



### ■ Introduction

Angel Island, off the coast of San Francisco, California, served a major role in immigration to the United States in the early 20th century. The island was the site of an immigration station that was open from 1910 to 1940. The location processed immigrants, mainly those arriving from different regions bordering the Pacific Ocean, including Canada, Mexico, parts of Central and South America, New Zealand, Australia, India, the Philippines, and Russia. Most, however, came from China and Japan, and many of these Asian immigrants were detained on the island. Immigration officials were reluctant to permit Chinese people, in particular, to enter the United States because the country’s Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted Chinese immigration, especially for laborers.

Some confusion occurred about which Chinese immigrants could enter the United States because official records were destroyed during the great earthquake and fires that occurred in San Francisco in 1906. According to the KQED Asian Education Initiative website, “There was no way for anyone to know who was or was not a legitimate citizen under the existing laws.... Many Chinese could get around the laws of the Exclusion Act and claim their right to be in the country. Furthermore, this allowed people to bring over spouses, sons and daughters.”

Some Chinese people lied about their family origins in order to enter the country, a phenomenon known as paper sons, which was illegal. Existing records, including photographs and oral testimonies, show that those of Chinese descent often suffered harsher living conditions during detention than did prospective immigrants from other countries. As a nonviolent form of protest, some of the detained Chinese men carved emotionally expressive poems into the walls of their barracks.

Chinese women also participated in these acts but so rarely that no records of their poetry survived the 1940 fire

that destroyed the island’s administration building. The fire was nonfatal but resulted in the station’s closing. Subsequent immigration processing took place on the mainland, in San Francisco.

### ■ Historical Background

Before the Angel Island Immigration Station opened in 1910, several different populations used the island for various purposes unrelated to immigration. For example, the island was used by Native Americans and later by the Spanish navy.

#### Early Uses of Angel Island

Miwok Indians traveled to Angel Island thousands of years ago to hunt, fish, and gather food. Juan Manuel de Ayala (1745–1797), a Spanish navy lieutenant who used the island as a base, wrote the first record of the island in 1775. He named the island *Isla de los Ángeles*, or Angel Island.

While the Spanish navy base was in operation, Angel Island also had other uses. Russian seal hunters stored furs there, and whalers from various countries used the island as a place to resupply their firewood and water. In 1814 the British repaired a damaged warship called the *Raccoon* (or *Raccoon*) at the island, which was the origin of the name then given to the strait of water between Angel Island and mainland California, Raccoon Strait. The US military used the island for various purposes, starting during the American Civil War (1861–1865), when it built an army post there. In 1900 this post was named Fort McDowell, and it went on to operate actively even after the immigration station opened on the island.

#### Early Immigration to the US West Coast

Although the Angel Island Immigration Station did not officially open until 1910, immigration to the West

## WORDS TO KNOW

**CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT OF 1882:** Act outlawing immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States.

**DETAINEE:** A person who is held in custody, typically by government officials.

**OPIUM WARS:** Two wars over trade between Britain and China in the mid-1800s. The second war involved France as well. Chinese losses led to political instability in China.

**PAPER SONS:** A phenomenon in the early 1900s in which prospective emigrants from China lied to the US

government about their familial relationships in order to gain entry to the United States.

**PICTURE BRIDES:** Japanese women whose marriage was arranged to men overseas by relying on photographs.

**QUOTA:** A limitation on a number of people or things.

**TAIPING REBELLION:** Culmination of several civil wars/rebellions against the Chinese government between 1850 and 1864.

**TRUCK FARMERS:** Agricultural workers who produce and sell fruits and vegetables commercially.

Coast of the United States was common in the latter half of the 19th century. At that time, immigrants were processed on the mainland in San Francisco. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 spurred immigration, particularly from China. Many Chinese men sought to improve their economic situation by sailing to the United States to find work. According to the Library of Congress, “By 1851, 25,000 Chinese immigrants had left their homes and moved to California, a land some came to call *gam saan*, or ‘gold mountain.’” Whether working in mines or building the first transcontinental railroad, most Chinese immigrants came to the West Coast as laborers. And most were single men who intended to return eventually to their home country.

