

## GOVERNOR PICO'S "LITTLE RANCH" HOUSE REVEALS HER SECRETS

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*In the mid 1800s, the last Governor of Mexican California built his ranch house in Whittier. This large, 28-room adobe has survived floods, earthquakes, numerous owners, and the death of its original owner. DPR is undertaking a new restoration of the adobe and a reconstruction of the cultural landscape. The plan is to restore the building to its prime in the 1880s (Figure 1). The story of the adobe mirrors the life of its owner, the famed Don Pio Pico. It is a classic rags to riches and back to rags story. The man born into the mission system of Spanish California rose to be a Governor. The only surviving structure from this period in the area, this adobe is now revealing her secrets to archeologists and historians during the restoration. This paper will outline that restoration and the fascinating story that goes with it.*

Archeology and history often provide key clues in the restoration of historic buildings and in landscape reconstruction. In 2000, the Department of Parks and Recreation undertook an ambitious plan to restore the Pio Pico adobe in Whittier California and reconstruct the landscape to how it may have appeared during the heyday of the ranch in the 1880s. For many years the adobe has needed repairs, and finally enough funding was available to conduct and finish that work. Based on significant archeological work and historical research, it was felt that there was enough new data to undertake such an ambitious project. There were numerous challenges as well as discoveries during the course of this project. It was also interesting to learn how one man not only survived but flourished through the Spanish, Mexican, and American periods in California history.



*Figure 1: View of the Pio Pico ranch house in the mid-1880s. Note the dovecote on the left, smokehouse in background, and early façade.*

### BACKGROUND

The story of Pio Pico began in a much earlier and simpler century. Don Pio de Jesus Pico was born in San Gabriel Mission in 1801 (Newland and Dallas 1999). His father was a soldier at the Mission. They led a simple life, but young Pio Pico had an ambition for more. Mexico's hold on Alta California was always turbulent and tenuous. In its short history, the fledgling province saw many governors. Few were popular, many were incompetent, and most did not last long in the position. Pio Pico himself helped oust several of the governors when their policies did not support his belief in the right of the common man to own land. He was also a pawn or puppet in a larger plan of members of his gentry, of acquiring land in the Mexican Period to prosper in this new country. Some historians have vilified him for ruining the missions. Others have painted him a buffoon. Yet by 1855, he was one of the richest men in California. Here was also a man who, despite leading a rather harsh life, lived to be 93 years old.

The exact moment when Pio Pico first set eyes upon the land in Whittier that was to become his country ranch is unknown. A myth has arisen that he took a drive one day east from Los Angeles and ended up picnicking at a serene spot just east of the San Gabriel River with his wife and he was overcome with its serenity or its possible future as a ranch, or perhaps just wanted to share a country estate with his wife. No evidence of such a trip has survived. Actually the truth probably has more to do with opportunity when, years before, having business dealings with an acquaintance, Juan Perez the landowner, he noted the possibility of ranching on the outskirts of his home in Los Angeles.

Years later, upon the death of Perez, his heirs offered the land for sale and Pio Pico negotiated a deal to possess this tract that included his future adobe: Rancho Paso de Bartolo Viejo, which was former Mission San Gabriel land. For this parcel, Pio Pico paid the heirs of Perez \$4,642.00 for 8,894 acres of prime river land. Pico took legal possession in 1852 (Gray 1998), but he had been building an adobe there since

about 1848. Pico was a wheeler-dealer, but early on he recognized that the road to prosperity was in owning land. He recognized trends and clearly saw that if he owned land and raised cattle, he could make money in this new land under these Americans.

Workman Temple described the rancho this way sometime in 1853: "Don Pico showed his guests through his twenty-room adobe, explaining that he hoped to build a chapel soon, as was the custom of the times, The casa was amply furnished, white and neat withal, surrounded by gardens well worthy his station" (Elliot 1990:16). In 1859, Joseph Pleasants visited the adobe and described it thus: "We came by the way of the Ranchito, on the east side of the San Gabriel River, then home of ex-Governor Pio Pico. He lived at that time in all the state of a feudal lord. The picturesque old ranch house at the Ranchito stood in the midst of a beautiful garden" (Elliot 1990:16).

Prior to owning the El Ranchito, Pio Pico was involved in the ousting of at least three Mexican governors, Micheltoreno, Victoria, and Alvarado (Newland and Dallas 1999:21-22). He also feuded with Governor Castro. Twice these revolutionary activities led to his being governor of Mexican California, in 1832 and 1845. But the tides of fortune and fame were not on his side, as the United States had been interested in California for some time. Finally, slightly ahead of schedule, disillusioned people captured General Vallejo in Sonoma and imprisoned him. They raised the Bear Flag over Sonoma. California's participation in the Mexican-American war had begun. Pio Pico and Mexican California were unprepared for a war with the United States, as

was Mexico. Pico traveled to Mexico to raise funds to fight, some say to hide, but to no avail. Pico returned after the war, not as a beaten foe, but as an enterprising businessman. By 1855, he and his brother Andres had amassed 532,000 acres partly as a result of deeding themselves land just at the outbreak of the war (Newland and Dallas 1999). Opportunistic purchases of land also helped them amass their large holding of valuable property, stretching from Los Angeles to San Diego.

