

The Persistence of Place: Geography in Camp Pendleton's History

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Rich in landscape but even richer in history, the land now known as Camp Pendleton carries a layered past. The land's vast terrain holds traces of the historical shifts of people, power, conflict, and resilience. Shaped by Indigenous tradition, Spanish ambition, Mexican ranchos, and the demands of a nation at war, the land is much more than just a modern Marine base. For thousands of years it held Indigenous communities who shaped their lives around its hills and rivers. Centuries later, this same land was marked by empires, ranching, and warfare. The history of Camp Pendleton lives in the land itself. While the use of Camp Pendleton's land changed throughout time, shifting from Indigenous stewardship to colonial institutions and later transitioning to private ranchos followed by federal control, the same geographic corridors and resources kept shaping settlement and land use over time.

Archaeological evidence shows that long before the land became a modern military base, it was a landscape full of people. Coastal access, waterways, and valleys made settlement possible for these individuals. According to Volume I of the ICRMP Update Report, there were a total of 840 archaeological sites recorded, with 744 of them being prehistoric archaeological sites.<sup>1</sup> These sites reflect documented prehistoric human activity and occupation across the land, not just a single location. To explain further, this human presence was made possible by sources of water such as the four drainage systems: San Mateo Creek, San Onofre Creek, Las Flores Creek, and the Santa Margarita River. The first of the four large drainage systems, San Mateo Creek, extends 22 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Santa Rosa Plateau in the Cleveland National Forest, ending in a freshwater marsh at the ocean. Serving as a source of freshwater, San Mateo Creek may be a factor in what made settlement and human presence on this land

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<sup>1</sup> Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Integrated Cultural Resources Management Plan Update for Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Volume I Report (Camp Pendleton, CA: Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, September 2017), Table 2, PDF p. 44, [https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Portals/98/Docs/Environmental/Cultural%20Resources/Volume\\_I\\_MC\\_B\\_CPen\\_ICRMP\\_Final\\_with\\_signatures.pdf](https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Portals/98/Docs/Environmental/Cultural%20Resources/Volume_I_MC_B_CPen_ICRMP_Final_with_signatures.pdf)

possible. Additionally, the San Mateo Creek basin also opened to the ocean, making travel easier since individuals had access to the coast. San Mateo Creek is only one example of a drainage system that could have made settlement possible; the other drainage systems created similar resource corridors across the base, especially Las Flores Creek, which sits much closer to the coastline. Starting about one mile from the ocean at the confluence of Las Pulgas Canyon and Piedra de Lumbre Canyon, the watershed of Las Flores Creek covers about 27 square miles and is located entirely on base.<sup>2</sup> The watershed drains the San Onofre Hills and the southwestern Flank of the Santa Margarita Mountains. Because the creek drains through long canyons, it would have created a natural route through the landscape, which would make travel and resources more accessible for early communities. Overall, these drainage systems show how the land itself supported long-term human activity. This directly leads into the indigenous occupants who later developed established ways of life that tied to these waterways and valleys.

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<sup>2</sup> Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Integrated Cultural Resources Management Plan Update for Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Volume I Report (Camp Pendleton, CA: Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, September 2017), PDF p. 19, [https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Portals/98/Docs/Environmental/Cultural%20Resources/Volume\\_I\\_MC\\_B\\_CPen\\_ICRMP\\_Final\\_with\\_signatures.pdf](https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Portals/98/Docs/Environmental/Cultural%20Resources/Volume_I_MC_B_CPen_ICRMP_Final_with_signatures.pdf)



**Figure 1. A view of San Mateo Creek and its channel habitat, illustrating one of the natural drainage systems that supported long-term human presence and shaped settlement patterns on the land that became Camp Pendleton. (Source: California Trout)**

Long before the land of Camp Pendleton had become a regulated region, the Indigenous people inhabiting the land treated it as a living system that supported their needs. At the Las Flores Estancia site, the land was first occupied by prehistoric Native communities and later by an ethnohistoric Luiseño village.<sup>3</sup> The Luiseño people's traditional homeland stretched along the coast from the San Juan Capistrano area down to around Encinitas and Carlsbad, and extended inland to the coastal mountain valleys and Mt. Palomar. Being one of the four indigenous tribes in San Diego County, the Luiseño people took advantage of the variety of plants and animals within the land. Within the tribe, each person had an established role which would contribute to

