



Discovering the Mare Island Preserve

In this high-flying, birds-eye-view of the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve,

Brian Collett, a landscape architect, planner and our park naturalist, who serves on the Board of Directors of the Mare Island Heritage Trust, captures the compact complexity of the Preserve's historic and natural resources melded together in this unique and remarkable place. From this vantage-point you really can see where the Preserve's rather lengthy name is derived from.

Surrounded by the waters of San Pablo Bay on the west, the Carquinez Strait on the south and forming the western mouth and shore of the Napa River/ Mare Island Strait with piers jutting far out into the two Straits, you can see just how "Shoreline" became part of the name.

The Preserve is situated on the former Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot the Navy's oldest arsenal in the Pacific founded in 1857 with its oldest cemetery founded in 1858 nestled above the historic Ordnance Worker's housing dating back to 1860 through the early 1900's. These 3 features together make up the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places and contributors to the Mare Island National Historic Landmark, the highest ranking National Park Service gives an historic site in America.

Many other historic sites dot the landscape from an early Bay Model built and operated by the Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1920's to the Bob and Alma Rowser Historic Gardens, a Victory Garden orchard and a reservoir dating back to the 1860's that supplied water for the fire-suppression system of the ammunition depot.

The 284 ft. hill with its geological marker dated 1852, an active Coast Guard communications tower, and an art tribute that honors former shipyard workers, provides scenic vistas of 7 counties. The Preserve is dotted with bunkers and magazines used for storage of munitions. Abandoned light poles on Piers 34 and 35 used for loading munitions onto Navy vessels, have been appropriated by osprey and great blue herons for nesting. Steep ravines and shear bluffs are blanketed with live oak and coastal sage and dozens of other rare and unique native plant communities. Grazed by tule elk and later Spanish horses, particularly mares and foals in the springtime, and later sheep, a dairy herd and cattle, natives grasses still have an amazing presence on the extensive grasslands.

A privately owned 18-hole golf course is adjacent to the Preserve on former Ammunition Depot land combined with the original 9 holes of the oldest golf course on a military base west of the Mississippi, founded in 1892.

Ninety-eight acres of the planned 215 acres of the Preserve are currently open for hiking, biking, picnicking and visits to the cemetery and our Visitors Center on the 2nd Saturday of every month and by appointment. Guided hikes onto the Historic Southshore and piers are often also scheduled on 2nd Saturdays. As volunteers join us and funds are raised, this special place will be open more frequently. It's all a quite magic place and we welcome you to experience and explore the Preserve for yourself. We are sure you will want to take an active role in its preservation, restoration and operation and interpretation.





Isla Plana “flat island”

Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve sketched from the perspective of the eyes of maybe a peregrine falcon by Brian Collett, landscape architect, planner and Preserve naturalist

Originally named Isla Plana “flat island” by Spanish Lieutenant Don Juan Manuel de Ayala and his men during the first expedition of the Spanish into San Francisco Bay, in August 1775, it was renamed Isla de la Yégua, Island of the Mare by Mexican General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. In 1852, the U.S. Navy purchased the Island to found the first U.S. naval base in the Pacific in 1854.

The southern or “original” hill portion of the Island was used by the Navy as its first ammunition depot in the Pacific beginning with the building of a black powder storage magazine by French stone mason John Gomo in 1857.

The Ammunition Depot expanded from the 1920’s up until WWII, at which time the Navy outgrew its operations at Mare Island and increased its capacity by developing and conducting transshipments of munitions at Port Chicago Naval Magazine north of Concord up the Carquinez Strait about 15 miles in the Suisun Bay.





Lay of the Land

Looking southwesterly here, Brian Collett, landscape architect, planner and our Preserve naturalist, shows a view of the Preserve from a perspective looking from Vallejo across the Napa River/Mare Island Strait from the east towards the southwest. You can see Pier 35 off in the distance as it extends into the

Carquinez Strait. The Ordnance Production Manufacturing Area of the Naval Ammunition Depot is in view directly below you along the river's shore with the cemetery shown on the slope just to the left. Brian's water-color drawings truly capture the village-like feel of the place which those who lived and worked here

describe. They experienced life at the Naval Ammunition Depot as pastoral and idyllic even though for more than a century, it's purpose was to build, store, transport and dispose of bombs. This is one of a series of five images depicting the Preserve from various directions. He first sketches the image in his sketch book using

Google Earth for the aerial perspective and then completes the content of the sketch from memory. Finally, he adds color to the sketches using Japanese watercolors from a set given to him as a gift from a friend who lives in Japan.





La Isla de la Yegua

Ordnance Workers Housing
 Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot
 National Register Historic District

Originally named Isla Plana by the first Spanish explorers to San Francisco Bay in August of 1775, and later renamed "Isla de la Yegua"—Island of the Mare by Mexican General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who owned a large Spanish land-grant in which the Island lay, was known as Mare Island Naval Shipyard beginning in 1854 with the Navy's founding of its first naval base in the Pacific at Mare Island. Three years later it designated the southern end of the Island as the Mare

Island Naval Ammunition Depot, the oldest naval arsenal in the West. The houses and grounds shown here in Brian Collett's charming sketch, evoke the village-like charm of life in another era and the passion with which commanding officers along with civilian workers and their families together with groundskeeping staff, created at once stately and utilitarian cultural landscapes that reflect the span of uses and design over the long time period of Navy presence. Being an embedded California landscape, it was planted

with redwood trees and other natives. However, because Navy vessels traveled around the globe, specimens were brought from hundreds of ports of call to augment the plantings.

The landscape features show the influence of the Victorian era, the turn of the 20th century, the 1930's and WWII through to modern late 20th century styles. Amidst the remnant elements of concrete walkways, light fixtures influenced by Asia and munitions, fish ponds, clothes lines,

kitchen gardens, vines, climbing roses and shrubs—now grow California natives reclaiming their place in the landscape and invasive grasses and shrubs that threaten to destroy it all.

Time is the enemy of not only the grounds, but the 6 houses, including the oldest—built in 1860, and their outbuildings, seemingly suspended in time while the Navy prepares them for transfer to the next generation of caretakers of this enchanted spot.





Where land meets water and the wet world in between

From this high-in-the-sky perspective Brian gives us a feel for what fledgling turkey vultures, osprey, and red-tailed hawks must see as they learn to maneuver the winds and updrafts of the western bluffs of the Preserve.

Imagine how the Island has changed from a small, low-lying rise appearing in the vast sea of water that is San Pablo Bay and the Carquinez Strait to the west and south, to now, a rather large expanse of tidal marsh that seems to more and more etch the edges of the largest Bay in the San Francisco Bay Estuary.

The buildings you see are munitions storage magazines carved into the hillsides of the western island and now part of the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve. It is hoped that soon the western marsh area you see below the hills in front of you, will be included in the Preserve. The marsh is teeming with wildlife

including the salt marsh harvest mouse—a federally listed as endangered species, and the California black rail—a threatened marsh bird, along with shorebirds and ducks, kingfishers and raptors such as white-tailed kites and kestrels.