However, by 1862-1863, Pio Pico was on the brink of bankruptcy, as he was land-rich and cash-poor. He had not foreseen the need to pay taxes on the land he owned. This American system would continue to haunt him for the rest of his life. He had to mortgage many of his properties to pay the taxes. This led him to lose one rancho, Santa Margarita, to his brother-in-law, John Forster in a bitter family lawsuit (Gray 1998). Eventually it would lead him to lose his beloved "Little Rancho," El Ranchito, at Whittier.

During these years Pico became rather litigious. He used the court system to acquire and hold rights to land and water. He was involved in more than 150 court cases between 1845 and 1880 (Dallas and Newland 1999). In the end a court case decided his fate, and he was evicted off his land in 1892. The State Supreme Court upheld the decision in a landmark case (Pico vs. Cohn), that clearly showed Pio Pico had been defrauded of his ranch (Gray 1998). Though he died in 1894, his legacy has not died. There are still streets named after him, and his Pico House (hotel) and El Ranchito adobe have survived (Figure 2). However, the story does not end there.

*Figure 2: The only known surviving photo of Pio Pico at his ranch house on the balcony. Entrance door is on the left. Photo taken in about 1891.*



## PROJECT GOALS

In 1901, Mrs. Barton, a member of the East Whittier Women's Improvement Club, led a group attempting to preserve the adobe. Along with Harriet Strong, a former friend and neighbor of Pio Picos, the group raised money to stabilize the adobe. The work began in 1908. The State picked up legal title to the land in 1917. As there was no formal Department of Parks and Recreation then, oversight went to the State Board of Control. Ownership did not transfer until 1927 to the then Division of Beaches and Parks. It was listed on the National Register in 1972 (#73000408). It remains today, in a housing sub-division just off of Whittier Boulevard and Highway 605.

Fast forward to the year 1999: DPR received a federal Transportation Enhancement Activity (TEA) Grant to help restore the 1848, two-story, multi-room adobe. This was possible due to its location near Highway 605. The plan was to restore the building to what it looked like in the 1880s. Damages from the 1987 Whittier and 1994 Northridge earthquakes had left the adobe in a deteriorating state. Walls had separated during the earthquakes; plaster had spalled and fallen off the walls. The adobe needed restoration, a new roof, and seismic retrofitting. It had been closed to the public since the early 1990s. Deferred maintenance of the building due to a lack of funding had also taken its toll on the adobe. The Department of Parks and Recreation saw this opportunity to spruce-up the adobe as part of long-delayed maintenance and improvements. Part of the new plan was to reconstruct four rooms (originally five) that had been demolished in the 1940s restoration, when previous planners felt that the front, first-story two rooms didn't look "Mexican enough." Yet, this front entrance gave the adobe building its character-defining look (Newland and Dallas 1999 and Figure 2). Ironically enough, it was built during the American Period, though owned by a *Californio* who welcomed the new age of the American business enterprise.

## THE RANCH HOUSE

The Pio Pico adobe is a very complicated structure with a complicated history. Pico moved to the adobe after losing his ownership of the Pico House hotel in 1880, along with many members of his family. This original eight-room adobe had expanded to 28 rooms through the years, at least by 1879 and maybe earlier (Dallas et al. 2003). It changed shape as well as size. Rooms and wings were added as the need and circumstances changed. Several floods necessitated a change in shape. It was repaired several times. Almost no records survived Pio Pico's time at the rancho. A few early survey sketches survive and, along with two early photos from the 1880s, have helped guide the restoration. If that wasn't complicated enough, the adobe underwent three major restorations in the Twentieth Century (in 1908, the 1940s, and the 1960s), with few details documented of the actual work performed or the processes involved. The first restoration was extensive in that:

The roof was raised and mended, walls were braced. Foundations were strengthened with cement, new floors laid to replace those which horses had kicked and trampled to

pieces, and the biggest job of all—the accumulated rubbish of twenty years of misuse was carted away (Elliot 1990:29).

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION AT THE ADOBE

Archaeological work has been extensive at the adobe, from uncovering facets of the building evolution, to geophysical studies, pollen studies, and normal excavation to uncover original foundations, features, and trash pits. "When landscape architecture meets historic preservation and archaeology, mysteries emerge" (Sorvig 2005). Some mysteries have been clarified and others remain to tease us into speculation on what occurred. It has been complicated and yet both fascinating and frustrating to the project specialists. Fascinating in the complicated history and evolution of the building and story of the man, Pio Pico. Frustrating in that the original documents and original data have not survived to better-detail the events and sequence of events that led to the evolution of the adobe that was the ranch for the last governor of Mexican California.

Luckily, there are a few early historical accounts of the adobe and the grounds that have also helped in the adobe restoration and reconstruction of the historic landscape. While these are helpful, they are vague and lack details, such as the exact configuration of the original adobe. Yet, between the early photos, accounts, archeology, and historical research, the picture is slowly coming into focus. We will probably never know the complete story of the man or his ranch house; however, enough information is there to not only complete this work, but provide ample data for interpretation in the years ahead.

