

THE ISLANDS OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY

THEODORE S. SOLOMONS

Though the new, man-made Treasure Island of San Francisco's splendid exposition will be visited by millions, it is an odd fact that few spots of earth have been seen closely by so many people and trodden by so few as have the natural islands of San Francisco Bay. Of the tens of thousands who daily cross that beautiful expanse of water, not many know the history of the three little hilly islands—Angel, Alcatraz, Yerba Buena.

It is also strange that for two hundred years navigators may have seen two of these islands before they saw the bay that surrounds them. Cabrillo, the first of the great Pacific explorers, may have seen them as he passed along the coast in 1542. Sir Francis Drake, thirty-seven years later, sailed past the Golden Gate and should have seen islands in the bay. Cermenho in 1595, after suffering shipwreck, made his way southward with his men in the *San Buenaventura* and should likewise have had a passing glimpse of these islands. None of these men left any record of having seen the bay itself.

The coast is bold and when no fog envelops it the air is so clear that the islands and the high hills back of the bay merge and seem part of an uninterrupted coast line. The Golden Gate and the calm, beautiful inner bay at the feet of the islands must have remained unseen. For a hundred and fifty years the Spanish maps showed San Francisco Bay as the broad, shallow indentation between Pt. Reyes and Pt. San Pedro, but outside of the Golden Gate.

Not until the coming of Gaspar de Portolá in 1769 was the real San Francisco Bay seen by white men, and some years were to pass before it was at all adequately explored.

On the night of August 5, 1775, Juan Manuel Ayala sailed through the Golden Gate in the *San Carlos* and began the first survey of the bay's waters. The next day he saw and named Angel and Alcatraz islands.

Ayala made surprisingly accurate soundings of all the more important parts of the bay. His pilots in their launch explored the waters to the south and also northward as far as Carquinez Strait. The *San Carlos*, meanwhile, lay snugly anchored in the shelter of Angel Island in nine fathoms of water, "in pistol shot of the land." The Indians were very friendly.



THE GOLDEN GATE

Names were bestowed by Ayala upon many places in and about the great *estero* or bay he was sent to explore, and Canizaries, one of the pilots, put them all down in a neat and beautifully lettered column. But only two of the names remain—those of the islands he first saw and which he named Isla de los Angeles and Isla de Alcatrazes. The birds upon the island were pelicans, but Spaniards in America called both species *alcatrazes*, or albatrosses. Beechey, the great English explorer, said in 1825 that "pelicans may be seen morning and evening winging their long line of flight across the harbor and settling upon the little island of Alcatrazes."

To Father Pedro Font we are indebted for an excellent early description of the bay and its islands. Font was a member of the Anza expedition, which brought the first settlers to the bay and whose leader selected the sites for both the presidio and the mission of San Francisco.

Just ninety-eight days before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Font wrote: "Within the harbor I counted eight islands The first one seen is called Isla del Angel or Isla de los Angeles. . . . It must be nearly a league long. . . . In front of the mouth [the Golden Gate] there is a very small one like a farallon and another not so small [Alcatraz]; and nearly to the southeast a still larger one [Yerba Buena]. . . . Finally, besides the foregoing, in the bay in front of the mouth of Puerto Dulce [Carquinez Strait] there is a medium-sized island which has this shape [here follows an outline of Mare Island]."

In addition to these, Font listed what he thought to be islands near the eastern shore but which on further investigation proved to be the low Coyote Hills to the south and Point Richmond to the north. He also described two or three "farallones" or rocky islets, one of which was Red Rock. There were others that he could not see.

Of the four real islands of the bay none but Angel and Alcatraz were named until many years after their discovery. Yerba Buena seems first to have been called *Isla del Carmen* on Spanish charts. Locally it was known as Wood Island until about 1826 when it began to be called Yerba Buena. It continued to be so called until, early in the 'forties, goats were brought to the island, reputedly by Jose Castro to whom Yerba Buena was granted in 1838; whereupon it soon became known as Goat Island. For a time the United States Geographic Board officially sealed that name upon it; but in 1931, largely at the instance of the Navy Department, the Board reversed itself and restored the pretty Spanish name.

The earliest mention of the word "*yerba buena*" in connection with the region of San Francisco occurs in the diary of Father Font who says of their first camp, at Fort Point on March 27, 1776, "Here there are yerba buena and so many lilies I had them inside my tent."

Yerba buena (good herb) is also called Spanish mint. This low, trailing, sweet-scented mint was used to make a medicinal drink. There was much of it on the island and on the shore of the little cove opposite, where afterward San Francisco (first called Yerba Buena) was built. Soulé, who wrote the famous *Annals of San Francisco*, thought it probable it was the island that "first bore the name which later was given to the cove."

