

New Frontiers, New Soldiers of Preservation

The Presidio of San Francisco under Civilian Control

Since the Ohlone Indians occupied the area now known as the Presidio of San Francisco (Presidio) thousands of years ago, various groups have made distinct contributions that have helped shape its identity. Until the United States Army's departure in 1994, the Presidio of San Francisco was the longest continuously occupied military installation in the nation, having been occupied by a succession of soldiers, settlers, and families sent by the governments of Spain (1776-1822), Mexico (1822-1846), and the United States (1846-1994). Bounded on the north by San Francisco Bay and on the west by the Pacific Ocean, the Presidio seemed to be on the edge of civilization. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Presidio simultaneously marked the northern frontier of Spanish and Mexican colonial expansion; the southeastern frontier for Russian fur traders travelling from Alaska and Fort Ross, its northern California outpost; and the western frontier of an American nation seeking its manifest destiny.

Map of El Presidio National Historic Landmark district and El Presidio Archaeological Site prepared by Christopher Lee, Presidio Trust.



In 1962, the Presidio was designated a National Historic Landmark district. Ten years later, Congress passed legislation designating it as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). Designated for closure under the 1989 Base Realignment and Closure Act, the 1,480-acre Presidio was added to the larger 76,500-acre GGNRA. The National Park Service (NPS) assumed total jurisdiction over the ex-military post in 1994. In 1996, Congress created the Presidio Trust (Trust), an executive agency of the U.S. government, to oversee 80% of the former Army post, that includes most of its historic buildings. Both the Trust and NPS are responsible for the stewardship and interpretation of the Presidio's cultural landscapes, historic buildings, and archeological sites. They also are entrusted with the research and preservation of the Presidio's rich oral and archival histories. Congress also mandated in the Trust's charter that it be financially self-sufficient by fiscal year 2013. Otherwise, the Presidio will be transferred to the General Services Administration and sold.

The most basic principle of the Trust's historic preservation program is adaptive re-use and rehabilitation of the park's 474 historic buildings. Many that stood empty and unused before the Army's departure now need extensive care. These buildings represent 11 significant styles of architectural classification and eight major historical periods represented in the National Historic Landmark district designation. In the year 2000, several historic buildings underwent rehabilitation, including seismic strengthening, electrical and plumbing modernization, and accessibility improvements. Over the coming decade, an estimated \$200 million is required to save the imperiled buildings, which will be funded from a combination of public and private investment, long-

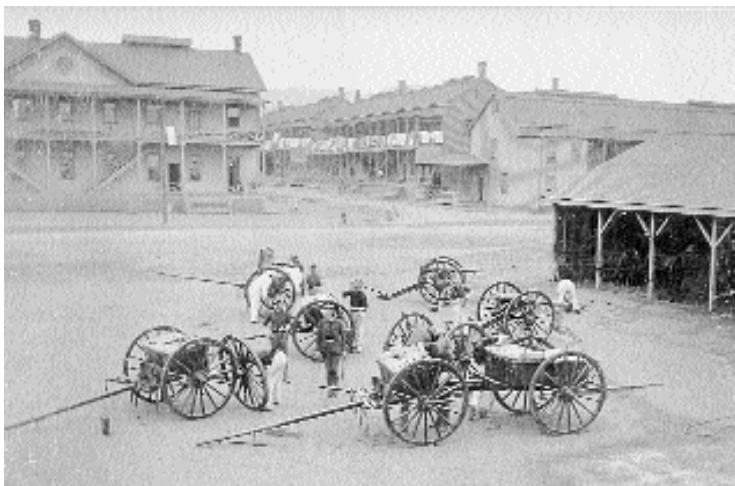
term leasing revenues, and federal tax credit incentives.

The Main Post is one of the most significant areas in the Presidio historic district both archeologically and in terms of preserving the built environment. At least 50 archeological features contribute to the post's history and cultural landscape development, including three recorded prehistoric sites. The Main Post has been the center of activity on the Presidio since its first temporary structures were built in 1776. Selected by the Spaniards for its wind-sheltered location and commanding views of San Francisco Bay, the Main Post now comprises 149 buildings showcasing a wide range of architectural styles. Collectively, these buildings represent the most substantial Civil War-era military complex in the far West. Housing was an integral part of the Main Post, including several enlisted men's barracks buildings and a distinctive row of officers' houses. This article describes the rehabilitation of three of these Main Post structures—Buildings 36, 39, and 50—as well as archeological investigations associated with the building rehabilitations and at the *El Presidio* archeological site. All three structures and the *El Presidio* archeological site serve to remind us of the many layers of the Presidio's history.

