WHERE CALIFORNIA BEGAN … FROM CITADEL TO CITY PARK:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO PRESIDIO PARK AND STATUS ON THE  
MANAGEMENT OF THE RUINS WITHIN IT  

MYRA HERRMANN  
CITY OF SAN DIEGO  

Buried high on a hill above Mission Valley are the ruins of the San Diego Royal Presidio. Founded in 1769  
and granted the status of a Royal Presidio five years later, the Presidio was the first Spanish outpost in Alta  
California. It continued to serve in that capacity until falling into decline in 1830 and abandoned in 1835,  
used for a time as a cattle and sheep coral. Today, the ruins of California’s first European community are  
protected as part of Presidio Park managed by the City of San Diego, and they remain one of the most  
important and best preserved, Spanish colonial sites in the western United States.  

AN OVERVIEW OF TODAY’S PRESIDIO PARK  

San Diego has many precious resources from the desert to the coast that can be considered tourist  
attractions to both local residents and visitors alike. These include Balboa Park, Old Town State Historic Park,  
the Gaslamp Quarter, the Hotel Del Coronado, Old Mission Dam within Mission Trails Regional Park, Anza-  
Borrego Desert State Park, and Torrey Pines State Park. However, none of these sites are as significant as the  
one referred to by local archaeologists and historians as “San Diego’s Best Kept Secret” – the San Diego  
Royal Presidio.  

Designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1960 and listed on the National Register of Historic  
Places in 1966, the buried remains of the San Diego Presidio (CA-SDI-38) are located northeast of Old Town  
State Historic Park within Presidio Park, owned by the City of San Diego and managed by the City’s Park and  
Recreation Department (Figure 1). Presidio Park is approximately 50 acres in size and contains the physical  
remains of the first Spanish outpost in Alta California along with the Serra Museum and many other special  
points of interest related to the Presidio (Figure 2). These include the Marston Wall (built in 1928 to protect  
the Presidio ruins), the Serra Cross (built from original tiles excavated from the Presidio ruin and dedicated in  
1913), the Padre Statue (commissioned by E. W. Scripps in 1903 and placed adjacent to the cross in 1933 to  
honor the missionaries who developed the missions of California), the Indian Statue (also commissioned by E.  
W. Scripps to represent the native peoples of California), the El Camino Real Bell (which marks the “Kings  
Highway” linking the California missions and presidios), and Palm Canyon (located to the east behind the  
Serra Museum). Little is known however, about the use of this area by Presidio soldiers and the Native  
laborers from the village of Cosoy/Kosa’ay. This canyon may have been exploited by the villagers for its  
diverse vegetation and faunal resources.  

While not directly related to the Presidio occupation, many commemorative plaques or monuments  
can also be found within the park boundaries which provide a direct link to the descendants of Presidio  
soldiers, civilian settlers, artisans and their families, Indian laborers, and others who eventually became  
permanent residents of present-day Old Town (Williams 2005). Today, the buried ruins of the adobe citadel  
and town are protected within Presidio Park and remain one of the most important, and best preserved,  
Spanish colonial sites in the western United States (EDAW 1999) (Figure 3).  

Establishing the San Diego Royal Presidio  

The tiny Presidio fort set the standard for subsequent colonization throughout California,  
commemorating two important events: the founding of the first permanent European settlement of the Pacific
Coast of what is now the United States, and the establishment of the first mission in California in 1769. Five years later, the mission was relocated to its present site in Mission Valley, and the outpost was granted the status of a Royal Presidio. The population of the Royal Presidio was made up of a diverse array of civilians and military personnel, sheltering more than 500 inhabitants and continuing to serve as both an administrative and judicial center and as a military outpost for the region, until falling into a sharp decline in 1830. In 1835, the Presidio was abandoned, and detailed documentation of the physical changes during this time are hard to find. However, several maps have been produced over the years identifying the Presidio ruins (Figure 4), and observations were noted in later years by William Smythe and others in his 1907 *History of San Diego*.

One such observation made by Alfred Robinson in 1846 noted that in the years following the abandonment, former Presidio residents, now living down the hill in Old Town, began systematically looting the site for building materials, eventually causing the deterioration and collapse of the adobe walls (Robinson 1846). An 1850 accounting by E. W. Morse, as told to Smythe, indicated that the adobe walls of the church and portions of the other buildings were still standing (Smythe 1907:241). Morse also noted that roof tiles from the Presidio were utilized in New Town. Many of the tiles removed from the site can also be seen in the cross located south of the north wing excavation site (Figure 5). Smythe noted the later use of the abandoned Presidio site as a corral for cattle and sheep, resulted in butchering activities and creating deposits of discarded bones still found today eroding out of the remaining adobe walls and slopes surrounding the buried ruins.

