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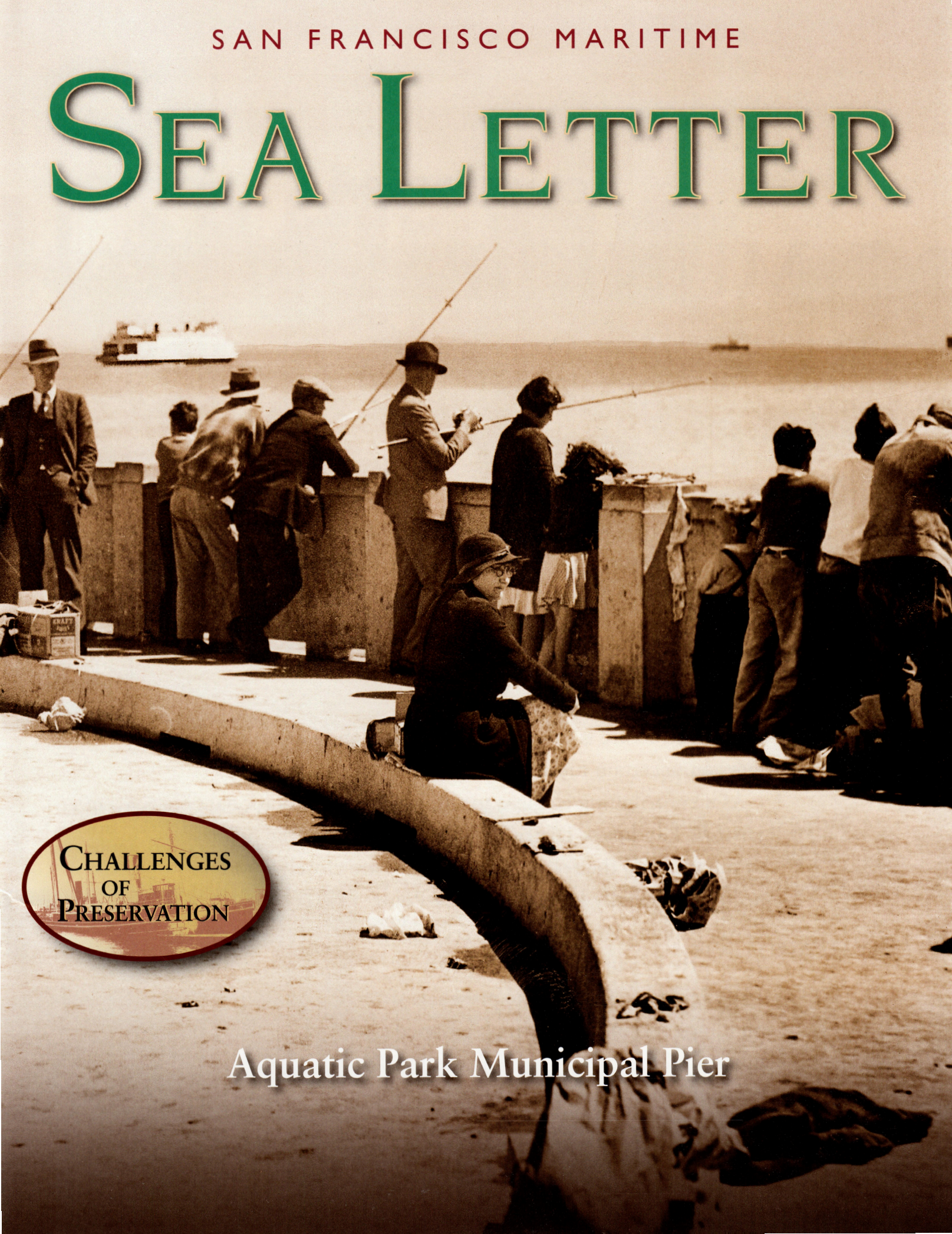
SEA LETTER



CHALLENGES OF PRESERVATION

Aquatic Park Municipal Pier

Almost three million people visit Aquatic Park at the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park every year to see the historic ships, take a dip in the bay or just enjoy this gem on San Francisco's northern waterfront. Few of them realize that the beautiful cove, the small beach, and even the largest floating collection of historic ships in the world are protected by a long curving pier that is one of the San Francisco's treasures—and one of its biggest physical challenges. For years locals have called it the Municipal Pier—the Muni Pier for short—but it is the responsibility of the National Park Service. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park superintendent Kevin Hendricks writes about the pier and how to preserve it for future generations.

