

Edwin W. Newhall Residence
2950 Pacific Avenue
San Francisco



portrait of architect Albert Farr

Year built: 1907
Architect: Albert Farr

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for Steve Gothelf, Pacific Union Real Estate Brokerage

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This house occupies a large lot in Pacific Heights, fronting 87'-5" on Broadway and extending south to a depth of 137'-6". A driveway fifteen feet in width connects this lot with Pacific Avenue, and by virtue of this access the property has a Pacific Avenue address. The house is a shingled version of the Dutch Colonial Revival style, and fills most of the width of the lot; its several large windows and dormers command a view of the Golden Gate.

The house was built in 1907, and has remained in the same family since its construction. The original owner, Edwin W. Newhall, was the son of Henry Mayo Newhall, who came to San Francisco during the Gold Rush and developed several spectacularly successful businesses, including an auction house, a shipping and commission merchant business, an insurance agency, a railroad, and ranches. Edwin W. Newhall followed in his father's footsteps, working in most of these lines. His architect, Albert Farr, practiced from the 1890s to the 1930s and is renowned today for the elegant houses he designed in San Francisco, Piedmont, and on the peninsula.

Henry Mayo Newhall and Edwin W. Newhall

Henry M. Newhall was born in Massachusetts in 1825 and was working there as an auctioneer when news of the California Gold Rush reached the east coast. He decided to go west, and arrived in San Francisco in 1850. Because the best placer mines were already taken by this date, Newhall reestablished himself as an auctioneer in San Francisco. He was formally in business in this line by 1852 or 1853, and by 1856 had taken on the additional role of commission merchant. Because his son Edwin went into the same line of work, this occupation will be described here.

During the 19th century, commission merchants typically did not purchase and sell goods on their own, but represented eastern firms who sent their goods to California for sale. Commission merchants did much more than simply sell the goods and retain a percentage. They remained in close communication with the eastern firms, advising them regarding which goods were currently in need, and commanded good prices, in the west. Commission merchants located markets for imported goods, arranged for transshipment of goods by steamboat to the Central Valley, and remitted the proceeds from the sale of goods back east in the form of gold or bank drafts. When shipped goods could not be sold at the desired prices, commission merchants would either sell them at lowered prices, store them in warehouses in anticipation that the price would rise, or ship them back east. These were some of the many services that San Francisco commission merchants performed for their eastern clients.

Eastern goods were often sold at auction when no better means were available. Because H. M. Newhall and Co. were also experienced auctioneers, this firm had an advantage over other commission merchants who were not. The firm also became the California agent for several eastern U. S. and European marine and fire insurance companies, which (because eastern goods were vulnerable to losses at sea and by fire) complemented its commission merchant business.

During 1861-1864, with profits from his business, Henry M. Newhall joined with Peter Donahue, the owner of the Union Iron Works foundry, and other partners to build the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad, one of the first two railroads in the state. They sold the railroad to Southern Pacific at a substantial profit in 1870. With the proceeds, Newhall began investing substantially in real estate. During 1872-1875 he purchased several Mexican-era ranchos located from Monterey County to southern California. One of the largest of these, in northern Los Angeles County, became known as the Newhall Ranch.

Edwin W. Newhall was one of five sons of Henry Newhall. For several years he clerked with H. M. Newhall and Co., learning the business. In 1880 he and some of his brothers formed Newhall's Sons and Co., wholesale auctioneers and commission merchants, which was located in their father's office and loft building on Sansome Street. After their father's death in 1882, the brothers also formed the Newhall Land and Farming Company, to manage the southern California ranch lands that their father had purchased. These ranch lands remained in the family for generations, transitioning in use from grazing for cattle, to orchards, and, in the 1960s, to planned suburban development. For office space from which to manage these businesses, the Newhalls remained in their Sansome Street building until it was destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906, and then built a very beautiful replacement, the Newhall Building at 260 California Street, which still stands.

Edwin W. Newhall suffered a stroke in 1914, and an electrical elevator was installed at 2950 Pacific Avenue later that year to aid his mobility. He died just over a year later, at the end of October 1915. Besides managing the Newhall businesses, he had become very active in philanthropy and charities, including the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Lick Old Ladies' Home, which still exists in the Portola District.

