



1935 view of Public Health Service Hospital, with cemetery in background. Courtesy of GGNRA Archives.

Recent Research

Since the “rediscovery” of the cemetery by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1989, ongoing research has uncovered a fascinating history of this important subset of American culture. This research has allowed us to piece together the stories of sailors from all over the world, whose lives ended here in San Francisco, and have been long forgotten for over 100 years.

To date, over 100 names of sailors interred in the cemetery have been recovered. Though it is possible that over 600 were buried in the cemetery, it is improbable that all the names will ever be recovered, as the deaths of foreign citizens often went unreported, and the deaths of sailors were generally not well-documented.

Through the use of historic maps, oral history, and aerial photography, the history of the cemetery itself has become more and more well-defined, including the periods of use, abandonment, and disappearance from public memory.

Besides the recovery of names and the reconstruction of the cemetery’s history, this phase of research also sought to better inform the remediation of the Public Health Service Hospital site and ensure that the memory of these men is respected and not lost again.

Did you know...?

- Not everyone buried in the Marine Hospital Cemetery was a sailor. Others known to be buried there include a hospital attendant, a nurse, a gardener, and the stillborn son of one of the hospital’s doctors.
- Respiratory diseases were by far the most common causes of death among sailors buried in the cemetery, especially tuberculosis. Also common were heart disease, kidney diseases, and conditions affecting the brain.
- The sailors possibly buried in the cemetery represent 30 of the United States and 43 countries.
- The majority of sailors died between the ages of 30 and 50, about 53%.
- The Ladies’ Seamen’s Friends Society—a local benevolent organization which ran a home for sailors out of the former Marine Hospital at Rincon Point—established a cemetery plot for sailors in 1883 in City Cemetery, which is now under Lincoln Park. They buried many of the sailors who died in the Marine Hospital. The monument they erected still stands in the park.

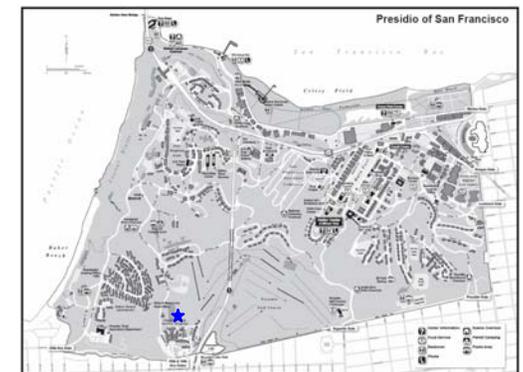
Where Jack is at Rest:

The Marine Hospital Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco



WHERE THE SAILORS ARE BURIED.

San Francisco Call, 1896.



The Presidio Archaeology Center
230 Gorgas Avenue
San Francisco, California

Why did the Marine Hospital need a cemetery?

Sailors at the turn of the twentieth century were subject to maladies and injuries as diverse as the lands they sailed to. Deadly contagious diseases, such as tuberculosis, spread rapidly on ships. Occupational hazards were rampant, with great risk of falling from the ship's heights or the development of hernias that would go untreated for months at sea. Many of the sailors who went to the Marine Hospital died there. Most had no money and no known family to arrange for their funerals. Sometimes a sailor's shipmates or employer would handle these expenses, but often a ship had to sail away from San Francisco before a sick crew member either recovered or died. When there was no next of kin or friend to contact, the hospital staff had to bury deceased patients somewhere. The most convenient—and cheapest—location was right out back.

What happened to the cemetery after it was no longer used?

Over the years, better provisions were made for the burial of deceased sailors, both by benevolent societies and by the government. The need for a burying ground at the hospital lessened, and eventually, with few visitors and no one to officially maintain it, the cemetery fell into ruins. The on-land population forgot that the cemetery was ever there, if they even knew it had existed in the first place. During the 1950s, when the hospital was constructing additional wings, the construction debris was disposed of on the flat top of a nearby plateau—right on top of the cemetery. There is no record of any protest by any party, further attesting to the marginalized existence of sailors on land—even their fellow sailors eventually forgot their secluded resting place as time passed.

What will happen to the cemetery now?

The Presidio Trust is just beginning the process of remediation of the area surrounding the Public Health Service Hospital. The research accomplished regarding the hospital's cemetery is just one piece of this complicated puzzle, but it will help inform remediation of the cemetery and the landfill currently covering it. Many options have been proposed for how to proceed with remediation. Through a series of public meetings and many planning stages, the Presidio Trust will determine what course of action will best serve the community, the environment, and the memory of the sailors interred in the cemetery. This will likely include the preservation of a peaceful area where native plant and animal life can thrive, and a memorial evocative of the lives of the men at rest, without further disturbance of their graves.

