

# 1: Digging for Treasure Island

From its birth in the minds of its San Francisco promoters, the exposition was audacious. As early as 1933, city leaders floated the idea of building an artificial island on the shoals of Yerba Buena Island, a minor prominence that rises from the San Francisco Bay. At four hundred acres, it would be no ordinary island, but rather the largest man-made island in the world. Adding to the fantastic nature of the project, at fair's end the grounds would become the city's airport.<sup>1</sup> Even by the standards of the Bay Area, where thousands of acres of coastline have been reclaimed from the water, this was an exceptional project. The island rivaled some of the most ambitious public works projects in the world. In the mid-1930s, the Golden Gate Bridge (1933–1937) and the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge (SF0BB, 1933–1936) brought Marin County and the East Bay within a mere commute to the city by automobile. The first was the longest suspension bridge of its time, the second the longest span of any kind. They joined the San Francisco Bay Toll-Bridge (now the San Mateo Bridge), which had been the world's longest bridge when it was completed in 1929. The tens of thousands of boats that crossed the bay each day were gradually replaced by hundreds of thousands of cars and, to a lesser extent, trains running on rail lines on the lower deck of the SF0BB. The Caldecott Tunnel (1937), which led to

Contra Costa County, extended the reach of commerce and commuters, allowing traffic to bypass the inner East Bay for the towns and more spacious suburbs east of the hills.

These bridges and Treasure Island, as it soon would be called, reflect the last gasp of early-twentieth-century urban competition, or what historian Roger Lotchin called “the tournament of cities,” a competition that, by the early 1930s, San Francisco appeared destined to lose.<sup>2</sup> Between 1900 and 1940, the population of greater Los Angeles had grown almost sixteen-fold to 2,700,000 people, while San Francisco’s population, 670,000 in 1940, had not even doubled. The city no longer had the raw population necessary to compete with its southern rival. “San Franciscans simply could neither understand how the ‘Southland’ had overtaken them nor accept their own decline. Los Angeles provided the most maddening irritant to community; and during the 1920s and 1930s, San Francisco struggled to catch up.”<sup>3</sup> The fair and the airport were hatched in this climate of decline and aggressive overcompensation. At the same time, they joined a visionary tradition in a city whose physical realities often called for outsized or pie-in-the-sky proposals.<sup>4</sup>

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## A GOLDEN GATE AIR TERMINAL

Even among such grandiose schemes, Treasure Island was a different animal. Where the bridges attempted to overcome San Francisco's geographical limitations, the airport was a more desperate gambit to secure West Coast dominance of commerce in the Pacific. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, farsighted business leaders anticipated that air commerce would displace shipping. While blessed with a large deepwater port, San Francisco lacked suitable sites for airports.<sup>5</sup> In this moment of explosive growth in air travel, while dozens of airports were being built across California, San Francisco muddled about. Intrabay competition made matters worse. By 1932, all commercial carriers in the Bay Area used East Bay airports. The issue became so pressing that some authorities backed building great platforms over piers and train sheds to serve as airstrips.<sup>6</sup>

By the time San Francisco became serious about planning a fair in the mid-1930s, the idea of building an airport on the Yerba Buena Shoals already had powerful sponsors that included Mayor Angelo Rossi.<sup>7</sup> The new airport, to be part of a regional system of airports, would join the Marina, Mills Field, and a few smaller airports to serve the growing metropolis.<sup>8</sup> From a practical standpoint, the island airport was not nearly as preposterous as it would now seem. The Bay Bridge, which crosses Yerba Buena Island, made the idea of a midbay "Golden Gate Air Terminal" possible. With a causeway, the island could be stitched directly into the emerging regional highway system. The location, moreover, was closer to downtown San Francisco than any other proposed site, and it overcame competition between Bay Area cities by providing ample access to East Bay cities.