**Excavating the Presidio**

Informal archaeological activities at the Presidio began in the late nineteenth century, with an 1851 flood-control mapping project by George Derby which included the ruins of the Presidio. Another observation...
Figure 2. Presidio Park General Development Plan (City of San Diego, Parks & Recreation Department)

documented by Smythe (1907:87) indicated that “nothing whatever of the site now remains, the earth forming the point of the hill having been hauled away and used by the government engineers in making the embankment for turning the San Diego River in 1877 ... some also used for grading the county road across the valley from then [sic] end of the Old Town Bridge.” As shown in Figure 6, several large and small pieces of Imari Ware that may belong to one shallow bowl were recovered in the area where the Old Town Bridge once stood, which is now part of a larger historic burn-ash site; however, it is unclear how those pieces got there or if they relate to the Presidio occupation. Photos of the sherds were sent around to several ceramics experts and ultimately examined by Leland Bibb in 2001. Bibb determined that the pieces likely found their way to San Diego via one of the shipments to the Spanish colonies as part of the Manila Galleon trade and that further study is required (Leland Bibb, personal communication 2001).

In later years, the excavations also took large quantities of earth from the north side of the hill, the extent being measured by the widening of the road from a narrow track to its present width. It was also thought that earth from the river valley was used to backfill the exposed and deteriorated ruins. Information from an interview with Percy Broell conducted in 1978 as part of the SDHS Oral History Program confirms, in his words, “that a little bit of fill dirt was hauled up to the site in 10 ½ ton trucks to cover the rocks which at some places were two-foot deep exposed” (Culberth 1978). Broell went on to clarify that they hauled silt (alluvial soil) from the middle of the river bed for months to get a good cover for plantings.
Observations between the years of abandonment and the early 1900s indicated that although the adobe walls of the church and portions of the other buildings were still standing, the Presidio was in a state of severe deterioration and lay abandoned once again. It was not until 1907 that philanthropist George Marston began to take an interest in the abandoned Presidio site.

**DEVELOPMENT OF PRESIDIO PARK**

**George White Marston**

George White Marston arrived in San Diego in 1870 at the age of 20 to begin a business life that would last over 73 years (Figure 7). Three years after his arrival, he became secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, then president, which eventually led to a term on the City Council from 1887 to 1888. Marston also ran unsuccessfully for Mayor in 1913 and 1917. His exuberant love for the out-of-doors would eventually lead to his increased interest in providing “room to breathe” for San Diego (Polos 1984:259). Marston’s feeling for beauty found expression in his efforts as a civic leader to improve his environment with development projects such as Balboa Park, Borrego Desert Park, Torrey Pines Park, the Panama-California Exposition of 1915, and eventually Presidio Park.
Much has been written about George Marston over the years, but in the fall 1984 *Journal of San Diego History*, Dr. Nicholas C. Polos wrote that the Presidio Hill area also embodied his great affection for history. This was clearly evident in the early part of 1907, when Marston and four other members of the Chamber of Commerce began purchasing the lots on the hill to preserve the site of the “first Spanish mission of California,” hoping one day to convey the lots to the city at cost for the purpose of an historic park.
However, after five frustrating years working with City officials, Marston eventually bought out the other committee members and began creating a park on his own. Over the next 12 years, Marston continued to acquire additional lots until he had 20 acres, all of which was put into trust for the City and citizens of San Diego. City planner and landscape architect John Nolen was hired by Marston in 1925 to provide technical advice on design of the new park. It was Nolen who suggested that a building was needed at the top of the hill to serve as a monument to Spanish settlers and to set the tone for the park (Figure 8).

Presidio Park was a historic preservation project designed to save the site and its surroundings from urban sprawl (very forward thinking for 1925). The City cooperated with expansion plans for the park by vacating streets, eventually donating 10 acres of adjacent property, while Marston began developing the park, paying for surveys, excavations, grading, landscaping, road construction, water systems, and planting according to the Nolen Plan. As work revealed more ruins of the original Presidio, a wall was built to protect and delineate the area. In 1928, Marston organized the San Diego Historical Society (known today as the San Diego History Center) to stimulate interest in local history and encourage its preservation. The Spanish Colonial and Mission Style Serra Museum, designed by local architect William Templeton Johnson, was dedicated on July 16, 1929, the 160th anniversary of the arrival of Father Junipero Serra and the establishment of Spanish colonial rule in upper (Alta) California. The property was deeded to the City later that same year.

