

## Statement of Significance

### *General Statement*

In 1962 the Presidio of San Francisco became a National Historic Landmark (NHL). In 1993, the NHL documentation was updated to include a list of contributing buildings, structures, and objects. This update formally recognized the Fort Point Coast Guard Station as a component of the Presidio of San Francisco and identified its principal surviving structures as contributing features. This Cultural Landscape Inventory is intended to supplement the 1993 NHL nomination by inventorying the landscape features and characteristics that contribute directly to this component district of the Presidio of San Francisco or constitute to its setting. This CLI is also intended to elaborate upon the unique history of the Fort Point Coast Guard Station and clarify how it is distinct from the larger historical context of the Presidio in which the station is geographically situated. The period of significance for the Presidio of San Francisco was identified by the NHL nomination as 1776 to 1945. This is extended to 1964 for the Coast Guard Station. This inventory also introduces several new contextual themes which were not included in the NHL nomination. These additional themes are justified by the unique history and mission of the Coast Guard at its Fort Point Station, which was significantly different from that of the Army at the Presidio of San Francisco.

### *Parent Landscape: The Presidio of San Francisco National Historic Landmark*

The National Historic Landmark documentation from 1993 noted that the "Presidio of San Francisco is the oldest Army installation operating in the American West and one of the longest-garrisoned posts in the country." [8-1]. The size and duration of this installation has resulted in a complex landscape in which many layers of history overlap in a relatively small geographical area. The NHL documentation goes on to explain, "The Presidio district is like a great landscape palimpsest, characterized by a rich and often dense overlay of resources from individual periods." [Sec. 8, pg. 3]. The complexity and diversity of the landscape is itself an important characteristic contributing to its unique historic value. Few places offer the opportunity to witness, in such close proximity, the military histories of the Spanish colonial, Mexican, and American national periods. As one of the U.S. Army's largest and most important garrisons, the Presidio of San Francisco has played a key role in nearly all of the country's military campaigns since the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848, when the garrison was acquired by the United States through conquest. These campaigns include the Civil War, most of the Indian wars in the West, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, the Mexican-Punitive Expedition, World War I, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the first Gulf War in Kuwait.

Another factor contributing to the Presidio's unique historic value is its close relationship to San Francisco, and, in turn, San Francisco's regional importance in the American Far West.

The Presidio has been a primary and focal element of San Francisco's long ascendancy in the Far West; as the importance of the City has increased, so has the importance of the Presidio that has protected it and the Bay area beyond...The Presidio and the City of San Francisco are intertwined, most fundamentally through their sharing of a peninsula and through the Post's long-running function of guarding the entrance to the Bay. The reservation, now engulfed within the City, holds the most strategic position on the San Francisco Peninsula, commanding access and egress through the Golden Gate strait into San Francisco Bay. [Sec. 8, pg. 5]

San Francisco's position as a vibrant economic and cultural center has contributed to and augmented the importance of the Presidio by reason of association. But at the same time, the Presidio has contributed to San Francisco's own importance by protecting its vital resources and making it possible for the city to grow and flourish. This protection has not been limited to military defense but includes a range of other

services rendered by the Army and its various lessees at the Presidio. These include Army assistance during natural disasters, like the earthquake and fire of 1906; forest-fire air patrols conducted by Army pilots flying out of Crissy Field; medical care provided by the United States Public Health Service based at the Marine Hospital; and protection of commercial shipping provided by the aids to navigation and life-saving services of the U.S. Coast Guard.

The 1993 NHL update recognized the national significance of the Presidio of San Francisco under combined National Historic Landmark Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 6, explaining that,

The property is composed of a wealth of historic, architectural and archeological resources that collectively comprise a distinctive entity of exceptional historical significance (Criteria 4, 5, and 6), and whose archeological study can amplify our understanding of those periods and peoples underrepresented in the existing historical record. As a vast district entity, the Presidio possesses exceptional value in illustrating the history of the United States through its association with important historical events and its outstanding representation of patterns of national development through multiple periods (Criterion 1). [Sec. 8, pg. 7]

It also recognized the Presidio's national significance under combined National Register Criteria A, C, and D, which closely parallel the National Historic Landmark Criteria. Criterion A recognizes the district's association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of American history. Criterion C recognizes the district's embodiment of distinctive characteristics of several historic periods and methods of construction. And Criterion D recognizes the district's potential to yield valuable information through its historic archeological resources. The period of significance was listed as 1776 to 1945 (and 1951).