Isla de Yegua (Mare Island) was farthest from the settlements, and when seen from the Carquinez Strait seemed to be part of the north shore. It was undoubtedly the last to be named. Several versions of its christening have survived. One is that General Vallejo, whose ranches lay near, was floating some horses through the strait when one, a fine white mare, jumped overboard and swam to the island. Another is that Victor Castro, who was granted the island by Governor Alvarado in 1841, placed upon it a herd of valuable brood mares to safeguard them from Indian horse thieves.

These stories, especially the first one, are not lacking in confirmation. Joseph W. Revere, in his *Tour of Duty in California* in the middle 'forties, says that when sailing into Carquinez Strait they observed "the large herd of elk for which Mare Island is famous, which was invariably accompanied by a wild mare who had found her way thither.

"We saw the beautiful band feeding in company with their equine friend. We could not get near enough for a shot. . . . A fine

spectacle they made as they dashed off under the lead of the fleet mare . . . until they faded from sight in the morass inaccessible to human footsteps."

For over half a century the serenity of Angel Island remained undisturbed. In 1834 it was granted to John Reed as part of the Rancho Corte Madera, now in Marin County. Five years later in some strange way it was also bestowed upon Antonio Maria Osio. Though he did not live upon the island, Osio built there four houses and a little reservoir. He raised horses and cattle and cultivated some of the land.

About 1852, when the federal government began actively to concern itself with the defense of California, the island was taken over by the United States. Probably some settlement was made with Reed. Osio's claim was rejected by the courts.

Alcatraz Island in earlier years was called Bird Island and White Island. A solid rock, shaped like a battleship, it is a quarter mile long, 525 feet wide, 140 feet high. It was too small and too desolate to be used by the Spanish Californians. Julian Workman obtained a grant of it from Governor Pio Pico in 1846. Workman sold it to Temple from whom, in 1849, Colonel Fremont bought it "as the legal representative of the United States" for \$5,000. But he sold it to Palmer Cook & Company without paying Temple, and neither Temple nor Cook could get the island back from the government.

The American fortifications on the Pacific coast were begun on Alcatraz and at Fort Point at the entrance to the Golden Gate in 1853. The first lighthouse on the coast flashed forth its beams from Alcatraz Island in 1854.

With the rapid Americanization of California, the other three islands were seen to possess a similar usefulness to the government. The two facing the Golden Gate were necessary for fortifications. All four were ideal sites for the many army and navy establishments where separation from the turmoil of civic and commercial activities was desirable.

Beginning in 1852 with the erection of a dry dock built in sections in the East, there was gradually developed on Mare Island one of the finest navy yards in the world. At Alcatraz further fortifications were made during the Civil War, and a military prison was established there. For many years the island was the saluting station for entering ships worthy of honor. Now Alcatraz has become a federal penitentiary for desperate criminals.

Angel Island was selected as the site of a quarantine station which was built at Hospital Cove on the north side. During the erection of the state penitentiary at San Quentin in 1853, convicted criminals were confined in hulks anchored off Angel Island. Not long after-

ward, fifty cannon were emplaced on the island at strategic points. There was finally established on Angel Island a military post under the name of Fort McDowell. A harbor light and a fog horn had already been installed. A later development was the erection of a detention station for immigrants entering at the Port of San Francisco.

The history of Yerba Buena Island is both interesting and amusing. Situated midway between the east and west bay communities, its resources and possibilities were earlier known and coveted than those of the other islands. Castro's grant of Yerba Buena did not protect the island from being squatted upon, settled, bought, sold, traded and exploited for years before, during, and after the early gold days. Prominent men, including Frank Pixley, founder of San Francisco's pioneer weekly, *The Argonaut*, took a "flyer" in Goat Island land titles.

