

Border Field State Park and Its Monument

Nancy Carol Carter

Few places in San Diego have such a defined sense of place. Standing [in Border Field State Park], it's impossible not to picture yourself on a map, standing almost atop the line separating the United States and Mexico, in the southwestern-most corner of the 48 states.—Photographer Rob Davis

Eight tons of Italian white marble arrived in San Diego in April 1851. Upon delivery of the unwieldy pieces of stone, buyer's remorse gripped Captain Edmund L.F. Hardcastle, who had placed the order with a Boston supplier one year earlier. However, he had a very specific responsibility to fulfill and took charge of the cargo. He arranged military barges to float the four heavy pieces to the south end of San Diego Bay, where they were loaded onto gun carriages for transport to a precise point on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

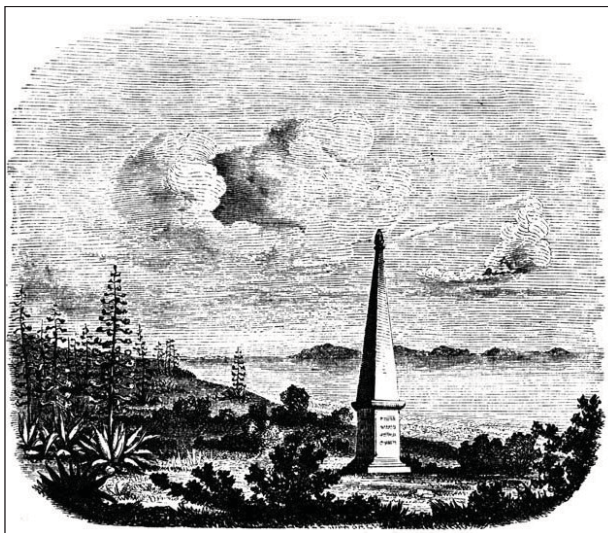
Hardcastle, a US Topographic Engineer, assembled the marble pieces to create a solid foundation topped with an obelisk. On July 14, 1851, he dedicated this 14-foot-tall edifice as Monument No. 1, a marker of the initial point of the boundary between the US and Mexico as established in 1849.

As loser in the war with the United States, Mexico relinquished more than half its territory to its northern neighbor in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. A joint boundary commission surveyed the new 1,952-mile border. Mexico hoped to retain the useful natural harbor at San Diego and a generous land bridge between the Baja Peninsula and the Mexican mainland, but the boundary was drawn south of the bay and south of the Tijuana River estuary.

Along with the ruins of Mission San Diego de Alcalá, Monument No. 1, standing on what came to be known as Monument Mesa, was a popular Southern California tourist destination during the 19th century. The monument attracted more than 100,000 visitors annually after railway service to the border was established. Military uses of the land adjacent to the monument grew in the 20th century, reducing access and stemming the tide of tourists.

Federal Operations and the Creation of Border Field State Park

The US military presence at the border was increased when Mexico erupted into revolution in 1910. After General Francisco "Pancho" Villa conducted a cross-border raid in 1916,



*Monument No. 1 soon after its placement.
Courtesy The Journal of San Diego History.*

the Army established a camp in San Diego County, near Monument No. 1. The Army expanded its uses of the camp named "Border Field," but it was the Navy, after World War I, that began buying up the entire southwest corner of the United States. The Navy added an additional 245 acres in 1941 and constructed several buildings and bunkers. In the 1950s, with the outbreak of the Korean War, Border Field became home base for all helicopter squadrons of the Pacific Fleet.

For almost 50 years, Monument No. 1 and its historical

significance were lost to the public, although in 1951 the San Diego Historical Society received special permission to hold a ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the placement of the initial boundary marker. Ten years later, the Navy deactivated Border Field as an operational base.

California voters approved funds in 1964 to acquire Border Field as a state park. Meanwhile, real estate speculators who had bought up nearby farmland were pushing a different agenda and mounting an intense federal lobbying effort. The development scheme called for encapsulating the Tijuana River into a concrete flood control channel. Once the flood-prone river was constrained, an upmarket marina would be planned, along with commercial and housing development. Opponents of the concrete channel sought to preserve the ecologically important Tijuana River estuary and discourage development in this unique border and beach space.

