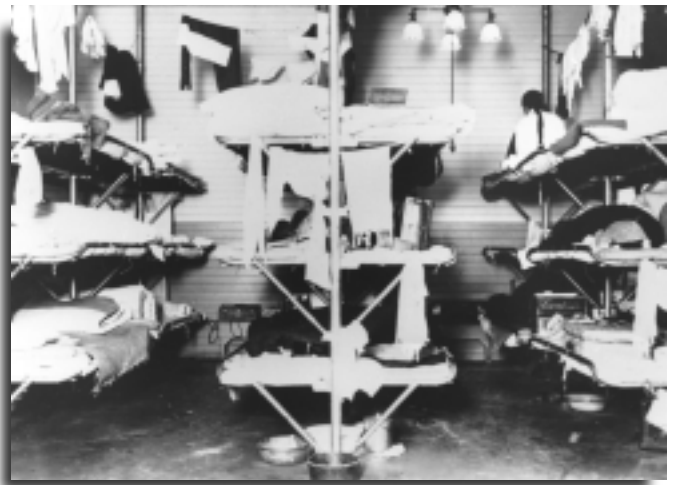


ANGEL ISLAND

A Historical Perspective

Angel Island Association
Angel Island Immigration Station
Historical Station
California Historical Society
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Americans All® A National Education Program

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The Angel Island Immigration Station

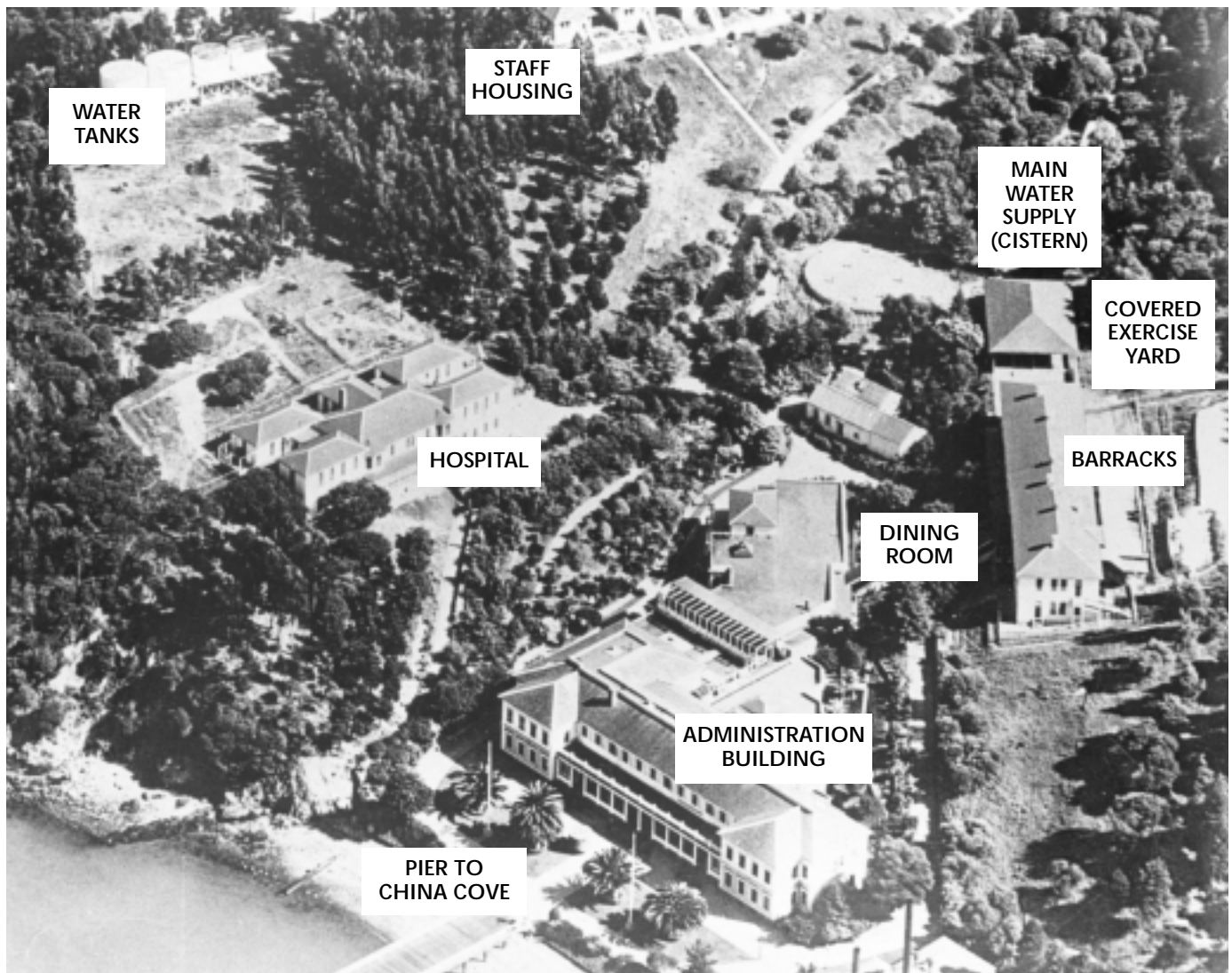
Because the majority of European immigrants who came to the United States passed through the admission process on Ellis Island in New York harbor, the Ellis Island Immigration Station is a famous historic site. Yet it was not the only major port of entry for immigrants. Between 1910 and 1940, Angel Island in San Francisco Bay was the location of a large and imposing government compound where immigrants seeking entry into the United States via Pacific routes were processed.

