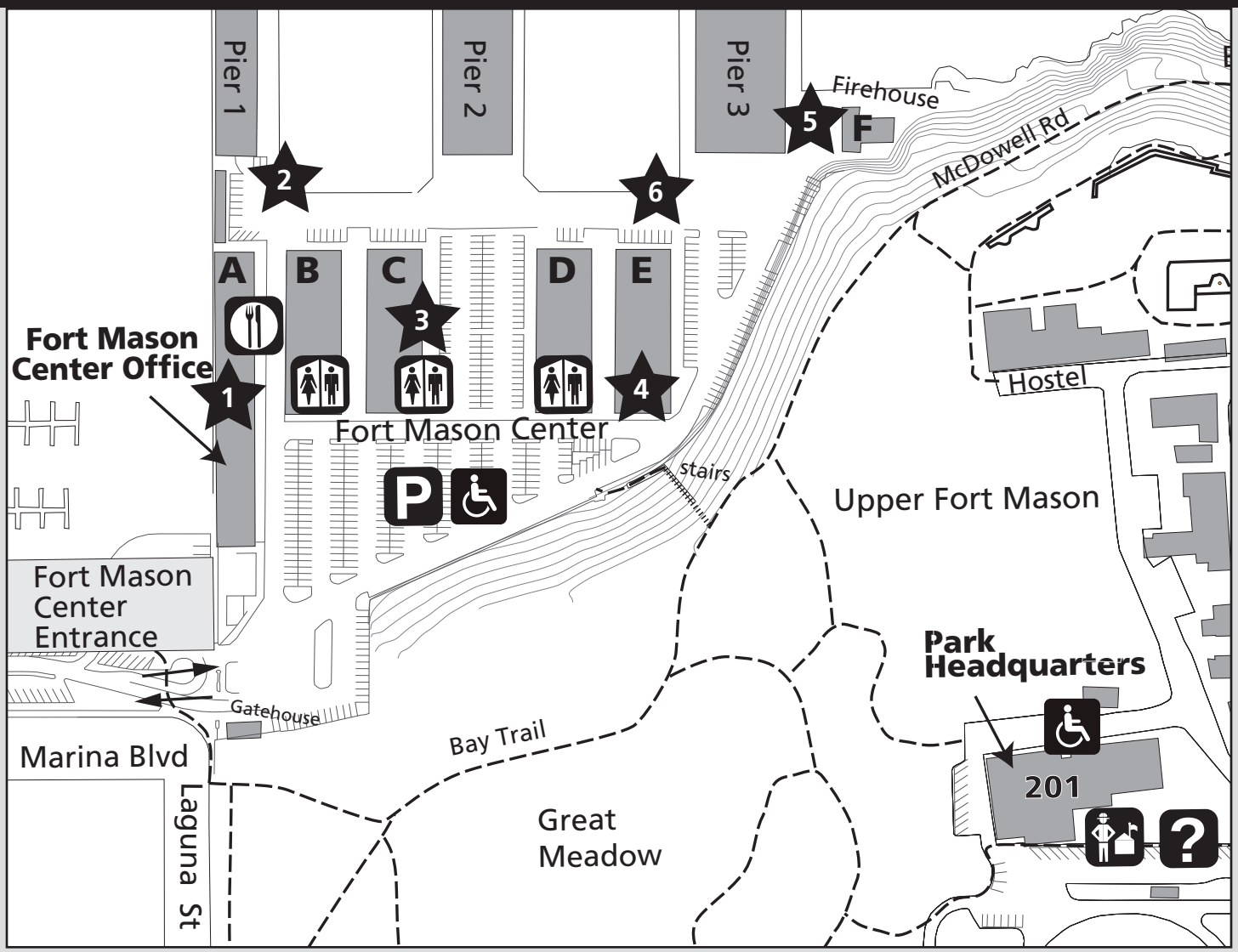
National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



