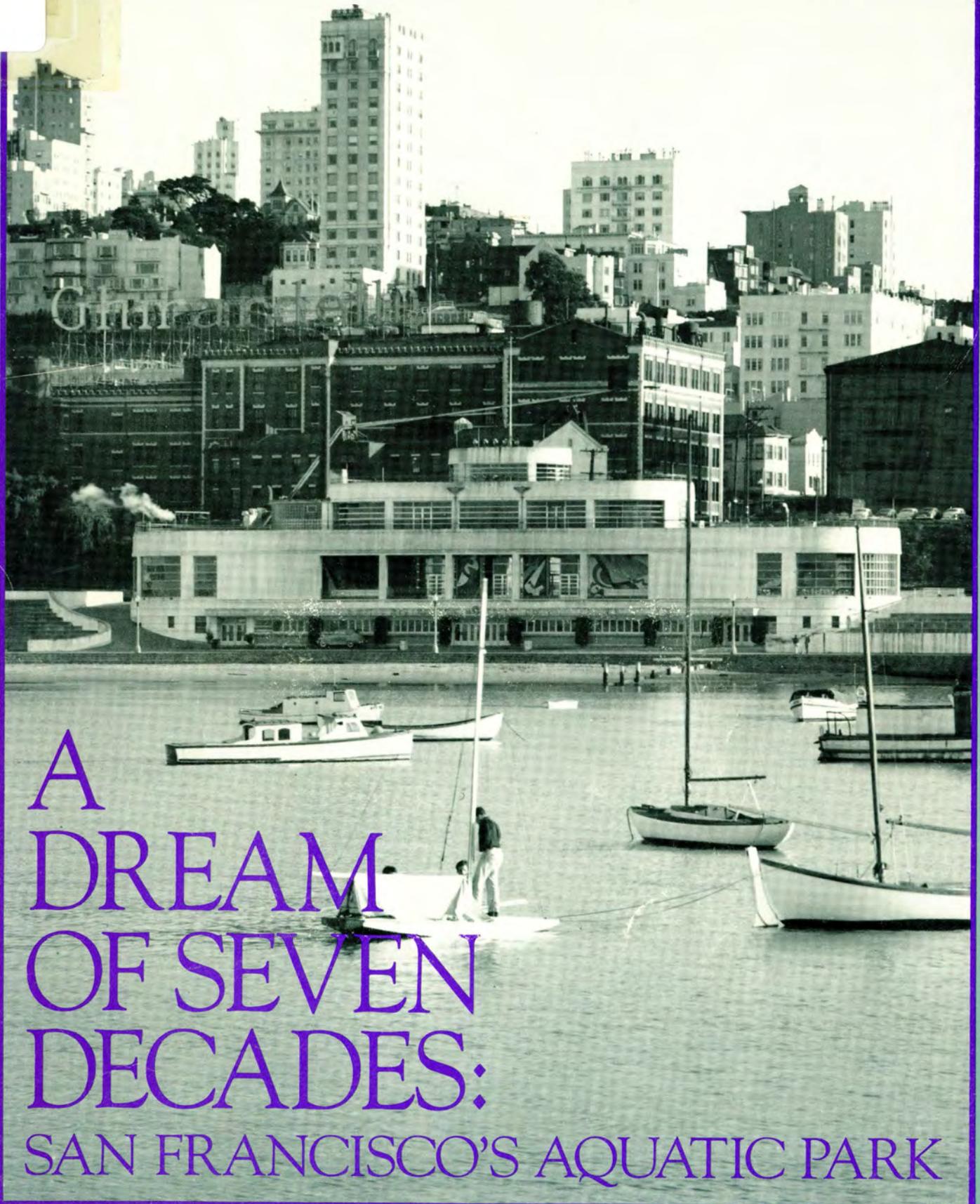


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James P. Delgado



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James P. Delgado

Reprinted from *California History* 64:4
The Magazine of the California Historical Society
Fall 1985
Not printed at government expense.



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iers, docks, wharves, and landings dominate the waterfront of San Francisco. Landfill, seawalls, and millions of pilings driven into the bay bottom transformed the soft contours of Yerba Buena Cove, Mission Bay, North Beach, and Hunters Point as the city thrived on its rich maritime trade. There is, however, one purposeful exception. Nestled against the slopes of Black Point (now Fort Mason), and surrounded by the bustling commercial activity of nearby Fisherman's Wharf is San Francisco's Aquatic Park. Conceived in the nineteenth century when rapid commercial and industrial development of the waterfront drastically limited access to the open water, Aquatic Park was planned as another type of development, a recreational enclave preserved and set apart from the construction of break-

waters, piers, and wharves. It took seven decades for the dream to be realized, and then, in the hour of triumph during the Great Depression, the park became a battleground for opposing interests contending over broken promises. Despite the problems which plagued its development and construction, though, a determined group of enthusiasts continued to use the park, and today it is administered by the National Park Service as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

The area ultimately developed as an aquatic park was first known as Black Point Cove. The cove was named for adjacent Black Point, the northernmost extension of the San Francisco peninsula, which received its name from its stand of dark laurel which contrasted with the surrounding dunes of white, wind-blown sand. The shallow water cove, with narrow beaches and steep sand cliffs rising from the

water's edge, was isolated from the small urban core of pre-Gold Rush San Francisco, then limited to today's financial district. In the 1850s, the burgeoning population of the infant city pushed the town limits over the sand hills bordering Yerba Buena Cove, up onto the slopes of Russian Hill, and into the North Beach area. By the time the city reached the cove and the point, both were public property. On November 6, 1850, President Millard Fillmore designated the land a military reservation vital to the defense of San Francisco harbor.¹ The land was not immediately occupied by the military, however, and others quickly moved onto it.