Often referred to as the Ellis Island of the West, this one-mile-square state park is the largest island in San

Francisco Bay. It was christened Isla de Los Angeles by a Spanish explorer, Juan de Ayala, in 1775.

Native Americans had used the island for thousands of years. In the early 1800s, Russian sea-otter hunters visited it. In the mid-1800s, the United States government began developing the island. Gun batteries on Alcatraz and Angel Islands formed the inner defense of San Francisco Bay.

The island was a favorite dueling ground for San Franciscans during the mid-nineteenth century and was a military staging site during three wars.



The Angel Island Immigration Station, c. 1910

Of the 1 million immigrants processed at Angel Island Immigration Station, approximately 175,000 were Chinese and 117,000 were Japanese. Immigrants also arrived at Angel Island from India, Italy, Russia, Armenia and Ireland. The average length of stay for a detainee was two weeks; the longest was 22 months. Between 75 percent and 80 percent of the immigrants successfully entered America through this station.

Entry to the United States

Gaining entry into the United States was complicated for the Chinese by the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1888, 1892 and 1902 and the Immigration Act of 1924. These acts increased restrictions on Asian immigrants, especially laborers, until only students, teachers or merchants were admitted to America. Clearly discriminatory—no other national group was denied entry to the country—these exclusionary laws were prompted by racism and fear that laborers from China would take jobs away from European American workers. This fear was aggravated by a severe economic depression coupled with surges of new immigrants entering the United States from Europe.

Despite their early arrival in California and their contributions to the growth of the state, Chinese immigrants experienced growing prejudice in the 1870s. The first Chinese immigrants had worked in the gold fields. When the wealth from the gold fields diminished, Chinese workers were recruited to build the railroads linking the East and West Coasts. In time, Chinese people settled



The original fog-warning bell now sits on the beach at Angel Island.

into a variety of occupations in agriculture, fishing, business and light industry.

To enforce the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the federal government built the immigration station compound on Angel Island, chosen because it isolated the immigrants from their relatives and friends on the mainland. After the station was opened in 1910, immigration officials boarded ships arriving in San Francisco to inspect each passenger's documents. Those whose papers passed inspection were free to go ashore in San Francisco; those whose papers did not pass inspection were transferred to a ferry and taken to Angel Island.

The Immigration Station

When the immigrants approached the station, they saw a beautiful island with wooden buildings. They were coming to *Gam Saan* (Gold Mountain) to realize their dreams. Today a large bell sits on the beach. It is the original fog-warning bell that sat at the end of the landing pier. Years ago, it disappeared from Angel Island and was found in a San Diego junkyard. The two-ton bell was restored and returned to the island, first as a marker at Ayala Cove and later to its present site in China Cove.