Subsequent to his death, the house was occupied for many years by Edwin Newhall's widow, Virginia, and by their son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin W. Newhall, Jr. Miss Jane Newhall was born in San Francisco on October 4, 1913, the only child of Jane Peers and Edwin White Newhall, Jr. She lived in the home designed by Mr. Farr for her grandmother, who was certain that a properly built New England-style wooden house would better withstand California's propensity for earthquakes.

Miss Newhall resided in the home for her entire 97 years until the summer of 2011. Throughout her long life, Miss Newhall was active in many philanthropic and civic organizations, and was a generous donor to numerous charities both in the San Francisco Bay Area and Martha's Vineyard where she spent her summers.

Albert Farr, the architect of the house

This house was built for Edwin W. Newhall to designs by architect Albert Farr (1871-1945). Farr's work was well-documented in his own time and has since been the subject of a few short studies. He was an important practitioner of the Shingle style, the Bay Area version of which is sometimes known as the First Bay Tradition, but also designed

in many other styles. He designed many houses on Russian Hill, in Pacific Heights, in Presidio Heights, and in Belvedere, and became the pre-eminent architect in the East Bay city of Piedmont.

He was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and grew up in Japan, where his father helped to establish a postal system. When he returned to the United States at age nineteen, it was to live in Oakland, where Farr began to study and practice architecture. After a brief partnership, he worked as a draftsman for Clinton Day and the Reid Brothers, both very prominent. He opened his own office in 1896.

Like other architects of the time, he designed in many styles that relied on historical precedent but were adapted to modern needs. He designed in Tudor, Classical, Colonial, and Georgian revival styles, fine examples of which include 2660 Scott Street (Colonial, 1901), 2445 Sacramento Street (Georgian, 1903), and 2629 Larkin Street (Tudor, 1916). He was equally-well known for his Shingle style work. Well-known examples include 3333 and 3343 Pacific Avenue (1902), the sprawling Belvedere Land Company building in Belvedere (1905), 1629 Taylor Street (1910), and 1020 Broadway (1910). 2310 Steiner Street (1903) is a complete remodeling of a Victorian house using a wide bay window and a shingled skin. These shingled buildings are spare in their ornamentation, and achieve their effect from a concern for proportions and from surface texture. 2950 Pacific Avenue, with its Dutch gambrel-roofed dormers and shingled exterior, is a house of this type.

Farr's best known house survives only as ruins. It is Jack London's Wolf House, in Glen Ellen, Sonoma County. This rustic wood and stone house was built in 1911 and was days from completion when it was destroyed by fire. Recent analysis concluded that the cause was probably oil-soaked rags that were left on the site overnight and spontaneously combusted.

Another rustic design by Farr that is well-known is the Benbow Inn, on Highway One on the way to Garberville, and still in business today.

Farr is better known in the East Bay and on the peninsula for his very large stucco-clad houses in Spanish Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, and French Provincial styles. These were variously elaborate or restrained, according to the tastes of the clients. Many of them were designed with his partner (after 1923) J. Francis Ward, as the firm of Farr and Ward. Farr and Ward's work became quite restrained during the 1930s, and their works of the early 1940s could be considered to be early examples of Modernism.

Many dozens of Farr's works survive to the present day. A catalog of his houses would reveal him to be one of the premier domestic architects in Bay Area history.

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Primary source for the construction of this house and its design by Albert Farr: *Daily Pacific Builder*, February 16, 1907.

On Henry M. Newhall, Edwin W. Newhall, and H. M. Newhall and Company: "Henry Newhall" (Wikipedia website); "About H. M. Newhall" (Newhall Foundation website); San Francisco city directory listings, 1854-1982; "Edwin W. Newhall Is Suddenly Stricken," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 10, 1914, p. 3; "Edwin W. Newhall Has Passed Away," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 29, 1915, p. 5.

On Albert Farr: this author's personal research; Bradley Weidmaier, "Near and Farr: The San Francisco architecture of Albert Farr," *Heritage Newsletter*, Sept.-Oct. 2004.