



Fort Point





The key to the whole Pacific coast

At the outbreak of the Civil War, newly constructed Fort Point stood as a prime example of the U.S. Army's most sophisticated coastal fortifications. Military officials declared its position at the Golden Gate as the "key to the whole Pacific coast." Its massive brick walls looked to be impenetrable. Even as its praises were being sung, new rifled artillery was in use that could bore through masonry walls—as had happened at similar forts on the East Coast. Fort Point never saw action. It survives as a monument to a bygone era and a place where you can explore life at a coastal defense garrison.

Sentinel at the Golden Gate

The entrance to San Francisco Bay has long been the site of human habitation. The earliest residents, ancestors of the Ohlone and Miwok peoples, depended on the bay's waters for food and transportation. There is evidence of a 4,000-year-old Ohlone village site along the bay shore about a mile from Fort Point.



The Castillo de San Joaquin

In 1769 Gaspar de Portolá's overland expedition reached San Francisco Bay. By 1776 Spain had established the area's first European settlement, with a mission and a presidio (military post). Fearful of encroachment by the British and Russians, Spain fortified the high white cliff at the narrowest part of the bay's entrance, where Fort Point now stands. The Castillo de San Joaquin, built in 1794, was an adobe structure housing nine to 13 cannon. The little fortress guarded the Spanish colony until 1821, when Mexico won independence from Spain and gained control of the region.

In 1835 the Mexican army moved to Sonoma, and the castillo's adobe walls were left to crumble in the wind and rain. War broke out between Mexico and the United States in 1846. On July 1, U.S. Army officer John Charles Frémont, along with Kit Carson and a band of 10 followers, stormed the castillo and spiked the cannons. They discovered that the fortress was empty.



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possible to water level so cannonballs could ricochet across the water's surface toward enemy ships. Workers blasted the 90-foot cliff down to 15 feet above sea level. Seven-foot-thick walls and multi-tiered casemated construction were typical of Third System forts (see diagram on the other side of this brochure). In 1854 Inspector Gen. Joseph F.K. Mansfield declared "this point as the key to the whole Pacific Coast...and it should receive untiring exertions."

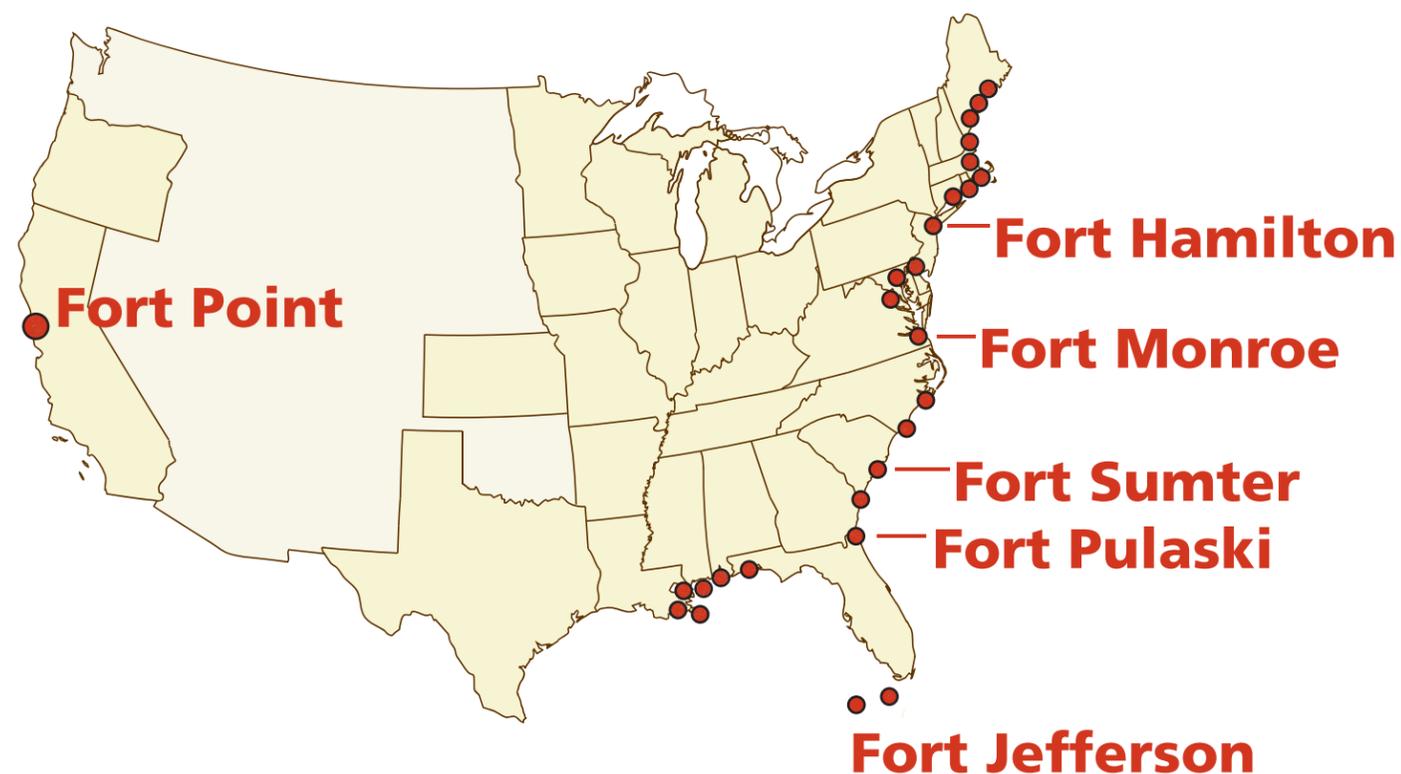
A crew of 200, many unemployed miners, labored for eight years on the fort. In 1861, with war looming, the Army mounted the fort's first cannon. Col. Albert Sidney Johnston, commander of the Department of the Pacific, prepared Bay Area defenses and

