

# *When the System Works—the Campo de Cahuenga*

Roberta S. Greenwood

## **Abstract**

The adobe in North Hollywood where Andrés Pico and John Frémont signed the document ending the Mexican American War hostilities in California had fallen into ruins by 1877. In 1931, amateurs discovered stone foundations that corresponded to the location on hand-drawn, mid-nineteenth century maps, but left no records of their work. As new construction for Los Angeles MetroRail approached the location, monitors observed suggestive rocks and floor tiles, and a sequence of expanding excavations revealed the full extent of the very large structure. Historical research disproved most of the local lore about the owner, builder, and age of the adobe, concluding that it was older than had been suggested and associated with Mission San Fernando. The efforts culminated in total preservation and dedication of an historical park on the *National Register of Historic Places*.

## **Historical Setting**

On January 13, 1847, General Andrés Pico and Lt. Col. John C. Frémont tethered their horses to an oak tree in back of an old adobe and sat on the broad porch to sign the Articles of Capitulation that ended hostilities of the Mexican-American War in California. While it may be hyperbole to claim, as some have done, that this marked the birthplace of the state, the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe that followed in 1848 did provide for the acquisition of territories that became the states of California, Nevada, and Utah, most of Arizona, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico and extended the country's boundaries for the first time from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

It had been recorded that the signing took place “at Cahuenga,” near the north end of the pass by that name, on El Camino Real and close to the Los

Angeles River (Fig. 1). The foundations of an adobe at that location were briefly uncovered by historian J. Marshall Miller and a group of high school students in 1931. No notes or artifacts were found, but Miller labeled the place Campo de Cahuenga, recorded his observations, and described the hypothetical footprint and appearance (Miller 1932). He claimed that the structure was built by Don Tomás Feliz in 1845, and this date and ownership have been repeated and accepted uncritically for 70 years until the recent research.

The adobe, however, was described in an 1842 land claim document as a mission building already “dilapidated” (Pitt and Kimbro 2000:29); as “abandoned” by Frémont himself on the date of the signing; and as “deserted” by another member of his party (Bryant 1967:392). It was depicted as a ruin on the Galsworthy survey of 1877. By then a general, Frémont returned to the location in 1888 and confirmed its identity. After a series of owners, the last vestiges were erased when the subdivision and development of the Universal City tract occurred in 1915-1920 (Miller 1932:22-23).

In 1923, when the City of Los Angeles acquired two of the three lots identified by Miller, the site was occupied by a landscaped 1920s animal hospital with several buildings. These were converted to public use. It was named the Fremont-Pico Memorial Park and designated as State Landmark No. 151 in 1935, and also Los Angeles Cultural-Historic Landmark 29. The

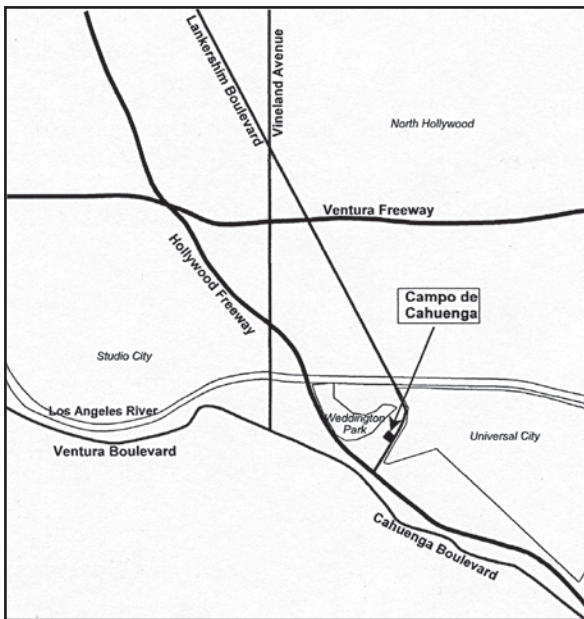


Fig. 1. Location of Campo de Cahuenga.

