NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

# Foundation Document Overview

## Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial

### California

**Contact Information**

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# Purpose

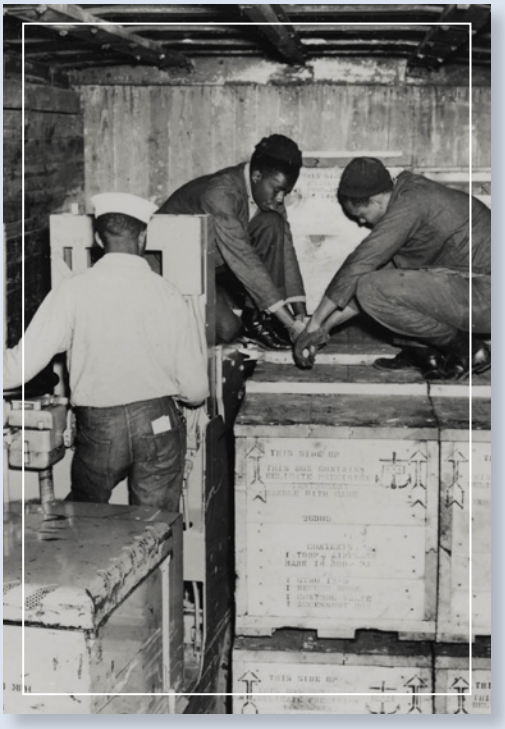
*PORT CHICAGO NAVAL MAGAZINE NATIONAL MEMORIAL preserves the site of the deadliest home front disaster of World War II, honoring those who lost their lives or were affected by the munitions explosion on July 17, 1944. The disaster and its aftermath illuminated the issues of segregation and racial inequality in the military, and today the memorial serves as a springboard for exploring social justice in our society.*

# Significance

Significance statements express why Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

The following significance statements have been identified for Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial. (Please note that the sequence of the statements does not reflect the level of significance.)

- The munitions explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine on July 17, 1944, was the largest stateside disaster of World War II. The blast registered 3.4 on the Richter scale, was felt more than 450 miles away and resulted in 320 fatalities and approximately 400 injured. The memorial is located at the site of the explosion, the final resting place for the unrecovered casualties.
- Following the explosion, as before, surviving sailors received unequal treatment based on their race. Many African American sailors refused to return to work soon after the explosion and 50 were convicted of mutiny in the largest naval trial of its kind in US history. These convictions still stand today despite efforts to overturn them.
- Port Chicago Naval Magazine was the largest ammunition transshipment facility on the West Coast and was essential to the success of the war effort in the Pacific Theater; much of the ammunition and bombs used by US forces in the Pacific passed through the hands of sailors at Port Chicago. This transshipment facility continues to operate today under the US Army.
- The Port Chicago explosion, the mutiny trial, and the response of African-American communities to these events exposed the shameful injustices of racism in the military. These events were a catalyst for the Navy, the armed services, and ultimately, the nation to weigh the costs of racial segregation. The memorial serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles for equality and social justice today.



# Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

The following fundamental resources and values have been identified for Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial:

- **The memorial.** The memorial, constructed at the location of the explosion, is on the Suisun Bay shoreline overlooking the remnant piers, and includes granite monuments with engraved names of the 320 men who lost their lives.
- **Final resting place.** The memorial recognizes those who lost their lives and marks the final resting place of those unrecovered after the explosion. The exposed and open landscape along the water provides a compelling visitor experience, creating a contemplative and inspirational space for visitors.
- **Port Chicago explosion site.** The Port Chicago explosion site—listed in the National Register of Historic Places—preserves the site and remnants of the 1944 disaster, including the pier pilings, the historic location of Pier 1, and archeology associated with the explosion.
- **Historic features.** Historic features in the vicinity of the memorial such as the railroad cars and revetment, railroad tracks, military structures, and other landscape elements provide context for visitors to imagine the historic scene of WWII operations at Port Chicago. The location of the memorial on an active military base, which has been continually used as a transshipment facility since World War II, helps visitors understand the historic significance of the operation.
- **Museum collections.** The museum collections, including remnants from the explosion, historic photographs, relevant documents, memorabilia, and oral histories tell the diverse stories of Port Chicago.
- **Richly layered stories.** Richly layered stories—personal, institutional, and political—provide a lens for understanding the complexity of the Port Chicago experience and its historical reverberations throughout many aspects of military culture and American society.

# Other Resources and Values

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial may contain other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

The following other important resources and values have been identified for Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial:

- **Sites outside the immediate memorial area.** Sites outside the immediate memorial area such as the town of Port Chicago and the inland area of the Concord Naval Weapons Station provide an opportunity to understand the complexity of the Port Chicago stories within their historical geographic context.

# Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

The following interpretive themes have been identified for Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial:

- Disrupting the momentum of the Pacific campaign, the Port Chicago explosion was the deadliest home front disaster of World War II; the memorial honors the service and sacrifice of the 320 individuals who lost their lives, the hundreds who were injured, and those who were otherwise affected by the disaster.
- The varied experiences of Port Chicago survivors give us an opportunity to contemplate just what constitutes service and sacrifice in defense of the country, the community, and its values and ideals.
- The sailors at Port Chicago who refused to resume loading ordnance under unsafe conditions took a courageous stand in the face of grave repercussions, joining the longstanding tradition of defiance against unjust systems.
- The Port Chicago tragedy revealed systemic racial inequalities and shed light on the magnitude of discrimination, racism, and the blatant disregard for basic human safety in the Navy.
- The desegregation of the military proved that racial integration was realistic and inevitable, which then helped inspire the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s.
- The story of Port Chicago is critical because it enriches our understanding of the historic struggles for civil rights and establishes a continuing legacy for the pursuit of social justice.

# Description

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was established in 1992 to mark the site of the Port Chicago explosion, the worst stateside (or home front) disaster in the United States during World War II. The Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial successfully advocated for establishment of the memorial, and remain the park's primary partner. Located on the shore of Suisun Bay, in Concord, California, the memorial was an NPS-affiliated area from its establishment until 2009, when it was designated a unit within the national park system. Three themes—the role that the naval magazine played in the Pacific Theater war effort, the loss of life caused by the tragic explosion, and the poignancy of the social justice struggles that ensued after the explosion—compelled the nation to set aside Port Chicago as a place of national remembrance.

Constructed in 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the naval magazine was named after the nearby town of Port Chicago. It quickly grew to become the Navy's largest ammunition shipment facility on the West Coast, essential to the success of US armed forces in the Pacific Theater. The unprecedented demands for war materiel generated by America's entry into World War II called for mobilizing all Americans, including African Americans who were generally barred from meaningful service in the US armed forces. Like most Americans, the African American sailors and other service personnel stationed at Port Chicago were deeply committed to our nation's fight against global fascism. In spite of the harsh inequalities they experienced here in their home country—and in our nation's military—they loaded dangerous munitions every day and performed their duties honorably in the service of their nation.

On July 17, 1944, the naval magazine was rocked by a devastating explosion that killed 320, injured approximately 400, obliterated the pier and cargo ships S.S. Quinault Victory and S.S. E.A. Bryant and heavily damaged the nearby town of Port Chicago. Most of those who died were the young African American sailors who served in newly established and racially segregated work units where they were subjected to disparate treatment from their white counterparts because of their race, and had not received any training for the dangerous work of loading ammunition onto ships. Survivors of the explosion, as well as many local townspeople, immediately pitched in to assist the Navy with cleaning up after the disaster. All of them were traumatized to some degree by the enormity and horror of the event.

All operations were halted for several weeks after the explosion, causing a major disruption in the supply lines to the Pacific Theater, but the facilities were quickly rebuilt.

When 258 of the surviving sailors refused to return to work in the wake of the explosion—protest of unsafe working conditions and racial discrimination—50 were charged and convicted of mutiny in the largest such trial in U.S. naval history. The convictions sparked public protests and drew the attention of Thurgood Marshall and Eleanor Roosevelt. Although the black sailors were imprisoned, their protest and the subsequent public outcry prompted historic steps toward racial integration by the Navy in 1946, steps that in 1948 President Harry Truman ordered be taken by all the armed forces. Military desegregation tied directly to Port Chicago ultimately helped to inspire the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Despite these advances, repeated efforts to have the Port Chicago 50 exonerated of their mutiny convictions have failed, just one indication that the struggle for social justice remains a work in progress in the United States.

Accordingly, the Port Chicago Naval Weapons Magazine is recognized as a pioneering site in the racial integration of our armed services—the setting for a convergence of the nation's wartime need and the commitment of these young black men to fight for their country even while their presence was devalued. This confluence evokes contradictory truths of brotherhood and abusive treatment; honorable and second class service; a preventable disaster whose death toll reflected the segregationist policies of the day; and a misguided mass mutiny trial, the significance of which reverberates through our nation even today.

