



California State Parks Video Transcript



Angel Island State Park Orientation Video

NARRATOR: In the beginning—before this was an island, before there was a bay—time was measured by the coming of storms. Clouds piled up against mountain barriers, dropping cold rains over foothills and valleys, and covering the mountains deeper and deeper beneath their snow. Winter after winter, for thousands of years, the storms swept in from the North Pacific. To the north, great glaciers slowly spread across the continents, locking away much of the world’s water in the form of ice. The sea level was lower then; the ocean lay far to the west. There was no bay here, only a broad inland valley broken by high ridges now known as Tiburon, San Mateo Point, and Coyote Hills.

Then, not long ago as glacial time is measured, the weather began to warm and the ice to thaw. Drop by drop at first, meltwater flowed out in springs, poured into cascades, and formed rivers rushing through gaps in the coast range, back to their source—the ocean. Rising waters crept up slowly through the Golden Gate, filling in the valley, surrounding the ridges, and spreading a sheet of water fifty miles long across the valley floor. The islands—Yerba Buena, Belvedere, Alcatraz, and Angel Island—were born.

Until two centuries ago, varied Indian cultures lived harmoniously on the land throughout California. Then, in 1769, a new phase in California’s history began, as Spain set out to claim territory in this part of the New World.

The distinction of the being the first Spaniard ever to set eyes on the San Francisco Bay belongs to Governor Don Gaspar de Portolá, who sighted it from a hillside near San Jose during the course of his overland expedition. Inspired by the vastness of this hidden bay, Father Crespí, chaplain of the expedition, wrote, “It is a harbor such that not only the navy of Our Most Catholic Majesty, but those of all Europe, could take shelter in it.”

For nearly two centuries before, the Golden Gate eluded explorers’ ships. Plagued by heavy fog and treacherous offshore winds, navigators simply failed to see its entrance, but now it is 1775. Across the continent, the American Revolution is fast approaching. While British colonists struggle for their freedom, a Spanish expedition sets sail from San Blas, Mexico, bound for Monterey. The 193-ton packet boat *San Carlos* was commissioned . . .

ACTOR PORTRAYING JUAN MANUEL DE AYALA (speaking with a Spanish accent): “Oya! Permítame decirle sobre nuestro viaje. Oh, excuse me. Allow me to introduce myself, please. My name is Ayala, Lieutenant Juan Manuel de Ayala, of the Royal Spanish Navy. Let me tell you about our voyage . . .

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“We set sail with three ships from San Blas, on the West coast of Mexico, bound for the north. Let’s see, it was March, yes, March 16th, 1775. I was commanding this flagship, *San Carlos*. Ours was a dual purpose: provisions in our hold for the mission in Monterey and commission to explore and chart this new harbor, this Bay of San Francisco. But soon after the beginning of this fateful voyage, a pistol left in the cabin by Manrique, crazy man, discharged accidentally. If only he’d taken proper precautions. I received a severe wound in my right foot, here, and spent most of the trip aboard the *San Carlos* resting.

“Great winds and strong currents made for slow headway. After many days pushing ahead, we reached the inlet of what you know as the Golden Gate. Distant three miles out, we moved with great caution, sailing our vessel in through the mouth of this great bay. The force of the wind, and the necessity of having the sails set, made me afraid every moment of springing a mast or topsail. We finally anchored at 10:30 that night, and . . .”

NARRATOR: Captain Ayala, this is all very interesting, but we must move along; we have over 200 more years of history to cover.

ACTOR PORTRAYING JUAN MANUEL DE AYALA (speaking with a Spanish accent): “Oh yes, of course. Excuse me. By August 13th, we found the sheltered cove of this island, and here we named it Isla de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, Our Lady of Angels, for that was the feast day. It was from this island that we directed the survey of San Francisco Bay. I sent Carnizares ashore to the mainland to map this area. For a month and a half we surveyed and charted the bay. Then, setting sail, we cleared the shelter of this island. It was early in the morning and it became so foggy that, being but a pistol shot from the coast, one could not see it. But, crowding on sail with the current favorable, we continued our course.”

NARRATOR: By 1821, Mexico had secured its independence from Spain. This new government granted parcels of land in California to form large cattle ranchos. António María Osio, a customs official, persuaded Governor Alvarado to allow him to establish a rancho in the bay. He transported fifty-four head of cattle to Angel Island in 1839, and within seven years the herd had grown to 500. Later, a flaw in Osio’s land grant title was discovered, and in November of 1850 United States President Millard Fillmore declared Angel Island a military reserve.

