

## Out of the ashes: Two historic banks

By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Jul 21, 2023

The 1922 fire left Astoria's business district without permanent necessities like supply stores, food establishments, and financial institutions. Rebuilding, which mostly took place between 1923 and 1925, required haste and efficiency, ultimately resulting in a somewhat uniform streetscape. Two buildings on Duane St., however, stand out as exceptions to this uniformity: Astoria City Hall and the building that houses the Museum of Whimsy. These two bank buildings act as gateways to a past when bank architecture was designed to be prodigious with an emphasis on sophistication and intimidation rather than the convenience and friendliness implemented into banks used today.



**The Scandinavian-American Savings Bank**  
New Building, Corner 12th & Duane Sts.

Before the fire, downtown Astoria had four major bank buildings, all of which burned to the ground in 1922. For days after the disaster, embers continued to glow and fragments of the banks' brick walls stood tattered around their exposed vaults, too hot to touch, let alone open. Sailors and soldiers were assigned as guards to protect the contents

of the vaults from looters who did nothing but add to the chaos of the aftermath. Once bank officials retrieved the cash and other valuables, they moved everything to the safety of the Clatsop County Courthouse where, according to late local historian, Russell Dark, "sailors from the destroyer Yarrowborough mounted a machine gun to protect the money."

Astoria's first official bank had been established in 1886 as regional fishing and timber industries turned the city into a boom town, and three more banks opened by the turn of the century. In 1907, Astoria cannery man, Gustavus Holmes, organized the Scandinavian-American Savings Bank, and in just five years, the success of his financial institution warranted construction of a brand new bank building on the southeast corner of 12th and Duane streets, across from the Weinhard-Astoria Hotel. Architect Emil Schact designed the hearty two-story structure composed of white glazed brick. Announcements for the new bank building touted fireproof and burglar proof vaults. Then in 1920, the directors of the Scandinavian-American Bank decided to consolidate with the Astoria National Bank as a way to quadruple their overall capital stock. As hands shook and ink dried, the consolidated Astoria National Bank put in an order for a new 40-ton vault.



Just two years later, in the wake of the fire, amid the rubble and caved-in streets, the hollow walls of the burned-out Astoria National Bank building endured, cradling its steadfast fireproof vaults. Astorian architect, John Wicks, who was also vice-president of the bank, resolved to incorporate the surviving walls and vaults into a reconstruction rather than starting a new building from scratch. Work began in the summer of 1923. Wicks' design implemented

Classic Revival features such as four twenty-foot Ionic terra cotta columns with a palmette-lotus frieze.



Although Greek and Roman Revival architecture was commonly used for financial institutions across the country, this temple-like building was like no other ever built in Astoria. Dominating the streetscape, the new Astoria National Bank building was an optimistic gesture to a city picking up its pieces, ensuring stability and the protection of Astoria's financial future.



Bookending the other side of the block, on Duane at 11th St., the Astoria Savings Bank opted for a similar style for its new post-fire building. Architect John V. Bennes, known for designing Astoria's Liberty Theatre and Portland's Hollywood Theater, drew the plans for the classically styled building with two Ionic columns flanking a pair of bronze doors. Eight fluted pilasters lining the eastern elevation, gave this building, too, an imposing presence. The concrete

foundation from the original 1906 Astoria Savings Bank building, a brick, four-story structure, was re-used and new walls were built around the bank's surviving pre-fire vault, which was encased in 27 inches and 80 tons of fireproof reinforced concrete. The contract for construction was signed July 10, 1923 and the bank re-opened the following summer.



Unfortunately, neither monument was Herculean enough to withstand the 1929 stock market crash and subsequent Great Depression. All but one bank in Astoria failed. Both Astoria National Bank and Astoria Savings Bank went into receivership and never recovered. But the Astoria National Bank building didn't sit empty for long. In 1930, the vacancy was filled by the newly chartered Bank of Astoria, which was then purchased by U.S. Bank a few years later. U.S. Bank served Astorians with their finances at the building for a handful of decades, but bank styles were changing. Customers no longer wanted to go to a building that felt like a frigid mausoleum and banking staff wanted more natural light in their workplace. Banks across America evolved with new attitudes toward buildings and banking, incorporating energy efficient practices, color, and style. The emphasis on intimidation shifted to creating a more customer friendly atmosphere. In 1973, U.S. Bank embraced the national trend and constructed a new, much more modern building down the street on Duane and 9th. The fashionable brown brick building was designed by John Wicks' daughter Ebba Wicks Brown, who incorporated various lines and shapes including a circular window to showcase one of the bank's original vaults, brought over from the old building.

During the Great Depression, the Astoria Savings Bank building sat empty for about seven years before it was acquired by Clatsop County. In 1938, the

Public Works Administration, part of Roosevelt's New Deal program, helped fund the building's renovation for use as a new city hall. While the layout and details of the building were altered, it continues to retain a commanding appearance to the block. Visitors to Astoria City Hall can see the original vaults behind the front desk. The original light fixture hangs above in the vestibule and the original interior pilasters can be seen up close on the second floor.

During uncertain times, Astoria's banks projected security and stability by incorporating intentional architectural details. These two bank buildings are examples of how architecture can act as a window allowing us to peer into how people lived during different periods of history and how priorities have shifted over the decades. They inspire curiosity, standing as reminders of how people interacted with the world one hundred years ago and offer the opportunity to reflect where we are today.



Photos:

Scandinavian American Bank Astoria Daily Budget 12-31-1912

Bank of Astoria/Astoria National Bank (Present day Museum of Whimsy) looking north  
*Clatsop County Historical Society*

12th and Duane post fire rebuild 1923. Astoria National Bank center Astoria Savings  
Bank back right *Clatsop County Historical Society*  
Astoria Savings Bank Duane and 11th Streets post fire (CCHS)  
Jaime Lump March 2022  
Astoria Savings Bank Duane and 11th pre-fire postcard (LCPS)