

Battery Chamberlin

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Golden Gate
National Recreation Area



Practice firing of an original 6-inch gun mounted on a disappearing carriage, around 1910.

Baker Beach, 1905

A voice bellows, "Load!" Like integral parts of the gun they are loading, thirteen soldiers spring into action. The first yanks open the breechblock (door) at the rear of the barrel, allowing the next to shove the seven-foot sponge in and out of the firing chamber. Two men

bring forward the 100-lb. shell on a ladle, followed by another with a long pole who rams the shell into the barrel's breech. The bag of gunpowder is heaved in behind, and the breechblock is swung shut and locked. Still another soldier trips a lever, and the gun springs up on massive arms, above the wall behind which it was hidden. The sergeant shouts "Fire!" and tugs on the long lanyard attached to the rear of the gun. There is a deafening boom, a tongue of flame, and a huge cloud of smoke! The shell speeds toward a target mounted on a raft seven miles out to sea. The gun recoils, swinging back and down, behind the wall of the battery the men stand poised to reload. Sweating in their fatigues, they silently thank the sea breeze for cooling them. Only thirty seconds have passed, and they are once again reloading the gun.



Gun drill at Battery Chamberlin around 1942. One soldier loads the gun powder bag as another with shell ladle withdraws.

A New Era of Defense

New weaponry and ironclad ships forced brick forts and cannonballs into obsolescence during the Civil War. Secretary of War William C. Endicott authorized the construction of a new system of defenses to guard U.S. ports against foreign naval attack. Rifled guns, which fired bullet-shaped projectiles, replaced the old smoothbore cannon. Concrete batteries, armed with rifled guns, were built at all major American ports between the 1880's and the 1910's.



The largest of the new guns installed at the Presidio in the 1890s, like this one at Battery Godfrey, had 12-inch bores.



San Francisco History Center, SF Public Library

Observers at several remote posts sighted on moving targets and telephoned angles to a plotting room. Here, officers triangulated the target's position and relayed aiming orders to the gun crews.

Guns on the Beach



Battery Chamberlin's guns protected underwater mines like this one.

Battery Chamberlin, the last Endicott-era battery built at the Presidio, was completed in 1904 and initially armed with four 6-inch guns. These guns were mounted on disappearing carriages, which allowed the gun and crew to be hidden behind a concrete shield during aiming and loading. The battery protected underwater minefields located outside the Golden Gate from enemy minesweepers and moderate-sized warships. Its guns had a range of 8 miles and each could fire at the rate of two rounds per minute. Most of the guns around the Golden Gate ranged

in size from 3 inches up to 12 inches in diameter and could strike battleships up to 15 miles out to sea.

Battery Chamberlin's original guns were removed in 1917 for use in World War I, but the battery was modified and two 6-inch guns on simple "barbette" carriages were again mounted in 1920. By the mid-1920s, many of the "smaller" guns were removed from their batteries, but in 1929 the largest seacoast guns made were mounted on either side of the Golden Gate—16" guns with an accurate range of 25 miles!

World War II



Red Cross Cookie Brigade visits Battery Chamberlin during the war.

After Pearl Harbor, the West Coast was on high alert for an expected Japanese attack. The Sixth Coast Artillery Regiment, Battery "D," manned the guns at Chamberlin, which were hidden from aircraft by camouflage netting. The soldiers had to be ready to defend at a moment's notice. They slept in cramped makeshift bunks in the battery's magazine (ammunition storage room). A mess hall and additional underground barracks were built, but the attack never came.

World War II proved the superiority of air power as well as amphibious attack, and made stationary defenses like battery Chamberlin obsolete. In 1948, the Coast Artillery Corps was deactivated, all the

batteries disarmed, and the guns scrapped during "Operation Blowtorch." A new era of air and missile defense had arrived, ushering in the Cold War and nuclear brinkmanship with the Soviet Union.



Cramped sleeping quarters in Chamberlin's shell room, 1942.

Battery Chamberlin Today



Join a Gun demonstration.

Today, you can take part in demonstrations of a 50-ton rifle and relive the duties of a soldier preparing for imminent attack. The underground magazine is now a museum, with photos and exhibits on the coastal defenses of San Francisco. Here you can contemplate the role these men and weapons played in our nation's security.

National Park Service volunteers maintain and interpret the historic gun. Talk to any staff member about volunteer opportunities.

Battery Chamberlin is located at the north end of the Baker Beach parking lot. It is open on the first full weekend of each month, between 11 p.m. and 3 p.m. Call 415-561-4323 for more information.