

# Little-Known Facts About The Presidio Of San Francisco

- 1) The Presidio has a history military use going 218 years. It was originally founded as the most remote, northerly outpost of the Spanish Empire in September 1776. It was used as a military post continuously by the Spanish, Mexican and American armies until 1994, when it was transferred to the National Park Service.
- 2) The only overnight campsite in San Francisco, Robb Hill Campground, is located at the Presidio's highest point in a eucalyptus grove above Bakers Beach.
- 3) Today, urban forests cover the Presidio's hills. Most of the trees, especially the eucalyptus, cypress and pine, were planted by the Army starting in the 1880s.
- 4) Presidio cavalry troops (including some of the African American "Buffalo Soldiers") were posted at the Presidio in the early 1900s and served as park rangers, protecting and maintaining Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks before the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916.
- 5) In 1968, a soldier-prisoner attempting to escape from the Presidio's military stockade was shot dead by a guard. A few days later, 27 prisoners staged a sit-in, singing "We Shall Overcome." The Army cracked down on the protesters and charged them with mutiny. The first prisoner to be convicted was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor, prompting an outcry in the media.
- 6) Mountain Lake along the Presidio's southern boundary is one of San Francisco's three remaining natural lakes. The other two being Lake Merced and Pine Lake.
- 7) The Presidio contains nearly 900 structures. 470 of them are considered historic.
- 8) The Presidio's "Pet Cemetery" is the final resting place for hundreds of animals owned by families that were stationed at the Presidio. Dogs and cats are the most numerous of the cemetery's 424 handmade headstones but there here are also birds, rodents, and reptiles interred here as well.
- 9) In 1975, the Presidio became the first stop for 1,300 infant refugees from Vietnam. The controversial "Operation Baby Lift" airlifted babies and toddlers orphaned by the Vietnam War to the United States for adoption by American parents. The Army agreed to house and feed the children until permanent homes were arranged, converting an old drill hall into a sprawling baby nursery.

- 10) A pro-democracy foundation run by former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev opened an office in the Presidio in 1993. It was both symbolic and meaningful at the time—the Soviet Union had fallen only two years earlier, and the Presidio was still officially a military base for another year.
- 11) The Presidio is home to the largest collection of British artist Andy Goldsworthy's public works on public view in North America, including Wood Line, the snaking wood piece on Lover's Lane, and the towering Spire.
- 12) It has a bowling center with twelve lanes. Why not?

*Adapted from <https://sf.curbed.com/2019/12/18/21028391/presidio-sf-facts-to-do-history-san-francisco>*

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Presidio of San Francisco  
Golden Gate National Recreation Area