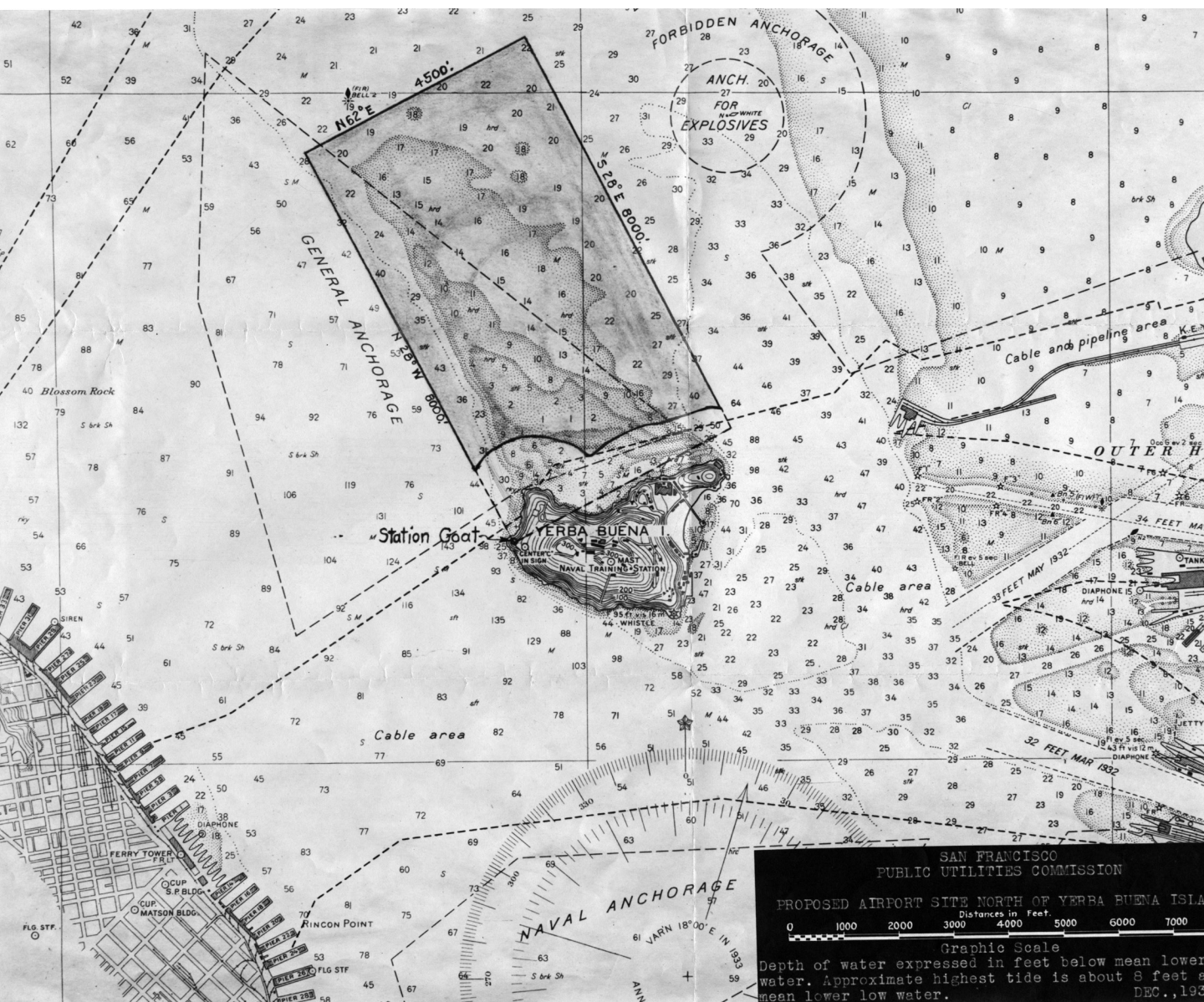
The key municipal players quickly fell into line. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission roughed out a plan in late 1932 that anticipated the basic shape of and dimensions of the island [figure 9]. As the Bay Bridge project moved forward, the supervisors requested engineering and traffic studies from the bridge's engineer, Charles H. Purcell.<sup>9</sup> A host of civic groups threw their weight behind the idea, and Rossi soon prevailed upon the state to cede the land to the city and county of San Francisco.<sup>10</sup>

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## FROM AIRPORT TO FAIR

With the political will in place, the fair became the pretext and the impetus to build the island quickly. Airport and fair converged. Weeks after the governor granted the shoals to the city, the idea for hosting an exposition as a bridge celebration on the shoals site had

9.  
Proposed airport  
site map.  
[Special Collections  
Research Center,  
California State  
University, Fresno]



SAN FRANCISCO  
PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION  
PROPOSED AIRPORT SITE NORTH OF YERBA BUENA ISLAND  
Distances in feet.  
0 1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 7000  
Graphic Scale  
Depth of water expressed in feet below mean lower  
water. Approximate highest tide is about 8 feet above  
mean lower low water.  
DEC., 1933