THE ROUTE

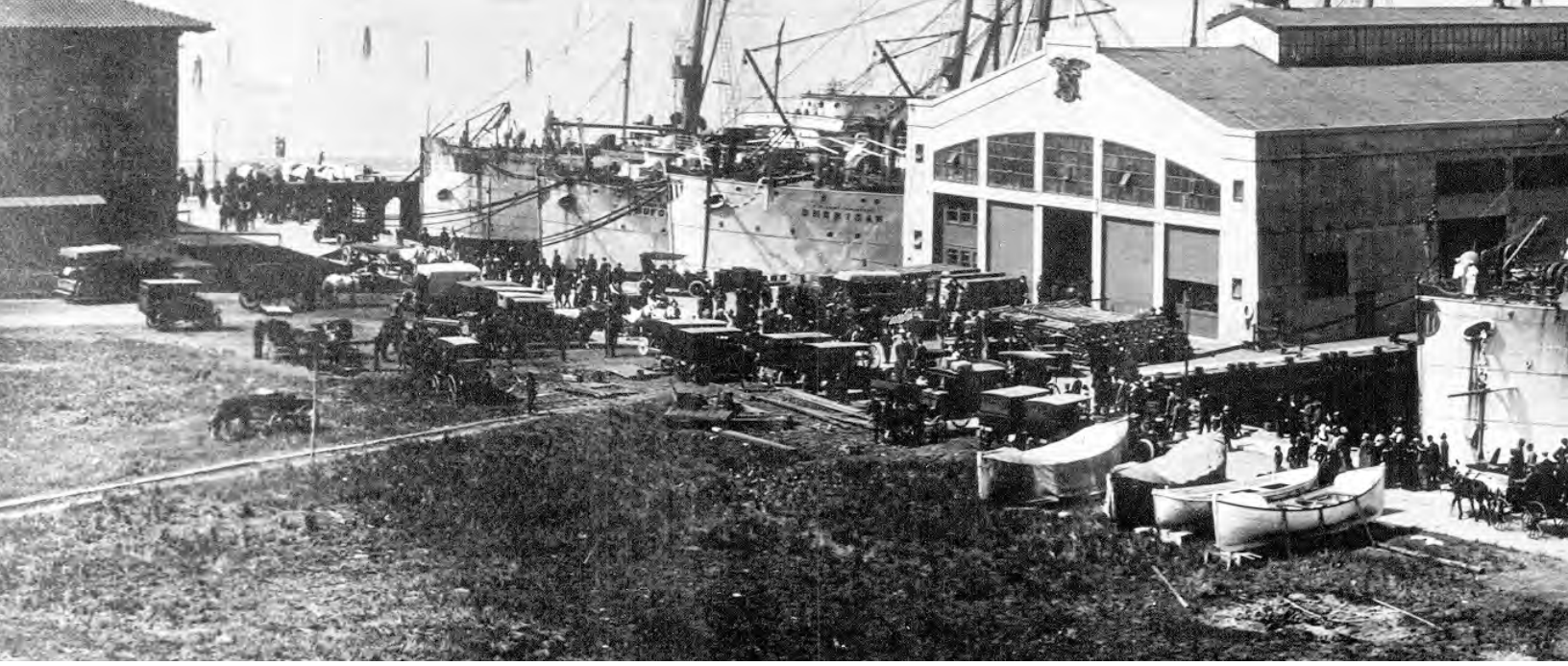
Length: About ½ mile
Number of Stops: 6
Time Required:
About 45 minutes
Access: Fort Mason Center is accessible.

The Fort Mason Center office, located in Building A, is open daily from 8:30 am to 8:00 pm. Phone (415) 345-7500 or visit online at www.fortmason.org. Public restrooms are located in Buildings B, C and D. The Golden Gate National Recreation Area information center, located in Building 201, at upper Fort Mason is open Monday through Friday, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. Phone (415) 561-4700 or visit online at www.nps.gov/goga.

Fort Mason Center History Tour

GATEWAY TO THE PACIFIC

San Francisco Port of Embarkation (circa 1933)



