Kate Kennedy School Women's Club (1910). (California Federation of Women's Clubs 1916: passim; Gullett 2000:34-35).

As their names suggest, some of these clubs were based on affiliation with particular schools or colleges or on graduation from a college. Some had a mission of helping the poor. Some existed to foster discussion about matters of interest to women. Some were based on family heritage.

Among the most successful, the Century Club “promoted women's intellectual advancement and their involvement in public service” through study groups. “Activists formed the Century Club with the vision of its uniting professional and upper-class women and training them to serve as patrician leaders in community betterment” (Gullett 2000:41, 50-51).

After suffrage was defeated in 1896, the California Club was founded as an activist pro-suffrage organization. As it evolved, it established a Civic Department, “active in every branch of civic demand”; a Social Science Department for hospital and welfare work; an Educational Department; and the Outdoor Art League — “the City Beautiful arm of the California Club,” affiliated with the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco. (Gullett 2000:137; Lyons 1922:53).

The Town and Country Club, sometimes called the Woman's Book Club in the beginning, was a social club — like several prestigious men's clubs. As such it was a pioneer, described by the

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*New York Sun*: "A unique club for women has been started in San Francisco. This is the first club organized by women with no underlying motive to uplift the world or themselves" (Town and County Club 1993:9-10). Four of the founding members of the Woman's Athletic Club were members of the Town and Country Club.

The Francisca Club was also a social club, a spin-off of the Town and Country Club. Among the five founders of the Francisca Club in 1903 was one, Lucie King Harris, who was later a founding director of the Woman's Athletic Club. Another, Molly Thomas McMullin, was president of the Francisca Club in 1913-1914, and vice-president of the Woman's Athletic Club in 1915. Nine of the founding members of the Woman's Athletic Club were members of the Francisca Club.

The Woman's Athletic Club opened in 1917 and expanded in 1923 — the first athletic club for women west of Chicago. According to the *Wasp*, "It pioneered the way for other women's clubs to build their homes near town, in what is now the club district of the city" (*Wasp* 1924). The YWCA, with a swimming pool, built next door in 1918-1919, the Francisca Club built a half block away in 1919-1920, and the San Francisco Women's Building opened between the Woman's Athletic Club and the Francisca Club in 1927.

The last major downtown development representing San Francisco women's clubs before World War II was not so much a single club as a center for clubs and clubwomen. The San Francisco Women's Building, was described when it opened in 1927 as a "civic center for women." (SFAH 2003). Later called the Marine's Memorial Building, this building had dining rooms, a theater, a swimming pool, hotel rooms, and club rooms for rent to small clubs. In 1972, the Women's City Club, which opened in the new tower addition to the St. Francis Hotel, included a swimming pool.

Altogether, San Francisco's women's clubs from the 1860s to the 1920s were products of the Women's Club Movement. The founding of clubs during that period reflected the efforts of women to participate in public life, to end their social isolation, to influence American society on a wide range of issues, to gain equal rights, and to improve themselves — intellectually, physical, and artistically. While participation in club life extended these efforts beyond the end of the Women's Club Movement, the role of women's clubs gradually changed. Women's beginning to vote in 1920 emboldened women and the club movement, but it also undermined one of the motivations for the movement. The gradually increasing access to higher education for women diminished the significance of clubs as centers of literary discussion, political debate, and educational lectures. The gradually increasing presence of women in professional jobs

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removed some of the motivations of the club movement. The huge increase of the federal government in social programs during the Depression, beginning in 1934, took over some of the charitable and social roles previously performed by women. The cumulative effect of these gradual changes was probably not significant until World War II when many women served in the armed forces and many others worked in war industries or in other jobs vacated by men. After the war, social and demographic changes substantially altered the role of women and women's clubs in American society.

### EVALUATION

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of Social History at the local level of significance.

The club is significant as the first women's athletic club west of Chicago when it opened in 1917 and as the largest such club in the country after its expansion in 1923. Women's athletic clubs were distinctive and important types of clubs produced by the Women's Club Movement (1860s to 1920s). It was also significant in San Francisco where its construction served as the catalyst for the emergence of a women's club district in the 1920s — a concentration of several of the most important women's organizations in San Francisco. The property is significant for the period 1917 to 1954, from the time the club opened until fifty years ago. The club continued as the largest and most active women's athletic club in northern California until 1966 when the name was changed, if not later. The only event that might provide a basis for a different period of significance is the name change from Woman's Athletic Club to Metropolitan Club in 1966. Because this event is less than fifty years old and the property does not appear to possess exceptional importance under criteria consideration G for "properties that have achieved significance within the last fifty years," the period of significance ends fifty years ago in 1954.

### CRITERION C: ARCHITECTURE

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HISTORY OF THE CLUBHOUSE AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

##### Site

The Woman's Athletic Club was built northwest of Union Square in an area that was first surveyed into blocks and lots by Jasper O'Farrell in 1847. The site of the club was located in what was first called block 193 in the 50 Vara Survey. According to a brief history of the

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property, "The site was originally a steep brush-covered sandy slope just north of a large sheltered flat adjacent to the east-trending sand dune area that covered the present 'Union Square' district." The first building on the site appears to have been a small dwelling in 1865. Three more dwellings were built on the site in 1874 and the first dwelling was replaced by a large boarding house — The Westminster House — in 1875. By 1894, the entire site was owned by Andrew B. McCreery, described at the time as a capitalist. (Lampen 1989-1991).

The buildings on the block were mostly or entirely built of wood. If they were not destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, their remnants were destroyed by the subsequent fire.

A 1906 map of the block shows that McCreery owned at least one third of the block in that year, including the future site of the Woman's Athletic Club and a larger adjacent area offset to the northeast with frontage on Bush Street (San Francisco 1906). In 1908 a suit was filed challenging McCreery's ownership of land in the block. In 1909, he won five judgements confirming his title to this site and the others (San Francisco n.d.1). In 1913, McCreery sold the entire future site of the Woman's Athletic Club (137.5 by 137.5 feet) to Caius Tacitus Ryland (San Francisco n.d.2), the eldest son of a wealthy banker and real estate developer in Santa Clara County (Shuck 1901:548-549). By mid 1914, Ryland was discussing the development of the site for the Woman's Athletic Club. When plans were ready for the building, arrangements were made for Ryland to build it on half of the square site. Construction began at the end of 1915 on the east half of the property fronting 68.75 feet on Sutter Street, designated lot 5. The other half of the property, also fronting 68.75 feet on Sutter Street, was designated lot 5A. Lot 5A remained vacant until the Woman's Athletic Club bought it in 1923, whereupon the club began construction of an addition that doubled the size of the building. The Club bought the original lot — lot 5 — from Ryland's estate in 1923 about the time the addition was completed. After the addition was completed, the two lots were merged into a single lot, now known as lot 22.

