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Pioneer Courthouse Square

"The Portland Hotel. Hostelry Arose From Abandoned Foundation." April 4, 1984.

"Own a share of your square," Jonathan Parry Nicholas, Downtowner, April 6, 1981

"Historian Finds Square Unique Urban Project," E. Kimbark MacCall, Old Portland Times, April 4, 1984.

"At the time of its initial planning six years ago (1978), the 200 foot square city block was valued at \$3 Million—the most expensive piece of real estate in Portland—quite an appreciation from its 1849 selling price of \$24."

"Portland Celebrates! Completion of Courthouse Square Marks Urban Renewal Area. April 6th Historic Date for Central City Block;" Old Portland Times, April 4, 1984.

"The April 6th date [for the opening of the Square] also marks the 133rd anniversary of Portland's incorporation as a city, the 94th anniversary of the opening of the Portland Hotel that stood on the site from 1890 to 1951, and the birthday of the Square's architect, Willard Martin of Portland."

"... on July 30, 1980, the City Council accepted the Jury's recommendation that the design proposed by Martin be accepted."
Design revisions to the square were adopted August 17, 1980 by the Portland Development Commission and the next day by the City Council."

"... some 48,657 personalized bricks were purchased to fund the square, netting \$500,000 ... Under the chairmanship of businessman Phil Bogue, the Friends launched the brick sale drive on the future site of the square on April 6, 1981. An army of volunteers selling bricks in person and on the phone, processing orders, mailing share certificates and processing corrections. Over 200 people were involved in the effort. The Committee also launched a major gifts drive, 'selling' major architectural features of the square. Items ranged from the amphitheater to stoa columns, drinking fountains, trees, trash receptacles, tubs and grates. This effort raised another \$1,000,000 and bronze bricks close to each feature commemorate major donors."

"City Council appointed a non-profit organization to manage and operate the public square, Pioneer Courthouse Square, of Portland, Inc. Presided over by businessman Melvin Mark, Jr., the board of directors is comprised of seven representatives: three from the business community, three citizens at large and one representative from the city. This Committee revived brick sales, offering to replace 12,000 plain bricks already in place with new personalized bricks. Sales were brisk, even at twice the original price. As of a month before dedication day only 4,300 remained. Charter memberships were offered and the business community contributed goods and services to launch the non-profit organization. Two weeks after a recent mailing 49 businesses had already

responded. Most popular item of support is Keeper of the Square. Funding this position for an official greeter responsible for square security around the clock will necessitate approximately \$1,000 a week."

"Will Martin Described Process That Determined Final Design," Will Martin, Old Portland Times, April 4, 1984.

"The gestation and birth of Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square is a story rich in human endeavor. First came the dream, as in all great ventures, and the sharing of that dream by many people dedicated to the creation of a very special place for themselves and their children in the very heart of their city.

"I decided to form a special team of local talent in various professions other than architecture. The team included Robert Reynolds, artist and photographer; Lee Kelly, sculptor; Terence O'Donnell, author and historian with the Oregon Historical Society; Spencer Gill, writer; and Douglas Macy, a landscape architect. Lovingly referred to as the "Portland Bowser Club," we gathered weekly with expensive cigars and good Scotch for review of the week's design efforts.

"Our design approach immediately took a strong and wonderfully human direction. Early programming sessions centered on two major areas of concern: What are the uses and activities that make public open spaces vital, interesting places? And what are the most appropriate forms and materials that will relate to the richness of surrounding buildings and streets?

"Design motivators began with my emotional responses to the nature of this place, its people, and my involvement here for over 20 years. I studied the shadow patterns and the patches of sunlight influenced by the neighboring terra cotta clad buildings. I remembered the stoa of Attalus in Athens that I had studied years ago, and I began to research ancient Greek villages and their public squares. The stoa and its use of shelter, edge definition and marketplace became a strong influence.