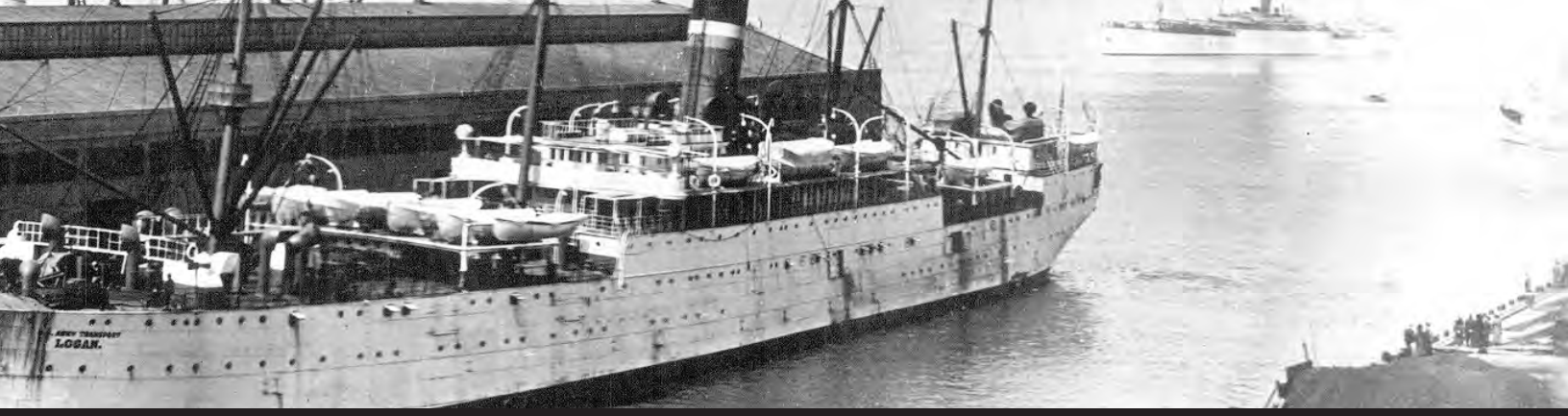
"In a conflict fought on foreign soil, success is absolutely dependent on the number of soldiers and the quantity of material that can be moved to the overseas commands, and [the] timeliness with which they are delivered."

—Chester Wardlow, Chief Historian, Transportation Corps

Welcome to Fort Mason Center, a national model of building reuse and community programs and home to a lively variety of creative organizations. The U.S. Army's original pier sheds, warehouses, and machinery shops now house theater programs, art and music schools, restaurants, and innovative museums. But before the buildings rang with the sounds of drumming or dance practice, they played a much different role.

From 1915 through the 1950s, this area served as the San Francisco Port of Embarkation (SFPE), the army's major West Coast shipping port and a giant supply funnel that provided provisions to remote military outposts. Most remarkably, during the 45 months of World War II, over 1.6 million military men and women and more than 23.5 million ship tons of material left the docks here and sailed through the Golden Gate on their way to islands in the Pacific Ocean.

All images from GGNRA, Park Archives & Records Center unless otherwise noted.



Even before all three pier sheds were completed, the depot was able to accommodate four transport ships at a time. In this photo, the site is still grass and dirt; the railroad tracks have not been laid yet (circa 1915).

Imagine the sight that greeted the newly inducted soldier arriving at SFPE in 1942 on his way to island battlefields: Massive sheds packed to the rafters with provisions, everything from food and sub-machine guns to tanks. Trains carrying more supplies rattling along the tracks, and ships' cargo booms loading and unloading the goods. Master sergeants shouting orders to line up and wait, trucks maneuvering through the densely built structures, and gulls wheeling and screeching overhead. During the war years, this was a tumultuous place.

Although this brochure suggests a specific route, feel free to wander, exploring what interests you most. Note: Please remember that while the Fort Mason Center buildings are open to the public, some are occupied by groups conducting business; your consideration of their privacy is appreciated.

Start the tour in front of the Fort Mason Center office in Building A. Compare the view in front of you to the historic photograph on the front cover. Some of the shed buildings have been removed, but look down at the pavement to see remnants of the train tracks that ran directly into them. Notice that in the cover photo, Building A has not yet been constructed; it was built in 1935 as a marine repair shop.

STOP 1: LIFELINE TO THE PACIFIC

Until the end of the 19th century, the United States had never fought a significant war overseas; most of its political and economic struggles had been internal. With the Spanish-American War (1898), however, American men were sent into battle in the Philippines, thousands of miles from home. For the first time, our nation became an international power, one with troops and permanent overseas garrisons in the Philippines, China, Guam, and the Hawaiian Islands.

Everything that these far-flung American troops needed had to be delivered to them by large, ocean-going cargo ships. To support the transport effort, the army rented private docks and warehouses along the city's waterfront. After the 1906 earthquake destroyed most of these buildings, the War Department authorized the construction of an army general depot in San Francisco.

