



Source: Gaines-Burkhead Photography (defunct). Quarrying the Rock for Building Material, c 1920s

Morro Rock: Static or Shape-Shifting?

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Once used as a tie-up for fishing vessels, a source of foundational stone, a mariner's locator, and an enduring sacred place of the Chumash and Salinan peoples, Morro Rock – stately and majestic – is the darling of the photographer's lens and the painter's brush. The Rock has survived a history that almost matches its many visual angles.

Morro Rock is the northernmost of the Nine Sisters, a group of peaks that are volcanic in origin. Morro Rock was once an island reachable on foot at low tide. It was connected to land in the 1930's by a causeway on the north end of the Rock, originally built to accommodate railroad tracks so that rail cars could haul the quarried rock more easily to shore.

The shape of the Rock, probably named Morro from the Spanish word 'moro' for the hat worn by a Moor, has changed in recent times, mostly by man-made influences. Massive amounts of Morro Rock have been blasted (as shown in the photo), quarried, and removed. Its fate as a source of mined rock was determined in an 1890 *State Mining Bureau Report*, which describes the Rock as "...a gigantic cone of porphyritic trachyte in the ocean off Morro Bay... (made of) available building stone, (which) although very hard chiseling, can be quarried in as large dimensions as can be handled."

From 1889 to 1963, 1,200,000 tons were taken from its mass through such quarrying. The rock was used to construct several structures in the county, including the breakwater at the Port of San Luis and the Morro Rock causeway. Although the rock was once thought to be very strong and durable, both these structures were later rebuilt because the strength of the original material was not adequate.

Morro Rock was under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers during the height of the rock-quarrying period. But public pressure continued to grow – especially as Morro Bay became a popular tourist destination – to stop the quarrying of Morro Rock. It finally gained protection from further human-induced alteration in 1966 when title to it was transferred to the State of California. In 1968, our 'Gibraltar of the Pacific' was officially named **California Registered Historical Landmark No. 821**.

Also in 1968, 5,000 tons of rock fell from its south facade. The rumble was heard at the Coast Guard station. The giant fallen boulders lie in place near Morro Rock to this day. It is possible that the parts that fell had been rendered unsteady by the quarrying. What will Morro Rock's future be?