

THE PORT LANDSCAPE AND THE CITY





The port of San Francisco is a complex entity that has always connected the waterfront to the larger city beyond. When we envision the port we think first of the berths of ships—the places where ships are loaded and unloaded. In broader terms, the port is also the area that was controlled by the Board of State Harbor Commissioners (BSHC), a corridor of land and water that runs along the waterfront from Fisherman’s Wharf at the northern and eastern edges of the city to the San Mateo County line, including the two-hundred-foot-wide Embarcadero and the seawall lots on the west side of the Embarcadero, both created by fill behind the seawall, as well as the extensive wharves and associated facilities at China Basin, Islais Creek, and India Basin. The port also encompasses the Belt Railroad that runs along the Embarcadero and onto the piers, the rail yards on many of the seawall lots, and the yards and spurs that extend beyond the land owned by the Port of San Francisco into city streets and onto privately and publicly owned land.

Business generated by the port played a substantial role in the development of San Francisco’s skyline, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, and extended beyond downtown into industrial and residential districts of the city.



North Point. 1855.

North Point in 1855, before Telegraph Hill was quarried and fill extended the shoreline. This view evokes the early term *city front* for the edge of the city, used when people frequently experienced the city from the water. As the importance of that experience diminished over time, the term *water-front* became more common.

The port's gently curving outer boundary is defined by the Pier Head Line, a demarcation established by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, beyond which no pier or other structure may be built. The Pier Head Line was first established at six hundred feet from the shore and was extended to eight hundred feet from the shore as the size of ships increased. The angling of Pier 45 to the waterfront was a way of building a pier longer than eight hundred feet that stayed within the Pier Head Line.

The port is most irregular on its inner boundary, where the seawall lots meet the preexisting waterfront of the city. Prior to the erection of the current seawall, which was built in stages from 1878 to 1915, the waterfront was a jagged edge, the result of the filling of water lots within extensions of the street grid beyond the shoreline. These lots were filled behind sheet pilings and, for short stretches, behind an earlier version of the seawall. The port controls a corridor of water between the waterfront, or Bulkhead Line, and the federally defined Pier Head Line from Van Ness Avenue to the San Mateo County border.

The area controlled by the Port of San Francisco is also intermittent along the waterfront, extending continuously except for gaps

that have remained in the jurisdiction of others for most of its history. These gaps are at Potrero Point (known as Pier 70 since 1982, when it was acquired by the port), Hunters Point, and Fort Mason. Potrero Point was first developed by private industry; Hunters Point was sparsely developed until it was taken over by the U.S. Navy in World War II; and Fort Mason was an Army facility. In addition, the waterfront below Hunters Point, adjoining South Basin, was filled and developed with Navy housing.

The port is distinguished from the rest of the city by its ownership, but it is also defined by the character of its landscape—by the types of structures built there, by its abundance of open space, and by the presence of water as well as land. The seawalls; the wharves and piers; the railroad tracks, yards, car ferries, and engine house; the cranes, pile drivers, dredges, and other mobile working machinery; the berths between the piers; the two-hundred-foot-wide Embarcadero; the seawall lots inshore of the Embarcadero; and the imposing architecture of the facades of the bulkhead buildings: together these features created a visually distinctive part of the city. The open character of the port is in contrast to the densely built-up city that starts at the edge of the port property; portions of the city side of that boundary have been called the “city front” for the wall it presents to the more open area of the port.

If the legal entity known as the Port of San Francisco is a specific area along the waterfront, more broadly speaking, the port is a much larger part of the city that contributes to the operation and business of the waterfront. If any city might justifiably have been called Port City, it was San Francisco for its first hundred years. The port did not grow so much to serve the city as the other way around. The port first developed to serve the mining and agricultural economy of a vast part of California, and the city grew in the beginning largely to serve that same economy, via the port.

Specifically, because of the port, railroads were established in San Francisco: the port's own Belt Railroad, the Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe, the Western Pacific, and the Northwestern Pacific. Warehouses and manufacturing plants were located on the various rail lines and spurs, where they were linked to the piers along the waterfront. Power and fuel facilities were located on the waterfront to serve

railroad, representing the interdependence of the two. Large-scale industrial development began in 1866 at Potrero Point with the establishment of Pacific Rolling Mills. The first dry dock, which was the first significant development at Hunters Point, was built in 1868. Seeing the demand for waterfront property, the state passed the Tidelands Act in 1868 and established the Board of Tidelands Commissioners to survey and auction tidelands not previously sold. As a result, by 1871, thirty acres south of China Basin and west of Third Street was sold to two railroads, the Central Pacific and the Western Pacific—both of which would end up in the hands of the Southern Pacific—on the condition that each establish a “San Francisco terminus.” At the terminus would be yards, a roundhouse, and shops.

