

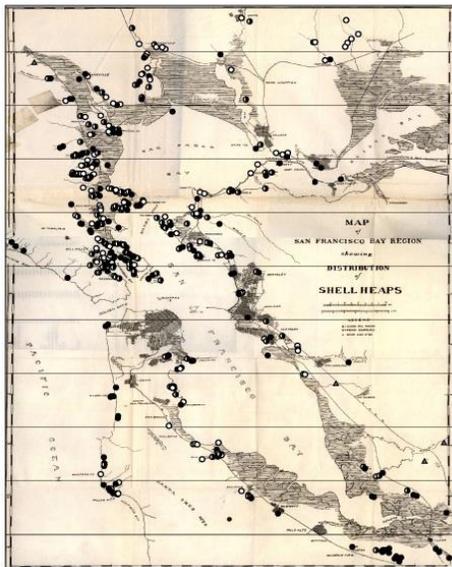
The Rich History of Pillar Point

—Marc Strohle

Pillar Point is perhaps best known as the site of the big “golf ball” radar installation, and for Mavericks, the surfing location. Dig a little deeper, however, and it turns out that it has an interesting and varied history that spans Native American dwellers, Spanish explorers, World War II-era defense, rocket and missile tracking, and even a bombing by a radical domestic terrorist group.



The earliest known inhabitants in the Pillar Point area were the Ohlone Native Americans, who the Spanish called Costanoans, or “coastal people.” University of California anthropologist Nels Nelson discovered evidence of their existence in the course of his survey of Bay Area shell mounds conducted in the early 1900s.



Over 400 shell mounds remained in 1909, reminders of the Ohlone who lived here for thousands of years. Most of these shell mounds are now gone, having been built upon.

Shell mounds, or middens, are comprised of mollusk shells, cooking stones and ashes, bird and mammal bones, and other village artifacts. The Pillar Point mound is dated sometime between AD 500 and AD 1000.

A tribelet of Chiguan Ohlone occupied a village named Chagunte at Miramar, south of Pillar Point. Those Chiguan would have watched Spanish explorer Francisco Gali sailing past the point in 1585 as he explored the coast and charted Pillar Point, not knowing how their lives would change almost 200 years later.

In 1769, Spanish Military explorer Gaspar de Portolá led a mission north from San Diego in search of Monterey Bay.

Having missed the bay, the explorers continued north and were reportedly fed by Ohlone near Pillar Point on their expedition that ultimately led to the first sighting of San Francisco Bay by Europeans. The traveling party included Father Juan Crespi, who named Pillar Point “Punto de los Angeles Custodios,” or Guardian Angel Point. The Ohlone land was subsequently claimed by Spain, and 44 Chiguan were taken to Mission Delores where many sickened and died.

In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain, including Alta California. Pillar Point became part of Rancho Corral de Tierra (Earthen Corral), with the 1839 Mexican Land Grant to Francisco Guerrero y Palomares. The land, including the Pillar Point bluff, was used primarily for farming and grazing.

As American settlers populated the coast, Pillar Point Marsh was dammed in the 1920s by farmers to prevent salt water from moving into upland farming areas, and to provide a crossing for farm equipment for access to the slopes above the marsh for farming.

In October of 1940, the U.S Army acquired about 50 acres of land on Pillar Point for a military reservation. It was believed that the Japanese would attack San Francisco using the point and harbor as a “back door”, and the Army wanted to use the site as an artillery observation post.

One remaining World War II structure, a bunker, and several objects including concrete markers, are reminders of Pillar Point’s role in World War II. The Army installation was shut down after the war, with the feared attacks having failed to materialize. It was re-activated in 1959 when it was transferred from the Army to the Navy for use as a command and control facility for the nuclear-armed Regulus missile, as well as to support the Minuteman I missile program.



Pillar Point 1943, during World War II

In the early 1960s, over 12 acres of the original Army acreage were transferred to the U.S. Air Force and a missile tracking installation was established on the site. The property, still owned by the U.S. Air Force, continues to be used as part of the missile tracking installation.

Ironically, after all of the earlier preparations for a Japanese attack, the only attack on the Pillar Point military site occurred on February 3, 1975 when the radical New World Liberation Front bombed the Air Force’s station. Members of the group entered the base at night, through an opening in a fence, and planted two pipe bombs under a diesel-fuel tank. The bombs failed to ignite the fuel, and 400 gallons of diesel fuel drained into the ground. Afterwards, the Air Force upgraded security of the installation.

Currently, Pillar Point Air Force Station is a tracking station that is part of the Western Range, which extends from the California coast westward to the Indian Ocean. The highly visible “golf ball” replaced a large radar dish that was dismantled in 1996. The site is managed by the U.S. Air Force 30th Space Wing, headquartered at Vandenberg Air Force Base. In conjunction with other test ranges, the Western Range provides continuous and complementary instrumentation coverage over a large portion of the Pacific Ocean. It supports polar-orbiting space satellites and operational intercontinental ballistic missile launches from Vandenberg. Operations at Pillar Point Air Force Station include radar tracking, telemetry reception, command control, and communication services to support launch operations.

In 2011, the San Mateo County Parks Department acquired Pillar Point Bluff with a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board as an addition to Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

Peninsula Open Space Trust also secured parcels in the area and made public-access improvements including a parking lot, restroom, and the Jean Lauer Trail that have made Pillar Point more accessible for visitors.

Today, Pillar Point is a popular destination for hiking, whale watching, birding, wildlife photography and a host of other activities, all while the Air Force Station continues its silent tracking vigil.

Despite the modern additions, it is still intriguing to stand on the point and wonder what the Ohlone felt as they observed Francisco Gali sailing past, or 200 years later, as the Portolá expedition struggled north.

This article first appeared in the December 2020 issue of *Coastside Chronicles*.