George Marston maintained the park and museum for another 12 years, during which time he hired Percy Broell to manage the “planting” of the site with the assistance of Kate Sessions, the queen gardener of San Diego. Broell’s test excavations at the site from 1927 to 1940 were related to park development, mapping the general layout of the obvious mounds and eventually covering what remained of the Presidio site (Figure 9). In 1940, the City of San Diego added the 10 adjacent acres to the site and assumed all maintenance responsibilities for the entire park.

In later years, Marston often characterized his work on Presidio Hill and the museum as being “the largest work of my life” (Scharf 1986:115), and it was considered by many to have been his most important philanthropic contribution to San Diego. Prior to his death in 1946, George Marston sent a message to City officials, reminding them of the park’s historical importance and character (Scharf 1986:103-115).
Figure 7. George White Marston (courtesy of the San Diego History Center, Junipero Serra Museum Informational Pamphlet).
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

San Diego Historical Society Oversight

From the late 1960s through late 1990s, the San Diego Historical Society (SDHS), now known as the San Diego History Center (SDHC), managed the San Diego Presidio site under the terms of a right-of-entry (ROE) permit issued by the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department. During that time, several scientific archaeological excavations were conducted at the site (e.g., by Percy Broell, Paul Ezell, Diane Barbolla, Brad Bartel, and Jack Williams). The most recent excavations were conducted by the Center for Spanish Colonial Archaeology from 1992 to 1998, with oversight by the SDHS. Over a six-year period, the north wing of the Presidio quadrangle was exposed, yielding more than 500 boxes of historic-period artifacts.

RECLAIMING THE PRESIDIO

Site Preservation – City of San Diego

No other site in California has preserved so well the details of daily living during this period, as the remains from the Presidio. Amid the ruins of more than 200 rooms can be found hundreds of thousands of artifacts that were left behind by the people who lived in San Diego in the nearly forgotten era. For this reason, the City of San Diego began to take a more active role in the management and preservation of the site.
In late 1997, the City Park and Recreation Department consulted with archaeological staff from the Development Services Department to determine the best course of action to stabilize the exposed Presidio ruins, and after extensive discussions with local experts, the ROE permit with the SDHS was revoked and the archaeological excavation closed. In early 1998, the City began to explore the logistics of site reburial as a method of resource conservation to protect what remained of the north wing Presidio ruins.

**Guidelines for Action**

In April 1998, the San Diego Presidio Preservation Conference, sponsored jointly by the City of San Diego and the SDHS, was held with the goal of developing a comprehensive plan for the protection and future use of the San Diego Presidio. The conference included experts in the field of conservation archaeology and adobe conservation, archaeology, history, and architecture. These experts ultimately produced a draft plan which included guidelines for actions in three areas: site conservation, collections management, and intellectual property. This plan was not intended to be a preservation management plan, but rather provided immediate direction to the City and the SDHS so that the site could be protected and stabilized. It was assumed that as funds became available, a preservation management plan would be developed, along with a master plan for the park. The preservation plan was the first step to a coordinated management effort for the City of San Diego.

**Conditions Assessment Report**

Shortly after the Preservation Conference, the City’s Historical Resources Board applied for and received a $60,000 grant from the State of California for the preparation of a preservation and management plan for the Presidio site which required the preparation of a conditions assessment report (CAR) and would
serve as a first step in the three-phased plan with the goal of providing findings and recommendations for immediate and long-term protection of the physical remains of the Presidio. In 1999, KEA Environmental (known today as AECOM) was hired to provide a site assessment and prepare the CAR which included recommendations for the preservation and management of the historic core.

Data Sharing

In April 1999, adobe specialist Tony Crosby, other members of the KEA team, and City staff participated in a precedent-setting data sharing meeting that included archaeologists from all over San Diego County to discuss approximately three decades of archaeological investigations at the Presidio Site. The value gained from this gathering was used by the consultants to determine the amount of change that had occurred at the site since formal archaeological investigations began there in the mid-1960s. With an aggressive schedule, the CAR was completed in 1999 and was used to develop the stabilization effort that resulted in the north wing reburial, which began on May 24, 1999, in order to continue the legacy of rediscovery for generations to come (Figure 10).

Site Stabilization and Reburial

The stabilization effort took over a year to complete, at a cost of about $31,000 and included cleaning the site, removing any standing water, old sandbags, weeds, and invasive plants, and installing a French drain along the base of the Marston Wall on the west side of the north wing (Calcaro 1999; San Diego Union-Tribune 13 May 1999). The old sprinkler system was also removed, but the only large invasive feature which remained in situ was the E Clampus Vitas NHL monument; however the brass plaque was removed.

