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Camp Pendleton: A Look Into The History Of The Land

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The Land now known as Camp Pendleton is more than just a military base— it's a living narrative of centuries of evolution and cultural change. From the pre-history or archaeology of the land, to its origins of being a homeland for Native American occupants, to the Spanish exploration and mission era, all the way to the bustling cattle ranches of the rancho period, and finally to its longstanding role as a significant military and economic institution in San Diego County since 1942, this region has been a staple in shaping California's history. Every era has left a mark, contributing to Camp Pendleton's vast and enduring story. In this essay, I am going to take a look into the history of the land known as Camp Pendleton, and explore the diverse eras that have helped shape this land into the remarkable piece of historical significance that we know today.

Starting off, I will be diving into the early history of the land of Camp Pendleton encompassing its prehistory, Native American occupants, and the Spanish exploration and Mission era. Long before written history, Camp Pendleton was home to rich biodiversity and thriving ecosystems that supported human settlement. One stretch of beach was home to many animals and archeological remains, known as The Red Beach site.



#1 Pictured is the Red Beach Site today (Photo by Sofia Max)

The Red Beach site has been occupied, abandoned, and re-occupied over an extensive period of time from 2200 B. to A.D. 900. Not only were different portions of the site occupied during different time periods, different parts of the site were used for different purposes. The site, however, appears to

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have been used primarily as a short-term residential base that was frequently re-occupied over a long period of time during different seasons of the year. The range of animal species exploited, especially the presence of deer and rabbit from all time periods demonstrates that the site was used for more than just collecting nearby fish and shellfish. The density of bone, diversity of animal taxa, range of local habitats exploited, spatial patterning of bone remains, moderate density and diversity of flaked stone material, and seasonal evidence based on isotopic analysis are consistent with short-term residential use on the site (Foster, 1999). Other archeological evidence reveals that Native American tribes, particularly the Luiseno people, inhabited the region for over a thousand years (Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, n.d.). The name “Luiseno” was the name given to the Native Americans by the Spanish, the Luiseno’s referred to themselves as *Payómkawichum* or *Payómkowishum* (which means “People of the West”) (Bacich et al., 2023). Archeologists have found evidence of seven villages on Camp Pendleton that were inhabited, likely when the Spanish arrived. For the most part they were gathered along the Santa Margarita River and Las Flores Creek. The Luiseño people did acquire items such as steatite to make bowls or obsidian to make arrows. The discovery of seven villages along the Santa Margarita River and Las Flores Creek as well as acquiring materials to make useful items and weapons suggests a well-established, and thriving community that had adapted to the land’s resources. (Rothwell, n.d.). There could have been about 1,000-3,000 Native American people living on Camp Pendleton when the Spanish arrived. The Luiseno people utilized the land’s natural resources for sustenance and trade. These people led a hunter-gatherer life. Men hunted small animals and fished in the rivers and ocean. Clans gathered acorns together, sometimes traveling substantial distances into the mountains for the harvest. Women pounded the acorns into a meal that was a staple of their diet. Villages had hereditary leaders and shamans who

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passed their skills down to their sons. They held instructions and rights of passage for their children. They traded with their neighbors. It was a simple life that worked well for hundreds, even thousands, of years. (Rothwell, n.d.) However, the arrival of Spanish explorers in the mid 18th century would disrupt this centuries-old way of life, leading to profound societal shifts. In order to locate land suitable for port, the Spanish, under the command of Captain. Gaspar de Portola led his party of Spanish Soldiers and Franciscian missionaries north from San Diego, en route to Monterey (“Gaspar De Portolá’s Travels Through Camp Pendleton,” 2019). Portola and his men sought to seize Spanish control over Alta California. Six days after leaving San Diego and some 40 miles North, the crew camped out on the banks of a river flowing through present-day Camp Pendleton. Since it was the feast day of Saint Margaret of Antioch, they



named it Rio Santa Margarita (“Gaspar De Portolá’s Travels Through Camp Pendleton,” 2019).

#2 Pictured is the Santa Margarita River today (Photo by Sofia Max)

The first significant Spanish settlement in the area was the establishment of Mission San Luis Rey de Francia in 1798.