AQUATIC PARK

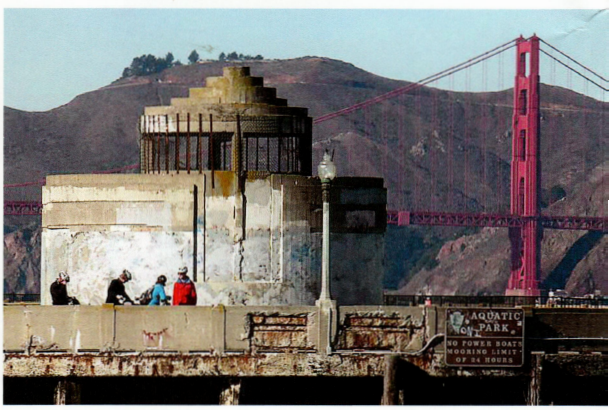
MUNICIPAL PIER

BY KEVIN HENDRICKS

This article originally appeared in Sea Letter *(Winter 2016, Number 74) and has been slightly modified for this reprint.*

The Aquatic Park Recreational Pier, also referred to as Municipal or Muni Pier, is one of the most iconic features along San Francisco's northern waterfront. Built by the city of San Francisco and the Works Progress Administration, and now the responsibility of the National Park Service, this impressive structure is in a deteriorated state and unfortunately faces an uncertain future.

As a contributing element to the Aquatic Park National Historic Landmark District, it's no surprise that the history of the pier and the rest of Aquatic Park are closely interconnected. Originally known as Black Point Cove, Aquatic Park Cove was recognized very early in San Francisco's history as a special place. Despite the presence of buildings and industry, which cropped up around the cove as early as the 1850s, noted landscape architect and planner Frederick Law Olmstead observed in



The unfinished roundhouse and the curving parapet show evidence of their age.



The Pier glows in the afternoon sun, circa 2005.

Photo: Lance Iversen, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

1866 that the cove would be an appropriate location for a "public pleasure ground." He also envisioned the cove as a kind of ceremonial entrance to San Francisco, where dignitaries and national representatives would land and embark, replete with an elegant pavilion, seats for spectators, landscaping, flagstaffs and monuments. Olmstead's original vision was never realized, but over the ensuing decades the idea of a waterfront park persisted.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, architect and city planner Daniel Burnham developed a plan for San Francisco and identified a "bay shore park" at Black Point Cove. However after the 1906 earthquake and fire, many thousands of truckloads of debris were dumped along the shoreline, significantly altering the character of the cove. But the dream of an aquatic park did not fade. In 1912, E.L. Fricke won first prize offered by the Architectural Club for the best sketch of an aquatic park at Black Point Cove. He worked with the natural curves of the shoreline, and the possibilities of the spot, which nature apparently has designed for a swimming and boating place.

Ultimately, he envisioned "a large water space that could be included by a protecting breakwater." In the early 1920s, the city had engineer Frank White prepare plans for a new government wharf, breakwater, and