On the slopes of Black Point several influential citizens, including banker Joseph C. Palmer, explorer John Charles Frémont, and editor James Brooks of the *Golden Era*, a popular literary newspaper, built homes in the hope that they could establish title to the property



The three rowing clubs at the foot of Van Ness Avenue in 1918. From left to right, the San Francisco Rowing Club, Dolphin Rowing Club, and South End Rowing Club. The Belt Line Railroad trestle had been completed in 1913.

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through possession. Meanwhile, Black Point Cove was developed into the industrial center of the young city. The first to build on the shores of the cove was entrepreneur John Bensley. In 1857 Bensley's firm, the San Francisco Water Company, established San Francisco's first permanent system of water supply by constructing a redwood flume to carry fresh water from Lobos Creek near the Golden Gate along the coast and bay shore to a small wood frame pump station erected on the beach of Black Point Cove. The pumps conveyed the water to reservoirs on nearby Russian Hill.² At the same time, the firm of Heynemann, Pick, and Company built a substantial industrial complex of wood and brick

structures next to the pump station to house California's first woolen mill.

More industry came to the cove in 1867, when San Francisco businessman and politician Thomas Henry Selby built a large smelter on its eastern shore. The pump station, the woolen mill, and the Selby smelter gave the cove's shoreline a decidedly industrial character. Meanwhile, the residents of Black Point had been dispossessed. Troops occupying and fortifying that spot in 1863 established a military post which would ultimately be called Fort Mason. The low-lying cove, however, was not required for defensive purposes and the businesses along its shore were allowed to stay. In 1869, when the military finally decided to evict the "squatting" industries, substantial opposition mounted, and on July 1, 1870, Congress reduced the size of the military reservation, excluding the cove and placing the land in the hands of the

private speculators who occupied it.

As the century drew to a close, however, nearly all of the original businesses left the area. In 1885 Selby closed the smelter, citing a need for adequate rail service, deep water frontage, and room for expansion. Within the year it had relocated to the eastern shores of San Francisco Bay. Four years later, in 1889, the woolen mill folded, victim of intense competition from eastern mills and racist anti-Chinese agitators who had successfully campaigned against the mill's almost exclusive use of Chinese workers. By the turn of the century only the pump station, rebuilt and enlarged as part of the new Spring Valley Water Company, and the chocolate manufacturing D. Ghirardelli Company, which had purchased the abandoned woolen mill buildings in 1894, remained.

The cove was partially filled in 1858 to accommodate its industrial users; later fill along the eastern and



Black Point Cove in the 1860s. The sluice visible in the foreground carried water to the San Francisco Water Company's pumping station to the right of the woolen mill. Smallscale filling to even out the jagged shoreline is visible in front of the mill.

western edges cut the area of the cove in half. The despoliation of the cove's sand beach continued in 1906 after the disastrous earthquake and fire when Black Point Cove was designated as a dump site for debris from the devastated urban core. Fifteen thousand truckloads of broken brick, stone, and burnt rubble completely obliterated the beach.³ The last major episode of fill at the cove was the result of preparations for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition. In 1913 backers of the proposed exposition, anxious to connect the waterfront Belt Line Railroad to the exposition site west of Black Point, applied for and received permission to extend the line across the cove. An elevated trestle was built through the middle of the cove and a railroad tunnel was excavated through Black Point; its tailings were dumped alongside the trestle. As the Belt Line extension went into operation in 1914, the California Board of Harbor Commissioners, which had jurisdiction over waterfront development, encouraged further filling of the cove. According to the harbor commission-

ers, "by this means a large new waterfront area of desirable flat land has been made more available for factory and other commercial uses."⁴



he destruction of Black Point Cove was accomplished despite a long tradition of public use and plans to preserve the area for recreation. The sheltered sand beach of Black Point Cove had attracted swimmers after the Gold Rush. While the most frequent users were no doubt employees of the nearby factories, an influx of "bathers" anxious to swim in the cove started a substantial trade for "bathhouses." The first bathhouse at Black Point Cove was probably built in the early 1860s. Later court testimony concerning the character of development in the area noted that the first bathhouse, as observed in 1863, was "a small shanty on the beach at the foot of Larkin Street . . . at the corner of Larkin and Beach streets there were steps leading down to the beach. . . ." ⁵ The bathhouses were little more than changing areas where swimmers could safely leave their clothing and obtain a suit and towel, although some offered piers which extended into the deeper water of the cove. The bath-

houses were very popular; one account notes that between 6 and 9 a.m. "the bay at the cove below Black Point was dotted with bobbing heads. . . ."⁶