The Franciscian missionaries relied heavily on labor from the Luiseno people to make the adobe bricks and tiles

(*HISTORY OF MISSION SAN LUIS REY*, n.d.). This mission, located east of present-day Oceanside, played a pivotal role in Spanish colonization efforts. A significant event that highlights an early interaction between the Natives and the Spanish occurred when the Spanish encountered a small group of Native Americans who had two very ill girls with them; one was badly burned, and the other lay very still in her mother’s arms. By communicating through

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gestures and signs, they convinced the Native Americans to let them perform a ceremony for the sick girls. The parents watched, as the Spanish made mystical movements with their hands and arms, sprinkled water, and uttered strange words. Afterwards, the Native Americans returned to their villages unsure of what they just experienced with their dying children. Little did they know that the Spanish had just performed the first Christian baptism in Alta California, at a site now known as the Cristianos (“Gaspar De Portolá’s Travels Through Camp Pendleton,” 2019).



#3 Pictured is a sign dating the first baptism in Alta, California when Portola and his expedition came across a group of Native Americans in need of help (Photo by Sofia Max)



#4 Pictured is the site where the baptism took place today (Photo by Sofia Max)

This interaction signified the gradual imposition of Spanish religious as well as cultural practices upon the Native American population. The glory days would soon be over, however, when in 1833 the Decree of Secularization was

issued by Mexican Governor Jose Echeandia, and in 1835 all of the Missions had been secularized. The missions were turned into parishes and the lands were sold or gifted to colonists

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and members of the military and politicians who established large ranchos. (*HISTORY OF MISSION SAN LUIS REY*, n.d.) This resulted in the beginning of the Rancho era. In 1841, Pío and Andrés Pico received the largest land grant in California history — 89,742 acres. Most of the land granted to the Pico brothers had been part of the mission's Rancho Santa Margarita and was dotted with 2,000 horses, 15,000 sheep and 10,000 cattle. In 1844, the Picos acquired Las Flores and its surrounding Indian land, effectively ending the “*pueblo libre*” experiment. The Picos noted their acquisition in the expanded name of their *rancho*, Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores.

Pío, the last Mexican governor of Alta California and his brother Andrés, general of the Mexican army who signed the peace treaty with the Americans, led lavish lifestyles, and were known gamblers. They often mortgaged land at exorbitant interest rates to pay their debts. In 1864, threats of foreclosure resulted in the sale of the entire Rancho Santa Margarita y Los Flores To their brother-in-law, Don Juan Forster. Forster expanded the Santa Margarita ranch house into a princely, 8,500 square-foot residence befitting the fabled *ranchero* and his love of weeklong fiestas and dazzling rodeos.



#5 Pictured is a sideways view of the Santa Margarita Ranch House today (Photo by Sofia Max)

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#6 Pictured is the Santa Margarita Ranch House today (Sofia Max)

Forster continued the tradition of large scale cattle ranching. (Reynolds,2023) Don Juan Forster died in 1882, leaving the *rancho* and a \$207,000 mortgage — a fortune at the time — to his two sons. Within a year, financial difficulty forced his sons to sell the *rancho* for

\$450,000 to Nevada’s “Silver King,” James Flood. James’ friend, Richard O’Neill, ran the

rancho and leased some of its land to tenant farmers, including the next residents of the Las Flores *adobe*, the Magees.



#7 Pictured is the Las Flores Adobe today (Photo by

Sofia Max) Henry Magee had come to California with the army. He married Victoria de Pedorenna, a descendant of two of San Diego’s Old Town families, the Estudillos and de Pedorenas. Two years after Victoria died in 1886, Richard offered the vacant Las Flores *adobe* to Magee’s motherless children. Las Flores would be the Magee home

for the next 79 years.

Magee’s oldest daughter, Jane Magee, never married and proceeded to be an outstanding business woman as well as a surrogate mother to her brothers and sisters. Jane expanded the farmland to 3,000 acres. Under her management, Las Flores became the largest lima bean producer in San Diego’s County, providing one-third of the state’s crop. She became respectfully

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known as Southern California's "Bean Queen." The *rancho* culture in California lasted for a relatively short period from the 1830s to just after statehood in 1850. Devastating floods and drought in the early 1860s caused the downfall of the *ranchos*, and vast plots of land were sold off.

