

News Release



For Immediate Release
September 16, 2005

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Photos Available Upon Request
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“Ellis Island of the West”

Work Begins on Angel Island Immigration Station -- One of West Coast’s Most Significant Historic Sites

The Place to Visit for Great Views, Hiking, Biking, History and Lunch

ANGEL ISLAND -- Work began in mid-August on a \$50 million, three-phase restoration project to preserve and rehabilitate Angel Island’s historic Immigration Station, the “Ellis Island of the West.” The work will focus on protecting and highlighting the famous poems that were etched into the barrack walls nearly 100 years ago by Chinese immigrants seeking a new life in America. Passed in 2000, Proposition 12 provides the initial \$15 million for phase one of the restoration project.

In the past, 200,000 annual visitors to Angel Island Immigration Station could view only a small portion of the barracks. The first phase will make rooms on both floors of the barracks accessible and create a terraced interpretive footprint of the massive administrative building that was destroyed by fire in 1940.

“The Immigration Station is a significant national historic treasure,” said State Parks’ Director Ruth Coleman. “The messages found in the poems provide us with a valuable history lesson about a people who were desperate to enter a new land and begin a new life. The Chinese became the first nationality in U.S. history to date, denied entrance into the U.S. We are thrilled that this project will begin restoring the Angel Island Immigration Station, and we would encourage visitors to visit and watch the changes.”

“Starting the preservation of ‘one of America’s Most Endangered Historic Places,’ as named by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is critical,” stated Daphne Kwok, Executive Director of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. “We cannot afford to lose these historic poems. They were almost destroyed in the 1970s when the Immigration Station was slated for demolition. Now is the time to draw attention to our nation’s history through the preservation of this site.”

The Perfect Autumn Weather Place for Hiking, Biking, History, Fun, Food And Watching the Restoration Take Place

As the largest island in San Francisco Bay, Angel Island State Park is home to wildlife, trails, historic sites, and breathtaking views. Mount Livermore, the top of Angel Island, offers spectacular views of the San Francisco skyline, the Marin Headlands and Mount Tamalpais. Besides being the site for an Immigration Station, Angel Island was also used as a fishing and hunting site by Miwok Indians, a Quarantine Station by the Public Health Service, and military bases by the U.S. Army during the Civil War, World War I, II, and a Cold War Nike missile base. Visitors can enjoy scenic hikes and bike rides around the island as well as places to camp and picnic.

"Angel Island represents the most comprehensive collage of Native American and American military history available in the Bay Area," said John Koeberer of the California Parks Companies, operator of the concession facilities on the Island. "In addition to the tram tours around the Island that cover much of this history, scenic hiking and picnicking opportunities abound in what many call the best views of San Francisco and its bridges. The cafe, which serves sandwiches, beer, wine and other snacks, offers bicycle rentals and Picnics to Go packages on a daily basis." For more information, please call (415) 897-0715.

Woolsey and Feinstein Support Preservation

U.S. Representative Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma is one of the leading supporters for the rehabilitation of the Immigration Station. Rep. Woolsey states on her website, "The completion of the Angel Island Immigration Station project will preserve an important chapter of our nation's rich and complex immigration history. In particular, the Station is a significant historical landmark because it teaches visitors about the Chinese American experience."

Rep. Woolsey introduced H.R. 606, which authorizes the use of federal funds for the restoration of the Immigration Station. On May 23rd by voice vote, H.R. 606 was passed unanimously. Currently the Senate is considering the companion bill introduced by U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein. If it is passed by the full Senate, then the authorization process of the requested \$15 million will begin. New to this bill is a required 50/50 match of State and private funding.

It is estimated that nearly \$50 million dollars will be required to complete the necessary renovations. Over \$19 million dollars has already been secured for the project. Without the efforts of Rep. Woolsey and Senator Feinstein, federal funding would never have been considered for the State Park run facility.

Immigration Station History: Poems Tell the Story

Lured by the promise of gold and a better life, Chinese began immigrating to the United States in larger numbers in 1848. In the late 1800s, believing that the country's economic

depression was related to the influx of new immigrants, politicians enacted the start of successive legislation making it difficult for foreigners, especially Asians, to enter the country, attain citizenship, own property or compete in business. While known today as the "Ellis Island of the West, Angel Island was established through the federal legislation aimed at stemming the tide of immigration, and known to officials as the "Guardian of the Western Gate." The facility consisted of a boat dock, barracks, a dining hall, a hospital, and rooms to conduct the interrogations.

Because of the exclusionary laws directed at them, some Chinese immigrants adopted false identities, becoming "paper sons or daughters," children of American citizens who were allowed to enter the country. All Chinese were considered suspect and had to prove their identity by matching answers about their lives in detail with those of their relatives' in the United States. Inspectors presiding over each case had wide discretionary power in determining the fate of each applicant. Processing and questioning of new arrivals took weeks and sometimes months and years; admittance was never assured. With their chance at a new life hanging in the balance, feeling of loneliness, isolation, despair and doubt played on the minds of many who waited.

Because of the long delays associated with testimonies, living conditions became the focal point of immigrants' frustrations. Food was a common complaint. Lester Tom Lee recalls in a statement made to Lydia Lum for her Immigrant Journey's of Chinese-Americans project, "We ate vegetables twice a day and some very rough rice, very hard to swallow. I was a growing boy and hungry." Lee's experience was not uncommon to that of many immigrants. He came to the Island as a sixteen year old boy in 1935. He was detained for two months until he could prove his rightful citizenship. "Sometimes I wondered why we all came over here for that kind of treatment. Sometimes I just wanted to go home because they treated us like criminals. We were only immigrants" said Lee.

Carved into or brushed onto walls of the living quarters, Chinese poetry served as a way for detainees to deal with their anger and frustration. The poems, many based on traditional styles, serve as beautiful testaments to all facets of the immigrant experience from the reasons many came, to how they felt once they got here. One anonymous poem reads,

Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd
That I took passage on the President Lincoln.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building?
The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of tears flow.
I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon.
Thus sparing me the additional sorrow here.

As first hand accounts, nothing existing in print about the immigration experience written during this period comes close to rivaling the power of the poetry on Angel Island.

The Restoration

The restoration plan is broken into three phases. The main goal of this first phase is to restore the detention barracks. In the past only the first floor of the barracks has been open to visitors. An elevator will be installed in the building allowing access to the second floor of the barracks which contain additional poems and writings by non-Chinese immigrants.

Phase one of the project will restore and furnish the barracks so visitors will see the rooms as they would have been in the 1910s and 20s and install a new lighting system to better view the poems. Other first phase work includes creating a footprint to better convey the size, function, and importance of the former Administration Building, as well as rebuilding the covered stairway connecting the Administrative Building and barracks. Future phases will stabilize and rehabilitate the hospital and convert the power plant into the Immigration Station Visitor Center.

Angel Island has been called many things throughout its history: “Guardian of the Western Gate, “Ellis Island of the West”, and even “the Bay Area’s Best Kept Secret”. While the Island has transformed from a home for Native Americans to a military installation to a detention center and finally to the bustling hub for recreation that it is now, Angel Island remains an important part of U.S. history. Once the restoration is complete, the Immigration Station, only one small part of everything the Island has to offer, will finally be ensured of it’s preservation for future generations.

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