

San Diego's Lost Landscape: La Punta

John Blocker

On Friday morning August 19, 2011, backhoes cut a hole in one of the levees protecting an evaporating pond used by the Western Salt Works on south San Diego Bay. For the first time since 1960, seawater in this pond began to rise and fall with the tide. This is the first small step taken by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the process of converting this 160,000-acre South Bay salt production facility back to its natural condition. Complete conversion may take decades.

Salt has been produced in this area since 1871. The present salt works buildings are listed on the State Register of Historic Places and are eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Before restoration could begin, the Fish and Wildlife Service photographed the location of all the levees to preserve the present cultural landscape for future generations. New bridges for the nearby Bayshore Bikeway were built over trestles used by trains bringing people and material to Coronado in the early 20th century. The trestles were protected to preserve the memory of the trains that rode on them.



Ocean tide flowing into former salt-collecting pond in south San Diego Bay. www.fws.gov/sandiegorefuges

In 1951, before public agencies were required to consider the cultural landscape when undertaking construction projects, the Arguello Adobe, one of San Diego's most notable adobes and located 200 yards from the southeasternmost evaporating pond, was destroyed during construction of a new freeway. With the loss of this key adobe, a critical portion disappeared of the earliest history of La Punta, an area approximately 10 miles from downtown San Diego.

The Spanish and Mexican Period at La Punta

In 1782, a dozen years after the San Diego Mission and Presidio were founded, Juan Pantoja y Arriaga, a Spanish cartographer sent by the King of Spain, mapped parts of California's coastline. He named the area around an elevated promontory above the Otay River's outlet into San Diego Bay *La Punta* ("the Point"). On his map he noted the presence of a Native American village. Seven years earlier, Native Americans from the village, along with Indians from 15 other villages, had attacked the newly established mission and killed three people, including a padre. The site of



The Pantoja map of San Diego Bay, first made in 1782.
www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/2000-2/pantojaphotos.htm

La Punta's Indian village has not yet been determined.

Around 1834, Santiago E. Arguello, son of San Diego's first commandant, built the La Punta adobe *casa* as the headquarters for his new Melijo Rancho ranch as well as two other nearby cattle-raising ranches, the Janal and Otay ranches. The two last-named ones had been granted to his wife's relatives, the Estudillos—another of San Diego's prominent families.

During the 1830s the Mexican government secularized the missions in San Diego. Large tracts of land where Indians lived were granted to prominent Mexican citizens. With their lands now given out to others, the missions were unable to provide support to the Indians who had been under their charge. Between 1836 and 1840, Indians plundered almost all the ranchos throughout the region.

Agustin Janssens, manager of the La Punta ranch for the Arguellos in 1838 and 1839, described an Indian attack in *The Life and Adventures in California of Don Agustin Janssens 1834–1856*. (The work, which chronicles California's early history, was not translated into English and published until 1953. It is now available online.) According to this account a band of some 300 Indians pillaged the Tia Juana Rancho to the south, then attacked the La Punta adobe by shooting arrows over the house. Janssens offered the Indians beef and grain to keep them from plundering his ranch. That night the Indians, camping nearby, held a scalp dance, which Janssens attended.

La Punta During the American Period

The Mexican-American War erupted in 1847. On February 2, 1848, the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of

Guadalupe Hidalgo, which made California an American territory. On June 1, 1849, cartographer William Emory arrived in San Diego to head the United States Boundary Commission's effort to establish the official border with Mexico. He made La Punta his headquarters and named it Camp Riley after General Bennett Riley, acting military governor of California. By this time Emory was already well known. As a mapmaker in 1846, he had accompanied General Stephen Kearny on his journeys. His record of the overall venture, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance from Fort Leavenworth to San Diego* (1849), became an important guide for travelers heading for Southern California.



Courtyard of the Arguello Adobe, c. 1879. The two women were the daughters of Refugio Arguello Coutts. Catalina, on the left, was married to Josiah Shaffer, owner of the La Punta Salt Works. Courtesy Chula Vista Library.

