

HOW AQUATIC PARK CAME TO BE

BY STEPHEN CANRIGHT

The Aquatic Park complex, finished by the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939, was the product of years of agitation by local citizens, spearheaded by the rowing and swimming clubs, located within Black Point Cove since the 1890s. Beginning in 1912, the clubs and their supporters campaigned for the establishment of a city park devoted to aquatic recreation and protecting this bit of the waterfront from commercial development. By 1927, the city had acquired the land area around the lagoon, and had made a start on the development of a seawall



WPA seal on the front steps of the bathhouse.

and on design work for the complex. Municipal Pier was begun under a city contract in 1931 and was largely finished by 1933, but there was no funding for parapet walls and the pier was not opened to the public.

With the pressures of the Great Depression, work came to a halt until 1936, when the WPA agreed to take on the project. Over the next three years, they were able to complete the central Aquatic Park Building and the adjacent bleachers, to largely finish the interior decoration of the building, and to complete Municipal Pier. Other structures that were planned to house the rowing clubs and the Sea Scouts, were dropped from the project for lack of funding. The complex was turned over to the City in January of 1939.

The City initially leased the building to private restaurant developers, but a public outcry and a Federal inquiry led to a cancellation of the lease by the end of 1940. During 1941, an exhibit of ship models and maritime artifacts was shown for a time in the building. In December of 1941, some days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the complex was turned over to the U.S. Army for use as the head-

quarters of an anti-aircraft gun unit. The Army would maintain control of the Park until 1948.

Upon its return to city control, the Park was reopened for limited public use. The San Francisco Senior Center began leasing a portion of the main building in 1949. The newly established San Francisco Maritime Museum Association opened its museum in the remainder of the building in early 1951. Agitation by the Museum Association led to the establishment of the San Francisco Maritime State Historic Park, which opened at Hyde Street Pier in 1963 with four historic wooden vessels. The state park was transferred to the National Park Service in 1977, followed by the Maritime Museum and the whole of the Aquatic Park complex in 1978. Initially operated as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the Maritime Park became an independent unit of the National Park Service in 1988. ■

“WITH THE PRESSURES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION, WORK CAME TO A HALT UNTIL 1936, WHEN THE WPA AGREED TO TAKE ON THE PROJECT.”

Stephen Canright is the Curator of History at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.



Two views of Aquatic Park, nearly complete in 1938. The familiar structures are in place, with the rail line, now routed along the shore (SAFR P88-035.139.p) and (SAFR P88-035.121n).