After the United States prevailed in the war against Mexico in 1848, California was ceded to the United States. The gold strike that year at Sutter's Mill on the American River lured tens of thousands of prospectors. Most of the Fortyniners arrived by sea, making San Francisco the major West Coast harbor as of 1849.

When California became the 31st state in 1850, the U.S. Army and Navy officials recommended a series of fortifications to secure San Francisco Bay. Coastal defenses were built at Fort Point and several other strategic points (see map below).

Fort Point and the Civil War

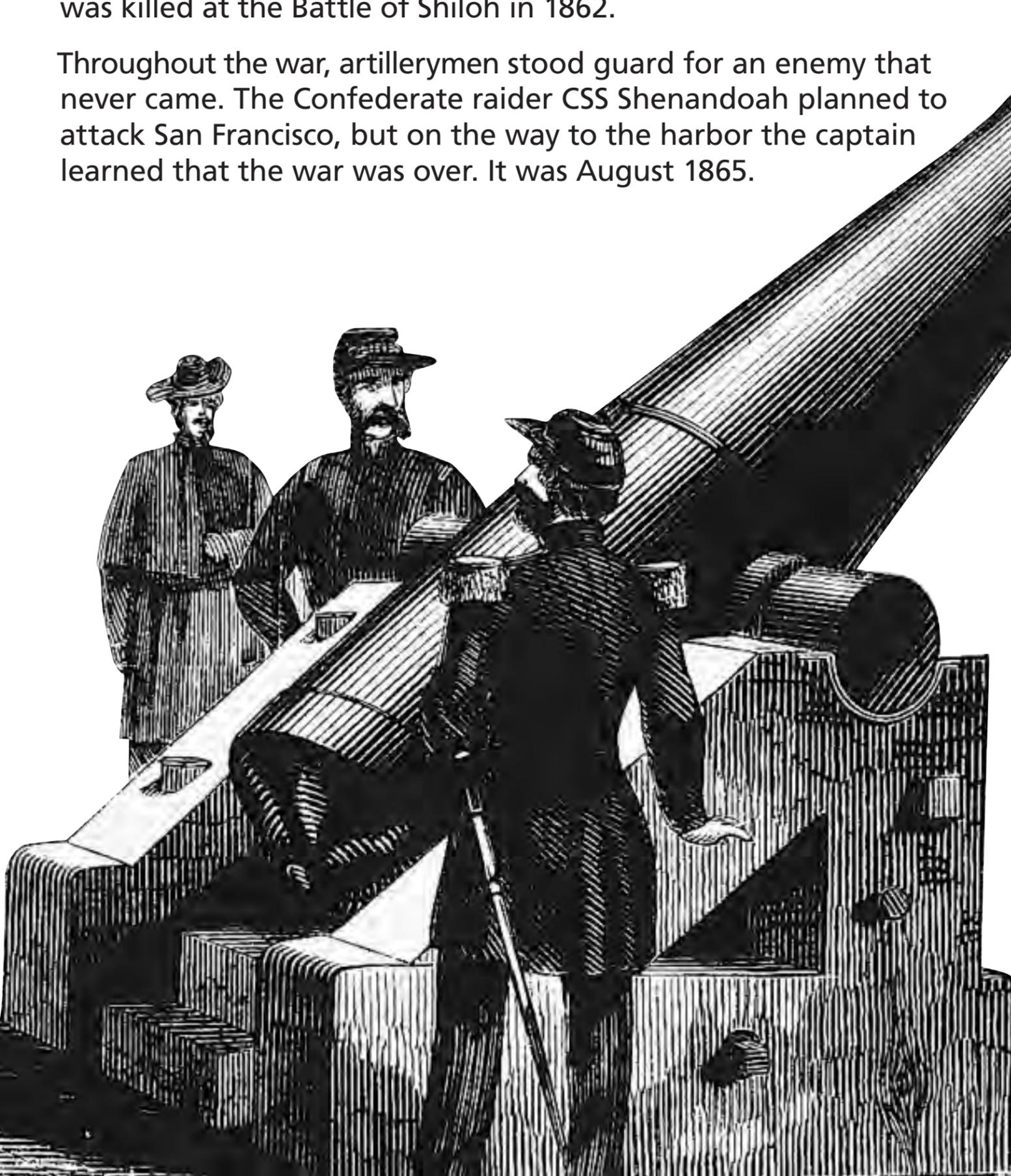
The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began work on Fort Point in 1853. It was sited to defend the maximum amount of harbor area. Plans specified that the lowest artillery tier be as close as



