

Testimony of Katherine Toy
On behalf of
the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation
Before
the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and
Human Resources
of the Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives
Regarding
“Historic Preservation of the Peopling of America”
Thursday, May 20, 2004



**A N G E L
I S L A N D**

**I M M I G R A T I O N
S T A T I O N
F O U N D A T I O N**

P.O. Box 29237 • San Francisco, CA • 94129-0237

415/561-2160 t • 415/561-2162 f

www.aiisf.org

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Souder, Ranking Member Cummings and members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to speak to you regarding historic preservation of the peopling of America.

I am Katherine Toy, Executive Director of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF). AIISF is the non-profit partner of California State Parks and the National Park Service in the work to preserve the historic U.S. Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay.

Our nation offers a history of great diversity, one that matches the wealth of experiences of our rich heritage. So many of these stories, however, have gone untold. Angel Island Immigration Station is one example of a hidden history now coming to light and enriching our understanding of our nation in historic and contemporary times.

The immigration experience is a common thread binding the histories of most Americans. Whether escaping persecution, poverty, or lack of economic prospects, immigrants have come to this nation for the ideals it represents – freedom, democracy, and opportunity.

Most Americans know the story of Ellis Island, which processed immigrants crossing the Atlantic, but the story of its West Coast counterpart, Angel Island, is little-known. Located in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, Angel Island Immigration Station was routinely the first stop for many immigrants crossing the

Pacific Ocean. Between 1910 and 1940, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from around the world came through this station.

Angel Island's greatest significance is tied to the story of the estimated 175,000 Chinese immigrants who risked everything to travel to "gam san," or "Gold Mountain." Their experience was shaped by the Chinese Exclusion Act, the only legislation ever to ban a specific ethnic group from entry into the United States. Whereas many immigrants passed through Angel Island in a number of days, the average detention time for a Chinese immigrant was two to three weeks, and often several months. A few were forced to remain on the island for nearly two years.

Chinese Immigration

Political chaos and economic struggles plagued China throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, prompting many to leave in search of opportunities in America. California, with its news of gold in 1848 and building of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s offered dreams of survival and prosperity. By the late 1870s, however, America found itself in economic turmoil, and many blamed Chinese labor for the depression.

In 1882 Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting Chinese laborers from immigrating and denying citizenship to foreign-born Chinese. This act marked the first time any group of laborers was denied entry to the United States solely on the basis of race. Other

exclusionary laws followed that profoundly affected all Asian immigration until the repeal of Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943.

Exclusion did not stop the Chinese and other Asians from coming to America. Many young men, desperate for a better life in America, developed ways to circumvent the system. They came as “paper sons”, falsely claiming to be related to a legal resident or another family legally entering the country. But, the burden of proof fell squarely on the shoulders of every Chinese immigrant brought to Angel Island Immigration Station.

Life at the Immigration Station

Isolated as Angel Island was, immigration officials regarded the location as ideal – communication was limited, quarantine was possible, and escape was unlikely. About 250 to 350 people were usually housed in the barracks. Immigration officials separated men and women, and also segregated Chinese, Japanese, Korean and European immigrants from one another.

New arrivals to the Immigration Station underwent a medical examination. Unfamiliar with the language, customs, and Western medical procedures, the examination was often characterized by newcomers as humiliating and barbaric.

After the physical examinations, the entry hearing was the most critical hurdle. Hearings often lasted two to three days, with inspectors interrogating applicants about the smallest details of their house, village, or family. A family member of the applicant was also interrogated to confirm the applicant’s answers.

Passing the interrogation was no simple task. Failure could mean deportation. The last resort was an appeal to a higher court and an indefinite stay on Angel Island while awaiting a decision. Inspectors presiding over each case had wide discretionary power in determining the fate of each applicant.

Questions typically asked:

- What is our living room floor made of?
- Where is the rice bin kept?
- Where is your village's temple?
- What are the names of the neighbors who live in your village land and what are their occupations?
- What direction does your home in China face?
- How many windows does your house in China have?

Poems

For Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island, weeks easily passed into months and in some cases, nearly two years. Anxiety, depression, and fear were expressed through poetry written or carved into the barrack walls. Today, more than 100 of these poems are still visible at Angel Island Immigration Station, capturing the voices of the immigrants in time and place, and serving as a physical and emotional testament that resonates with all Americans who share a history of immigration.

*Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?
I look to see who is happy but they only sit quietly.
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.
The days are long and the bottle constantly empty; my sad mood, even so, is not dispelled.*

Nights are long and the pillow cold; who can pity my loneliness?

After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow,

Why not just return home and learn to plow the fields?

- poem from the walls of Angel Island Immigration Station, author and date unknown

Current Status of the Immigration Station

Angel Island Immigration Station closed in 1940 after a fire destroyed the Administration Building. The remaining detainees were moved to San Francisco. The Chinese Exclusion Act was finally repealed in 1943 when China became America's ally in World War II. The Immigration Station site and buildings were transferred back to the U.S. Army, which quickly adapted the site to temporarily detain prisoners of war and to house enlisted soldiers. The Army built mess halls, additional barracks and guard towers on the site.

When the Army vacated the Angel Island, the structures fell into disrepair. Most were removed by the Army Corps of Engineers and California State Parks. Of the original Immigration Station structures, only the Detention Barracks, Hospital, Power House, Pump House and Mule Barn remain.

Today Angel Island Immigration Station is a part of Angel Island State Park, owned and operated by the California State Parks system. Limited restoration efforts by community members in the early 1980s allowed the first floor of the Detention Barracks to be opened to the public and some of the poetry to be viewed. The site is a popular destination for school field trips, with more than 30,000 students and their teachers visiting the site each year.

Preserving the Legacy

It has been nearly 50 years since the last active use of Angel Island Immigration Station. The buildings and the treasure of poems have been battered by time and elements. Over the past two decades, the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) has tirelessly advocated for the preservation of the poetry and remaining structures on the former detention site and for the creation of a world-class visitor and genealogical research center that will ensure the story of Angel Island's Immigration Station can be told for generations to come. Achievements include:

- Designation of the site as a National Historic Landmark in 1997, and one of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places" in 1999.
- Designation as a member of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience
- Placement of a \$400,000 earmark in the state budget in 1999 and \$15 million in bond funds for the restoration into Prop. 12 in 2000.
- Working with members of the 107th Congress in requesting a report from the GSA as to how the federal government could best support the restoration of Angel Island Immigration Station.

Over the past few years, AIISF and its preservation partners, California State Parks and the National Park Service, have conducted approximately \$500,000 worth of historic preservation studies with funds raised from private, state and federal sources. A master plan for the site has now been completed, calling for five phases of restoration for the historic Immigration Station. Phase I, funded by a \$15 million in bond funds approved by California voters in 2000, and a \$500,000 Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, is now underway. The entire project is expected to cost more than \$30 million.

While owned and operated by the State of California today, Angel Island Immigration Station represents a national history of importance to all Americans. In fact, while the Immigration Station and the precious poems carved on the walls serve as a physical touchstone to this history, the stories of these immigrants are chronicled in the National Archives and Records Administration. Future phases of the Immigration Station project call for restoration of the Immigration Station hospital as an education and family history/genealogy center, providing visitors with digital access to NARA and other immigration records.

Building the Future

The enduring value of Angel Island Immigration Station lies in the lessons that its past can teach us about our present and our future. Immigration is a national story, one which gets to the very heart of the American identity: “Who is an American?” “Who is included/excluded and how has that changed over time?” Angel Island and Ellis Island serve as bookends to the national story of immigration, not only in geography, but also in meaning and experience. While Angel Island Immigration Station represents a difficult chapter in our national history, it is ultimately a story of triumph and of the perseverance of immigrants to endure and establish new lives in this country.

The restoration of Angel Island Immigration Station is prime example of how everyday Americans can work together with private, State and Federal partners to preserve a chapter of our national story. Congress can aid this work by supporting bills such as the Angel Island Restoration and Preservation Act, introduced this week by Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, which will help direct federal dollars towards the preservation of this important historical site.

I applaud the members of this subcommittee for your efforts to understand the needs of preserving the history of the peopling of America. I urge you and your fellow members of Congress to work to preserve sites like Angel Island Immigration Station. In doing so, generations to come can appreciate these sites, which are symbols of the perseverance of the immigrant spirit and the diversity of this great nation.