The fate of the military land was determined in 1971, when President Richard Nixon announced that Border Field would become part of his "Legacy of Parks" program in which surplus federal land was transferred to states for recreational uses. Three hundred seventy-two acres were transferred from military uses to the State of California as Border Field State Park. While granted scant attention initially, these park lands were home to invaluable historical, archeological, and botanical resources. It is believed that the mission founder Father Junípero Serra and the accompanying Spanish military contingent led by Gaspar de Portolá



Old photo of Monument No. 1. Courtesy The Journal of San Diego History..

entered Alta California in 1769 by following the ancient Indian trails crossing the new state park. A potential treasure of Indian artifacts and the more recently constructed bunkers of World War II were preserved. Likewise, Border Field State Park protected the “best succulent habitat” on the Southern California coast and a “nearly pristine” growth of native vegetation. In fact, it was the only United States habitat for some plants and was the location in which the type specimen for

certain species had been discovered years earlier.

First Lady Patricia Nixon traveled to San Diego in August 1971 to dedicate the park and deliver a message of binational unity and friendship. She greeted surfers who had been assembled to demonstrate the recreational potential of the new park. Then the small barbed wire border fence separating the United States and Mexico was cut so that Mrs. Nixon could greet the crowd of Mexican citizens who had gathered to see her. “I hate to see a fence anywhere,” she said, while signing autographs and admiring babies on the Mexican side of the border, “I hope there won’t be a fence here too long.... We’re good friends.”

Mrs. Nixon’s comments articulated a vision for Border Field State Park that would place it among the exclusive



Mrs. Pat Nixon greeting attendees at the dedication ceremony in 1971. <http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/>

society of international cross-boundary parks. Exemplars dated back to the 1920s and ’30s with parks celebrating peace and friendship on the Canadian border. Mexico took the lead by building a beautifully landscaped park with a wide set of stairs leading up to Monument No. 1 from its side of the border. However, the former Navy training fields on the US side remained undeveloped.

Friendship Circle and Other Park Developments

Park improvements were slowed by uncertainties over the exact park boundaries and continuing advocacy for a concrete flood control channel on the Tijuana River. A report from the US Corps of Engineers disappointed real estate developers by making a strong case for preserving the natural course of the river and its richly populated estuary. This home to 170 bird species was called in 1972 “the finest salt water marsh remaining along the California coastline.” Only a portion of the estuary was protected within Border Field State Park, but efforts to preserve the entire estuary gained support and eventually succeeded. Today the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve is known as a biodiversity hotspot and operates under a state-federal partnership. It is recognized by the United Nations as a “wetland of international importance.”

Despite delays in building roads and additional amenities within the new park, visitorship soared to more than 10,000 per month within the first year. Eventually a picnic and barbeque area intended for use by people from both sides of the border was created at Friendship Circle, a landscaped park enhancement incorporating Monument No. 1 and celebrating the harmonious relationship between people of the US and Mexico.

Border Field was a popular meeting place for families living on different sides of the border, but the practice of casual boundary crossings was receiving more scrutiny. The idea of creating a cross-border international park celebrating peace and friendship faded as news reports increasingly described the park as a magnet for illegal immigration and the passing of contraband. An enhanced Border Patrol presence and a sturdier barrier meant that people had to communicate through the mesh of a border fence. Still, friends and relatives gathered to visit from their respective sides of the border. Others enjoyed the panoramic views and the hiking and horseback riding trails at the park, although swimming and beach use declined due to water quality problems caused by the repeated discharge of untreated sewage into the Tijuana River on the Mexican side of the border.

Operation Gatekeeper and the US Department of Homeland Security

Political pressure on the federal government for stricter border control led to Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, a policy aimed at halting illegal entry into the United States. This controversial strategy targeted the San Diego portion of the

border and exerted intense pressures on Border Field State Park. Among other changes, Monument No. 1 was flanked by a tall and inhospitable metal fence.

The border changes wrought by Operation Gatekeeper pale, however, in comparison to those imposed by the Department of Homeland Security, the agency created after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In San Diego, scientists, the California Coastal Commission, environmentalists, preservationists, and park officials were rendered powerless in their efforts to protect the Tijuana River estuary, the cultural and natural habitat of Border Field State Park, and access to public lands and Monument No. 1. Some of the more objectionable proposals of Operation Gatekeeper for additional fencing and construction across Border Field State Park could no longer be forestalled. Lawsuits based on endangered species and environmental protection legislation were dismissed because the head of Homeland Security was authorized by statute and presidential decree to waive all environmental and other laws impeding border fence construction.

