



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Immigration Station: Guardian of the Western Gate at Angel Island State Park

Hi my name is Casey Lee, and I'm a park interpretive specialist here at Angel Island State Park. I'd like to welcome you to Angel Island Immigration Station.

This immigration station was operational between 1910 and 1940, and it dealt with all kinds of different immigrants. But the main group of immigrants that came to this immigration station were from China, and so that's the story we tell here: Chinese immigration.

Immigrants would arrive on ferries that would bring them to San Francisco, and then smaller ships would bring them here to Angel Island for additional processing. They would arrive at the ferry and then be brought into the administration building. In the administration building, they would sign the registry and then wait for a medical examination.

If they were healthy, they would be put into the barracks building to wait for interrogation. If they had an illness that was curable, they would be sent to our hospital here. If they had a disease that was considered deportable, they could be immediately sent back to their country of origin. People that were allowed to come into the United States that were Chinese were people such as merchants, diplomats, students, tourists, and family members of American citizens. And this last group of people was the loophole that people used to come into the country illegally, because that relationship was something that could be faked or falsified.

The people that came in under false papers were called "Paper Sons" or "Paper Daughters." This existed on a small scale before the 1906 earthquake. After the 1906 earthquake, when fires destroyed City Hall, all the records of citizenship were destroyed, so many people came forward and got new paperwork that said they were citizens despite not actually having that citizenship. So when they got their new paperwork established, they would also describe their families. They would often say that they had a few more children than they actually did. You might say you had as many as 10 or 12 children, because all of those names were identities that could be sold to people who wanted to immigrate to the United States. So now we have "Paper Sons" and "Paper Daughters" on a much larger scale, and that's what they were doing here was trying to figure out who was coming in illegally and who was coming in legally, under the laws of the time.

To understand why the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 were passed, you have to go back a little further in history into the 1850s and 60s. And, for the first time, larger amounts of Chinese immigrants were coming to the United States, and California in particular. In 1849 when the

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Gold Rush started, a lot of Chinese immigrants came over to seek their fortunes. Now, they were eventually pushed out of the gold fields and found other ways to prosper during the time.

And during the 1860s we were building the Transcontinental Railroad, and a lot of laborers were needed to accomplish that task. Now, the railroads were being built primarily by Chinese laborers from the West Coast east, and mainly by the Irish laborers from the East Coast west. Chinese laborers were willing to work for very little money, very long hours, very dangerous jobs, and so they were sought after by the people building the railroad.

When the railroads were completed, however, those laborers were not needed anymore. We also had an economic depression at the end of the Civil War in the 1870s. So those combining factors--more people here looking for work and economic depression--led to a backlash against the Chinese laborers. At this time there were also white labor unions coming into power. They used Chinese laborers as their scapegoats. They had slogans like "The Chinese Must Go," and they used their voting power to help pressure Congress into passing the Chinese Exclusion Acts, which eventually led to very few Chinese immigrants being allowed into the country.

This is the monument that was dedicated to the immigrants who came through the Angel Island Immigration Station. This monument is inscribed with, basically, a poem, and the poem says, "Leaving their homes and villages, they crossed the ocean, only to endure confinement in these barracks. Conquering frontiers and barriers, they pioneered a new life by the Golden Gate." This poem basically commemorates the experience of immigrants at the Angel Island Immigration Station.

This is the location where immigrants would arrive at the Angel Island Immigration Station. The wharf went out about 200 feet, and this bell was placed at the end of the wharf to warn ships away from the dock during the night, as well as the foggy days we have here in San Francisco bay. The bell was reestablished at this location in 1982.

Welcome to the barracks. This is where immigrants spent most of their time. The room we're in now was the waiting room. This is a room that women would have had access to, and now it is kind of our museum. This is where you can see some displays and photographs of what the immigration station used to look like. In this photograph right behind me you'll see the dock that goes out into the water and the administration building.

The administration building burned down in 1940, and that's why this place closed as an immigration station. You'll also see, at the bottom of the photograph, the central heating building and, on the far right, the barracks building where we are today. At the top of the photo is the hospital, where individuals would have gone for medical treatment during their stay at the immigration station.

So, this room is the women's barracks. Women and children stayed in this room. Children did stay with their mothers, with the exception of boys around the age of twelve and up. They would have to go to the men's side, whether or not they came with a male relative. For children who were unaccompanied, that meant a 13-year-old boy might be on their own over on the men's side. Small children did stay with their mothers though, and they spent most of their time indoors.

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The only reasons that immigrants left the building were for their meals, if they were interrogated, and for a little bit of exercise each day. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as their interrogation, were down in the administration building, the building down below us. The two buildings were connected by a covered wooden walkway, so immigrants never got outside, even going from one building to the next.