Political and economic issues in China motivated prospective immigrants to seek work in the United States. The Opium Wars over international trade weakened the Chinese central government. The first of these wars was against Great Britain between 1839 and 1842 while the second was against both Great Britain and France between 1856 and 1860. The Taiping Rebellion, a culmination of civil wars in China between 1850 and 1864, also created political and social unrest. In addition, droughts and famines occurred during the mid-1800s. Many Chinese men, as well as some Chinese women and children, were motivated to find political and economic stability through emigration.

People of Japanese origin also immigrated to the United States in large numbers during the late 19th century. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, droughts and monsoons in Japan led to unstable agricultural work. Many Japanese people within the agricultural community found work in Hawaii and California. Some worked as truck farmers while others went on to create agricultural corporations. Educational opportunities also presented a common reason for Japanese immigration to the United States.

Despite being well received when they first immigrated to the United States, Chinese and Japanese immigrants eventually encountered resentment from previous immigrants (and their descendants) of non-Asian countries. This negative sentiment, particularly toward Chinese immigrants, was due to the competition the immigrants presented for low-wage labor. For some Japanese immigrants, resentment occurred because of their pioneering success in the agricultural industry.

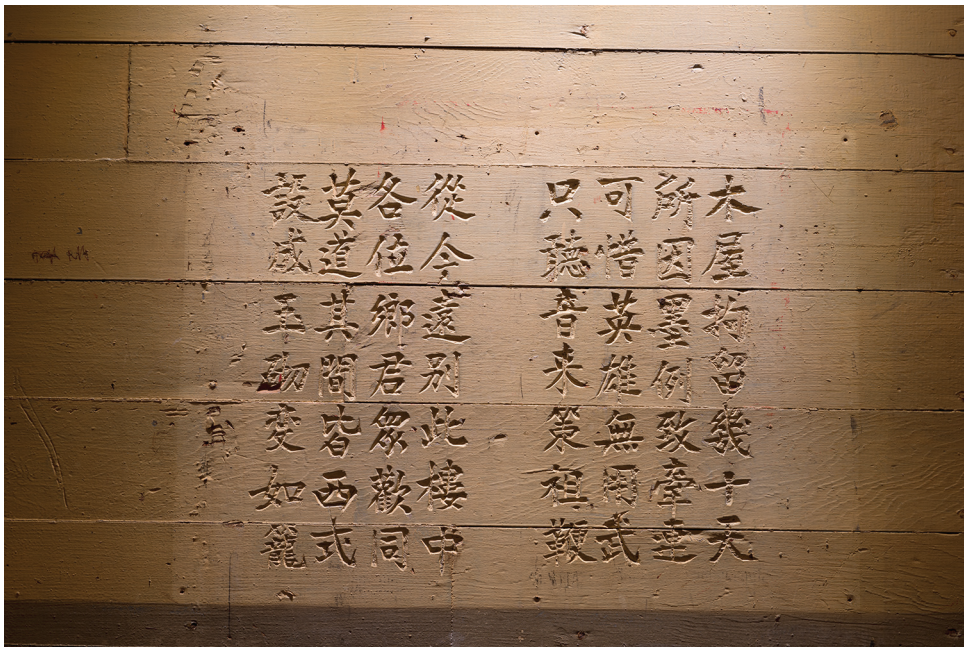
### Angel Island Immigration Station: Setup and Daily Life

West Coast immigration processing before 1910 took place in a rough detention shed built on a wharf in San Francisco. Growing complaints about this facility compelled federal government officials to consider building a better facility. Angel Island in San Francisco Bay was deemed a suitable spot. Modeled after the efficient Ellis Island facility in New York Harbor, the Angel Island station included an administration building, a medical center, and a detention center. The new facility, officially dubbed the Angel Island Immigration Station, began processing immigrants the day after it opened on January 21, 1910.

