

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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BENICIA ARSENAL

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BENICIA ARSENAL

One mile east of Benicia and scattered over the rolling hills which skirt the shores of Carquinez Straits are the buildings of Benicia Arsenal, the depot for the deposit and distribution of ordnance stores for all the United States troops west of the Rocky Mountains, in Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippine Islands and China. Until 1849, ordnance, quartermaster, commissary, and other supplies for the Pacific Division of the army were stored in San Francisco warehouses. The leases of these were due to expire about July first of that year, and since they could have been renewed only at prohibitive rentals, Major-general Persifer F. Smith, commander of the division, looked about for some other spot to which the supplies might be moved.

In the spring of 1849, several neighboring places were examined, and on April 9, 1849, General Smith reported in favor of a location one mile east of Benicia. The town had been laid out with high hopes in 1847, and two years later it still aspired to become the metropolis of the San Francisco Bay region. The proprietors of the town site, who were also the owners of the land immediately to the east, believed that the proposed military establishment would greatly promote their interests, and they readily agreed to donate the necessary

land to the government. By deeds of April and May, 1849, and others of 1854 and 1855, Robert Semple and wife, Thomas O. Larkin and wife, and Bethuel Phelps formally transferred the ground to the United States.¹

Some years later it was decided that the proprietors had no legal right to cede the property, their title having been derived by deed from Mariano G. Vallejo; his based on the so-called Suscol grant which was rejected by the Supreme Court of the United States. The land, therefore, had never legally ceased to be a part of the public domain. An executive order of October 10, 1862, cleared up the matter by setting aside the ground as a military reservation. Title to that portion of the land which bordered the Carquinez Straits and was situated below high-water line was ceded to the United States by the State of California on March 9, 1897.²

On April 31, 1849, two companies of the Second Infantry roached the recently transferred property to construct a military post for protecting the stores, and not long afterward the stores themselves arrived from San Francisco. The military post and the supply depot were situated on the same

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1. E. Bandel, Frontier life in the Army, 309; United States Judge-advocate-general's Department (Army), United States military reservations, national cemeteries, and military parks, 26-27.
 2. United States, Judge-advocate-general's Department (Army), United States military reservations, national cemeteries, and military parks, 26-27.

land, but were separate and distinct establishments, the former being known as the "Post near Benicia," and the latter as the "General Depot near Benicia" or the "Division Depot Benicia."

Towards the end of 1850, the chief of ordnance ordered Brevet Captain Charles P. Stone, then commanding Fort Monroe Arsenal, Virginia, to proceed to California, where he was to take charge of all ordnance property of the Pacific Division and to consult with the commander of the division as to the best location for an ordnance depot. Captain Stone, with twenty-one enlisted men of the ordnance corps and a ship load of stores, left Fort Monroe in January, 1851.³

The long trip around Cape Horn in the ship Helen McGaw passed without special incident. An old order reveals one of the methods employed in maintaining discipline on board.⁴

Ship Helen McGaw
at sea
March 1, 1851

Order

Artificer Buckley, for neglect of duty as sentinel last night, is relieved from guard duty until further orders. He will walk the deck from main mast to the foremast, every night from 8 until 12 o'clock. The First Sergeant will see to the execution of this order.

Signed C. P. Stone
Brevet Captain,
Commanding.

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3. Bandel, Frontier life in the army, 309; United States 35th Congress, 1st session, House, Executive Document, No. 88, 139.
4. King, G. An incomplete history of Benicia Arsenal, Mss., loose sheets.

San Francisco was reached in the latter part of July. Upon reporting to General Ethan A. Hitchcock, commanding officer of the division, Captain Stone was directed to select "the most favorable" point in the entire division for an ordnance depot and to establish there a temporary depot sufficient for the wants of the time but which could be changed to an arsenal of construction of the largest size should conditions ever require such a move.

Acting under these instructions, the captain personally examined the country about San Francisco and the adjacent bays. He carefully questioned army officers and civilians about conditions in the other part of the division and finally selected the military reservation near Benicia as the best site for the new arsenal. He believed that the large population and extensive business facilities of San Francisco would have made that city an ideal location for his depot had it not been for two drawbacks - the heavy summer fogs which tended to rust the arms and destroy ammunition and the ease with which the yet inadequately fortified San Francisco could be taken by an enemy approaching from the sea.⁵

Benicia he found to be an easily defended position, located thirty miles inland but still accessible to the

5. United States 35th Congress, 1st session, House, Executive Document, No. 88, 139-140.

largest sea-going vessels. The climate was dry and favorable to the preservation of ordnance supplies.