Women did have a little more freedom than men. Women were allowed to walk the grounds with a matron while the men were confined to exercise yards that were fenced in behind this building and beside this building. If you look in this room, you can see one of our immigrants now. This wax figure was donated to help give a better image of what the barracks looked like when people were here. People stayed here on average two to three days, unless they were Chinese. Chinese immigrants stayed here on average two to three weeks. The longest stay we do know of though is 22 months, and at the end of nearly two years that woman was deported.

Now, inside of this room there wasn't a lot to do, and so people spent most of their time kind of waiting and not really knowing what was going to be happening to them. And we think that's why there is so much poetry in this building. The poetry was an opportunity for people to express themselves, to get out their feelings; and that's why we see it on the walls today.

The healthy capacity for this room, as determined by the Marine health service, was about 25 or 30 people. During the immigration station era 50 to 60 people were being housed in this room at one time. Now that's far exceeding what they considered to be healthy, even at that time. And you can see it is quite crowded conditions. You have the three-tiered bunks. The older people would be sleeping on the lower bunks; younger people would sleep on the top bunks because it was easier for them to climb up there. You used the bunks as a ladder. You go from one step up to the next, and that's how you make your way all the way to the top bunk.

This basin right here is actually a wash basin. It was used to perhaps wash faces and maybe even take a sponge bath at your bed. A lot of the women felt uncomfortable, probably, using the showers and things that were here because showering was not the typical way of bathing for Chinese people of that time. They would have been more used to taking baths or even a sponge bath rather than taking a shower.

This is a spittoon. It was used to catch the juice from chewing tobacco. It was common for people to use chewing tobacco at that time, and it also would not have been uncommon for women to use chewing tobacco as well.

After the women's barracks, we're going into the poetry room. And we call this room the poetry room because of this example of poetry that's found here. This poem is the best example of the carving that you can see today in the barracks building. It's very deeply carved, it's very artistically done, and even if you aren't able to read the poem, you can tell that this is art. It's a very beautiful carving.

We are very lucky that this building is here today. This poem is credited with saving this building from a fire. This building was actually going to be burned down on purpose by California State Parks in the early 70s. The building was old, it was abandoned, it was

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dangerous, it was a hazard, and so they were going to burn down the building and have a nice flat spot for camping and picnicking. But things changed. A ranger came through the building doing the last look around, and he kind of rediscovered the poetry here in the building. And so, with his activism and the help of others, they saved this building from destruction. So we get to hear of voices from the past today because of the actions of a single person.

And this poem in the English translation reads,
*Detained in this wooden house for several tens of days.
It is all because of the Mexican exclusion law which implicates me.
It's a pity heroes have no way of exercising their prowess.
I can only await the words so that I can snap at Zu's whip.
From now on I am departing from this building.
All of my fellow villagers are rejoice with me.
Don't say that everything within is Western styled.
Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage.*

A couple things I like to talk about with this poem. The first is you might have heard something in that poem that didn't sound quite right, and that's the "Mexican exclusion law." Now Mexico did have similar laws to the American Chinese Exclusion Acts to prevent people from coming into Mexico and then the U.S. But this character here is translated as "Mexican." More literally the simple translation for that character is "black ink." If you put that in, the poem reads, "It is all because of the black ink law which implicates me," or the "written law." It might reference actually to the American Chinese Exclusion Acts, but the abbreviation for the word Mexican in Chinese is this character. And so it actually might mean both. And the poetry that is written here was written by people who were very highly educated, so it's absolutely possible that the poem has dual meanings.

Another thing I'd like to talk about here is this character up here. This character is the character for "wooden," and wooden house, wooden building, wooden prison are phrases that reoccur in many of the poems here in the building. Now the building is made out of wood, but because it reoccurs so frequently, we think that it's more than a simple description. The other interpretation of what the "wooden" character might mean has to do with the fear of fire. They were very concerned there would be a fire here in the building. And the building that burned, the administration building, burned down very quickly. Luckily no lives were lost in that fire. But had that fire happened in this building, it probably would have not been the same story. The people here were locked in, and the building is basically a firetrap. It would have been very difficult to save everyone's life had there been a fire in this building.

The fact that this building was made out of wood was one of the three major complaints about the immigration station. The second was the fact that federal prisoners were being housed on the second floor of this building at the same time as immigrants. Federal prisoners are the guys that end up in Alcatraz later; basically the worst of the worst criminals were upstairs from people like you and me. And all we wanted to do was immigrate.

