

Resurrecting the Presidio's Historic Radio Network

The "penthouse" message center at the Fourth Army Headquarters, the Presidio of San Francisco, just before World War II. The men at the typewriters are transcribing Morse code radio messages and routing the hard copy to staff departments through a mechanical conveyor belt system known as the Lamson message conveyor. Photo courtesy Golden Gate NRA

A small, unassuming concrete building lies abandoned behind a chain link fence on a windy hill overlooking the Pacific in a remote part of San Francisco's Presidio. The hill was the site of the antenna farm for the Presidio's World War II radio transmitters, and the building was the Coast Defense Radio Station. The Perham Foundation and the California Historical Radio Society are working with the National Park Service to research the history of the Presidio's military radio network and preserve its associated artifacts and structures.

As headquarters of the Ninth Corps Area during the inter-war years, the Presidio was an important link in the Army's radio network from Washington, DC, to Fort Shafter in Hawaii and on to the Philippines. In 1921, the first dedicated radio buildings at the Presidio began broadcasting under the call letters WVY. The chief of the Signal Corps Engineering and Development Division, Major Joseph O. Mauborgne, approved the plans for these standardized structures. A Military Affiliate Radio Station (or "MARS" station), soon joined WVY. Formerly known as the Army Amateur Radio Service, MARS trained the military to set up emergency communications facilities with civilians and was an informal conduit for messages between far-flung service personnel operating as late as the Persian Gulf War.

In the early 1930s, the Army did not have an official program of monitoring radio transmissions from Japan; it labored under Secretary of War Stimson's admonition, "Gentlemen do not read each others' mail." "Reading the mail" later became a euphemism for monitoring radio transmissions, particularly radio teletype. However Mauborgne, a colonel destined to rise to the post of commanding general of the Signal Corps before World War II, was assigned to the Presidio. He monitored and recorded Japanese radio traffic as early as 1931 and passed the intercepted coded messages to the Signal Intelligence Service in Washington. These intercepts became part of the earliest grist for the code breakers' mill that solved the Japanese machine cipher known as "Purple" in 1940. These intercepts contributed to the stream of intelligence, code named "Magic," that allowed the Allies unparalleled access to the enemy's plans

and greatly contributed to the victory in the Pacific.

By 1941, the Presidio had an official, but secret,

monitoring station. On the eve of World War II, the Army finished a more expansive facility for Radio Station WVY and a dedicated Harbor Defense Radio Station. Testimony from the congressional investigation of the Pearl Harbor attack makes it clear that the Presidio was intercepting Japanese radio transmissions on the eve of the attack. During the war, the Western Defense Command, headquartered at the Presidio, communicated with Washington and units across the vast Pacific theater from its "Penthouse" operating room, reached by a set of spiral stairs from the Commanding General's offices. The Coast Defense Radio Station provided signal service to one of the most heavily fortified harbors in the United States. All these structures remain extant in the Presidio, which is now a National Historic Landmark district and part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Recently, technical experts from the California Historical Radio Society, with information provided by NPS historians and curators, have produced a better understanding of the operation and significance of the Presidio's radio network. They have enhanced the collection and preservation of the post's historic radio artifacts, properly identified photographs of vintage radio equipment from the 1920s, '30s and '40s, and performed oral history interviews with veteran radio operators. These experts have provided a fuller assessment of the history, integrity and future adaptability of the structures associated with the Presidio's historic radio operations.

On April 19, 1997, the California Historical Radio Society, the Perham Foundation, the Military Collectors Radio Net, and the Boy Scouts of America worked with NPS personnel to restore native plants on the site of the Coast Defense Radio Station and antenna farm. After a morning of work, members of the Military Collectors Radio Net operated World War II vintage radios for sev-





The site of the Presidio's World War II Coast Defense Radio Station has recently benefited from collaboration in research and site rehabilitation between the NPS and radio historians. Photo courtesy Golden Gate NRA.

eral hours. This activity put the Presidio "back on the air" as it was during one of its most significant periods. It also helped develop a sense of stewardship of the site's natural and cultural resources. The research, the special events, and the resource preservation activities illustrate the value of partnerships between Golden Gate NRA and local organizations.