“Gold! Gold! Gold in California!” Abandoning farms, families, and businesses, men eager for gold swarmed west by the thousands. In California, they heard, a man could take a fortune out of the hills and streams with only a shovel and a tin pan. The Gold Rush, a grand, gaudy adventure for a generation of brash young men, most of them citizens of a brash young nation, helping to build a brand new state.

Almost overnight, San Francisco turned into the rip-roaringest and liveliest boomtown of its day; it became the largest center of commerce and wealth on the West Coast. So, with a prospering city to be protected and the threat of civil war brewing in the East, the army moved to fortify San Francisco Bay. The army established a camp on the west side of Angel Island to reinforce the batteries already protecting the bay. Unlike other installations, these batteries at Camp Reynolds would employ movable cannons pulled by mule teams to any point on the island.

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Military life on Angel Island was a taste of heaven to the soldiers returning from the Indian Wars. Martha Summerhayes, a colonel's wife, paints an 1880 picture of the island through the words of her diary:

ACTRESS PORTRAYING MARTHA SUMMERHAYES: "When we received the good news that Captain Corliss' company was ordered to Angel Island in the bay of San Francisco, we now began to live, to truly live, for we felt the year spent at those desert posts under the scorching suns of Arizona had cheated us out of all but a bare existence upon Earth. Army life was indeed a 'glittering misery,' as the Germans had called it; but here the flowers ran riot in our garden. Fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh fish, and all the luxuries of that marvelous climate were brought right to our door. A comfortable government steamboat plied between San Francisco and the harbor posts, and the distance was not great, only three-quarters of an hour, so we had a taste of the social life of that fascinating city, and could also enjoy the theaters.

"On the island, we had music and dancing, too; it was the headquarters of the regiment. And Mrs. Kautz, always so charming, held grand court here—receptions, military functions, lawn tennis, and bright uniforms were the order of the day. And that incomparable climate—when the fog rolled in from the Golden Gate and enveloped the great city of Saint Francis in its cold vapors, the island of angels lay warm and bright in the sunshine.

"Was this a real paradise? It surely seemed so to us. And, as if Nature had not done enough, the fates stepped in and sent all the agreeable young officers of the regiment here, to help us enjoy this heavenly spot. Did any uniform ever equal that of the infantry in those days—the dark blue, heavily-braided blouse, the white stripe on the light blue trousers, and the jaunty cap, and then, the straight backs and slim lines of those youthful figures? It seems to me, any woman who was not an Egyptian mummy would feel her heart thrill and her blood tingle at the sight of them. Altogether, there was so much to do and to enjoy, that time rushed by, and we knew only that we were happy and enchanted with life."

NARRATOR: Now, leaving West Garrison behind, we turn south on the Perimeter Road and enter a part of this island dominated not by echoes of the past, but by the vibrant sights and sounds of a unique natural world.

The twentieth century ushered in an expanding military involvement overseas. The United States Army proposed a large military base on the east side of Angel Island. Fort McDowell, in 1902, turned into a tent city of thousands of soldiers returning from the Philippines. In the years before World War II, Fort McDowell became the Army's largest West Coast base and induction center. And as world tensions increased, facilities there took on greater dimensions. One young recruit, awaiting his orders, turned his thoughts to friends at home:

ACTOR PORTRAYING YOUNG RECRUIT: "November 14th, 1939. Dear Willy, You know, it's been a long time since we were kids playing soldier, and here I am now the real thing—'Private John Q., sir!' Let me tell you what it's really like being here. I lay ten-to-one you never heard of this place. No apologies; I hadn't either. I remember holding up my right hand at the recruiting station when I was asked my preference to serve and do my stuff for Uncle Sam. And, before I knew it, I was on my way. On my way? Yes sir, to OD and RD at Fort McDowell, California.

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“Well, my arrival on this island as Private John Q. was novel only to me. Seems like the minute I set foot on the island I was conducted to the Drill Hall for a physical inspection, inoculations, and check-ups from head to toe. I didn’t know it then, but I was one of over 5,000 soldiers given physical exams each month here. Gosh, think of it, over 175 a day, day in and day out!

“By now I was hungry; it was lunch time. Here I found a Mess Hall which serves 1,400 men at one sitting, three times a day, and up to three sittings per meal! Twelve-thousand sets of dishes to wash in one day? Glad I’m not on KP duty. A cook told me that the mess hall is equipped with pressure cookers able to cook 350 pounds of vegetables in eight minutes. Speaking of pounds, they go through 30,000 pounds of bread, 85,000 pounds of potatoes, 30,000 quarts of fresh milk, 52,000 pounds of beef, and about 22,000 pounds of pork every month! Oh boy, don’t worry about us eating right.

