
Before Newport Was Newport

For centuries, there was little to distinguish Newport from the lonely beaches and marshes stretching along much of California's coast. It was not until nature added a protective arm to a swamp to form Newport Bay that Southern California's world-renowned recreational harbor began to take shape. Despite this lucky accident, it would take visionary entrepreneurs and the dredging of millions of tons of silt before Newport could claim its title as the playground of the rich and famous.

During the Spanish era, Newport was largely ignored. While explorers were chronicling their journeys and claiming California for Spain, soldiers were building presidios (forts), and padres were establishing a powerful mission system, Newport was seen as little but a stretch of unwelcoming swamp. After **Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo** chronicled his 1542 exploration of the coast and claimed it all for the King of Spain, the Spaniards ignored California for more than two centuries. Only when England and Russia began to covet its rich land and convenient harbors did the King of Spain realize that he must assert ownership immediately by fortifying and settling the vast unexplored land. His first step to accomplish this was to send an overland expedition to identify sites for presidios and missions. Under the command of **Gaspar de Portola**, 67 men and 100 pack mules left San Diego in 1769 and proceeded north. Portola selected an inland route and missed Newport by 10 miles. Consequently, Newport was not selected for one of the presidios or missions.

Based on the findings of that expedition, Spain sent soldiers to build four presidios and padres to establish a string of missions along the coast. While, in theory, Spain placed its highest priority on its four presidios at Monterey, San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara, in practice, the presidios were ignored, poorly provisioned, and staffed with soldiers who were seldom paid. On the other hand, the missions, charged with converting the local tribes, were given

authority over virtually all of the land. This land was to be used to teach the newly converted Native Americans ranching and agricultural skills in hopes that they would become “productive” Spanish citizens. In the process, mission land was cultivated, and many missions prospered.

Although the missions were given control of virtually all the land, there were some rare exceptions. One of these occurred in 1810 when **Jose Antonio Yorba** and **Juan Pablo Peralta** were awarded control of the 62,512 acres that encompassed today’s cities of Santa Ana, Orange, Villa Park, Costa Mesa, and Tustin. Although aware that they retained this land only at the pleasure of the King of Spain, they named their large grant Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana and began running wild cattle on it. When it was divided and sold after the United States gained possession of California, its break-up provided land for settlers.

Throughout the Spanish era, from 1542 until 1821, explorers journeyed on without stopping, and soldiers were seldom seen traversing Newport’s swampy marshland. Likewise, the padres from the two nearest missions, San Gabriel, established in 1771 and given jurisdiction of the Newport area, and San Juan Capistrano, established in 1776, almost never journeyed there but used Dana Point as their sea landing for supplies.

Local Tribes

For thousands of years, small tribal settlements flourished in the Newport area. The Spanish, who left detailed chronicles of other California tribes, seldom journeyed to Newport, and, as a result, did not record their observations of them. Nevertheless, plentiful artifacts found in the area have provided a great deal of information. Believed to have journeyed from the Great Basin area of Southern Oregon and Nevada, they were hunters and gatherers who used shells for beads and fishhooks and made arrowheads from obsidian. They also crafted decorative stone objects that were believed to have a religious significance. Their huts were dome-shaped and made of poles and brush.

Evidence confirms that they made canoes from bundles of tule caulked with the asphalt that washed up on the beaches. There is also strong evidence that they made planked canoes similar to those of the Catalina and Santa Barbara tribes. They used their canoes to venture far into the sea to fish and to trade, as evidenced by the abundance of implements made from Catalina soapstone that have been found in the Newport area.

Although the Spanish ignored Newport, the diseases they brought spread and, eventually, had a tragic impact on local tribes. Whether they sickened from the occasional soldier who journeyed into the area or caught diseases from the tribes that had frequent contact with soldiers and padres, before long, they experienced the deaths, lowered birth rates, and high infant mortality rates that plagued virtually all California tribes. Those who survived were either converted and went to one of the missions, or wandered farther inland to escape Spanish interference.

A River in Motion

Largely forgotten, the early decades of the 19th century might have been uneventful. However, during these years one of Newport's natural forces, the Santa Ana River, took a starring role in its transformation. Before recorded history, this river had meandered through the marshland to empty into the area today known as Back Bay. Later, it began to empty into Newport Bay, depositing silt to form the sandbars that became its islands. During flood times, this mighty river left its course through the bay. Instead, it cut a new course to the ocean by skirting the coastal mesa and emerging between Huntington Beach and Newport. Everywhere it went, the Santa Ana continued to deposit tons of silt, until it formed the barrier beach now known as Balboa Peninsula, the protective arm that encloses Newport Bay.

When the first United States team arrived in 1860 to survey the area, Balboa Peninsula already stretched south of the future site of the Pavilion. Although information about the extent of the peninsula in 1860 is invaluable, the survey was considered a failure. Using

a boat named the *Humboldt*, the survey team attempted to enter the bay by floating over the bar at the entrance. Their entry was hampered by “a frightful swell rolling and tumbling at all stages of the tide, making it dangerous to cross in boats of any kind.” Unable to float over the bar, the *Humboldt* was soon caught by the swell. When it became clear that the boat was about to be wrecked and that the crew was in peril, the team left, promising to try again the following spring. With the outbreak of the Civil War, those plans were forgotten, and it was 15 years before the first hydrographic survey of Newport Bay was completed.



