





# CITY OF STOCKTON

## FIRE DEPARTMENT

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January 21, 2009

Cultural Heritage Board, City of Stockton  
Community Development Department  
425 N. El Dorado Street  
Stockton, CA 95202-1997

To Whom It May Concern:

As the Chief of the Stockton Fire Department, I would like to support the nomination for designating the Central Fire Alarm Station building at 46 W. Fremont Street as a Stockton Historic Landmark.

The classical revival style of the Central Fire Alarm Station building makes an important architectural contribution to the Civic Center area. More importantly, the structure represents an important example of firefighting innovation. Built in 1925, it became the central location for emergency calls to the fire department from call boxes throughout the City. The Central Fire Alarm Station building exemplifies the progress of the City in modernizing its municipal services, and reflects the historical importance of the Stockton Fire Department.

I thank you for your consideration to have the Central Fire Alarm Station building included as a Stockton Historic Landmark.

Sincerely,

RON HITTLE, Chief  
Stockton Fire Department



D C A D E R I V I  
C O N S T R U C T I O N  
A R C H I T E C T U R E

January 20, 2009

Cultural Heritage Board  
City of Stockton  
Community Development Department  
345 North El Dorado Street  
Stockton, CA 95202

Re: Fire Alarm Central Station (Visitor's & Convention Bureau)  
46 West Fremont Street  
Stockton, California

Dear Members of the Cultural Heritage Board:

As a native Stocktonian, local architect, and one-time member of the Cultural Heritage Board, I support the nomination of the Police and Fire Alarm Central Station as a Stockton Historic Landmark.

This compact yet elegant building was constructed for a very utilitarian use, but its design remained faithful to the City Beautiful movement which inspired our Civic Center's design. It is a supporting component of the monumental scale and style established for the City Hall and Civic Auditorium, centerpieces for Stockton's seat of government.

The Central Station was designed by the architectural firm of Mayo, Bidwell, and Cowell, and Frank V. Mayo FAIA was a leading architect in our area at the time, conducting his practice in Stockton and the Menlo Park areas of California. The building's simple Classical details of Doric columns, pediments, and frieze bands make it a contributing part of the ensemble of Renaissance Revival and Classical monumentalism of the City Hall and Auditorium.

Recognition of this Civic Center building as a landmark will increase the public's awareness of the City's architectural and public safety history.

Respectfully,



Linda Derivi, AIA  
President

# Nomination for Designation as a Stockton Historic Landmark Central Police and Fire Alarm Station building

Alice van Ommeren, Toby Trana and Kevin Taylor

## Statement of Significance

The Central Police and Fire Alarm Station, built in 1925 by the City of Stockton, is eligible for designation as a Stockton Historic Landmark based on its architectural contribution to one of northern California's finest Civic Centers, built during the City Beautiful movement. The Central Police and Fire Alarm Station also represents innovation in fire protection by one of the most progressive fire departments in the state at the time.

## Narrative Description

The Central Police and Fire Alarm Station, also referred to as the Fire Alarm Station, is situated on a triangular lot (.65 acres) in McLeod Lake Park across the street from the Civic Memorial Auditorium and a block from City Hall. In order to protect the city's alarm system, the building was purposely isolated on the edge of the park, away from other structures while remaining centrally located within the city. The twenty-three hundred square foot building is located in the northwest corner of the park, at the intersection of Commerce and Fremont Streets.

The growth of the city prompted Stockton voters in 1924 to approve a bond that included funds to upgrade the fire alarm system. In 1925, the concrete structure designed to house the alarm system was completed. The Fire Alarm Station, built in Classic Revival architectural style, became an integral part of the municipal buildings designed for the Civic Center area. The Fire Alarm Station makes an important architectural contribution, exemplifies the progress of the city in modernizing its municipal services and reflects the historical importance of the Stockton Fire Department.

## Building Description

The one-story square building with a basement is made exclusively of brick and concrete in order to protect it from fire. The basement extends only half underground, making the building look higher and grander. The structure is thirty-five feet in height and has a flat concrete roof. The classical detailing includes a projecting cornice around the entire building below the roofline. Eleven small metal windows encircle the lower half of the building. Across the upper half of the building, there is a large metal framed window on each side, divided into square tiles. The two different size windows make it appear as if the building has two stories or levels.