The San Francisco *City Directory* included its first formal bathhouse listing in 1871: Joseph Dunkley's "Sea Baths," later known as the "Neptune Bath-house." The Neptune Bath-house was a collection of mismatched frame structures perched by the water at the base of the steep sand cliff and accessible only by means of stairs leading down from Beach Street. A rickety wharf stretched out into the cove; from this a line was usually strung to hold drying towels and bathing suits. Business was good and as the popularity of the area increased other bathhouses opened. By 1883 two others were in operation at Black Point Cove: the Sheltered Cove Baths of Joseph J. Bamber, a former teamster, and the Golden Gate Sea Baths of Henry Frahm, a one-time "fish-curer." While the majority of bathhouse users were members of the working class, more affluent members of San Francisco society frequented them as well. The most famous was financier, merchant prince, and philanthropist William Chapman Ralston. After the setback which ended Ralston's ten-

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Black Point Cove in the 1870s, showing the San Francisco Water Company pump station on the far right, the Pioneer Woolen Mills (in a brick building constructed in 1863) at center right, the Neptune Baths in the center to the left of the factory complex, and the Selby smelter on the far left. The shore in front of the woolen mill has been extended northward, although the cove still retains a deep indentation which had disappeared by the time Aquatic Park was built.

ure as president of the Bank of California, he finished the day with a customary trip to the Neptune Bath-house. While swimming in the cove, he faltered and was pulled from the water dead. Though a coroner's jury ruled that he had over-exerted himself and died of a "pulmonary embolism," many felt that Ralston had chosen his favorite form of recreation to commit suicide.⁷

The demise of the popular Ralston notwithstanding, the bathhouses prospered through the 1880s, expanding to meet an ever-increasing use. On Sunday afternoons the dozens of small bathhouses or changing rooms which had sprung up on the sand would be in use, and hundreds of bathers would dot the beach with their picnic lunches between dips into the icy bay waters. Unfortunately the boom was brief. By the 1890s all of the bathhouses had closed, outclassed by new, enclosed salt-water bathhouses such as the Lurline, Crystal, and Sutro Baths. By 1895, wrote one reporter, the weather-beaten, abandoned bathhouses seemed to possess "an air of despondent regret over their desertion. The future does not seem to hold out much promise for the little beach at Black Point as a swimming resort. Its glories are of the past and

are fading as the bath-houses are crumbling. . . ."⁸ Yet there were hardy swimmers who disdained the heated comforts of indoor baths and who braved the harsh industrial landscape of Black Point Cove. They were the rugged members of the Dolphin, South End, and Ariel Rowing and Swimming Clubs.

Established in the 1870s by German-speaking working-class men as *turnvereins*, the three clubs had evolved into athletic organizations by the advent of the twentieth century. Members of the clubs had undoubtedly swum in Black Point Cove prior to the closure of the bathhouses. When continued industrialization and waterfront development south of Market Street forced the clubs to relocate during the 1890s, their members looked to Black Point Cove. By 1900 the clubhouses of the South End Rowing Club and the Dolphin Club stood at the foot of Van Ness Avenue in the cove. These had been barged into place, and were soon joined by the Ariel Club structure.⁹ The strong ties to aquatic sport evidenced by each club's activities were to be tested once again at the new site, however, as the industrialization of Black Point Cove threatened the last spot left on the waterfront for the clubs to go.

The clubs had arrived at a cove already altered and slated for further change. As the beach was ruined by the dumping of earthquake debris and by the construction of the Belt Line Railroad extension, club members began to lobby actively for the preservation of the cove for recreational purposes. It was not a new idea. As early as 1866 landscape architect and urban planner Frederick Law Olmsted had proposed a waterfront park at Black Point Cove. In a report to the Board of Supervisors Olmsted had outlined a plan for "Public Pleasure Grounds" throughout the city which envisioned Black Point Cove as a "municipal landing place and marine parade" for dignitaries and foreign representatives:

Here there should be a suitable landing quay and a plaza, with a close and thick plantation of evergreens on the west side, with banks of shrubs and flowers. The plaza or parade should be open and large enough to be used as a drill ground by a battery of artillery or a regiment of infantry, with some standing room and seats for spectators. It should also contain an elegant pavilion for the accommodation of committees of reception and their guests and should be decorated with flagstaves, marine trophies, and eventually with monuments to naval heroes, discoverers and explorers. It should not,



however, be very large or fitted for extended ceremonies, being considered rather as the sea-gate of the city rather than a place of entertainment for its guests.¹⁰

Olmsted's plan for Black Point Cove was never realized, probably because of the firmly entrenched industries and the then unsettled question of military ownership.

The failure of the Olmsted plan did not discourage later schemes. In 1905, noted planner Daniel Hudson Burnham proposed a park at Black Point Cove. Burnham's plan was more restrained than Olmsted's, seeking rather to preserve the cove as open space. It was, however, part of a larger plan to redesign San Francisco along new lines urged by a citizens' committee headed by former mayor James Duval Phelan. The committee, known as the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco, hoped to use urban planning as an impetus for political change in a city ruled by fighting factions of labor and capital and presided over by ruthless "bosses."¹¹ Indeed, at Black Point Cove working class "labor" was clashing with industrial capitalism to preserve the

recreational enclave. The status quo remained unchanged, though, since commercial opposition prevented the Burnham plan from being adopted.