Building 36

Located on Lincoln Boulevard, Building 36 was designed by Captain Charles F. Humphrey, a U.S. Army quartermaster officer, and constructed as one of a pair of barracks in 1885. It is the last extant Indian War-era (1865-1890) wooden barracks at the Presidio and represents a period during the 1870s and 1880s when the Presidio expanded in both size and importance. The wood-frame military architecture of Building 36

Main Post in the 1890s with Building 36 on the far left. Courtesy NPS Park Archives, Presidio of San Francisco.



was almost entirely superseded by brick construction after 1890. The building is now part of the Trust's Main Post leasing program and has been converted into offices for a collection of smaller non-profit tenants.

The former barracks building underwent a complete rehabilitation consistent with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* and with the Presidio's *Rehabilitation Guidelines*. The entire structure was seismically strengthened and then brought into compliance with all applicable building codes including complete fire detection and suppression systems. The non-historic fabric in the interior of the building was selectively demolished. All remaining historic fabric was incorporated into the design for the building rehabilitation of common and tenant spaces while some historic fabric was lost. Other historic fabric was replaced in kind or carefully removed and reinstalled, some of which will lend to the seismic stability of the structure. Deteriorated historic plaster and wood lath were replaced with new drywall and veneer plaster. Missing historic fabric of certain elements on the first floor front porch were converted back to an original state by restoring missing windows and doors at historic openings and replacing missing column brackets. A second stair was also repositioned where the missing historic stair had previously existed. All restored elements matched remaining historic elements, or replicated elements found in historic photodocumentation. The contractor provided supervision to ensure that the rehabilitation of the structure and remaining historic fabric complied with drawings and specifications. During the installation of utility trenches for Building 36, ground disturbance precipitated the recovery of a buried Civil War-era 88-pound, 9-inch solid-cast Dahlgren cannonball. The cannonball is now displayed in the Presidio's Archeology Lab, a "temporary" World War I wooden structure originally built as a Quartermaster depot warehouse.

Building 39

Located on the Presidio's historic Main Post, Building 39 was built in 1938 to house enlisted troops. Constructed in modified Mediterranean Revival style, the three-story I-shaped barracks was later transformed into the headquarters of the U.S. Sixth Army. The building stood vacant since 1995, when the Sixth Army was de-activated. In 1998, the San Francisco Film Centre (Centre) became the first



Building 36 after rehabilitation. Photo by Robert Wallace.

long-term tenant of the Presidio Trust by signing a lease for Building 39 and the 800-seat Presidio Theatre. The Centre conducted a \$6.6 million rehabilitation of the 67,000-square-foot former barracks that included a complete seismic upgrade of the facility, accessibility improvements, and complete replacement of the electrical, plumbing, and fire safety systems. The tenant's design team carried out the project in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, under the supervision of Trust historical architects. The Centre is now home to a variety of non-profit and for-profit arts-related organizations, including the San Francisco Film Society and the George Gund Foundation. The site also includes state-of-the-art film production and editing facilities, and public space showcasing film-related exhibits.

During the rehabilitation, artifacts dating from 1815, including *tejas* (roofing tiles used by the Spanish colonists), multicolored ceramic pottery (*majolica* and lead glazed earthenwares), a fired-clay tobacco pipe, oxidized metal hooks, and cattle bones, were discovered on the west side of the building. Since Building 39 is bisected by the c. 1815 expansion of the Spanish garrison quadrangle, avoiding adverse effects to this archaeological site was a top priority in the rehabilitation. This site appears to have been a kitchen or hearth. The objects were removed and the soil and strata recorded so that the rehabilitation work continued with minimal delay. The artifacts are now on display at the Presidio's Archeology Lab.

