

History Comes Alive!



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member

One City, Five Halls

Last month's article was a news release by Dr. Judson A. Grenier, Retired Professor of History Emeritus from California State University, Dominguez Hills. The release was an overview of a massive two-volume history of Los Angeles City government to be published shortly. Within the confines of this major work is a section on the history of the five original city halls, featured below, written by Irene Tresun.

Los Angeles City Halls, 1853 to Present



~ 1853 Rocha Adobe City Hall ~

1853 Rocha Adobe City Hall

On April 4, 1850, Los Angeles, with a population of about 1,600 within its jurisdictions, became an incorporated city. The homes of prominent citizens such as Benjamin Hayes and Abel Stearns were the first meeting places of the Common Council. In 1853, the city began leasing space in an adobe on the southern end of town. Traveling south from the plaza on the west side of a dirt road known as Spring Street sat the Rocha Adobe. The building became the first official Los Angeles City Hall under the American flag.

The Jose Antonio Rocha building, across from the present City Hall, was a single story adobe typical for its time, long and narrow with an extended roof over the porch. The adobe housed the offices of the Tax Collector and City Treasurer. A dimly lit room served as the Council chamber, where candles were in good supply in case of late meetings.

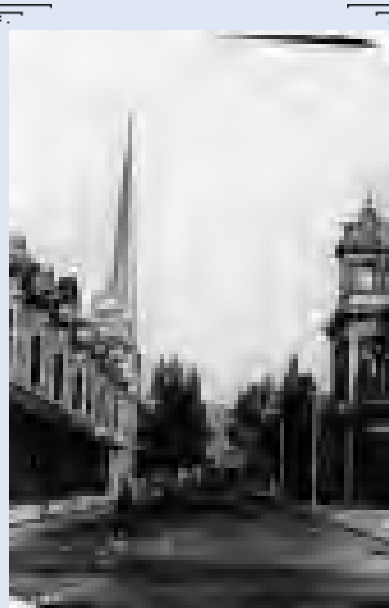


~ 1859 Los Angeles City Market and City Hall ~

1859 Los Angeles City Market and City Hall

In 1858, Jonathan Temple began construction on a two-story brick structure. The Council approved the proposal, and in September of 1859 moved into its new chamber. Located on the east side of Spring Street, and a stone's throw to the north from the Rocha Adobe city hall. The building was officially called the Los Angeles City Market and City Hall. Its large clock tower, with a clock facing four directions, boldly rose above the town's predominantly single story adobe skyline.

In 1869 the County purchased it and gradually the building became known as the Clocktower Courthouse. Despite the new owner and the new name, the Common Council would continue to meet on the second floor. Later, Mayor Cameron E. Thom declared the need for the government to have its own city hall.



~ 1885 Second Street City Hall ~

1885 Second Street City Hall

In July of 1884, the Council approved drawings for a new municipal building. The plans were for the first city hall built and owned by the City of Los Angeles. The building, completed in 1885, sat on the north side of Second Street, between Spring and Fort Street. Its brick and stone façade was crowned with a schoolhouse-style bell tower.

Within two years of completion, the three story city hall had become inadequate to serve the rapidly growing city. Population increased from 11,000 to 50,000. Los Angeles was no longer a dusty pueblo. City hall was sold in 1887 for \$120,000, which assisted in the construction of the new 1889 city hall.



~ 1889 Fort Street City Hall ~

1889 Fort Street City Hall

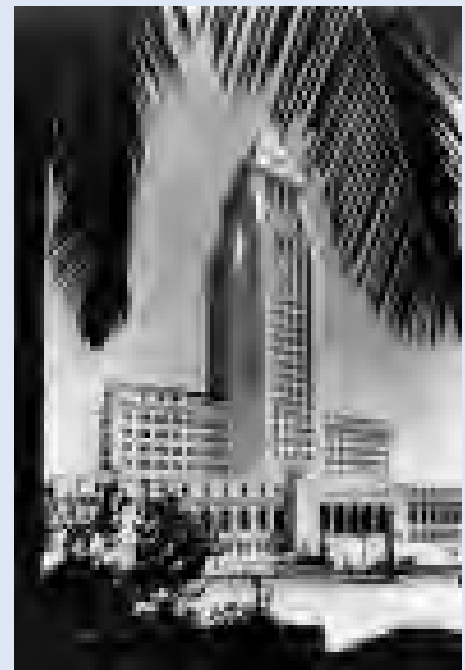
In 1889, a much needed city hall was built that would serve the City's present and future needs. The Romanesque revival structure was constructed of red sandstone, steel and wood, with a tower that extended well above the downtown skyline. The location on Fort Street between Second and Third Streets was to showcase the building and emphasize its importance. The Mayor's office and the Council chamber were on the second floor of the tower section.

The City, having spent more than \$300,000 for construction was able to provide space in the building for almost every municipal department, including the City's library. The Fort Street city hall remained in existence until 1929. In 1890, Fort Street was renamed Broadway.

1928 Spring Street City Hall

Los Angeles began the 20th century with a population of more than 102,000. In 1912, when it was apparent that William Mulholland's dream to pipe water from Owens Valley, 240 miles away to the City of Los Angeles, was to become a reality, the City Council began plans for a new city hall. By 1920, the population had reached 576,000, and according to Mayor George E. Cryer, 80 percent of the City's offices were in rented buildings. The old city hall completed in 1889 on Broadway was outdated and overcrowded, and its tower had been cut down to half its height, as it was discovered to be leaning in 1918.

The new city hall would eventually cost close to \$10 million for site, construction, structures, equipment and furniture. Special legislation was drawn up to allow the new city



~ 1928 Spring Street City Hall ~

hall to exceed the City's 150 foot height limit, clearing the way for Los Angeles to build a world-class skyscraper. By 1927, keeping with tradition, when the steel skeleton was completed an American flag was placed at its apex, more than 450 feet above the streets below. At that time it was the tallest building in Los Angeles.

On Friday April 2, 1928, the new city hall opened its doors to the world, establishing itself as the seat of local government. The building was dedicated April 26, 1928. The celebration culminated with President Calvin Coolidge touching a telegraph key at the White House, lighting the Charles Lindbergh Beacon atop the pyramid roof of city hall.

In 1986, almost 60 years after dedication, Project Restore was established under Mayor Tom Bradley to restore and preserve this national landmark. The new agency believed the changes could be realized through an energetic partnership of the community's public and private sectors. By 1998, City Council adopted Project Restore's Master Plan for City Hall's renovation. By 2001, many restoration projects were completed. City Hall was rededicated April 26, 2002, 74 years later to the exact date of the original dedication.