“After lunch I was assigned a bunk and bedding in a barracks holding up to 3,300 men at peak times. Since my arrival that morning, the Drill Hall has been converted to a theater seating 900 casuals for—yeah, I couldn’t believe it either—free, first-run movies!

“Well, anyway, I’ve been here five days now. My orders have already arrived, and tomorrow I board a transport for Hawaii, my first duty assignment. But tonight, I’ve got my liberty pass, and I’m spending my last evening in San Francisco. Say hello to Betty and the boys, especially Betty. Gee, it would be swell if you were here. Your pal, John.”

NARRATOR: Significant changes came with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. All the buildings on Angel Island were camouflaged a dark gray-green. The next four years were the busiest time for Fort McDowell, as the Army rushed thousands of troops out to the Pacific war zones. And when World War II was finally over, the returning GIs were greeted by sixty-foot letters on the side of the island: “Welcome Home.” Because other military processing stations were less expensive to operate, Fort McDowell was soon abandoned.

Several anti-aircraft missiles, named after Nike, the Greek winged goddess of victory, were placed on Angel Island in 1955. The missiles were never launched, and, as has happened throughout military history, changes in weapons technology soon made the Nikes obsolete. The security of San Francisco Bay no longer required local sites of defense, and so in 1962 the missiles were removed. The importance of Angel Island’s military role ended, possibly forever.

Moving once more around the island, we reach the site of the Immigration Station. For many immigrants, life in America began on Angel Island. They arrived on these shores perhaps with only a suitcase containing a lifetime of memories and a whisper of the homeland many would never see again.

Between 1910 and 1940, the Immigration Station was the port of entry for thousands of people seeking a new life in America. Angel Island’s immigrants came from all over the world, but most of them came from Asia. Red tape and vigorously enforced immigration laws made admission to this country extremely difficult for many new Asian arrivals. At any one time 300 men and fifty women could be delayed here, sometimes for prolonged periods.

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ACTRESS PORTRAYING IMMIGRATION STATION DETAINEE (speaking with an Asian accent): “When we first arrived, more than a hundred of us, we were told to put down our luggage, and they hurried us toward the buildings. The men had their dormitories, and the women had theirs. They assigned us bunk beds, and there were foreign women to take care of us.

“We had Chinese food with meat and vegetables. Many had relatives send Chinese food from San Francisco, such as barbecue pork or duck. Island food was so bad. On return from the dining hall, they locked the doors behind us. Once you are locked in, they don’t bother with you. It was like being in prison. Some read newspapers or books; some knitted. There was a small fenced-in area for exercise, sunning, and ball-playing. I remember there was poetry written on the walls. It was like songs people would sing. I didn’t write on the walls, but I did compose and create at the same time.

“There was a lot of memorizing in preparation for interrogation: how many brothers and sisters your father had; names of your uncles; when your grandparents died. Most of the people passed the test and left after three weeks, but three out of every ten failed and had to appeal their cases. In my case, I had to endure twenty months of confinement. Think how sad it all was.”

NARRATOR: The last group of detainees was removed from Angel Island in November of 1940 when fire destroyed the Immigration Station’s administration building. During World War II these same barracks temporarily housed prisoners of war and allied troops on their way to and from Pacific campaigns.

One final story in Angel Island’s extensive history begins in this very cove; once named Raccoon, later Hospital, and most recently, Ayala Cove—after the early Spanish explorer whom we have already met. For centuries this inlet has provided a safe anchorage for ships coming into the bay. For this reason, and because it stood a safe distance from the city, a Quarantine Station was set up that served San Francisco for nearly sixty years. Ships carrying passengers from around the world were quarantined here to prevent the spread of contagious diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, and bubonic plague. With the medical control and near elimination of these kinds of diseases, the Quarantine Station was closed.

Today Angel Island is a park. Each year thousands of people are drawn to its shores, where they walk its trails, picnic along its meadows and slopes, and simply enjoy the beauty and uniqueness of its setting. But a special part of Angel Island is reserved for those who take time to allow their imaginations to roam, for Angel Island is a place to listen for voices from the past, to explore the inner beauty of a flower, and to take part in a long and colorful story that even now continues to unfold.

Running Time: 22 minutes
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