THE HISTORY OF ANGEL ISLAND

Angel Island is one of the largest islands in California’s San Francisco Bay. In 1775, the Spanish explorer Don Juan Manuel Ayala sailed into the bay, stopping at what is now Ayala Cove. His men explored the bay and made a map of the region. Because the island seemed to protect the bay like a guardian angel, Ayala named it “Isla de Los Angeles”--- Spanish for Island of the Angels.

Angel Island is one of several islands in San Francisco Bay.
In 1910 the United States built an immigration station at the northeast corner of the island in the area known as China Cove. For the next 30 years it served as the main point of entry for thousands of immigrants coming into the United States through the West Coast. It was known as the “Guardian of the Western Gate.”

Angel Island Immigration Station was a complex of many buildings.
Few European immigrants entered the United States through Angel Island.

The immigration station was set up to receive people from Asia and Europe. However, only a few Europeans were ever detained at Angel Island during these years. Japanese immigrants, too, were generally allowed to enter San Francisco soon after their ship docked and their paperwork was sent to the immigration station. For the most part, immigration officials detained only the Chinese whom they wanted to keep out of the United States.
WHY THE CHINESE CAME

The Chinese began coming to the United States in the 1840s, shortly after gold was discovered in California. At the time, wars and poverty in China forced many young men to leave their homeland for a better life. Believing the stories they had heard about streets “paved with gold,” the Chinese joined more than a half-million other people from around the world who flooded into the California mountains searching for gold. The Chinese called California “Gam Saan”---Land of the Golden Mountains. Newspapers called this worldwide event the “Gold Rush.”

Many Chinese left their homeland to look for gold in California.
Like all hopeful miners, the Chinese believed that they would get rich quickly in California. Then they would return home to take a place of honor in their families. But discrimination kept the Chinese from mining in areas where gold was plentiful, and taxes took money away from those who did well. Only a few lucky individuals ever made a fortune as miners. Usually, the Chinese worked together and shared what they found. Whenever they could, they sent money home to their families.

In 1851, a second wave of Chinese laborers started to arrive in the United States. This group of immigrants came to California to build the western half of the transcontinental railroad, and they continued to arrive through 1864.

Some Chinese railroad laborers later worked in California vineyards.
After the railroad was completed in 1869, many Chinese took various jobs on farms and ranches. Using their knowledge of farming, these immigrants created successful fruit-growing businesses and helped build the first vineyards in California.

Other Chinese immigrants worked to improve the fishing and canning businesses along the West Coast from San Diego north to Alaska. Those who settled in the San Francisco Bay area opened grocery stores, restaurants, and laundry shops. The neighborhood where their businesses were located was called “Chinatown.”
CHINESE ARE NOT WELCOME!

More than 300,000 Chinese laborers entered the United States between 1849 and 1882. In those days, there were no immigration laws, such as quotas, to keep people out of the country. Everyone came and went freely. This freedom was due in part to the Burlingame Treaty, an agreement that the United States and China signed in 1868. It gave American and Chinese citizens the freedom to travel back and forth between the United States and China and stay as long as they liked. The treaty was named after Anson Burlingame, an American official serving in China at that time.

When the Chinese first began to settle in the United States, they were welcomed---especially by business owners. The Chinese took jobs that no one else wanted, and they were willing to work long hours for low wages. But when companies began hiring Chinese workers for jobs that Americans wanted, feelings toward the Chinese changed. Some angry American workers attacked the Chinese, believing that the Chinese were taking away their jobs. In remembering these times, one Chinese man said, “We kept indoors after dark for fear of being shot in the back. Children spit upon us as we passed by and called us rats.”

As the persecution got worse, mobs destroyed Chinese homes and businesses, killing women and children in the process. Afraid for their lives, many Chinese fled east to larger towns. When riots began breaking out in several cities, the U.S. government passed laws to stop more Chinese from coming to the United States.

The laws, which were passed in 1882, were called Exclusion Laws. They kept Chinese laborers out of the United States for 10 years. They did not, however, exclude
Chinese teachers, tourists, merchants, students, or their wives and children. These people were allowed to live and work in the United States even though they could not become citizens. When their children were born in the United States, however, they became citizens at birth.