After California became a state in 1850, disputes over the legal ownership of many ranchos as well as their boundaries ended up in American courts. By the 1860s many ranch deeds sufficient for the 1830s and Mexican courts had failed to meet American legal standards. Though unable to substantiate their claim to all the acreage included within the boundaries of their Melijo Rancho, the Arguello family still managed to retain considerable property, including their all-important house.

In 1863 Santiago E. Arguello's daughter Maria Antonia married Alfred H. Wilcox, founder of one of the region's early steamship lines. The Colorado Steam Navigation Company initially operated in Arizona between cities along the Colorado River. After their wedding, the Wilcoxes built their own wooden home at La Punta within 100 yards of the Arguello adobe. In 1869, Wilcox with partners bought the Rancho Santa Ysabel in the mountains near Julian and established one of the largest sheep herds in San Diego. He was on his way to becoming a millionaire.

During its early existence, the Arguello Adobe had been the sole structure between the San Diego pueblo and the Mexican border. For many years the La Punta adobe commanded the intersection of two major travel routes: the main road from San Diego to Baja California and the overland route eastward. The latter route followed the Otay River into the mountains and continued along what is now Route 94 toward Yuma.

In 1869 James Pascoe initiated a stagecoach line that

took the eastern road, and. La Punta became one of the stops on this overland journey. It was 25 miles shorter than the previously used route through Warner Springs and had 55 fewer miles through the desert.

By 1873 La Punta had become one of San Diego's first resorts. It was a favored destination for people taking a day sail from San Diego. Advertising it in a local San Diego paper as "La Punta Gardens," the proprietor, who must have rented this desirable venue from the Arguello family, avowed that the resort served "meals at all hours."

By then a new industry had started in the area. In 1871 the Shaffer Brothers established a salt works plant, with large dehydrating ponds along the bay shore. A constant in civilization has been the need for dependable sources of sodium chloride. A significant portion of the California's salt was produced at this location. For 140 years, under various ownerships and several different names, the salt works buildings have occupied La Punta land with their seawater ponds claiming considerable acreage in the bay.

The Wilcox wooden farmhouse earned a place in the development of human flight. Attorney Zachary Montgomery bought the Wilcox land in 1881 to begin an agricultural venture in the Otay Valley. By then the area was renowned for its fruit production. He named his ranch Fruitland, a name occasionally used today. A year later, Montgomery's son John arrived with a science degree from St. Ignatius College in San Francisco, to become the ranch foreman. In his spare time in the loft of his family's barn, John built a glider fashioned in the shape of a huge bird's wing. On August 28, 1883, he and his brother brought the wing to a rise on Otay Mesa a few miles from their house. The two attached a rope to the front of the glider. John ran down the hill while seated below the wing, the wing resting on his shoulders. The glider began to rise. His brother continued to run with rope in hand, pulling the contraption higher into the air as if flying a kite, then let it go. John and the wing, now fully airborne, flew about 600 feet.

John Montgomery's feat, of piloting the first controlled glider flight, went unrecognized for 50 years. He would continue his flying experiments, though, and later became a professor at Santa Clara University.



Aerial view of the salt works at La Punta in 1929. Courtesy Chula Vista Library.



A replica of John Montgomery's glider, flown at La Punta., on display at Western Museum of Flight, Torrance, CA. Photo: John Montgomery in 1881. <http://www.wmof.com/1883.htm>.



The Arguello family heirs retained ownership of the ranch house and much of the surrounding ranchland through the early 20th century. Gradually holdings were sold except for 10 acres that surrounded the Arguello Adobe. Japanese and Mexican farmers leased this acreage. During World War II, soldiers used the adobe as a lookout station. After they left, the building quickly deteriorated, losing roof and windows. Some heavy doors and large beams were taken away by Davis Dairy workers for use at a nearby farm. Soon the adobe was uninhabitable.

The property's last owner was Mary Longstreet, Maria Antonia Arguello Wilcox's daughter. She was born at the La Punta Adobe in 1864 and lived parts of her life in Paris and Italy. She maintained ownership of the ranch for sentimental reasons. When notified that the California Department of Transportation wished to construct a new freeway through her property, she sold the land and the badly crumbling house to the State. Her last residence was the luxurious Huntington Hotel in Pasadena.