City demolished the former veterinary facility in 1949 and built a commemorative structure for public use at 3919 Lankershim Boulevard. It was dedicated in 1950 and administered by what was then called the Park Department. The structure was designed to approximate the appearance of the original adobe, although opinions differed about whether it was directly superimposed over the original foundation, or if the adobe could have stood “anywhere within a half-block” (Kaptain 1994:4). The Park Department designed the surroundings as a traditional Spanish landscape with a central fountain, retaining the mature palms and other plantings already established on the property (Fig. 2).

### The Discovery

That was the status of knowledge, preservation, and approximate location when the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) was about to begin construction of the Universal City station on the MetroRail Red Line. Because the area was considered sensitive, the MTA required that activities

around the Campo property be monitored. In June 1995, the monitor was watching closely as Century Cable began to dig a trench in the lawn between the sidewalk and the front gates to the Campo park and almost immediately observed cobbles in close formation and fragments of floor tiles that were 10 to 18 centimeters (cm) below the grass. The discovery was reported promptly to MTA, work in the vicinity was stopped, and the cable was ultimately installed by tunneling deep below the surface.

Four archaeological units exposed segments of a wide stone foundation and a narrower perpendicular foundation suggesting an interior partition, floor tiles *in situ*, and an abundance of broken roof tiles (Foster and Selverston 1995:1-6). With the understanding that more investigation would take place at the site designated as CA-LAN-1945H when MTA station construction and the widening of Lankershim Boulevard occurred, the remains were mapped, covered, and left in place as found.

The next increment of work and knowledge took place in 1996 when MTA began several road and freeway improvements and requested a formal determination of the significance of the remains. Although an environmental statement written in 1983 had found the park eligible for the *National Register of Historic Places* (NRHP), the Keeper of the Register did not concur at that time because the adjacent property owner demurred. The renewed excavations were limited to the lawn between the sidewalk and the ornamental fence enclosing the Campo park (Fig. 3), a strip of approximately 5 by 18 meters encumbered by planters and mature trees. The majority of the site remained inaccessible—under the street and sidewalk, within the park enclosure, below the adjacent parking lot, or otherwise outside the area of impact. Still lacking historical context, the approach focused on basic topical issues of construction techniques, materials, and architecture.



*Fig. 2. The commemorative building.*



*Fig. 3. Excavation of a floor.*

The excavation revealed portions of four of the six rooms described by Miller. Although disturbed in places by massive tree roots, sprinkler and other utility pipelines, the floor tiles showed evidence of lime mortar and many included animal footprints impressed while the clay was still plastic (Fig. 4). The foundations that would have supported the exterior walls measured 1 meter wide and 0.9 meter deep, and the partition walls rested on foundations between 0.6 and 0.65 meter wide and at least 0.44 meter deep. Both roof and floor tiles were coarse-textured with a black core. Most of the floor tiles measured 35 by 35 cm, with thickness averaging 3.5 cm, with a row measuring 21 by 28 cm to fill gaps where the floors met the walls. Artifacts were rare, but included British transfer printed ceramics, blue and brown edgewares from the first third of the nineteenth century, and a figural clay pipe sherd (Fig. 5). Native American material included four fragments of protohistoric or contact period pottery and an isolated stone scraper. On the basis of the work completed, the State Historical Preservation Officer (SHPO) determined in 1997 that the site was eligible for the NRHP under criterion D, the potential to yield information, and requested additional documentation about the history and function of the adobe and the importance of the 1950 memorial building.

Minor excavations continued in 1997 and 1998. The former confirmed that the stone foundations extended below the sidewalk, curb, and southbound lane of Lankershim Boulevard, and the latter exposed only amorphous deposits of modern construction debris and disturbed soil in the area between the Metro station and the park. Two new phases of work were authorized in 2000. The first provided additional excavation in the parking lot north of the park where more of the foundation was predicted, and further research to many questions about the ownership and age of the adobe. Limited fieldwork in the parking lot revealed that perhaps as much as one-third of the adobe did extend to the north and east, although further excava-



Fig. 4. A floor tile. Note the footprints.

