

“Liberty Station” and the Naval Training Center in San Diego

Molly McClain

The redevelopment of the Naval Training Center (NTC) in San Diego is one of several projects in California aimed at preserving historic military sites and structures and adapting them for public use. Others include the Presidio in San Francisco, the Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro, and the Oakland Army Base. This short history and photo essay recalls the history of the NTC and documents the restoration process that began in 2000.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. Navy modernized and expanded its fleet and trained sailors to operate increasingly sophisticated battleships. It also established academic departments at every base in an effort to “make the Navy a great university, with college extensions afloat and ashore,” in the words of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels (term in office 1913-21).¹ San Diego’s Naval Training Station, established by Congress in 1919, trained recruits and instructed fleet personnel. Its role in educating young sailors caused it to become known as “The Cradle of the Navy.”²

Congressman William M. Kettner (term in office 1912-21) played a key role in securing an area near San Diego Bay for the NTC. He convinced the government to relocate the existing Goat Island

Training Station in San Francisco to San Diego and persuaded local businessmen to finance the purchase of land for the Navy. San Diego’s Chamber of Commerce donated 135 acres of land located north of the Mean High Tide Line and Rosecrans



Sailor stationed at the entrance to the Naval Training Station.
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Street while the City of San Diego gave 142 acres of submerged tidelands. Kettner's work was part of a larger effort to make San Diego the main operating base of the Pacific Fleet.³

Construction at the Loma Portal site began in 1921. The Navy retained Lincoln Rogers, the architect of the New York Water Supply System, and an assistant W. L. Menzies who had worked on the Naval Air Station, North Island, and the San Diego Naval Hospital. According to architect Milford Wayne Donaldson, the two men were inspired by Bertram G. Goodhue who had designed many important structures in San Diego, including the Panama-California Exposition buildings in Balboa Park, and Irving Gill, architect of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. They also drew on a Beaux Arts tradition that emphasized symmetry and a formal approach to design. As a result, the architects adopted a modified Spanish Colonial Revival style and oriented the buildings along two main axes running from north to south.⁴

In 1923, the U.S. Naval Training Station, San Diego, was placed in commission under the command of Captain (later Rear Admiral) David F. Sellers, U.S. Navy. Buildings included a mess hall, barracks, dispensary, cubicle building, fire station, information building, guard's quarters, regimental quartermaster's building, and regimental office. All were designed to take advantage of San Diego's mild climate, with loggias, open-air porches, and arcades. Over the next fifteen years, the Navy expanded the size of the campus and the number of buildings to accommodate 1,500 men.⁵

During World War II, the station trained a population of as many as 25,000 recruits and 8,000 students in forty-one schools that included radio, yeoman, bugle, and electrical. Barracks included Camps Lawrence, Jones, Decatur, Luce, Mahan, and Farragut. One building housed the "Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service," or WAVES. In 1944, the training station became a group command and was redesignated as the U.S. Naval Training Center, under the command of the Center Commander, with three subordinate commands: Recruit Training Command, Service School Command, and Naval Administration Command. It continued to meet the nation's defense needs from the 1950s through the end of the Cold War.

In 1993, the U.S. Navy announced its intention to close the NTC under terms of the Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990. At that time, the NTC consisted of over three hundred buildings occupying almost 550 acres of land, plus training buildings at the 32nd Street Naval Station. The City of San Diego, led by Mayor Susan Golding (term in office 1992-2000), responded by entering into a master lease agreement with the Navy in 1995 to ensure that there would continue to be activity on the base. The city subleased buildings to film companies, nonprofit organizations, city departments, and small businesses. It also began negotiating with the Navy for the transfer of the bulk of the base to city ownership.⁶ On April 30, 1997 all active military use of the base ended, though the Navy retained some land for about 500 units of military housing.

On May 13, 1997 the city adopted a redevelopment plan for the NTC that called for, among other things, the development of housing opportunities, the acquisition of park and recreation facilities, the preservation of historically and architecturally significant buildings and landscaped areas, and the conservation of the environmental habitat at the base.⁷ Faced with the enormous cost of implementing

the plan, the San Diego City Council decided to partner with an outside master developer. They held a competition and, in June 1999, selected the Corky McMillin Companies to develop the site.

The NTC was transferred from the Navy to the City of San Diego on May 3, 2000. It also was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district. Planning began for two hotels, 350 market-rate housing units, educational facilities, office, research, and development buildings, retail shops and restaurants, museums, live/work lofts, nearly 70 acres of parks, open spaces and golf course expanses, and the civic and arts center.