The NHL update identified several contextual themes and sub-themes in which the Presidio of San Francisco expresses its significance. The language and organization of these themes were drawn from NHL guidelines that preceded the 1993 revision of the National Park Service's thematic framework. The nomination's list was comprised of the following items:

- II. European Colonial Exploration and Settlement
  - A. Spanish Exploration and Settlement
- V. Political and Military Affairs, 1783-1860
  - I. Mexican War, 1846-1848
  - K. The Army and the Navy
- VI. Civil War
  - C. War in the West
- VII. Political and Military Affairs, 1865-1939
  - D. The United States Becomes a World Power, 1865-1914
  - E. World War I
  - F. Military Affairs not related to World War I or World War II, 1914-1941
  - H. The Great Depression and the New Deal, 1929-1941
- VIII. World War II
  - B. War in the Pacific, 1941-1945
- X. Westward Expansion of the British Colonies and the United States, 1763-1898
  - C. Military-Aboriginal American Contact and Conflict
- XVIII. Technology (Engineering and Invention)
  - E. Military (Fortifications, Weapons, and War Vehicles)

These themes all relate principally to Army military operations associated with the Presidio. The NHL acknowledged that several other themes might also be cited to describe activities and facilities associated with the Presidio that were not directly related to military operations. However, it declined to elaborate on these themes, writing that, "with regard to several other National Historic Landmark themes/sub-themes, there is not sufficient contextual information at this time to establish significance at the national level." [Sec 8, pg. 9]. Among these excluded themes are those which describe the life-saving activities of the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station. In the language of the pre-1993 revision, these themes are comprised of the following:

- XIV. Transportation
  - B. Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures

In the language of the post-1993 revision, they are:

- II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
  - B. Social and Humanitarian Movements: Emergency Aid and Health Care
- V. Developing the American Economy
  - T. Shipping and Transportation by Water: Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures

This Cultural Landscape Inventory proposes that the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station Historic District is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under these different themes and sub-themes than those previously offered by the NHL. Additional contextual information is provided to sufficiently determine the significance of the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station in light of these themes and sub-themes.

*Period of Significance (1915-1964)*

This CLI also proposes using a separate period of significance for the Fort Point U.S.C.G.S. Historic District in order to more accurately reflect the historic reality of the Station as distinct from the Presidio. This proposed period of significance is 1915 to 1964. This period reflects a relatively continuous state of operations during which the physical character of the Fort Point Coast Guard Station and its landscape changed very little. Moreover, the existing structures and landscape retain sufficient integrity to convey the significance of this period. The argument might be made for pushing back the period of significance all the way to 1890, when the Fort Point station first opened under the Coast Guard's predecessor organization, the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Two of the buildings at the existing site date back to that time and have experienced only minor structural alterations since. But in 1915 the entire facility was moved approximately 700 feet, and in the process its constituent structures lost their original relationship to one another and to their immediate setting. This action seriously compromised the integrity of the early station, and existing conditions no longer convey the significance of that period. Also in 1915, the U.S. Life Saving Service experienced a profound change of identity when it was absorbed in the newly-created U.S. Coast Guard. The consequences of this reorganization were not immediately apparent but would eventually result in revision of the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station's mission and the duties associated with it. The Coast Guard's close association with the Navy would require its small craft stations, like Fort Point, to devote increasingly more time and resources to harbor patrol and coastal defense work. Taken together, these factors argue persuasively for 1915 as the beginning of a distinct historical period for the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station.