"It became clear that Portland needed an urban square, an 'American' square, not another park. But what was an American square, and how would Americans most likely use a public square? We carefully explored the studies of William Whyte for insights.

"Other strong forces impacting the project were future (1985) light rail lines on two bordering streets, the recently constructed paved transit mall on the east boundary, and space definition created by several excellent buildings of the 1920s.

"Portland's cast iron past was reviewed and contemplated. Maximum areas of sunlight and shaded areas were plotted. The grade changes across the site were considerable and offered the potential of enclosed space beneath the square itself. More than 7,000 square feet of leasable space became a part of the scheme.

"We chose brick paving to extend from the square proper, across traffic lanes and sidewalks to the building facades on neighboring streets. Our purpose is to visually liberate the square from its constricting 200 foot property line, and to give the peripheral pedestrian and motorist the sense of being 'in' the square.

"From the southeast corner, a line of 12 monumental columns extends west. These relate to the surroundings of the square in several ways; the level of their capitals to the building floor lines on the north and south sides of the square; in their classic character to four of the adjacent structures; in their glazed terra cotta sheathing to the facing material of three of these structures.

Proceeding clockwise around the square, we cross a raised terrace which, together with the monumental stairway, solves the grade change. A 'stramp' is provided across the stairway for the handicapped.

"The north end of this monumental stairway is interrupted by an arch of terra cotta with the entrance to an enclosed lower level area. The podium-like keystone of the arch will serve as a place of public address.

"Behind the keystone stand tinted glass-covered pergolas, latticed in bronze and crowned with arbors of climbing roses. These will house a food service area with enclosed and open-air seating. This area was chosen to take maximum advantage of the sunlight year around.

"Below the pergolas, to the east, lies a small amphitheater, designed to serve as a canvas-covered orchestra or bandstand or, using it in reverse, as a seating area for small musical or stage performances.

"The north side of the square functions differently. It is the disembarkment point for L.R.T. so there is little need for covered waiting areas. Here, the logic and order of the stoa concept dissolve. Four columns remain to support the L.R. T. cables and a small covered area. Some columns are missing, some have fallen selectively to provide seating elements, some are replaced by trees. This romantic, emotional association with classical ruins intimates the cycle of past, present and future. Progressing around the square, we come to an actual artifact of the square past: the wrought iron gate of the Portland Hotel, placed where it originally stood. Based on these design concepts our interdisciplinary team was selected as designer for Pioneer Courthouse Square.

"The Jury's decision did not ensure completion of the project. Lengthy council hearings and uncertainty about project funding presented a formidable obstacle. Political forces and lack of downtown business support nearly sabotaged the entire effort.

"To draw attention to the project delay, we painted a stylized blueprint of the square over the entire site, with help from local architects and volunteers. The color chosen was, naturally, brick red. The project remained in the public's eye and a group of fine citizens stepped forward to raise the necessary funds. They called themselves Friends of Pioneer Square. A strong uprising of public support

combined with the help of several council members and the media gave the project the buttressing necessary for its ultimate success.

"The Friends went into action with a marketing scheme to bolster public involvement. It was the right to 'own' a piece of the square, to have your name stamped in an individual brick and placed in the square. As a result, 50,000 name bricks were sold, with a financial benefit of nearly \$750,000."

Architecture California May/June 1983 Willard Martin

PIONEER COURTHOUSE SQUARE

[The following video script was written by Gregg Kantor, and edited by Ernie Bonner. A 30-minute video was produced by Ernie Bonner using this script, in 1986.]

That was an exciting day back in April of 1984. It was the day Pioneer Courthouse Square was born.

But to fully appreciate how miraculous a birth that was, I need to tell you about a death that occurred almost 100 years earlier.

It was on a cold, wet night in November 1886, a man named Kenealy stepped out of a seedy saloon on the corner of SW 4th and Yamhill. The saloon was thought to be a front for prostitution and was a well-known rendezvous for Portland's criminal element.