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<sup>3</sup> National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Las Flores Estancia, National Register Information System #93000391, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/6981180c-de60-40b9-bd6b-726e4827ee11>

the thriving state of the tribe. The men of the tribe would hunt animals such as deer, wood rats, rabbits, ducks, quail, seafood, and various species of insects. While the men hunted, Luiseño women would gather roots, seeds, acorns, berries, grapes, onions, strawberries, and prickly pear. Not only did the Luiseño tribe take advantage of the vast species of plants and animals on the land, but they also used the various raw materials to construct tools to aid them in everyday tasks. For hunting, the Luiseño used bows with stone-tipped arrows to help with hunting bigger animals such as deer.<sup>4</sup> Other tools the Luiseño used for hunting included deer-head disguises, throwing sticks, slings, and traps. To add on, the Luiseño were not only surviving off the land, but were also organized into a structured society. They lived in villages of semisubterranean earth-covered lodges, and appeared to be organized in small kin-based groups clustered into clans or quasi-clans. These clans have territorial, economic, and political functions.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, the Luiseño's food systems, toolmaking, and clan-based village organization were all factors that supported a stable way of life closely tied to the land's resources.

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<sup>4</sup> Damian Bacich, "The Luiseño of Southern California," The California Frontier Project, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.californiafrontier.net/the-luiseno-of-southern-california/>

<sup>5</sup> "Luiseño," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Luiseno>



**Figure 2. Historic photograph of Luiseño community members in Southern California, illustrating the Indigenous population whose lifeways were closely tied to the region's waterways and valleys. (Source: Fallbrook Historical Society)**

Although Indigenous communities had long maintained stable lifeways on this land, the secularization era introduced new systems of control, which became clear in William Hartnell's 1839-1840 inspection at Las Flores. Hartnell encountered Indigenous communities who asked him to distribute to them the livestock which had formerly been "cared for by the community."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar W. Hebert, "Las Flores," *Journal of San Diego History* 7, no. 3 (July 1961), accessed January 27, 2026, <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1961/july/lasflores/>

This suggests that the Indigenous people were treating the livestock as a collective wealth. Hartnell eventually agreed to their request and began to distribute animals according to household categories, transforming the Natives' livestock system from one of shared resources to instead to a system of personal or family shares. This process of reorganizing property through secularization shaped what emancipation actually looked like for the Indigenous people. However, the individuals of authority such as Hartnell really used this process of emancipation to regulate the Indigenous people. Hartnell exemplified this when he warned the Natives that whoever neglected what was given to them and did not work would lose their "freedom" and be sent back to the mission community.<sup>7</sup> To better understand Hartnell's motives behind emancipation, it's important to consider that the CPHS account notes he did not believe Indigenous people could manage alone, showing that emancipation was still framed as supervision rather than full independence.<sup>8</sup>

Spanish exploration and the mission era in this region did not unfold randomly, because the land itself forced movement and settlement into predictable corridors. An example of this is the 1769 Spanish expedition led by Gaspar de Portolá, because geographic necessity dictated movement. Portolá and the expedition's engineer, Miguel Costansó, were tasked with navigating a terrain that was completely unknown to them, yet their route was far from random. Their decisions were constrained by the immediate survival needs of thirty-seven soldiers and a large

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<sup>7</sup> Edgar W. Hebert, "Las Flores," *Journal of San Diego History* 7, no. 3 (July 1961), accessed January 27, 2026, <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1961/july/lasflores/>

<sup>8</sup> Paul Durrance, "Las Flores: The History of a Place," *CPHS Groundbreaker* 17, no. 4 (2023), Camp Pendleton Historical Society, accessed January 29, 2026, [https://camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CPHS.17.4.web\\_.pdf](https://camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CPHS.17.4.web_.pdf)

number of livestock.<sup>9</sup> According to Portolá's diary, the expedition set out from Santa Maria on May 11, traveling for four hours through a landscape that offered almost no water or pasture for the animals. This lack of resources forced them to push further into the coastal hills to find sustainable points to stop. After five hours of travel on May 12th, they reached a location named La Poza de Agua Dulce.<sup>10</sup> While this provided a vital freshwater pool, Portolá noted with frustration that there was still no pasture nearby, highlighting the constant struggle to balance the needs of both the men and their grazing animals.

