Call Building
Views of San Francisco streets and scenes
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Room One: San Francisco in the New Century

Building Construction Standards

In 1906, 90 percent of San Francisco's buildings were constructed with wood frames and only 54 of the city's buildings were fireproofed. These highly combustible buildings, which were not required to have sprinkler systems, were packed together on narrow streets. Frame buildings were constructed out of wood, sometimes on stilts, with brick chimneys held together with lime mortar. According to the 1904 San Francisco Ordinances, these building were limited to 50 feet in height and to 35 if the building was a factory. Anything over that height, such as a church spire had to be covered in fireproofing material. The city required that the roofs of all buildings within the fire limit zone be covered with metal, slate, tiles, terra cotta, or asphalt. All buildings were also required to have fire escapes. Building materials were restricted to such things as "hard, well-burnt brick" and "clean, sharp grit sand, free from loam or dirt." Building weights were also restricted to certain types of soil. Soft clay surfaces were only allowed to support one ton per square foot, while a mixture of coarse sand, stiff gravel or hard clay was fine for supporting 4 tons.

The domed Call Building was built in 1898 by Claus Spreckels, owner of the newspaper *The Call*, as a way of showing up his competitors, the *Chronicle*, who had built the city's first high-rise building eight years earlier in 1890. Following the building code of the day, the Call Building, and the building directly to its east, are surrounded by tall wood fences to protect pedestrians from "brick, timber, mortar or debris falling from . . . building[s]." By 1904, builders would not only have to erect a fence to protect pedestrians, but they would also be required to build temporary sidewalks to provide safe, unobstructed passage for pedestrians.