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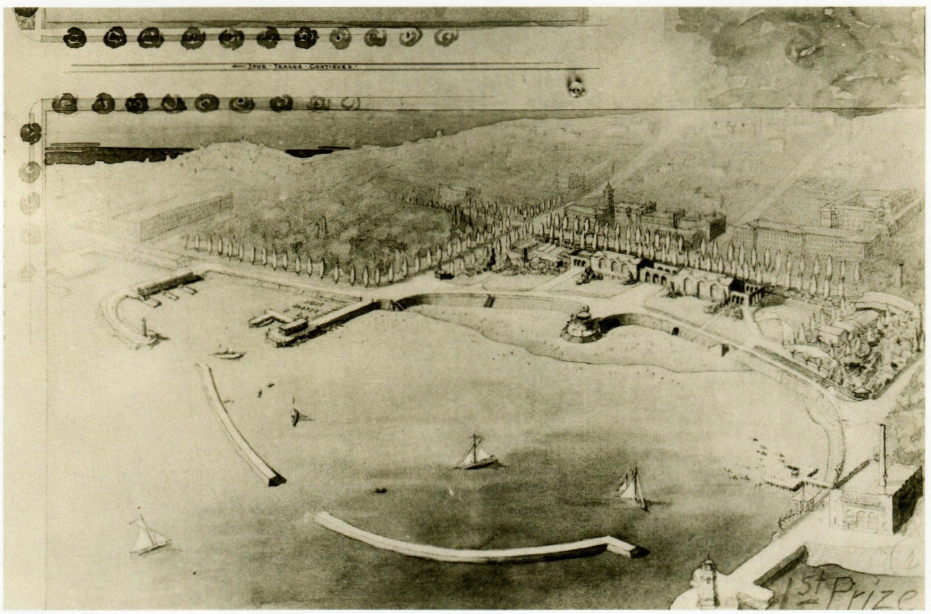
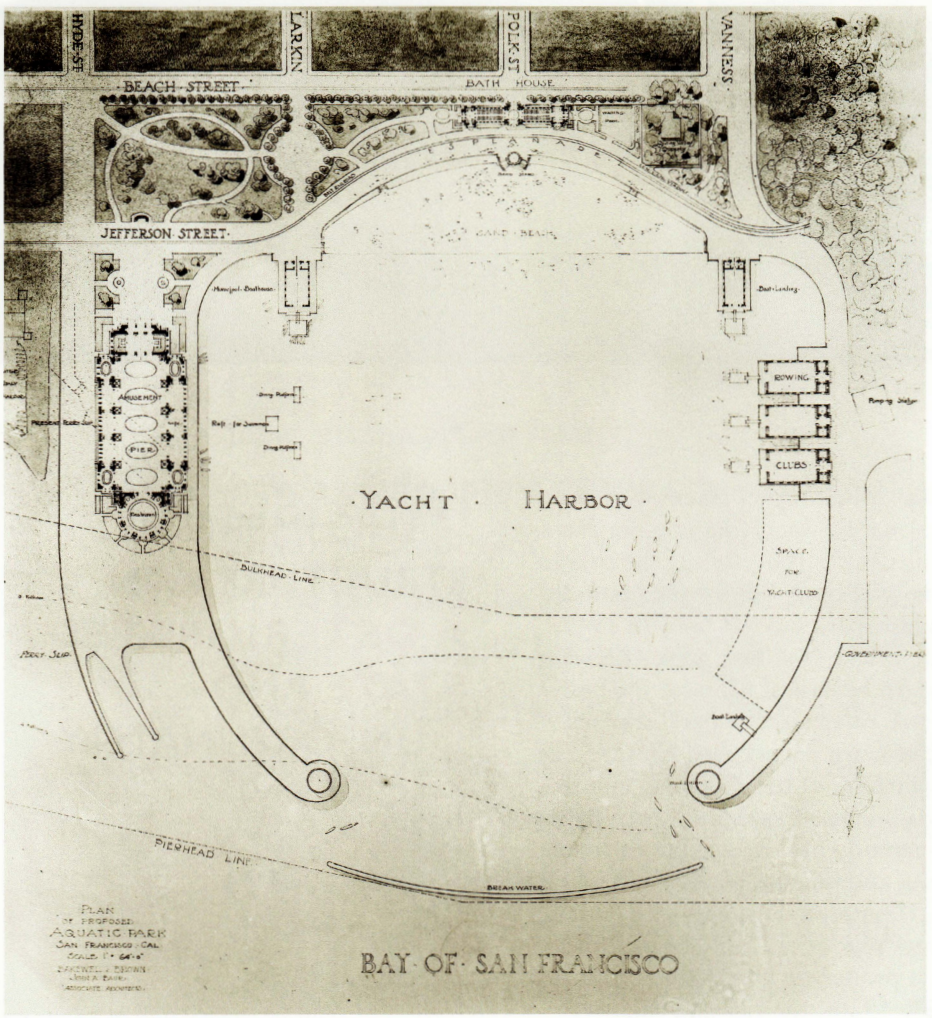


E.L. Fricke's prizewinning design of 1912. (San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library).

