In 2013, I was awarded a three month placement on the US/ICOMOS Internship Program. The program started in Washington D.C, where I met other interns from Iran, India, Ireland, Paraguay and various parts of the United States (Illinois, Florida and Louisiana). We spent several days visiting a number of historic sites and attending meetings organised by US/ICOMOS where we learnt about various aspects of the Federal heritage system, advocacy and world heritage issues. After a week we departed for our internship placements which included Paris, Ireland, Jamaica, Philadelphia, Nantucket and Charleston.

I was fortunate to have been placed with the Presidio Trust, San Francisco. During my time there, I worked with the Historic Compliance team. Originally occupied by the Indigenous Ohlone/Costanoan people, the Presidio site became the northern most Spanish imperial outpost from 1776 to 1821. The site was later occupied by the Mexicans (1821-1846) and the US Army (1846-1994) as a military outpost. In 1994 the Presidio was handed over to the National Park Service and by this time, it was established as a National Historic Landmark. The Presidio Trust was formed to preserve, maintain and manage the park, with the mission to become financially self-sustainable principally through the adaptive re-use of the many historic former military buildings.

My main project for the Historic Compliance and asset management teams was to undertake an Unoccupied Historic Building Survey – identifying those historic buildings that are not currently in use and may have potential to be adaptively re-used. A key part of the survey was to undertake a preliminary condition assessment of these buildings to identify where priority building stabilisation works may be required.

The survey identified 122 unoccupied historic buildings, comprising a quarter of the historic buildings at the Presidio. The unoccupied buildings included a variety of types, from sheds to former hospitals, powerhouses to barracks. The unoccupied historic buildings dated from 1864 to 1955. A total of 37 buildings were categorised as a high priority for building stabilisation. I prepared a detailed report on the results of the whole project and individual heritage inventory sheets for each of the unoccupied historic buildings.

Other aspects of my internship included preparing a review and gap analysis on past historic preservation programs at the Presidio and preparing a prospectus for future programs, attending building inspections, participating in planning meetings and reviewing restoration projects.

There were a number of other activities that the Presidio Trust staff helped organise as part of my internship such as visits to Novato Airfield, the Frank Lloyd Wright Marin Civic Centre building, Alcatraz and the recent restoration of the Hallidie building (one of the earliest curtain wall buildings in America). I also attended heritage workshops, tours, talks and exhibition openings. It was great to be able to live and work on site. I lived with a number of other summer interns from other disciplines and we had regular dinners, outings and trips to the local pub trivia.

At the end of the internship, I returned to Washington to meet the other US/ICOMOS interns for final presentations and meetings.

After the completion of the internship, I remained in the US for a month to visit a number of other historic places and buildings in Los Angeles, Virginia, Chicago and New York and was even able to fulfil a dream of visiting Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater.

I had a wonderful internship and trip to the US; it was definitely a worthwhile experience. I have come away with wonderful memories and new skills and knowledge in historic preservation. I would like to thank Australia ICOMOS for nominating me as their 2013 national representative, my employers at AHMS for encouraging me to apply for the internship, US/ICOMOS and the staff at the Presidio Trust who made my stay so interesting and enjoyable.

Laura Matarese, Heritage Consultant
Laura Matarese at Battery Saffold (c.1895), Presidio San Francisco