

Angel Island Immigration Station

Immigration History in the Middle of San Francisco Bay

A tourist's visit to San Francisco is not complete without a ferry ride on the bay to Alcatraz, the historic island penitentiary. But Alcatraz is not the only famous island in San Francisco Bay. Situated just northeast of the Golden Gate Bridge lies Angel Island, a lesser-known spot of land with its own similar but unique historical lineage. Like Alcatraz, Angel Island was occupied during the Civil War by the U.S. military as part of a coastal defense network. Like Alcatraz, it once housed federal prisoners. But unique to this island is its use as a United States immigration station. From 1910 until 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station operated as a primary gateway for immigration from the Pacific. It was a counterpart to Ellis Island Immigration Station on the eastern seaboard.

The significance of Ellis Island as a symbol of European immigration into the United States has been well documented and equally well supported as a prominent place of historical interest. The 1997 nomination of Angel Island Immigration Station as a National Historic Landmark speaks clearly of its equal significance as a West Coast symbol of immigration.

History of the Immigration Station

In 1905, local architect Walter J. Mathews was commissioned by the Bureau of Immigration to design a new processing station on Angel Island. The immigration station emerged from a 15-acre hillside site on the northeastern coast of the island in 1908. It consisted of three large wood frame structures, a concrete power plant, and a wooden pier. Outbuildings and underground water tanks were constructed the following year, and in 1910, its opening year, 12 employee cottages designed by architect Julia Morgan were built.

With the onset of World War I, European immigration to the West Coast via the Panama Canal all but ceased, and the immigration station became the portal through which people from

China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, South America, and Russia immigrated. From 1910 until 1940, some one million immigrants were processed at Angel Island. Less than one half of those immigrants actually set foot on the island, but a large number of those who did were detained and held there pending their immigration hearings. Almost exclusively, those detained for long periods were Chinese. In its 30 years of operation, 175,000 to 200,000 Chinese immigrants passed through the station.

The discriminatory Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese laborers from immigrating, resulted in a "paper son" system designed to circumvent the law. Despite the exclusion policy, Chinese residents of the United States could legally bring blood relatives into the country. In this system, a person wishing to immigrate could purchase papers from a legal Chinese resident claiming that he was a blood relative. Because of the "paper son" system, immigrating Chinese were viewed with suspicion and subject to rigorous and detailed interrogations designed to stymie even true blood relatives. Those who answered incorrectly were subject to detainment and further hearings, or deportation. To exasperate matters, detainees often waited many weeks or months, and sometimes years, for their immigration hearings.

The station was overcrowded from the beginning, with operations further complicated by its segregated facilities. Caucasian and Oriental eating and living quarters were segregated and also divided by gender, with the Oriental facilities further subdivided between Chinese and Japanese. For a brief time, the second floor of the barracks doubled as a detention facility for World War I POWs and in the 1920s for Federal prisoners.

In 1940, fire destroyed the administration building, spelling the end for the immigration station. By the end of that year, a new station had been established within San Francisco proper.

Building 317, the detention barracks, is one of the three major structures remaining at Angel Island Immigration Station. Photo courtesy the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.



The site reverted back to the U.S. Army, and when the United States entered World War II, it became a Prisoner of War Processing Station. Between 1942 and 1946 it functioned as an intake and transfer station for German and Japanese prisoners and enemy aliens bound for inland POW camps. At war's end it was an outgoing port for prisoners being returned to Japan.

The Discovery and The Save

After the war, the Army decommissioned the site and turned the site over to the State of California. From 1946 until 1963, it languished in obscurity, with the wood frame buildings deteriorating with each succeeding year. In 1963, Angel Island was established as a state park and the California Department of Parks and Recreation assumed stewardship of the immigration site. Overgrown with brush and in a shambles, the area was initially cleared. The administration building ruins were bulldozed, the wooden pier removed, and the employee cottages razed. Also slated for demolition were the detention barracks. Fortunately, a state park ranger exploring the barracks discovered a wealth of Asian inscriptions carved on its interior walls. With the help of a college professor and a local photographer, the trio recorded their discovery and reported it to park officials and the local Asian-American community. A small cadre of historians, professionals, and concerned citizens soon took on the preservation challenge.

The inscriptions turned out to be poems written in a classical Chinese style, each by a different author. Translated, they expressed the emotional heartbreak, sorrow, and anguish felt by the immigrating Chinese detained on Angel Island.

Historians estimated that over 100 poems had been written. Repainting of the walls and more recent weathering had left only a portion of them visible though. These poems, first-person accounts of the immigration experience, were clearly significant historical treasures.

Community groups lobbied state government about the importance of the discovery, which ultimately led to a 1976 appropriation of \$250,000 for repair and preservation of the detention barracks. Roof repair, foundation stabilization, seismic

bracing, building access, exterior patching and painting, and installation of a sprinkler system were completed in 1981. The restoration was designed to bring the detention barracks back to its last occupied period as a POW camp.

With a cash-strapped state park system, no further restoration or preservation has proceeded. An urgency now exists to complete the stabilization and restoration of the immigration station. Over the years, volunteer organizations have actively trained and maintained a dedicated docent staff and have sought public and private support for planning and implementation. Sponsorship of a bill by Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-Hawaii) has resulted in a \$100,000 federal appropriation to study the feasibility of a major West Coast immigration museum center, of which Angel Island Immigration Station would play a pivotal role.