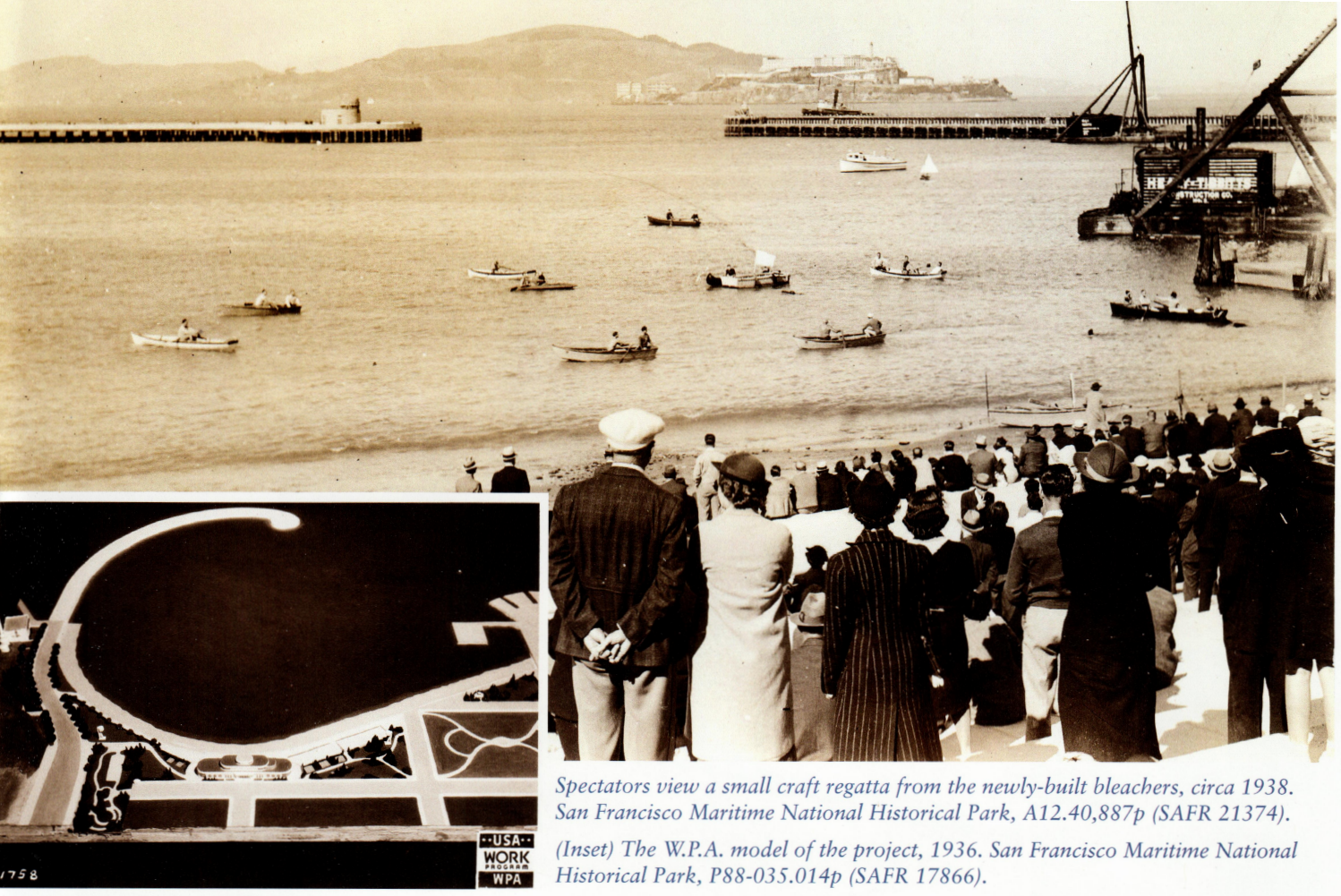


The Bakewell, Brown, and Baur design of 1922. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, A10.19,196n (SAFR 21374).

recreational pier to turn the cove into a sheltered harbor. In 1922, city commissioners appointed the firm of Bakewell, Brown and Baur to develop a plan for Aquatic Park. Their plan proposed not one, but two curving piers creating symmetry in the cove. Over the following years, much effort was spent acquiring land, transferring title to submerged lands, negotiating with the federal government for relocation of the Quartermaster's Wharf, moving the swim clubs, and allocating funding for the park. Thousands of yards of fill were placed for the extension of Van Ness Avenue, and a crude seawall was built along the shoreline. There was wide support for an aquatic park, from the Recreation League, the swimming and rowing clubs, and the Vittoria Colonna Club which advocated for "the necessity of having a public recreation beach on the north shore."