The parking lot next door, known as lot 6, was owned by Blanche S. Norton (or Morton) and Maud Smith by 1894 (Lampen 1989-1991). In 1906, Norton was the sole owner. The lot was sold several times before it was purchased by the club from the former club president, Edna Black, in 1925. When lot 6 was first acquired by the club, it included a ten-foot easement from the middle of the lot to Taylor Street across the north ends of lots 7, 8, and 9 (San Francisco Recorder 1925).

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## Neighborhood

The site of the building was chosen for several reasons. It was a short distance from Union Square. It was located on a streetcar line linked to a neighborhood where many members lived. And, it was located in a district that was developing a concentration of clubs.

The area around Union Square was the center of the most fashionable shopping district in San Francisco. In a dissertation on "Women and Public Space in San Francisco, 1890-1915" Jessica Sewell wrote about the area: "The downtown shopping district was the most commonly experienced shopping landscape for upper class women . . . Downtown functioned as a kind of main street for rich women, and they commonly visited its restaurants for club meetings and socials, and rested and wrote letters in downtown hotel parlors. This was a space within which upper-class women felt comfortable." (Sewell 2000:123). In addition, working class women formed a large part of the work force, and middle-class women also came to the area to shop or window shop. Altogether, the area was overwhelmingly populated by women. Whereas in 1896 women were like "visitors in public space," by 1911 women were "full participants in public space," and nowhere more so than Union Square. The Union Square area was a natural place to build a woman's club.

For residents of Pacific Heights, where most of the founding members of the Woman's Athletic Club lived, the best route to Union Square was on the Sutter Street streetcar. Even upper middle class women with automobiles took the streetcar during the early years of the club. (Although the club bought the vacant lot next door in 1925, it did not have a parking lot until 1935.) "Some mid-day streetcars along Sutter Street leading from an upper-middle class residential area to the downtown shopping district were even designated as . . . 'shopper's specials' and were populated entirely by women." (Sewell 2000:87).

Before the club chose its site, many other establishments that catered to women located along Sutter Street. By 1909, the eight-story Rose Building, the Goldberg-Bowen delicatessen, the White House Department store, and Hammersmith Jewelry were all located on Sutter Street downhill from the site of the Woman's Athletic Club. Closer to the clubhouse, in 1909, Vickery, Atkins and Torrey, a fashionable and renowned art goods store, built a two-story building at 550-556 Sutter Street, one block away. In 1912, construction began on the Beresford Hotel, "a high-class hostelry" across the street at 635 Sutter Street. Once the Woman's Athletic Club was underway, it became part of the street's attraction for new businesses and institutions catering to women. In 1915, a two-story building was erected at 600-608 Sutter Street at the northwest corner of Sutter and Mason streets, described as housing studio, art, and auction rooms. This

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building was later occupied by the Manson School for Private Secretaries and by the Curtis Stewart Fur company. In 1916, the Print Rooms of Hill Tollerton opened in a new building at 540 Sutter Street. (SFAH 2003: *San Francisco Chronicle* 27 July 1912; property files).

In addition to these businesses, the two blocks of Sutter Street between Powell and Taylor streets developed as San Francisco's densest concentration of women's clubs. Before the Woman's Athletic Club was formed, the Francisca Club rented space above Vickery, Atkins and Torrey beginning in 1909, and the Sorosis Club built its clubhouse at 532-536 Sutter Street in 1910. In 1916, the Cap and Bells Club was at 315 Sutter, the Papyrus Club was at 420 Sutter, the Forum Club was at 525 Sutter, the Corona and Mills clubs were at 536 Sutter, and the Council of Jewish Women was around the corner at 430 Mason — all in rented quarters. (California Federation of Women's Clubs 1916: *passim*). After the opening of the Woman's Athletic Club in 1917, the YWCA was built next door at 620 Sutter Street in 1918, the Francisca Club gave up its rented quarters and built its own permanent clubhouse at 595 Sutter Street in 1919, and the twelve-story Woman's Club of San Francisco was built at 609 Sutter Street in 1927. (SFAH 2003)

In reference to the 500 block of Sutter Street, the block adjacent to the Woman's Athletic Club to the east, on 6 November 1920, the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote: "This block on Sutter Street is the home of the smart decorators shops of the city and many of the fashionable women's clubs." Among the highly prestigious San Francisco women's clubs not located on Sutter Street, the Town and Country Club was on Stockton facing Union Square and two others were located outside of the Union Square area. These clubs, the Century Club and the California Club, were both built within a block of Van Ness Avenue several blocks to the west. (SFAH 2004).

In addition to its proximity to other women's clubs, the Woman's Athletic Club was built near several men's clubs. Most pertinent, the Woman's Athletic Club was built a short distance from its male counterpart, the Olympic Club, located on Post Street between Mason and Taylor streets in a building begun in 1906. The Olympic Garage was built by the Olympic Club for its members across the street from the Woman's Athletic Club in 1918. The Bohemian Club, the Argonaut Club, the Press Club, the Elks Club, the Family Club, and the Union League Club were all within a few blocks of the Woman's Athletic Club and all near Union Square. In addition, the Pacific Union Club, the Southern Club, and the University Club were all up the hill on California Street (Corbett 1979).

Following the example of a two-block area in Los Angeles with three major women's clubs (the Friday Morning Club, the Woman's Athletic Club, and the YWCA), which has been referred to as "the Civic Center of Women's Activities" (Dubrow 1991: 203), the Woman's Athletic Club of



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San Francisco sits at the heart of a more extensive center of early twentieth-century women's organizations and activities in San Francisco.