The proposed terminal date for the Fort Point Coast Guard Station's period of significance is 1964. At that time the Coast Guard's new 44-foot motor lifeboat was introduced at Fort Point, causing operational

changes which would result in significant modifications to the facility and eventually require its abandonment altogether. The new lifeboat was too large to fit on the marine railway and had to remain moored in the water. As a result the railway ceased to be used from this date and was allowed to deteriorate. With the abandonment of the marine railway, the boathouse also ceased to be used according to its original design. These changes constitute a significant turning point for the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station and represent a break in its historic continuity which had extended since 1915. The terminal date for the Presidio's period of significance, as proposed by the 1993 NHL update, is 1945. This makes sense for Army operations and facilities at the Presidio, which experienced significant changes associated with the end of World War II. But the Fort Point Coast Guard Station experienced only minor changes in operation and virtually no change in physical structure at that time. Its period of significance should therefore extend beyond that of the Army Presidio and terminate only when events justify a break in its history—1964.

#### *Criterion A*

The Fort Point Coast Guard Station is historically significant at the state level under Criterion A for its association with events that have contributed to the broad patterns of American history. In this respect it may be understood within contextual theme *II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements*, sub-theme *B. Social and Humanitarian Movements: Emergency Aid and Health Care*. It may also be understood within contextual theme *V. Developing the American Economy*, sub-theme *T. Shipping and Transportation by Water: Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures*. These contextual themes are closely related in this instance, because the Coast Guard's life-saving mission helped (and continues to help) develop and maintain the American economy by ensuring relative safety and security in maritime transportation. The Fort Point Station's importance in this regard is directly related to the economic and commercial importance of San Francisco. This commerce was significantly threatened by the dangers of the difficult maritime approach to this port city, a situation which the Fort Point Station, in conjunction with other Coast Guard facilities, was designed to mitigate. Like the Presidio, then, much of the Fort Point Coast Guard Station's unique historic value derives from its close relationship to San Francisco.

Life saving stations were a response to maritime conditions unique to nineteenth century America. An increase in shipping during the first half of this century brought rising numbers of shipwrecks, especially in Massachusetts and along the coasts of New Jersey and Long Island, where two of the nation's most important maritime centers were located, Boston and New York. The relative lack of navigational aids—like accurate charts, signal buoys and lighthouses—compelled early mariners to sail close to shore so that they could use physical landmarks to orient themselves. Along much of the Atlantic seaboard, the land sloped at a very gradual angle into the water, so that sandy shoals were often present a long ways from the shore itself. Ships sailing close to the coast frequently grounded on these shoals, and their crews had to be rescued. For much of the nineteenth century this responsibility was left up to local volunteers, but as the problem only worsened with time, many legislators came to recognize the need for a more comprehensive and better-organized solution. In 1871 they finally succeeded in getting the federal government involved, and the Treasury Department created a life-saving branch within its Revenue Cutter Service. By 1878 the enormous value of this new institution was recognized, and it became its own bureau within the Treasury Department, the U.S. Life-Saving Service. The Life-Saving Service established permanently-manned stations at regular intervals along the coasts where shipping was present. Eventually, nearly 300 of these stations were built throughout the country. There were different types of stations, but nearly all were equipped with boats for reaching victims in the water and a "beach apparatus" for reaching victims from the shore. Crews were trained in a variety of life-saving techniques and first aid procedures and were required to stay in a high state of readiness at all times.

The topography of the Pacific Coast differed from the Atlantic in that much of it was composed of hard rocky shelves and fell steeply away into deep water. Ships were more likely to run aground only on points which extended far out into the ocean shipping lanes—like Point Arena or Point Reyes—or when they neared the shore as they approached or departed from a port. The Life-Saving Service responded to these differences by concentrating its stations on points and near harbor entrances. It also built more lifeboat, rather than life-saving, stations. A lifeboat station was designed specifically to accommodate the larger, heavier lifeboat, which the service used for providing assistance in deep water and in heavier seas. These stations had to be located in relatively protected, deep-water bays, and were frequently situated within a harbor itself.