The man who stepped out onto the street corner that night was not one of Portland's finer citizens. He was a waterfront vagabond, known to frequent the city's lesser hangouts.

But he was not to return to his waterfront haunts that evening. His life was brutally ended by an unknown attacker with a deadly knife.

Kenealy's body was found here the next morning, November 6, 1886. It lay inside the abandoned hotel foundation, that stood here at the time.

A trail of blood discovered on the street in front of the saloon on Yamhill, led toward the deserted foundation. It suggested Kenealy had been stabbed to death in front of the saloon and then dragged up the street and dumped in the overgrown lot. His murderer was never found.

Ordinarily the murder of a man with Kenealy's background wouldn't warrant description 100 years later. However, in his demise, Kenealy made a small, but important contribution to the evolution of the city block that is today downtown Portland's most important gathering place.

The gruesome publicity that surrounded the murder, chilled the blood of some of Portland's leading citizens at the time. The abandoned, overgrown lot was a public nuisance. On it stood the grim stone foundation of an earlier attempt to build Portland a grand hotel. During the day the foundation was an eyesore, and at night, prowlers could be heard roaming within the partitioned walls. In fact, Kenealy's wouldn't be the only body found there. The body of a prostitute would also be discovered within the wall. The combination of murders shocked Portlanders into action.

And that's what this show is all about. We are going to show how over 140 years this block changed from a dense stand of trees to the inscribed red bricks that are Pioneer Courthouse Square.

How does the center of a city evolve from trees to red bricks? The answer is simple.

The square that adorns the heart of downtown Portland today is there because of people—as a matter of fact, thousands of them. They were people who had visions of a better Portland. Some had wealth and were willing to take risks; others had little, but were generous; and some, like Mr. Kenealy, simply lived and died in the right place at the right time.

This is their story.

A SHOEMAKER

First, there was Elijah Hill, a shoemaker, who came to Portland in the 1840's with a desire to begin a new life in a frontier town.

Hill paid the not so grand sum of \$24 and a pair of boots for the property that is now Pioneer Courthouse Square.

But he didn't hold on to it long. A man named James Field acquired the property a few years later. Nothing much is known about Mr. Fields except that in 1849 he struck it rich. That was the year he sold his property to the Portland School District for \$1,000.

While \$1,000 might not seem like a terribly high sum to pay for the property that is today Pioneer Square, its value had actually increased over 300 times from what Mr. Hill had paid for it. That's assuming, of course, that Mr. Hill paid for the property with a quality pair of boots.

PORTLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 1

The next step on the road to Pioneer Square was taken by the members of the Portland School District No. 1. On May 12, 1856, they voted to build a schoolhouse to replace the old rented quarters at First and Oak Streets. A \$4,000 school tax was approved, and with part of this money the block was bought from Mr. Fields.

On the site Portland's first schoolhouse was built. Central School, as it was called, opened on May 17, 1858, with 280 pupils enrolled for the first term.

If you've ever questioned the Portland School District's financial dealings, you'll be proud of the return the District received when they sold the property only five

years after Central School opened. In 1883, the District sold the block to Henry Villard's Northern Pacific Terminal Company for a then astronomical \$75,000.

HENRY VILLARD

Henry Villard was no ordinary man. At one point or another in his life, he was a renowned journalist, a financier, a railroad tycoon, and even the owner of the New York Post. But it was between 1874 and 1884 that Villard would leave his mark on Portland.

Terrence O'Donnell of the Portland Historical Society, tells us of Villard:

"Villard was born in Bavaria. He came to this country in 1853. He worked as a journalist. In fact, he became famous as a journalist because he covered the Lincoln Douglas debates. He went on to become a battlefield journalist in the Civil War. And after that he suffered from ill health, and returned to Germany where he became interested in the railroad business. And it happened that at about that time people were trying to get a railroad from Oregon to California. And they were selling bonds to finance it, many of these bonds in England and d Germany. And they were about to default. So the holders of the German bonds sent Villard over to see if he could rescue the whole enterprise. And that's how he happened to come to Oregon. He did rescue the enterprise. In fact, he formed the Northern Pacific and was able to get the first train through to Oregon. It cost him so much money, however, that he went broke the same year that it arrived, 1883. Therefore the hotel he had planned for the center of the city (at the present site of the square) got its foundations built, but that was about all."