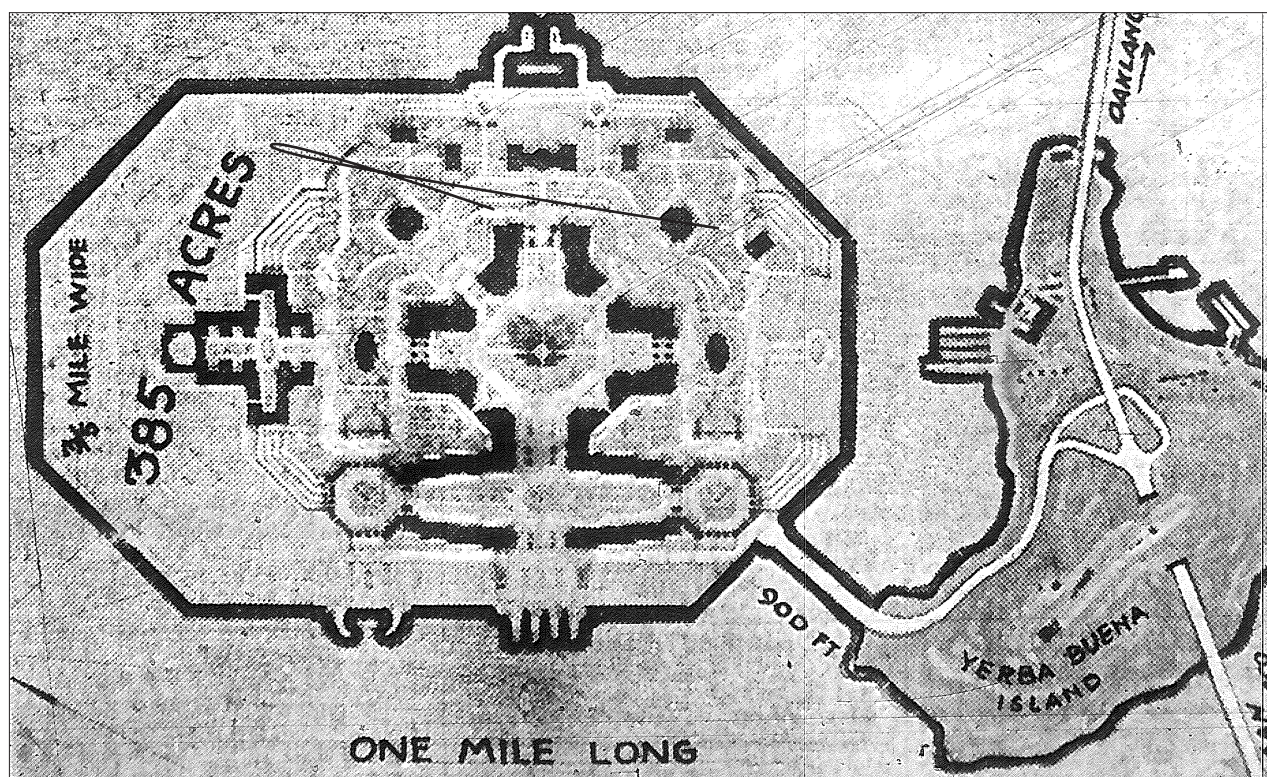


**10.**  
Harmon S. Butler  
promoting his model  
for an island exposition.  
[*San Francisco History  
Center, San Francisco  
Public Library*]

been proposed and published in the newspapers.<sup>11</sup> Harmon S. Butler, a local publicist, built a model and promoted the idea widely [figure 10]. Local interests would vie for other sites, but the airport and exposition had been linked in the popular imagination: an island on the Yerba Buena shoals was a foregone conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

Political theater followed. The Advisory Planning Committee for the Bridge Celebration formed in early 1934 and almost immediately came out in favor of the shoals. The committee justified its choice on political and practical grounds. The site minimized the “risk of sectional antagonism . . . [and] community jealousies” in the Bay Area.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it had “the advantage of being directly connected with the bridges whose completion the celebration will commemorate, for in addition to utilizing the facilities of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge directly, it will afford an unobstructed view of the Golden Gate Bridge, which in turn [will] just be used by those residents of North Bay counties coming to the exposition.”<sup>14</sup> One month later, Mayor Rossi authorized architects W. P. Day and George Kelham to study potential sites for the fair. Day was uniquely qualified. As a seasoned establishment architect and engineer, he had the technical skill to test the site himself and the design background to project how the fair might look. In addition to being the superintendent





of building permits in San Francisco, he had designed several of the landmark buildings in the city and state, including the Mark Hopkins and Sir Francis Drake hotels, the Chronicle Building, and the Cathedral. He was equally well connected at the state level, having built the state library and courts building in Sacramento. Kelham was a versatile traditionalist who could move freely between Beaux-Arts classicism and the Art Deco and moderne modes then in vogue. He had designed the San Francisco Public Library and the Federal Reserve Bank in the Civic Center, and was the supervising architect for the 1915 exposition as well as for the University of California, Berkeley, campus. Day and Kelham were among the elite and enterprising architects who had rebuilt San Francisco after the earthquake and fire of 1906.