For the new depot location, the army chose Fort Mason over the Presidio because it was closer to the city and the proposed railway expansion, and the bay's currents were less challenging here. Fort Mason, originally reserved in 1850 to take advantage of its strategic location, had been fortified during the Civil War to protect gold-laden commercial sailing ships from Confederate attack. In 1910, the army began construction of the piers, storehouses, and seawalls. The depot buildings were specifically designed to get soldiers and cargo on transport ships as quickly as possible: four could be loaded simultaneously. Trains carrying food and other supplies ran directly into both the pier sheds and the warehouses.

Take a moment to look up at Building B, the historic storehouse in front of you. Architecturally, all four of Fort Mason Center's remaining storehouses combine Mission Revival details with industrial elements such as long loading docks, wide loading doors, corrugated metal awnings, and 16-pane windows.

The construction of the port and its piers was a major undertaking. The army dumped fill into the bay, drilled timber pilings into its sandy floor, and built seawalls and bulkheads (circa 1910).

Mission Revival Buildings

The army spared no expense in planning the depot, hiring the prominent architectural firm of Rankin, Kellogg & Crane, best known on the East Coast for its large, neo-classical administrative buildings. Responding to the 1906 earthquake's fire damage, architects chose concrete and steel instead of wood-frame construction. In a departure from prevailing classical design, they elected to use the Mission Revival style, which reflected the West Coast's Spanish colonial mission heritage and echoed the missions' shapes and building materials. The Fort Mason General Depot was the first military building project in the Bay Area to be constructed in this style.

Mission Revival Style: Broad, unadorned stucco walls, deep windows and door openings, and red clay-tiled overhanging roofs.

Continue north, stopping at the edge of Slip #1, to the right of Pier 1. At the water's edge, you can still see traces of this once-busy industrial area—for example, the large metal bollards used to secure the ships. The pier shed buildings had wide loading doors to expedite cargo transfer and long roof monitors (projected windows). Look across the bay for an excellent view of Angel Island, home to Fort McDowell, which functioned as another part of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation operations.

STOP 2: TO FORT MASON & BEYOND

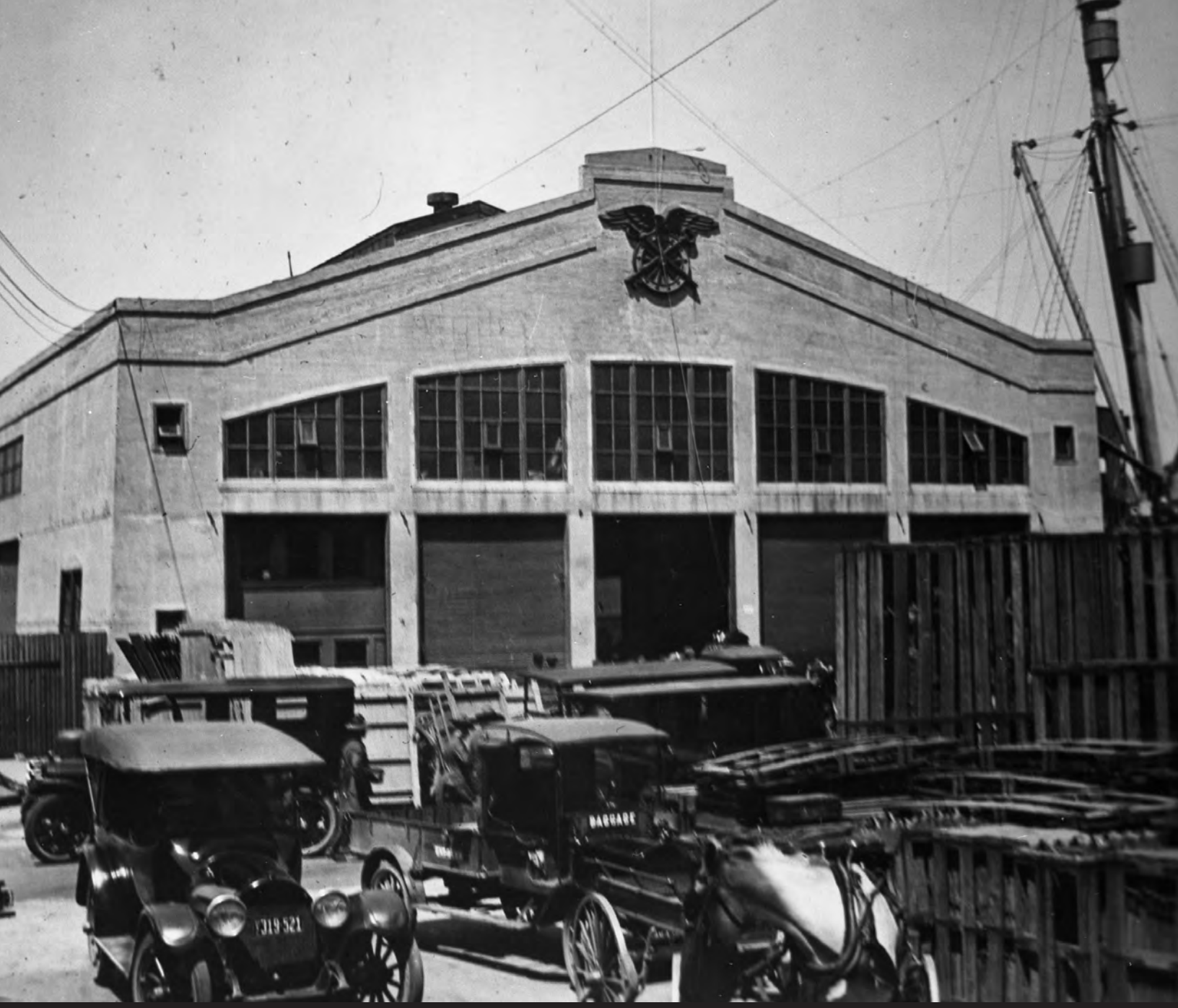
The General Depot was responsible for making sure enlisted men had enough food, medical and office supplies, ammunition, trucks, communication equipment, and even horses and mules to do their jobs. Each day, hundreds of thousands of ship tons (each equivalent to 40 cubic feet of cargo) were delivered to the depot and then stacked in the ships. The minute a fully loaded cargo ship pulled away from a pier, an empty one took its place. Delays backed up the whole sequence and resulted in expensive mistakes. For example, fresh food not immediately put in the ships' refrigerators would rot while sitting on idling trucks.