**Building**

Early on, the efforts to create the Woman's Athletic Club led to planning for a clubhouse. Unlike many women's clubs which first existed in members homes or in rented space (e.g., Century Club, California Club, Town and Country Club, Sorosis Club, and Francisca Club), the Woman's Athletic Club did not exist until its building opened in January 1917. Until then, ideas about the club underwent several phases.

The first information about the clubhouse comes from a newspaper article in June 1914. At that time, the architects, Bliss & Faville were working on designs for a four-story building that would house both the Woman's Athletic Club and other women's clubs. The club was to be "parallel to the best men's clubs in the city" and comparable to the Olympic Club, the nearby men's athletic club. (*San Francisco Examiner* 1914).

*Building and Engineering News* reported in January 1915 preliminary plans for a \$40,000 two-story and basement building with "a thoroughly equipped gymnasium," offices, reading rooms, and lunch rooms. This was to be of Class C construction, the least expensive and least fireproof building allowed under the building law for that location — its interior frame was to be heavy timber (BEN 1915: 20 January 1915). Nevertheless, the *San Francisco Examiner* praised its luxurious appointments and conveniences"; the *Examiner* also pointed out that these revised plans did not provide space for other clubs (*San Francisco Examiner* 1915a).

In May 1915, the *Examiner* reported that "plans have been submitted" (*San Francisco Examiner* 1915b). In August 1915, the *Examiner* said that plans had been approved, \$100,000 financing was pledged, and construction would start within two months. In this version of the building, "The interior will not be elaborate, but will be comfortable." (*San Francisco Examiner* 1915c). The September 1915, *Building and Engineering News* described plans for the building "being prepared" at that time. It was to be of Class A construction — considered "fireproof" — with a steel frame, concrete floors, interior hollow tile partition walls, and metal windows. It was to have steam heat, an oil-burning furnace, an elevator, and a heated concrete swimming pool. The Sutter Street facade was to be faced with expensive materials — pressed brick with terra cotta ornament (BEN 1915: 8 September 1915, p. 16). During the first two weeks of December, revisions were made and costs were figured (BEN 1915: 1 December 1915, p. 13, 8 December 1915, p. 16).

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On 11 December 1915, C.T. Ryland, owner of the property, applied for a building permit for a seven-story building to cost \$95,000. This was a steel frame structure with reinforced concrete footings, foundations, and basement. The exterior walls were described as "reinforced brick" — if true, this was an unusual example at the time of a San Francisco building designed specifically to withstand earthquake stresses. The permit described a building similar in most respects to the proposal of a few months earlier. The principal difference was the use of wood floor joists above the first floor. The use of wood joists was a change that provided for a building that was less expensive and also less fire resistant under the code (San Francisco Board of Public Works 11 December 1915). The identification of seven stories rather than four appears simply to call out mezzanines and a penthouse in addition to the principal floors. In an article published four days after the building permit, *Building and Engineering News* described the accepted plans, which had gone out for bids, as for a four-story and basement building of Class B construction (BEN 1915: 15 December 1915, p. 14-15).

On 12 January 1916, *Building and Engineering News* listed accepted contracts whose total value was more than half of the estimated revised total of \$110,000: P. Montague Company (excavation; \$2,900), Victor Stanquist (concrete; \$7,550), Dyer Brothers (steel; \$16,900), J. Harold Johnson (carpentry; \$13,800), James H. Pinkerton (plumbing; \$6,200), Forderer Cornice Works (sheet metal; \$1,122), and J.C. McLeod (plastering; \$7,389) (BEN 12 January 1916). In March, a contract was let to Central Electric Company (electrical; \$1,743) (BEN 1 March 1916). No contracts or costs for painting, terra cotta, hardware, elevator, kitchen, equipment, furnishings, or other features have been found.

Construction of the club began in 1916 and took about one year. The club opened in January 1917.

The first expansion of the club was a small addition at the rear, undertaken without a comprehensive assessment of the club's needs. In July 1919, the club applied for a permit for a steel frame and reinforced concrete kitchen addition to cost \$3,000. The designer was T. Ronneberg, Engineer (San Francisco Board of Public Works 7 July 1919).

After a thorough study of the inadequacies of the existing club and an analysis of financing possibilities, the architects of the original building, Bliss & Faville, prepared plans for an addition that would roughly double the size of the club. An incomplete set of plans in possession of the Metropolitan Club, was dated 8 February 1922 and revised 19 September 1922.

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*Building and Engineering News* reported early in September 1922 that grading contracts had been awarded and that construction would be in charge of A.A. Brown of the San Francisco Motor Drayage Company. The addition was to cost \$250,000. (*BEN* 2 September 1922). Two weeks later, the following contracts were awarded: Mission Concrete Company (concrete and carpentry), J. McLeod (plumbing), Scott Company (heating), A. Quandt & Son (painting), C.J. Hillard Company (ornamental iron), Heidt (or Heldt) Cornice Works (sheet metal), Otis Elevator Company (elevator), W.P. Fuller & Company (glass and glazing), Standard Electric Company (electrical), and Atlas Roofing Company (roofing). No decision had been made on marble and plastering contractors (*BEN* 16 September 1922).

Except for excavating, construction on the addition did not begin right away, however. The building permit was withdrawn 9 November 1922 and only re-approved after an agreement to build "concrete retaining walls from street line to bottom of excavations, resetting of granite curbs", and a temporary sidewalk (San Francisco Board of Public Works 9 November 1922; 13 November 1922). Thus, construction on the addition itself began in November or December 1922.

Construction took about a year and was completed in December 1923.

Following completion of the addition, building permit records show numerous alterations to the club between 1929 and 2003. Most of these were minor and had little impact on the appearance or overall functioning of the club. Among these were several designed by prominent architects or engineers. In 1929, Bliss & Fairweather, successor to Bliss & Faville, designed kitchen alterations; in 1936, Douglas Dacre Stone designed alterations to "treatment rooms"; in 1948 and 1949 minor alterations to the lobby were designed by Clifford Conly, Jr.; in 1950, bedroom alterations were designed by Joseph Esherick; and in 1967 H.J. Brunnier, engineer, prepared plans to remove existing skylights.