In La Punta's early years a natural spring provided year-round water for the use of its residents and visitors. Elisha Babcock and Hampton L. Story, builders of the Hotel del Coronado and owners of Coronado Island, knew they needed water brought to the island to fully develop their land. Around 1888 when the hotel opened, they dynamited the spring at La Punta in hopes of increasing output and piping the water to Coronado. Instead, the source plugged and water ceased to flow. In 1892 Babcock sold his share in the hotel to John D. Spreckels, the San Francisco sugar baron. In 1911 Babcock bought the salt-producing facility at La Punta, the Western Salt Works, and installed a narrow gauge rail line at the plant.

In 1916 torrential rains caused the Otay Dam to burst, devastating the valley. Flood waters destroyed the Wilcox-Montgomery farmhouse. (It stood where Swiss Park is today.) The flood also damaged much of the salt works ponds and buildings. By 1918, with the ponds repaired, the site again produced abundant salt. Some of the existing buildings date to this reconstruction, though others were built after 1949, when the facility expanded. In 1922 Henry G. Fenton bought the business from Babcock and subsequently became one of San Diego County's most successful developers.



This 1946 photo of the Arguello Adobe shows its collapsed condition. Courtesy Chula Vista Library.

The San Diego Historical Society, aware of the impending loss of an important historical resource, tried to prevent the Arguello Adobe's destruction, but was unsuccessful. In about 1951, about a year after Mary Longstreet's death, it was bulldozed during the construction of a freeway. The new section of road that replaced it was named the Montgomery Freeway to honor La Punta's gliding pioneer, but the name is not in common usage. Instead, it is referred to as the I-5.

In 1998 the Fish and Wildlife Service began managing the newly established wildlife refuge at the south end of San Diego Bay. In 1999 the Fenton family sold the remaining salt works land and the buildings to the Port of San Diego. The property is now managed by the Airport Authority, a newly formed offshoot of the Port Authority. The Fenton family also sold the salt-production business to their employees. Salt making is scheduled to continue until development of the wildlife refuge impedes production.



Salt works in south San Diego Bay, near the La Punta area. Photo: John Blocker.

A Plan to Establish a Visitor Center

San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox recently proposed a plan to establish a visitor center at the Western Salt Works headquarters in Chula Vista. His report points out that this site is at a nexus with three important and newly established public-recreation projects: the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Otay Valley Regional Park, and the Bayshore Bikeway. Each is administered by a different government agency. The report also notes that the Pacific Southwest Railway Museum Association would like to re-establish a tourist train route running from its historic National City depot and museum to Western Salt Works headquarters.



Egrets at South San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge. <http://www.fws.gov/sandiegorefuges/>



*New bike path bridge built over an old train trestle.
Photo: John Blocker.*

Cox's report, though, makes no mention of the Indian village, the Arguello Adobe, or the farmhouse where John Montgomery once lived. If any remnants existed today, attention to these sites surely would have been included in the plan for developing a visitor center. This example demonstrates how losing historical buildings or other artifacts can lead to their histories being disregarded or forgotten.

Public meetings, available resources, and political resolve will determine how much of the historical and cultural landscape will remain or be restored. It is too late to rescue or

revive the lost La Punta structures. But the proposed development of a visitor center at the Western Salt Works provides an opportunity to acquaint the community with layers of La Punta's history other than its still-extant salt works: the Native American settlement; the Arguello family's rancho, its Adobe, and the people who lived in it; the work of establishing an international boundary; the stagecoach era of travel; the farmhouse where John Montgomery lived when he built and took wing on the first heavier-than-air glider; and the soldiers who during World War II watched from La Punta for invading Japanese ships.

*Having retired from San Diego County's agricultural industry with 31 years of service, **John Blocker** now writes a column, "Growing Grounds," on the county's agricultural history for California Garden magazine. He attends garden conferences throughout the world and was on the board of CGLHS from 1998 to 2008.*