At the depot, professional civilian dockworkers loaded the ships with the help of booms and other machinery. However, once the ships arrived at their Pacific Island destinations, where only rudimentary docking facilities were available, the soldiers were responsible for the unloading. Many had never been on a ship before, much less had experience handling valuable cargo. To train the soldiers how to safely move the heavy supplies, the army installed a ship's crane in one of the pier sheds.

In 1932, the Fort Mason General Depot was renamed the San Francisco Port of Embarkation (SFPE). By this time, the port had been expanded, incorporating the 68 acres of upper Fort Mason, which served as the SFPE's administrative headquarters.

The army operated a fleet of transport ships, like the SHERIDAN pictured here, which could hold up to 1,000 men (circa 1920).

Now walk due east toward Building C and take a right up the steps to its loading dock. The large parking lot was originally occupied by a warehouse building big enough to accommodate cargo trains. Feel free to explore inside. Don't miss the extra-wide industrial interior staircases in the building; they give you a sense of the building's immense storage capacity. Note: public restrooms can be found here.



Originally, Piers 1 and 3 were constructed in corrugated steel with decorative motifs, while Pier 2 was constructed in concrete. In the later 1930s, the army reconstructed the metal sheds in concrete and decorated them with the Quartermaster Corps' branch insignia, which incorporated symbolic references to the corps' Revolutionary War origins (circa 1920s, photo courtesy of the National Archives).

Located closest to the water, the pier sheds provided short-term storage for items designated for immediate loading. Note the ship's boom on the right-hand side, which the army installed for cargo-loading training (circa 1921).

STOP 3: PREPARING FOR WAR

By the late 1930s, world war threatened and President Franklin Roosevelt launched the country into a massive mobilization effort to quickly modernize the army and navy's outdated resources. The SFPE had been working well as the supply pipeline to the Pacific Islands and Panama. However, as more and more men were assigned to Hawaii, the Philippines, and other island outposts, a new and enormous demand for overseas supplies developed.