This reliance on water and grazing land locked the Spanish into what the Camp Pendleton Environmental Operations Mapbook identifies as predictable natural corridors.<sup>11</sup> The mapbook illustrates that the region is defined by distinct drainage and riparian habitats, such as the San Mateo and Las Pulgas valleys, which act as the only logical routes through the rugged terrain. By following these valleys, Portolá was able to avoid the physical strain of crossing steep contour lines while staying close to the intermittent streams and riparian areas where water was most likely to be found. These drainages, which the mapbook identifies as jurisdictional wetlands and sensitive habitats today, were the same geographic lifelines that determined the Spanish route in the eighteenth century. Ultimately, the exploration of the future Camp Pendleton region was a process of discovery limited by the land itself, as the expedition could only move as far as the next drainage allowed.

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<sup>9</sup> Don Gaspar de Portolá, "Diary of Don Gaspar de Portolá," trans. Donald Eugene Smith and Frederick J. Teggart, San Diego History Center, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://sandieghistory.org/archives/books/explorers/trans10/>.

<sup>10</sup> Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, *Environmental Operations Mapbook*, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://pendleton.isportsman.net/files/Maps%2FEOM%20DTD%202013%20March.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, *Environmental Operations Mapbook*, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://pendleton.isportsman.net/files/Maps%2FEOM%20DTD%202013%20March.pdf>

The California mission system was an ambitious project designed to completely change the way native people lived, worked, and worshiped. The Spanish priests did not just want to spread their religion; but, they intended to train native tribes to live in a European colonial society.<sup>12</sup> This meant native people had to move into mission enclosures or separate villages called *rancherías* where their daily routines were strictly controlled. They were taught to speak Spanish and learned new industrial skills like raising cattle, weaving, and construction. For the area that is now Camp Pendleton, this system relied on a network of smaller ranch stations to keep the community running. Breanne Robertson points out that the Santa Margarita ranch house, which is still a landmark on the base today, began around 1810 as an *estancia*, or outpost, for Mission San Luis Rey.<sup>13</sup> This site was essential for raising crops and producing cattle products like tallow and hides, which were the backbone of the mission's economy.

However, keeping this system running was a constant struggle against the local geography. Phil Brigandi explains that Mission San Luis Rey had to manage a massive network of outposts over 1,000 square miles because the coastal land did not have enough water or grazing land in one spot.<sup>14</sup> Father Antonio Peyri reported in 1827 that the mission was forced to search for fertile canyons to grow grain and feed their livestock. At Santa Margarita, the priests grew wheat and corn by using water from the mountains, but even that supply was often low.

Another outpost on the base called Las Flores had to use water from a pool near the ocean to

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<sup>12</sup> Library of Congress, "The Missions," *Early California History*, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/missions/>

<sup>13</sup> Breanne Robertson, *Camp Pendleton: The Historic Rancho and the Military Base—A Shared History* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division), accessed February 15, 2026, [https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton\\_web.pdf](https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton_web.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Phil Brigandi, "The Outposts of Mission San Luis Rey," *Journal of San Diego History* 45, no. 2 (1999), accessed February 15, 2026, <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1999/april/outposts/>

grow corn in the sandy soil. Because the environment was so dry and rugged, the mission could only survive by following the water and spreading its animals across the different valleys of Camp Pendleton.

Although the mission system was intended to centralize native life around a single church, the dry geography of the region forced the priests to build a spread-out network of outposts to survive. These outposts were categorized based on their specific roles within the mission's economy. An *asistencia* was essentially a sub-mission that included its own chapel for religious services, while an *estancia* served primarily as a ranch station for managing livestock and growing crops. Phil Brigandi explains that Mission San Luis Rey established one of the most extensive networks in California, covering about 1,000 square miles across what is now San Diego and Riverside counties. This spread-out system was a practical response to the lack of consistent water and pasture in any one location along the coast. By placing these outposts in fertile valleys and canyons, the mission could sustain thousands of animals and provide food for both the native converts and the Spanish military.