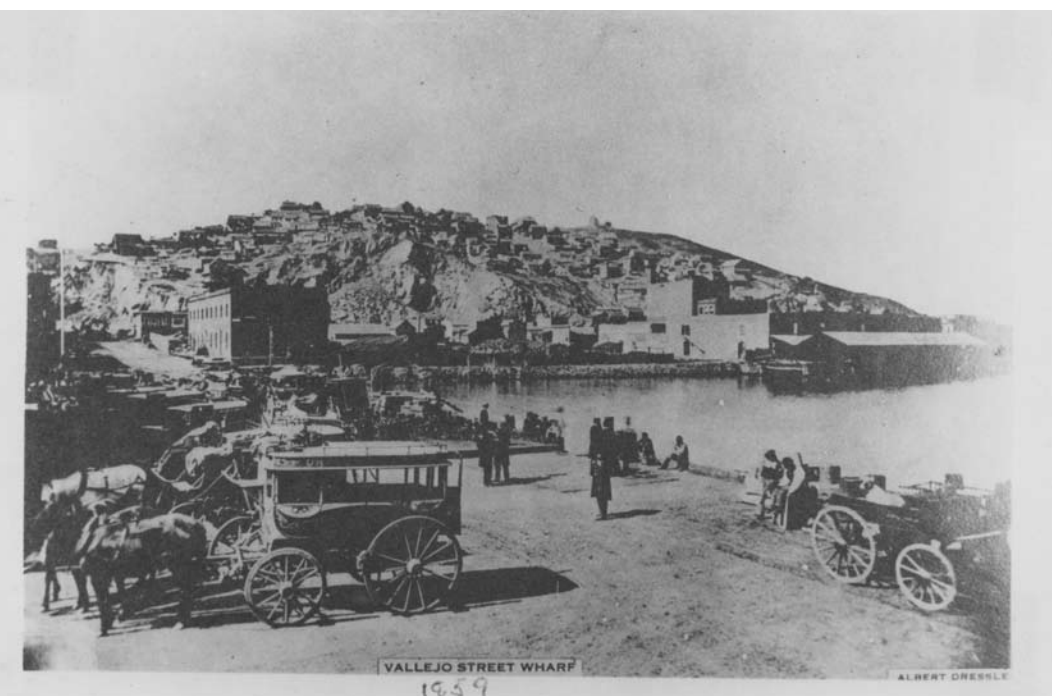
In addition, Central Pacific and its successor Southern Pacific bought many blocks north of China Basin, where it built yards, a station on the south side of Townsend Street east of Fourth Street, and general offices in a three-story brick building at the northeast corner of Townsend and Fourth streets. Of particular symbolic importance was Southern Pacific’s 1870 purchase of Tichenor’s Ways, a shipbuilding and repair facility on Steamboat Point at the foot of Second Street near its later intersection with Townsend Street. This brought the Southern

Pacific Railroad to the waterfront, a position it would hold for decades until section 13A of the seawall, an extension of the engineer T. J. Arnold’s seawall plan of 1878, was completed in 1924, the last section of the seawall north of China Basin. The dominance of Southern Pacific in the South Beach area of the waterfront was enhanced by its control of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, whose facilities were at the foot of First Street.

Just as Central Pacific-Southern Pacific was the first private railroad on the waterfront, it was the only railroad that connected San Francisco by land to the rest of the United States, running down the San Francisco Peninsula to San Jose and up the east side of the bay to the main transcontinental line at Niles. The other railroads were connected to main lines only by water—via car ferries across San Francisco Bay.

The second railroad on the waterfront was the Belt Railroad of the BSHC. Built in phases starting in 1890, it was initially located several blocks north of Market Street, at the far end of the port from the area served by the Southern Pacific. The first section of the port’s railroad picked up railcars from the car ferry at the foot of Lombard Street and in the beginning served yards and warehouses between Broadway and Taylor Street. Only with the victory in 1910 of

This 1859 view shows the rock seawall along Front Street from Vallejo to Union streets, one of only two built segments of an early seawall designed in a zigzag alignment. The plan caused silting and was abandoned.



This 1881 drawing from *Harper's Weekly* shows the gently curving alignment of the redesigned seawall, built from 1878 to 1915 and later extended, before construction of the bulkhead wharf made it possible for ships to unload directly onto the shore.