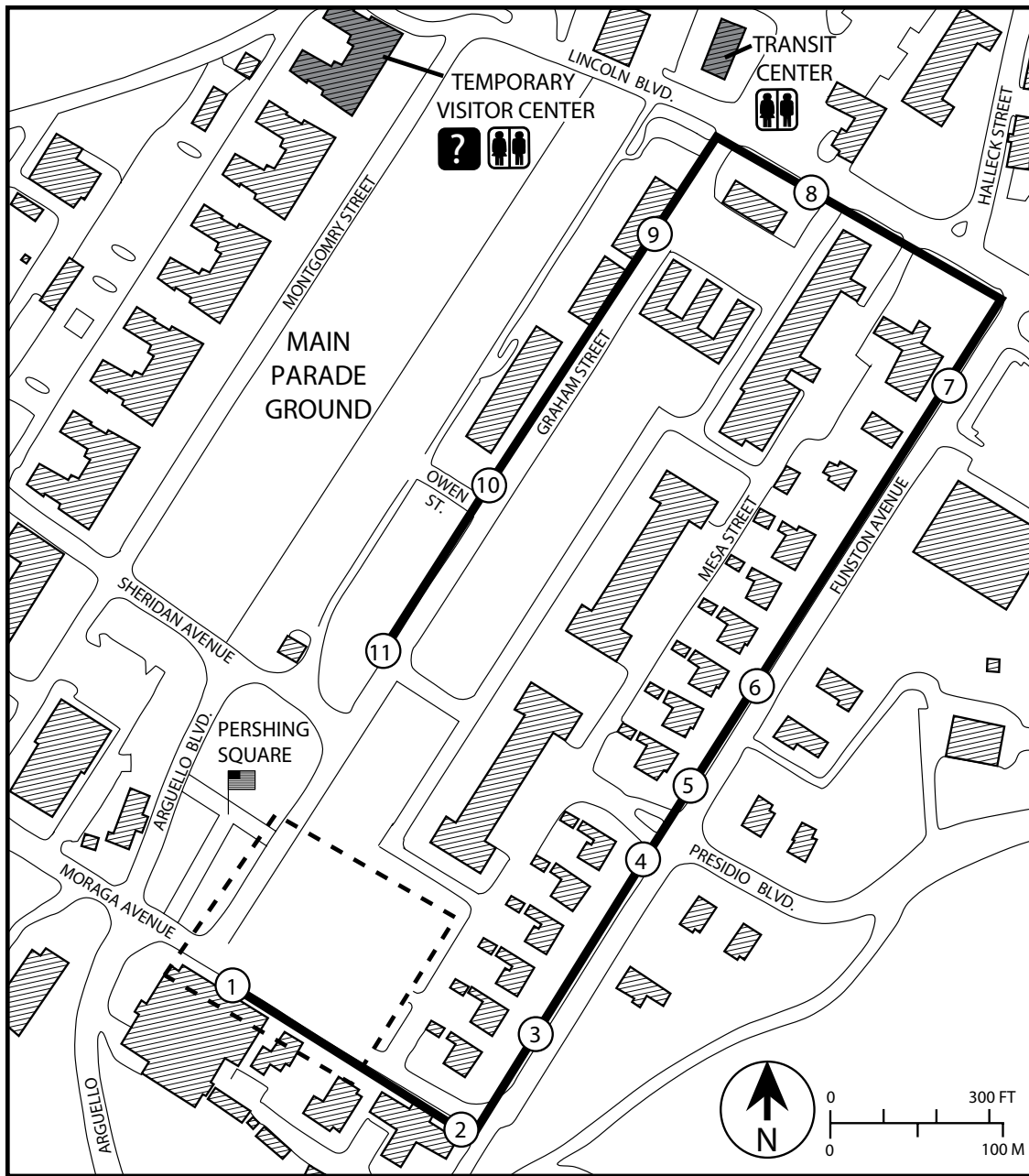
# Main Post Walk

*200 years of history and architecture*



Fort Mason, Bldg. 201  
San Francisco, CA 94123  
(415) 561-4323  
[www.nps.gov/goga](http://www.nps.gov/goga)  
[www.nps.gov/prsf](http://www.nps.gov/prsf)

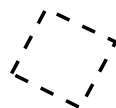




INFORMATION



RESTROOM



FOOTPRINT OF  
1776 PRESIDIO

Walk around the Presidio's main post and experience firsthand more than 200 years of history, architecture and natural beauty...17th-century cannon...homes occupied by soldiers during the Civil War...a forest where wind once whipped sand dunes.

### The Route

**Length:** One mile

**Number of stops:** 11

**Time required:** About one hour

**Access:** The entire route is paved with curb cuts, but watch for steps and cracked pavement. There is one steep downhill on Funston Avenue (between Stops 6 and 7).

**Restrooms:** Located at the temporary visitor center, 105 Montgomery Street or the Transit Center, at Lincoln Blvd. and Graham Street.

If you have any questions, please call 415-561-4323.

Begin in front of the Officers' Club facing downhill (see map).



### El Presidio de San Francisco

To understand how the Presidio developed, imagine it as it looked more than 200 years ago: windswept and almost barren, with low-growing dune plants, grass and shrubs. An extensive marsh along the bayshore abounded with seagulls and pelicans, a few deer and occasionally a mountain lion or grizzly bear. The native people, the Ohlone, lived nearby in small villages, in shelters constructed of reeds. The animals and plants provided the inhabitants with food, tools and clothing. For about 5,000 years Ohlone life ebbed and flowed with the seasons: with the sunshine, fog and rain.

At this spot in 1776, Spanish colonists established a presidio—the Spanish term for a walled fortification where soldiers and their families lived. The original Spanish presidio formed a square about 90 paces on each side; you are now standing near its southwest corner (see map).

On the cover: against backdrop of the main post, a medical detachment poses before Montgomery Street barracks. Note medical steward at upper left holding a kitten.



Artist's conception of how the Presidio may have appeared in 1779.

“We rode up to the Presidio...into a spacious verdant plain, surrounded by hills...a square area, two hundred yards in length, enclosed by a mud wall, and resembling a pound for cattle. Above this wall the thatched roofs of their low small houses just made their appearance.”

—Captain George Vancouver, 1792

At first the Spanish lived in thatched shelters similar to those of the Ohlone. Soon, however, they began to erect the adobe and timber structures more familiar to them, only to have harsh winter storms wash apart the earthen bricks and blow off the thatched tule roofs. Eventually they made clay tile roofs to shield the buildings from the wind and rain.

Initially about 40 soldiers, their wives and children, and 140 civilians lived on the Presidio. Gradually the civilians moved three miles inland to Mission Dolores, where the weather was better.