A key example of this system on the land that is now Camp Pendleton is the Las Flores *Asistencia*, which was established in 1823 by Father Antonio Peyrí.<sup>15</sup> This site was strategically located about 14 miles north of the Santa Margarita Ranch House along the El Camino Real corridor. The geography of the Las Flores area offered unique resources that were not available at the main mission. For example, the mission utilized a pool near the sea to irrigate corn crops, while the open plains of nearby Las Pulgas provided necessary pastures for the cattle.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> California Office of Historic Preservation, "Las Flores *Asistencia* (Landmark No. 616)," accessed February 15, 2026, <https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/ListedResources/Detail/616>

<sup>16</sup> Phil Brigandi, "The Outposts of Mission San Luis Rey," *Journal of San Diego History* 45, no. 2 (1999), <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1999/april/outposts/>

buildings themselves were impressive, forming a large square patio that measured about 142 by 153 feet.<sup>17</sup> The site included a tile-roofed adobe chapel for Mass and a hostel where travelers could find comfort during their long journeys. Interestingly, the outpost even featured a tall bell tower that was used as a navigational landmark by sailing ships passing along the coast.



**Figure 3. Las Flores Adobe, a former mission asistencia and later rancho structure that demonstrates how colonial settlement expanded along natural coastal and valley corridors.**

**(Source: Save Our Heritage Organisation)**

Beyond its agricultural success, Las Flores became the center of important historical events for the region. In April 1838, the adobe and its adjacent corral were the site of a battle between Juan Bautista Alvarado and Carlos Antonio Carrillo, who were fighting for control of the governorship of Alta California. After the mission era ended, the property passed through several owners, including the Forster family and later the Magee family, who were famous for

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<sup>17</sup> Camp Pendleton Historical Society, "Las Flores Adobe National Historic Landmark," accessed February 15, 2026, <https://camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org/las-flores-adobe-natl-landmark>

growing lima beans on the coastal plain. Today, the site is a registered National Historic Landmark and has undergone major restoration efforts supported by the Marine Corps and the Camp Pendleton Historical Society.<sup>18</sup> These ruins stand as a vital connection to the past, showing how the mission system had to adapt to the natural corridors and resources of the land to survive.

After the mission system began to fade away, a major political shift called secularization completely changed how the land of Camp Pendleton was owned and used. According to Breanne Robertson, the Mexican government decided to take power away from the Catholic missions and redistribute the land to private individuals instead.<sup>19</sup> While the government originally claimed this land would be returned to the native people, most of it was actually given to powerful families like the Picos. Pio Pico had served as a government official during the secularization of Mission San Luis Rey, and he used this opportunity to turn the former mission outposts into a private empire. Between 1842 and 1844, he built the Santa Margarita Ranch House as a grand home for his family, using traditional adobe bricks and timber. He and his brother Andrés eventually combined their various land grants to form the massive Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, which covered over 100,000 acres. As noted in an article from the San Diego History Center, this period started a long era of ranching that kept the landscape of the future base intact for many decades.<sup>20</sup> Even after California joined the United States in 1848, the new government eventually upheld the Pico family's legal claims to the property. When the Picos faced financial trouble and a severe drought in the 1860s, they sold the ranch to their

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<sup>18</sup> National Park Service, "Las Flores Adobe," accessed February 15, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/places/las-flores-adobe-ca.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Breanne Robertson, *Camp Pendleton: The Historic Rancho and the Military Base—A Shared History*, [https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton\\_web.pdf](https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton_web.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> San Diego History Center, "Las Flores," *Journal of San Diego History* 7, no. 3 (1961), accessed February 15, 2026, <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/1961/july/lasflores/>

brother-in-law, John Forster, who continued to run it as a major cattle operation. This legacy of large scale land use was carried on by later owners like Richard O'Neill and James Flood, who kept the ranch together until it was purchased by the military in 1942. Understanding this transition is important for the history of the region because it explains how these historic ranch houses and the open land around them were preserved as a single, connected piece of California history.