His decision once made, Captain Stone proceeded to the Benicia reservation, where he separated the ordnance stores from the others and began to construct buildings in which to house them. He had observed that those portions of the reserve which were most suitable for the construction of an arsenal were already occupied by the depots of the quartermaster's and subsistence departments and had recommended to General Hitchcock the purchase of additional land to the north of the government property. Until more land should be bought, however, he determined to locate a temporary ordnance storage station between the barracks and the quartermaster's depot.

General Hitchcock approved of the plan and on his own initiative purchased nearly four hundred acres of ground adjoining the reserve on the north. This land was apportioned to the ordnance depot and its occupation was begun. When the secretary of war heard of the new real estate, however, he denounced the whole deal as unauthorized and ordered General Hitchcock to pay for the property himself. Captain Stone was greatly disappointed by the loss of this land and advised the chief of ordnance that without additional space the new depot could never become an arsenal of construction.⁶

6. United States 35th Congress, 1st session, House, Executive Document, No. 88, 140-141.

As early as September, 1851, the first building of the arsenal - a small wooden powder magazine - was completed. The next year several more structures were erected, one of which, a stone workshop, is still in use. During the next few years the growth of Benicia Arsenal was steady and rapid, being fostered by a continuous flow of appropriations. Between 1853 and 1863, congress authorized an expenditure of 550,970 dollars on the establishment, and in the same period some fifteen stone and frame buildings were constructed, including storehouses, magazines, workshops, quarters for officers and enlisted men, and a wharf.⁷

One of the most beautiful structures on the arsenal grounds is the stone powder magazine which was constructed in 1857.⁸ The graceful arches of the ceiling and the handsomely decorated supporting pillars are splendid examples of the stone-cutter's art. Another fine building is the main storehouse, which, before it was gutted by fire in 1912, rose three stories high. At present there are only two stories, but the taller of the two towers at diagonal corners of the storehouse retains their original height. Built of Benicia sandstone, with loop-hole windows in the lower floor, this structure was built to withstand attack, and retains a

7. Bandel, Frontier life in the army, 309; King, An incomplete history of Benicia Arsenal, Mss., 2.

8. United States 35th Congress, 1st session. House, Executive Document, No. 2, pt.2, 568.

formidable appearance to the present day.⁹ The clock in the front tower commemorates the long service of Colonel Julian McAllister, who for twenty-two years was in command of Benicia Arsenal.¹⁰

When first established, the arsenal was known as the "California Ordnance Depot," then as the "Benicia Ordnance Depot," and finally, in April, 1852, the name was changed to "Benicia Arsenal." The arsenal was founded primarily as a supply depot for military activities of western posts, and serves in that capacity to the present day. Here are kept the ordnance stores for the Regular Army, the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and the National Guard in Oregon, Washington, California, Nevada, Utah, Montana and Wyoming, besides those for the Philippine Islands, Hawaii, China, and Alaska.

These stores are of a most diverse character and are designed to meet every need for ordnance material which might arise within the area served by the arsenal. Included among them are rifles, machine guns, pistols, optical instruments for fire control, all classes of mobile artillery, some seacoast artillery, tractors, tanks, repair trucks, parts and accessories for all types of weapons, cleaning and preserving

9. United States 36th Congress, 1st session. Senate, Executive Documents, No.2, pt.3, 1130-1131; United States 36th Congress, End session. Senate, Executive Document, No.1 pt.2, 987.

10. King, An incomplete history of Benicia Arsenal, 175, loose sheets.

material, and all kinds of ammunition and explosives, from calibre .22 cartridges to 2,000 pound airplane demolition bombs. These supplies are stored in magazines and warehouses which are distributed over a large area of the reservation. Many of the explosives are kept in underground magazines, and wherever practicable a hill separates the warehouses in which ammunition is stored, to minimize the danger from explosions.

In spite of all precautions, however, Benicia Arsenal has suffered some severe losses through fire and explosion. In October, 1912, a conflagration of undetermined origin broke out in the main storehouse, and the entire contents of the building were destroyed, with a loss of about 1,571,000 dollars. Even more spectacular was the fire and explosion of August 12, 1922. A spark caused by the disassembling of a three-inch shrapnel projectile ignited some loose grains of black powder, and the resulting fire, carried by the dry grass on the hills, spread rapidly over a large section of the reservation. When the flames reached the ammunition stored in magazine No. 1, a terrific blast occurred. Bits of the building were blown hundreds of yards away, and not a trace of it remains. Several other structures were destroyed by the fire.

