



# California State Parks

## Video Transcript



### ***Fort McDowell: A Century of U. S. Army Use At Angel Island State Park***

Welcome to Angel Island State Park. You have landed at the dock at the east side of the island--East Garrison, also known as Fort McDowell. Behind me, up the stairs, is the old guard house that was built in 1911, but it now houses our visitor center. So, after the long walk you've taken up the hill and up those steps, we invite you to come into the visitor center, take a look at what Angel Island State Park has to offer.

Come and follow me . . .

Bugle calls, shouted orders, the sound of marching feet, the sight of imprisoned people--all of these stand as history for Angel Island, in contrast with the way the island looks today: peaceful and bucolic. But that look is deceiving. For nearly a hundred years Angel Island was an active part of the defenses of the United States and, in particular, of San Francisco Bay. Today it stands as a silent testimony. The island itself is an outdoor museum; the buildings mute witnesses to what happened here.

This room is the visitor center for Fort McDowell and for the island. It shows all of the aspects of the history of Angel Island, in pictures and in models. We hope that what we have in here will help stimulate questions; we hope that you ask questions so that we can enhance your enjoyment of the island and your understanding of what happened here.

One of the stories that helps make history more personal here on Angel Island are the stories of the men who actually served here during the second World War. We have some of the artifacts of one of those gentlemen--Mr. McPeek. Well, he's no longer a mister for us--he's a lieutenant when he is here on Angel Island. He stayed in the army and served a distinguished career, retiring with the rank of lieutenant colonel. His widow, who lives in the Bay Area, was gracious enough to donate some of his old uniforms that she had, and we've been able to put them on display here on Angel Island, which is where he started his military career.

We have here on the mannequin wearing his uniform of lieutenant colonel with all of his services ribbons. He was in the military transportation unit. Down at my feet what we have is a duffel sack, originally somebody else's that was used by Mr. McPeek as lieutenant. It says originally to W. B. Gilbert, and that's been crossed off and in indelible ink, which is now 57 years old, R. W. McPeek.

Major McPeek's footlocker--at one point in his career (Mrs. McPeek shared with me some of her memories as she donated these to us) at one point they were stationed in Berlin and that when he was a major, so his footlocker is from those times. The desk plate--Lieutenant

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Colonel R. W. McPeek, and that was the rank at which he retired. The photograph on top of the footlocker shows Major McPeek about the time 1960, I believe.

I'm standing in front of the Post Exchange. This building was built in 1911, and it started a building boom here at Fort McDowell of a very unusual style. Most army buildings are built along a single set of plans. The army quartermaster, or whoever it is, gives you a set of plans and off you go and you build them. Fort McDowell was very unique. As you can see from the red roofs on the building behind me up the hill, and the building at the post exchange here, the overhanging eaves are very ornate for an army building and the style is of a California mission revival style that was the craze in California starting at the turn of the 1900s. For some reason the army built along that style. It's one of the only, I hesitate to say the only, army posts in the United States built on a mission revival style.

We have a number of these kinds of buildings. As an example, the Post Exchange is one. The building at the top of the hill is the hospital, later converted at another time to an administration building for the Nike missile program. The guard house where we started our tour and the mess hall, to my left, are all examples of a mission revival style in California.

Take yourself back in history half a century. It's the height of World War II. Angel Island is processing, at its peak, close to 10,000 men a week coming through the island. Those men have to be housed, they have to be fed, and they have to do something in their spare time, and what you can see behind me are those three elements here at Angel Island.

Directly behind me is the mess hall and multipurpose building. This building would be able to feed about five thousand men for every meal: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They did it in rotating shifts--two, sometimes three--of about 1,500 men per seating. That's 1,500 men--three shifts--at breakfast, at lunch, and at dinner. The food was very good, and a lot of GIs who've come back to Angel Island commented on the food. However, the downside was doing kitchen duty. You're often up at four in the morning and working all the way through until nine at night--very little time for any rest or relaxation.

If you did get to rest it was in the big barracks right at the bottom of the hill, called the "Thousand Men Barracks." It probably housed about 600 then. It was built in what's called the tilt-up style. A frame would be laid on the ground and concrete poured to form the walls; then those walls would be tilted up, joined to the other walls and the floors. It's a common enough building practice now, but at the time it was very unique.

The relaxation part comes in the other building on the other side of the road, which is the Post Exchange. The Post Exchange was where men could buy . . . it's been described as a combination of a grocery store and dry goods. They could buy clothes, they could buy food. There was a small diner where they could buy hamburger, fries, milkshake--ease themselves of the pain of army food. There was also a small post office where they could send postcards home. Those postcards, though, would be censored. They would not be allowed to say where they were or where they were going. War time security was "Loose lips sink ships."

Imagine men lining up for dinner. They'd be standing down this road three abreast, four abreast, five abreast; and this line would go past where I'm standing, up the hill where the

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hospital was and around the corner then. You'd be waiting in line a lot when you were in the army back then--it was all part of the army experience.

This is the post chapel here at Fort McDowell Angel Island. This is a multi-denominational chapel used by Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths. As you can hear, the acoustics are quite wonderful in this chapel. There have been weddings that have been held here since it has become a state park, and it's a very popular place to do that. But only for the intrepid, as you have to bring everything to the island by boat.

The beams that form from the wall to the roof are formed using many different boards that are glued, pressed, and then steamed to form that shape. This is a common building practice now, but at the time it was very unique. The walls have a coating of corkboard, a fiberboard, and it was done to help the acoustics of the building. The smell that you have in this building is of cedar. It's a very restful contemplative place, and it seems almost at odds with the outside activities as the United States prepared for war.

For almost a hundred years—stretching from the Civil War through the Cold War—Angel Island has played a vital role in the defense of the United States. Beginning with the establishment of Camp Reynolds and its artillery batteries in 1863, the island also functioned as an important depot for troops in the military. From soldiers serving in the campaigns against western Indian tribes, to a detention camp for troops quarantined during the Spanish-American War, to a depot for recruits during World War I, to a port of embarkation for the Pacific theater of operations in World War II, and to a Nike missile base during the Cold War—Angel Island has played an active role in the development of our national defenses. We hope you've enjoyed this tour of Fort McDowell at Angel Island State Park, one of the many jewels in the California State Park System. Please come visit us again.

Running Time: 10:26

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