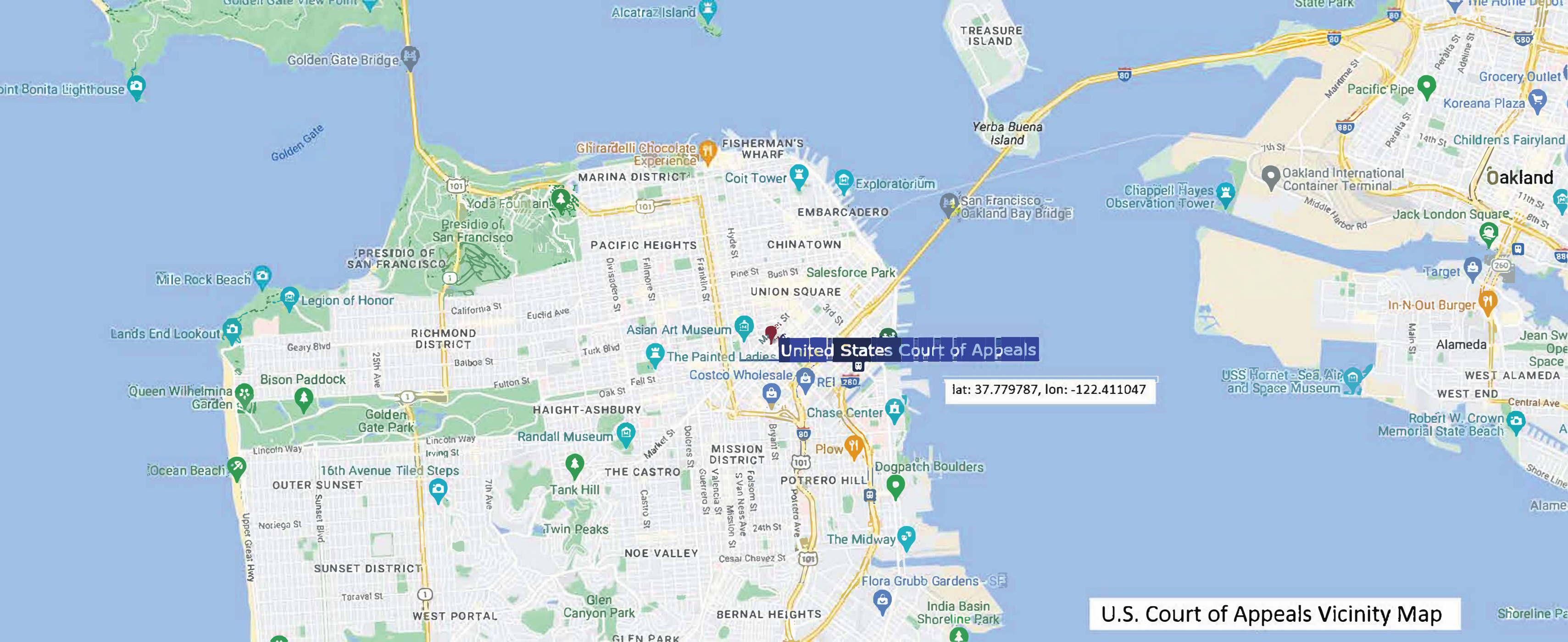




U.S. Court of Appeals 1905



United States Court of Appeals

lat: 37.779787, lon: -122.411047

U.S. Court of Appeals Vicinity Map

A brief history of the Beaux Arts Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals building in SoMa

<https://sf.curbed.com/2017/4/24/14831540/us-court-appeals-san-francisco-ninth-courthouse-soma>

By **Alex Bevk** | Updated Mar 18, 2020, 11:55am PDT

Photography by **Patricio Chang**

Originally built to showcase the increasing affluence and importance of the United States as a world power, this downright glorious 1905 structure, located at the not-so-glamorous corner of Mission and Seventh Streets, has stood as a symbol of justice and elaborate frippery for over 100 years.

Considered one of the most ornate public buildings in the west, this San Francisco treasure tends to get forgotten these days among the more show-stopping Transamerica Pyramid, City Hall, or Salesforce Park. Let's take a look at how this Beaux-Arts structure got its start.

A court without a home

Prior to the current building, the federal courts and post offices were scattered throughout the city. The first federal court in California was established in 1851 immediately after statehood at the Merchants' Exchange building on Battery Street. Located in the heart of the Financial District, the early court kept busy with ownership cases from the chaos surrounding land grants made under Spanish and Mexican rule. Soon after a U.S. Circuit Court of California was formed, it moved into a separate building on Battery Street. This grew to become the Federal Ninth Circuit in 1866. Soon after, its building on Battery Street burned down forcing the court to meet in numerous temporary locations around the Financial District.

Need for a new building

By the 1870s, the country acknowledged that it would make more sense to house all of the federal courts in one place. After a commission was formed to select a site in 1887, Congress initially allocating a mere \$350,000 for the project. But after the commission pooh-pooed that amount, the government increased it to a whopping \$2,500,000. (That's around \$68 million by today's standards; for comparison's sake, the contemporary Federal Building on the other side of Seventh Street cost \$144 million in 2007.)

At the time, Seventh and Mission, located in what was then known as "South of the Slot," was far from the central business district and surrounded by working-class neighborhoods. The area featured mostly small manufacturing warehouses, as well as a slew of railroad yards. Though the site was cheap and available, the downtown crowd was hardly thrilled to travel more than a mile to the new courthouse site in a less than glamorous area. The site was purchased in 1891.



