The Oriental Warehouse, at First and Brannan Streets, is a sentinel of San Francisco's past. Once the hub of vital activity on the waterfront, the massive brick building today stands isolated in an area undergoing rapid change. The Oriental Warehouse symbolizes San Francisco's onetime importance as a center of international trade and maritime activity. The building itself played a crucial role in that trade and was part of a complex which received the majority of Asian immigrants arriving in the West, from the 1860s to the early twentieth century. Nearly all passenger traffic to the Orient passed through this facility, as well.

Contemporary accounts portray the drama that centered on the site of the Oriental Warehouse. In 1872, the Alta California observed that the arrival of a ship there created "such a state of excitement and confusion as to suggest to the mind of the spectator the Tower of Babel...Hackmen, boarding-house runners, touters of every denomination and a heterogeneous mass of seemingly self-interested humanity...crowd the gangways as soon as they are fixed, throwing cards, shouting names, hustling passengers and attacking baggage..."

The New York-based Pacific Mail Steamship Company (PMSS) constructed the Oriental Warehouse in 1867, at a time when entrepreneurs in San Francisco were laying the foundations of an economic empire that drew riches through the port of San Francisco, to and from North and South America, the Pacific Islands and the Far East. PMSS was the principal carrier of that trade, and its San Francisco facilities handled millions of dollars worth of goods. The Oriental Warehouse is all that remains of the PMSS complex.

The Company got its start in New York when William H. Aspinwall successfully bid on a U.S. Government contract, in 1847, to provide postal service from the East to the West Coast. It appeared to be a risky venture, even with heavy government subsidies, that is, until the Gold Rush entered the picture.

When Pacific Mail's steamer, the California, stopped at Panama City, en route to inaugurate the Panama-California service, her crew found that word of the discovery of gold had preceded their arrival. A crowd of would-be prospectors demanded passage. On arrival in San Francisco on February 28, 1849, the California dropped anchor at the eastern lee of Telegraph Hill, and four hundred fifty passengers disembarked for the gold fields. She was the first steamer ever to arrive in this port. The steamers Oregon and Panama followed the California within the next four months, loaded with gold seekers. As a result of the Gold Rush, PMSS's regular mail service between Panama and San Francisco thrived.

The Oriental Warehouse in c. 1880s (photo by Carleton E. Watkins) and today. The warehouse, identified by the sign on its north wall, dominates the Pacific Mail Steamship Co.'s complex in the 1880s. The First Street wharf and sheds lie to the east and the coal yard to the west. Taverns, rooming houses, residences and restaurants nearby reflect the mixed use of the area. In 1990, the massive warehouse survives amid the towering new Rincon Point-South Beach residential development.
Francisco proved more profitable than the most extravagant expectations.

During the next twenty years, the explosive growth of California and the building of the transcontinental railroad (completed in 1869) encouraged the nation to look to the establishment of a regular steamship service across the Pacific to the Orient. In 1865, an act of Congress directed the Postmaster-General to call for bids on a ten-year contract to provide monthly mail service between San Francisco and China, with calls at the Hawaiian Islands and Japan. Pacific Mail submitted the only acceptable bid.

To accommodate the trans-Pacific service, PMSS built four new steamships: the Great Republic, Japan, China and America. Ashore, the Company, which had previously leased existing facilities, decided to construct its own new facilities in South Beach and leased land for this purpose from the State Board of Harbor Commissioners. The property, then at the water's edge, now lies between Brannan, Townsend, First and Collin P. Kelly (originally Japan) Streets. The new complex included a wharf at the end of First Street, the Oriental and the Occidental Warehouses, coal yards and rail facilities. In order to accomplish this major effort, according to Langley's San Francisco City Directory (1869) the Company "cut down hills, and filled up swamps to such an extent that what had been the most useless portion of the city front has become the center of an extensive business."

In early 1866, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's President described the new San Francisco facility in his annual report to the stockholders: "At San Francisco, the Company . . . have erected extensive and commodious wharves . . . at which the inward and outward steamers of the Panama and China Lines lie and discharge and receive cargo, without interfering one with the other. In connection with these wharves, and to meet the demands of the increasing freight traffic, particularly that to and from China, the Company have built three convenient warehouses, the Oriental Warehouse divided into thirds by fire walls of ample capacity, and provided with the best protection against fire . . ."
1870s in the vicinity of today’s Fisherman's Wharf, reached the area of the Oriental Warehouse and, ironically, cut it off from the water that was its life-blood. The seawall construction entailed demolition of the old “Mail Dock” (the First Street wharf) and the addition of bay-fill, paved to create the new East Street (now the Embarcadero), separating the Oriental Warehouse from the new piers built further east.

The 1910s proved to be a transitional period for South Beach. In the area just west of the Oriental Warehouse, bounded by Colin P. Kelly, Brannan, Townsend and Second Streets, the South End Warehouses and Rosenberg’s Dried Fruit Company replaced modest housing and a coal yard. Hooper’s South End Grain Warehouse (1874) and the 1882 California Warehouse (taken over by the South End Warehouse Company) remained at the Townsend St. end of that block.

Southern Pacific continued the practice, begun when the Oriental Warehouse opened, of leasing it to a variety of operators. The first proprietors were the firm of Howard and Pool, whose sign is visible on the north wall, in a photograph from the 1880s. Other operators have included the Haslett Warehouse Company, at the turn of the century, and the De Pue Warehouse Company, from 1920 until about 1955. A “ghost” of the De Pue name appears on the building’s east face. In the years that followed, the Oriental Warehouse served as a records storage facility for Southern Pacific.

In the Post-World War II period, South Beach maintained an important, if not commercially aggressive role, as a warehouse district. Beginning in the late 1960s, the City of San Francisco and subsequently the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA) made the area the focus of study for a new residential and mixed-use development. In 1977, the City designated the Oriental Warehouse a landmark. In 1980, the SFRA adopted the Rincon Point-South Beach Plan, which proposed that the Oriental Warehouse—soon to be designated eligible for the National Register of Historic Places—play a vital role in the context of the new development. Documents accompanying the plan stated that the SFRA intended the warehouse to “include a combination of such uses as retail, commercial, day-care, recreation and service facilities.”

During the next ten years, several development proposals involving the Oriental Warehouse surfaced, but none were actually undertaken. In 1990, the City of San Francisco created the South End Historic District and included the Oriental Warehouse, the district’s “historically most important building,” over the objections of the Redevelopment Agency. The ordinance designating the district extends recognition to other historic warehouses in the area. Despite this recognition, the future existence of the Oriental Warehouse remains in doubt.

—Jean Kortum,
Lauren Weiss
Bricker & Don Andreini