In 1965, the Brookman Company, general contractor, prepared plans for a significant change: "suspend Celotex Corporation Class A Incombustible Safetone Mineral Board in steel grid from existing slab in second floor gymnasium." In 1967, the elevator doors were all replaced; in 1971, 1981, and 1989, a fire sprinkler system was installed and improved; in 1974, the shower room tile walls were replaced; in 1975, concrete was repaired around the pool according to plans by Nishkian Hammil & Associates; in 1979, the parapet was reinforced according to plans by Peter Culley & Associates. In 1983 and 1984, Hertzka & Knowles designed alterations to the kitchen and installed smoke barriers in the main stairway.

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Two expensive alterations were undertaken in the 1980s. In 1987, new shower rooms were built on the first floor at a cost of \$101,000. In 1989, Hertzka & Knowles designed an "interior remodel upgrade of athletic facilities" at a cost of \$250,000.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: BLISS & FAVILLE

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco was designed by the San Francisco architectural firm, Bliss & Faville — Walter Danforth Bliss and William Baker Faville. Bliss & Faville was established in San Francisco in 1898 and dissolved in 1925. In 1926, Bliss joined Julian Stewart Fairweather in a new firm — Bliss & Fairweather — until 1951, and Faville continued in practice on his own until the 1940s.

Bliss (1872-1956) was the son of Duane L. Bliss a wealthy Lake Tahoe lumberman, banker, and developer of railroads, steamship lines, and a resort. When Walter Bliss was engaged to be married in 1910, the *San Francisco Call* stated that, "The Bliss family is numbered among the wealthiest in the city." His fiancé, Edith Pillsbury, "belongs to one of the oldest families of the city . . . She has traveled abroad a great deal and is exceptionally well educated in music and art." Her brother, Horace D. Pillsbury, was a founder of the prominent San Francisco law firm Pillsbury, Madison, & Sutro. (*San Francisco Call* 1910). Bliss graduated from M.I.T. in 1895. From 1895 to 1898 he worked for McKim, Mead and White in New York.

Faville (1866-1947) was born in San Andreas, California but grew up in Buffalo, New York, where he apprenticed with Green & Wicks. He graduated in 1896 from M.I.T. in architecture after a special program of study in 1894-1895, after which he stayed briefly to teach. From 1895 to 1898, Faville worked for McKim, Mead & White in New York.

Bliss and Faville met at M.I.T. and worked together in the offices of McKim, Mead & White, at that time the largest and best-known architectural firm in the United States. Two years before they started, McKim, Mead & White had 110 employees — the high point for the firm. During the depression of the 1890s, however, "the staff had to be cut back to about fifty-five." (Roth 1978: 35). It is not known whether the depressed economy contributed to Bliss's and Faville's leaving New York. During the years Bliss and Faville were in the office, McKim, Mead & White's projects included the Rhode Island State House, several buildings at Columbia University and New York University, the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (Brooklyn Museum), the University Club (New York), the Harvard Club (New York), and a gymnasium at Radcliffe College. (Placzek 1982: vol. 3 p. 150). It is not known what projects the two young architects worked on.

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In addition to their designs, McKim, Mead & White played a major role in American architecture by training architects in their office and by the example of their large office organization. Like other firms of the time, they operated somewhat like an atelier associated with the Ecoles des Beaux Arts in Paris, the leading architectural school in the world. Many young architects left the firm to establish major firms or partnerships of their own, including Cass Gilbert, Henry Bacon, Carrere and Hastings, York and Sawyer, John Mead Howells, and John Galen Howard. "Many of these offshoot offices established themselves in New York, while others became important in cities across the country," including Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Joseph, Missouri, and Portland, Oregon. "Bliss & Faville carried the classicizing influences of McKim, Mead & White to San Francisco." (Roth 1978: xl-xli).

Bliss & Faville started their practice in San Francisco in the Claus Spreckels Building in 1898, and moved to the Crocker Building from 1900 to 1906. Their presence in these fashionable new buildings, designed by the Reid Brothers and A. Page Brown, respectively, asserted their architectural convictions and ambitions. They saw themselves as representing the latest developments in architecture which was more advanced in New York and other eastern cities than in San Francisco. They were ready to design large modern, fire-proof structures for a large new scale of business clients. They sought to express the purposes, organizations, and character of buildings and their clients by drawing on the example of Renaissance architecture — especially the Italian Renaissance.

In 1901, when California's new architectural licensing law took effect, Bliss and Faville each received a license without any examination — on the basis of their experience alone. Through Bliss' father's connections, they started their practice with several houses for prominent San Francisco families and with the sprawling, shingled Tahoe Tavern near Tahoe City in 1901. "Early on in their career the firm was commissioned by Charles F. Crocker to design the St. Francis Hotel on Powell Street opposite Union Square. Crocker sent the pair on a trip to Europe to study the finest hotels in London and Paris." (Parry 2004). The St. Francis opened in 1904.

In the years after the earthquake, Bliss & Faville continued to design houses for prominent San Francisco families including several who would later be associated with the early years of the Woman's Athletic Club — I.W. Hellman, Erhman, W.M. Newhall, R.D. Girvin, and various members of the Bliss family. Most of these houses drew on the Italian Renaissance for inspiration.

Between 1906 and 1914, they also designed an impressive number of large and imposing commercial and institutional buildings. Many of these were based on the work of McKim, Mead

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& White — both work done when Bliss & Faville were in that office and work done after they left. They maintained their connection to McKim, Mead & White through publications and as supervising architects for a McKim, Mead & White project at the University of Nevada in Reno in 1906-1908 — the “Mackay School of Mines and replanning the campus” (Roth 1978: 103, 201).

The most prominent of Bliss & Faville's designs before their work on the Woman's Athletic Club were the Bank of California based on the Knickerbocker Trust of New York by McKim, Mead & White — through Duane Bliss' business partner, Darius Ogden Mills; the Diocesan House for the Episcopal Bishop of California; the Oakland Public Library, based on the Boston Public Library by McKim, Mead & White; the Savings Union Bank & Trust Company, which resembles several banks and other buildings by McKim, Mead & White; the Columbia Theater (now the Geary Theater); the Hospital for Children and Training School for Nurses and the Hotel Oakland, which are both similar in part to the courtyard of the Boston Public Library; the Liverpool and London and Globe Insurance Company Building; the Balboa Building, where Bliss & Faville located their offices beginning in 1907; the University Club; and the Masonic Temple. (Cahill 1914: passim.).