The Resource

The major standing features from the immigration station period (1910–1940) are the detention barracks, the hospital, and the power plant. A barn and a small carpentry shop also remain, as do the partial foundations of the employee cottages and the administration building. The most significant of all the features is the detention barracks with its inscribed Chinese poems. Also, on the second floor of the barracks can be found carvings in Japanese, Russian, and Arabic, establishing the presence of other immigrating groups.

A number of structures were added to the site during the World War II POW camp period (1942–1946). A mess hall, two guard towers, and a set of army barracks were built during the war

Poems carved by Chinese detainees were discovered throughout the detention barracks. Photo courtesy the Angel Island Immigration Foundation.



years. The mess hall remains intact, as do two of the military barracks and the remains of one guard tower. Related to this period and located on the second floor of the detention barracks are several inscriptions written by Japanese and German POWs.

The value that these buildings hold is not in their individual architectural merits, as they are neither unique nor distinguished in that way, but in their collective symbolism as a processing station and in the valuable carved inscriptions contained within them. The immigration station site as a whole is the only one of its kind existing on the West Coast.

Protection and Preservation

During the barracks restoration, great care was taken to protect the carvings. After completing the restoration, park officials decided to leave the carvings largely untouched, determining also that no mechanical systems were to be added to the barracks. Any change in temperature and humidity could potentially produce irreversible changes to the walls, thus further degrading the carvings. A minimum of interior lighting was added to allow some of the carvings to be read, but no surface protection was provided. Guided docent tours, an alarm system, and limited hours of operation have served well to limit the amount of touching or vandalism occurring in the barracks, but a long-term solution is now needed.

The carved poems were actually the second generation of wall inscriptions. In the early station years, Chinese immigrants were said to have written on the walls with ink brushes. The staff

immediately painted the barracks walls, but succeeding groups of detainees simply carved their inscriptions into the redwood paneling instead. Time and again, the carvings were covered with layers of paint until many of the lower relief carvings filled in. Now, only the more deeply inscribed poems are visible. The challenge that this poses for preservationists today is that of recovery. Can layers of paint be stripped away to reveal the more delicately carved poems? Can oil-based paint be stripped to expose the water-based, ink brush painted inscriptions without destroying them? Are there ways to read and record the inscriptions on the walls without having to actually remove paint? And finally, can a long-term solution for both protection and display be found?

Next Steps

An in-depth study of the inscriptions is currently proposed that will analyze the historic paint and the Chinese writing ink, determine the probability for successful recovery of written inscriptions, and explore alternative safe recovery techniques. Mapping and photographing the poems and translation of all other inscriptions in the building will also be completed. Historical research will be conducted concurrently to access known historical translations and references that may provide additional clues to the locations and ages of the carvings.

Alternative methods of protection and security for the carvings will also be studied. Different lighting techniques could be explored that would enhance the visibility of the carvings while generating less heat and ultraviolet radiation. Security alternatives such as clear protective coatings, glass covers, railing systems, or area alarms may also be considered.

Conditions assessments of the hospital and power plant will also be conducted to establish benchmarks for their restoration. Unchanged in use and untouched since 1946, both structures are badly in need of basic repair. The assessments will determine the level of effort required for restoration and adaptive re-use of the buildings. In addition, a cultural landscape study will be completed in order to restore much of the site to its former appearance.

Summary

The greatest benefit that can be offered to the visiting public from this work is the ability to share the rich history of this valuable resource.

The site provides the foil against which the hardships of immigration and the ramifications of political realities such as exclusion can be presented and discussed. The carved inscriptions provide the personal insight that humanizes these issues and relates them to the visitor. It is a great accomplishment to preserve the carved poems, but it is not enough if they are not available for public view and interpretation. Likewise, restora-

tion of the buildings and grounds combined with a good interpretative program will give visitors a greater sense of the physical presence of the station, the power of the governing authority behind it, and the feelings of those it affected.

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Stonewall—An Icon in Gay History— Recognized by the National Register

It was a spontaneous uprising by a rag-tag group fiercely resisting arrest for the simple act of gathering in a local tavern, the Stonewall Inn, a semi-underground, Mafia-run watering hole in New York's Greenwich Village neighborhood, that catered to a predominantly gay male clientele. None of the participants—not the policemen nor the patrons of the bar nor those who joined in when the fight moved out into the street—could have imagined that the rioting they precipitated would come to be an international symbol for the struggle for gay and lesbian civil rights. What started out as an ordinary bar raid by police but turned into a pitched battle in the streets that stretched over three nights now, 30 years later, has been recognized by the federal government as a site worthy of preservation. On May 27, 1999, Stonewall Inn was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is considered to be the first property listed in the National Register specifically for its association with gay history.

An outgrowth of the revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s, Stonewall is historically significant because it marked a sharp turn in the tactics of the gay rights movement—from an attitude of politely requesting respect and tolerance to one of vocally asserting that gays should have the same civil rights as the

“straight” population. It is this defiant stance that is celebrated in hundreds of gay rights parades and festivals around the world, many held in June to commemorate the Stonewall event. The listing is a testament not only to the increased acceptance of gays and lesbians in contemporary society but also to the still young but growing field of scholarship in gay history. Also, it is another example of how, in recent years, the National Register, and historic preservation in general, have become more inclusive of a broader spectrum of human experience than in the past.

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The Stonewall Inn was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on May 27, 1999. Photo courtesy the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation/Andrew Dollart.