The immigration station extended from the pier to the top of the hill, where there was housing for station employees. A bustling center, it had its own power and lighting system, water system, dormitories, hospital, dining facilities, and staff home and administration facilities. It could handle up to 2,500 immigrants per day and had sleeping accommodations for 1,000. Of the 20 original buildings, only 4 remain: the mule barn or stable (later used for linen supply, a garage and housing for non-Asian cooks), the detention center, the hospital and the power station (a steam-generating plant). After the administration building burned in 1940, the homes of the immigration station staff were dismantled. The other buildings deteriorated, and all but the detention center are currently off limits to the public.

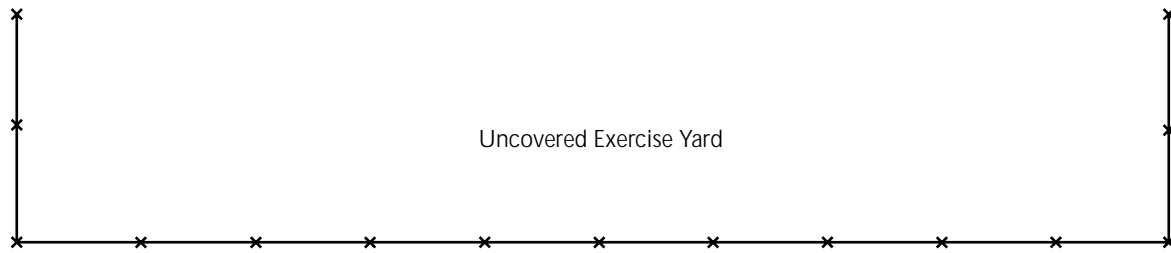
Men and women, in separate shifts, walked to the dining hall from the barracks through a covered passage. Today a granite monument stands near the site of the dining hall. The translation of the Chinese inscription on the monument is as follows:

*Leaving their homes and villages, they crossed the
ocean
Only to endure confinement in these barracks;
Conquering frontiers and barriers, they pioneered
A new life by the Golden Gate.*