The East elevation or main façade faces a promenade that crosses over part of McLeod Lake Park before ending at Center Street. Serving as the main entrance, this side makes the most significant architectural contribution to the historic character of the Fire Alarm Station building. The classical details include two massive Doric columns on either side of the entryway and a pedimented front door. A wide staircase enhances the recessed front entrance area. The double brass doors open into the main lobby. Above the entrance, below the detailed cornice and frieze bands, is the following inscription "*Police and Fire Alarm Central Station -1925.*" Although covered by plywood today, the caption is important in identifying the building's original purpose and time in history.

The interior was built to accommodate one large alarm instrument room specifically designed for the "Gamewell" fire alarm system. Although the inside originally boasted tall ceilings, there is now an 8-foot dropped ceiling. In 1980, the alarm system equipment was removed and the building was renovated for office space including several small rooms on the interior. The Stockton Chamber and Visitor's Bureau occupied the building from 1980 until 2003. Since that time, the Stockton Symphony has used the

building for its administrative functions. Although still functional, the original main entrance is not used. The back entrance, which allows for disabled access, is now the only entry. The basement, currently used for storage space, once housed a large battery room and motor generator room.

The exterior of the building has undergone minimal renovation, the most substantial being the construction of another entryway on the west side, the backside of the building. This included the addition of a concrete access ramp for the disabled. Other changes include the partial boarding up of the large upper windows on all sides, as well as the covering of the inscription on the front of the building. The Fire Alarm Station building retains a high degree of integrity in spite of the alterations. The siding, windows and front door show signs of wear and some deterioration, but repair would involve minimal replacement of materials. The building retains original construction materials and its significant features, such as the brass doors, columns and cornice are intact, functional and physically sound.

## **Fire Department History in Stockton**

The first form of fire protection in Stockton was the Weber Bucket Brigade, named in honor of the city's founder. A fire, known as the Great Conflagration of 1849, destroyed most of the city's tent settlements and forced the City Council to issue a call to action. Officially organized on June 26, 1850, the Stockton Fire Department quickly became recognized throughout the state and nation as innovative, proficient, and professional. The department grew quickly, forming three fire companies before becoming a paid department in 1888, and an exempt one in 1895. The Fire Department earned its label as one of the most progressive on the West coast by being the first to master the Chemical Fire Engine in the 1870's, establish telegraph alarm lines in 1880, and frequently maintain communications in strategy and tactics with San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. The Fire Department later utilized the Civil Defense in World War II by training auxiliary civilians in fire protection, a program still in use today. In 1971 the Fire Department received a departmental Class 1 rating, the highest attainable, and in 1983 became only one of five cities in the nation with an overall Class 1 rating.

The City of Stockton had operated various alarm systems before the "Gamewell" system was installed in 1925. The fire bell, and later the fire whistle, was utilized to alert the public and fire volunteers to emergencies. As volunteers, and later paid firefighters, began to stay within the firehouses during designated times or nights, the alarm alerting system began to rely on telegraph fire alarm boxes as a means of shortening response times. The fire alarm box was a mechanically operated switch that stood on a shoulder-high pillar that the public could activate at designated spots throughout the city. The boxes and system originally installed in 1880 were among the most progressive on the West coast. The alarm boxes and system became obsolete as the 20<sup>th</sup> century approached. Designated fire personnel at a rate slower than the cities expansion could only install new boxes. Heavy winds could easily overcome the suspended telegraph lines, as often was the case. If multiple alarms were pulled, the system would fail. Even though telephones were introduced, they were rarely available and often unreliable. The shortfall of a "box on every corner" promoted by other cities, the multiple requests to restring the business district alarms underground, and blatant allegations of the current system being "junk" added to the realization that the city's fire protection was falling behind.