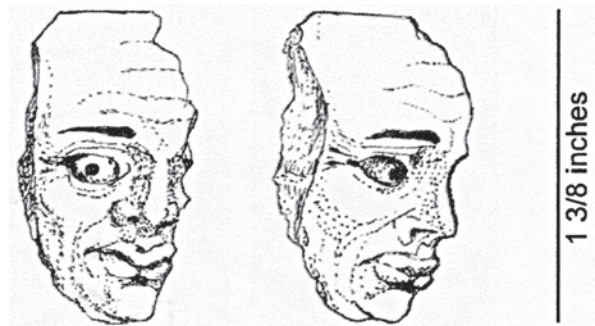


Fig. 5. Pipe bowl fragment.

tion could not be pursued until the City acquired the property.

### Historical Research

The second task in 2000 consisted of new research to support a formal evaluation of the significance of the park and its landscape, as requested by the SHPO. Consultants Leonard Pitt and Edna Kimbro were able to define the history of the adobe, correcting

much of the lore that had become attached to it and repeated endlessly without corroboration. There was no evidence that Tomás Feliz ever owned or built the adobe; in fact, he had died in 1830. Instead, they demonstrated that Andrés Pico had acquired this land as part of the Rancho Ex-Mission de San Fernando and sold it to Eulogio de Célis in 1846 to finance his new hotel in El Pueblo de Los Angeles. Even before that, Mariano de la Luz Verdugo had held grazing rights to the land since either 1783 or 1795. By at least 1795, he maintained a thriving ranch (Engelhardt 1973:6, 9, 47) until about 1810 when he was dispossessed by the Mission for its own needs. Verdugo was said to have an adobe building at the time; alternatively, this adobe could have been built by or for the Mission. An (unsuccessful) land claim filed in 1842 declared that “the land was occupied and built upon by Mission San Fernando Rey.” Either way, it is considerably older than previously thought and clearly has no association with Feliz (Pitt and Kimbro 2000:22-28).

### National Register of Historic Places

The second contribution in 2000 was the formal history, recording, and evaluation of the City’s commemorative building and its designed historical landscape (Slawson and Greenwood 2000). The research concluded that the park itself is significant under criterion A (contributing to the broad pattern of history in California and much of the American west) as the only known site or place associated with the ending of the Mexican-American War. Other associations include the location on El Camino Real, the use related to stockraising by San Fernando Mission, as a stop on the Butterfield Stage, and bivouac of the California Battalion during the Civil War, all contributing to the broad history of southern California. Regarding criterion B (significant in the lives of prominent individuals), while this is not the only place associated with Andrés Pico and John Frémont, it remains the most appropriate place to recognize the efforts of Mrs. Armitage S. C. Forbes, a pioneer figure in historic

preservation who fought to recognize the route of El Camino Real and established the familiar green Mission Bell symbol that marks its path. She sponsored more than 450 of the markers between 1906 and 1947. While commemorative buildings do not often qualify for the NRHP under criterion C (distinctive architecture representative of a period), the park building is a dignified reconstruction based on archaeological evidence, presented in the original environment which constitutes a designed historic landscape. The building and garden are both more than 50 years old and elements of the landscape, the surrounding walls, and decorative bronze gate date back to the 1920s when the City first dedicated the park. In consideration of the archaeological, architectural, and landscape values, the Campo de Cahuenga was formally listed on the NRHP on December 19, 2003, and added to the *California Register of Historical Resources*.