Benicia Arsenal, however, is not only a supply depot. Shops have been installed where extensive repairs and alterations of ordnance supplies are carried on, and to a limited degree Benicia has been developed into a manufactur-

ing arsenal. The manufactured articles consist chiefly of cast-iron projectiles for coast artillery practice, bags for putting up smokeless powder charges for coast artillery cannon, target material, and a few spare and emergency parts for artillery guns and carriages and for other ordnance equipment.

The depot possesses a large modern machine shop, a foundry, a mill and a carpenter shop. For the upkeep of certain supplies there are small arms and tractor repair shops and a plant for assembling and disassembling ammunition. In the early days a proving ground for powder was maintained at Army Point. Considerable experimentation in explosives was carried on there in conjunction with that done by commercial powder firms in the San Francisco Bay district. When smooth-bore muskets and cannon were superseded by rifled weapons, the arsenal altered many of the old guns and converted them into the newer types.¹¹

Throughout the various military crises which the United States has faced since 1851, Benicia Arsenal has played its part. Early in 1861, when the secession of the Southern States from the Union was under way, the commander of the Pacific Department of the Army was Albert Sidney Johnston, a man of known sympathy with the South, who was soon there-

11. Bandel, Frontier life in the Army, 305, 309-310; King, An incomplete history of Benicia Arsenal, Mss., 3-6 and loose sheets.

after to become one of the most famous generals of the Confederacy. He arrived in San Francisco in January, 1861, to take over his command, and it was not long before he was aware of the bitter struggle which was going on between the Northerners and the Southerners in California, over the question of secession.

It has often been asserted by writers that certain men of Southern leanings were plotting then to set up in California a Pacific Republic and that part of the plan was the seizure of Alcatraz Island and Benicia Arsenal. To the credit of General Johnston, it may be said no trustworthy evidence has ever been brought forward to show he was in any way connected with this scheme. On the contrary, it seems to be fairly well established that the general remained absolutely true to his trust and that, when warned a plot existed to seize the government arms and fortification, he took prompt measures to prevent any such occurrence.

General Johnston resigned from the United States Army on April 10th, 1861, and asked that a successor might be sent to relieve him. Lest knowledge of his act might weaken the morale of the soldiers under him or promote disaffection in California, Johnston told only a few trusted persons that he was leaving the service of the United States. About two weeks later General E. V. Sumner made a sudden and unannounced arrival at San Francisco, bearing orders to take

over the command of the department. The manner of his coming gave rise to many journalistic stories to the effect that the government had discovered General Johnston to be in league with the plotters to seize California. Sumner's arrival did, however, help to quiet matters in the State, and Benicia Arsenal was comparatively safe from seizure during the remainder of the war.¹²

During the Spanish-American War, Benicia Arsenal furnished ordnance supplies to troops going to the Philippines and was kept busy repairing arms which became unserviceable through use. The World War taxed the capacity of the arsenal to the limit. Supplies were sent to all troops west of the Rockies, including such large camps as Camp Lewis, Camp Fremont, and Camp Kearny. Furthermore, the expeditionary forces in Siberia received their ordnance stores from Benicia. Although the plant at the arsenal was expanded during the war, it was inadequate to house all the goods which were deposited there after the armistice.¹³

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12. Like so many other points in California history, Johnston's actions while in the State have been the subject of much controversy. It is understood that a great deal of the evidence on this matter has been collected and it is to be hoped that it will be made available in published form. See W. P. Johnston, The life of General Albert Sidney Johnston, 248-262; H. H. Bancroft, Bancroft Scraps, Set W, XLIX, 80-81; The Oakland Tribune, April 7, 1935 and July 19, 1936.
13. King, An incomplete history of Benicia Arsenal, Mss., loose sheets.

In the administration building of the Benicia Arsenal are two beautifully drawn old maps which show the establishment as it was during the early years of its existence. One serves as a reminder of one of the most interesting experiments in transportation ever made in North America, for it shows a circular area on a point of land, jutting out into the straits, which was set aside as a corral for camels.

