The Long Beach Breakwater:  
A History

by

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Introduction

In the past century, the Long Beach breakwater has become one of the defining features of the city of Long Beach itself. Without it, the city would cease to be considered one of the largest ports in the world. In the past two years, there has been discussion on the alteration or removal of the Long Beach Breakwater in order to boost commerce and tourism. However, before making such a momentous decision, it is vital to understand the history of the Long Beach Breakwater. The objective of this paper is to analyze the history of the Long Beach Breakwater. It will also help inform as to how the Long Beach Breakwater affects people’s daily lives.

Los Angeles Harbor Construction

Before the government of Long Beach began to even consider the construction of its own breakwater, speculation began over the construction of the Los Angeles Harbor in San Pedro Bay during the 1890s. In 1899, the City of Los Angeles created the Los Angeles Port Commission and soon after the U.S Army Corps of Engineers gained interest and would play a crucial role in the construction of the Los Angeles Harbor and Long Beach Breakwater. In 1902, the Federal government began to fund the construction of the Los Angeles Harbor, which spans from the Cabrillo Beach Park to slightly past Terminal Island. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began surveying the area and drafting plans for construction. The Federal funding assisted the completion of a 1000 feet section of breakwater that allowed the Los Angeles Harbor to be developed, which proved to be very lucrative. As Los Angeles began to profit from their newly constructed breakwater, the city of Long Beach began to show interest in the construction of their own breakwater.
Long Beach: Before the Breakwater

After the completion of the Los Angeles Harbor, surfing was introduced to Long Beach in 1911 by two young men who brought their surfboards from Hawaii (Coastal Conservancy 2007: 3). It was then that Long Beach had the best waves of the west coast of the United States. As surfing became more popular over the next two decades Long Beach hosted the National Surfing and Paddleboard Championships in 1938 and 1939 (ibid). The incredible surf brought in enormous amount of capital due to tourism. However, as World War II ended, the Breakwater was completed and as a result, the famous surf of Long Beach ceased to exist by the 1950s.

The early beginning of the construction of the Long Beach breakwater was made possible by lobbyists who insisted that funds should be provided by the Federal Government for this project (Hendricks, 2009). The Federal Government first wanted affirmation from the people to see if the majority was in favor. As a result, citizens of Long Beach began to tax themselves in 1909 and 1914 to do harbor studies and began dredging silt on the coast from the San Gabriel and Los Angeles River. Charles Whitham, the city manager of Long Beach through 1908-1910, pushed for funds for the breakwater during the late teens and early twenties of the 19th century (ibid, 2009). He was adamant that it would bring prosperity to Long Beach as he foresaw prosperity coincided with the development and construction of canals and harbors. At this time the San Pedro Bay was being dug and harbor facilities near the Queen Mary were being constructed (ibid, 2009).

Construction of the Long Beach Breakwater: 1919-1932

In 1919, the U.S. Navy splits its forces into an Atlantic and Pacific fleet. The Federal government decided the Pacific fleet was to be based out of San Diego, Long
Beach, and San Francisco (ibid, 2009). The U.S. Navy interest finalizes the government decision to construct the breakwater. Commerce also became an important motivational factor for the construction of the Long Beach breakwater.

In an effort to improve commerce in the Long Beach area, the Long Beach City Council agreed to begin construction of two giant moles*, which would make up the breakwater. This was also pushed by the Long Beach citizens, who voted to authorize $3,500,00 for the construction of this breakwater and the construction of sea front docking facilities (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 13). The Army of Engineers from Washington had already given official sanction of the project during that time. The dredging for the project had already begun, and limestone was quarried from Catalina Island and dropped by large barges into ideal locations for the base of the breakwater. The initial construction began in 1924 and lasted until 1927. (Hendricks, 2009).

However, as the project seemed to be building smoothly there was financial opposition to further the construction of the Long Beach Breakwater. In 1928, the Long Beach City Council opposed further financing of the construction of the Long Beach Breakwater, since no more outside help was being given. It was the belief of the Long Beach City Council and Army Corps of Engineers that the all deep-water dredging should be financed by the federal government (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 12). Aside from this conflict, a great deal of progress was made. One mile of the Long Beach Breakwater was completed, and council believed there was no reason why another $225,000 should be spent on the project(ibid 12). The Federal government then decided to not help finance the further construction of the Long Beach Breakwater because the City of Long Beach has not complied with conditions set out by Congress (ibid 12).
Appeals for the continued construction of the Long Beach Breakwater were made as the public recognizes importance in future commercial development. After a hearing in Washington in front of the U.S. Army Board of Engineers, George F. Nicholson, a harbor engineer, observed Congressional support for the proposed extension of the Long Beach Breakwater. Eventually, Congress authorized $7,000,000 for the construction of the Long Beach Breakwater (Cohan 1928: 1). The Navy also approved of the Congressional decision, since it would eventually provide anchorage for the Navy fleet (Drake, 1929: 17). The total costs of the further construction of the Long Beach breakwater were included in the Harbors and Rivers Omnibus Bill. In June 1930, the bill was passed in Congress and $8,346,000 was given to the City of the Long Beach for further extension of the Long Beach Breakwater by July 1, 1932 (Drake, 1930: 9). In June 1931, the preliminary work of filling and building 1900-foot bulkhead began as a part of the Long Beach Breakwater (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 19). More limestone was quarried and dumped into the ocean from Catalina Island for the foundation of the breakwater (ibid 19). After funds were exhausted, representatives of both Long Beach and Los Angeles ventured to Washington in order to propose receiving additional funds earlier for the construction of the breakwater (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 18). The funds were received and construction continued throughout the early 1930s.