### More Excavation

When MTA began to plan an interpretive program as the final mitigation measure, excavation took place for the first time inside the walls of the park (Greenwood and Messick 2002). A triangular area in the southeast corner was exposed to uncover more of the exterior and partition wall foundations. At the conclusion of this test, at least parts of all six rooms had been exposed, leaving only the northern end under the adjacent parking lot and the southern end under the street undocumented (Fig. 6). Associated artifacts included more unglazed brown pottery and a well-worn stone pestle, 12.75 cm long. These and an intact stone bowl recovered during construction of the next MTA station to the north may have come from the Native American village of *Kaweenga* (one of many spellings), whose precise location has never been established. This *Tongva* village contributed 105 recruits to Mission San Fernando, more than any other village (King 1994:102). Alternately, the items may have been possessions of Indians working for Verdugo, building the adobe, or tending the Mission’s flocks. Additional

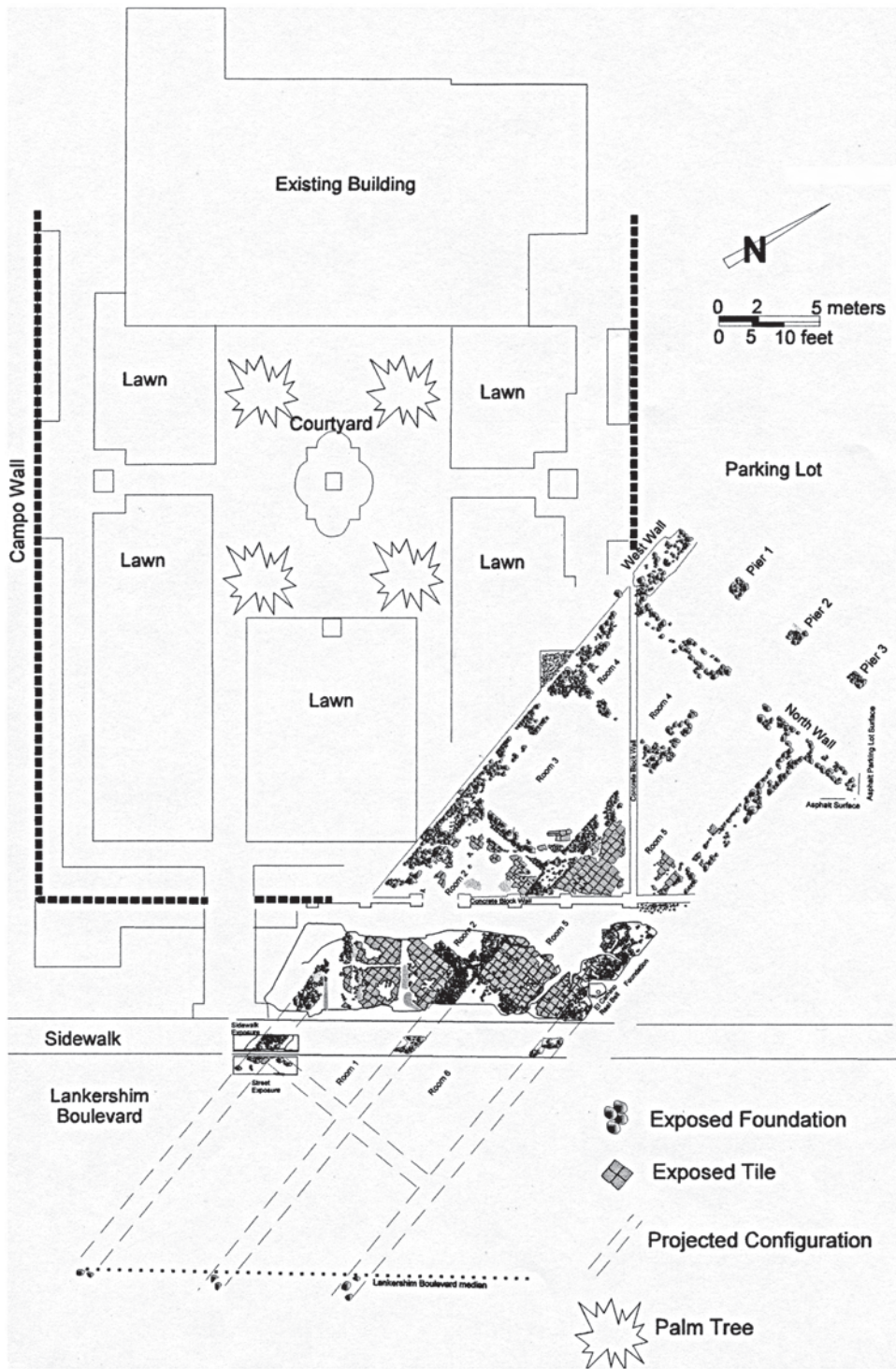


Fig. 6. Plan of the adobe.