Archeology has provided invaluable clues to completing this project in an accurate manner. Several key details, like the configuration of the two front rooms (rooms 4 and 5), were provided by archeological excavation, which found the original foundations of these rooms. This resolved a dilemma that the architect could not solve otherwise. Other contributions came when archeologists excavated in Room 11, one of the few rooms to still have a dirt floor – a wall was discovered in the middle of the room (Motz et al. 1990). Also, portions of wall-fall were evident, indicating that originally the room was actually two smaller rooms (Dallas et al. 2003:80-81).

The project team decided, after the discovery, to use this room to interpret the archeology of the site. A window in the wooden floor was installed to expose the adobe wall, and it was lighted with small track-under-floor lighting. Part of the wooden floor was left uncompleted in order to show the evolution of the building and the archeological work. Previous archeological work at the adobe had included work by Gutierrez in the 1940s; by Wallace in Room 14; and by Scientific Resource Surveys outside the adobe. DPR had done an Historic Survey Report in 1990. These were all useful, especially the HSR from 1990, in guiding the restoration of the adobe.

Geophysical tests were used to determine where historic features might be encountered prior to reconstructing the landscape. The idea was to avoid impacting historic features, if we could determine where

these features might be before reconstruction. Timing and economics were such that we could not conduct archeological excavations over the whole landscape, as we were still conducting excavations on the adobe until it was almost finished.

Specialists employed a battery of geophysical tests in areas thought to be sensitive and/or that were targeted for landscape reconstruction. Historic trash pits and several pipes were discovered in this manner (Conyers and Murphy 2002). However, it was noted that the three tests had difficulties in discovering buried rock foundations or old adobe features at this site. It is unclear why that occurred. The tests were very effective at discovering historic features with metal or that had been burned (Conyers and Murphy 2002). It could have been a calibration issue with the equipment used. It could have been due to the fact that prior to the geophysical testing, it was unknown at what depth these features might be encountered (another calibration issue). This needs to be examined in more detail, as this could be a great aid in discovering the location of buried historic features. But researchers would need to be confident that certain types of features would not be missed.

#### SUMMARY OF RESTORATION EFFORTS

The restoration of the Pio Pico adobe was very ambitious (Figure 3). First, seismic retrofitting occurred. Damages to the lower blocks were repaired. A new roof was installed. A new A-frame was erected over

*Figure 4: Pio Pico adobe and landscape after restoration and reconstruction. Note that the front rooms have been reconstructed, second floor balcony, along with the front wooden façade as important character defining features of the building.*



*Figure 3: West view of the Pio Pico adobe prior to restoration and landscape reconstruction. Note one of several non-contributing structures in the foreground.*

the flat roof above rooms 1, 2, and 3. This necessitated a false floor in the attic in order to preserve the structural integrity of the rooms. Rooms 4, 5, 18, 19, and 20, and a second-story balcony, were reconstructed. New porch awnings were installed. Floors were restored, refinished, and replaced. The adobe was re-plastered. Old cement and other incompatible mortar were removed. A new electrical system was installed. Historic door hardware was restored and reinstalled. Modern compatible Baldwin dead-bolt locks were also added for security. Several of the doors and windows that had been changed in earlier restoration efforts were restored back to their original function or status during the period of interpretation. The function of the building changed from a static house museum to updated exhibits and interactive panels. Historic wallpaper was reconstructed and installed in the *sala* (Room 7) and in Room 14. A new state-of-the-art audio/video sound system was installed in Room 2. Room 11 was converted into an archeology interpretive room after it had been determined that it was not the remains of the kitchen (DPR 1990; Dallas et al. 2003). Also many historic landscape features were reconstructed for the reconstruction of the cultural landscape. A few of the most notable features are the orange orchard around the adobe, the gardens to the west of the adobe, and a dove cote. Some of the difficulties of reconstructing a cultural landscape were outlined in an article for *Landscape Architecture Magazine* (Sorvig 2005).

#### CONCLUSIONS

Archaeologists monitored all aspects of the building restoration and landscape reconstruction. Archeology in this case provided ample details about the evolution of the adobe building and

transformations of the building through time. It also helped fill in the data gaps in the historical records, providing details about historic foundations and, through historic artifacts, giving clues about its inhabitants and their activities. Archeology and history verified that the three chimneys were original and not restorations from the 1930s.

Archeology also has added to the mystery of the adobe by finding things that are difficult to explain. For example, a wall was found upstairs that had graffiti scratched in it with the dates 1850 and 1853, yet the upper story supposedly was not built until 1879. These investigations also indicated that the adobe might have been enlarged earlier than was previously thought, matching the early description of a 20-room adobe. The mystery wall was found in the middle of room 11, dividing that room into two rooms. Was this room part of an earlier adobe? No trace was found of a mystery building that is shown next to the adobe in an early sketch. The final product is certainly a compromise, but a likely interpretation of an American rancho and adobe in the 1880s with strong Mexican influences (Figure 4). The public can now visit the restored adobe and learn more about the man, the myths, and the adobe.

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