GRANT SPOTLIGHT

UNCERTAIN PATH TO THE PROMISED LAND

Ellis Island Counterpart Gets Day in the Sun

As American icons go, there are perhaps none more powerful than the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Yet often unnoticed in the story of immigration is that, while millions were arriving in New York, an island in San Francisco Bay was also receiving a multitude of hopeful souls in search of a better life.

Angel Island was the entry point for hundreds of thousands of immigrants—most of them Asian—between 1910 and 1940. The immigration station, a National Historic Landmark, is now the focus of a preservation effort involving California, the National Park Service, and the nonprofit Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. A $500,000 grant from the National Park Service-administered Save America's Treasures program will help fund the project. The goal is to restore the site as a major tourist draw where visitors can not only learn about immigration—and the difficult racial issues—but trace their origins in a genealogical research center.

Often referred to as "the Ellis Island of the West," Angel Island bore some prominent differences. It was meant to enforce laws intended to keep immigrants out—mainly Chinese. In the late 1800s, powerful anti-immigration sentiment blossomed in the United States. Chinese workers were blamed for taking jobs away from whites and for helping to trigger the depression of the 1870s. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, halting the immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years. Teachers, students, merchants, and travelers were allowed in, but only with difficult-to-obtain certificates. Variations of the law extended exclusion to other unwanted groups. The attitude of the times was reflected in the name that an official gave the island: "Guardian of the Western Gate."

With an average stay of three weeks, immigrants lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions, separated by ethnicity and gender and kept under lock and key by night. Guards patrolled the fences. Detainees were subjected to rigorous physical exams and interrogations, with entry into the United States prohibitively stringent. Immigrants expressed their sadness and frustration by carving poetry into the walls of the barracks and hospital, now one of the island's most unique features.

By 1963 the station had become a State park, with the buildings slated for demolition until a ranger discovered the carved writings. The foundation helped procure funds to save the barracks as a State monument. When the station was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997, it was as an artifact of what nominators called the "unique immigration experience resulting from a series of racially prejudiced immigration laws enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries."

In recent years the foundation has done much to publicize the plight of the place, which has languished. The State legislature allocated $400,000 in 1999 and voters approved $15 million for preservation as part of a bond measure to improve parks.

Intensive work is now underway. A National Park Service report—on the island as a cultural landscape—offers a detailed historical overview. Volunteers are clearing overgrown pathways while planners weigh ideas about a visitor center, exhibits, and digitized immigration case files.

Angel Island is only one of two National Historic Landmarks commemorating Asian American history; the other is California's Manzanar National Historic Site.

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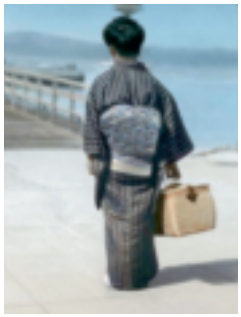

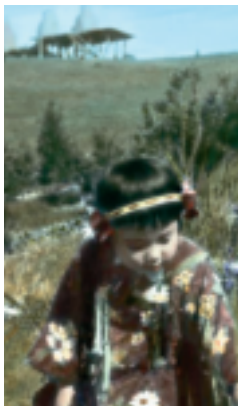

Above: Hand-colored lantern slides of Angel Island in the 1920s. Produced by the Episcopal Methodist Church in New York, they may have been used to publicize the immigrants' plight.

Right top: Japanese women with San Francisco Bay in the background, captured in hand-colored lantern slides; Right bottom: Arrivals in a mix of traditional and western dress.

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