With the creation of land behind the new seawall, the port's property was an irregular corridor of open space that was occupied by the Embarcadero and rail yards in the seawall lots between the water and the warehouses and businesses of the city front. This view from the 1930s extends across Seawall Lot 5 to the Harbor Warehouses and Piers 39, 37, and 35.

reform politicians who opposed the power of the Southern Pacific was the Belt Railroad extended south of Market Street into what had been considered Southern Pacific territory. In 1913, the north and south sections of the Belt Railroad were joined across the foot of Market Street in front of the Ferry Building. In the following year, the railroad was extended through a new tunnel to the west side of Fort Mason and the Harbor View section of the waterfront that was being developed for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE). Following the exposition, the Belt Railroad was extended in 1917 to its ultimate northern terminus at the Presidio. At the other end of the port, in 1933 the Belt Railroad was extended south of China Basin for the first time, across a new Third Street Bridge. Because extensive rail lines south of China Basin were already in place, in part the Belt Railroad used Santa Fe and Western Pacific tracks to reach its own rail spurs to the piers.

The second major private railroad, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe (known as the Santa Fe), began service in San Francisco in 1900. It was promoted and supported to provide competition to the Southern Pacific. In 1895, the

Santa Fe had taken over the tidelands that the old Western Pacific had acquired in 1868 south of China Basin. Then, under an agreement with the BSHC, the railroad built the seawall from China Basin to El Dorado Street, one block above Sixteenth Street, and made major improvements over many years. The Santa Fe constructed a car-ferry terminal at the northeast corner of this property, connecting San Francisco to its main yards and shops in Point Richmond. Parallel to the waterfront, the company established a secondary yard linked to Piers 48, 50, and 52, as well as to Pier 54, which it built in 1911 under a special act of the legislature.

The Northwestern Pacific (NWP) Railroad, formed in 1907 out of several smaller railroads that ran up the coast to Humboldt County, operated a car ferry to San Francisco from its main yards and shops in Tiburon. At its peak in the 1940s, the NWP leased two rail yards in seawall lots from the BSHC and operated a passenger ferry from Sausalito.

The last private railroad to establish facilities in San Francisco was the Western Pacific (not related to the earlier Western Pacific Railroad that was taken over by Southern Pacific), another

Right: Potrero Point, one of the few projections of private property within the zone of the publicly owned waterfront, was a creation of the confluence of ships and railroads at the port of San Francisco. The densest concentration of heavy industry in the West, it was bordered by housing for workers, as shown in this 1892 photograph.



Below: This view from the 1930s shows Southern Pacific Railroad's vast holdings on both sides of Channel Street, just west of its original terminus on San Francisco Bay, including the six-story China Basin Building, wooden freight sheds, rail yards for freight and passengers, and the passenger depot at the southwest corner of Third and Townsend streets.



important competitor of Southern Pacific's. Western Pacific began its operation from Salt Lake City to Oakland in 1909, with car-ferry service across the bay to terminals near the foot of Army Street (now Cesar Chavez Street) and at Pier 36. From its car ferry at Army Street, a Western Pacific line ran west to Iowa Street, then diagonally across the Potrero district to yards along Brannan Street from Seventh to Eighth streets and to spurs nearby. The Western Pacific also leased rail yards in seawall lots from the BSHC, but it built its principal yards and shops across the bay in Oakland.

Other railroads—including the Napa Valley, the Sacramento Northern, and the Petaluma & Santa Rosa—served the port through ferries, car ferries, and the Belt Railroad, but none of them had any yards or other facilities in San Francisco.

These railroads provided the means for extending the business of the port beyond its boundaries. The railroads picked up and delivered railcars full of goods, shuttling between car-ferry terminals and piers to warehouses, factories, and other industrial plants. The spurs of the various railroads served a broad range of destinations.

WAREHOUSES AND INDUSTRIES SERVED BY THE RAILROADS

The first warehouses, used during the Gold Rush, were converted ships, which were soon accompanied by buildings on piles over water lots in Yerba Buena Cove. These early structures were followed by those built on landfill as the water lots were made into permanent parts of the city. Before the arrival of the railroads, the best location for a warehouse was at the edge of the waterfront, as close as possible to the berths of the ships. Two surviving examples from this era—the Gibbs warehouses on Front Street flanking Vallejo—faced the water when they were constructed but lost their prime position as more fill extended the edge of the city into the bay. These were two-story brick structures on standard city lots, much smaller than warehouses built a few years later. They were made for the general cargo of the day: commodities, hardware, and dry goods that were imported because they were not produced in California.