Meanwhile rowing and swimming club members wishing to save Black Point Cove had been working quietly behind the scenes. With the failure of the Burnham plan, they formed the Aquatic Park Improvement Association to lobby actively. In April of 1909 the association presented a cost estimate for a proposed recreational development to the board of supervisors along with a request that the proposition be submitted to the voters as a bond issue.¹² The public rejected the concept that November; another proposal was rejected in 1912. Yet the 1912 defeat marked a turning point, because a majority voted for the park, although the votes fell short of the required two-thirds. This cheered the Aquatic Park Improvement Association's members, who would continue to push for the park under a different mantle.¹³ Some individual members of the South End Rowing Club at the same time attempted to arrange for a transfer of land. The Southern Pacific Railroad had purchased a large portion of the cove in hopes of developing it, only to find that the area was too small unless

extensive filling took place. The rowing club members hoped to convince the board of supervisors to offer the railroad more desirable, accessible land south of Market Street in exchange for Black Point Cove. Negotiations faltered, however, and by 1913 the Belt Line Railroad extension had filled much of the cove.

The continued filling of the cove angered the membership of the San Francisco Recreation League, an organization dedicated to establishing public enclaves for recreational use. Beginning in 1913 the recreation league spearheaded the fight for an aquatic park, obtaining the support of United States Congressman Julius Kahn and various members of the board of supervisors. Supervisor McLaren presented a resolution to the board on March 13, 1914, calling for the preservation of Black Point Cove as the "site of the proposed aquatic park."¹⁴ At the same time, however, an application for a permit to fill the cove entirely filed by the harbor commissioners sat before the board of supervisors. In a key test of the aquatic park proposal, McLaren's resolution was approved and the harbor commissioners were denied a permit. The adopted resolution stated that there was nowhere else "on the shore line of San Francisco suitable for an aquatic park or



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The Dolphin Club's junior crew, winners of the Bay Area rowing championship on April 16, 1916.

for swimming, boating or fishing" and called for the cessation of development at the site. It did not call for the reversal of damage already done:

*Be it resolved by the Board of Supervisors that we invite the cooperation of the citizens of San Francisco who are interested in the moral and physical welfare of the citizens of the State of California in the creation of a sentiment that will arrest this march of commercialism and attempted threat of public rights. . . .*¹⁵

The McLaren resolution marked the turning point in the struggle to create an aquatic park. Momentum now moved quickly toward fulfilling the first goal, setting aside Black Point Cove from commercial development and placing it in public stewardship. In 1916 the city assessed lands in Black Point Cove; various parcels, some belonging to the Southern Pacific Railroad, some state tidelands, and others belonging to various small businesses on the cove's shore, were all appraised. The largest parcel, nearly one-third of the cove, was held by the Southern Pacific, which had little use for the limited area of the cove. The possibility of exchanging lands south of Market Street, which the railroad wanted, for the Black Point Cove property was revived at this time.

There was still some opposition, though. Public hearings before the board of supervisors introduced an alternative plan to use the recently closed Panama Pacific International Exposition's marina as an aquatic park. Proponents of this idea argued that "we already have an aquatic park fronting on the Marina and that this would be a duplication." Black Point Cove partisans pointed out in response that Black Point provided a sheltered locale with potential for development for swimming and rowing and that there was a long tradition of aquatic recreation at the site. The newly developed yacht harbor on the Marina, on the other hand, had been recently reclaimed from marshlands.

Opposition to setting aside Black Point Cove also came from commercial interests who noted that an extension of Van Ness Avenue to the water and its subsequent development as "another Market Street, another commercial artery of San Francisco" could not happen if the cove was made into an aquatic park. A park was not suitable, they stated, because "that location will be required for ferries in the future when the people of San Francisco may be taken for recreation and pleasure to the attractive places in Marin County." Edward Scully, a member

of the South End Rowing Club, countered with testimony that the recreational use of the cove would actually encourage commercial growth in the surrounding area as large crowds flocked to the park, which would "keep San Franciscans in this city."¹⁶