The core of the architectural cadre that would design the fair was thus in place from its inception. Day and Kelham, if conventional, were competent and politically savvy. They quickly published a proposal for the fair on the shoals in the *San Francisco Chronicle* [figure 11]. It shows the characteristic rectangular island with its corners lopped off and the outlines of the Beaux-Arts palaces and courts sheltering the fair against westerly winds—the fair in embryo.<sup>15</sup> In their subsequent official report, they argued compellingly for the artificial island.<sup>16</sup> In

11.  
Day and Kelham.  
Proposed plan for fair.  
[Oakland History Room,  
Oakland Public Library]

contrast to the sites favored by various local groups—Golden Gate Park, China Basin, South Basin, Candle Stick Point, the Presidio, and Lake Merced—the shoals was an “unusual and unique” site, less prone to fog, and accessible by automobile, ferry, boat, and plane, which made it an ideal location for the celebration of the bridges.<sup>17</sup> Its eventual use as an airport made it an obvious asset. The fair had been the pretext for building the airport; now the airport would justify the fair. Day and Kelham bolstered their preference with extensive research on dredging and filling, fog calculations, potable water, and other technical details.<sup>18</sup>

Local groups and California legislators wrangled for months, but the outcome was never in doubt. Arthur Brown, Jr., acting in his role as city supervisor, motioned to appoint the Exposition Company, the nonprofit body that already employed him as an architect, to plan and conduct the fair on the shoals.<sup>19</sup> Day was immediately appointed director of the works, and soon after Kelham became chief of architecture, until his death in October 1936, when Brown took his place. The first dated sketch of the fair was made on July 8, 1935, days before the Exposition Company’s appointment was made official. Brown acted as the *éminence grise* and, in the following months, helped work out the basic form of the fair. By the end of 1935, with the shoals still submerged, publicity broadly based on Brown’s sketches began.

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## ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS

How did a group of essentially conventional architects and civic leaders come to support and even obsess over a visionary plan to build an island in the bay for an exposition and airport? In fact, the project reflected a common way of thinking about land, airports, and municipal infrastructure. Much of the coastline of the San Francisco Bay had been reshaped using the same methods, including entire neighborhoods such as the Marina, which was built on the tidal flats, marshes, and dunes that were “improved” for the 1915 exposition. Given that a number of veterans from the earlier fair, both architects and civic leaders, were in charge of the GGIE, it is not surprising that civic improvement and reclamation would again be linked to the exposition. With the great bridge projects under way, dredging and filling were already a part of everyday life in the Bay Area.

Many cities, moreover, had used fairs as a way of improving land, adding infrastructure, and generating tourist dollars and as a form of civic improvement or beautification. Most recently, the 1933–34 Century of Progress Fair in Chicago—one of San Francisco’s models—took place on Northerly Island, an artificial island built between

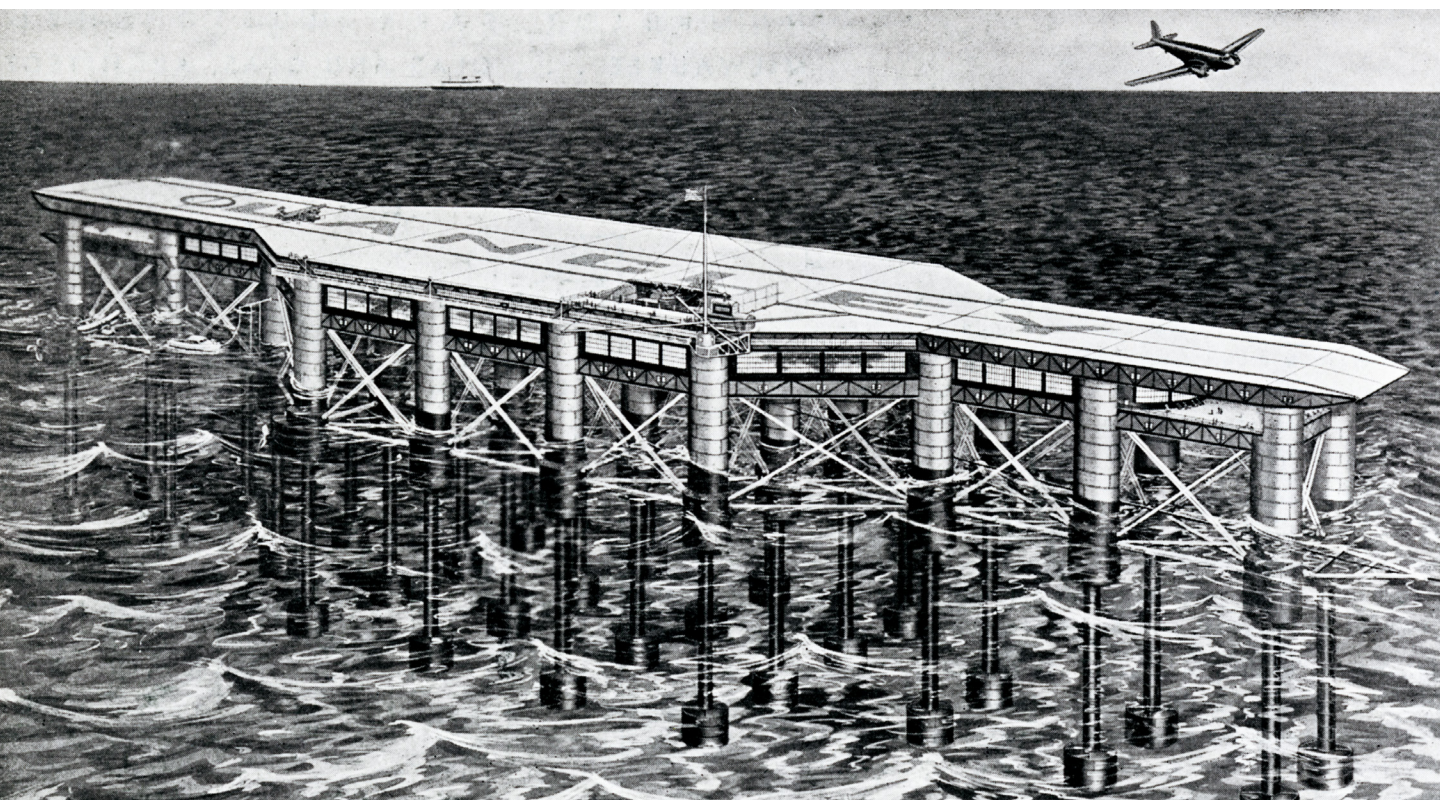
1922 and 1925 that realized part of architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham's 1909 Chicago Plan. Even before the island was finished, Chicago's business community and Mayor William Hale Thompson approved a plan to locate the city's airport there.<sup>20</sup>

