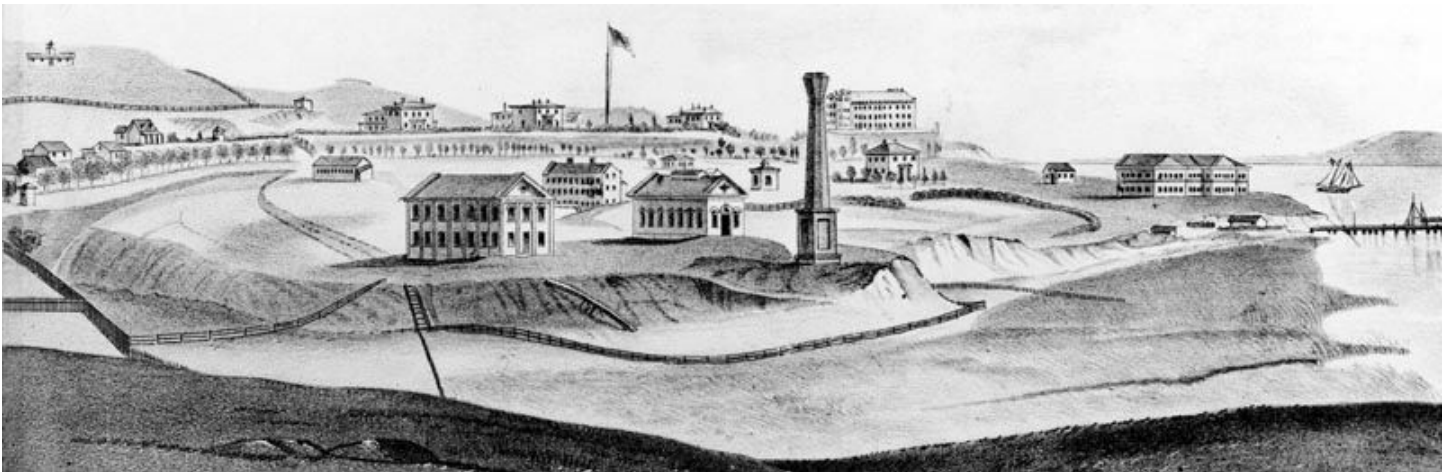


Presidio Historical Association Joins Fight to Preserve Historic Benicia Arsenal Site

Gary Widman

Benicia Arsenal opened in 1851 and experienced the Civil War, WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. It closed in 1964. The Benicia Arsenal, as listed on the National Register of Historic Places (#76000534), includes twenty-two contributing buildings; six buildings are owned by the City of Benicia and the rest are privately owned. The site is also a California Historical Landmark. Among the historic buildings are two camel barns, which briefly housed an Army experiment in transportation across the arid Southwest. The City of Benicia owns the “Clock-tower Building” (combination warehouse and ridge-top fort) and the Commanding Officers Quarters (COQ), which now serves as a community art center. There are two other large historic homes on the ridge-top. Land between those buildings, land across the street to the north, and land on a forested, down-slope west-facing lot, is privately owned. All that land described (both public and private) comprises the site listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Benicia Arsenal, from a lithograph published in *Historical Atlas of Solano County 1878*

The owners of the undeveloped portion of the site (excepting the three houses and Clocktower) have proposed to build 300+ apartments that will surround the historic houses and will cover the adjacent down-sloping west lot and north lot. This proposal has been accepted and approved by the City Council. The Council claimed it acted under the authority of the controversial Senate Bill 35 provisions, now adopted into statutory law, which allows development proposals to be dropped out of city review and approval processes if specified conditions are met. The City Council and Mayor said they “had no choice” and had to approve this proposal without the benefit of environmental impact statements or any further review.

A local group (which the PHA strongly supports) is fighting this approval in Court, arguing that the Council did have lawful choices and made the wrong decision by approving projects that destroy the historical significance of the nationally listed site. If the apartments are built, it is expected that the listings on the National (and State) Registers of Historic Places will be terminated. The apartments across the street and surrounding the historic houses will be higher and more massive than the historic buildings, thus destroying the historic value and significance of the all historic buildings and the registered historic site, as is clear from the photo.

The Benicia group opposing the project is *1000 Friends Protecting Historic Benicia*, or “1000 Friends PHB”. In order to publicize this threat, the 1000 Friends held a meeting in the old Clock-tower Building at the Arsenal on Sunday afternoon, March 12. The meeting drew approximately 150



Part of the site today, from the *Yes! Benicia Arsenal Park* website
<https://www.yesbeniciaarsenalpark.com/what-s-the-vision>

Benicia residents. The program focused on a description of the threat, the values of the Historic District, 19th Century History of Benicia Arsenal and Alternative Futures for the Arsenal Historic District.

It is clear that, if built, the proposed project will destroy the significant historic experience that can now be experienced in and around the structures and surrounding areas of the listed site.

The PHA strongly supports the 1000 Friends. If you would like more information, and/or would like to join them in this fight, see www.1000FriendsPHB.org. If you can help support the Friends and their legal expenses, donate at: <https://1000friendsphb.org/donate>.

Future Conditions on Jefferson St. Looking West from the Clock Tower



Mass and Location of Proposed Buildings: historic structures are identified by name and arrows; all others are proposed new construction