The original lower Fort Mason facility could no longer handle this flood of troops and cargo. To increase its shipping capacity, the army quickly constructed additional port installations around the Bay Area, leasing berths and terminal facilities in Richmond, Benicia, Eureka, Stockton, and the Alameda Estuary and constructing new troop staging areas, including Camp Stoneman

This World War II photo shows upper Fort Mason at its densest period. The port's administrative nerve center, located above the piers, was home to military offices, warehouses, barracks, garages, utility shops, cafeterias, a fire station, a post office, and a theater. Most of these buildings were removed in the 1970s to create the Great Meadow (circa 1942).

in Pittsburg and Fort McDowell on Angel Island. The sprawling port at the Oakland Army Base, the army's largest new facility, had far more space for staging cargo and better direct access to the railroad system than Fort Mason. Able to accommodate sixteen ships at one time, it dramatically opened up the flow of supplies and was incorporated as a sub-port under SFPE's command. All of these new facilities were overseen from SFPE's administrative headquarters at upper Fort Mason. Between 1940 and 1945, SFPE had more than 30,000 military and civilian employees.

Safely cross the parking lot to Building D. Take a left between Building D and Building E, following the historic railroad tracks. In this quiet corridor, you can get a closer look at the large industrial buildings. Notice the two-story connecting passageway that the army constructed to allow easy (and dry) transfer of cargo from one building to another. Building E is now home to San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park administrative offices and its J. Porter Shaw research library.

STOP 4: WORLD WAR II ARRIVES

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, dramatically tested the functionality of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation. At first, there was chaos at the port when all Hawaii-bound transport ships were immediately ordered to return to San Francisco. More than 16,000 combat-ready soldiers found themselves back on land, and the army hurriedly re-assigned them to Bay Area posts until their new orders came through. With piers occupied by too many fully loaded ships, the port was a wild scene of rushing men, frenzied dockworkers, and rotting food.

However, this strange and alarming period kicked operations at the port into high gear, and some great good emerged: because so many ships, soldiers, and supplies were unharmed and available in San Francisco, the port was in a unique position to organize the first Hawaiian relief efforts. On December 16, the army sent out three of its fastest available ships, each loaded with officers, soldiers, medical supplies, food, navy repair supplies, machine-gun ammunition, airplanes, and bombs. This convoy was the first to reach Oahu after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

SFPE also supervised the staging areas where soldiers were outfitted just before their overseas journey. The soldiers' readiness was checked out and equipment needs or deficiencies

Loaded with full gear and equipment, soldiers at Camp Stoneman wait for their assignments. Once the "call to port" went out, the army chalked each soldier's steel helmet with a number that indicated his order of embarkation and billeting aboard ship (circa 1942).

were identified and remedied—in combat, a faulty gun or gas mask, even a broken watch, could be fatal. Medical officers provided last-minute immunizations and dental exams, military lawyers finalized the soldiers' wills, and the port's chaplain provided spiritual guidance. The men were also taught how to launch lifeboats and safely abandon ship if need be.

From between Building D and Building E, go north toward the water. At the head of Slip #2, turn right and walk toward

the embankment wall and the Firehouse. Listen carefully for the sounds of the working bay as commercial and pleasure boats cruise past the wharves. Stop at the Firehouse and take in exceptional views of Alcatraz Island, the San Francisco Municipal Pier at Aquatic Park, and the East Bay.

STOP 5: LIFE ON THE SHIPS

Every sliver of space on these ships was valuable, so it was critical that they be filled as efficiently as possible. Around the clock, the port's crew of longshoremen, dockworkers, and stevedores loaded the ships using heavy lifts, booms, and winches. Serums, vaccines, and blood plasma were stored in portable refrigerator boxes, while large weather-resistant items such as tanks, trucks,

Trained nurses from the U.S. Army Nurse Corps also boarded ships at the Port of Embarkation. They played a crucial role at the Pacific Island army hospitals, where they tended to the wounded and treated men suffering from such tropical diseases as malaria, dengue fever, and tropical dysentery (circa 1942).

Longshoremen use pick-up cables and a winch to load crates of tinned milk into the hull of the PRESIDENT TAFT. Immediately above are three stacks of "troop quarters," or on-board sleeping bunks for the soldiers (circa 1921).

and aircraft were lashed to the ship's deck. If the troops were expected to encounter enemy fire at their landing site, guns, ammunition, and combat gear were stowed close to the top.