## **History of the Fire Alarm Station building**

After a landslide win in June of 1924, the city used bond funds of \$346,000, equivalent to \$15 million in today's dollars, to hire the Gamewell Fire Alarm Company to build a system "superior to any other city on the Pacific Coast." Capitalizing on the concept promoted by other cities of having a 'box on every corner,' the new system would increase the number of fire alarm boxes from 50 to 147. This made alerting services available and reliable in every corner of the city. With more boxes, more circuits were added to the new system enabling it to grow with the needs of the city, and an expanded organization of fire districts allowing increased efficiency in response. Multiple alarm boxes could be pulled without shorting out the system, and an entirely secondary circuit loop enabled the alarm operator to alert the firehouses instantaneously, both features previously impossible. The new circuitry in the downtown and

business areas were underground and immune to weather conditions, and street level sirens activated by the alarm operator would notify the public to vacate the street until the fire apparatus had passed. Perhaps the most important feature for fire and police, specifically in a time before radios, was the ability to communicate back to the alarm operator through the telegraph in the alarm box. This important feature gave firefighters the ability to call for more support and gave police officers the ability to contact the central station in cases of emergency. The Fire Alarm Station was the headquarters until 1980 of this and subsequent generations of systems and was praised as a “model in all phases of efficiency.” As Chief M. D. Murphy boasted when it opened, “We now have the best fire alarm system yet devised, the people of Stockton are to be congratulated.”

### **The Architecture of the Building**

The Fire Alarm Station, built in 1925 by J. F. Shepherd, has considerable architectural significance. The local architectural firm of Mayo, Bidwell and Cowell designed the structure in Classic Revival style. The architects matched their design to the exterior of the Civic Auditorium as well as City Hall. Therefore, the building has extensive architectural detailing and features. In spite of minor alteration, the Fire Alarm Station building retains a high degree of architectural integrity. Frank Mayo, the lead architect of the firm, was an initial advocate and planner of the Civic Center complex. A prominent architect, he subsequently built the Medico-Dental building, another locally landmarked building, several bank buildings and residences, as well as the San Joaquin Courthouse built in 1965.

The Fire Alarm Station makes an important contribution to the Civic Center, built as part of the “City Beautiful,” an architectural and planning movement that swept the nation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The movement was based on improving cities through beautification and inspiring civic loyalty and moral virtues among citizens. It also aimed at making cities more inviting to stimulate growth, and was an effort to have architectural equality with European cities. The Civic Center in Stockton, a collection of municipal buildings surrounding a plaza, provides an important example of this urban planning movement. In 1921, the design of the Civic Center included City Hall and the Civic Auditorium, as well as filling in the McLeod Lake to build a plaza. The plaza, now called Martin Luther King Jr., was not constructed until the late 1940’s.

The Central Police and Fire Alarm Station is an important historical landmark as it is an integral part of Stockton’s major civic project during the 1920’s, the Civic Center. The building is significant for its association with the development of vital municipal services, and the legacy of the fire department in this city. The building is a fitting monument to the Stockton Fire Department. Just to the south of the front is the Firefighter’s Memorial, dedicated on October 11, 1998 to those who gave their lives in the fire service to the City of Stockton. This makes the surrounding grounds important to the historical significance of the building.

*The photo collection and research of Horace Spencer was provided with courtesy of the Haggin Museum with special thanks to Tod Ruhstaller, Executive Director and Curator of History; Kimberly Bowden, Curator of Archival Collections and the Spencer Family for their support.*