Eventually the army's Quartermasters Wharf was removed from the west side of the cove and rebuilt near the tip of Black Point, which today is known as part of Fort Mason. The city began work on the Municipal Pier in August 1931, and, by 1933 had completed over 1,800 feet of pier. Green wood piles were driven for the entire length of the pier, with concrete jackets, to support a concrete deck. Designed for two-way vehicle traffic, the massive structure has over 600 pilings. A baffle system incorporated into the pier served to mitigate the effects of the bay currents and calm the waters of the cove. The pier included power for lamps, as well as water for a convenience station. The parapet wall, benches, and curbs were added in 1934, however, the round Comfort Station building located at end of the pier was never completed.

In 1934 the city was granted a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in order to complete the pier and Aquatic Park. In 1936 John Punnett submitted a revised plan for the park, and work continued. The construction of the bath-



Spectators view a small craft regatta from the newly-built bleachers, circa 1938. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, A12.40,887p (SAFR 21374).

(Inset) The W.P.A. model of the project, 1936. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, P88-035.014p (SAFR 17866).

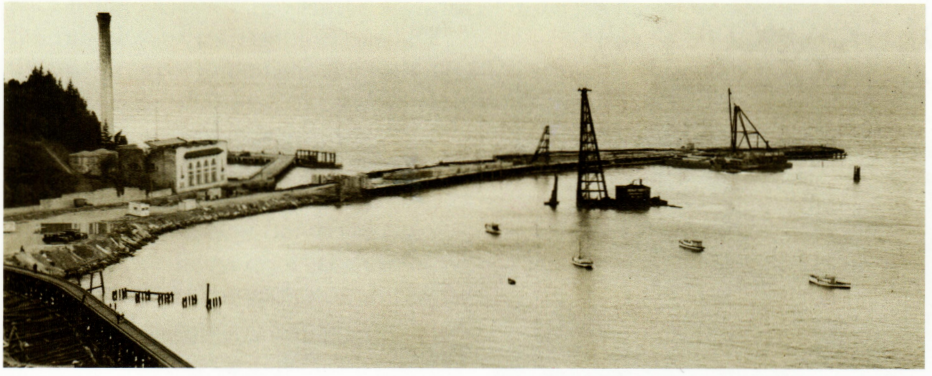
house building, designed by William Mooser Jr., and the Federal Art Project work in the building are well documented and depict a fascinating history. Finally, in January 1939, the WPA turned the park over to the city with much work unfinished.

An army tug crashed into the pier during the World War II military occupation of Aquatic Park (1941-1948). Repairs were made in 1947, and the pier was returned to city ownership in 1948. In 1953, the freighter *Harry Lukenbach* collided with the pier causing over $10,000 in damages. Repairs from these two collisions can still be seen today in the sagging section of pier about midway along its length. When Congress created the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the National Park Service acquired responsibility for the Municipal Pier. And when the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park took shape, the Municipal Pier was ultimately added to the new park.

Other long-term deterioration can be seen as well, from the areas fenced-off and closed due to concerns for integrity of the deck, to crumbling



Black Point in about 1910. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, A11.20,821p (SAFR 21374).



Muni Pier in mid-construction, about 1932. (San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library).



Looking southeast over the badly spalled parapet wall. (Left Inset) Spalled concrete on the Pier's underside. (Right Inset) High water nearly laps at the underside of the Pier.



"INSPECTION UNDER THE DECK SHOWS **A MULTITUDE OF SEVERELY COMPROMISED PILINGS** DUE TO **CONCRETE FAILURE.**"

parapet walls. Inspection under the deck shows a multitude of severely compromised pilings due to concrete failure. The sea level is alarmingly close to the deck of the pier during today's king tides, and the pier's problems will only be exacerbated by future sea level rise.

The pier endures today as a key component contributing to the character of Aquatic Park. The length and width of the pier, the curvature, the benches, lights, and parapet walls, all are significant characteristics. The pier augments and extends the cove's graceful curve, forming an encircling protective arm. It complements and completes the rest of Aquatic Park. The museum building and the other shore-based facilities would not be the same without the enclosing sweep of the pier, forming a sheltered cove. Delamination, spalling, and corrosion of the ageing concrete continue with no solution in sight. Repair or replacement of the pier is a monumental project for which there is no funding.

