

Camp Pendleton from the Mission Era to Modern Day

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Before becoming a Marine Corps base, the land of and near what is now known as Camp Pendleton was home to several Spanish missions and ranchos. Today they are historical landmarks that remind us of the land's past and culture, going back to when settlers first arrived in the area. From the first settlements to the historical relics we can still see today, the land has ample history to be learned from. This essay will explore the topics of the Spanish missions and the ranchos established in Camp Pendleton.

Spanish missions were a major part of California's history. In the 1700s and 1800s, twenty-one missions were built, forming the mission trail.<sup>1</sup> In 1769, an expedition was led by Captain Gaspar de Portola, a Spanish military officer. They traveled north of Baja, California in search of an ideal port. On the 20th of July that year, they discovered the land that we know now as Camp Pendleton.<sup>2</sup> They named the land Santa Margarita after Santa Margarita of Antioch, a catholic saint whose holy day is traditionally celebrated on July 20th. Soon after, the missions San Juan Capistrano and San Luis Rey were established nearby, in 1776 and 1798 respectively. In 1823, the Las Flores Asistencia was established in Camp Pendleton, in between the two

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<sup>1</sup> California State Parks, "The California Missions Trail," last modified 2019, accessed January 25, 2025, [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=22722](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=22722).

<sup>2</sup> United States Marine Corps, "History and Museum," last modified 2025, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Main-Menu/Base-Information/History-and-Museum/>.

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missions, and functioned as an extension of San Luis Rey. It served as a rest stop for travelers through the area.<sup>3</sup>

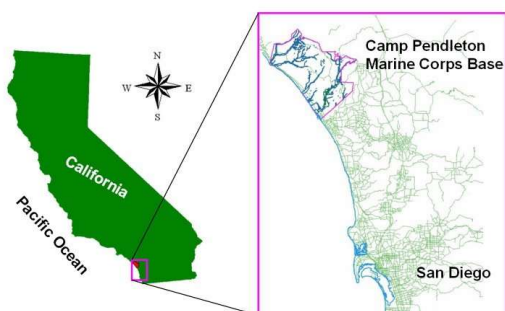


Figure 1: Map of Camp Pendleton Area

Originally, the Spanish government had intended the missions to be temporary. After the Native American inhabitants of the area were considered ready to receive citizenship, the land would return to them and the missions would become secular Parish churches. However, the turning over of land was delayed by missionaries,

who claimed that the Native Americans weren't yet civilized enough. It is also believed that Native Americans were subjected to abuse such as corporal punishment while being forced to work for the missions. Secularization really began in 1821 with Mexico's independence; because Spaniards were seen as threats, many missionaries were expelled from Mexico, undermining the missions' power. Demand for secularization grew, and in 1834, it was finally implemented, with most mission lands being given to Native American families, sold, or granted.<sup>4</sup>

The conclusion of the Mission era gave rise to ranchos, which were grants of land given by the government. Grants were given in an effort to populate the Alto California region.

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<sup>3</sup> California State Parks, "Las Flores Asistencia," last modified 2025, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/ListedResources/Detail/616>.

<sup>4</sup> John Caragozian, "Few Heroes: California Mission Secularization," last modified 2021, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.cschs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/History-Resources-Caragozian-Mission-Secularization-11-29-21.pdf>.

Ranchos were typically used for raising livestock, such as cattle, and for agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Pio Pico,



Figure 2: Rendering of Las Flores Adobe

the last governor of Alta California, and his brother Andr s were given one such grant in 1841. The land, which included much of what was previously held by Mission San Juan Capistrano, was in fact the largest grant in California's history at 89,742 acres. Three years later in 1844, the brothers obtained the previously mentioned Las Flores Asistencia, now a full-fledged rancho, and updated

the name of the rancho to Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores. In 1864, as a result of several poor financial decisions (mainly gambling and living an overly luxurious lifestyle), the brothers had to sell their entire rancho to Don Juan Forster, their brother-in-law, in order to avoid foreclosure. Forster significantly expanded and improved the ranch house before passing away in 1882. He left the rancho to his son, who was soon forced to sell the rancho to James Flood for \$450,000 due to financial hardship. The rancho was managed by Richard O'Neill, a friend of James Flood, who also leased its land out to farmers.<sup>6</sup>

One family to whom O'Neill leased farmland, the Magees, would be the next residents of Las Flores. The head of the family, Henry Magee, became a widower in 1886 after his wife, Victoria de Pedrarena died. Two years later, O'Neill gave the rancho's adobe to the Magee children. The eldest daughter, Jane, went on to manage Las Flores and substantially expanded

<sup>5</sup> California Missions Foundation, "Ranchos," accessed January 27, 2025, <https://californiamissionsfoundation.org/ranchos/>.

<sup>6</sup> United States Marine Corps, "Las Flores Adobe," last modified 2025, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Main-Menu/Base-Information/History-and-Museum/Las-Flores-Adobe/>.

the farmland. Thanks to her leadership, the rancho produced a large portion of San Diego's lima bean crop, and she became known as the "Bean Queen". The area officially became Camp Pendleton in 1942 when President Roosevelt dedicated it as a military base following the Pearl



Figure 3: Areal View of Santa Margarita Ranch House

Harbor attacks. The Magees were authorized to continue living and farming in Las Flores for Jane's generation. Following Jane's retirement in 1922, her younger brother Louis took over managing the rancho until his retirement in 1962. After the death of his wife, Ruth, in 1968, Las Flores became vacant.<sup>7</sup> Although online records of the Magee family are scarce, Ancestry.com's Find a Grave® Index lists a Henry Cave Magee who was born in 1825 in New York and died in 1895 in Las Flores. He is recorded as having married Maria Victoria Magee (maiden name Pedrorena),

who died in 1886. This is most likely the Magee family of Las Flores. While no daughter Jane is listed among the couple's nine children, there is a Louis Alfred Magee, and an eldest daughter Jennie Magee. Interestingly, her middle name is noted as *Pendleton*.<sup>8</sup>

After becoming vacant in 1968, the adobe became a National Historic Landmark, a century after it was first built by Forster. Three years later in 1971, the Santa Margarita Ranch

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Reynolds, "From Rancho to Marine Base," *Western Horseman*, December 13, 2023, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://westernhorseman.com/blogs/out-west/from-rancho-to-marine-base/>.

<sup>8</sup> "U.S., Find a Grave® Index, 1600s-Current," database, Ancestry.com, last modified 2021, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60525/records/199234199>.

House was registered on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>9</sup> Today they are situated on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base, and efforts to continue the preservation of these structures' rich history are ongoing.<sup>10</sup> Camp Pendleton continues to be a major cultural institution in California, as it has been for many years.

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<sup>9</sup> United States Marine Corps, "Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton > Legacy Content > Ranch House and Adobe," last modified 2025, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Legacy-Content/Ranch-House-and-Adobe/>.

<sup>10</sup> United States Marine Corps, "History and Museum," last modified 2025, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Main-Menu/Base-Information/History-and-Museum/>.

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