



The Russ House was built by Christian Russ who arrived in San Francisco with his wife and sons on March 26, 1847 from New York on a boat called the Loo Choo. Upon arrival he immediately took wood from the ship and built a cottage on the outskirts of San Francisco... at Pine and Montgomery Streets. He was a jeweler by trade established a jewelry shop which turned into a huge booming business when the upcoming gold rush came. In fact, he expanded to different areas of the business like assaying where he was able to take a little gold off the top for each assayal. His timing couldn't have been better. Since the land in the area was dirt cheap, he and others like James Lick, purchased as many lots as he could. Russ even built a hotel on Pine and Bush called the American Hotel. When the Gold Rush came, he built about 40 cottages to rent to the miners. When the Gold Rush ended, he tore down those cottages and built the Russ House which became a famous hotel and restaurant. The idea to build this house and the use his name this way came from a similar restaurant/hotel that James Lick built called the Lick House. The idea was for Russ to make his bigger and better which he succeeded in doing... In the 1906 Earthquake, the Russ House was badly damaged but it did survive. In 1927 or so, the building was rebuilt and turned into a 31 story building which, as hard as it may be to believe, was then known for a long time as the tallest building in the West.

--Harry Murphy, January 03, 2002.



The Russ House, built by Christian Russ, was arguably San Francisco's first grand hotel. —Photo courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

SEE NEXT PAGE

⑥ 235 Montgomery Street – Russ Building (1927) / Site of Russ House (1862–1906).

When the block-long Russ Building was completed in 1927 it dominated Montgomery Street. It was the tallest building in San Francisco, at 31 stories, and remained so until 1964. It was designed by architect George Kelham, who three years later, would execute a similar but even more engaging variation of a setback office tower when he did the Shell Building (see Market Street walk). The Russ Building was the first high rise in San Francisco to have a garage for automobiles.

The ornamentation is that of Gothic Revival, probably chosen because Gothic arches lend themselves to a heightened sense of verticality, which the Russ Building certainly has. The lobby with groin vaults and the front entryway with niches for saints on each side bring to mind a cathedral. Perhaps the illusion was intentional: it is a cathedral of commerce.

The building gets its name from pioneer Emanuel Charles Christian Russ (1785–1857) who came to San Francisco in March 1847 with his wife and nine children. Within a few days of his arrival he purchased this site—which at the time was little more than shifting sand hills—for \$75 and erected a ramshackle home made from wooden boards salvaged from the ship he had arrived on. Russ, a German immigrant of Polish descent, was a silversmith by trade, and in the wake of the gold rush he prospered as a jeweler and assayer. In 1862 his heirs erected on this site a three-story brick Italianate structure, the Russ House, a hotel that catered to farmers, merchants, and miners. It charged \$2 to \$2.50 a night for a room, whereas its more upscale neighbors, the Lick and the Occidental, cost \$3 to \$5 a night.

Like most everything else on Montgomery Street the Russ House burned in 1906. It was replaced by a three-story office building, which in turn was demolished to make way for the present 1927 Russ Building.