Angel Island Immigration Station

YouGuides Tour Transcript

1. Angel Island Immigration Station

Right now, we are at the US immigration station at Angel Island State Park. And this site was operational between 1910 and 1940 as San Francisco's immigration station. It had a second life during World War II as an internment and prisoner of war detention facility.

2. Immigration Detention Center Barracks

So this site has many buildings and we're going to be visiting the detention barracks today. And we'll be seeing the different areas where immigrants were held while they were awaiting the decision of the immigration service, whether they'd be allowed to enter the country or be deported.

3. Room 105

This room is known as room 105. And it was a place where Chinese men were held while waiting for their immigration hearings and for permission to enter the United States. This room would have been filled with beds. The healthy capacity here was considered to be about 50 people, but there were about 200 beds in this space. This site, in part, was saved because the people detained here wrote on the walls, and while we might call this graffiti historically, today we're very appreciative of this writing. Most of it comes in the form of poetry that was written by Chinese detainees, but there are inscriptions in about a dozen languages.

4. Chinese Poetry

This is one of the poems written in the Chinese men's barracks, and this poem actually starts off by talking about the fact that there are tens of thousands of poems on these walls. They're all cries of complaint and sadness. There aren't actually tens of thousands of poems on the walls, but it really does create an image of what you'll see when you're in this space, which is a building covered in poetry. Another thing this poem mentions is that the author should remember this chapter. And that's what we ask of all of the people that come and learn more about Angel Island to remember that this chapter existed so that we can learn from it.

5. Layers of Paint

And this section of wall, we have an unusual peak under the layers of paint. We can see on the original wooden walls of the building that the poems may have been put up onto the walls first in ink, and then carved. You can see partially carved and carved characters here. And the reason we can see this is because at one point, this door was expanded or maybe even put in brand new. And you can see underneath where there was some trim, the different colors of paint on the walls. There's actually only about seven layers of paint on the walls because the writing that was here was considered graffiti by the immigration service and it was painted over repeatedly. So this is a great little chance to look back at how the building was when it first opened.

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6. Carved Pictures

This section of the wall has a lot of small drawings and it might have been a place where younger people were expressing themselves on the walls. We see a lot of houses. There's three just right here, and this one seems to be nestled in the mountains. So it's very common for young people to draw their home. And we think that people were writing about and drawing the things they were thinking about and possibly even missing. Now, there were children detained at the immigration station, and if you were 12 or older, you were considered kind of old enough to be treated as an adult. And so in this space, there were men and boys, mostly 12 years old and older.

7. Poem: Random Thoughts Deep at Night

This poem placed a little bit high up on the wall, has a couple of unique elements. Not a lot of the poems here have titles or signature lines. And this one has both. This poem is called Random Thoughts Deep at Night, and it was written by Yee of Toishan. There's a lot of imagery in this poem that uses nature to describe how the person is feeling. And you can almost imagine the person being here on a foggy day in the middle of San Francisco Bay. We also have a recording of this poem in Toishanese which is the dialect that most people that came through here probably spoke.

8. Expectation of Journey

The poem on this part of the wall talks about the long journey and the expectations of what this person thought was going to happen when they got here and how that was changed once they actually arrived. We also have a signature line on this poem as well telling the region that the author is from.

10. Medical Exam

Some of the poems in the building talk about what happened when the immigrants were here. This one is about the medical exams, which were one of the barriers for entry for many immigrants. They talk about the hookworm examination, which could be pretty invasive as well as being stabbed for blood samples. So not very good memories of their experience with the medical exam.

11. Distress of Constant Change

This poem has a date, which is very rare in the building and it was written in 1911. The author here is talking about his distress at having to be moved from one room to another. He talks about being confused and frustrated by the experience. A lot of the immigrants here probably felt like they didn't have a lot of control over what was happening to them. And this simple move, which might've been done for variety reasons by the immigration service, maybe to clean or disinfect a sleeping area, caused him a lot of distress.