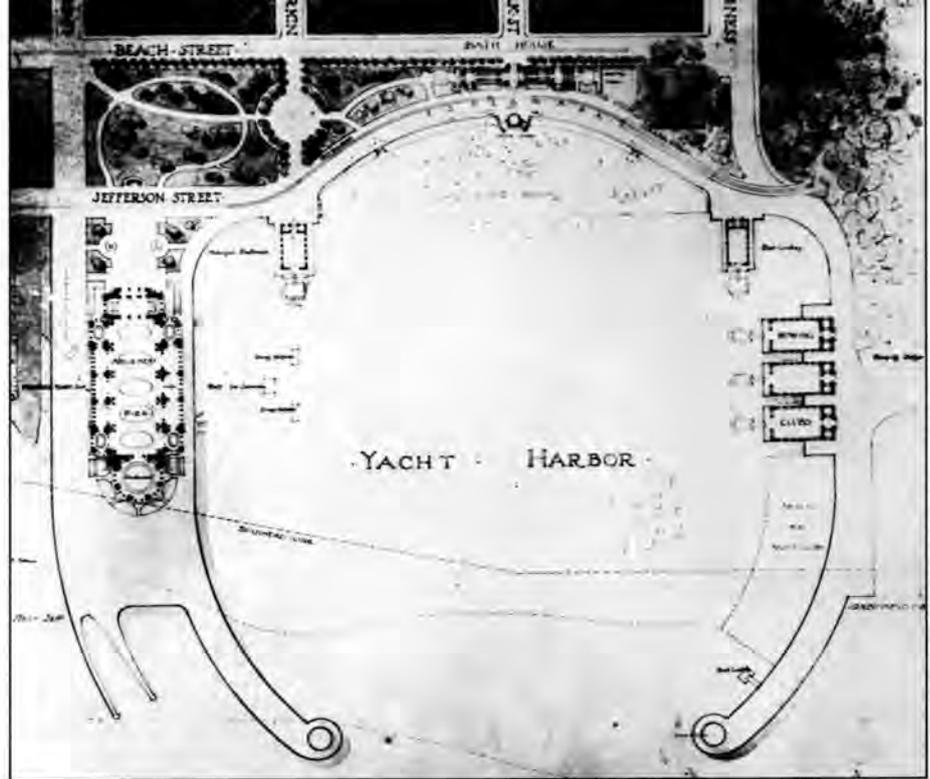


Support of the park idea eventually outweighed the opposition as a diverse array of public groups, including the Congress of Mothers, North Beach Promotion Association, the Olympic Club, the League of Improvement Clubs, and the San Francisco Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, all joined to lobby on behalf of the aquatic park proposal. In mid-1917 the board of supervisors voted to trade undeveloped city-owned lands south of Market Street to the Southern Pacific Railroad for its one-third of Black Point Cove. In November of the same year Southern Pacific approved the deal and the land transfer took place. The city received \$392,073 to compensate for the fact that the Black Point Cove property was "lesser valued."¹⁷

Eager to acquire the other two-thirds of the cove, the board of supervisors voted in December 1917 to

Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer's plan for Aquatic Park. The pier on the right was constructed and is still used for fishing and strolling; plans for the one on the left were scrapped when the bond issue which would have paid for it failed.

(Far right) The park site in 1925, with the Dolphin Rowing Club visible in the background.



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allocate funds for the purchase of additional land. Proposals to spend the \$392,000 from Southern Pacific for the development of the aquatic park were tabled, however, as the supervisors emphasized acquiring the land. Between 1918 and 1928 a series of piecemeal purchases brought the remaining Black Point Cove land into the public domain.

Planning for the proposed park began in 1920 when San Francisco Civil Engineer John Punnett was directed to prepare a conceptual basis for more detailed plans to be drafted by architects and engineers in an open competition.¹⁸ More than just a conceptual basis, the Punnett plan proposed no major restoration of the original contours of Black Point Cove but was aimed at intensive recreational development. Subsequent plans followed these lines rather than the quite different concepts which later won the open competition.¹⁹ Actual site development also began in 1920 with the grading of the cove's shoreline between Van Ness Avenue and Larkin Street. In the next year the Belt Line trestle was relocated closer inland, freeing much of the cove's remaining open water space from encroaching development.

In 1922 the board of supervisors placed the aquatic park site under

the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Board of Park Commissioners, which promptly appointed the firm of Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer as architects for the project and directed them to prepare a prospectus and plans.²⁰ The Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer plan was completed in 1923 and quickly approved by the park commissioners. Reminiscent of the Punnett plan, the new design called for the extensive recreational development of Black Point Cove. Curving concrete piers would arc out into the bay, enclosing the waters of the cove; inside, on broad sand beaches and expanses of lawn would be "various buildings, bathhouses, boat-landings . . . driveways, approaches, and planting and landscaping the entire park area. . . ." ²¹ If completed, the Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer plan would have cost almost two million dollars and would have rendered the cove practically unrecognizable.

A bond issue intended to finance the project was presented to the voters in November 1928. Advertisements in favor of the issue noted that "People Demand and Deserve A Safe Place to SWIM, ROW, FISH in the Heart of San Francisco" and urged passage to "Make the Bay A Safe Place to Play."²² Hopeful that the bond issue would pass, the

board of supervisors appropriated \$100,000 to build one of the enclosing piers envisioned in the Punnett and Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer plans.²³ The supervisors' optimism was misplaced, however. The bond issue failed. Nevertheless the appropriation for the enclosing "recreation pier" had been made, and the commitment would be met. Construction was delayed by the onset of the worldwide economic depression in 1929, but work began in earnest in 1931.

Prior to 1931 work at the site had included relocating the three rowing and swimming clubhouses from the foot of Van Ness Avenue to the foot of Polk in 1927 (they would be moved again to their present location at the foot of Hyde Street in 1938). With the clubhouses out of the way, Van Ness Avenue was extended over landfill bordering the western edge of the cove to the very tip of Black Point. This paved the way for pier construction in 1931. Commencing on August 17, a crew of laborers cleaned the park site, working beside a large sign which proclaimed "Site of San Francisco's AQUATIC PARK To Be Erected By The Park Commissioners For The People of San Francisco." Cribbing salvaged from other construction projects was stockpiled at the foot



of Van Ness Avenue and a crude concrete and rubble seawall was built against the exposed dirt bank of the road. Workmen for the Healy-Tibbetts Construction Company, under contract to the city to build the pier, began work late in the year and by December the first half of the reinforced concrete pier was in place, sweeping out into the bay and then curving in to enclose the indented shoreline of the cove. The pier remained only half complete until 1933, though; final costs for the project were more than half again what the supervisors had allotted, and additional funds were not available.