Nor was an island airport an unusual proposal. In the late 1920s San Diego and Portland both built airports on sites reclaimed from water.<sup>21</sup> The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce knew Portland's project well.<sup>22</sup> Other cities had used reclaimed or improved islands for airports, as well. In Los Angeles, San Francisco's main competition for control of air-based commerce on the West Coast, Allen Field began operating as a civilian airport in 1927 on Terminal Island, an artificially enlarged island that had originally hosted the Los Angeles Terminal Railway. Creating land was one of the few ways that cities could find sites near commercial centers while avoiding the use of eminent domain.

Given the economic motives and eventual theme of the fair—the Pageant of the Pacific—the island site also had symbolic value. At the fair, San Francisco would articulate its vision of becoming the center of Pacific culture and commerce. In turn, the airport, the planners hoped, would help make that vision a reality. Given the limited range of airplanes in the mid-1930s, the only way to make the airplane viable for Pacific trade was to build a succession of floating airports across the Pacific. A plan for floating airports, or “seadromes,” came surprisingly close to reality in the 1930s. Engineer Edward Robert Armstrong widely published his ideas for a seadrome akin to an oil platform that could be placed in deep water, allowing aircraft to island-hop their way across the oceans [figure 12].<sup>23</sup> The Depression tempered some of the enthusiasm for the work, as did the increasing size of airplanes, but the idea of island airports continued to be widely disseminated, from magazines like *Popular Mechanics*, to science and architecture journals, to news magazines.<sup>24</sup> In these early years of aviation and city planning, the real often blended with the visionary.

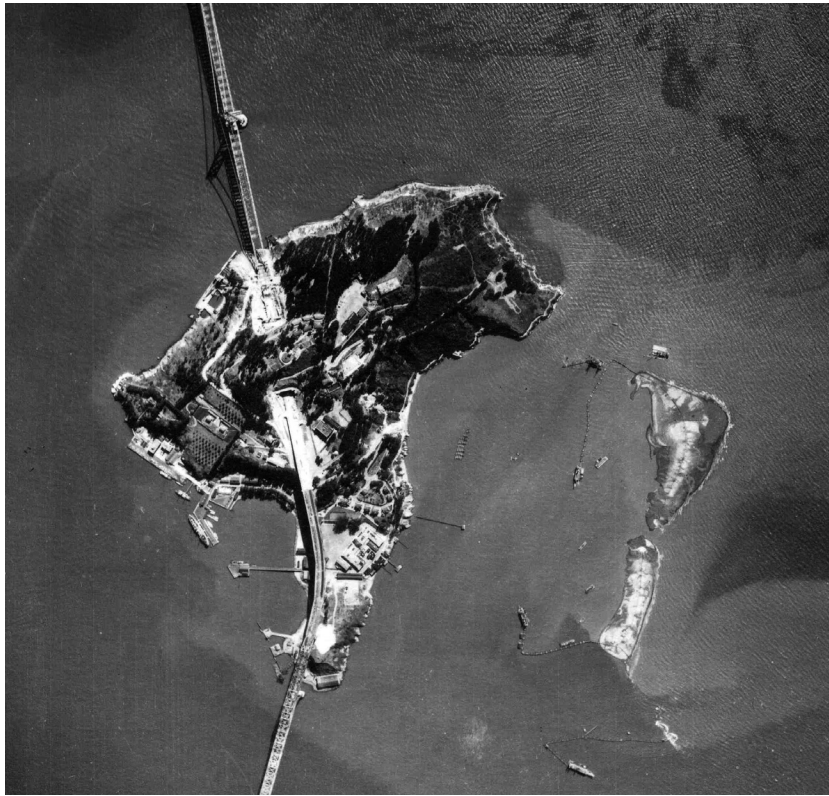
The proposed airport on the Yerba Buena Shoals was very much part of this moment of overheated speculation and rapid change, putting the airport project in dialogue with national issues of aviation and land use, as well as international issues of commerce and culture. A trail of small floating airports spanning the Pacific would have been a powerful vision to the San Francisco business elite who wished to tap into the commercial potential of Pacific markets. They imagined their artificial island as the West Coast terminus of a great system spanning the Pacific. In other words, the idea for a regional system of airports grew quickly into a vision for a network that would span the globe.





