

Fort Winfield Scott

December 6, 2009

The walk begins in front of Bernard Hall, 1330 Kobbe Ave (off Ralston) in the Presidio, across from the parking lot.

This walk retraces a walk published by Adah Bakalinsky in her classic "Stairway Walks in San Francisco" except the route will be covered in reverse direction and we will visit more batteries close the Golden Gate bridge.

OPENING REMARKS

Fort Winfield Scott occupies an area of land that has been in continual use as some form of military installation since the Spanish built Castillo de San Joaquin in 1793 on the point they christened La Punta de Cantil Blanco. The Castillo eventually housed 6 bronze cannons that were cast in Peru in the 1600s and are among the oldest known cannons in the US. The adobe Castillo was difficult to maintain in the harsh coastal weather and eventually fell into disrepair.

The cliff upon which it stood was leveled by the US military when they began construction of Fort Point in 1853 but the surrounding land was commandeered for another, at the time, unnamed masonry and brick fort. In 1861, the first garrison was stationed here and official military documents referred to it as "the fort at Fort Point." It wasn't until 1882 that the Army issued General Order #133 naming the installation Fort Winfield Scott after a general who was a hero of the Mexican War and had commanded the Union Army at the beginning of the Civil War. The post was downgraded 4 years later to a sub-post of the Presidio and the name officially discontinued in 1886. However, the name survived.

In the 1890s, the Army began installing long range guns at various vantage points along the coast of San Francisco and plans for a place to house the necessary garrison were begun in 1909. On June 18, 1912, the War Department issued General Order #11, resurrecting the Fort Winfield Scott moniker and establishing the coast artillery post. Guided missiles and other modern defenses eventually rendered the Coastal Artillery unnecessary and Fort Scott was once again designated as a sub-post of the Presidio on June 25, 1946.

The dominating architecture at Fort Winfield Scott is Mission Revival. The buildings here on Kobbe, officers' quarters, maintain the Colonial Revival style. We'll also see housing sprinkled throughout the post that reflects both Colonial and Greek Revival styles. But the barracks and all the major buildings are Spanish Revival. Barnard Hall, where we now stand, housed unmarried officers. 6 men originally occupied the building, 4 upstairs and 2 down. Each apartment consisted of a sitting room, bedroom and large, tiled bathroom. The lower, common area consisted of a sitting room, parlor and assembly room. The rear wing contained the kitchen and shared dining room.

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While in such a setting it is easy to fixate on the military occupation of the area, it's important to remember that the area is also a national park, home to a variety of rare and endangered flora and fauna, home to a diverse commercial and residential real estate community, and a recreational destination. We will explore all these roles on our walk.

Cross Kobbe Ave to the parking lot and descend the stairs on the left.

This is just the first of many trademark stone staircases that can be found throughout Fort Scott in particular and the Presidio generally. This is perhaps one of the nicest ones. The former Officer's Recreation Hall is the building on on left

Circle left around the Rec Hall to the staircase to the left and ascend to Upton. Cross Upton and stop in front of the Brick building across the street.

This was the Commanding Officer's quarters. Note the designation. If Fort Scott had remained its a post, it would be the Post Commander's quarters. Unlike the other buildings at Fort Scott, this building reflects Gregorian styling. That and it's dominant position on this hill make it a very striking part of the post. Now we will take the walk that every commanding officer undoubtedly took several times a day - to post headquarters.

Proceed to the right of the CO quarters, stopping to note the old garden space at the corner, then cross Ralston to the front of #1201.

From here in front of headquarters, you can look out over the Parade Ground and take in the essence of the military days of Fort Scott, the enlisted men's barracks lining each side and the vast Parade Ground as the centerpiece. In addition to the routine parades and inspections, the Parade Ground was also used for obstacle courses and as temporary tent area for troops.

Walk north towards the open end of the Parade Ground on the western sidewalk that passes the enlisted men's barracks. At #1203, turn left to look at Battery Dynamite on Ralston.

Access to Battery Dynamite is no longer allowed but you can see the mound and the 40 foot high wall in front of us. This 1890s battery used dynamite powered cannons, causing a compression that would propel the shell.

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Return to the barracks walkway and continue north to #1207, return to Ralston and on to Lincoln. Cross and proceed to Battery Godfrey.

This is Battery Godfrey, the first of five Endicott-era batteries we are about to visit. There are seventeen such batteries housed at Fort Scott throughout its history. This is also a good time to talk about the transition of the Presidio to a national park. The Presidio became a national park in 1972 when it was designated part of the Golden Gate National Recreation area. The area we just left was part of area B, which is comprised of most of the Presidio. It is managed by the government-formed and controlled Presidio Trust that operates as an enterprise operation (meaning they can make money). The area in which we now stand is area A (as is the periphery of the park everywhere and is managed by the National Park Service. Area A is also where the wild Presidio has started to take hold. The batteries have been abandoned and are in a state of decay while new plantings are popping up everywhere and nature is being allowed to thrive once again. The faces of the bluffs are host to serpentine scrub and coastal bluff scrub. At different times of the year, you will see coffeeberry, California lilac, Toyon and, of course, coyote bush. There are fresh and saltwater marshes and riparian forests. Over 60 species of bees and over 200 species of birds can be found in the area.

Explore all five batteries, traveling along the coast to the bridge. Return to corner of Lincoln and Storey and cross Lincoln on the north side. Continue to the old chapel on the left and explore. Then proceed to the Log Cabin.

This building was constructed in 1937 and was originally a non-commissioned officer's (sergeant) club. In 1942, it was damaged by fire. It was rebuilt and expanded, made into an enlisted men's club. In the 1970s, it was converted to an officer's mess. It is now a general purpose rental event space and can be rented.

Cross Storey to Ralston and proceed to the Brig.

Back to military-era Fort Scott, this is the Brig where military prisoners were held. Those windows, by the way, were too high for prisoners to see out of. It is worth repeating one of the fun facts of the presidio here. Jerry Garcia was stationed at Fort Scott for a military career that lasted only eight months. He went AWOL nine times and was court-martialed twice.

The building next door, #1214, is the Band Barracks. I'm not sure why the band was sequestered here with the criminals - perhaps both demonstrated anti-social tendencies.

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Head down Ralston to Ruckman and then to Appleton. Proceed to the Habitarium.

Part of the new Presidio, the Presidio Native Plant program operates the Habitarium. There was a big planting party up here yesterday. Bags and boxes of native plants were distributed to teams of volunteers with staff members supervising planting activities. The Habitarium is also used as classroom for children's programs.

Descend the log and earthen stairs in front of the Habitarium to the nursery area below. Explore the nursery and interpretive paths. Follow Shoefield to the dirt road at the east end of the area.

Note the granite slabs here that were remnants of the 1906 earthquake. They were originally stored at Lands End but were brought here when people began to pilfer them.

Head up the hill on the path, pointing out Dragon Fly Creek to the left and proceed into the redwood grove.

In Adah's book, she refers to a tennis practice area here that has apparently been dismantled and converted to a picnic area. Over to the southwest, you can see new stonework that has been completed to create a bridge across the ravine. There was once a windmill in this area that was used to pump water to the clubhouse.

Proceed up the stairs to the left to the corner of the tennis courts.

These tennis courts are now part of the facilities managed by the Presidio YMCA. You may think of them as fairly modern developments but there has been some form of tennis court in this area going back to the early 1900s.

Take the walkway past the eastern end of the tennis courts back to the Officer's Rec Center and ascend the steps to the parking lot.