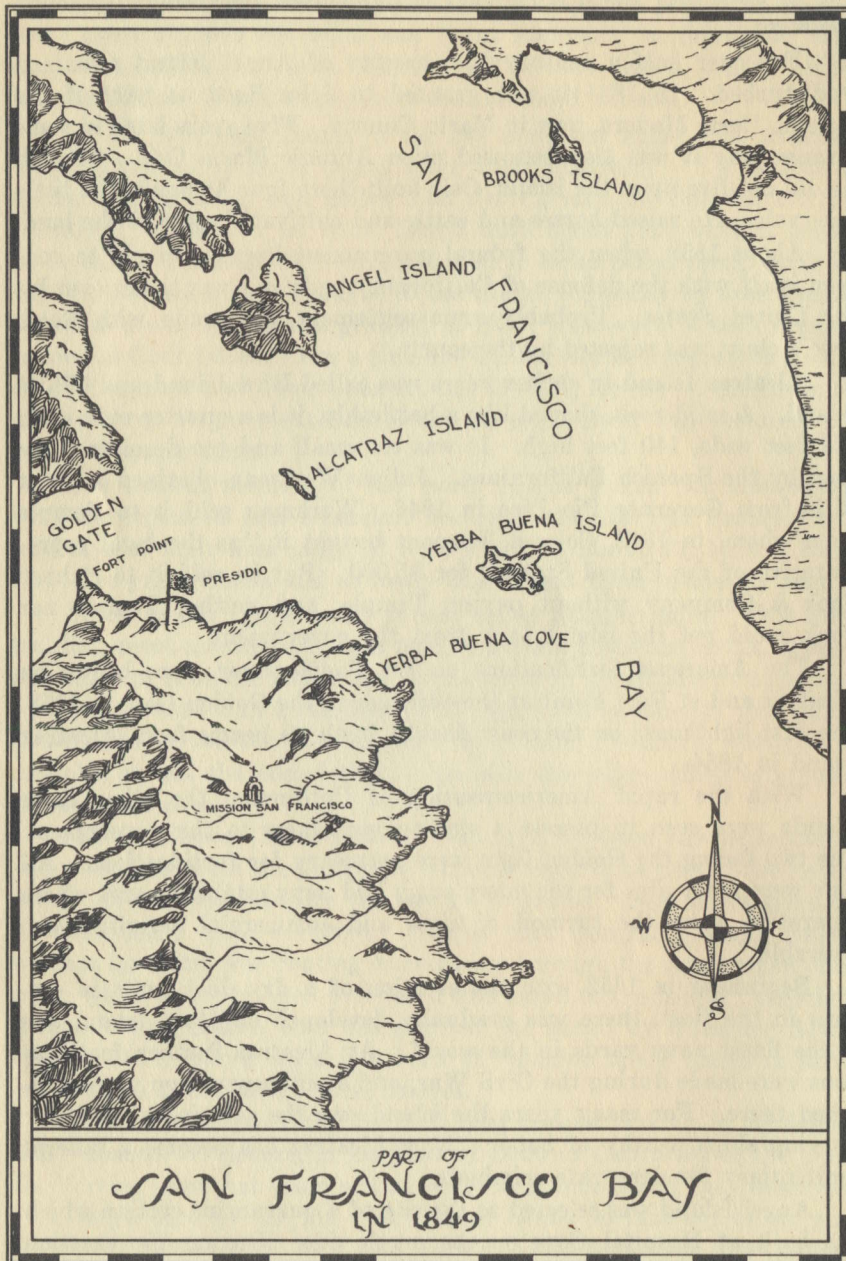
Castro's claim was disallowed and other claims, insecurely based on city, state and congressional enactments, were rejected. After nearly two decades of private squabbles and government suits the federal titles were upheld and the early claimants dispossessed by federal troops. In 1867 the island was turned over to the Navy Department while beacons and fog horns sounded. A naval school was later established, with the old *Pensacola* as a training ship.

In the 'seventies, 'eighties, and 'nineties the lighthouse on Yerba Buena Island was kept by R. A. Weiss, who has preserved a great deal of information on the early history that otherwise would have perished.

Weiss tells us that Thomas Dowling, one of the claimants, developed a quarry of excellent building stone. He also says (though mistakenly) that another old settler, William Barnard, known as "Barnacle Bill," was the "man who brought the first goats to the island." In 1902, old, blind, and forsaken, Barnard died in the almshouse, but there still remained on the island Lonesome Billy, the last of the flock, thin, scrawny, minus a horn and hardly able to walk. Navy men hoped that with his death the name Goat Island would be forgotten. But names are tenacious. In spite of the United States Geographic Board's final decree restoring "Yerba Buena," the majority of San Francisco Bay people still speak of "Goat Island."

Originally the island was densely wooded, and thousands of cords of tough oak fuel were cut in the late 'forties and early 'fifties. At first the fuel was sold to ships and to the Spanish American people of Yerba Buena, the settlement on the bleak little mainland cove of the same name. It was not until 1847 that the alcalde changed the name of the pueblo of Yerba Buena to "San Francisco."

Stripping the island of its wood was good for the goats but bad for the landscape. Therefore San Francisco of the early 'eighties



asked Joaquin Miller, "the Poet of the Sierras," to undertake the reforestation of the island.