The frequently obvious basis of Bliss & Faville's designs on prototypes by McKim, Mead & White was praised in the architectural press. Speaking of the Bank of California, “The general resemblance of the design to that of the building of the Knickerbocker Trust Company in New York will, of course, strike everyone who is familiar with the latter building; but the architects are to be congratulated rather than condemned for their frank and intelligent attempt to make under happier conditions a revised version of a good thing.” (*Architectural Record* 1906: 471).

A lengthy article in the *Architect and Engineer* in January 1914 by B.J.S. Cahill, a prominent critic, praised this work. “The career of Bliss & Faville, the architects,” has produced “results that have brought credit to the status of architecture on the Pacific Coast, as well as inspiration to their brethren and pleasure to the public, who enjoy the many-sided benefits conferred by well-arranged and beautiful buildings.” (Cahill 1914: 48). He characterized aspects of the work as influenced by “the traditions of the foster firm or master . . . where apprenticeship was served” — i.e., McKim, Mead & White; as “fixed along definite lines that are distinctly Italian”; and as loosely and inventively based on tradition — “it is a style in which materials of the cheaper kind such as brick and terra cotta are wrought into forms of unexpected elegance — where considerations of color and texture give new charm to old motives and where by the magic of the builder's craft inert masses of material take on a new glamour of poetry and romance.” (Cahill 1914: 48-49).

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In September 1911, about two years before Bliss & Faville was hired by the Woman's Athletic Club, William Faville was appointed to the Executive Council of the Architectural Commission of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which was responsible for planning and designing the exposition. In addition to his duties on the Executive Council, Faville "was assigned one of the most difficult of all the problems the architecture of the Exposition presented: the continuous outer facade of the whole central group of eight palaces, which should, from without, bond them into one composition" (Todd 1921: volume 1, 294). Faville wrote about this:

In the apportioning of the work of the exposition to the several architects, the treatment of the Great Wall was assigned to the writer, he having suggested the idea, and to the firm of Messrs. Bliss & Faville was entrusted the development of these eight buildings, including the interiors, outer walls, domes, and the walls forming the passageways connecting the various courts (Faville 1915:6).

The principal features of the great wall were "a succession and variety of portals, niches, and arcades of Spanish and Italian origin of great beauty." In addition, Faville designed the Florentine Court and the Venetian Court inside the central group of eight Palaces. (Mullgardt 1915: 9, 100-101).

Some time in 1914, the Woman's Athletic Club hired Bliss & Faville to design their new building. While the reasons for choosing this firm are not recorded, there were connections between the founders of the club and the architects that must have been factors. At least four of the families of the founding members had hired Bliss & Faville to design houses and the architects were part of the same elite social circles as the club women. Most significantly, the club leader was the sister-in-law of Walter Bliss — Elizabeth Taylor Pillsbury was married to Horace Davis Pillsbury, and Horace Pillsbury's sister, Edith, was married to Walter Bliss. Elizabeth Pillsbury and both Bliss and Faville also had ties to Boston where Pillsbury's father was the publisher of the Boston Globe and both architects had studied. In addition, the architects had recently designed the well-received University Club where four of the founders' husbands were members. Finally, the architects and several of the women were deeply involved in preparations for and operation of the P-PIE.

Both partners were involved in the design of the Woman's Athletic Club. Bliss appears to have had the lead in day-to-day contact with the club, as he was referred to in the minutes of the Board of Directors and in Mrs. Bogg's scrapbook. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported in 1915 that Faville "made a particular study of the needs of such a club" (*San Francisco Examiner*

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1915a). Faville may have been too busy with the P-PIE in 1914 to pay much attention to the Woman's Athletic Club. During design and construction of the building he was also busy as president of the San Francisco Chapter of the AIA in 1915-1916.

It may be that substantial responsibility for the design was taken by the head draftsman of the firm and Bliss' future partner, Julian Stewart Fairweather. Fairweather (ca. 1878-1947) joined the firm before 1904. He received his architectural license in 1910. He was president of the San Francisco Chapter of the AIA in 1924-1925, while he was still head draftsman for Bliss & Faville. According to his obituary, he "planned the Matson Building, the Balboa Building, the State Building, the Hotel Oakland, the Western Woman's Club, and the Woman's Athletic Club (Boggs Scrapbook 1947).

During the period of their work on the first phase of the Woman's Athletic Club, Bliss & Faville designed the Southern Pacific Company headquarters on Market Street in San Francisco, based on another McKim, Mead & White design — the Gorham Building in New York. After completion of the Woman's Athletic Club in 1917, Bliss & Faville remained both busy and successful. They won a competition for a new branch of the Bank of Italy at 1 Powell Street in San Francisco with a design based on McKim, Mead & White's University Club in New York. They won another competition for the State Building in the San Francisco Civic Center. They also designed the Matson Building on Market Street and the China Basin Building for Southern Pacific, both in San Francisco around the time they designed the addition to the Woman's Athletic Club.

In June 1922, while the Woman's Athletic Club was under construction, Faville was elected president of the American Institute of Architects in Washington. He served from 1922-1924.

In the period after completion of the Woman's Athletic Club, Bliss & Faville designed the Pacific Telephone Company Building at 420 Bush Street and the Woman's Club building across the street from the Woman's Athletic Club, both in San Francisco.

In the whole of their work, Bliss & Faville was one of the most important architectural firms in San Francisco during the first quarter of the twentieth century — in the consistent quality of their designs and in their cumulative contribution to the character of the downtown area.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: CLUBHOUSE ARCHITECTURE**

There are two parts to the history of American clubhouse architecture. The first is the history of the clubhouse as a building type. The second is the history of the appearance of clubhouses.



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**The Clubhouse as a Building Type**

The eighteenth century London men's club was adapted in American cities during the nineteenth century as a comfortable retreat for wealthy members — typically merchants, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. Because elite clubs were notable for having no other rationale than catering to the social activities of their members, by the late nineteenth century these clubs developed with a predictable repertoire of features — lounges, bars, dining rooms, libraries, smoking rooms, card rooms, and a few overnight rooms. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, after beginning in converted houses or rented spaces, many men's clubs built new luxurious clubhouses.