In 1890 the Fort Point Lifeboat Station was built just inside the mouth of San Francisco Bay in order to provide assistance to vessels traveling through the treacherous waters of this narrow inlet. It cooperated closely with the Point Bonita Lifeboat Station, which was built in 1899 on the north side of the bay entrance, and also with the Golden Gate Park Life-Saving Station, which had been built in 1877 to patrol the southerly approach to San Francisco from outside the bay's entrance. The crew of the Fort Point Lifeboat Station distinguished itself almost immediately by their heroism and earned the gratitude and respect of the citizens of San Francisco. Only a year after the Station opened, the San Francisco *Examiner* wrote the following praise for its tragic attempt to save the crew and passengers of the sailing ship *Elizabeth*:

It is gratifying to note that the Life-Saving Station on this side of the channel showed no lack of promptness or courage on this occasion. The life-saving crew at Bakers Beach [Fort Point] put off for the scene of the wreck, but it was too distant to be reached by a lifeboat in the heavy sea that was running. The death of the captain of the station is much to be regretted, but it has done much to raise the Service in the esteem of the people.

The Fort Point Lifeboat Station would continue to distinguish itself over the years in numerous actions, both large and small, around the San Francisco Bay. It continued to perform the same duties for which it had originally been intended following its transfer to the Coast Guard in 1915 (after which the facility became officially known as the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station). During times of war, the station assumed the additional responsibility of providing harbor patrol for coastal defense. With the consolidation of Coast Guard life-saving resources in the area—the Point Bonita station closed in 1946 and Golden Gate Park closed in 1951—the Fort Point Coast Guard Station assumed even greater importance as the sole lifeboat facility guarding the entrance to San Francisco Bay. Changing technology eventually rendered the station obsolete, and the Fort Point Coast Guard Station was deactivated in 1990. However, the services it always rendered were still needed. They are now provided by larger, faster lifeboats operating out of a new Coast Guard facility at East Fort Baker and by helicopters operating from Coast Guard airfields.

*Criterion C:*

The Fort Point Coast Guard Station is also significant at the state level under Criterion C for embodying the distinctive characteristics of a landscape and architectural type associated with a particular period in American maritime history. A characteristic architectural and landscape style grew up around the stations of the U.S. Life-Saving Service and was carried on by the U.S. Coast Guard after 1915. That style was derived from a conscious emulation of existing domestic architectural styles, usually those popular on the East Coast, but was made distinctive by its adaptation to the specific utilitarian purposes of these life-saving institutions. Because the unique value of this architectural and landscape adaptation lies in its connection to the Coast Guard as an expression of that institution and its life-saving mission, this subject should be understood within contextual theme *V. Developing the American Economy*, sub-theme *T*.

*Shipping and Transportation by Water: Ships, Boats, Lighthouses, and Other Structures.* An argument might also be made for treating this subject as architectural and landscape sub-themes of contextual theme III. *Expressing Cultural Values*, but this further classification is not necessary and misses the more essential point of the *purpose* for which these landscapes were intended.

The earliest life-saving stations—for example, those built by the Massachusetts Humane Society—were utilitarian, wood-frame structures with no architectural styling or adornment. With the creation of the U.S. Life-Saving Service in 1871, the buildings became more substantial and elaborate. This was partially in response to the need to accommodate a larger, more permanent staff, but professional pride also played a role in determining the character of these structures. Nearly all of the facilities built after the 1870s borrowed their architectural motifs from contemporary domestic models. Many of the early stations were built according to the Stick or Eastlake style, which was popular during the first two decades of the Life-Saving Service. Colonial Revival, including the Dutch Colonial or Gambrel, became popular slightly later. The basic residential model was modified according to the specific needs of a life-saving or lifeboat station. Boat houses, for example, all needed a large bay on the ground floor to store and service the station's small craft. These bays had to be accessed through barn-like doors, which pierced most of the ground-floor wall on one or more sides. Usually there was a ramp of some sort attached on which the boats were conveyed to the water. With the later lifeboat houses, this launchway ramp was one of the most visually arresting features of the whole structure. Most boathouses had a living room or lounge adjacent to the boatroom on the ground floor and sleeping quarters on the upper floor. Another peculiarity of boathouses was the need for an observation deck or a watchtower. Many had either an open widow's walk or a cupola built into the roof peak. The Keeper's Quarters were closer to the typical residential house in design, but they too often had some distinctive features which betrayed their unique use. Many, for example, had cupolas like the boathouses.