The symbolism of an island airport, moreover, would have been accessible to San Francisco's businessmen, many of whom were also cultural leaders with a keen interest in Pacific culture. The Chamber of Commerce, in fact, strongly linked its mission to the work of a quasi-scholarly group called the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), and did so explicitly in terms of aviation. The IPR, with chapters throughout the Pacific, sponsored conferences and publications on the economy and culture of the Pacific Rim. The local chapter, which was deeply intertwined with the city's business community, would be decisive in formulating the fair's theme and agenda. The institute sought a stable, peaceful Pacific theater for larger, idealistic reasons, while the businessmen sought the same for more commercial reasons and justified their views through the institute's agenda. The airplane was central to their thinking. As one Chamber of Commerce member, Robert Newton Lynch, wrote: "When two intrepid flyers crashed into Molokai, having made the trip from San Francisco to the Hawaiian Islands in a single day . . . [they] annihilated the element of time in transportation across the Pacific. Heretofore the element of time has been the determining factor in solving and adjusting the relationship of nations. . . . We have now come into an age when there will not be time to get ready for the inevitable."<sup>25</sup>

12.  
Armstrong Seadrome.  
[Courtesy of Time, Inc.]



Fourteen years before the attack on Pearl Harbor, San Francisco already anticipated the darker side of air travel. Preoccupied with the related prospects of aviation and the Pacific, its leading citizens were willing to go to great lengths to defend the city's economic interests from competition and war. This dynamic between flight, Pacific commerce, the community of nations, culture, and soon the rising specter of war gave the fair its meaning. The same dynamic also built Treasure Island. Its name famously invoked the gold dust that once floated down the Sacramento River into the Bay in the nineteenth century, but it just as easily could have referred to the untapped commercial riches that lay west of the Golden Gate—a modern gold rush waiting to be mined by intrepid aviators. But first San Francisco would need to build a new Pacific island.<sup>26</sup>

13.  
Dredging, 8 May 1936.  
[National Archives and  
Records Administration,  
San Francisco]

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## BUILDING THE ISLAND

As Arthur Brown, Jr., and the others fiddled with their preliminary designs, bids went out in August 1935 for the dredging. The work proceeded at a blistering pace. The city procured funding from the Works Progress Administration, but it hinged on making land available for the first buildings no later than July 1936.<sup>27</sup> Contracts were advertised only in February of that year, the same month that the overmatched WPA