Women's clubs followed a similar pattern on a later schedule and generally at a smaller scale. After occupying houses or rented space in the beginning, a few women's clubs built their own buildings beginning in the 1890s. According to a 1933 study, the "club house movement" — the period when the most women's clubs were built began about 1894; it ended with the Depression in the early 1930s. In 1933 there were 1,200 women's clubhouses in the United States. Some doubled as public assets — with libraries, auditoriums, or other amenities for the public. Others more closely followed the example of the men's clubs, perhaps replacing smoking rooms with rooms for other purposes. "The most costly club houses — both in plant equipment and in dues to the members — are the athletic clubs, which flourish with such conspicuous success in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago. They offer an infinite variety in their services to their members. Comfortable bedrooms, luxurious libraries, good living rooms, all kinds of athletic equipment, reducing machines, Turkish baths and beauty parlors." (Breckinridge 1933: 43, 82-83).

Apart from accommodating the purpose of the club (i.e., literary discussion, social involvement, or athletics), "Costly club houses provide shelter and living conditions that are comfortable and private — where a woman may have 'a room of her own,' where she may exercise hospitality without the burden of preparation" (Breckinridge 1933:1).

In California, the first purpose-built woman's clubhouses were similar in size to large houses or small hotels or apartment buildings. At the time construction began on the Woman's Athletic Club, every other women's club in the state was residential in scale. The biggest clubs, like the Century Club, at Franklin and Sutter streets in San Francisco, were comparable to large houses. Excepting buildings for the YWCA — a different type of institution — The Woman's Athletic Club appears to have been the first large commercial scale woman's club in California.

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Writing about somewhat different types of women's clubs and organizations in Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco in the early twentieth century, Marta Gutman observed that club leaders "wanted greater symbolic prominence in the urban landscape" (Gutman 2000: 320), a comment that applies equally to the women building the generation of clubhouses represented by the Woman's Athletic Club.

### **The Design of Clubhouses**

Following the development of the clubhouse as a building type, the first designs for women's clubhouses were not only residential in scale, they were usually designed to harmonize with a residential neighborhood, and often looked like houses. By the time Bliss & Faville began designing the Woman's Athletic Club in 1914, there were many well-known women's clubs in California that fit this model. The shingled Town and Gown Club in Berkeley designed by Bernard Maybeck, was built in 1899. The Century Club, the oldest prominent women's club in San Francisco, was designed by Henry A. Schulze in 1905 as a large Renaissance style urban mansion. The Friday Morning Club, the oldest prominent women's club in California and the leading club in Los Angeles at the time, built a Mission Revival style mansion-like clubhouse designed by Julia Morgan in 1908. The La Jolla Women's Club, completed in 1913, was designed by Irving Gill near San Diego in a manner that evoked the missions. Also in 1908, the Adelpian Club, designed by William Wilcox in the Mission Revival Style, was built in Alameda. By 1914, the California Club in San Francisco was shingled, the Ebell Club in Los Angeles was a French Renaissance mansion, and the Ebell Club in Oakland was a half-timbered Tudor Revival style building like a large house or a small apartment building. During the period when the Woman's Athletic Club was in design and construction, Julia Morgan designed the Saratoga Foothill Women's Club like a craftsman bungalow and the shingled Sausalito Women's Club.

If residential clubs in residential styles and residential areas were the rule, two early San Francisco clubs occupied urban buildings in a commercial district. These were small buildings over commercial ground floors in styles that still conveyed associations with a home. The Sorosis Club at 536 Sutter Street rented space that was designed for the club from Vickery, Atkins, and Torrey. The club's facade above a storefront featured a row of rustic Greek columns similar in character to columns on many craftsman-era bungalows. The Town and Country Club above Robertson's bookstore at the southeast corner of Stockton Street and Maiden Lane facing Union Square had conservative brick facades like Colonial-era rowhouses in Boston or Philadelphia.

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About the time the Woman's Athletic Club was first formed, the first of the new major post-1906 men's clubs was built. The Pacific Union Club occupied the expanded and modified nineteenth-century Flood mansion on Nob Hill. In 1912, the Olympic Club completed its new clubhouse on Post Street one block below the Woman's Athletic Club site. This building was based on the Palazzo Massimi in Rome, a Renaissance palazzo with a second level piano nobile housing the main rooms and upper level hotel rooms (*Architect and Engineer* 1910). This was followed by the University Club at Powell and California streets on Nob Hill, which was completed in 1915. The University Club, designed by Bliss & Faville, was also based on the idea of a Renaissance palazzo. However, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the usual clubhouse organization was reversed — here the piano nobile was at the top of the building and hotel rooms were in between the ground level and the piano nobile (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1913).

Designs for the Woman's Athletic Club were prepared in 1914-1915. This was the first women's club in California designed on the model of a Renaissance palazzo. Although not the first in a commercial area, it was the first to adopt a style that was usually associated with business buildings and men's clubs. This style asserted the equality of the Women's Athletic Club with men's clubs and other male institutions.

Following the choice of this style for the Woman's Athletic Club, other women's clubs built in similar styles. The YWCA, designed by Lewis Hobart and completed in 1918, and the Women's Club of San Francisco, designed by Bliss & Faville and completed in 1927 — both in the same block of Sutter Street as the Woman's Athletic Club — both followed the basic stylistic model and composition of the Woman's Athletic Club, with the most important spaces at the bottom and the top, and hotel rooms in between.

Further afield, other large urban women's clubs built new buildings during the ten years after completion of the Woman's Athletic Club, taking a mixed approach to architectural style. In Los Angeles, the Friday Morning Club replaced its mansion clubhouse with a large Mediterranean style building in 1924 (*Architect and Engineer* 1924). In 1926, the Woman's Athletic Club of Los Angeles built a nearby building in a similar style (Foster 1926). In 1926, the Illinois Woman's Athletic Club published a design for "the largest clubhouse for women in the world" (Foster 1926: 22). This was designed with the dominant imagery of a business building. Like so many tall Chicago buildings, the architectural expression of its structure and its height took precedence over the modest application of ornamental details. In 1927, the Plantation Club of Providence, Rhode Island was built with "a colonial atmosphere" (Allinson 1927: 22). In 1928, the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago built a large, new building derived from nineteenth century French classicism (Taussig 1991). In 1928-1929, the Woman's Athletic Club of

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Oakland (now the Belleview Club) was built, designed in the style of a French chateau by Roeth, Bangs, & Couchot (Marvin 2003).