Building 50

Building 50 is a complex series of interconnected concrete, wood-frame, and steel-frame structures representing several periods of con-

struction over approximately 200 years. In the late-19th and 20th centuries, the building served as the U.S. Army Officers' Open Mess and later as the Presidio Officers' Club. Although no complete buildings remain from the Spanish or Mexican occupations, the front portion of Building 50 contains the adobe walls of a much earlier Spanish building from c. 1812-1815, making it one of the oldest structures in the city and county of San Francisco. Therefore, it is most likely the most historically significant building on the Presidio. It is the largest of only two remaining Spanish Colonial military buildings in California; the other being El Cuartel, a soldier's residence, located on the quadrangle of the Presidio of Santa Barbara.

Building 50, although only a partial structure, contains the fabric of the last *comandancia*, or commanding officer's quarters left from Spanish Colonial California. Building foundations from an even earlier adobe structure have also been found beneath it. From 1846-1856, U.S. troops rebuilt the crumbling wall of *El Presidio's* buildings, joining the two wings of the original adobe with plaster and wood infill to reuse the structure as a court-martial room. A projecting central assembly hall with gable was added in the 1880s, later used as a ballroom. During the period from 1931 to 1934, Quartermaster Captain Barney Meeden directed an attempted "restoration" of Building 50, transforming the building into a contemporary Spanish Colonial Revival edifice, with the Spanish tile roofs, decorative iron work, and heavy timber lintels and beams. This building saw minimal use after the Army's departure until early 2001, when it was upgraded to accommodate a museum-quality public exhibition space. In January 2001, a portion of the still-extant adobe wall was found during rehabilitation activities for the building's exhibit gift shop. Archeologists and historic preservation personnel from both the Trust and NPS recorded and measured the exposed portions of the adobe wall in order to see the interfaces between different building episodes. The Trust has contracted with Architectural Resources Group of San Francisco to prepare a complete historic structures report.

Archeological Investigations

Located in the heart of the modern Presidio's Main Post area, the *El Presidio* site has driven development in the post from 1776 to the

present. Several archeological investigations have been conducted at this site, including

- the discovery of the Spanish Colonial *El Presidio de San Francisco (El Presidio)* in 1993, during the Army's removal of an underground fuel oil storage tank along Funston Avenue;
- additional research on the 1780 *El Presidio* chapel site between 1996 and 1999, done by NPS in cooperation with Cabrillo College, and;
- field studies along the Funston Avenue "Officers Row" at the *El Presidio* site by the University of California at Berkeley's Archaeological Research Facility during the summers of 1999 and 2000.

The project conducted by U.C. Berkeley yielded a wide range of significant, intact archeological deposits and features that span from early colonial occupations of the Presidio through the early 1900s, including dense concentrations of Spanish-colonial (1776-1821) and Mexican (1822-1846) period archeological deposits. Limited testing showed that an American period component of the site contains well-preserved archeological remains, including privy pits, brick foundations, a box drain or sewer, wooden architectural remains, and household waste deposits. The site also has preserved structural remains associated with previous historical landscapes, such as remnants of wooden fences from the early 1900s.

The importance of these findings is only heightened by the Presidio's prominent role in the history of Spanish colonies in the New World, indigenous Californians, the city of San Francisco, and 18th- and 19th-century international relations. The Trust recognizes *El Presidio's* international importance and is preparing a specialized Archeological Management Plan for the site as part of its overall Main Post planning. These intact remains relate to each historic phase of the Presidio's occupation and provide rich fodder for in-depth studies into any of these time periods. Archeological resources are essential to the Presidio's long-term use as a national park, and a conservation-based interpretive approach to managing and protecting these resources will greatly enhance both the educational and recreational values of the Presidio.

Today a network of supporters—public, private, local, regional, and national—is uniting around an effort to preserve one of our nation's most beautiful and significant destinations. Their

contributions of time, expertise, and financial resources reflect the broad support the Presidio enjoys. These people provide indispensable support for the Trust and NPS, helping the organizations achieve the preservation and economic mandates set forth by Congress. The former crown jewel of the United States Army retains much of the rich foundation left behind by our American soldiers—historic structures, customs, and culture upon which to build a vibrant community where people live, work, and visit.

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