Later on, other laws were passed to limit a Chinese person’s right to travel. One of these laws said that “no Chinese laborer in the United States shall be permitted, after having left, to return hereto.” Only individuals whose wives or children lived in the United States were allowed to leave and return. Those who owned land or businesses worth more than $1,000 could leave and return also.

Another law made all Chinese laborers in the United States carry papers to prove that they lived in the United States. Anyone found without a paper could be arrested and returned to China.

In 1885, 15 Chinese coal miners in Wyoming were killed by a mob of white miners.
The Exclusion Laws continued to limit the number of Chinese entering and leaving the United States through the 1940s. However, in 1906, an earthquake and fire destroyed parts of San Francisco, including the Hall of Records. This building held all the city’s marriage, birth, and death certificates. After these papers were gone, many Chinese people began claiming that they had been born in the United States and were citizens. As citizens, they could travel freely and bring their families from China.

Since it was now impossible to check if citizenship claims were true, U.S. authorities had to give the Chinese the papers that would allow their family members to come to the United States. Many Chinese used this situation to their advantage. When they were asked to name their family members, they included extra ones who did not exist. The Chinese sold these extra family member names to other immigrants who were waiting to bring their relatives into the United States. Those who pretended to be children of American citizens were known as “paper sons” and “paper daughters.” They were not really related. Their connection to the families existed only on paper.

The cost to become a paper son or daughter was about $100 per year of age. This amount bought the papers needed to come to the United States, but it still did not ensure that the person would be allowed to enter. He or she had to prove family ties by correctly answering very specific questions that Angel Island immigration authorities asked them.
Chinese immigrants could buy papers that gave them a legal identity in the United States.
KEEPPING THE CHINESE OUT

As soon as immigrants arrived at Angel Island Immigration Station, they were separated into three groups: Whites, Japanese and other Asians, and Chinese. Then the men and women were also separated. Children under the age of 12 stayed with their mothers.

The immigrants were taken to the island hospital for a health exam. Because many of the Chinese immigrants had come from areas where health conditions were poor, U.S. officials examined them more carefully than others. If they had diseases that could spread, they were kept from entering the country.

Many of the Japanese women who came to the United States did so as mail-order brides.
Those who passed the health exam then waited for their papers to be examined. U.S. authorities were looking for paper sons and daughters among the Chinese. The authorities believed that most Chinese lied to gain entry into the United States and were not related to U.S. citizens at all. To keep the “paper families” out, authorities asked these immigrants questions that they thought only real family members would know.
To prepare for these questions, immigrants studied information about their pretend families from “coaching papers” or “coaching letters.” They purchased these papers along with false identity papers before leaving China and memorized the information during the long ocean trip. Then before the ship arrived in San Francisco Bay, they destroyed the papers or tossed them overboard.

Sometimes, immigrants received coaching information while they were detained at Angel Island. Chinese families in San Francisco paid the kitchen staff at the immigration station to carry information to the immigrants. A gardener or a night watchman on the island might also supply information. Often, they hid the papers in clothing or food. Once, a piece of paper was even put in a peanut shell.

Usually, immigration officials began the questioning by asking the immigrants to describe their parents, grandparents, and other family members. Next, they asked them very specific questions about their home in China such as, “How far is your village from the bamboo tree? How many steps are there to the front door of your house?”
Immigrants were questioned about their family in Angel Island’s examination room.

Where did your family keep its rice?” Then, their relatives in the United States were asked the same questions to see if their answers matched. This was a difficult test, even for real relatives. For many of these people, it had been 20 years since they were last in China. Things change and memories fade, making a match unlikely, if not impossible.