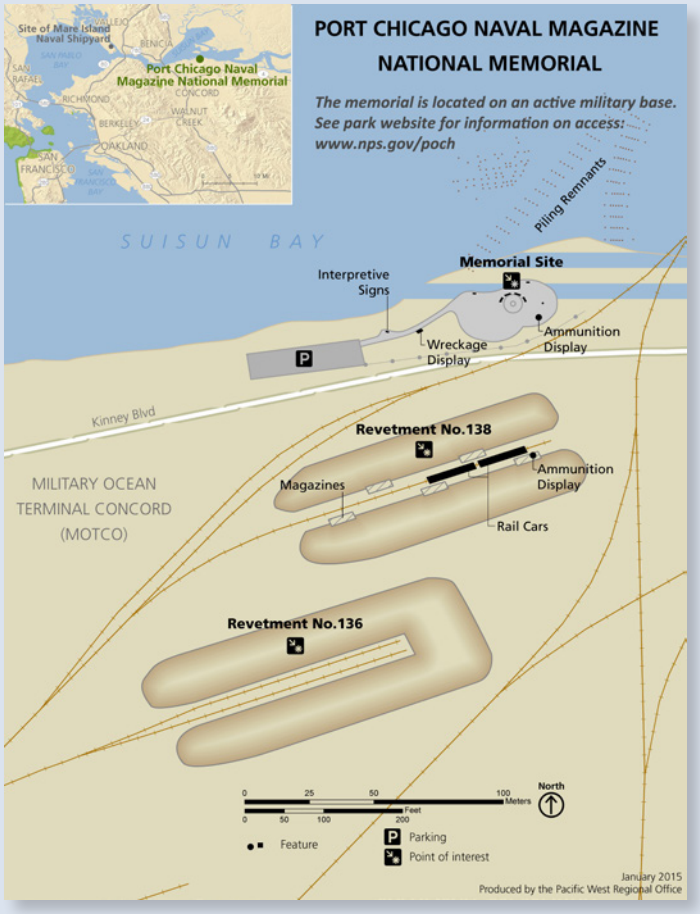
The memorial landscape of Port Chicago is appropriately stark for a site that is the final resting place for those victims unrecovered after the tragedy. Remnant pilings, weathered grey, jut from the shallow waters just off shore. The only remains from the exploded pier, they bear witness to the tragic events of July 1944. A simply designed memorial sits on the shoreline of Suisun Bay overlooking the pilings. It comprises a paved plaza whose main feature is a roll-call of the dead engraved on four dark granite stones that each sit altar-like upon granite bases. Along a path leading from a parking area to the plaza, a piece of twisted metal, part of a ship blown apart by the explosion, evokes the cataclysm of the event. Across the road from the memorial, railway boxcars sit within an earthen, concrete, and wood piling bunker, called a revetment.

# Description (continued)

These features comprise a historic vignette where one imagines the dangerous mission of Port Chicago labor. This entire shoreline scene is presided over by a lighted nautical flagpole bearing the American flag, a sober tribute to the men who served and died at the site.

The memorial's elegiac feeling and simple, unadorned character are amplified by its setting along the wind-swept Suisun Bay on the northeastern margins of the San Francisco Bay Area. Despite its proximity to this populated urban area, the Suisun Bay region appears and functions today as it has for much of its recorded history. Bordered by low, grass-covered hills that rise gradually from its shores, Suisun Bay forms part of the estuary that carries Sacramento and San Joaquin river waters originating in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the San Francisco Bay and Pacific Ocean. Because it connects coastal and interior California cities, the estuary has always been favored for shipping. Today, as in the past, industrial enterprises served by ships dot the shoreline, the hills behind providing a broad, rural backdrop. In 1942, Port Chicago Naval Magazine joined the ranks of these industrial enterprises, and today the memorial continues to inhabit this industrial-estuarine setting.

A significant factor contributing to the memorial's strong sense of place is that it continues to reside within an active military base whose mission remains the shipment of ammunition and supplies overseas. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the Navy built new piers at Port Chicago and continued to supply the Pacific Theater until the war's end. An additional 5,028 acres located inland of the waterfront site were acquired to provide onsite storage capacity in the wake of the explosion. In order to create a large buffer zone between stored munitions and nearby civilian communities, the residential town of Port Chicago was eliminated entirely as part of this base expansion.

The Navy operated and expanded its shipment operation until 1997, at which time the US Army assumed management of the base and established a shipment operation of its own, Military Ocean Terminal Concord, California. The inland properties were placed in reduced operational status in 1999 and designated for closure in 2005. In 2008, the Navy officially transferred the property to the US Army. The national memorial is a five-acre area within the Military Ocean Terminal Concord. As provided for in the enabling legislation, the Army continues to own all of the land on which the memorial resides. Under the terms of an operating agreement between the agencies, the National Park Service works with the Army to maintain the memorial, coordinate historic preservation efforts, and provide access for visitors to the highly secured area where the memorial is located during certain times of the year when military operations are not occurring.

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial is a powerful site with important stories to tell—stories evocative of the past and resonant for the future. At the same time, having been established in 2009, it is a fledgling park that in some ways still defies description. The full story of the Port Chicago disaster and aftermath encompasses a number of other sites that are outside of the park's designation. These include sites at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, California, where sailors engaged in a post-disaster work stoppage and were imprisoned soon after, the now-closed inland area where munitions were stored following the explosion, as well as the site on Treasure Island where 50 of the sailors were court-martialed for mutiny.