To protect their tiny outpost, the Spanish erected an adobe fort at the harbor entrance in 1793. The two bronze cannon flanking the door of the Officers’ Club—the San Pedro (1673) and the Poder (1673)—were once positioned at that fort. Six of the fort’s 13 bronze cannon remain on the Presidio today. Among the oldest known cannon in North America, each contains the coat of arms of the king of Spain and the viceroy of “New Spain,” the date of casting, the maker’s mark, and the name of the piece.

2

**The Forest**

San Francisco grew explosively following the 1849 Gold Rush, prompting the U.S. government to formally establish a military reservation here in 1850. The Presidio's proximity to gold and other resources gave it new importance a decade later, during the Civil War. Rumors of Confederate plots flew. With Fort Point just completed at the harbor entrance, a greater military presence at the Presidio would safeguard the West Coast for the Union. Thus, the post experienced its first major expansion—and beautification.



Chapel, about 1867

In 1883 Major William A. Jones proposed a forest to “crown the ridges . . . and cover the areas of sand and marsh . . .” San Francisco was advancing westward. A forest would provide contrast between city and post, and accentuate the government’s power. It would also create windbreaks, subdue the blowing sands and beautify the bleak expanses. Over the next 20 years some 400,000 seedlings were planted, often in orderly rows, like soldiers in formation. Eucalyptus, cypress and pine trees thrived, altering the landscape forever.

**Cross Moraga Avenue and walk downhill to Presidio Boulevard, noting especially the houses on your left.**

3

### Funston Avenue

Built during the U.S. Civil War in accordance to standard Army plans, these houses faced west toward a new, larger parade ground. In 1878 the porch was removed from the front side of each house and reattached to the back side, which you are now viewing. This “about face” re-oriented the houses to present a more pleasing appearance to visitors from the city. Over the years bay windows, gables and dormers added to their unique charm. By the mid-1880s, white picket fences, street lamps, flower gardens and the developing forest gave the street a garden-like quality.

As you stroll down this street, imagine life as it was during the late 19th century: soldiers awakening to bugle calls before sunrise, wives preparing meals on wood-burning stoves, boys chopping wood, girls learning to make lace doilies to decorate elaborately furnished rooms, troops and horses parading down the street daily.

4

### The Alameda

Halfway down Funston Avenue the “Alameda” (Spanish for avenue) served as the post’s official entrance from the 1860s until 1895. Old photographs show a soldier standing guard duty here, by a formal wooden arch, with hundreds of cannonballs lining the street as decorative curbing. A bandstand here further added to the picturesque setting.

View up Funston Avenue from the Alameda in the 1880s



“I went to the Presidio... where the soldiers live in barracks and in tents. There are beautiful residences where the officers live and a wide cement drive where automobiles and carriages go, with dirt roads for the cavalry.”

—Laura Ingalls Wilder, author, 1915

5

### Queen Anne/Stick Style

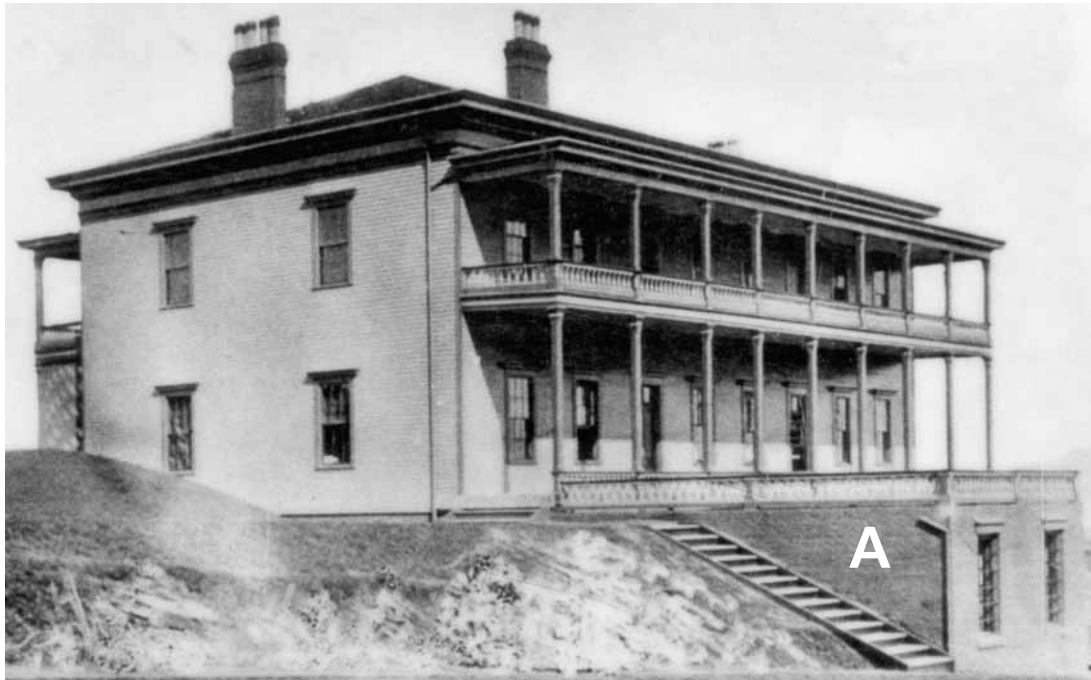
The more elaborate Victorian-era houses bordering Presidio Boulevard were built in the late 1880s for higher-grade officers, reflecting the Presidio’s increased status. They contain simplified versions of both the Queen Anne and Stick styles of architecture: wrap-around porches with lattice beneath, roof brackets and column braces, fish-scale shingles with horizontal siding.

