

NATURAL RESOURCES

Q: In 1900, I heard that the most popular beach in the Los Angeles area was the beach on Terminal Island. What happened to that beach and how was it connected to the “Great Free Harbor Fight”?

The beach on Terminal Island in San Pedro was a very popular beach. It faced south, thus avoiding the glare from the afternoon sun. It was also safer, because it was protected from heavy ocean waves and because the beach receded gently into deeper water.

Initially, many of the wealthiest families in Los Angeles bought property on the beach and built a line of magnificent homes. Later, development brought many immigrants (particularly Japanese) to work in these homes and on the local farms, ships, railroads, and factories. However, saving the Terminal Island beach was not a high priority for everyone. Southern Pacific Railroad, the dominant political force in California in the late 1800's, viewed Terminal Island as a threat to its monopoly. The SP was the first long-distance line in the West, and already controlled the Oakland waterfront. SP did not want competition from a competing harbor at Terminal Island that could be built by the City of Los Angeles.

To further its plan to protect its main facility in Oakland, SP proposed to provide Los Angeles with an SP port to be built in Santa Monica. The Santa Monica Port would serve Los Angeles, but would be a small satellite facility that supported the principal SP port in Oakland. The Los Angeles City leaders did not agree and the result was the “Great Free-Harbor Fight,” between SP and the City of Los Angeles. Southern Pacific sought federal funds to build a breakwater for its satellite port in Santa Monica, where SP had acquired all available waterfront property. While SP relied on its monopoly position and its lobbying power in Sacramento and Washington D.C., the anti-Southern Pacific effort, led by the City of Los Angeles, focused on the excellent geography and geology offered by a port centered on Terminal Island and San Pedro.

CITATIONS

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After years of confrontation, Los Angeles finally received federal funding and dredging began at San Pedro. But with the end of the Great Free-Harbor Fight, a new challenge arose: the need for huge investments in and Los Angeles City control over port infrastructure.

As a first step, in 1906, the voters in Los Angeles approved the annexation of the narrow, 16 mile strip linking Los Angeles and the new harbor (the “Shoestring Addition”). Next, in 1909, Los Angeles received approval from the State of California to incorporate San Pedro and Wilmington into the City of Los Angeles. As a final step, Los Angeles turned to the 1848 Act admitting California as a State. Under that Act, Los Angeles and other California cities asserted that waterfront land, particularly property in the area of potential ports (the “tidelands”), belonged to the State of California and not to private interests like SP. This was confirmed in 1911 by the Tidelands Trust Act when port cities like Los Angeles were designated as trustees of the tidelands, removing control from private owners like SP.

This is only a brief snapshot of the long Free-Harbor Fight. The details are still interesting and informative and are well-worth investigating.