The third big complaint here was actually the food. The food was very bad. The Chinese immigrants received rice and vegetables for most of their meals. But the rice was often not cooked properly, and so it was more soupy than rice; and the vegetables were also steamed cooked, but they were often over-cooked and very soggy. And there was very little protein or

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meat in their diet, and so they actually had a lot of complaints. And they got to the point where they had to bring in Chinese cooks from the restaurants in San Francisco. Some of those cooks helped out with the cooking, and things improved. But they also became part of an underground system to cheat through the interrogations. Because those cooks could go back to San Francisco on their days off, they could pass notes, and they became a pipeline of communication. If you were having a hard time with a question in your interrogation, you could give word to a cook, and I'm sure this cost a fee, but they could find out the answer for you, bring it back in a small note, and pass it to you underneath the chicken or underneath the soup and perhaps even inside of a grapefruit or a peanut shell. And you'd take that information back to your bed, read it in secret, and the next time you were interrogated, you could suddenly remember the answer to that question you couldn't quite remember before.

This room is set up as an interrogation although no interrogations actually took place in this building. Interrogations were all in the administration building. But that building has burned down, so we represent that process here in the barracks. In our representation, our wax figures, we have a detainee, an immigrant, we have a translator, and we have a guard. There also would have been two interrogators and a stenographer.

In the interrogations, it was a very difficult process. The immigrants were being asked very difficult questions. They weren't being asked, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" They were being asked things like, "How many windows are in your bedroom? How many steps from your front door to your kitchen? What is the name of the oldest man in your village? What are the birth dates and death dates of your grandparents and your great grandparents?" And the reason they were being asked questions like this is because they were trying to find those people who were coming in illegally--those "Paper Sons" and "Paper Daughters." So they were trying to get every little detail they possibly could out of the immigrants during this process.

Now, there were a lot of problems with this interrogation process. First of all, the interrogators did not know the answers to the questions they were asking. The way they found out the truth was to ask the immigrant, and then ask the person they were claiming to be related to here in the United States the same question and compare their answers. If their answers matched, they assumed that was the truth; if the answers were different, they assumed that was a lie. Now this is not the best way to find out the truth because people have different points of view. This room is a very good example of that because if you look at the windows in this room and you try and count them, you can see that there are two, four, and sixteen windows depending on your point of view. There are two holes in the wall, but each window is divided into two pieces so there's actually four; and each pane of glass, if you count them, counts up to sixteen. So, depending on your point of view, you could come up with a very different answer there. And things like that could happen.

You also had problems because you were going through a translator, and translators happen to be human beings. And human beings make mistakes from time to time. So if the translator made a mistake, it could hurt you during the interrogation process. But you also have to remember that Chinese is not one language. There are thousands of different dialects, and people who speak different dialects cannot understand each other. So if you spoke a dialect that was not common, it might be more difficult to find a translator for you.

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Another problem here has to do with cultural differences. In Chinese culture, where the immigrant is coming from, when you speak with someone of authority, to show that person respect you put your head down while you speak to them. While in American culture when you talk to people, you are supposed to make eye contact with that person; it helps let them know that you're telling them the truth. In Chinese culture, he would've come in the room and he would've tried to show respect to the people he was talking to. But in American culture when someone puts their head down and doesn't make eye contact, it looks like they're hiding something, it looks like they feel guilty. And so the interrogator sees someone who's telling lies, even though all he's trying to do is show respect to the people he's speaking to. In this case the cultural differences work against the immigrant and make it more difficult for him to pass the interrogation. You can imagine how frustrating this whole process must have been for the people who came through here. You didn't know how long you'd have to stay; you didn't know what would happen to you when you left; you didn't know if you'd be allowed to immigrate, if you'd be deported; and you never got an opportunity to stand up and say, "I don't like the way I'm being treated."

The poems we see here are the expression of those feelings--the anger, the sadness, the boredom. And it is an opportunity to express the dissatisfaction they might have had with their experience here.

The last room we go into is the men's barracks, and that's where you will see most of the poetry. This is our last room. This is the men's barracks, and this room is where up to 200 men stayed. Now, the healthy capacity for this room was only 50, so you had at times four times as many people as it was healthy to have in this room. As you can tell, this room is much larger than the women's barracks. There are about seven men immigrating for every one woman, and eventually women were even moved out of the women's barracks to another building to make more room for men.

This is the room where you see most of the poetry. In this room the poems are basically as high as you can reach from the third bunk down. Some of the poems are carved into wood, and some of the carved poems were actually inked in to make them further stand out from the paint on the walls. And then there are some poems that are simply written in ink and were not carved at all.

Thank you for coming to the Angel Island Immigration Station. I hope you enjoyed your tour. We hope that you have learned something from this experience as well. We hope to see you soon at Angel Island State Park.

Running Time: 21:16
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