Once the site was clean and prepped, mud was applied to all exposed adobe walls for extra protection and then covered with a geotextile barrier to hold the walls in place and guard against root and water erosion, also acting as a horizon marker. Some rooms were backfilled without a geotextile layer to provide context for future analysis. Prior to backfilling the site, mounds of dirt that were used as an observation platform for the Williams excavations were screened for additional artifacts. Each room was then systematically mapped using Total Station, creating elevations, and the site was triangulated using GPS. Each room was photo-documented, and markers were placed on the floors of each room for future reference. Tile fragments which could not be curated due to space constraints were reintroduced into the rooms. Then two skytracks were brought to the site to carefully place the 4,000 yd.\(^3\) of inorganic “yellow soil” 1 ft.\(^3\) at a time, which was hand-tamped to protect the fragile walls, covered with topsoil, and hand-rolled. Mulch was subsequently placed over the newly rolled topsoil, covering the E Clampus Vitas monument and burying the north wing excavation 5 ft. below grade (Figure 11). After the reburial effort was completed, unsafe drop-offs of 4 ft. or more were identified on the northern perimeter of the site adjacent to the Marston Wall, which required installation of approximately 400 ft. of peeler-log fencing which still stands today.

Presidio Park Oversight Committee/Presidio Park Council

Under the direction of the City’s Park and Recreation Department Director, the Presidio Park Oversight Committee was formed in 2000 to address the need of protecting and preserving the Presidio site and associated artifact collection. In 2002, the Presidio Park Oversight Committee brought the entire 50-acre park within its purview. In 2003, the committee was officially recognized as a Recreation Council and changed its name to the San Diego Presidio Park Council (SDPPC).

The purpose of the SDPPC is to support the conservation and management of the cultural and natural resources of the publicly owned Presidio Park for education and enjoyment, as envisioned by its donor, George W. Marston. The SDPPC meets bimonthly with City staff to address current issues with the park, projects in the vicinity, status of the collection, and updates from individual subcommittees, including the curation and interpretation subcommittees, which are presently the most active subcommittees to date.
Figure 10. Conditions assessment report (City of San Diego, Parks & Recreation Department).
Figure 11. Before, during, and after reburial of the North Wing excavation (top photos by Dominic Calarco, 1999; bottom photo by author, 2012).
Recovering the Presidio Collection

Shortly after the original oversight committee was formed, an agreement was signed between the City and Jack Williams to transfer all artifacts and intellectual property from the north wing excavations to the City’s Park Administration Building in Balboa Park. This process was completed in 2005, and through funding from the City’s Archaeological Mitigation Fund, administered by Development Services Department, all documents, photos, slides, and drawings were scanned, and originals were returned to Dr. Williams. These materials are housed in the Presidio Collections Lab and are currently being inventoried in conjunction with the San Diego Archaeological Center, with grant funding provided by the City of San Diego’s Historical Preservation Fund.

Developing a Policy Framework for Presidio Park

In 2009, the SDPPC developed a Policy Framework (Figure 12) intended to be used as a guide for preserving and maintaining a beautiful park with historic structures and gardens and to commemorate what lies underground (City of San Diego 2009). The Policy Framework identified 13 policies to support their goals for understanding and preserving the significant aspects of the City’s heritage that are embodied in the cultural, historical, archaeological, educational, recreational, and botanical resources of Presidio Park for the benefit of current and future generations. Along with the policies, the Council identified the urgent need for development of a Master Plan for the park, to identify critical issues and establish a set of management goals and objectives that, when implemented, will ensure long-term protection and promotion of this important cultural, historical, archaeological, and botanical landmark to the history of the United States.

Work continues toward these goals, and as stated earlier in this paper, through the efforts of the Interpretation subcommittee of the Park Council, an interactive website is being developed which will include information on the history of the Presidio site, the people that lived there and their relationship to descendants of present-day Old Town. In addition, members of the Presidio Development Circle, which consists of the members of the archaeological, professional, and academic communities, have been working diligently throughout the year to bring life to the now-buried Presidio site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In closing, the City of San Diego has taken great effort to finally be able to share this information with the archaeological community at the conference and ultimately with the general public, and thanks everyone involved with the Presidio Park Council, the Presidio Heritage Development Circle, San Diego State University Anthropology Department, and the Archaeology Subcommittee of the City’s Historical Resources Board for their guidance and support.
A Policy Framework for
The San Diego Presidio Park Council

San Diego Presidio Park Council Mission Statement

The purpose of the San Diego Presidio Park Council (SDPPC) is to support the conservation and management of the cultural and natural resources of the publicly-owned Presidio Park for education and enjoyment, as envisioned by its donor, George W. Marston.

Figure 12. Policy framework for the Presidio Park Council (City of San Diego 2009).
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