

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.