Getting to the Pacific Islands took a long time, particularly by today's standards. The average sailing time to Hawaii was more than fourteen days, and it took at least four weeks to make the 7,200 mile journey to the Philippines. In an effort to boost the soldiers' morale and distract them from upcoming combat, the army provided on-board entertainment. Nightly movies, recorded music played over the ship's loudspeakers, and best-

Left: Soldiers made the best of their cramped quarters on the USAT MAUI (circa 1942). Right: Soldiers saddled with heavy packs, helmets, rifles, and essential-stuffed A bags boarded using the narrow gangplanks. The soldiers' experiences at the Fort Mason piers would be their last on U.S. soil before they headed out under the Golden Gate Bridge (circa 1942).

sellers from the well-stocked ship library helped pass the time. The army also screened battle-training films and—in an effort to educate the men about the countries they were traveling to—provided information on local languages, customs, and public-health concerns.

Leave the Firehouse and head west to the end of Pier 3. When a returning transport or hospital ship docked here, the whole area turned into a riotous swirl of music, celebration, and joyous reunions. Fittingly, Fort Mason Center converted the pier sheds into large event spaces, renaming them Herbst Pavilion and Festival Pavilion.

A transport ship, loaded with soldiers eager to disembark and enjoy stateside life once again, approaches the SFPE (circa 1940s).

STOP 6: COMING HOME

For the thousands of men and women returning from the Pacific as wounded, freed prisoners of war, and combat veterans, San Francisco was their first U.S. port of call. As they sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, many soldiers held back tears, realizing that they were now home and safe. The CAVANAUGH, the San Francisco Port of Embarkation's "Welcome Home" boat, greeted every returning ship with a marching band; salutes from officers; and, most importantly, waving, attractive girls. Angel Island's Fort McDowell proudly installed a huge sign that read "Welcome Home, Well Done." These celebrations became daily events; local newspapers published ship-arrival times and San Franciscans rushed down to the piers, waving frantically to the returning soldiers as they sailed slowly past.

Left: A returning wounded POW exiting from one of the port's large piers (circa 1945). Right: Many American soldiers married while overseas, and these "war brides" came to the U.S. on military transport ships, many accompanied by babies. Learning that an incoming ship was carrying infants, the Red Cross Volunteer Nurse's Aide Corps set up a temporary nursery on the pier, using laundry baskets as makeshift cribs (circa 1946).

The returning ships prompted a flurry of activity at the piers. After the veterans disembarked, the port's commanding officer greeted them and invited them to enjoy their first stateside meal of fresh milk, grilled steak, and french fries. Port and Red Cross volunteers supplied cups of fresh coffee and doughnuts, and offered free long-distance calls so they could contact their families. Returning wounded and POWs arrived on specially outfitted army hospital ships. After being gently carried off on gurneys, the wounded were immediately transferred to hospital trains, which transported them along the Marina Green directly to Letterman Army Hospital at the Presidio.

Fort Mason Center provides a vibrant gathering place for creative programs and events. All elements of the campus, both indoors and outside, are utilized to connect people with arts and culture (circa 2012, photo courtesy of Fort Mason Center).

A NEW ERA: THE FORT MASON CENTER

After the war, the SFPE went into decline as the military role of airplanes surpassed seafaring ships. By the 1960s, the last army ship had left the port. The buildings fell into disrepair and the army declared the property as surplus.

The future of Fort Mason, and other former military sites, was the focus of intense debate at the local and national level. In the early 1970s, under the leadership of Congressman Phillip Burton to protect historic sites and make national parks more accessible, Congress established the first urban national park, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), which includes Fort Mason Center.

Fort Mason Center, a nonprofit organization, partnered with the GGNRA and opened in 1977. It was the first conversion of a military base to peacetime use and as such, has served as a national model. Each year more than 1.5 millions visitors connect with arts and culture on the historic waterfront campus. Through special events and resident organizations, Fort Mason Center offers musical and theatrical performances, exhibits, workshops, and classes that inspire and foster creativity for visitors of all ages. Within the historic warehouses are free museums, a bookstore, classes, restaurants, and theaters.

In order to effectively steward this National Historical Landmark, Fort Mason Center continues to evolve as a nonprofit center for arts and culture. Please continue to explore the campus and take advantage of the public programs. Stop by the Main Office in Building A, open 8:30 am to 8:00 pm daily, to learn more about current and future events; or visit the Fort Mason Center website www.fortmason.org

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