12. Length of Detention

So this poem is a slightly different configuration than most of the poems in the building. Most of the poems are written in seven characters and four lines. This one has four characters and 10 lines. They talk about how long they were detained. One autumn in this poem. So about three months, which is average for about half of the people coming from China. They also talk about their family and have a signature line that gives a hint as to the town that they're from.

13. Living Conditions

In the larger rooms of the barracks the healthy capacity was about 50, but there were actually about 200 beds in these spaces, four times the healthy capacity. These are reproduction bunks to give us a better idea of what the space would have looked like when people were staying here. There were no ladders so you just simply climb up by stepping on the beds themselves. And you'll notice some have mattresses and some don't when the immigration station first opened, Chinese men were not given mattresses, but everybody else was including Chinese women. Everyone received a blanket and pillow as part of their stay here. But the Chinese men, when they found out that there were being treated so differently, protested and were eventually granted mattresses to sleep on too.

14. Room 211

Here on the second floor in room 211, many different groups of people were detained over the 30 years of operation of the immigration station. Initially women were held in this space from Japan, but over the years, men from Europe, Asia, and China were all held here, the three categories of segregation that existed on Angel Island. There are layers and layers of writing in this room, mostly names, dates, and home towns.

15. Japanese Immigration

So in this space, we see a lot of what you might call more typical graffiti, where people wrote their names, dates, hometowns and that's what we see here with this inscription from Miyamoto. So this is someone who has written their name, their village prefecture, and the year. And this family was from Hiroshima and part of their family was ultimately impacted by the atomic bomb during World War II. But during the earlier years of immigration to the United States, they passed through Angel Island. The Japanese people were the second largest group to come and be detained on Angel Island after the Chinese who were the largest group. And for Japanese immigrants, the stays here are about two to three days on average. And the shorter stays are in part due to the better relationship that Japan and the United States had diplomatically prior to 1924.

16. Children Detainees

High up on this pole, we see some writing in Japanese. There's also some Arabic numerals. It says 1936 here, but this inscription is from a 14 year old boy. And there were children detained here on Angel Island. The children about the age of 12 and up were basically considered adults as far as the immigration process was concerned. They were asked questions and interviewed in entry hearings. Although children, as young as four years old remember being asked questions from oral histories from former detainees. So the Japanese people coming through were mostly male, but we did have a lot of Japanese picture brides that came through Angel Island as well on their way to the United States to meet their new husbands.

17. South Asian Immigration Experience

All right, on the column here we have a few different inscriptions. And this one here was written by Tara Singh. And we know that because he wrote his name. He also wrote 100 days, presumably how long he was here when he wrote this inscription. He wrote a second inscription in another room that says nine months. So we believe he was here for quite a long time. Most South Asians had an extremely difficult time coming through. They were classified as Asian. They were often exposed to parasitic infections from working in rural areas with animals, which could lead to deportation. Many of them were poor and many of

them were part of the Ghadar movement, a political movement to free India from British rule. That meant the Americans often labeled them as political radicals. All these things worked against the South Asians trying to enter the country. So 50% failed their entry hearings. Because they didn't have as many strong community ties as other groups like the Chinese immigrants that stayed here, their deportations were almost a hundred percent. So they have the highest rate of being sent back.

18. Mennonites Immigration

So down here, we have another name that's visible kind of scratched into the top of the wooden layers that are under these layers of paint. And this is Russian. And the name here is Yakob Neufeld or Jacob. And there actually were two Jacobs that came through at the same time. One was an older man and one was a younger man. So we suspect that the younger man, that was the one that took his time to write on the walls. Now they were Mennonites and many Mennonites were fleeing Russia to avoid forced service in the military. And they would join up with other Mennonites that had already come to the United States. And this family met with the Friesen family and Nick Friesen is another former detainee of the immigration station that we were able to interview because he survived into the 2000s and talked about his experience, trying to leave Russia.

