

Statement Of Significance

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The Fort Mason Historic District is nationally significant for the years between 1855 and 1953. The district includes a wide range of designed and vernacular historic landscape resources that include vehicular and pedestrian circulation systems, buildings, batteries, and vegetation developed by the U.S. military during their one hundred year inhabitation of the site.

The Fort Mason Historic District was first listed on the National Register in 1972. The scope of the nomination was limited to the area surrounding the historic officers' quarters on East Black Point, identified as the "park" of four historic buildings, on the eastern side of the property, between Franklin Street and Van Ness Avenue. The Fort Mason Historic District was found eligible under Criterion C for its distinctive construction "characteristics of a type, period or method... or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction." In 1979, the boundary was increased to include the entire post. The enlarged boundary of the district was defined by Van Ness Avenue to the east, Bay Street to the south and Laguna Street to the west. To the north, the district was bounded by the San Francisco Bay, taking in the buildings and resources of the former San Francisco Port of Embarkation. The amended nomination also found the Historic District eligible for its "association with the events that have made a significant contribution to broad patterns of history," under Criterion A.

The period of historical significance established in the 1979 Fort Mason Historic District nomination begins with the construct of the civilian residences on the eastern hillside of Black Point during the mid-1850s and extends to the conclusion of the Korean conflict during the early 1950s. The listing of contributing buildings and sites found in the National Register documentation includes everything from the dwellings first constructed in 1855 as private residences, to the seven sets of Capehart-Wherry style officer's quarters comprising the area known as the "Quad," constructed between 1947 and 1953. The nomination specifically raises the issue of the level of significance for varied resources relating to this very broad period. It cites some of Fort Mason's buildings and sites as potentially having national significance, while the significance of more recent resources are cited as being locally significant.

In 1985, the San Francisco Port of Embarkation, now commonly referred to as Lower Fort Mason was designated as a National Historic Landmark based on the central role of these facilities in United States logistical strategy during World War II. The nomination also included Building 201, the former port headquarters building, discontinuous from the port area at Lower Fort Mason. The period of significance for the National Landmark is listed as 1912-1945. According to the nomination, "Between December 1941 and August 1945, 1,745,000 personnel embarked at San Francisco. In addition, more than half a million veterans of the war debarked at San Francisco during the same period. In the Bay Area, Fort Mason oversaw port operations at no fewer than thirteen other installations" (Fort Mason NL nomination form, 1985).

A draft nomination examining the significance of archeological resources at Fort Mason was also prepared in 1979, yet was never presented for entry into the National Register. In spite of its unofficial status, a working consensus among park staff supports the idea that Fort Mason is a potentially valuable archeological district. Because of this, Upper Fort Mason is currently managed as an archeological site. The proposed boundaries are drawn to include, "all known cultural deposits and areas of potential buried deposits such as environs of historic buildings, terrain beneath remnant floors and foundations and the current military residential area... ." As such, it is understood that there is a high potential for prehistoric archeological resources throughout Upper Fort Mason, well beyond the known archeological sites

identified in the draft 1979 nomination. The draft nomination suggests that the archeological resources at Fort Mason bear a local level of significance, yet are a potentially valuable source of information as to how the earliest Americans lived. Furthermore, it is said that these deposits may also have symbolic value as ethnographic resources.

This CLI does not alter the period of significance, the criterion used, or the boundaries or list of contributing features established by previous National Register nominations, but adds a higher level of detailed descriptions of the features and the cultural landscape as a whole.

Criterion A

The 1979 National Register form states, "The Fort Mason military reservation in its entirety is highly significant as a historic district. Commencing in 1797, and lasting through the Spanish and Mexican administrations of Alta California, Fort Mason was one of two sites on the San Francisco Bay that was armed with artillery for the defense of the harbor. For over forty years under the American administration, it played a role in the coastal defenses of the bay from the Civil War to post-Spanish-American War. It also served as an important element in the first submarine mine defense of the San Francisco Bay, in the Spanish-American War. From the Spanish-American War to the Korean War, Fort Mason's role as the headquarters of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation was of national significance historically. Through it moved millions of men and millions of tons of supplies, providing evidence of the United States' expansion and growing interests in the Pacific."

Criterion C

The 1979 National Register form states, "The collection of military structures dating from the 1850s to the Korean War illustrates the evolution of an Army post (and coastal fortifications to the lesser degree) over a period of 100 years. The contrasts and many moods of the architecture, the effect of the Army's caste system on the quarters, the charm of the earliest officers' row, the simple lines of the Endicott battery, the WPA architecture of the Great Depression, the Army's determination in landscaping - all these blend together to present a history of this place and its times. While many of the structures by themselves possess only local historical significance, together they build a district possessing both historical and architectural significance ranging from the local to the national level."

Criterion D

In the 1980s two excavations, one at Black Point Battery and one in the southeast corner of Fort Mason adjacent the MacArthur entrance gate, revealed nineteenth century military technology and artifacts. In addition, the brick battery gun emplacements remain in situ, under current landscaping, at Black Point Battery. These two locations have yielded and retain the potential to yield further information about the nineteenth century at Fort Mason.

Historic Context

Beginning in 1797 while California was a remote territory of Spain, Bateria Yerba Buena became one of two sites in the Bay Area armed to defend the harbor. Apparently abandoned during the subsequent Mexican administration of Alta California, the United States reserved the site from development in 1850, identifying it as the "Military Reservation at Point San Jose." The reservation was first occupied by the U.S. Army in 1863 during the crisis of the American Civil War and continued its mission of coastal defense through the Spanish-American War up until 1909, when armament was removed from its fortifications. Following this, the military mission of the post changed from defensive to logistical.