Red dots show locations of Civil War-era Third System defenses.

ordered in the first troops to the fort. Kentucky-born Johnston then resigned his commission to join the Confederate Army; he was killed at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862.

Throughout the war, artillerymen stood guard for an enemy that never came. The Confederate raider CSS Shenandoah planned to attack San Francisco, but on the way to the harbor the captain learned that the war was over. It was August 1865.



San Francisco Bay's Third System coastal defenses 1850–1884.

Severe damage to similar forts on the Atlantic Coast during the war—Fort Sumter in South Carolina and Fort Pulaski in Georgia—challenged the effectiveness of masonry walls against rifled artillery. Troops soon left Fort Point, and it was never again continuously occupied by the Army. The fort was nonetheless important enough to receive protection from the elements. In 1869 a granite seawall was completed. The following year, some of the fort's cannon were moved to Battery East on the bluffs nearby, where they were more protected. In 1882 Fort Point was officially named Fort Winfield Scott after the famous hero from the war against Mexico. The name never caught on and was later applied to an artillery post at the Presidio.

Into a New Century

In 1892 the Army began constructing the new Endicott System concrete fortifications armed with steel, breech-loading rifled guns. Within eight years, all 102 of Fort Point's smooth-bore cannon were dismantled and sold for scrap. The fort, moderately damaged in the 1906 earthquake, was used over the next four decades for barracks, training, and storage. Soldiers from the 6th U.S. Coast Artillery were stationed here during World War II to guard minefields and the anti-submarine net that spanned the Golden Gate.

Preserving Fort Point

In 1926 the American Institute of Architects proposed preserving the fort for its outstanding military architecture. Funds were not available, and the idea languished. Plans for the Golden Gate Bridge in the 1930s called for the fort's removal, but Chief Engineer Joseph Strauss redesigned the bridge to save the fort. "While the old fort has no military value now," Strauss said, "it remains nevertheless a fine example of the mason's art.... It should be preserved and restored as a national monument."

Preservation efforts were revived after World War II. On October 16, 1970, President Richard Nixon signed the bill creating Fort Point National Historic Site. The fort tells the story of its years spent guarding the Golden Gate.



Planning Your Visit

Fort Point National Historic Site stands beneath the southern end of the Golden Gate Bridge (see below). Parking is limited. For public bus information call 415-673-6864. For current park hours of operation call 415-556-1693.

The fort is closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. The fort is wheelchair accessible on the ground floor, including the theater. Visitor activities include a brief introductory film, cannon-loading demonstrations, and guided and self-guided tours.

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The admiration and pride of the Pacific

Between 1817 and 1867 the nation's coastal defense system included some 30 forts along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Fort Point was the only fort of this era built on the West Coast. An 1857 newspaper article praised the fort's "solid masonry of more than ordinary artistic skill We venture to predict it will be the admiration and pride of the Pacific."

This illustration shows many facets of its construction and how it might have been used under ideal conditions. As you tour the fort remember that in addition to serving as a heavily armed fortification it was home to hundreds of men.

Fort Point is an excellent example of a Third System coastal fortification, a system adopted after the War of 1812 to protect major U.S. harbors. The plan below was drafted before the east and west bastions were added. The fort had three tiers of casemates (vaulted rooms) housing cannon. A barbette tier had additional guns and a sod covering to absorb the impact of enemy cannon fire. The only entrance was a sally port with iron-studded doors. Work began in 1853. Since few local sources of building materials were available, granite was imported from as far away as China before engineers gave up the idea of stone. Some eight million bricks were made in a brickyard nearby.