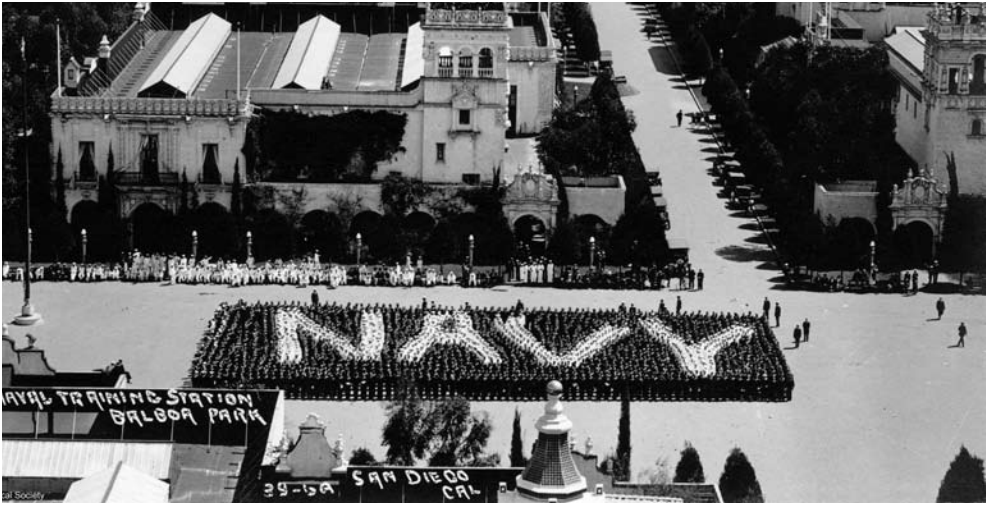
Heritage Architecture & Planning, preservation architects, played a leading role in identifying the NTC as "an important landmark in the development of the Spanish Colonial Revival style."⁸ The firm also provided the guidelines for the restoration of the many historic buildings and landscape features.

In 2000, the Corky McMillin Companies created the NTC Foundation, an independent nonprofit responsible for the rehabilitation and operation of the Civic, Arts, and Cultural Center. It also renamed the base "Liberty Station" in an attempt to attract residents and investors. Over the next seven years, the developer built houses and condominiums, new office buildings, and High Tech High School.⁹ It leased property to developer C. W. Clark in order to turn former barracks into a retail marketplace anchored by Vons and Trader Joe's. It also renovated the Sail Ho Golf Course. Future construction includes two hotels and a 46-acre waterfront park, executive golf course, boat channel, and athletic club.

The redevelopment of the NTC was controversial from the start. Critics included advocates for the homeless; the Campo Band of Mission Indians and the Kumeyaay Tribal Coalition, who contended that the site was part of their ancestral homeland; Brian Fletcher, whose family gifted 135-acres to the U.S. Navy for exclusive use as a training base; and a local citizens group, Save Our NTC, Inc. In 2007, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* reported that the city's deal with McMillin was lopsided in favor of the developer. It also showed that many of the houses and condominiums in Liberty Station had been purchased by wealthy investors rather than the "folks working their way up in the world." Delays in the construction of the waterfront park suggest that controversy will continue.¹⁰

To some, Liberty Station remains a national model for the conversion of military bases throughout the country. Harry H. Kelso, an attorney and executive officer of Base Closure Partners, L.L.C., considers Liberty Station to be an excellent example of how the redevelopment of former military sites "can be done very effectively and done correctly."¹¹ The Liberty Marketplace won a "Redevelopment Award of Merit" from the *California Construction Magazine* while the NTC Promenade won an Orchid for Urban Design from the San Diego Architectural Foundation in 2007.¹² At the very least, the city's proactive approach to the development of the former military base has saved a historic site for future generations of San Diegans.

The following photographs illustrate the development of the NTC from 1919 to the present:



Postcard showing recruits in military formation in Balboa Park. In 1917, the Navy leased land and buildings in the park, using them as temporary training facilities during World War I. ©SDHS PC #84-107.



Aerial photograph of the Naval Training Station looking southwest, 1928. ©SDHS #79:559.

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View looking northeast over the roofs of the newly constructed buildings in the Naval Training Station with the homes on San Diego's Bankers Hill in the background, ca. 1922. ©SDHS, #99:19920.



Aerial photograph of the Naval Training Station, ca. 1930. ©SDHS OP #12423-1133.



Navy recruits engage in a physical drill under arms in John Paul Jones Court, ca. 1920s. The barracks reflect the influence of the Spanish Colonial Revival style in architecture. ©SDHS #99:19919-2.



Drill in John Paul Jones Court, ND. ©SDHS UT #84:27118-3, Union-Tribune Collection.

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Recruits lined up for kit inspection, October 1935. ©SDHS, #89:17149-27.



Military exercises in Preble Field, ca. 1940s. Camp Luce Auditorium can be seen in the distance. ©SDHS UT #84:27118-5, Union-Tribune Collection.



A former administration building opposite Ingram Plaza, constructed in 1942, serves as the NTC's Visitor Center. Author's collection.^t



Captain David F. Sellers championed landscaping to make the base more hospitable. He was responsible for the planting of Bunya-Bunya trees, popular in the 1920s, shown here in Sellers Plaza. The flower-filled anchor was created in 1963. Author's collection.