Long Beach Breakwater Construction: 1935-1945

In 1935, more funds were requested for the Los Angeles-Long Beach project. At this time, 75.3% of the project was completed. Army Engineer Gen. Markham estimates that $5,400,000 would be required to finish the development. In 1940, the construction of approximately 3,100 more feet of breakwater would be required to finish the entrance of
the Long Beach Harbor. The Navy asked $7,074,000 for Los Angeles Harbor for urgent need of proper protection. Gen. Markham stated, “The Los Angeles project is the largest in a group of nineteen which military and naval authorities recommend in connection with moves to strengthen the defenses of the country.” The Los Angeles Harbor project called for a 7,920 foot breakwater extending into shallow water off Long Beach. As a result, the House passed the Harbor Bill. The Navy’s proposed amount of $7,040,000 is granted. This Bill is needed for “emergency river and harbor improvement” at Los Angeles Harbor. In 1944, a three and a million dollar contract was awarded to the Guy F. Atkinson Co. for the extension of another 10,000 feet of the Long Beach Breakwater, which would offset the difficult docking and navigation of operating base facilities. Later, an additional three million dollars were needed for the further construction of the Long Beach breakwater. Congress reviewed the Navy plan for new construction of Harbor buildings and parts of the Long Beach Breakwater (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 10). Funds were awarded to three different contracting companies: T.E. Connolly, Inc., Case-Connolly, Co., and Peter Kiewitt & Sons (Long Beach Breakwater Construction 1). The contract provided for the construction of 8,650 feet of detached breakwater and the restoration of 12,500 feet of other detached breakwater. The project involved dredging, filling stone, and concrete construction within the time span of 1080 days (ibid 1). During the construction of the last two miles of breakwater, commerce begins to boom in the Port of Long Beach. This is caused by the end of World War II and the demand of aid in European countries. Also, Japan, Germany, and Italy were no longer major trade competitors after the end of World War II (Cave, 1946: 8). Many of the ships used for shipping cargo during the war were being used after the war for international commerce.
In 1946, a portion of the Pacific Fleet is stationed at the newly built Naval Base (ibid, 1946: 8). After the completion of two-mile breakwater extension, the breakwater was improved with dredging the surroundings of the breakwater, so that it may be easier for anchoring ships. The dredging was apart of a plan approved by the Los Angeles City Council, which focused on improving the harbor and flood control in the Los Angeles area (Long Beach Breakwater Construction, 11). Finally, construction was completed in 1948 (Hendricks, 2009). By the early 1950’s, Long Beach ceases to be the “Surf Mecca” that it once was. Since that time, minor updates and refinements of the Long Beach Breakwater have been made over the past half century (ibid, 2009).

Conclusion and Summaries

The Long Beach Breakwater is the longest in the U.S. It is over eight miles in length. The Army Corps of Engineers maintains jurisdiction over the breakwater’s modification or removal. Its primary purpose was to prevent large waves from disrupting the operations of the port and possible residencies. It took nearly two decades of government funds, manual labor, and political debate to fully construct the Long Beach Breakwater. To remove the Long Beach Breakwater, would be the reversal of this historic effort. However, the Long Beach Breakwater was no longer serving its full purpose, since many U.S. Navy facilities have been shut down since the 1990s.

Interviews of Julian Del Gaudio and others who have knowledge on the history of the Long Beach Breakwater could to be conducted for additional information. Through the use of the Los Angeles Times Archives, additional research could be conducted on the construction of the Long Beach Breakwater during the 1940s.

The following research paper deserved a B because of its lack of diversity of
types of sources. The sources consisted of one interview, nineteen newspaper articles, and one government document. There was additional information that could have been used to make this research paper become more complete. For instance, more visual aids could have been used in order to show a contrast of Long Beach today and what it was before the existence of the Long Beach breakwater. Otherwise, this report covered most of the history of the Long Beach breakwater.

References Cited


Angeles Times Archives. 7 Dec. 2009