The park's five National Historic Landmark ships and various small craft at Hyde Street Pier are protected by the Aquatic Park Recreational Pier, and by the newer breakwater seawall to the north built in the 1980s. Fisherman's Wharf and the associated small boat docks are also protected from the bay's tidal currents and waves by the pier, a kind of western buttress for the city's northern waterfront. The pier's benefits are wide and far-reaching, and a solution to its deteriorating state must include the city, state and other federal part-

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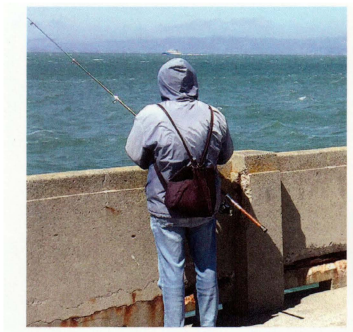


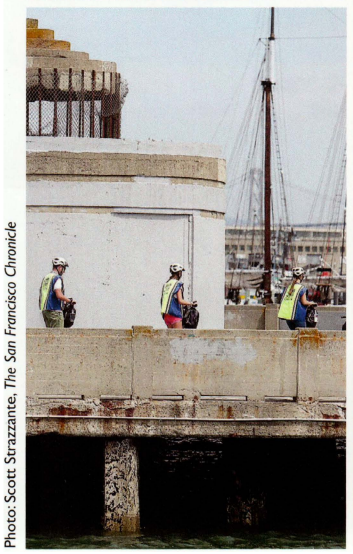
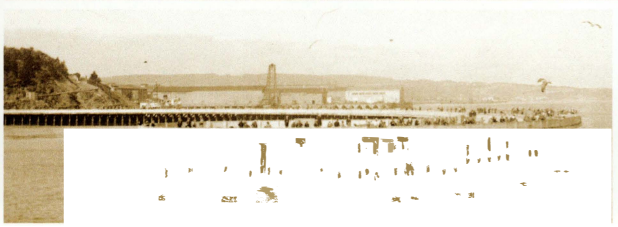
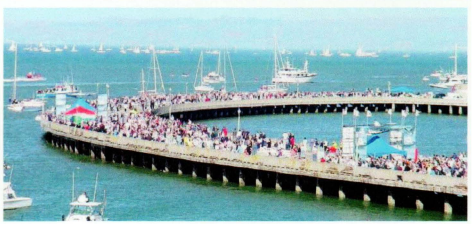


Photo: Scott Strazzante, *The San Francisco Chronicle*







ners, not to mention the possibility of large-scale philanthropic support.

A 1939 WPA fact sheet offers a glowing vision of Aquatic Park and "the finished park, protected by the great curve of the municipal pier… fills completely the need for a central water playland. Here one may bathe, swim, canoe or sail…here thousands of happy youngsters find a protected playground in the waters and on the shore. Here thousands of wearied adults may sink into warm, embracing sand, content to just lie and relax, and revel in the beauties spread before them."

That is very much the case today. Fishing has always been popular from the pier. You can stroll the pier and feel the breeze sweeping in from the Pacific. Bicyclists, runners, and even Segway tours find their way on the pier as part of the 2.9 million annual visitors to Aquatic Park. The 360-degree views from the pier are stunning and include magnificent views of the Golden Gate, the city's skyline from Coit Tower to Russian Hill, Alcatraz, and the historic ships at Hyde Street Pier. You can experience being enveloped in fog, or feel the sun on a bright winter day while listening for the sounds of the water and the seabirds.

Municipal Pier allows us to escape the hustle and bustle of the city—the traffic, noise, and commercialism. I urge you to visit the pier, and reflect upon our beautiful city's past, and the places that make it so special today. ■

Kevin Hendricks is the Superintendent at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

(Clockwise from left) A Segway tour on the Pier.

Fishing from the Municipal Pier today, and in 1934. (San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library).

Crowds of people on the pier today, and on July 24, 1934, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, John Procter photographer, Procter Collection, A12.38,848ps (SAFR 21374).

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