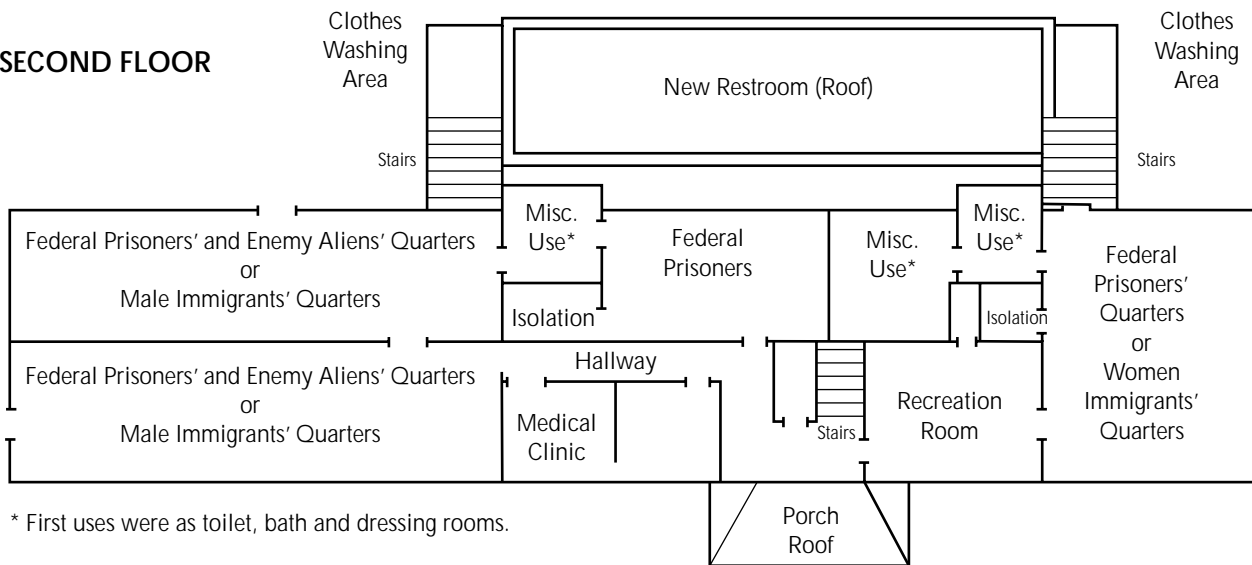
—Ngoot P. Chin

On the hill behind deodar cedars was the hospital. It is closed now and awaiting funds for restoration. Behind the hospital are two World War II prisoner-of-war barracks.

Detention Barracks Floor Plans

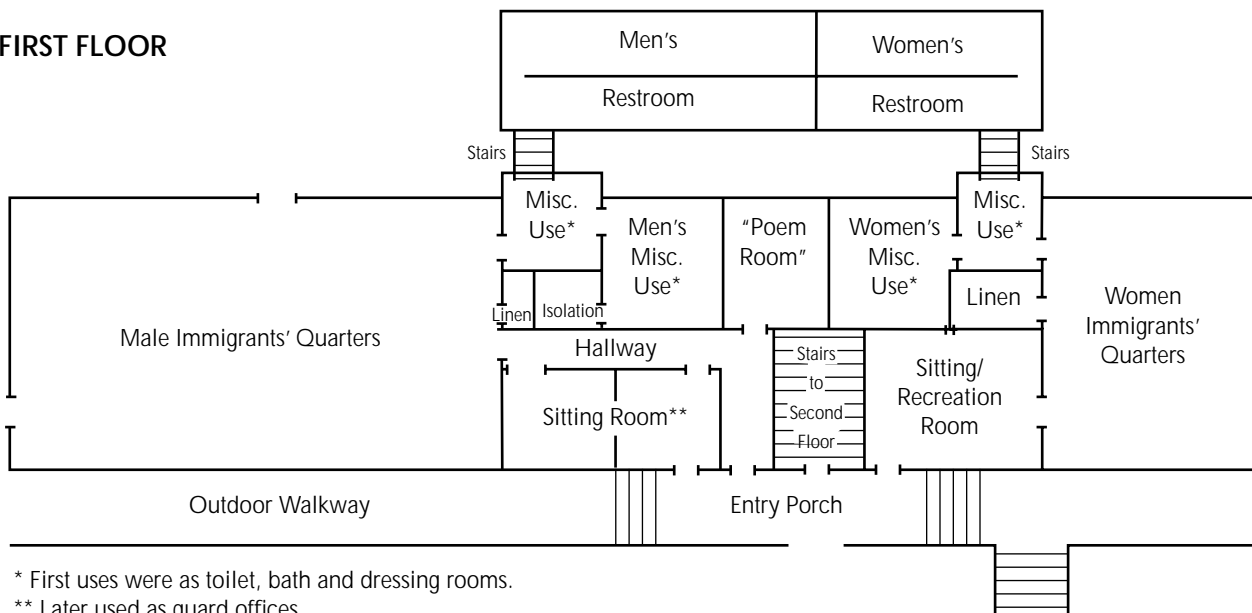


SECOND FLOOR



* First uses were as toilet, bath and dressing rooms.

FIRST FLOOR



* First uses were as toilet, bath and dressing rooms.

** Later used as guard offices.

Building the Immigration Station

- 1903** The first petition of the Commissioner of Immigration to Congress for funds to erect an immigration station on government lands in the San Francisco harbor. In addition to processing Chinese immigrants, it was intended to handle a flood of Europeans entering through the Panama Canal.
- 1905** Congressional appropriation of \$300,000 to start work on the immigration station. The Secretary of War approved the transfer of 10 acres at China Cove to the Department of Commerce and Labor (Bureau of Immigration).
- 1906** The San Francisco earthquake and fire caused work to be suspended on the immigration station. Records that verified citizenship were destroyed; thus many Chinese people then residing in California were able to claim they were citizens.
- 1907** Work on the immigration station was resumed.
- 1908** First tree planting at China Cove. Eucalyptus, Monterey pine and palm trees were not native to the island. The immigration station was completed in October, but was not opened due to a lack of funds.
- 1909** (April) The immigration station reservation was enlarged by 4.2 acres. (October) United States Senator William Dillingham visited the station and was impressed with its fine facilities and slightly location. Funds for an early opening were promised. Concurrently, the still-unused immigration station was criticized as being too large and “many years in advance of requirements.”