In these larger buildings there continued to be a division of designs into two types. One type emphasized the home-like character of the buildings by choosing styles usually associated with houses. The other, including the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, the Illinois Woman's Athletic Club, and the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago emphasized the equality of their clubs with places for men.

Inside, all women's clubs appear to have sought to create a home-like atmosphere. In a 1927 article referring to women's clubs in Minneapolis, Detroit, St. Paul, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Washington, Boston, Topeka, and Redlands, California, the *Woman Citizen* stated: "The members of the various women's clubs have spared neither time nor effort to make real homes out of their clubhouses" (Herdman 1927: 49).

Because, as was typical, nothing was written about the choice of a Renaissance palazzo as a model for the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, to understand that choice it is necessary to extrapolate from the wider context. "The Renaissance ideal suggests a cultivated society, one of patronage and understanding of the arts; this was implied when the metropolitan leaders of financial and social life embraced it as patrons of architecture." (Whiffen 1981: 270). Leaders of American society in the early twentieth century saw themselves as like the merchant princes of the Renaissance.

Because merchant princes lived in palazzi, elite Americans adopted the palazzo as a model suitable for themselves. Houses, apartment buildings, clubs, and institutional buildings were the types most frequently based on the palazzo in the United States.

To understand the design of the Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco, it is also helpful to explore further the relationship of McKim, Mead & White to Bliss & Faville. In addition to playing a major role in the training of Bliss and Faville who each spent three years in the office, McKim, Mead & White are generally credited with having introduced and maintained the Italian Renaissance as a popular architectural style in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Once the firm had 'discovered' Renaissance classicism as a repertoire of infinite variations that virtually assured balance and decorum, they embraced it wholeheartedly . . . This embrace of Renaissance classicism and the resulting greater reliance on established authority came at an opportune time, for the increasing pressure of business, as it forced the partners to relegate more and more work to their assistants, made it convenient . . . to

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send the men to the library to perfect the details. The partners seem to have sensed, too, the parallel of their own age with that of the Medicis." (Roth 1983: 94).

Throughout their careers, Bliss & Faville based many of their designs on the work of McKim, Mead & White, especially on their Italian Renaissance designs. Among the most notable examples before the Woman's Athletic Club, the Bank of California was based on the Knickerbocker Trust in New York, the Oakland Public Library was based on the Boston Public Library, the Savings Union Bank and Trust Company was based on several banks and institutions, the Hospital for Children and Training School for Nurses and the Hotel Oakland were based on the inner court of the Boston Public Library, and the Administration Building at Atascadero was based on the Low Library at Columbia University and the rotunda at the University of Virginia. After The Woman's Athletic Club which was based on the St. Gabriel's Branch of the New York Public Library, the Bank of Italy at the foot of Powell Street in San Francisco was based on the University Club, and the Southern Pacific Building was based on the Gorham Building.

The initial design of the Woman's Athletic Club, published in August 1915 was a Renaissance palazzo. Like Bliss & Faville's design for the State Building, this initial design was perhaps based in part on the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. It had a two-story rusticated base with a large arched entryway. This was surmounted by two high stories, each with large arched windows. (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1915). By December 1915, the building was redesigned as it was built. This design strikingly resembled St. Gabriel's Branch library in many of its details, including its overall composition, its arch-windowed piano nobile, its escutcheon, its colonnaded upper floor, its gable roof with overhanging eaves, and the palladian motif on its side walls. Writing about the architecture of a group of New York branch libraries by McKim, Mead & White, Robert Stern wrote:

"Perhaps the firm's loveliest library was the restrained, Florentine design of St. Gabriel's Branch (1906-08) at 303 East Thirty-sixth Street. Its heavily rusticated base and ashlar superstructure rose to an open loggia shaded by a projecting red-tile roof carried on sinuously curving iron brackets. Here, more than in their other branches, McKim and his assistant [William] Kendall succeeded in bringing to the problem the same suavity and associational appropriateness that characterized their best townhouse work in the period; here, in a sense, the wisdom of the Renaissance was made available to all in a tough East Side neighborhood." (Stern 1983: 101).

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St. Gabriel's Branch library was in turn inspired by the early Renaissance palazzi of Florence. The most distinctive feature of the library — the upper level colonnade — was based on a type of Florentine palazzo represented by two well-known examples, the Palazzo Guadagni begun after 1503 (Kauffmann 1971: opposite p. 369) and the Palazzo Davanzati from the late fourteenth century. The colonnade at the Palazzo Davanzati, for example, reflects the absence of a central court which was an essential feature of most palazzi. Because Palazzo Davanzati was built on a small site, there was no room for a central court. Instead, "the very large loggia on the top floor provides somewhere for the family to sit on summer evenings." (Murray 1963: 61). St. Gabriel's Branch library had a similar open-air reading area behind its top level colonnade. The four floors of round arched windows in Palazzo Davanzati became two floors of large arched windows — for sunlight — in St. Gabriel's Branch library. Both buildings used rustication on the stone walls and had a single carved stone escutcheon.

As it was built in 1915-1917, the Woman's Athletic Club also lacked an interior court. While it also lacked an open-air space on the top floor, its upper level colonnade symbolized the presence of the two-story tennis court — a high space for what is an amply ventilated and, ordinarily, an outdoor activity.

To say that the design of the Woman's Athletic Club was based on St. Gabriel's and on buildings like the Palazzo Davanzati is not to say that it is identical. While following the models that they admired, the architects were not simply copying a style. True to their training in the Beaux Arts tradition, they were also expressing the interior organization and functions of a building that was thoroughly modern for its day. The windows were not large round arched openings except at the piano nobile. Because one of their major considerations was the cost of the building, they did not use expensive stone or terra cotta for the entire facade. Instead they used a cheap brick for walls and a more expensive material — terra cotta — in a limited way for ornamental trim. In the tension between the rough plain brick and the smooth refined terra cotta, all put together in the image of a Renaissance palazzo, perhaps they intended to suggest something like the uplifting influence of the Woman's Athletic Club on its members and on San Francisco.

