



San Quentin's Shady Past
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The selection of the State prison site at San Quentin dates to the early years of California statehood and is replete with accusations of political chicanery and bribery, along with corruption and gross mismanagement by those entrusted with caring for and securing the prisoners.

In 1851, Mexican War general, James Madison Estell and former governor John McDougal had received the State contract to run the future prison on a 10-year lease in return for the right to sell the prisoner's labor. This was a contract that had been shepherded through the legislature by then Governor McDougal. The prisoners were initially incarcerated on the 268-ton ship, the *Waban*, that had been abandoned during the gold rush. It was moored off Angel Island, and prisoners worked a stone quarry under the security of John Hayes and John Caperton, formerly the Sheriff and Deputy of San Francisco. In 1852, the state legislature passed another act that would fund the building of the prison to replace the overcrowded *Waban*. Bids were solicited for the new prison, and although 20 acres of land was offered free to the State in the city of Martinez, Governor John Bigler accepted the highest bid of \$10,000 for twenty acres of Benjamin Buckelew's Punta de San Quentin. The *Waban* was move to the point and construction began on buildings to house prison guards, a cafeteria for the prisoners and machine and tool shops. Estell then purchased another sixteen acres from Buckelew that contained the raw materials for a brick factory and stone quarry. A deep-water wharf was built near the prison site and the prisoners began manufacturing bricks that were sold to a fast-growing San Francisco market. Estell also maintained a quarry on Marin Island near Loch Lomond that was worked by prisoners housed on board a hulk in the bay.

Newspaper accounts chronicle the public's displeasure with the prison deal, especially as the \$100,000 budgeted for the actual construction was left off the printing of the bill and Governor Bigler accepted a \$1 million dollar bid from Estell's friend, Ferdinand Vassault.

This was eventually revoked by the legislature and Estell was given the contract for \$725,000. By 1854 the original prison buildings were completed with prison labor and Estell, now a State legislator, sub-leased the administration of the prison to others. Additional newspaper accounts reported the inhumane living and working conditions of the prisoners and the use of “floggings” and “shower baths” with high-pressure hoses as punishments for infractions. There were also more than eighty escapes in the early years as no outer walls had been constructed and prison work crews were under the supervision of only one or two guards. Many prisoners, and some guards were wounded or killed in these escape attempts. The legislature ended the prison leasing program in 1860 and the Lieutenant-Governor was put in charge until the State began hiring prison wardens in 1880. Living and working for the prisoners improved over the years and rehabilitation programs became the norm under future wardens James A. Johnston and Clinton Duffy. The photograph above, taken *circa* 1930, shows the undeveloped wetlands of Larkspur and Corte Madera in the background.

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