

W. H. Weeks: architect and expert in school designs

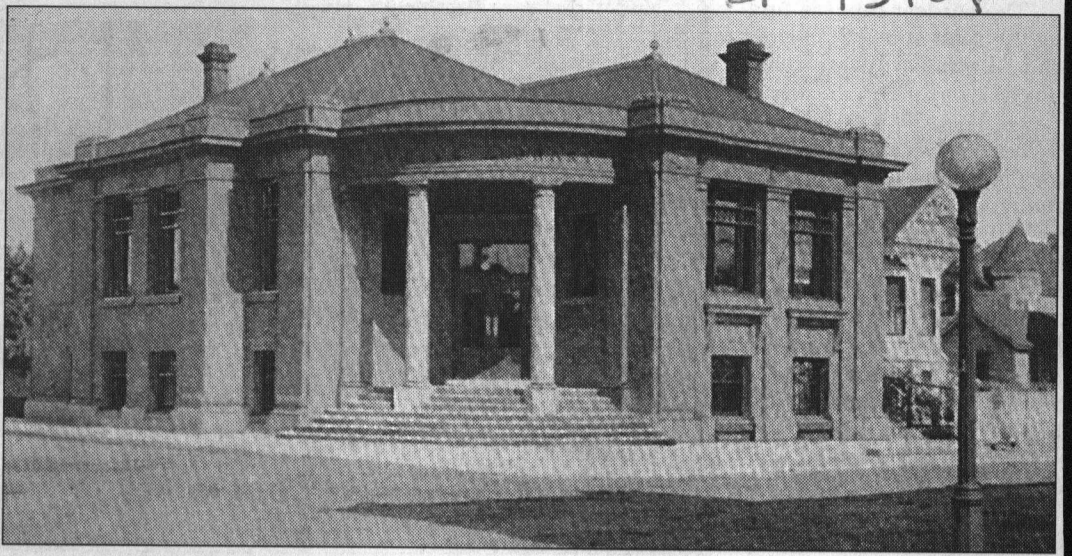
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That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

The Watsonville Public Library was built by William Weeks in 1905.

“The construction of a new school building is so rare an occasion that it makes an epoch in the average school system,” architect William H. Weeks wrote in 1911. “So few schools are built in the average district that the trustees are at a loss as to how to precede”

Weeks offered his services as a consultant to “any school board that may desire information or advice in the preliminary steps connected with the erection of new school buildings ...”

Epochal though the event might be for an individual school district, however, new school buildings were going up all over California in the 1910s and '20s, and William Weeks was designing them. In 1916, when Weeks was chosen to build Watsonville's third high school, he had just finished or was working on schools in Monterey, Eureka, Glenn County, Santa Cruz, Auburn, Winters, Woodland, Roseville, Red Bluff and Paso Robles. In another landmark year, Weeks was at work in 1922 on high schools in Pomona, Santa Barbara, San Mateo, Taft, Santa Rosa, Napa, Santa Clara, Mt. Diablo, Piedmont, Colusa, Turlock, Mountain View, Exeter, Lemoore, Del Norte County, Elk Grove and Esparto.

Weeks' career coincided neatly with California's school-building boom. Born in 1864 in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada, Weeks moved with his family to Denver where he studied architecture at the Berger Institute. Thereafter he entered his father's construction firm, then located in Wichita, Kan. In 1891, William Weeks married Maggie Haymaker and moved to Oakland. A year later, he opened an office while working on Watsonville's first high school. Maggie soon joined him in Watsonville, where they stayed until 1911. Their home was at 17 Jefferson St., and they had nine children; only five of whom lived to maturity, including a son who became a partner in his father's firm in 1924.

By 1897, Weeks was designing so many of the buildings in

the factory town of Spreckels that he opened another office in Salinas. In 1905, Weeks opened an office in San Francisco, which enabled him to participate actively in the post-earthquake reconstruction. While William Weeks was acquiring experience and establishing himself as a reliable architect, California was getting ready to expand its educational system. After enacting one of the first compulsory attendance laws in the United States in 1874, the state added high schools to the free public school system in 1904. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of public school students more than doubled from 272,420 to 663,476, reflecting the rapid increase in California's population. Kindergartens became part of the system in 1920. In the following years, California passed tax and finance laws that, for the first time, provided realistic backing for a comprehensive, statewide public school system.