Continue down Funston and note the two houses across the street.

6

### Two More Styles

The first house, built in 1889, was modeled after Army buildings in the still-untamed Arizona Territory. The one next door, constructed four years later, is French. Its big mansard roof was very



The hospital before its morgue (small building marked "A") was removed about 1881-84.

fashionable in France in the mid-1800s, because it created an extra floor that was technically considered an attic, and as such was not subject to taxation. Houses of this style are uncommon on U.S. Army posts.

Continue down the hill to the corner.

7

### Post Hospital

The homes on Funston Avenue weren't the only structures to get an "about face." Built in 1863, the post hospital also opened toward the parade ground before it was remodeled in 1878. The octagonal-shaped section on the right contained the operating room. Its windows on many sides enhanced the lighting for surgery, an important aid in foggy San Francisco. The hospital became a dispensary in 1899 following construction of Letterman Army Hospital and continued as such until 1973.

Turn west at Lincoln Boulevard and look for the fire station across the street.



Field artillery assembled near the main post guardhouse (now the U.S. Post Office) in about 1910.

8

### Fire Station

Among the famous names connected with the Presidio is that of Brigadier General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, whose family lived in a house where Pershing Square is today. In 1915, while General Pershing was on duty in Mexico, the house burned, and his wife and three daughters perished. Out of the tragedy came the construction in 1917 of this fire station with its hose-drying tower outside and brass pole inside. It also resulted in the establishment of the first professional firefighters on a U.S. Army post.



Presidio Fire Department, 1939



Field cannon firing with Montgomery Street barracks in background, about 1898.

9

Continue west on Lincoln to Graham Street. Cross Graham Street and begin walking up the hill.

### Enlisted Barracks

After the Civil War, the number of men in a company increased from 75 to 100, resulting in a need for more housing, like the artillery barracks on your left, which dates to 1886 and was recently restored. The barracks on your right, built in 1862, were part of a chain of one story barracks that once formed a row up the hill. They received their second story in 1885.

With the end of the Indian Wars in 1891, the U.S. stretched from coast to coast. The frontier had been settled. Many small Army outposts were closed and the troops moved to larger urban posts with better communications, transportation and supplies. On the West Coast, the Presidio of San Francisco continued to expand.

Continue uphill to Owen Street, then face east.

10

### Romanticized Past

The two buildings with massive arched entryways reflect a romanticized vision of California's past, popular in the state earlier this century. In the late 1930s the Army began "restoring" the main post's Spanish/Mexican appearance

11

through the use of architectural elements like arches, stucco and red tile roofs. Built in 1940, these buildings served as headquarters for the Sixth U.S. Army from 1946 to 1995.

Continue up Graham and face west near Sheridan.

### Montgomery Street

The row of barracks bordering Montgomery Street mark the first major use of brick in Presidio architecture. Built from 1895 to 1897, these monumental barracks symbolized permanence—a visible statement that the Army was here to stay. These barracks and the adjacent new parade ground once again expanded the main post.

In 1898 the U.S. went to war with Spain. The Presidio became the West Coast staging area for mobilizing and training troops bound for the Philippines. Fighting there was heavy. Sick and wounded returned to a hospital temporarily housed in two of these barracks while a new general hospital (later named Letterman General Hospital) was built near the waterfront. After distinguished service in World War I, the 30th Infantry Regiment, "San Francisco's Own," was garrisoned in these barracks from 1921 to 1941.

The Presidio of San Francisco was a military post for more than 200 years under the flags of three nations. Its long, proud history is visible everywhere: in its architecture and landscape, its cannon and parade grounds. Now that you've explored the heart of the Presidio, discover its byways. Visit the cemetery. Climb Lovers' Lane. Marvel at Fort Point. Stroll Crissy Field's promenade. Inspect Battery Chamberlin. Seek out the Presidio's wonders, broad vistas and hidden nooks. And come back—again and again.



Inspection of the 30th Infantry Regiment on the old parade ground, around 1923. Note the row of barracks along Graham Street that no longer exists.