PORTLAND'S LEADING BUSINESSMEN

"Villard's Ruins" were a sore upon the Portland landscape. For five years they would sit idle, a testament to the city's lack of vigor.

Two years after Kenealy's murder, six of Portland's leading businessmen, including William Ladd, Henry Corbett, and Simeon Reed, took action. The City needed a first-class hotel, not a downtown graveyard for dumping bodies. They offered to put up \$250,000 to build a first-class hotel, if others would put up an equal amount.

Some 322 local citizens invested in the Portland Hotel Company, setting a tradition of community involvement that would eventually be repeated to help finance today's Square. The majestic Portland Hotel opened to the public on April 7, 1890 atop Villard's old foundation. It cost over \$750,000 to build and no other hotel on the west coast could rival it.

George McMath, a local historian, recalls the later years of the hotel.

"The Portland Hotel was not just for visitors to the City. For over 60 years it would serve, like today's Pioneer Courthouse Square, as a gathering place for the residents of Portland. The Hotel, like the Square, became the focal point of the City where Portlanders came to eat, dance and socialize. Over the years its reputation as an elegant hostelry grew. Many names and faces graced its entrances, including seven United States Presidents who stayed during their visits to Portland. The Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905 brought thousands of visitors to Portland and the Hotel's business boomed."

But in the 1930's, competition from the newer and more modern Benson and Multnomah Hotels bit into profits, causing great concern over the future of the hotel's operations. And despite efforts to modernize to keep pace with the new competition, profits remained low.

The mortal blow was to come on Christmas Eve, 1941. Edward Boyce, part owner and the man in charge of the hotel's operations for 30 years, died suddenly. The family—after Boyce's death—kept spending to a minimum but shortly afterwards put the hotel up for sale.

Wartime rationing, food costs, and a loss of trained personnel to better paying defense jobs finally brought the Hotel to its end.

MEIER AND FRANK

In 1944 Julius Meier and Aaron Frank (owners of Meier and Frank Department Store) purchased the Portland Hotel. It was rumored they bought it to prevent another interested investor from constructing a major department store on the site.

Whatever their reasons for buying the Hotel, on June 27, 1951 Aaron Frank announced that it would be demolished. The new use for the property would be a two-story parking structure.

It was a use that would nearly two decades later bring the property to an important turning point—and an important battle. It was a battle being fought in many American cities between public and private interests and between people and cars. The winner would decide the fate of the property for a long time to come.

Portlanders, like residents of other cities in the country, became addicted to the automobile in the 1950's and 1960's. This addiction created parking and traffic problems that threatened to drive away both shoppers and merchants from the center of the City.

By the late Sixties the lack of parking was frustrating all who used the downtown area. And it was obvious to Meier and Frank that their two-story parking structure could not meet the demands of those driving downtown to shop.

So in 1969, Meier and Frank proposed to replace their two-story parking structure with an 8 to 10 story parking structure that would have room for 800 cars. They hired a Tacoma developer who, on their behalf, came to the City for a building permit. A storm of protest arose as many felt the City needed a park for people not for cars. Meier and Frank claimed the garage was the key to their survival downtown.

THE DOWNTOWN PLAN

A city park at the site of the Meier and Frank parking structure was not a new idea in 1969. In the early sixties Lloyd Keefe, then City Planning Director, had believed the site would be ideal for a park and had directed his staff to prepare designs as early as 1962 and 1963. But the time wasn't right. And the admitted parking problem was not addressed by a new park.