For the remainder of 1931 and 1932 a limited amount of work kept the project alive. While the city fathers waited for more money, workers graded and stockpiled granite cobblestones which had been trucked to the park site from resurfaced San Francisco streets. Borrowed tools and salvaged materials (such as the cobblestones) allowed what work there was to continue. Completion of the park according to the Bakewell, Brown, and Bauer plan would require the construction of another enclosing "recreation pier" running offshore from the foot of Hyde Street as well as the erection of various buildings and the creation of green lawns and sand

beaches. The millions of dollars needed were clearly beyond the fiscal resources of the City of San Francisco. Unless support from private, state, or federal government sources was obtained, the aquatic park project was doomed.



ark backers took heart from the passage of the National Recovery Act in 1933, believing that money would now be made available by the federal government. The board of supervisors applied for NRA funds for a number of civil projects, including the completion of the city's aging sewer system and the development of Black Point Cove as an aquatic park, "one of the most important recreational developments in the City and County."²⁴ The board of supervisors pledged \$1.6 million from any forthcoming NRA funds to the aquatic park project and placed a proposal on the ballot to raise additional funds to build

boat houses for rowing clubs, the creation of a bathing beach, park and playground areas, a concrete wharf to facilitate auto parking, bath-houses, convenience stations, service buildings, gymnasiums,

*hand ball courts, shower and locker rooms, solariums, and club quarters.*²⁵

The construction of the aquatic park and other NRA sponsored projects would create six thousand jobs, and the supervisors hoped this prospect would win enough support among the unemployed to assure passage of the bond issue. Other bond issues passed in November, but the aquatic park proposal was defeated. The board of supervisors still sought to realize the obvious benefits of setting aside the last area of open bay waterfront for recreational uses, however. Construction limped along at Black Point Cove through 1934 and 1935, aided in part by State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) funds and private donations. Another setback came when the National Recovery Act was declared unconstitutional in 1934. Hope revived, however, with the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal the following year. A proposal submitted to the WPA in late 1935 finally hit the mark. On December 19, 1935 the Works Progress Administration announced that it would build San Francisco's Aquatic Park.

The dream of an aquatic park which had been born decades before was finally to be carried into reality.

Aquatic Park under construction in March, 1938. The shoreline extends into the Bay, and the relocated railroad track is visible just inland from the bathhouse construction.

(Far right) Aquatic Park on Dedication Day, 1939.



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The board of supervisors appointed architect John Punnett, who had drafted the first plans for the park in 1920, to prepare the final site plan. San Francisco City Architect William A. Mooser III was selected to design the structures in the park. Mooser's appointment was practically traditional: his father, William A. Mooser II, had designed two structures at Black Point Cove, the D. Ghirardelli and Company factory and the California Fruit Cannery Association warehouse. Mooser's grandfather, William A. Mooser, had designed the Pioneer Woolen Mill's brick buildings in 1863. Hence the designs and buildings of three generations of Moosers would ultimately stand on the shores of Black Point Cove. If Mooser's selection as architect was traditional, however, the design for the aquatic park buildings was not. Bold, sweeping lines, curved façades of sheer white walls, stainless steel railings, and porthole windows combined with tiered levels to create a nautical motif in the contemporary "streamlined moderne" style.

Even as the plans were being drafted, WPA crews hired from the ranks of San Francisco's jobless began work. The first major job was the construction of a stepped granite cobblestone seawall along the land-

filled shoreline of Black Point Cove, sweeping in a curve that mirrored that of the recreation pier at the foot of Van Ness Avenue. Foundations for six reinforced concrete structures were poured; one was a large bathhouse, three were small restroom/lifeguard station/convenience stands, the others were two speaker towers to broadcast sports events in the cove to the anticipated crowds of bathers and spectators. Punnett's plans called for other buildings, but limited funds dictated that the priority for construction was the bathhouse, which would accommodate five thousand bathers. Awaiting future appropriations were a large new building to house the South End, Dolphin, and Ariel rowing and swimming clubs, a bandstand, and expansively landscaped grounds.

When the park was dedicated in 1939 the results, though limited, pleased everyone. According to WPA officials:

The finished park, protected by the great curve of the municipal pier . . . fills completely the need for a central water playground. Here one may bathe, swim, canoe, or sail . . . Here thousands of happy youngsters find protected playground in the water and on the shore. Here thousands of wearied adults may sink into warm, embracing sand, content to just lie and relax, and revel in the

*beauties spread before them.*²⁶

The bathhouse was the crowning achievement of Aquatic Park, its nautical design decorated by Federal Arts Program artists Hilaire Hiler, Sargent Claude Johnson, Beniamino Bufano, Richard Ayer and a bevy of assistants. It featured terrazzo floors laid to resemble shoal charts, murals of "undersea life," and softly shaped sculptures of sea creatures. The "moderne" motif was matched by the modernity of the structure, which contained a fully equipped hospital, complete with an operating room, showers activated by photoelectric "eyes," rooms where blasts of warm air and heat lamps dried swimmers, a full-service restaurant, a large concession stand, dressing rooms and lockers for five thousand men, women, and children, and exterior stadia which could seat over two thousand spectators. A small room on the top level of the building housed an announcer's booth, which was linked to the speaker stands on the park grounds. The public was evidently pleased; tens of thousands flocked to Aquatic Park on January 22, 1939 for its dedication. Over \$1.5 million in public funds had been poured into the project, and many San Franciscans, particularly those who had lobbied for the aquatic park concept,



were anxious to see what they had gotten for their money.