After the catastrophe of 1906, when much of the city was leveled by earthquake and fire, a decision was made to consolidate shipping and transport operations serving United States territorial possessions in the Pacific. Located at Fort Mason, the consolidated facility was completed in 1912, and in time became

known as the headquarters post for the San Francisco Port of Embarkation. Fort Mason reached the zenith of its military mission before WWII and the highest point of its physical development somewhat later, during the Korean Conflict. Following the Korean Conflict, Fort Mason's limited size and incapacity to expand its facilities led the U.S. Army elsewhere and Fort Mason was gradually phased out of the military's plans.

Analysis of Landscape Integrity

The National Register program identifies seven aspects of integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Retention of these qualities is essential for a property to convey its historic identity or evoke its appearance during a significant period in history; however, all seven qualities are not required in order to convey a sense of past time and place. The CLI provides additional documentation related to these aspects, particularly that of “setting”.

Location

This aspect of integrity refers to the place where the landscape was constructed or evolved into being. Although the size of Fort Mason was circumscribed by an 1870 boundary reduction, the location has remained fixed. Buildings within the landscape that may have historical significance in their own right, such as FM-2, have however been moved following their initial construction. Nevertheless, the location and boundaries of Fort Mason have remained in place since 1870, and because of the aspect of location remains intact.

Design

The combination of elements that create the form, plan, spatial organization, and style of a cultural landscape or historic property fall under this category. Sub-divisions of Fort Mason were designed as independent compositions and retain integrity of design. For example, Black Point, settled during the 1850s retains sufficient aspects of form, plan, spatial organization and style. The “Revival-style” cottages found there retain their architectural style from the mid-nineteenth century while remaining organized inwardly along Franklin Street with few non-contributing additions. Likewise, Lower Fort Mason was designed as an independent military composition and retains its stark rectilinear and utilitarian configuration. Although changes were made to the area north of Bay Street and around the parade ground in the 1970s, significant elements, such as the Capehart-Wherry Housing Complex (the Quad) and the Mission Revival Officers’ Park, were left intact retaining essential designed complexes dating to the period of significance. Consequently, Fort Mason retains integrity of design reflecting the entire period of significance, from 1855 to 1952.

Setting

Setting is the physical environment of a historic property that illustrates the character of the place. Fort Mason's setting has remained relatively consistent since the late 1920s to early 1930s, when the neighborhood surrounding the property became fully urbanized. Because of this, Fort Mason retains the qualities of its setting late in its period of significance, during the mid-twentieth century.

Materials

All types of construction materials, including paving, plantings, and other landscape features as well as the materials' placement in the landscape are considered in evaluating this aspect of integrity. The quality, condition, and placement of the materials found at Fort Mason are mixed, representing diminished integrity. The National Park Service has taken measures to remove many of the temporary buildings erected to meet the demands of both WWI and WWII. Consequently, many of the utilitarian landscape materials and small-scale features found in areas where demolition occurred have been removed as well. One illustration of this is the reduction of the amount of chain-link wire fencing

enclosing Fort Mason along its Bay Street frontage. While Fort Mason had long been an open base, the placement of this fencing was meaningful, intended to define the property as a separate precinct from the densely settled city surrounding it, and to make possible a closure of the base if need be. The remaining fencing, black on white street signs at intersections, and displays of militaria are deteriorating or threatened with removal, and may soon become lost. As a result, Fort Mason retains a diminished level of integrity of materials.

Workmanship

This aspect of workmanship refers to the physical evidence of the crafts of a particular period. Under National Park Service management, Fort Mason does not enjoy the high level of landscape maintenance that the U.S. Army was once able to direct toward the property. In spite of constrained maintenance resources, including the elimination of much of the laborious handwork required to maintain beds of annual plants and thriving shrub borders and foundation plantings, the Fort Mason landscape remains reasonably well cared for, retaining historical aspects of workmanship.

Feeling

A property's expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period is evaluated under this aspect of integrity. Fort Mason retains its quality as an enclave isolated from the surrounding city and through this its integrity of feeling. The low density of buildings at Fort Mason is the primary contributor to this aspect of integrity and its effect. In a counter-intuitive way, the National Park Service's creation of its "Great Meadow" green space during the 1980s, introducing a wholly contemporary and non-historic element of the landscape, improved the qualities of feeling at Fort Mason. Before the creation of the Great Meadow, many of the buildings within that western quadrant of the property had been vacant for a number of years - engendering feelings of abandonment and decay. The removal of these derelict buildings has restored to Fort Mason the sense that this place is being inhabited and cared for.

Association

This aspect of integrity refers to the direct link between the significant historic event, period, person, design, etc., and the cultural landscape. The Fort Mason landscape retains a very high degree of integrity of association. Fundamentally, the retention of the historic name itself, Fort Mason, continues to associate this place with the United States Army. Beyond this, the survival of the property retains that association - it has not been redeveloped for other commercial or civic purposes. Sufficient physical characteristics and features survive from the historic period to sustain this association between the property and its historic use and occupants.

Integrity of the Property as a Whole

Of the seven aspects of integrity defined by the National Register program, Fort Mason retains a high degree of location, design, setting, feeling, and association. Integrity of materials and workmanship are diminished by the reduced level of maintenance under National Park Service management as compared to that of the U.S. Army, however integrity of materials and workmanship are merely diminished - not missing. According to National Register guidelines, a property does, or does not retain its overall historic integrity. The seven qualities of integrity need to be evaluated together - leading to an overall conclusion regarding the integrity of the property. Given the retention of high or partial integrity in five of its seven aspects, Fort Mason does retain its integrity as a historic property.