Under his supervision school children planted thousands of saplings. But grass fires killed them all.

Weiss says that the remains of a mastodon were found on Yerba Buena Island, and that the burial place of a very ancient people was uncovered: One skeleton measured six feet, seven inches. There may have been buried treasure, for in Weiss' earlier years on the island mysterious men secretly dug here and there at night. In 1875 a very old West Indian, Charles Stewart, came to Weiss in the lighthouse and told him this tale:

"In 1837 I was on an out-bound Arctic whaler which stopped at Callao, Peru. An insurrection had broken out, and the rich and great of the city came out to our ship one night with two very heavy barrels and a chest and begged the captain to keep them safely aboard until the revolution could be halted. The captain waited some days, grew tired, weighed anchor, sailed on up the coast, put into San Francisco Bay and buried the barrels of gold and the chest of jewels on an island; for he feared the hazards of the whaling voyage in the Far North. He intended to return for the treasure when we were homeward bound.

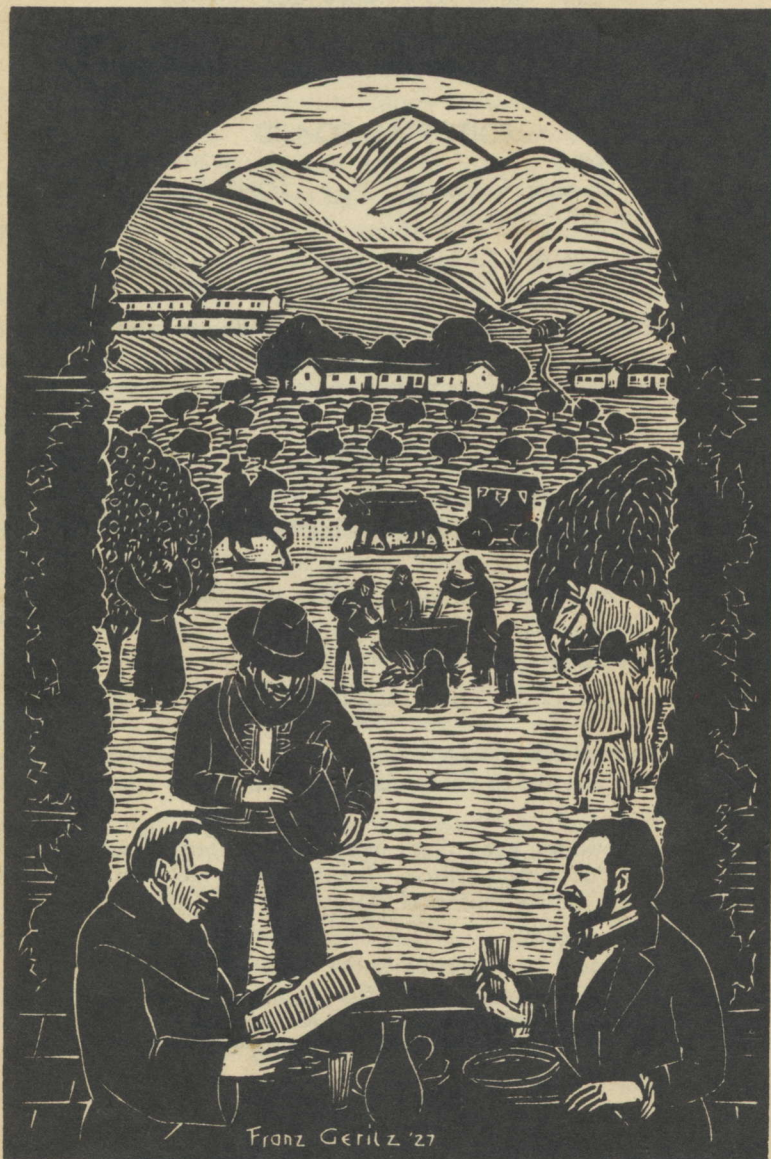
"I was one of four men who went with the captain to help him bury the barrels and chest. And he bound us by a terrible oath of secrecy. In the north we four deserted, but the captain killed one of us. The vessel was never heard of again."

Stewart would not reveal to Weiss upon which of the bay islands the treasure had been buried. He died soon and the secret died with him. We are left to suppose that the island was Yerba Buena, and that Stewart had searched, and searched in vain. Weiss remained upon the island for the better part of a lifetime. Perhaps he, too, searched for many years.

Could the treasure have been bitten out of the island by the giant teeth of steam shovels for the Bay Bridge abutments on Yerba Buena Island? Could Peruvian doubloons and the jewels of South American grandees have been mingled with the earth that now has made Treasure Island?

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