The location of pre-railroad industries

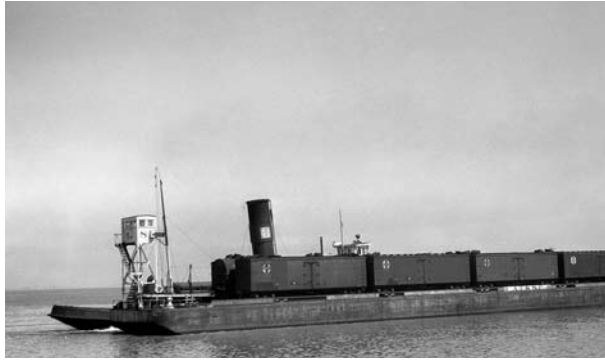
followed the same pattern. Tubbs Cordage Works, which made rope, long a necessity of sailing ships and cargo handling, was established just south of Potrero Point in 1856. Tubbs's rope walk—a traditional type of building for making rope in which long strands of hemp or other material were laid out and twisted—was fourteen-hundred feet long by forty-five feet wide and was built at an angle to the city's grid, projecting into the bay.



Another pre-railroad industry was the Pioneer Woolen Mill, founded in North Beach in 1858. Its principal building of 1862 was taken over by the D. Ghirardelli Company and is now part of Ghirardelli Square. Like Tubbs Cordage, the Pioneer Woolen Mill was built at the water's edge without regard for the grid. One of the earliest factories in California, the mill was conceived to capture the market previously held by importers of wool by using the abundant wool available in California. In this way it represented a pattern that would be followed by many other port-dependent industries—manufacturing and processing California's natural and agricultural resources for local and distant markets.

With the arrival of the railroads, industries were established or relocated following a new

The first railroad at the port was the Central Pacific, the predecessor of the Southern Pacific. It met the warehouses and wharves of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in 1869 near what is now Second and Townsend streets, shown here in the early 1870s. This private outpost lost its water frontage in 1909, when the port finally built the seawall and filled behind it, landlocking the Southern Pacific.



Top: Car ferries were long an essential link in the system that brought freight cars from the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, Western Pacific, and Northwestern Pacific railheads across the bay to car-ferry slips at the port, where they were moved by Belt Railroad locomotives to piers or warehouses.

Middle: Rail spurs and yards—like this Western Pacific yard at Seventh and Brannan streets in 1929—connected the port to warehouses and industrial sites in scattered neighborhoods such as North Beach, South of Market, the Mission District, and the Potrero.

Bottom: Before the railroads, warehouses and industrial plants were located adjacent to the berths of ships, like Cowell's Wharf of 1853 at Battery between Union and Filbert streets, shown here about 1870. Some—abandoned ships altered for the purpose—were in the water, others were in unfilled water lots, and still others were at the edge of the shore.

pattern, and some of these enterprises were much larger than their predecessors. The densest concentration of heavy industry stimulated by the railroad occurred at Potrero Point, with the appearance of Pacific Rolling Mills in 1866, a large gas works of the San Francisco Gas and Electric Company in 1872, the California Sugar Refining Company in 1881, Union Iron Works in 1883 (relocated from First and Mission streets), and the Arctic Oil Works of the Pacific Steam Whaling Company by 1884. By 1899, the California Barrel Company had built a factory and the Southern Pacific Railroad had set up cattle corrals in the area.

The industries of Potrero Point had their own private wharves, but they were also served by spurs of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Like an octopus with its eight tentacles—Frank Norris titled his novel exposing the unfair practices of the Southern Pacific *The Octopus*—that company monopolized San Francisco rail traffic for decades, in part by the tentacles of its spurs. Few warehouses or other industries would be built in the city from 1869 to 1910 that were not on a Southern Pacific spur. Until the seawall was built and the seawall lots behind it were filled, the railroad could control its own access to the waterfront.

Along with Potrero Point, in the late 1860s and early 1870s industry also concentrated around Steamboat Point, where First and Second streets terminated at the shoreline of Mission Bay, more or less along Townsend Street. (The BSHC had not yet exercised control of this section of the waterfront.) Southern Pacific's spurs on these streets served the dispersed facilities of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, including the Oriental Warehouse. Within a few blocks, in 1899 Southern Pacific also served the California Car Works of J. M. Hammond & Company, a stone yard of the McGilvray Stone Company, the Pacific Oil and Lead Works, the bottling works of the Buffalo Brewing Company, and the Union Ice Company, to name a few.

With the railroad linking the port to warehouses and industrial plants, there was no longer an advantage in being located next to the water. Indeed, as long as it was on a rail spur, the specific location of an industrial plant made little difference, except that sites further from the water were less congested and less