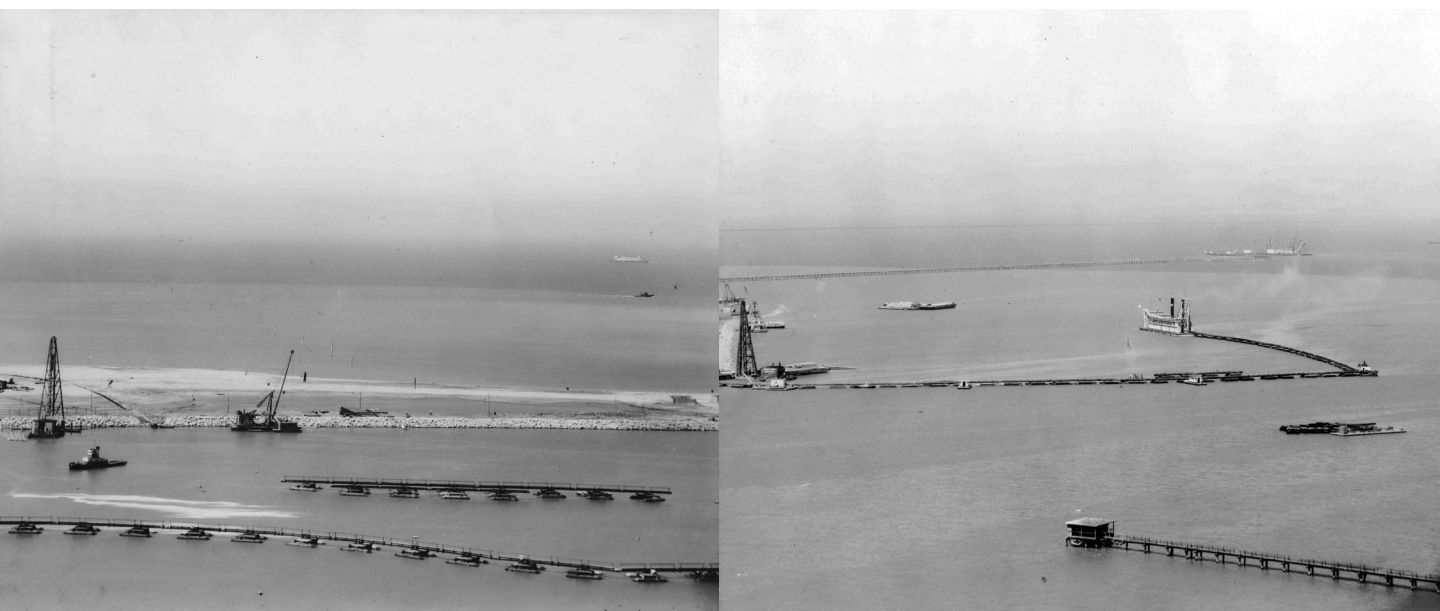
handed the work over to the Army Corps of Engineers. Dry land had to rise in mere months. The plan involved building a seawall to provide shelter for the dredges and allow the fill to be placed in still water rather than in currents. The construction of the perimeter would act like an enclosure dike and resist the lateral movement of the fill.<sup>28</sup> The workers would then fill in the area roughly from south to north [figures 13–15].

**14.**  
Panorama of the new  
island taking shape,  
18 August 1936.  
[National Archives and  
Records Administration,  
San Francisco]

## A PACIFIC ISLAND

Intense labor agitation formed the backdrop to this massive public works project. As the fair was being proposed, the Depression nearly reached its nadir, and the violent Waterfront Strike of 1934 paralyzed San Francisco. The threat of further violence and Communist agitation, let alone a work stoppage, could have undone the fair. From the fair organizers point of view, labor had to be held in check.<sup>29</sup> The stakes were thus immense. As much as labor tension pressured the city and the fair, so did the larger economic realities of the moment.

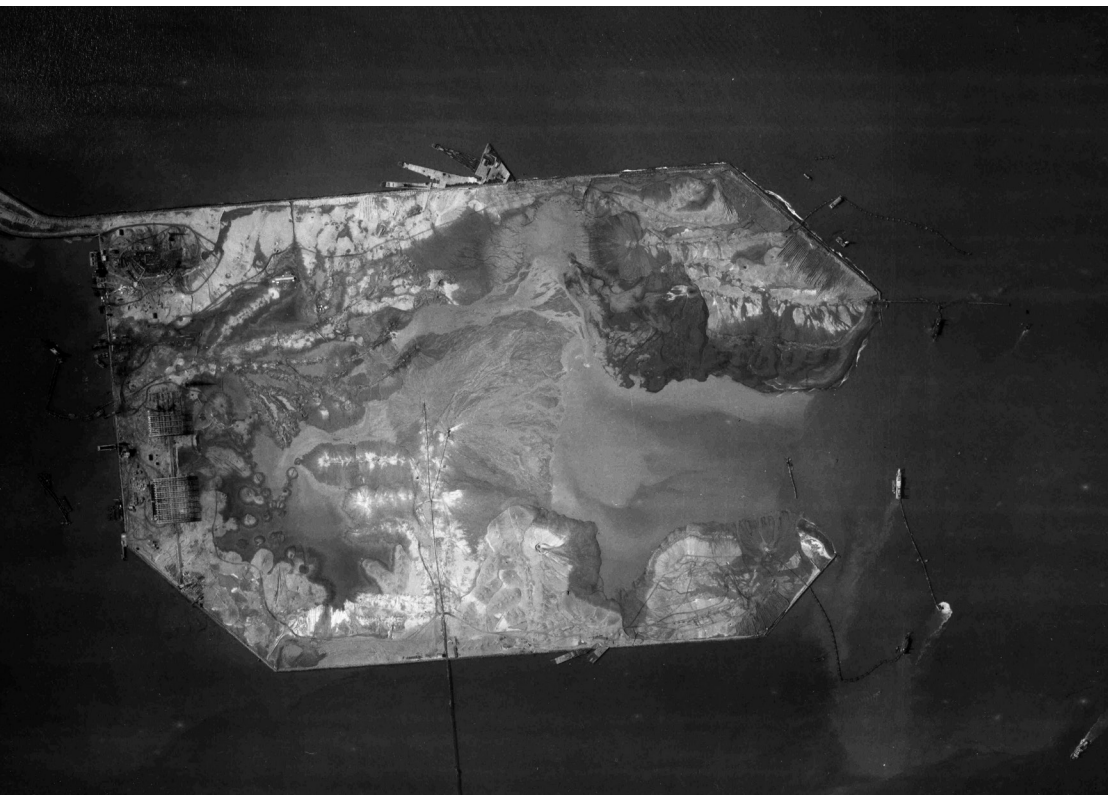
As bold as the bridges, exposition, and airport appear, they were born of insecurity. Before World War II the intense competition between western cities for resources created a system of metropolitanism. Cities essentially operated as city-states waging commercial wars for