**Figure 4. Santa Margarita Ranch House, a historic adobe structure that served as a mission outpost and later as the center of Rancho Santa Margarita and Las Flores. (Source: The Cultural Landscape Foundation)**

The massive scale of Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores was a practical necessity dictated by the Southern California landscape. Breanne Robertson explains that after combining the land grants in 1841, the ranch eventually covered over 133,000 acres of rolling hills, deep canyons, and coastal plains, which provided the vast space required for a successful cattle

economy.<sup>21</sup> Because the environment was naturally dry and the terrain was rugged, the rancho's boundaries had to include diverse areas with reliable water access to keep the livestock alive. For example, the fertile Santa Margarita River valley and the coastal area of Las Flores were essential because they offered consistent water and grazing when other parts of the ranch were dry. The National Park Service notes that the Las Flores site was particularly important because it sat along a natural travel corridor and featured a pool near the sea that helped sustain the ranch's agricultural operations.<sup>22</sup> This specific geography allowed the owners to manage thousands of head of cattle across a single, connected landscape, moving the animals between different valleys as the seasons changed to find the best grass.



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<sup>21</sup> Breanne Robertson, *Camp Pendleton: The Historic Rancho and the Military Base—A Shared History*, [https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton\\_web.pdf](https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/CampPendleton_web.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> National Park Service, "Las Flores Adobe," <https://www.nps.gov/places/las-flores-adobe-ca.htm>

**Figure 5. The Santa Margarita River corridor, one of the primary drainage systems that supported Indigenous settlement, mission agriculture, rancho grazing, and later military land use. (Source: The Wildlands Conservancy)**

Ownership of this huge estate shifted through several prominent families who worked to keep the land together for over a century. In 1864, Pio Pico was forced to sell the ranch to his brother-in-law John Forster to avoid foreclosure after a terrible drought killed much of his livestock. Forster was an English immigrant who arrived in California as a teenager and fully adopted the local culture, eventually becoming a wealthy businessman known as "Don Juan." According to the Camp Pendleton Historical Society, Forster was famous for his hospitality, often allowing travelers to stay at the ranch for free and even leaving money on their bedside tables if they needed it.<sup>23</sup> He also made major improvements to the property, adding a winery, a blacksmith shop, and new wings to the Santa Margarita Ranch House. After Forster died in 1882, his heirs were struggling with a large mortgage and sold the property to Richard O'Neill and James Flood for \$457,000.

This partnership between Flood and O'Neill was the final era of private ownership that kept the ranch's massive boundaries intact. Flood provided the capital from his success in the Gold Rush, while O'Neill was a hands-on manager who lived in the ranch house and oversaw the day-to-day operations for decades. O'Neill was known for his hard-working personality and was usually seen wearing boots and denim trousers because he actively worked the land alongside his employees. He was so dedicated to the ranch that he was eventually rewarded with a half interest

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<sup>23</sup> Camp Pendleton Historical Society, "Forster and O'Neill and Their Great Ranch," accessed February 18, 2026, <https://camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CPHS-vol17nr4.pdf>

in the business in 1906, a legacy his descendants maintained for many years. Even as modern farming and new laws changed other parts of California, these families preserved the ranch's huge boundaries until the military purchase in 1942.<sup>24</sup> This history is why the base still looks so much like the old cattle grazing era today, as the Marine Corps needed that same vast, open landscape for its own training missions.

The long history of the land that became Camp Pendleton is a story of continuity where each new era followed the same natural corridors and waterways. For thousands of years, indigenous villages were built along the valleys and streams that provided the resources needed for life. When Gaspar de Portolá explored the region in 1769, he followed these same paths to find water and grazing land for his animals. This geographic pattern continued during the mission era as outposts like Santa Margarita and Las Flores were established in fertile valleys to support farming and livestock. During the rancho period, the Picos and Forsters maintained the massive scale of the estate because the open terrain was perfect for cattle ranching. Finally, the Marine Corps purchased the property in 1942 because they needed that same vast and varied landscape for military training. By protecting these historic sites and natural routes, the base ensures that the connection between the land and its history remains intact for future generations.

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<sup>24</sup> Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, "History and Museums," accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil/Main-Menu/History-and-Museums/>

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