19. Ukranian Immigration

Right here on the wall, we have an inscription from the Vodniak brothers and they came to Angel Island to actually get to New Jersey. Many of the Russians, and in this case Ukrainians, that came across to the US came across the Pacific, would end up here on Angel Island and on their way they used most of their resources. So they didn't have a lot of money on hand when they got here. The United States labeled them LPC "likely to become a public charge." And it was assumed that they would not be able to take care of themselves. Now, this is something you could appeal, or if you got money from family that were already living here or even abroad if you could show that you had some financial resources, you could overcome that label. But for many, it meant the end of the road and possible deportation.

20. Korean Immigration

On the backside of this column, there's a Korean inscription and the Korean inscription is actually written in both Korean and Chinese. It has a date of 1923 and a person's name. The Korean experience here was very different from everyone else because Koreans were under occupation by Japan during the immigration era here on Angel Island. And so people leaving Korea had to get permission from the Japanese run government to do that. The Japanese government didn't give permission to many people, if any. And so folks had to find other ways of leaving. Often, they would go to China and from across from China. And when they got here claim that they had been in China prior to the Japanese arriving. And that is why they would explain their lack of documents. Koreans on Angel Island were usually detained for medical reasons or for their lack of paperwork. The Korean Aid Society was an organization that was recognized by the American government to recognize, excuse me, to represent the Korean people abroad. And so they were able to work on their behalf to help them through the process here, including providing translators like a man named David Lee.

21. Mexican Immigration

This inscription is fairly rare. It's in Spanish. We didn't have a lot of people that spoke Spanish that came through here and in numbers, but we do have a lot of representation of Mexico, Central and South Americans in smaller numbers. This man wrote the memories of Enrique Piton and a date 6-24-32. So we

assume he was here in June of 1932. Now in Enrique's story is again a very unusual story because he was not immigrating into the United States through San Francisco and therefore Angel Island. He had already been in the United States and was being deported for crimes committed here. So he is not representative of most of the Mexicans, which is where he was from, that came through Angel Island. We had about 400 people from Mexico and for the vast majority of them, they're being detained here or excluded or deported because of class. And they did not have the financial resources that the American government thought they needed to be able to stay here.

22. Germain Detainees

So this bed is representing the German experience. Actually, one of the largest groups of Germans to come through Angel Island were not immigrants at all, but a group of sailors that were trying to go from a cruise ship that was in the Atlantic Ocean of all places, all the way back to Germany at the beginning of World War II. But that cruise ship after offloading its passengers ran into a British ship and Germany and Britain were at war, so the German crew scuttled or intentionally sank their ship and escaped in boats. They were rescued by the United States. And because the United States was not involved in World War II yet, they shipped those sailors mostly to the West Coast to send them back through Japan, to get home to Germany, a very circuitous route. But by the time they get here to the West Coast diplomatic relations are deteriorating even further. They end up spending about seven years in the United States, the duration of war, not all here on Angel Island, but while they were here, they did help put out the fire in the administration building of the immigration station that burned down in 1940.

23. Filipino Experience

The Filipino experience on Angel Island is a unique story because Filipinos were considered American nationals for most of the time, the immigration station was open. American nationals can move freely from place to place within the American territories. And so when those circumstances changed about 10 years before the Philippines was granted independence, the Filipinos that had been going back and forth without difficulty found themselves reclassified as “aliens” as Asian, and both of those categories made it difficult for them to enter the country. Some were even in route when the law changed. So they left the Philippines allowed to come here and they arrived here and were detained. Now, if you had already been here, you could reenter the country. And so some were allowed to land as people returning to the United States. Others who were coming for the first time were deported and sent back to the Philippines.

24. Women Detainees

Before this room held men, it held women, women and children were also detained on Angel Island. And this room was for Japanese women and children. We know that women had writing in the building they ended up in the second floor of the administration building, but unfortunately, that building was destroyed by fire taking away all of those potential inscriptions.