regional dominance—and this in a moment of diminishing resources. The western economy stumbled in the 1920s, “pushing the West toward hard times about a decade before the rest of the nation experienced a severe downturn,” historian John M. Findlay has observed.<sup>30</sup> By the 1930s, “the atmosphere of opportunity that had long pervaded the West had vanished.”<sup>31</sup> Growth became the central mechanism through which a city could make vast claims on its own citizens and appeals to the federal government for funding.<sup>32</sup>

This was not just a matter of elites and boosters having their way. As Lotchin has convincingly shown, ordinary citizens elected booster mayors and ratified public works projects. This is particularly important for understanding the morass surrounding the San Francisco airport, which, as infrastructure, was as essential as the bridges were to the growth of the city and its competition with its rivals. The same citizens who supported two of the most dramatic bridge projects in the world balked at turning Mills Field into a major airport. Simultaneously, they backed building an artificial island for the fair and airport. In other words, San Franciscans sometimes rejected pragmatic local projects in favor of risky, visionary, and symbolic projects.





**15.**  
Buildings rise out  
of the mud (far left),  
17 February 1937.  
[National Archives and  
Records Administration,  
San Francisco]

The ebb of San Francisco's power in the "tournament of cities" helped create a particular self-sustaining dynamic: "As the size of government grew in response to San Francisco's relative economic decline, more power over the creation and implementation of policy fell into bureaucratic and supposedly expert hands, like those of the chief engineer, the airport manager, and the head of the Public Utilities Commission. This wind-fall gave the bureaucrats an incentive to favor still more urban competition, thereby placing further power within their spheres."<sup>33</sup>

Arthur Brown, Jr., demonstrates this crossover from professional expertise to bureaucratic power, as does W. P. Day, with his wealth of managerial expertise. Day was placed in the pivotal technical role, which in the end was also a matter of public persuasion. Brown, Kelham, and Day were servants of the larger phenomenon of urban competition. Lotchin aptly calls this dynamic a "defense mechanism" in a moment of "urban status anxiety." One of the outcomes of these urban battles in the early twentieth century was a remarkable string of public works, many of which brought employment to the Bay Area during the Depression.<sup>34</sup>

As is well known, after the fair the navy took over Treasure Island, which was almost immediately rendered unusable as an airport with the advent of the larger and faster planes developed to fight the war.<sup>35</sup> There would be no Golden Gate Air Terminal. This apparent failure, however, is largely overlooked, partly, one suspects, because the city put almost no money into it in the first place. From a fiscal point of view, it was as dispensable as the fair. As infrastructure it became redundant, as well. Mills Field, which was expanded with WPA funds at the same time that Treasure Island was built, became viable and has served continuously as San Francisco's airport since the war.

Interurban competition manifested itself most often in San Francisco's attempts to overcome its geographical limitations. It built bridges, highways, and tunnels and filled in the bay to acquire more land. Even the control of water and electricity "would be the ultimate weapon to force the suburbs into a 'Greater San Francisco.'"<sup>36</sup> Air travel, of course, became indispensable for transcending the city's physical boundaries and overcoming its isolation. A great airport linked to the bay's advantages would draw commerce regardless of the city's size. This explains why the tone of the Chamber of Commerce was so urgent in the early 1930s, and why otherwise prudent city supervisors, businessmen, and architects put an airport in the middle of the bay. And, finally, interurban competition explains the compelling necessity of an exposition to celebrate the bridges, as well as the maturation of the city and its infrastructure in a reinvigorated metropolis that could sustain future growth. The world was invited to Treasure Island not just for a visit but also to contemplate western migration and the emergence of a new Pacific civilization. How the fair articulated this vision is the subject of the following chapters.