The Presidio Trust, a newly chartered government corporation charged by Congress with seeking tenants to rehabilitate the former military post, will manage much of the Presidio. The California Historical Radio Society, the Perham Foundation, and their allies have been seeking an operating area and public museum facility to house and display their collections of early radio equipment. They are developing a program proposal to place before the Trust for the rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of the Coast Artillery Radio Station site. Such a proposal has the potential to preserve the built environment, enhance the natural resources of the landscape, bring authentic historical programming to the Presidio, and provide an appropriate home for the historic radio collections of these community groups:

- Stephen A. Haller is park historian at Golden Gate National Recreation Area.
- Bartholomew Lee is a past ^{Chairman} president of the California Historical Radio Society.



As of 2007, the Presidio Trust has expressed an interest in preserving this building and grounds as an interpretive historical site. The San Francisco Amateur Radio Club has helped maintain the site for its annual ARRL Amateur Radio Field Day emergency radio exercises for a number of years.

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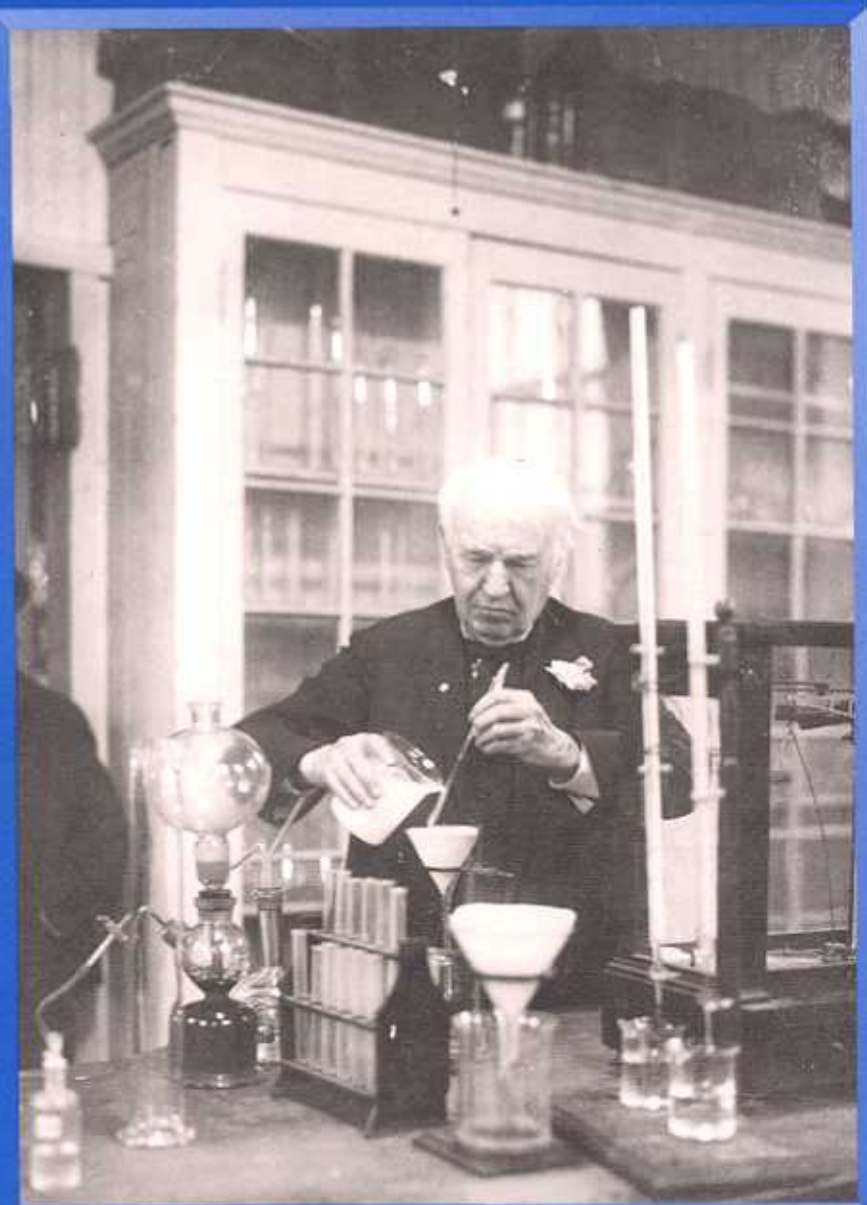
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