U.S.G.S. Survey of 1875

The Mexican Ranchos

When Mexico gained independence from Spain and took ownership of California in 1821, it was soon evident that the days of the missions were numbered. By 1833, Mexico passed the *Decree of Secularization* that took the land from the Catholic Church, and transferred virtually all of it to the Mexican government. Almost immediately, Mexican citizens rushed to petition for enormous land

grants. Many of those who had proven their loyalty—or potential value—to the Mexican government were awarded huge expanses of land. Those awards ushered in the era of the Mexican rancho that is fondly known as “Old California.”

Although the Yorba and Peralta families retained ownership of their rancho, large expanses of adjacent land were suddenly available and, by 1837, 35-year-old **Jose Sepulveda** was awarded land. Considered a difficult neighbor, he was immediately in conflict with the Yorbas and Peraltas, who complained that his herds wandered onto their property, accused him of stealing their cattle, and insisted that he was claiming even more land than he was granted.

Sepulveda’s response was to ask for more land. After investigation of his request, the report to the Mexican governor concluded that Sepulveda “was a slippery and dishonest person who persistently and willfully sought to mislead lawful authorities” and that his request clearly contained incorrect information. Despite that damning testimony, by 1842, Sepulveda was granted a second tract of land. Combined, his land grants, named Rancho San Joaquin, included almost 47,000 acres and extended north to the Santa Ana Mountains, east to today’s 55 Freeway, and south to Laguna Beach. Interestingly, it was later discovered that this grant did not include the land surrounding Newport Bay and the oceanfront at Newport Beach, for each was considered worthless.

Like most California ranchos, Sepulveda’s Rancho San Joaquin was soon largely self-sufficient, producing most of its everyday needs by growing virtually all its produce and beef cattle. Sepulveda focused his attention on his grasslands and ignored the abundance of the ocean adjacent to his property. Comfortable on horseback, he probably never even ventured near the water, a fact noted by a bemused **Richard Henry Dana** in his wonderful recounting of this era in *Two Years Before the Mast*: “These people have no boats of their own. . . . It is difficult to fish from the back of a horse.”

Everyday clothes were woven at the rancho, just as boots and saddles were crafted there. Luxury items, such as the lavish costumes and jewelry enjoyed by the Sepulvedas, were acquired through

trade with visiting ships seeking hides and tallow, items in abundance at the rancho. Although some of that trade was conducted with Mexican ships, the only vessels legally allowed to trade in California waters under Mexican rule, much of this trade was conducted illegally with American and English ship captains. They were glad to smuggle luxury items to Sepulveda in exchange for his hides and tallow. This trade was so prevalent all along the coast that these hides became known as "California Dollar Bills."

Sepulveda's two land grants allowed him to live the life of a wealthy Mexican ranchero (rancher), a life symbolized by large families, lavish clothes, fine horses, and fiestas replete with gambling, rodeos, huge banquets, music, and dancing. He claimed to have 3000 horses and 14,000 cattle on his enormous rancho, and loved to host large family reunions to show off his 14 children. Like most Mexican rancheros, he was an avid gambler and enjoyed races, bear-roping contests, and bull and bear fights. Horse racing was one of his favorites, and legend has it that he won \$25,000, 1000 horses, 500 heifers, and 500 sheep on one race.

Though quite comfortable during the Mexican era, life for Sepulveda and other rancheros got even better soon after America took possession of California. Whereas cattle had been valued only for their hides and tallow, the California Gold Rush of 1849 changed all of that. Suddenly, the wild, rangy Mexican cattle became the major food source of thousands of hungry prospectors craving meat. For a short period, the cattle were driven to the booming San Francisco area, and the rancheros basked in relative prosperity.

Demise of the Ranchos

As the excitement of the Gold Rush began to fade and the demand for wild cattle decreased, a series of events doomed the enormous ranchos. In 1852, six years after the United States took possession of California, a law requiring each ranchero to prove that he legally owned his land was passed. Rancheros had to survey their land and then submit maps, documents, and oral testimony to the Land

Commission. Although Sepulveda, like most rancheros, was able to prove legal ownership, his legal and survey fees were high. Added to that problem, the Americans introduced a new and shocking mandate to all rancheros who successfully proved ownership—taxes!

Whereas most rancho trading was barter, American lawyers and surveyors demanded cash. Although evidence exists that Sepulveda had acquired cash from gambling and selling beef during the Gold Rush—when he needed it most, his lavish lifestyle had caught up with him and he did not have ready cash. To pay his bills, he borrowed what he needed at usurious interest rates.

Just as the loans were coming due, a devastating three-year drought brought starvation to most of the cattle in California. When the rains returned, bills and taxes remained unpaid, cattle were dead, and a way of life was about to disappear forever. Sepulveda, plagued by his debts and the death of his herds, sold Rancho San Joaquin in 1864 to Flint, Bixby, Irvine, and Company for \$18,000. The Yorbas and Peraltas fared no better, and their Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana was claimed by numerous heirs and eventually divided and sold by court order. In addition to the dissolution of the large ranchos, the land surrounding Newport Bay and the oceanfront at Newport Beach reverted to the State of California to be sold as swampland for \$1 an acre. Many settlers journeying West after the Civil War came to California, and some came to Newport to buy the land that had suddenly become available.

Unlike many other areas in California, Newport was largely forgotten during the Spanish and Mexican eras. With the exception of the tragic demise of the local tribes, Spanish explorers, soldiers, and missionaries had minimal impact on the area. During Mexican rule, Newport's lonely beaches and swampy land held little attraction for the rancheros, and the area continued to be left largely untouched. It was the Santa Ana River, instead, that had the starring role. Its sweeping changes, combined with the break-up of the enormous ranchos set the stage for establishment of the Newport so many enjoy today.



Photo Courtesy of Newport Harbor Nautical Museum

Mudflat, Seen Beyond and to Left of Square-rigger, Became Balboa Island