They soon learned, however, that the enthusiasm of Dedication Day masked problems which had plagued the project. Since the beginning of the park's construction, delays in acquiring approved plans and specifications, a lack of supervision, poorly defined goals, and costly mistakes had hindered progress. A WPA investigation later found that

The project was under the supervision of at least six different WPA superintendents . . . yet few of those [superintendents] interviewed were able to give a concise description of the intended use of the building . . . One person remarked "It was like Topsy, it just grew" . . . Instances were cited showing that completed work had to be torn out because of changes made . . . It would be difficult to determine the exact locations of all of the final installations.²⁷

The first foundations poured for the bathhouse were inundated by the next high tide; new foundations were poured on two-foot-high pilings. Deliberate malfeasance had also been rampant. Municipal officials eager to find a paying use for

the bathhouse had leased the unfinished building to Kenneth and Leo Gordon, who operated a food concession in the Ferry Building. The Gordons were to create Aquatic Park Casino complete with bar, nightclub, and restaurant. Changes to accommodate the casino were made at the urging of city officials—at WPA expense. In 1937, when city officials toured the nearly completed building, it was suggested that the open area of the third floor, intended for use as a public lounge, should be made into a banquet facility. The officials accordingly ordered changes made. A completed wall was demolished and a small glass block pantry installed, adding months to the project schedule and thousands of dollars to the WPA's budget. A slow pace of work, estimated at three percent progress each month, and the presence of the Gordon concession angered WPA officials, who finally decided to withdraw from the project. At the end of 1938 the city had been notified that the City and County of San Francisco would have to assume the burden of completing the three smaller bathroom buildings and any additional construction. The park presented to the public in January of 1939 was incomplete.

Public dissatisfaction soon arose,

though not over the incomplete state of the park or the cost overruns and misadministration. The park was a success, with thousands flocking to the beach to enjoy a swim in the bay despite the fact the beaches had not yet received sand and were strewn with the broken bricks and rubble dumped in the cove in 1906. Even occasional overflows of polluted water from a nearby sewer failed to discourage bathers. What dismayed many was the near-complete takeover of the bathhouse by the Gordons. High prices discouraged most patrons, and public use of a building described by the city and the WPA as a "Palace for the Public" was frowned upon. A WPA investigator on one occasion observed a group of school boys bringing their lunches to the open veranda overlooking the cove, "They were ordered to leave by the concessioner." Throughout the bathhouse the Gordons had erected prominent signs stating "Private—Keep Out."²⁸ Additional controversy flared in 1940 when it was disclosed that the Gordons, angered over what they termed the city's failure to complete work in the building, had refused to pay rent for over a year.²⁹ Litigation and a storm of public outrage ensued, and by the end of 1940 the Gordons had been ousted from the bathhouse and the

Critics described the bathhouse as "built from the outside in." One of the most egregious examples of vacillating plans was the demolition of the east wall of the third floor and the addition of a glass-block pantry to accommodate private concessioners' desire to use the third floor as a banquet room rather than the public lounge for which it had been originally intended.



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doors padlocked. The beach, enriched with sand brought from excavations at Union Square to build an underground parking garage, remained open and popular until the end of 1941.

In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a wave of fear swept the Pacific Coast. Military forces in California, Oregon, and Washington were placed on alert and emergency defenses were hastily thrown up. Most were small anti-aircraft batteries. Embarrassed city officials anxious to unload their "white elephant" turned over the padlocked bathhouse to the Army for use as the headquarters for anti-aircraft defense on the Pacific Coast. In early 1942 troops occupied the park, living in the bathhouse, closing the beach, and training in preparation for war. Thus the long-awaited Aquatic Park dream, fulfilled in 1939, died as the former military reservation at Black Point Cove reverted to its original purpose.

In 1948 the military returned the land to the city and Aquatic Park once again became a reality. The dream had been largely forgotten, though.

The surrounding area remained industrial, and the bathhouse, closed to the public, awaited a purpose. That year the board of supervisors turned some portions of the building over to the newly created San Francisco Senior Center. Various museum uses for the building had also been proposed through the years; one plan called for moving in exhibits from the 1939 World's Fair Golden Gate International Exposition held on Treasure Island. The most appropriate use, however, was found by a young man who first came to Aquatic Park as a patron of the Gordons' casino. Karl Kortum, a Petaluma chicken rancher, had early been infected with a love for ships and the sea. Kortum envisioned the bathhouse filled with maritime exhibits and a fleet of historic vessels moored in the cove. The idea caught on, and in 1951 the San Francisco Maritime Museum was opened in the bathhouse. Within a few years the State of California opened the San Francisco Maritime State Historic Park in the cove at the foot of Hyde Street. Both the museum and the historic ships remain in the park today as part of the popular National Maritime Museum.