When the club was expanded in 1923, the architects lengthened the facade. This presented two design problems — one concerning the entryway and the other concerning the meaning of the upper level colonnade. In a published illustration of the proposed facade in 1920, the original entry in the 1915 building remained in place while a new larger entry was added in the center of the larger facade. This created a visual asymmetry and a functional problem of too much access. While the original colonnade had some association with the use of the upper level as a two-story tennis court, the extended colonnade only screened floors of hotel rooms.

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In the final plans, the redundant door was eliminated and its former location successfully bricked over, resolving the asymmetry of the design and eliminating an unnecessary entrance. However, the lack of relationship of the extended colonnade to its interior was unresolved. The roof top tennis court behind the extended colonnade had no architectural relation to the design.

## EVALUATION

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco is eligible for the National Register under criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance. The period of significance is 1917 and 1923, the years the two phases of construction of the building were completed.

The building is significant as an example of its style based on a late fourteenth century type of early Renaissance palazzo in Florence and on an interpretation of that type in the St. Gabriel's Branch of the New York Public Library of 1906, designed by McKim, Mead & White. The Woman's Athletic Club was designed by former employees of McKim, Mead & White who formed the San Francisco firm of Bliss & Faville.

## INTEGRITY

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco retains integrity for the period 1917 to 1954 as follows:

Location: The club retains integrity of location. It occupies the site on which it was built in 1917 and 1923. It has not been moved.

Design: Overall, the Woman's Athletic Club retains integrity of design. The composition of its facade and the allusion of that composition to a Renaissance Florentine palazzo is clearly intact. The entrance arch, the plain three-story base, the high arched windows of the piano nobile, the "WAC" escutcheons, the upper colonnade, and the gabled roof with overhanging eaves — the components of this composition — are all intact.

At the same time, some details have been altered. In 1980, the following features were altered for seismic safety: the railing on the balcony over the entrance was removed, and the fourth and fifth story terra cotta balcony floors were replaced by concrete.

Inside, all but one of the many significant spaces are largely or completely intact, including the ground floor lobby, library, and swimming pool; second, third, fifth, and sixth story hotel rooms (some of which are now used as offices); fourth story lounges, bar, and dining rooms; and fifth

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story tennis court. Only the second story gymnasium has been substantially altered since the end of the period of significance. In 1965, its ceiling was lowered and it was converted for use as a meeting room.

These changes to the design of the interior and exterior of the Woman's Athletic Club are minor in the context of the whole building.

Setting: The setting of the Woman's Athletic Club — a dense urban commercial and residential area — has changed very little since the period of significance. When it was first built, the club was one of the largest buildings on the block. Within a few years, almost every lot on the block had a comparable sized commercial, club, hotel, or apartment structure and the Woman's Athletic Club itself was enlarged. The unbuilt lot next door, owned by the club and operated as a parking lot, has not had a building on it since before 1906 — before the period of significance. The only substantial changes on the block are the addition to the two-story commercial structure at the northwest corner of Sutter and Mason streets and the replacement of the two-story Olympic Club garage across the street by a new structure that matches the rest of the block in bulk. These additions blend in with the dominant existing character of the area.

Materials: The relationships of differently colored and textured materials play a particularly important role in the character of this building, including rough red brick, cream colored glazed terra cotta, marble, wrought iron, and red tile. Although some removal of facade materials has occurred since the period of significance, the rich range of materials that was previously present is still amply represented. In relation to the amount of terra cotta still on the facade, only minor amounts of terra cotta were removed. Among the notable pieces of surviving terra cotta are the base, the entrance frame, balcony brackets, fourth story keystones and escutcheons, belt courses, and upper level column capitals — far more than was removed. In addition, the brick and concrete side and rear walls and the wood windows throughout the building are intact.

Inside, plaster walls, plaster ornament, stone and artificial stone fireplaces, metal light fixtures, wood paneling and trim, glass windows and skylights, and the exposed steel truss on the fifth floor are all present.

None of the many materials in the building has been removed to a significant degree.

Workmanship: The Woman's Athletic Club retains integrity of workmanship. In this case, the workmanship was largely the product of a sophisticated, industrialized construction industry. Except for the concrete formwork on the side and rear walls of the west wing, the workmanship is visible only in its seamless result. The terra cotta was made in a factory in a process that



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included molds from sculpted originals. The brick was made in factories — although carefully chosen for the colored texture of the facade. The iron railings were assembled by hand. The clay tiles were made in a factory. The structure of the building — the steel and concrete frames — were industrial products assembled here with large machines. Interior finishes and fixtures included plaster walls and vaults on armatures built by skilled carpenters, and hardware produced in a combination of machine and hand work. All of these features were assembled by a team of highly skilled workers.

Feeling: When the Woman's Athletic Club changed its name to the Metropolitan Club in 1965, it also diminished its accommodation of athletic activities by converting the gymnasium to a meeting room. Despite this change and despite the fact that it is a thriving operation in 2004, which has made many adjustments to changing times, the club retains a strong feeling of the period of significance. The setting, design, materials, and workmanship and the continuity of operation as both a women's social club and an athletic club strongly convey the period 1917 to 1954.

Association: Integrity of association is retained by the largely intact clubhouse. This is the little-altered place where the women who formed the club and the generations of San Francisco women after them have met their friends, exercised, dined, played cards, celebrated holidays, attended lectures, entertained others, and engaged in all the activities of the club.

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### **BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The Woman's Athletic Club of San Francisco occupies Block 283 Lot 22. This is a square lot measuring 137.5 by 137.5 feet. It occupies 18,906.25 square feet, on .434 acres.

#### **Boundary Justification**

The property includes the entire parcel occupied by the Woman's Athletic Club as it has stood since completion of the addition of 1923. The property does not include the adjacent property known as lot 6, which the club has owned since 1925 and has used as a parking lot since 1935.

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Acreage: Less than one acre

UTM: Zone 10  
Easting: 551990  
Northing: 4182370

Note on photos: Six historic photos; eleven current photos. Negative location for current photos - 640 Sutter Street, San Francisco, CA, in possession of the Metropolitan Club (Woman's Athletic Club)