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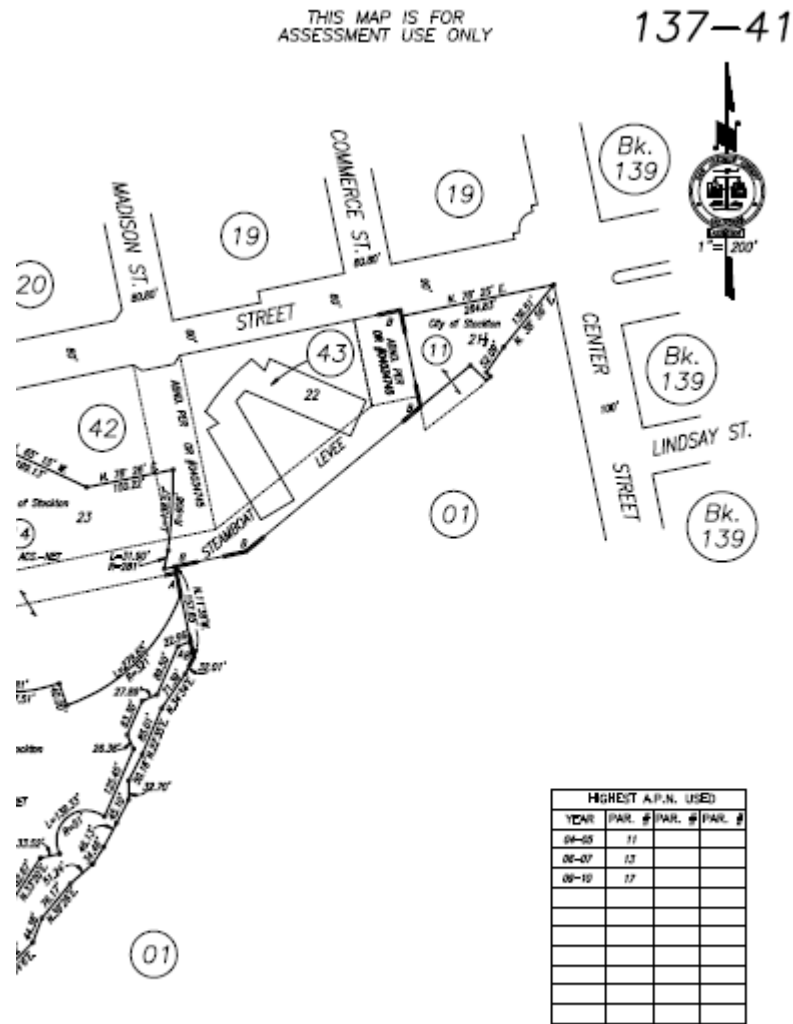
**Geographical Data**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

Parcel 11, of Block 137 in Stockton, San Joaquin County, California (City of Stockton, Assessor's Map, San Joaquin County Assessor's Office). Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 137- 41-11.

**Boundary Justification**

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Central Police and Fire Alarm Station building.



CITY OF STOCKTON  
Assessor's Map Bk.137 Pg.41  
County of San Joaquin, Calif.

## Appendix

**Historic Document** (Illustration by Ralph O. Yardley, Stockton Record and Evening Mail, June 3, 1924)

- Figure 1: How Much Longer Must Stockton Depend upon the Telephone in Reporting Fires?

**Contemporary Photographs** (Alice van Ommeren, January 2009)

- Photo 1: The main façade or east elevation of the structure
- Photo 2: The original main entrance to the building

**Historic Photographs** (Haggin Museum and the Bank of Stockton Archives, various dates)

- Photo 3: Aerial View of the Civic Center in 1946
- Photo 4: Aerial View of the Civic Center in 1959
- Photo 5: Central Police and Fire Alarm Station in the 1960's
- Photo 6: Control and Instrument Room of the Fire Alarm Station
- Photo 7: Fire Alarm Box
- Photo 8: Control & Instrument Room
- Photo 9: Control and Instrument Room



Figure 1: How Much Longer Must Stockton Depend upon the Telephone in Reporting Fires?  
Illustration by Ralph O. Yardley (Stockton Record and Evening Mail, June 3, 1924)



Photo 1: The main façade or east elevation of the structure (Alice van Ommeren, January 2009)



Photo 2: The original main entrance to the building (Alice van Ommeren, January, 2009)



Photo 3: Aerial View of the Civic Center in 1946 (Bank of Stockton Archives)



Photo 4: Aerial View of the Civic Center in 1959 (Bank of Stockton Archives)



Photo 5: Central Police and Fire Alarm Station in the 1960's (Haggin Museum)



Photo 6: Control and Instrument Room of the Fire Alarm Station (Haggin Museum)



Photo 7: Fire Alarm Box (Haggin Museum)



Photo 8: Control & Instrument Room (Haggin Museum)



Photo 9: Control and Instrument Room (Haggin Museum)