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Shops and offices now occupy the buildings in the South Promenade, formerly Lawrence Court, constructed in 1922. Author's collection.



Architects preserved the pendant light fixtures in the arcades linking former barracks along the South Promenade. Author's collection.



These barracks, built in 1923, will be renovated in the next phase of development: the NTC Promenade. Cast concrete units form the entrance arch to the arcade. Author's collection.



The Sail Ho Golf Course was constructed in 1925 as a four-hole golf course averaging 250 yards per hole. It has undergone several expansions but is still considered a small, short distance course. Author's collection.

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A billboard advertises the opening of new shops and restaurants around Sellers Plaza and touts Liberty Station’s “Redevelopment Award of Merit” from the California Construction Magazine. Author’s collection.



The new homes at Liberty Station conform as much as possible to the historic architectural style of the NTC with similar roofing and color palettes. They also feature off-street garages, allowing for the creation of pedestrian walkways. Author’s collection.



Arcades outside the condominiums at Liberty Station reflect the architectural style of the former NTC barracks. Author's collection.



The North Chapel at the NTC was built in 1942 as a non-denominational chapel for recruits and officers as well as those aboard military ships stationed at or visiting San Diego. Restoration by developer C. W. Clark preserved stained glass windows, ornate tile, and hand-carved pews. Author's collection.

NOTES

1. William J. Williams, "Josephus Daniels and the U.S. Navy's Shipbuilding Program During World War I," *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 1 (1996), 8.
2. Donald Raymond Craig, "Annotated Bibliography of the History of the United States Naval Training Center, San Diego, California," masters thesis, University of San Diego College for Men, 1969, 2.
3. Abraham J. Shragge, "'I Like the Cut of Your Jib': Cultures of Accommodation Between the U.S. Navy and Citizens of San Diego, California, 1900-1951," *The Journal of San Diego History* (hereafter *JSDH*) 48, no. 3 (2002): 230-255. See also Lucille Clark Duvall, "William Kettner: San Diego's Dynamic Congressman," *JSDH* 25, no. 3 (1979): 191-207.
4. Milford Wayne Donaldson, *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties: Naval Training Center San Diego* (San Diego: Prepared for McMillin NTC, LLC, and the City of San Diego, 2000), 1B-5-7.
5. Donaldson, *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, passim.
6. Duncan Hunter, a Republican member of the House of Representatives from California's 52nd congressional district and chairman of the military procurement subcommittee, supported the Base Closure Community Redevelopment and Homeless Assistance Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103-421) that amended the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (Pub. L. 100-77). The Act of 1994 allowed local governments to obtain surplus military land for free if it was used to create new jobs and fill an economic gap caused by a base closure. It eliminated the provision in the McKinney Act that gave priority to community groups interested in providing shelter to homeless persons when it came to the disbursement of unused federal property. Brooke Williams, Augustin Armendariz, and Maureen Magee, "Boom for McMillin, Bust for City / The Old Naval Training Center Has Been Transformed into a Gleaming New Community, But the Developer's Financial Pact with San Diego Proved Lopsided," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 3, 2007, A1.
7. Redevelopment Agency of the City of San Diego, "Redevelopment Plan for the Naval Training Center Redevelopment Project," adopted May 13, 1997, Ordinance Number 0-18405.
8. Donaldson, *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, 3A-5.
9. According to its website, High Tech High School "began in 2000 as a single charter high school launched by a coalition of San Diego business leaders and educators. It has evolved into a school development organization with a growing portfolio of innovative charter schools spanning grades K-12." <http://www.hightechhigh.org/about/> (accessed February 21, 2008).
10. Ronald W. Powell, "NTC Should Be Used to House Homeless, Protesters Declare," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 5, 2000, B.4.7B; Ronald W. Powell, "U.S. Halts Shift of NTC Land to City / Ancestral-home Suit by Tribes to be Heard First," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 12, 2000, B.1; Neil Morgan, "NTC is History: Its Land Barons Flashed Spirit to Build San Diego," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 15, 2001, A.3; Williams, et. al., "Boom for McMillin, Bust for City"; Corky McMillan told reporters in late 1999, "I could build a lot more expensive homes. But the vision I have is Middle America, for folks working their way up in the world." Brooke Williams, Augustin Armendariz, and Maureen Magee, "Million-Dollar America? Corky McMillin Envisioned the Old Navy Boot Camp Filled with Homes for 'Folks Working Their Way Up,' But It Became a Hotbed for Real Estate Investment," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 4, 2007, A1.
11. Pat Broderick, "Revamp of NTC Hailed as Model Base Closure," *San Diego Business Journal*, June 27, 2005.
12. "Best of 2007, Southern California: Liberty Station Marketplace, Redevelopment Award of Merit" *California Construction Magazine* (December 2007), 39; Roger Showley, "Orchids & Onions Entwines High Roads with Low Roads," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 2, 2007.