

# PRESIDIO TRUST

## FACT SHEET | Presidio History

### First Occupants

Native Americans have called northern California home for nearly 10,000 years. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the indigenous Ohlone people lived in villages in what is now the San Francisco peninsula and gathered shellfish along the Presidio's bayshore. Ohlone villages were built atop mounds of shell that accumulated over many generations. Archaeologists have located one of these shell mounds in the Crissy Field area that dates back to A.D. 740. Important archaeological investigations continue in the Presidio to better understand this period. Today, descendants of the Ohlone/Costanoan people live throughout the Bay Area.

### Spanish Imperial Outpost (1776 to 1821)

In 1776, at the same time Thomas Jefferson was drafting the Declaration of Independence on the East Coast, El Presidio was established on the West Coast as the northernmost outpost of colonial New Spain. Designed to defend against British, Russian, and French incursions into Alta California, El Presidio would become the administrative center of a large colonial district stretching from the northern reaches of San Francisco Bay, eastward into the Central Valley of California and south along the Pacific coast toward Monterey Bay. It was responsible for defending six missions, several pueblos, and many ranchos. The Presidio's settlers did not come from Spain, but were drawn from the western regions of modern Mexico, what today are the states of Sinaloa and Sonora. Married soldiers with families were the prized recruits; consequently, women and children far outnumbered the men in the colonial party.

Though it was later expanded, the original El Presidio garrison measured approximately 250 feet on each side. At the center stood the quarters and offices of the fort commander (today the Presidio Officers' Club), surrounded by a chapel, warehouses, a guardhouse, and jail.

With fewer than 200 people, the original colonists were outnumbered by many of the native villages in the area. Yet these few dozen soldiers soon came to dominate the region and by 1810 more than 11,000 native people representing 45 tribes had been converted by the missionaries and fell under control of the Presidio's soldiers.

### Mexican Frontier (1822 to 1846)

Mexico declared its independence from Spain in 1821, but it took a year for the news to reach Alta California. There was no change in personnel when the Presidio changed from Spanish to Mexican sovereignty. In 1835, General Mariano Vallejo shifted Mexican forces further north to the plaza at Sonoma in pursuit of new frontiers, and a caretaker was left in charge of the Presidio. During the previous decade the people at El Presidio had learned a level of self-reliance that would serve them well in the tumultuous beginnings of the Mexican Republic. In these years El Presidio became a beacon for trade with explorers and merchants sailing the vast Pacific.

In 1834, the first official election to create a civil government for the San Francisco Bay Area took place at El Presidio. At that time the post commandant relinquished his authority over the growing civilian

population. One of the new government's first actions was to distribute parcels of land near the port for residents to build new homes and businesses. The port was known as Yerba Buena and the community there would become the nucleus of the future city of San Francisco. Subsequent meetings of this civilian government continued to take place at El Presidio, which remained the seat of power, and the official records were kept in a drawer in an adobe building here. For these reasons and others El Presidio is considered to be the birthplace of San Francisco.

### **U.S. Army Post (1846 to 1994)**

The first United States forces landed in San Francisco and occupied the Presidio's crumbling adobes in 1846, during the Mexican-American War. With the discovery of gold in California in 1849, the sudden growth of San Francisco prompted the U.S. government to establish a permanent military base on the bay.

Over time this large military reservation at the Golden Gate developed into the most important Army post on the Pacific Coast. Its armaments evolved from cannons to modern missiles and it became the nerve center of a coastal defense system that eventually included Alcatraz and Angel Island and that reached as far north as the Marin Headlands and as far south as Fort Funston (all of which were incorporated into the Golden Gate National Recreation Area). Eventually, there were five distinct posts at the Presidio, each with its own commander: the Main Post, Fort Point, Letterman Hospital, Fort Winfield Scott, and Crissy Army Air Field. The 1,491-acre base also included a Coast Guard lifesaving station and a U.S. Public Health Service Hospital.

From the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the conquest of the Philippines to the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, the Presidio was a key link in the projection of American military power into the Pacific Basin and further west onto the mainland of Asia. The base served as a refugee camp for San Franciscans displaced by the Great 1906 Earthquake. During World War II, the Presidio was headquarters of the Western Defense Command, while Letterman Hospital became the largest debarkation hospital in the country. In the 1950s, the Presidio served as headquarters for the Nike missile defense system as well as the famed Sixth U.S. Army.

Through waves of building, demolition and building, the Army greatly expanded the Presidio, far beyond the walls of the original Spanish fort. The site of the original El Presidio would become the Main Post, the administrative and social hub of the growing base. Ironically though, it was the Army's presence that precluded the kind of development seen elsewhere in the Bay Area and helped to preserve the Presidio's natural resources.

### **The Park Years (1994-present)**

In 1972, the Presidio – then still an active military installation – was included within the boundaries of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Congress decided to close the base in 1989, and on October 1, 1994 it was transferred to the National Park Service.

The costs of converting a military post to public use were significant. In 1996 Congress, in a demonstration of innovative thinking and bipartisan collaboration, created the Presidio Trust, a federal executive agency, and gave it a mandate to preserve the Presidio and transform it for a new national purpose, and to do so without ongoing taxpayer support. In 2013, the Presidio Trust became financially self-sufficient, a milestone that means the Presidio will forever remain a public place.