

ORIGIN OF CONTRA COSTA WATER DISTRICT AND LOS VAQUEROS RESERVOIR

Contra Costa Water District (CCWD) was formed in 1936 to manage and distribute water from the Contra Costa Canal and help to manage salinity issues that had been plaguing the Sacramento Delta. In 1988, CCWD received voter approval for the proposed Los Vaqueros Reservoir, which had been in planning stages since the 1960s. Construction was completed on the dam in 1997. The filling of the reservoir irreversibly changed Los Vaqueros yet again. Gone were the cowboys and farmers, most of whom had moved away from the area by the Great Depression. However, you may still see cattle at Los Vaqueros as they are used to manage grasslands and minimize fire risk.



Construction of the dam and reservoir allowed archaeologists to conduct extensive excavations and research into the history of the many people who lived at Los Vaqueros for the past 10,000 years. Looking at the images in this brochure, imagine what life might have been like for Native Americans living in the more forested valley thousands of years ago, grinding acorns, and hunting the local wildlife. Think about what the Spanish and Mexican vaqueros might have seen when the area was a vast rangeland with no fences and few buildings. After the Gold Rush, imagine what life was like as a ranching family on the Vasco or as a worker on the farms in the area. All of those people left their mark on the landscape and helped to make Los Vaqueros, and Contra Costa County, what it is today.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND AN ARTIFACT

If you find potential archaeological material, either historic or prehistoric, please do not touch or move the items. Removing archaeological evidence from its location removes much of the important information that can be learned from artifacts. Vandalism and looting of archaeological sites are illegal under both State and Federal laws and may be punishable by imprisonment and/or costly fines. If you see anyone vandalizing or looting archaeological artifacts, please contact 925-240-2360. The past belongs to everyone, and it is all our responsibility to protect and preserve it for future generations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the John Muir Interpretive Center, which has a display of artifacts collected by archaeologists with information on their uses and additional information on the history of the area.

You can also visit ccwater.com/615/Cultural-History for more information on the history of the Los Vaqueros Watershed.

WATERSHED FACILITIES

MARINA

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925-371-2628

JOHN MUIR INTERPRETIVE CENTER

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925-240-2440

WATERSHED OFFICE

100 Walnut Boulevard
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CCWATER.COM

LOS VAQUEROS WATERSHED CULTURAL RESOURCES



CONTRA COSTA WATER DISTRICT

CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE LOS VAQUEROS WATERSHED

The area currently known as the Los Vaqueros Watershed has been occupied by people for almost 10,000 years. Some of the earliest known archaeological sites in California are located in the area. Archaeologists and historians conducted extensive research prior to and during the construction of the reservoir and dam. Today, evidence of historic and prehistoric occupation of the area can still be seen on the landscape. Walking along designated trails you may find evidence of previous human use of the area. This guide will discuss the history of the Los Vaqueros area and what to do if you find archaeological materials.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE WATERSHED

Radiocarbon dating of material from excavations at Los Vaqueros show that people began using the area as early as 9,800 years ago. At that time, the valley might only have been used as a temporary camp. A large obsidian spear point and other stone tools that date to this period were identified deep underground. Between 3,000 and 1,000 years ago, a larger, more permanent village was established where hearths, possible house floors, ceremonial objects, hunting items, and food processing tools were found. Remnants of trees were identified in an ancient streambed that suggests the landscape was likely very different. Buckeye, madrone, and big-leaf maple trees may have covered much of the valley where the reservoir is today.



Bedrock mortars, also known as 'Indian grinding rocks' are found across Los Vaqueros, where people were grinding acorns and grass seeds found in the valley.



The Spanish and Mexican missionaries kept meticulous records of the Native Californian 'neophytes' who lived and worked at the missions, including lists of baptisms, births, and deaths.

MISSIONIZATION/CHANGES WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SPANISH

Native Americans continued living in traditional groups in the area until around 1800, when many Native Californians were forcibly rounded up to live and work in Spanish missions. Most Native Americans in the Los Vaqueros area were likely moved to Mission San José and Mission San Francisco. Mission San José used Native Americans as vaqueros, or 'cowboys' to tend to the thousands of cattle, horses, and sheep that grazed between present-day Oakland and San José.

RANCHO CAÑADA DE LOS VAQUEROS

The economy of California opened to international trade when Mexico took over governmental control of California in 1822. European and American ships traded Californian cattle hides and tallow, or fat, to be used to make leather, candles, and soap. In turn, people living in California traded for goods that were difficult to make in the area including spices, tea and coffee, pots and pans, dishware, clothing, and furniture. The California missions were secularized in 1836 and their lands were gradually divided and awarded to private landowners. Rancho Cañada de Los Vaqueros, or the 'Valley of the Cowboys Ranch,' was granted in 1844 to Antonino Higuera, Francisco Alviso, and Manuel Miranda and included the area known today as the Los Vaqueros Watershed. Native Americans, after surviving the missions, were often enslaved or employed to work in the Mexican and later American ranches. Historic documentation suggests that in the 1840s there was a small Indian village, or 'rancheria' to house the eight to ten Native Americans that Francisco Alviso employed at the Rancho.



At the site of the Suñol Adobe, archaeologists identified English ceramic bowls and other tableware from the 1860s.

Rancho Cañada de Los Vaqueros, as its name suggests, was likely used mainly as range lands for cattle by Spanish, Mexican, and later American ranchers once California became a state. While the Los Vaqueros land grant changed hands many times, little had been done to improve the land until the Suñol brothers and a group of Basque ranchers purchased and moved to the area in the 1850s. Each group built an adobe homestead in the valley.



Another nickname for the area, the Vasco, is Spanish for Basque, or a person of Basque descent.

CALIFORNIA BECOMES A PART OF THE UNITED STATES

California's population exploded with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill. At Los Vaqueros, and throughout California's range lands, ranchers switched to raising cattle breeds to be used for meat, rather than hide and fat. Dairy cows and sheep were also introduced to provide milk, mutton, and wool. As more people came to California, many of the large Mexican land grants were parceled into smaller portions. Fencing was installed between parcels, both to signal ownership and to corral cattle and sheep herds, which were beginning to cause problems for nearby farms.

People from all over the world began to settle in Los Vaqueros, including Germany, Italy, France, and the Azores, who joined the Basque and Mexican families, in creating a vibrant, yet rural, series of farms and ranches throughout the valley.