The open-air qualities which had attracted the first bathers to the cove in the 1860s continued to bring suc-

ceeding generations. The number of bathers began to decline, however, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, although new forms of recreation attracted others. Dilapidated factories and warehouses were renovated to become popular shopping and restaurant facilities. Today hundreds of thousands visit The Cannery, Ghirardelli Square, and the other attractions along San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. Aquatic Park is now a unit of the National Park Service's Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which also administers the National Maritime Museum. Under National Park Service stewardship the buildings and the faded Depression artworks are being restored. In 1984 Aquatic Park was listed on the prestigious National Register of Historic Places as a historic property of national importance; future plans call for completely restoring the bathhouse to its original function.³⁰ A renaissance of the dream is apparent, supported by the National Park Service, by the last two swimming and rowing clubs, the Dolphin and South End clubs, and by the crowds who flock to the beach on warm days, drawn to the park and its promise of individual interaction with the all-surrounding sea. □



by Stephen A. Haller

FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE BATHHOUSE

It has been suggested that the "streamline-moderne" style of architecture blending geometric functional shapes with softer aerodynamic curves and lines was a manifestation of hope for a better future in the midst of hard times.¹ Nowhere was this aesthetic better expressed than in the bathhouse at Aquatic Park. Although a critic at a WPA investigation suggested—probably accurately—that the bathhouse had been "built from the outside in" without much serious study of its intended use,² it functions very well simply as a grand public monument to be admired both from the outside and inside without necessarily "doing" anything. The curvilinear shape of the building with its recessed upper stories purposefully recreates the bridge of an ocean liner. The effect is enhanced by tubular steel railings, porthole windows, rope set into the wall plaster, funnel-like ventilators, and a flagpole in the form of a ship's mast. It is appropriate that among the displays in the lobby is a large model of the 1936 liner *Queen Mary*.

But the architecture is only one part of the bathhouse's visual impact. The WPA-sponsored artwork inside and out is an integral part of the whole. As New Deal art in California, it is neither the first nor the last, but it is among the most distinctive because of its expressionist nature. In contrast to the vast majority of federally sponsored artists in

Sub-aqueous life teems on the walls of the bathhouse.

California, who painted scenes of social and working life in a realistic manner, the artists who worked on the Aquatic Park bathhouse expressed themselves in a surrealist, abstract, gently flowing style. It is ironic indeed that these artworks, so apolitical when compared with the controversial murals at San Francisco's Coit Tower or Rincon Annex Post Office, became an effective political vehicle when the artists ran head-on into the proposed private use of the building as the Aquatic Park Casino, a pricey restaurant. Led by sculptor Beniamino Bufano, the outraged artists forced an investigation into the entire project which eventually halted the private use of the public building.

Bufano's tangible legacy remains in the form of two smoothly polished statues, a seal and a toad, on either end of the veranda. The National Park Service would like to bring Bufano's *Penguin*, created for Aquatic Park and now standing in Maritime Plaza, back to its original place in the park. Bufano's two animals face a bright mosaic of abstract fish on the veranda wall. It was executed by Sargent Claude Johnson, one of a handful of black artists on the WPA rolls. Johnson also did the flowing carvings in green slate over the main entrance which depict life and work by the water.

In charge of all the artists at the bathhouse was Hilaire Hiler, who had returned to take a job with the WPA after years of self-imposed exile in the American expatriate community of

between-the-wars Paris. All the Aquatic Park artists, Hiler included, were exceptions to the tendency among California artists to welcome the "return to figurative art" as a validation of their own rejection of "modernism."³ In contrast to the lack of a plan for its use which characterized the construction of the building and brought on the WPA investigation, it is apparent that the design for its decoration adhered consistently to consideration of the "function of the building . . . , its uses and associations, and at no point depart[ed] from them."⁴

The highlight of the building decoration is Hiler's mural of underwater life. Curvaceous and brightly colored subaqueous forms frolic on the walls among the submerged ruins of the lost continents of Mu and Atlantis. Henry Miller once wrote, "Though the decor was distinctly Freudian, it was also gay, stimulating, and superlatively healthy."⁵ The walls merge into subtly colored marble wainscoting and a terrazzo floor that represents a shoal chart of San Francisco Bay. The grandeur of this open room with its bay view was enhanced by its emptiness, an impression which is strikingly apparent in photographs although it is now altered by the collection of nautical exhibits.

The Aquatic Park bathhouse has survived almost fifty years of neglect, attention, ridicule, and admiration. In a roundabout fashion, it has now returned to the use for which it was originally intended. It is once again a public building with a distinctly nautical theme and a grand veranda on San Francisco's magnificent bay. □

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NOTES

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This publication was funded by the NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM ASSOCIATION, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to the preservation of maritime history. Membership information is available from the National Maritime Association, 680 Beach Street, Suite 330, San Francisco, CA 94109.

COVER: San Francisco's Aquatic Park photographed by Minor White on February 20, 1950.

This print, which was made from White's original negative, has been cropped.

MINOR WHITE COLLECTION, CHS LIBRARY, SAN FRANCISCO

BACK COVER: Black Point Cove ca. 1910.

SOCIETY OF CALIFORNIA PIONEERS