But timing was not the only ingredient in Weeks' success. His early adoption of reinforced concrete as a building material and his work in small towns combined to give him an advantage in the educational boom. The San Francisco earthquake had demonstrated reinforced concrete's superiority over brick in a seismically active region; amid the rubble of the city, reinforced concrete structures had survived nearly intact. In 1915, Weeks anticipated later safety regulations by stating categorically that unreinforced brick walls and heavy tile roofs made an unacceptable combination for schools and by prescribing fireproof stairs and corridor floors in schools of

more than one story.

The Santa Barbara high school that Weeks completed in 1924 survived a devastating earthquake a year later without a crack. In high schools built in Watsonville in 1917 and Healdsburg in 1918, Weeks introduced ramps to replace stairs, arguing that ramps offered “more space for the same cost; safer in fire or panic, easier to clean; more secure; easier for wheelchairs; less noisy and service elevators can be eliminated.”

Weeks paid close attention to such practical details while carefully keeping his costs within his original bids. In its May 1915 issue, which featured Weeks in a cover story, Architect & Engineer described Weeks as a “safe man” whom school board members “instinctively trust” and who would not “advocate untried novelties or indulge in experiments likely to inflate the outlay.” Although he worked in a variety of styles – from Mission to Tudor – most of Weeks' schools shared a cost-saving formula: two floors and a basement. Conscientious and hard-working, he made sure his work could be depended upon.

In addition to his mastery of his craft, however, another aspect of Weeks' success may have been his self-promotion. He published many brochures and pamphlets advertising his school buildings and offering his services as a consultant. In addition to Architect & Engineer, his work was also featured in Architectural Record, American Architect, Concrete in Architecture and Engineering and other technical journals, as well as in the local press in the communities where he worked and lived. American School Board Journal hailed his work in an article titled: An Architectural Achievement in California, dated to November of 1923.

Weeks' firm built approximately 1,500 structures, mostly in California, and his private homes and commercial buildings dot the state.

At his death, the San Jose Mercury Herald eulogized “Weeks was a genuinely great architect and all over California there are monuments to his skill. For that matter, all over California there are thousands of youngsters whose lives are a little more happy and a little more healthy because of what W. H. Weeks knew about school architecture. Mr. Weeks was a specialist in school design and knew what exposure provided students with the best light, what type of exterior brings with it the greatest beauty ... schools were his chief love and he used to say that no man in California had designed as



many. His pride in his schools was justified ...” – San Jose Mercury Herald, April 30, 1936.

In Watsonville alone, he designed the town's first three high school buildings as well as the following schools: Primary School, 1909; Grammar school, 1909; Beach Road, 1909; Carlton, 1909; Green Valley, 1889; Linscott, 1929; Mintie White, 1928; Railroad, 1899; Roach, 1903; Moreland Notre Dame, 1899; and Aromas, 1895.

Of course, Weeks designed many homes and buildings in Watsonville, even the bandstand in the plaza. He was also well known for his designs of Carnegie Libraries in California. Of the 144 built, Weeks designed 21, far more than any other architect. These included Watsonville, Santa Cruz (4), Gilroy, Monterey and Paso Robles. Many, which weren't torn down, were converted into museums, art centers, police departments or community centers.

When speaking at a luncheon a long time ago; one man attending came up to me afterward and said he thought Watsonville should have some kind of statue or memorial of Weeks and I certainly agreed with that statement. William Weeks contributed much to the architectural history of this town, and many of the structures he designed still stand as a testimonial to his great versatility. The book I wrote on Weeks' history has been out of print for many years. If you know of an available copy, please let me know.

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Courtesy of Betty Lewis

William Weeks was known for his practical designs for schools.