Homeland Security seized ownership of 150 feet of land running immediately along the boundary and began heavy construction in 2008. To create the flat road and fence bed desired by border agents, 2.1 million cubic yards of dirt were needed to fill Smuggler's Gulch, a half-mile-long canyon. To locate this immense amount of landfill, construction crews looked no further than the mesas of Border Field State Park and scraped them, despite documentation of the botanical importance of these natural areas. In addition to altering the cultural landscape of Border Field State Park, construction work devastated the unique native habitat of each mesa. This construction poses a continuing threat to the ecosystem of the estuary because denuded hillsides and the new earthen berm supporting the road produces sedimentary runoff.



The fence dividing US from Mexico in the beach area of Border Field State Park. <http://mbiru.com/tour/border-field-state-park-2.html>

The Monument and Border Fates

Captain Hardcastle's Monument No. 1 has suffered many indignities in its long history. One of the worst is losing its first-place standing. When the border was subjected to a new survey, the count of boundary markers began in El Paso. Through the process, the historic *first* boundary marker on the United States-Mexico border became the *last*. The initial border marker was ingloriously renumbered as Monument 258 and is known today by that designation.

The monument fell from its place as a top tourist attraction in the 19th century, to become an unnoticed and forgotten relic on a military base for almost a half-century. When once again open to public view, the pressures of illegal immigration ended the monument's brief life as the centerpiece of a park intended to celebrate international peace and friendship.

Worse prospects for Monument No 1 exist. It is inaccessibly trapped in a "no-man's land" between unsightly double border fences. Moreover, the land upon which it stands no longer belongs to Border Field State Park. The Homeland Security agency is said to be contemplating a cession of this strip of land back to Mexico, an action that would redraw a portion of our national boundaries and transfer ownership of Captain Hardcastle's carefully sited monument (a nationally registered historic place) to another country.

All is not lost at Border Field State Park, but it must be recognized that the potential for public enjoyment of this park's beautiful setting and native landscape was not fully realized before these attributes were severely—and perhaps permanently—compromised. Efforts to rehabilitate the native habitat, improve visitor facilities, and save the remaining cultural elements of the park are ongoing, but success is far from assured. Perhaps never to return is the idealistic vision of an international peace park on this section of the United States-Mexico border. Harsh geopolitical realities now make such a plan appear sadly fanciful and quaint.

[For the author profile, see page 9.]



The old monument is now surrounded by the border fence. www.parks.ca.gov/

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.

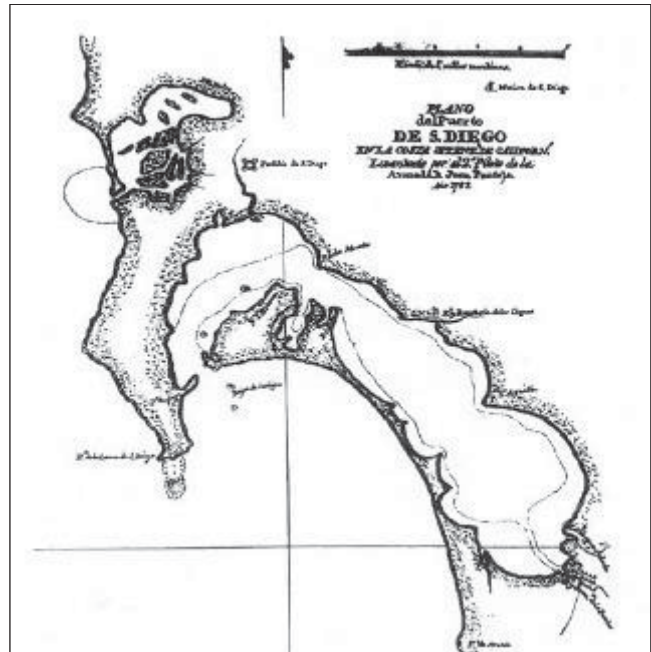


Ocean tide flowing into former salt-collecting pond in south San Diego Bay. www.fws.gov/sandiegorefuges

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 southeastern-most 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>.

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.



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

The Arguello family heirs retained ownership of the ranch house and much of the surrounding rangeland 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.



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.

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.*

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