Upon arrival at the port of San Francisco, immigrants were separated according to their respective nationalities. Those traveling in upper-class berths, which often included European migrants, had their entry paperwork processed onboard the ship and were permitted entry into the port upon approval. Immigrants in lower-class berths, which mostly included Asians, Russians, and Mexicans, were routed to Angel Island for processing.

Because of the exclusionary laws passed earlier, Asians were treated differently from their European counterparts while detained on the island. All immigrants were given a

Angel Island



Poetic verse carved into the wall of the detention barracks at Angel Island Immigration Station, near San Francisco. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

physical exam, and any immigrant found to have a contagious disease was not allowed into the United States. Immigrants who passed their physicals were then interviewed by immigration officials.

The Chinese were subjected to more-intensive physicals and interviews than were others because they were suspected of misrepresenting themselves in order to be allowed in. Immigration officials' suspicions about them stemmed from a phenomenon known as paper sons. This term refers to Chinese immigrants who entered the United States under false names. They chose names that showed a family relationship to Chinese residents already in the United States. Appearing to be a member of an already-established family allowed them to more easily enter the country under the laws then in effect.

Those confined to the detention center spent days, weeks, and even months waiting for their cases to be processed. They endured poor food, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, and boredom during this time. Some found it impossible to endure and sought an outlet for their frustration.

Forms of Protest

Violent protests were uncommon at the Angel Island Immigration Station, but various advocacy efforts occurred. Many detained Chinese men wrote poems expressing grief, outrage, and hope, some of which they carved into the walls of the barracks. Angel Island employees frequently painted and plastered over these poems.

A form of advocacy that was more public was legal action. Many prospective immigrants filed petitions for fair treatment in the American judicial system. Community organizations, often created by earlier immigrants, helped with this cause. Moreover, although violence on Angel Island was rare, a riot did break out in 1919. Federal troops intervened to successfully quell it.

Jewish Immigrants

Angel Island is known to have housed a significant population of Jewish migrants fleeing persecution in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1920s, following the fall of the Russian czars and the rise of Bolshevism (a communist form of government), many Jews in Russia were targeted in a Bolshevik effort to eliminate all religious factions and adhere to a nonreligious working-class community. Consequently, followers of the Jewish faith fled the Bolshevik Revolution, and many arrived in the United States through Angel Island. Years later, more Jewish immigrants arrived as they fled persecution and death from the Nazi regime that gained power in Germany during the 1930s and spread to various parts of Europe during World War II (1939–1945). A number of these immigrants, originating from countries such as Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, made the long journey across the Asian continent to ports in China and Japan, where they boarded ships for the United States.

Many of these Jewish immigrants claimed relatives and sponsors living in the United States, while others received financial assistance from ethnic support organizations such



as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Jews who had insufficient funds to continue their journey upon arrival at Angel Island, however, were not permitted to enter the United States. Consequently, these groups remained detained at the island until they had acquired the means to travel to their final destinations. Nevertheless, according to historians Erika Lee and Judy Yung, in their book *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, the average stay for Russians and Jews on Angel Island was only about two or three days.

Closing of the Station

In 1940 a fire destroyed the administration building of the Angel Island Immigration Station. This resulted in the permanent closing of the station. Detainees were ferried to the mainland.

After the station closed on Angel Island, the US Army detained prisoners of war there as well as refugees from countries against which the United States was fighting. Immigration services moved to the Appraisers Building in San Francisco. Precise records of the total number of people detained on Angel Island do not exist, but estimates range from 100,000 to 500,000 people.

Impacts and Issues

Several changes in immigration trends and policy occurred in the years before, during, and after the Angel Island Immigration Station operated. These policy changes and trends had numerous social impacts in the United States.