For more than a decade before the outbreak of the Civil War, the United States had been faced with the problem of transporting supplies, mail and people over the desert wastes which covered a large part of the area acquired by the Mexican War. The idea of using camels for that purpose naturally suggested itself, and the War Department finally decided to put the idea to a practical test. A number of these animals were secured in Egypt and the Near East and landed in Texas in 1856 and 1857. In the latter year the secretary of war sent Edward Fitzgerald Beale to open a wagon road from Fort Defiance, New Mexico, to Southern California. As a test of the camels' usefulness, Beale was to bring a number of them with him to the Pacific Coast.

The trip was made successfully, and the camels were kept in Southern California where they were employed for a number of years in carrying supplies to army posts, on messenger service, and for other tasks. It soon became apparent, however, that the experiment was not working as well as had

been expected. For various reasons the camels were used less and less for military work, and before long they were regarded as a needless expense.

In September, 1863, orders were issued to sell at public auction all government camels in California; at that time there were thirty-four or thirty-five at different posts in the southern part of the State. These were rounded up and driven north to the Benicia Arsenal, where they all arrived in good condition in February, 1864. For a month before the sale advertisements in San Francisco and Sacramento papers announced that the animals would be sold at eleven o'clock in the morning of February 26, 1864, for "cash in legal tender notes." The auction was held on the stated day, and the entire herd was purchased by Samuel McLenaghan. The new owner disposed of some of the animals locally and for a number of years afterwards they "would occasionally be seen driven in phaetons or in buckboards, ambling along in the most jerky, seasick fashion." A part of the herd was taken to Nevada for use in packing freight. For many years the government kept a supply of camel saddles at Benicia. It is said that one of the famous Mizner family finally purchased about two hundred of them at auction for ten cents apiece.¹⁴

14. A. Gray, "Camels in California" in California Historical Society, Quarterly, IX (December, 1930), 299-317; M. Stacey, Uncle Sam's camels, Cambridge, 1929; A. Mizner, The many Mizners, 33; The Oakland Tribune, March 15, 1936; Daily Evening Bulletin, February 25, 1864.

Life at Benicia Arsenal during the first decade of its existence has been recorded in a series of remarkable letters written to his parents in Prussia by a young German, Eugene Bandel, who became a civilian employee at the depot in 1859. No better idea of the every-day routine of arsenal life can be given than to quote the writings of that observant mechanic.

In a letter of October 23, 1859, Bandel described the manner in which he passed away his spare time. To his parents he wrote:¹⁵

Let us now discuss the pleasures which offer themselves to me on this day - Sunday. The American devotes his entire Sunday morning to church; I use it to write letters. In the afternoon I pay brief visits to a few of the soldiers here in the garrison, with whom I am associated. Evenings I could, as I have usually done, go to town, which is at a distance of a mile from the arsenal, and have a few games of billiards or play cards. Although I get some enjoyment out of the games, I do not like the expense and drinking connected therewith. You know I never cared for beer. The liquors are adulterated and of too poor a sort. Cigars are too expensive. Such an evening usually costs me about \$2 or \$3, which I consider money wasted.... There are no theaters or concerts here in Benicia. The town is too small. I am not acquainted in family circles, and... I have not exchanged so much as ten words with any unmarried woman in Benicia and so there remains nothing for me but to read or write.

Eugene Bandel was an energetic and faithful employee of the government and endowed with considerable mechanical

15. Bandel, Frontier life in the Army, 304.

ability. Although only twenty-four when he started to work at the arsenal, his promotion was rapid, and after the Civil War he was appointed master mechanic. His name is connected with the securing of an adequate water supply for the reservation. As superintendent, he was in charge of drilling the well which was begun on the arsenal grounds in 1872, this being one of the first deep artesian wells on the Pacific Coast.¹⁶

The number of troops and civilian employees at Benicia Arsenal has varied from time to time, depending upon the amount of work to be done and the size of congressional appropriations. At present there are two officers, about fifty-five enlisted men, and about seventy-five civilian employees at work on the reservation. To this force belongs the task of guarding and caring for the multitude of ordnance stores at the arsenal. The clerical work involved in the receiving and shipping of supplies and in filing blue-prints for every part of ordnance equipment is of considerable magnitude, but above all the staff of the depot must be ready to forward supplies on a moment's notice to any part of the Pacific area where they might be needed. In any emergency involving the use of military forces west of the Rocky Mountains, Benicia Arsenal stands ready to supply the "sinews of war" upon which any successful operations of troops are based.

16. Bandel, Frontier life in the Army, 64-65.

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(This typewritten manuscript is in the Administration Building, Benicia Arsenal. The loose sheets in the back of the manuscripts are not the work of Warrant Officer King.)