This type of questioning usually lasted two or three days. However, immigrants might have to wait months for the results. Some immigrants were held at Angel Island for as long as three years. Those who failed to answer their questions correctly were deported. One Chinese man said people knew that “if the guard came in and called out a name and said ‘sai gaai’ [good luck], that meant that a person was free to [enter the United States]. If an applicant was to be deported, the guard would make motions as if he were crying.”
CONDITIONS AT ANGEL ISLAND

Immigrants detained at Angel Island lived in a two-story wooden building called a barracks. It was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence to prevent them from escaping. Inside the building were two long rooms. The men slept in one room and the women slept in the other. Each room contained rows of narrow bunk beds. Two, sometimes three, people slept in the bunk beds, which were stacked one on top of the other. Often, 70 to 100 people lived there at one time. Usually, immigrants spent most of their day locked in the barracks while a guard stood outside.

*Immigrants ate their meals in the immigration station’s simple dining room.*
For meals, the immigrants went to a big dining hall. There were two meals a day, and men and women ate at separate times to keep them from talking with one another. Most immigrants complained that the food was poor. One person said, “All the dishes, including the melon, were all chopped up and thrown together like pig slop . . . After looking at it you’d lose your appetite.”

The days were long and boring. To pass the time, immigrants played games or read newspapers and books. Some just napped or washed their clothes. The women usually sewed or knitted. People could write as many letters as they wanted. However, officials read every letter going out or coming in. For entertainment, people sang or played music. Those who brought musical instruments with them from China formed a music club and played every night.

The immigrants had little opportunity to go outside. At set times, they could exercise or play ball in a small, fenced-in yard. Then once a week, accompanied by a guard, they could go to the docks where the luggage was kept. They were allowed to go through their luggage and take whatever belongings they needed.
A Christian church group tried to help the immigrants. The Women’s Home Missionary Society sent Katherine Maurer to Angel Island. Known as the “Angel of Angel Island,” Maurer did a lot to make the immigrants’ stay at Angel Island better. She brought toys to the children and small items such as towels and soap to the adults. She also helped the women and children write letters and learn English.

Katherine Maurer (at right) worked with Angel Island immigrants for nearly 30 years.
Living at the immigration station was a terrible experience for the immigrants. In 1922, even the U.S. commissioner general of immigration said that the buildings were dirty firetraps and not fit for humans. Unfortunately, little changed for the immigrants until a fire destroyed the main building in 1940. Then the government abandoned the station and moved the immigrants to San Francisco. The station was never used for immigrants again. Eventually, the government gave Angel Island to the state of California for a state park.
Being locked up like criminals made most of the immigrants angry. They did not eat or sleep well. Without the comfort of their families, the immigrants felt lonely and afraid. They worried that they had risked their families’ life savings to come to the United States only to be told that they could not stay. Many of them expressed how they felt in poems, such as this one, found written on a barracks wall:

Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,  
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?  
I looked to see who is happy but they only sit quietly.  
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.

Over the years, many of the poems had been covered by paint. They were not considered important until 1970. Just when the buildings were going to be destroyed, park ranger Alexander Weiss discovered the poems and notified authorities. After a careful search, more than 100 poems were found. The Chinese-American community rallied together and raised money to save this historic landmark. In 1976, the state of California set aside money to preserve the barracks and the poems.
Immigrants carved poems and other writings on the walls of the barracks.
Today, Angel Island is a state park and a National Historic Landmark. It is a popular place for people to visit. On a tour of the island you can see the various ways the land has been used over the years. There are military buildings from the Civil War era and government missile sites from the 1950s. A small museum on the island tells the story of Angel Island in words and pictures. You can also visit the old barracks building at the immigration station. A museum there features the men’s barracks and some of the poems that the men carved into the walls. The poems remind us of the sacrifices these people made to come to the United States.
Today, Angel Island hosts ceremonies to welcome new U.S. citizens.

Angel Island is no longer the “Guardian of the Western Gate.” As a state park, it welcomes everyone. As a National Historic Landmark, it honors the people and events that contributed so much to American history.
Random Thoughts Deep at Night

In the quiet of night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind.
The forms and shadows saddened me; upon seeing the landscape, I composed a poem.
The floating clouds, the fog, darken the sky.
The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp.
Grief and bitterness entwined are heaven sent.
The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window.

Written by Yu of Taishan

Untitled

America has power, but not justice.
In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.
Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.
I bow my head in reflection but there is nothing I can do.

Author Unknown