Pre-World War I

- 1910** The immigration station was officially opened. The complex included a two-story administration building with interrogation rooms and offices, detention barracks, hospital, dormitories for staff, power house, laundry, wharf, storehouse, carpenter shop, water tanks, cottages and a ferry boat station. A fence enclosed a small recreation yard and the barracks. A guntower guarded federal prisoners kept on the second floor of the barracks. There

were immediate complaints of the station’s inconvenient location and the lack of water, which made it unsanitary and a fire hazard.

- 1911** The immigration service ferry, the *Angel Island*, was launched at Alameda. Direct telephone service from San Francisco to the immigration station began.

The San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Six Companies and merchants called for an investigation of the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the detention barracks, the first of many regarding maltreatment and poor conditions. The San Francisco Downtown Association forwarded the request directly to President William Howard Taft.

- 1912** Deaconess Katharine Maurer, “the angel of Angel Island,” was appointed by the Methodist Women’s Home Missionary Society to do Chinese welfare work at the immigration station. She worked on the island until the station closed in 1940, teaching detainees English and providing the women with small amenities.

Tye Leung, a Chinese American who had been hired as an assistant to the matrons and an interpreter during the first year of the station’s operation, married immigration inspector Charles Schulze. Racist attitudes forced her and her husband to resign their positions.



Tye Leung

World War I

1914 The outbreak of World War I lessened the anticipated need for the immigration station to process immigrants coming from Europe directly through the Panama Canal.

1916 The Commissioner of Immigration recommended the expenditure of \$175,000 for improving sanitation and for fireproofing the detention house and hospital at the immigration station.

1917 The San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce requested that President Woodrow Wilson send a special investigating committee, entirely independent of immigration officials, to look into conditions at the Angel Island Immigration Station.

(April 5) The United States declared war on Germany. Following this, all enemy aliens were removed from German ships in Pacific ports and Honolulu and detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station.

1918 The Commissioner of Immigration admitted that the Angel Island installation was a mistake. Immediate relocation was recommended but did not occur until 1940.

Post-World War I

1919 A food riot broke out among male detainees. Federal troops were called in to restore order.

1920 More than 19,000 “picture brides,” mostly from Japan, had been processed through the station. Only “questionable” or unclaimed brides were detained.

(July) A congressional committee inspected the station but could not agree on the validity of local criticism. In August the Commissioner of Immigration cited poor conditions and high costs in recommending relocation.

(October) A three-month meningitis epidemic broke out, the result of overcrowding, poor sanitation and limited water, hospital and medical services.

1921 The Secretary of Labor urged the removal of the immigration station to San Francisco. An increase in immigration (50 percent over 1920) stimulated the desire to relocate.

1922 A special representative of the Department of Labor declared the facilities to be obsolete and disgraceful firetraps. He attributed the 1920 meningitis epidemic to station conditions.

Male detainees formed a self-governing association—*Zizhihui* or Angel Island Liberty Association—to provide mutual aid and a social structure. Officers were elected from among those who had been detained the longest.



Japanese “picture brides”

Officers were elected from among those who had been detained the longest.

1924 An even more restrictive immigration act was passed to exclude all aliens ineligible to be citizens. Considered to be “non-white” were Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Hindus, Filipinos, Afghans, Arabs, Burmese and native peoples from Canada and South America. “White” were Mexicans, Armenians, Parsees and Syrians. All Chinese women were barred. Previously, wives of Chinese merchants and American-born Chinese were allowed to enter the country, though wives of laborers were excluded.