Trends in Immigration and Community Building on the West Coast

For decades leading up to the opening of the Angel Island Immigration Station, there was an influx of Chinese and Japanese laborers into the United States. This trend, however, was limited by the exclusionary legislation that was passed before the immigration station was opened, as well as during its operation.

Even faced with exclusionary laws, wealthy people from China and Japan continued to immigrate. Clans of families of Chinese and Japanese descent began to form in the United States. For the Chinese, some of this was due to the paper-sons phenomenon. For the Japanese, some of this occurred because many young Japanese women, known as picture brides, were promised to Japanese men living in the United States. San Francisco’s Chinatown, which traces its origins back to the gold rush beginning in 1848, continued to grow residentially and commercially in the 20th century.

Organizations developed to support detainees and newly arrived immigrants. Despite previous negative publicity about Asian immigrants, San Francisco advertised the booming community of Chinatown as a tourist attraction

in its brochures. The US Congress voted to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. At that time, however, the quota for Chinese immigration was set at 105 immigrants annually, which remained in force until 1965.

Later Uses of Angel Island and Restoration Efforts

The US Army maintained control of the immigration station after it closed. Although the army used Angel Island as a place to detain prisoners of war and refugees from enemy countries during World War II, it had abandoned most of the buildings on the island by 1946. In 1954 the army set up a missile base on the island to protect the United States against a possible Soviet attack. The base remained active for eight years, after which the state of California took over the island.

In 1970 Alexander Weiss, a state park ranger, discovered Chinese characters that had been etched into the walls of the immigration station’s detention barracks. His discovery spurred scholarly investigation as well as community support for preserving the poems. Although the immigration station was slated to be demolished, the state of California delegated \$250,000 to the preservation and restoration of the station. Many poems were published, and the detention barracks were restored for tourism.

The barracks were opened to the public in 1983 as part of Angel Island State Park. In 1997 the immigration station officially became a national historic landmark. In the early 21st century, Angel Island attracts many student groups who come to learn about its role in US immigration history. Visitors to the island must travel there by ferry or private boat.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Mrs. Chan’s Story

SOURCE: *Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. “Mrs. Chan.” In Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980, p. 72. Courtesy of University of Washington Press.*

INTRODUCTION: *In this primary source excerpt from Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940, an immigrant to the United States tells of her experience at the West Coast immigration station. Mrs. Chan was 23 years old when she was detained at Angel Island, a short distance from the greater San Francisco Bay area, in the late 1930s.*



Personal belongings of Chinese immigrants interrogated at the Angel Island Immigration Station in the early 1900s are shown on display at the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. © Gina Ferazzi/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.

MRS. CHAN

“When we first arrived, we were told to put down ou[r] luggage and they [Angel Island officials] pushed us towards the buildings. More that 100 of us arrived. The men had [their] dormitories and the women theirs. They assigned us beds and there were white women to take care of us. When we returned from the dining hall, they locked the doors behind us. Once you’re locked in, they don’t bother with you. It was like being in prison. Some read newspapers or books; some knitted. There was a small fenced in area for exercising, sunning and ball-playing. There were windows and we could see the boats arrive daily about 9:30 or 10 a.m. Once a week, they allowed us to walk out to the storage shed where our luggage was kept. We could write as many letters as we wanted, but they examined our letters before mailing them. The same for letters coming in. There were good friends, but there were also those who didn’t get along. There were arguments and people cried when they saw others who were fortunate enough to leave, especially those of us who had been there a long time. I must have cried a bowlful during my stay at Angel Island.... Most left after three weeks. There were about twenty or thirty appealing their cases like

me. Three or four applicants of every ten would end up appealing. But I was there the longest and always the one left behind.”

SEE ALSO *Acculturation; China–United States Immigration; Ellis Island; Immigrant Health Screenings; Immigration to the United States; Melting Pot*

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