

History of the Embarcadero Seawall

The Embarcadero Seawall transformed three miles of shallow tidelands into a world-class maritime waterfront that was key to the prosperity of San Francisco.

From Quiet Harbor to Booming Port

San Francisco's waterfront was once a relatively quiet place. Just eleven ships dropped anchor in San Francisco's Bay between April 1847 and April 1848.

Quiet life on the Bay came to an abrupt end with the gold rush of the late 1840s. Fortune seekers flocked to California, using San Francisco's natural harbor as an entryway to the region. By 1849 alone, more than 90,000 passengers, aboard some 650 vessels, arrived via the San Francisco Bay. Many '49ers simply abandoned their boats as they headed inland – an estimated 500 ships were left to deteriorate in the mud flats that are now San Francisco's Financial District.

Booming Development Along the Waterfront

The Gold Rush accelerated development along the waterfront. During that time, piers were built to allow ships to dock despite the shoreline's shallow waters. Hastily built piers and sheds burned easily and fell into the water.

Establishing the Port of San Francisco

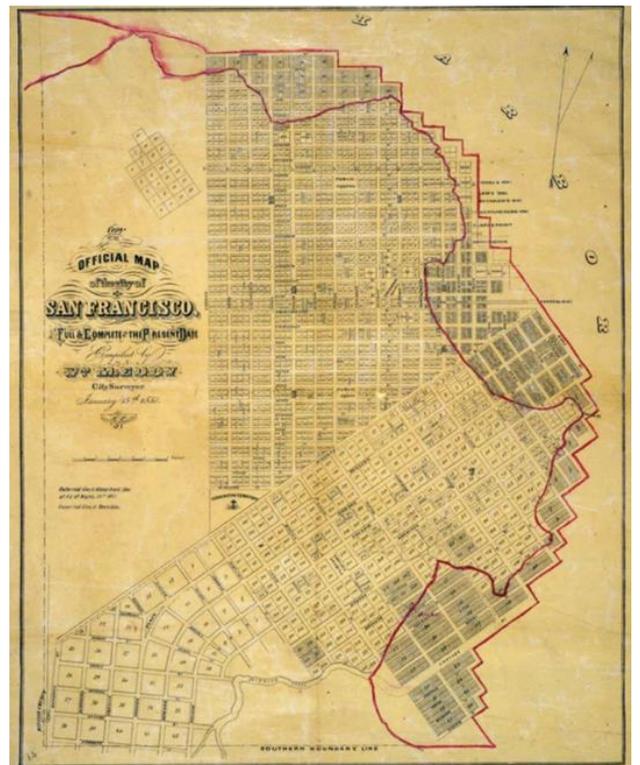
Seeing the great public value of the San Francisco waterfront – and alarmed by the dangers posed by haphazard and uncoordinated private development – California Governor Leland Stanford brought the waterfront under public control in 1863. Under the control of the newly established Board of State Harbor Commission, California established the Port of San Francisco. The Port of San Francisco's first major undertaking was the construction of the Embarcadero Seawall.

Constructing the Embarcadero Seawall

Beginning in 1876, the State Commission and newly established Port of San Francisco oversaw the construction of the Embarcadero Seawall.

Constructed between 1879 and 1916, the Embarcadero Seawall was built by dredging a trench through the mud, filling that trench with rock and rubble, covering the filled land with a timber pile bulkhead wall and wharf, and then filling the tidal

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marshland area behind the Seawall. More than 500 acres of land were filled behind the Seawall, extending the footprint of the city. The Seawall acts as a retaining wall for the filled land behind it and protects the waterfront and portions of downtown San Francisco from potential flooding. The Seawall is the foundation of the Embarcadero Historic District, which includes the bulkhead buildings and finger piers that extend into the Bay.

1900–1930s: The Embarcadero Seawall Supports a Thriving Maritime Industry

After the Seawall was built, in 1900 alone, six million tons of goods passed through the Port of San Francisco. To support the demand, the Port constructed new piers – by 1908, 23 new piers were built. In 1922, with the new Seawall and piers in place, 14.5 million tons of goods passed through the Port of San Francisco.

During the 37 years of Embarcadero Seawall construction, the City of San Francisco took advantage of the new shoreline to support other key projects. In 1898, the Ferry Building was built and served as the headquarters for the Harbor Commission.

The Embarcadero Seawall Today

The Embarcadero Seawall is now an essential part of San Francisco's identity, and provides the foundation for businesses both large and small, the Embarcadero National Register Historic District, a thriving maritime and tourism industry, the City's Financial District, a regional transportation network system, and parks and open spaces that provide equitable access to the San Francisco Bay.

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