The proposal to build the parking garage in 1969 focused the City's attention on the block. And at an emotional City Planning Commission meeting in January of 1970, Meier and Frank's proposal was denied.

Some say that Betty Merten's impassioned plea for open space at that location, helped carry the day.

"I wish to speak on behalf of the women of Portland, upon whom the life or death of the downtown retail business largely depends. An additional parking structure in the core area will not bring about revitalization. Another parking structure will not bring shoppers back. Lloyd Center, with its wide malls, greenery and park-like setting makes shopping appealing. Could not downtown Portland be equally appealing? Instead of cars, noise and air pollution we can have walkways, parks and people. Or, City Hall can wait and see while pollution levels become higher and higher and livability falls lower and lower. The choice is ours, for our city, for our children."

The vote was unanimous. The value of the property as open space weighed heavily in the City Planning Commission's decision. Still, they recognized the need to solve the serious parking problems in downtown.

The solution would be a plan for Downtown.

Richard Brainard, planner and urban designer, was among those who would be involved in that effort.

"The Downtown Group formed what was called a Downtown Committee made up of a number of important downtown business people, including Glenn Jackson, Bill Roberts, the Presidents of both banks, President or chairman of the local department stores and a number of other important developers in downtown. They came up with what I believe was \$80,000

towards a plan for Downtown Portland—a land use plan for Downtown Portland. In addition to that, the State Highway Department came up with something more than a hundred thousand dollars to do both a traffic circulation and a parking plan for downtown Portland. Frank Ivancie, who was then in charge of the Planning Commission, put together a citizens' advisory committee which was chaired by Dean Gisvold. Working with that committee, CH2M as the technical planners came up with a land use plan for Downtown Portland at the end of an 18-month period and in February of 1972, presented the plan to the City Council. So the City Council officially put their stamp of approval on a central square in Downtown Portland in December of 1972."

THE FIRST STEP TO PIONEER SQUARE

Only a month after adoption of the Downtown Plan Goals and Guidelines, a new Mayor walked into Portland's City Hall. His name was Neil Goldschmidt. He would take the first step to implement the Downtown Plan and pave the way for Pioneer Square.

In 1975, Neil Goldschmidt began negotiations with Meier and Frank to obtain for the city the property that was once owned by Elijah Hill, James Field, the Portland School District, the Northern Pacific Terminal Company and the Portland Hotel Company.

Ernie Bonner, planning director for the city at the time, comments on those crucial negotiations.

"Well, Neil went directly to Jim Coe, who was at that time the local manager for Meier and Frank. Jim made it very clear to Neil. Meier and Frank wanted parking. They needed parking. And so when the City could deliver a parking garage Meier and Frank would agree to sell the Pioneer Block to the City. It was really that simple.

Fortunately, Mayor Goldschmidt already had a plan: 2 parking garages, one on the east and one on the west end of Morrison, which was the shopping street in Downtown. So, as soon as Jim Coe laid out those conditions for the sale of the Pioneer block, Neil went to work. And when private interests found that it was infeasible to build a parking garage there, Neil sent Dave Hunt of the Portland Development Commission busy at the task of building a city garage on what was called at that time the Blue Mouse Block, between third and fourth on Morrison. Meier and Frank's demands on the design of the parking garage were really very tough. They wanted more spaces than the City felt feasible. They wanted a circular ramp design. They wanted elevators facing their store. They wanted skyways going directly between the department store and the parking garage. And, as it turns out, they eventually paid for the cost of the extra features that were included at their request. So when the City finished their design and committed to build the kind of parking structure that Meier and Frank wanted, then Meier and Frank agreed to sell the

Pioneer Square block to the city. It was a trade, really. A good trade, good for the city and Meier and Frank."

Even after arrangements were made by the City to acquire the property from Meier and Frank, there were still two major obstacles to overcome before Pioneer Courthouse Square could become reality.