These architectural elements were laid out in a simple but carefully designed and meaningful landscape. The boathouse was always, by necessity, oriented toward the water with which it communicated by means of a launchway. Launchways could range in complexity from a simple wooden ramp placed over the sand to the elaborate marine railways of the later lifeboat houses. All stations included a large open area for use as a practice area and drill ground. In many places this was the section of beach lying directly in front of the station, but some stations utilized an adjacent field for this purpose. A wreck pole always stood at one end of the drill ground. There was always a sharp contrast between the utilitarian purpose of a life-saving or lifeboat station and its domestic appearance. This was suggested in the architecture, as already described, but was emphasized even more strongly in a station's landscaping. Nearly every station took exceptional pride in laying out a residential-style garden and maintaining it meticulously. The quality of the garden and the care taken to maintain it were usually noted by the Office of Inspector, implying that this was an official, if largely unregulated, standard throughout the service. Proximity to saltwater and heavy winds usually restricted how elaborate a station's garden might be and limited its choice of plants to the more hardy variety of shrub, like cypress and juniper. A crew might also adorn its garden with non-vegetative features. The Fort Point Station, for example, included a variety of elaborate sculptures and fountains.

When the Coast Guard inherited the facilities of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, it generally preserved the architectural and landscape traditions of its predecessor. The new boathouse (bldg. PE 1903) designed by Andre Fourchy at the Fort Point Coast Guard Station in 1914, for instance, differed from the other buildings in specific style rather than general intent. Like the earlier structures, this building was designed to emulate currently-popular architectural styles, particularly those from the East Coast. The Fourchy addition did not retain the specifically Dutch Colonial elements of the original buildings, but it nonetheless remained decidedly Colonial Revival. The reconfiguration of the Fort Point Station

following its move in 1915 introduced an emphatically designed character to the landscaping surrounding it. With the Officer-in-Charge Quarters (bldg. figure 1902) now reoriented to face the boathouse, an open plaza was created between the buildings. The centrality of this plaza was emphasized by the flagpole which temporarily stood in the middle of it. Secondary plazas mirrored each other on either side of the grounds, at least in the original Fourchy plan. This symmetry was largely effaced when the old boathouse (PE 1902) was placed in the middle of the westerly driveway, blocking the projected plaza on that side, but a hint of the neoclassical pattern of Fourchy's original plan always remained and is still evident. The rectilinear layout of paths and driveways, for instance, is rigidly neoclassical in concept. Plantings would always be sparse at the Fort Point Station, largely because of environmental constraints, but the addition of palm trees (*Phoenix canariensis*) in the early 1920s was a creative response to this limitation and gave the station one of its most distinctive landscape characteristics.

### *Integrity*

The present-day Fort Point Coast Guard Station possesses integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association and conveys its significance from the period 1915 to 1964. The essential design and configuration of the station was established when the facility was moved to its present location in 1915. All of the major buildings associated with this date remain intact and relatively unchanged. The main boathouse (PE 1903) suffered a major renovation in 1979, when its boat doors and beach apparatus door were removed in order to convert the ground floor boat bay to residential quarters and offices. These renovations, however, were done thoughtfully, and the original feeling of the building was retained. The new ground floor walls were clad in shingles that matched the rest of the building's wall cladding, and the new fenestration was in keeping with that from the original structure. Moreover, these changes may be reversible, as the Coast Guard was instructed by the National Park Service in 1978 to preserve and store the original boat doors. Whether it did so or not, however, is presently unknown. The basic configuration of the vegetation as it was proposed in 1914 is similar to the original plan, though many individual plants have been replaced. The plan, however, is still preserved in existing drives and pathways.

Two changes have occurred since the end of the period of significance which compromised the integrity of the Fort Point Coast Guard Station. The first of these was the removal of the marine railway in 1979. The second was the breaching of the seawall in 2000 and the reconfiguration of vehicular circulation patterns associated with this action. Despite these changes, the U.S.C.G. Fort Point Station retains overall integrity.