Construction begins

At the time, the federal government had their own in-house architects tasked with designing buildings across the country. Starting in 1836 with Robert Mills, these architects launched a new era of Greek Revival and Renaissance Revival federal architecture (think Washington DC's [General Post Office](#) and [Patent Office Building](#)).

By the end of the 19th century, a backlash against the Victorian styles occurred as more architects studied at [École des Beaux-Arts](#) in Paris. After the game-changing White City at the [World's Columbian Exposition of 1893](#) in Chicago, private architects around the country pushed for a widespread acceptance of Beaux-Arts planning and design.

William Martin Aiken and James Knox Taylor, along with their crew of U.S. Treasury architects, were tasked with the new San Francisco courthouse and post office. Keeping in step with the modes of the time, Taylor and Aiken created an Italian Renaissance palazzo in the Beaux Arts style meant to elicit notions of grand classicism now associated with government buildings of the [City Beautiful movement](#) (think of the [San Francisco Civic Center](#) down the street built in 1913.)

When the courthouse opened in 1905, it gained a [reputation as the best constructed public building in the country](#), showcasing the United States as an important—and wealthy—world power.



A post office that's a palace

Master craftsmen from Italy were brought in to complete the interiors, which today read like a love letter to marble. Clad in white granite, the new structure was opulent even for comparable buildings of the time. The Italian Renaissance influence pulled details from 15th century palazzos, complete with replica bronze entry lanterns and balustrades galore. The original building was U-shaped with an interior courtyard. But the Italian Renaissance wasn't known for subtlety, so this courtyard comes decked out in ornamentation with colorful geometric patterns made of colored bricks.

Of special note are the 100 lion heads along the cornice.

The ground floor lobby uses imported material from all over the world. The first-floor hall is paneled in black-vein white Italian marble trimmed in green marble, while the vaulted ceiling comes with marble mosaics—even the stained-glass domes are ringed with marble mosaic tile eagles. The old post office portion of the lobby contains bronze panels and grilles for service windows.



The third floor's Great Hall is also heavily marbled with Indian mahogany carved doors, leading to the jaw-dropping Courtroom One room. Originally used for the U.S. District Court, this room is chock-a-block with ornamentation ranging from carved fruit motifs, plaster cupids, Corinthian columns, and more marble mosaics.

Fun fact: The installation of tile inlaid floor in the main floor lobby was overseen by [Julia Morgan](#) after she finished work on the [Fairmont Hotel](#). The same Italian craftsmen who laid those tiles were later hired by William Randolph Hearst to work on Morgan's masterpiece [Hearst Castle](#) in San Simeon.

Earthquake survivor and twentieth century additions

The building opened in 1905 to widespread acclaim, but was soon tested by the great 1906 [earthquake and fire](#). The new courthouse and post office building, along with the 1874 U.S. Mint on Fifth Street, were the only large South of Market buildings to survive. Postal employees were credited with preventing a spreading fire by ripping out wooden elements and covering the fire with water-soaked mail bags.



Damage did occur to the facade, but structurally-speaking, the building remained solid and restoration efforts were quickly completed. An added bonus to its survival: court records dating to the 1850s also survived, providing a rare look into early California statehood.

By the 1930s, an expanding federal presence meant the need for more office space, so San Francisco architect George Kelham—chief architect for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition and Main Library (now the Asian Art Museum), Federal Reserve Bank, and Russ Building fame—was brought in to design an addition.

Kelham created a four-story addition on the east side of the building that enclosed the courtyard. He replicated the design of the other original facades, but also made some curious choices in contrast. Compared to the opulent Beaux Arts Courtroom One, the new second floor courtrooms were designed in the Art Deco style; think gilded plaster eagles and patterned ceilings.

The largest circuit court in all the land

The [U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit](#) was created by Congress in 1891. Originally set to have jurisdiction over California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana, the coverage grew over the years to include Hawaii, Arizona, Alaska, Guam, and Northern Mariana Islands. It's the largest of the 13 courts of appeals by far—both in terms of geographic area and number of judges—and has several meeting places throughout the west (San Francisco remains its headquarters).

There are arguments that the district is too large and varied, even by some members of the Supreme Court, with past proposals to divide it up.

In 1971, the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural significance, later listed as a [National Historic Landmark](#) in 2012. It's only one of four remaining U.S. Court of Appeals buildings nationwide dating to the turn of the century.

A few Ninth Circuit Court's famous cases

- [Jane Stanford](#), co-founder of Stanford University, fought U.S. government to preserve her late husband's estate
- Railroad cases composed a large portion of the Ninth Circuit's docket in the 1890s
- [1880s Chinese Exclusion Acts](#)
- The struggle to gain control over the Anvil Creek Claim placer mine in Alaska
- [Teapot Dome scandal](#)
- Landmark search-and-seizure Olmstead wiretapping case
- Battle over [federal government's immigration ban](#)



Current courthouse state and upgrades

As is common with buildings this old, it benefitted from several renovations over the decades. Bay Area modernist architects Anshen and Allen initiated an extensive remodel in the 1960s to accommodate the circuit court. The 1964 alterations upgraded the building sufficiently to allow the courts to stay in place, rather than move to Civic Center, and the courthouse was renamed the U.S. Court of Appeals and Post Office.

The building was once again tested by a quake, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, but this time it suffered severe damage.

The restoration efforts resulted in a full seismic retrofitting, as well as conversion of the former post office into a law library by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, which took several years to finish. In 1996, it finally reopened as the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Judge James R. Browning, a circuit court for over four decades, was honored as the building's namesake in 2005. Today it is known as the James R. Browning U.S. Court of Appeals Building.



Reference

James R. Browning United States Court of Appeals Building

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_R._Browning_United_States_Court_of_Appeals_Building