With the passage of the Second War Powers Act on March 27, 1942, the transformation of the Rancho into the world's largest Marine Corps Base was initiated. In 1942, Camp Pendleton was dedicated September 25, 1942 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, along with Major General Joseph Fegan present at the ceremony who would become the installation's first Commanding General. Camp Pendleton was dedicated after the late Marine Major General Joseph H. Pendleton, an illustrious figure in early California military development (*HISTORY OF CAMP PENDLETON*, n.d.). During the dedication, President Roosevelt visited the Santa Margarita Ranch House and took great interest in it along with specifically taking a liking to a room which has since been referred to as the "President's Room".



#8 Pictured is the President's Room located at the Santa Margarita Ranch House today (Photo by Sofia Max)

Since its establishment, Camp Pendleton has grown into one of the most significant military institutions on the West Coast.

#9 Pictured is a sign at one of the gates of Camp Pendleton today (Photo by Sofia Max)

Beyond Camp Pendleton's military function, it serves as a cultural and economic institution in San Diego County. Camp Pendleton had a significant cultural impact in San Diego



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County when it first came to be. After the Vietnam War ended, resettlement centers (also called refugee camps) were quickly set up. Camp Pendleton was the first refugee camp that opened for Southeast Asian refugees. The camp was located in San Diego, California. It was the only refugee camp in the western United States. Vietnamese refugees from the first wave were sent to Camp Pendleton. Camp Pendleton was also known as “Tent City.” Tens of thousands of refugees lived there in cramped military tents. In six months, about 50,000 Vietnamese refugees passed through Camp Pendleton. Vietnamese refugees experienced many struggles including culture shock, trauma, and language barriers when they arrived. The U.S. Marines at the camp and other Vietnamese refugees provided some support. They served food, cared for the sick, and taught English. Refugees stayed there for about three months. Then, they would resettle with the help of the U.S. families that were sponsoring them. Many Vietnamese refugees resettled in Southern California. The warm weather reminded them of Vietnam. Some moved to southern regions of San Diego, like Linda Vista and City Heights. Others moved north to Orange County and Los Angeles. Vietnamese refugees resettled across different states based on where they found sponsors and jobs. Many refugees resettled in other parts of the U.S., such as Orlando in Florida, Fort Smith in Arkansas, and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania (“Vietnamese Refugees Arriving, Resettling in California; Southeast Asian Ethnic Enclaves; Little Saigon in Westminster, California | Lesson Plan Curriculum | the Asian American Education Project”).

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Movies played a big part in the culture of the ones who lived there. The earliest movie filmed at Camp Pendleton was “War Dogs” in 1942 the year that Camp Pendleton

#10 Pictured are the Quonset huts today, that were featured in the film “Heartbreak Ridge” (Photo by Sofia Max)

was dedicated (“Camp Pendleton: The Perfect Place to Shoot a War Flick,” 2019). Many more films were made on the land throughout the years such as “Sands of Iwo Jima”, “Flying Leathernecks”, and “Heartbreak Ridge” just to name a few. Camp Pendleton also preserves many cultural aspects of its history through its Cultural Resource Program. Camp Pendleton and the CPR maintain a government-to-government relationship with the Native American tribes that used to inhabit the base and regularly consults with these tribes on a number of subjects including the identification, protection, and management of the archaeological and tribal resources located aboard the installation (Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, n.d.-a). This is important because the Native Americans were the first people to inhabit the land, and it is great to see that today Camp Pendleton still keeps in touch with the local tribes to preserve their story and history.

Moving on to the economic significance of Camp Pendleton, Camp Pendleton has a \$6.1-billion positive economic impact on the surrounding communities (Townsend, 2011). The large workforce on the base, including Marines, military personnel, and civilian employees, plays a big role in boosting the local economy. With many people earning steady incomes, a significant portion of their earnings is spent in nearby communities. Local businesses benefit greatly from their daily needs, while the housing market sees more demand for home purchases

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and rentals. Other services such as healthcare, car repairs, and other important services such as childcare, also thrive as base employees as well as their families look for essential support. Beyond necessities, recreational and entertainment businesses grow as well. This steady economy creates an influx in jobs, encourages growth in businesses, and strengthens the surrounding communities, making Camp Pendleton a key contributor to the region's economic importance.

In conclusion, Camp Pendleton stands as an important testament to the rich, and evolving history of California. From its prehistory, its Native American inhabitants, and many other fascinating eras, the land has proven to adapt to the needs of its people. Each era brought profound changes to the land, leaving behind cultural and historical imprints that still resonate in today's fast-paced world. While this region serves as a vast military base today, its historic roots help remind us of the resilience and transformation that have defined it for centuries.

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