First, a design for the Square was needed. Second, and perhaps more important, money had to be raised to build it.

The first obstacle would be overcome by an inspired team of local urban designers. The second would only be overcome by tens of thousands of Portlanders.

WILLARD K. MARTIN

One would think that picking a design for the Square would be easy. But such was not the case. A national design competition was conducted by the Portland Development Commission in 1980, and over 162 submissions were received from across the country. A jury of Portlanders was selected to recommend to the City Council which design should be used.

On July 30, 1980 the City Council accepted the Jury's recommendation to proceed with a design submitted by a local team led by Willard K. Martin. The team included J. Douglas Macy, landscape architect; Terrence O'Donnell, author and historian; Spencer Gill, writer; Robert Reynolds, artist and photographer; and Lee Kelly, sculptor. The selection was controversial.

Doug Macy explains:

"The Downtown business community was concerned that the open design of the square would attract undesirables. They were more concerned about having an enclosed space which would serve people on a year-around basis. They were also worried about the weather. We understood the concern for year-around use and we understood the concern for undesirables hanging out in the square. But we felt that an open, accessible design which accommodated people's activities would really be a vital place in the Downtown to serve everyone. So we felt that to enclose the space any more would be a mistake. It would be like another building."

Dissension over the design threatened efforts by the city to raise money for the square. If the city could raise the money, it would receive a federal matching grant to help with the construction of the Square.

FRIENDS OF PIONEER SQUARE

In January of 1981, Portland Mayor Frank Ivancie announced that the Pioneer Courthouse Square was dead. The \$1,500,000 in local funds that were needed to supplement the federal grant Portland had received simply could not be raised, partly because of opposition to the design by important potential contributors.

When Corbett, Failing, Ladd and Reed tried to find local funding for the Portland Hotel, there were undoubtedly skeptics. And so perhaps it was only fitting that nearly 100 years later there would be skeptics who would claim the money couldn't be raised for the Square.

But in the tradition of those leading businessmen in the 1880's who found 322 local investors for the Portland Hotel, a group called Friends of Pioneer Square was formed. Molly O'Reilly, Director of the group, tells of their efforts:

"Well, when Frank made the announcement that the square was dead, its supporters kind of galvanized. They were really angry about that. They weren't willing to accept it. They got their organization together and really committed themselves to raising the money, because obviously if they could raise the money, the project couldn't be killed. I think it was in a real brainstorming session that the idea of selling bricks came up. It was obvious that with all the high level opposition to the square you couldn't run an ordinary fund-raising campaign and start with the big gifts because the big gift wasn't there right then. But if you could prove that the people of Portland really were behind this idea, and really wanted it, then the big gifts would come. That's the way the thinking went. So they came up with the \$15 bake your name in a brick campaign. And as soon as that got rolling and it was obvious there was support, the Friends put together a fine catalog of the other architectural features in the square. You could buy planters, you could buy trash receptacles, you could buy trees, you could buy trellises, waterfalls, you name it. They worked real hard at that. Those big items don't go without some salesmanship. But in a year they sold \$500,000 net of the bricks and \$1,000,000 of the major items and they accomplished their goal."

EXTRO

There were three birthdays celebrated here on April 6, 1984: Will Martin's, the City of Portland's, and Pioneer Courthouse Square's. At the Square's opening Will Martin told the crowds that had gathered that the Square was a "Downtown Living room for the people of Portland."

Since its opening the design for the Square has received international attention. Will Martin, unfortunately, saw it used for only 18 months. In September of 1985, he was killed in the crash of his own plane while flying through the Grand Canyon with his son.

But the Square will survive. It is now the focus of downtown life--a gathering place for Portlanders for generations to come. 191 events were held in the Square in 1985 alone.

The Square fits so naturally into our city that already it is becoming hard to remember what was there before the red bricks.

But should you ever forget, just look down at the floor of the Square and read the names on the bricks. These people and others brought you Pioneer Courthouse Square.