Island

of Many Uses

by Andrew Matthews

DID YOU KNOW?

The earliest people to be associated with Angel Island were the Coast Miwoks. They inhabited the coastal lands around the San Francisco Bay at least 2,000 years ago. Using small boats, they traveled to the island, where they spent time hunting, fishing, and gathering food.

The use of Camp Reynolds as an army installation dates back to the Civil War.

This row of officers' housing at Fort McDowell was built in the early 1900s.
Angel Island’s role as an immigration station is just one part of its history. Consider this: In April 1775, militia groups in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, fired the first shots in the American Revolutionary War. In August 1775, a Spanish explorer arrived off the coast of California. He sailed into a large bay and anchored his ship in the cove of a large island. The Spanish crew explored the area and gathered information. The ship’s captain, Juan Manuel de Ayala, put Angel Island, Ayala Cove, and San Francisco Bay on the first maps.

Angel Island appeared uninhabited by people when the Spanish arrived. By the early 1800s, however, Russian fur traders in search of sea otters had traveled far enough south to establish a storehouse there. In 1814, the British also made use of the bay and the island to repair a damaged warship. The ship’s name, the Racoon, became the name for the strait of water between the island and the mainland (the spelling was later changed to “Raccoon”). In 1839, a Spanish rancher introduced cattle to the island. But when the Spanish were defeated in the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848), they ceded California and most of the present-day American Southwest to the United States.

California became a state in 1850, but its location on the West Coast separated it by thousands of miles from the rest of the country. When the Civil War began in 1861, the federal government was concerned that Confederate sympathizers might attack California, which was a Union state. In 1863, it established Camp Reynolds on the west side of the island to protect San Francisco Bay.

Camp Reynolds then garrisoned and processed troops fighting in the Indian Wars in the West in the mid- and late 1800s, in the Spanish–American War in 1898, and in the Philippine Insurrection from 1899 to 1902.