1925 Protests occurred over the housing of federal prisoners. The second floor of the immigration station served as a temporary federal penitentiary until Alcatraz was opened in 1934. The station was not equipped or staffed to deal with hardened criminals.

(February) The crew members of a rum-runner escaped from detention (and were recaptured).

1931 to 1932 Two Chinese detainees, Smiley Jann and Tet Yee, copied most of the poems written or carved on the barracks of the men’s dormitories.

1935 The first of several deportation hearings regarding Harry Bridges was held on Angel Island for purposes of security. Founder of the Longshoremen’s Union and a native of Australia, Bridges was charged with being a Communist and, therefore, an undesirable alien. He ultimately was acquitted and became an American citizen.

World War II

- 1940 to 1941** The German liner *Columbus* was scuttled to prevent capture by the British. The 512-member crew was taken aboard American ships and, in the diplomatic confusion, sent to Angel Island as “distressed seamen” rather than immigrants, enemy aliens or prisoners. The German government paid nearly \$1,000 per day to support them.
- 1940** The administration building burned. This was the only important structure destroyed by fire in the island’s history. About 150 German seamen from the *Columbus* helped fight the fire. The building was destroyed, but the 32 aliens in the building escaped. The 223 Chinese then in detention were removed to other quarters and subsequently to the immigration dormitory on Silver Avenue in San Francisco. The Germans remained at the quarantine station in Ayala Cove and were later transferred to inland camps.
- 1941 to 1946** The site was returned to the Army and was designated as the North Garrison. During this period German, Japanese and Italian prisoners of war were held on Angel Island prior to being sent to permanent camps. The first Japanese prisoner was captured from a one-man submarine in Pearl Harbor. Japanese Buddhist prisoners of war were permitted to worship, but Shintoists were not allowed to practice their faith because of its similarity to emperor worship. All German prisoners were processed at the North Garrison Prisoner-of-War Camp, a total of 272 by the end of the war; none ever escaped. Italian soldier-prisoners were captured during the Africa campaign. When Italy surrendered, they were no longer considered prisoners and were provided with services on the island, especially in hospitals. Pay for members of the Italian Service Unit was 80 cents per hour.
- 1943** The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. An annual token immigration quota of 105 was assigned to China. Arriving Chinese were still detained to determine the validity of their papers. Not until the early 1950s were consular officials at ports of embarkation made responsible for processing emigrants.
- 1944** The detention center was moved to the Appraiser’s Building, 630 Sansome Street in San Francisco.

Post-Military Period

- 1946** Fort McDowell was considered government surplus and decommissioned as a military base, and the North Garrison was closed.
- 1960s** Clemency was granted to “paper sons and daughters” during the Kennedy administration.
- 1962** Most of Angel Island became part of the California state park system.
- 1970** Park ranger Alexander Weiss recognized the significance of the former immigration station, especially of the poetry written on the barracks walls. The buildings were saved from demolition.
- The California legislature, under House Resolution 205, created the Angel Island Immigration Station Historical Advisory Committee (AIISHAC) for the sole purpose of making recommendations and taking appropriate actions to preserve the immigration barracks on Angel Island as an important chapter in Asian American history.
- 1974 to 1976** The state legislature allocated \$250,000 to preserve and restore the barracks. Work was undertaken by the office of the state architect.
- 1979** Members of the Chinese community and others founded the Immigration Station Foundation to help in the restoration.
- Victor “Trader Vic” Bergeron, internationally famous restaurateur and artist who has employed a great many Asians (some of whom underwent the Angel Island experience), conceived of and donated an eight-foot, 6,000-pound black granite monument dedicated to those who were detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station.
- (March) The EUREKA Foundation restored the immigration station service bell, which was discovered in a San Diego metal junkyard, to a permanent resting place back on Angel Island.
- 1982** The Exclusion Law Centennial Commemorative event was held on the island.
- 1983** The Immigration Station Museum opened.
- 1986** A naturalization ceremony was held on the site of the immigration station for 107 new American citizens.