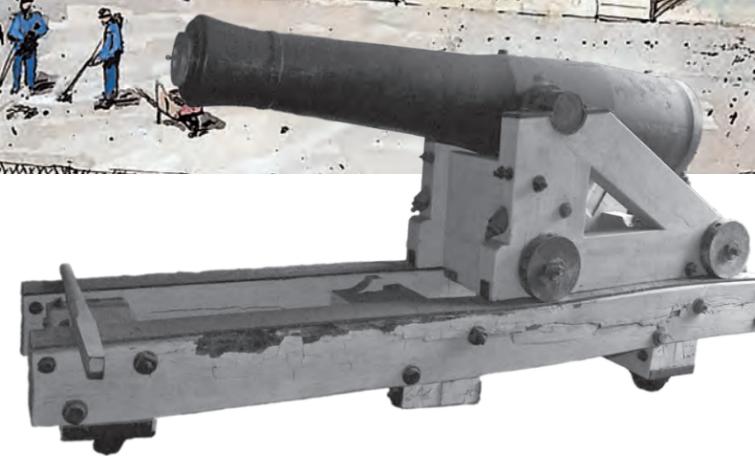
As soon as it was completed, Fort Point needed modifications. Civil War battles in the East proved masonry forts vulnerable to rifled cannon. In the 1870s Battery East, a great earthwork atop the bluff just to the southeast, supplemented fortifications at the point.





Lighthouse

This is the third lighthouse built at this site—a natural promontory from which to guide mariners through waters treacherous in fog. The first was demolished shortly after construction in 1852 to make way for Fort Point. The second, north of the fort at the tip of the point, suffered continual erosion. The present lighthouse was used from 1864 until 1934, when the foundation for the Golden Gate Bridge blocked its light.



Artillery and Hotshots

Fort Point never mounted its planned 141 cannon. By October 1861 there were 69 guns in and around the fort: 24-, 32-, 42-pounders and 10- and 8-inch Columbiads (*right*). After the war, the Army installed powerful 10-inch Rodman guns in the lower casemates; these could fire a 128-lb. solid shot over two miles. At its greatest strength, the fort mounted 102 cannon. In addition the fort had “hotshot” furnaces: iron cannon balls could be heated red hot, loaded into a cannon, and fired at wooden ships to set them ablaze.

Bastion and Seawall

Each of Fort Point's bastions held 15 small cannon to discourage attackers from scaling the fort. By protruding from the main structure, the bastions allowed defenders to fire from a protected position along their own walls rather than revealing themselves by peering down over the parapet. To protect the fort from land attack, a small cannon battery was designed for

the west end of the scarp wall at the front. It was built but cannon were never mounted. Because the land on which the fort stands was cut down to within 15 feet of the water, a seawall (*right*) was needed for protection. This 1,500-foot-long structure is an impressive engineering feat. Granite stones were fitted together and the spaces between them sealed with strips of lead. Completed in 1869 the wall held fast for over 100 years against the Golden Gate's powerful waves until it began to give way in the 1980s. The National Park Service rebuilt the wall and placed boulders seaward to deflect the force of the waves.



Garrison

During the Civil War, as many as 500 men from the 3rd U.S. Artillery, the 9th U.S. Infantry, and the 8th California Volunteer Infantry were garrisoned here. Thousands of miles from the major theaters of combat, the men spent their days in a routine of drills, artillery practice, inspections, sentry duty, and maintenance chores. Enlisted men bunked 24 to a casemate on the third tier; officers had single or double quarters one tier below.

To supplement coal heating fuel, soldiers gathered driftwood from the shore. Bvt. Maj. William Austine, the fort's commander, summed up conditions in an 1861 report: "During the summer months the post is enveloped in fogs, and dampness and high winds constantly prevail, and consequently rheumatism and severe colds are very common."



Above, from left: Cavalry trumpet, playing cards, U.S. Army issue tin cup, clay pipe, Federal artilleryman's forage cap.

- 1 Scarp wall
- 2 Rifle slit
- 3 Sally port
- 4 Parade ground
- 5 Hot shot furnace

- 6 Casemate
- 7 Powder magazine
- 8 Officers' quarters
- 9 Enlisted men's quarters

- 10 Penthouse
- 11 Barbette tier
- 12 Parapet wall
- 13 Lighthouse

- 14 West bastion
- 15 East bastion
- 16 Cannon mount