historical material possibly contemporaneous with use of the adobe included dark olive (“black”) glass shards, cut nails, and a fragment of Chinese porcelain. A smoking pipe stem fragment was made by the Glasgow company of T. Davidson & Co., operating from 1861 to 1910.

### Interpretation

As part of its commitment to interpret the Campo site to the public, MTA acquired a part of the adjacent parking lot now known to overlay the north end of the adobe. From the three corners exposed, the adobe measured 103.1 feet (31.4 meters) long by 37.5 feet (11.4 meters) wide, not including the porches. All of the corners were interlocked, implying that the structure was all built at the same time, rather than growing through later additions. Because the central north-south foundation is as deep and broad as the exterior foundations, in contrast to the smaller east-west partition footings, it is believed that this was a bearing wall and the adobe had an end-gabled roof. All of the rooms were 14.7 feet (4.5 meters) wide. The largest room, 61.5 feet (18.7 meters) long, faced east so the major entrance may have been on the east elevation. There were porches on the north and east side, probably on the west side as well. Massive foundations for the posts found along the north wall showed that the porch was at least 13 feet (4.0 meters) broad. There was no evidence of a fireplace or chimney to suggest indoor heating or cooking.

Two attributes of the Campo structure are unusual: its size and the tile floors. It is longer and wider than some of the missions and substantially larger than most early secular adobes (Frierman 1982:54). The tile, massive stone foundations, materials, and method of construction are consistent with mission building practices. The footprint is linear, rather than wrapped around a courtyard or blocky, as were many haciendas. For example, the Avila Adobe on Olvera Street in Los Angeles, built ca. 1818, is 14.4 by 13.0 meters,

on foundations 0.76 meter wide. The nearest comparable example to the Campo structure is the adobe of Patricio Ontiveros in Santa Fe Springs. Built ca. 1811, that linear structure measures 30.1 by 7.0 meters, with a dirt floor. The comparison is relevant since there is a definite association to mission enterprises there, because Ontiveros was *majordomo* of Mission San Juan Capistrano (Frierman 1982:146). His adobe was almost the same length as the Campo adobe. The Campo adobe was further unique as an early secular structure with tile floors. The floor and roof tiles were almost certainly made at the Mission, the only source for this material at the time. Although no date has been found for a brick or tile kiln at Mission San Fernando, by 1797, “all those [buildings] thus far erected were roofed with tiles” (Engelhardt 1973:15). The dimensions of the tiles are at midpoint within the average for all California missions (Baer 1958:19). The mass of the foundations for the north porch piers suggests that a portion of the corridor was arcaded. This would be another association with contemporary mission architecture since vaulting was largely limited to the Church complexes prior to the advent of wood frame construction. The tile roofs typically antedate the advent of shingle roofs in the 1840s.

### Preservation

Inquiries were made to preservationists and others who had installed interpretive displays and outdoor parks for their experience and guidance in the choice of preservation techniques. The experts advised against the concepts of stabilizing and then leaving the remains open for viewing or installing transparent “windows” over the floors. The option ultimately selected was to recover the remains *in situ* and replicate the appearance of the original on the surface. Gil Sanchez, A.I.A., designed the plan (Fig. 7) and method to cover and protect the historic foundations and floors with layers of sterile sand and microfiber and duplicate them directly above the footprint with appropriate drainage. Daryl Allen prepared text and graphics

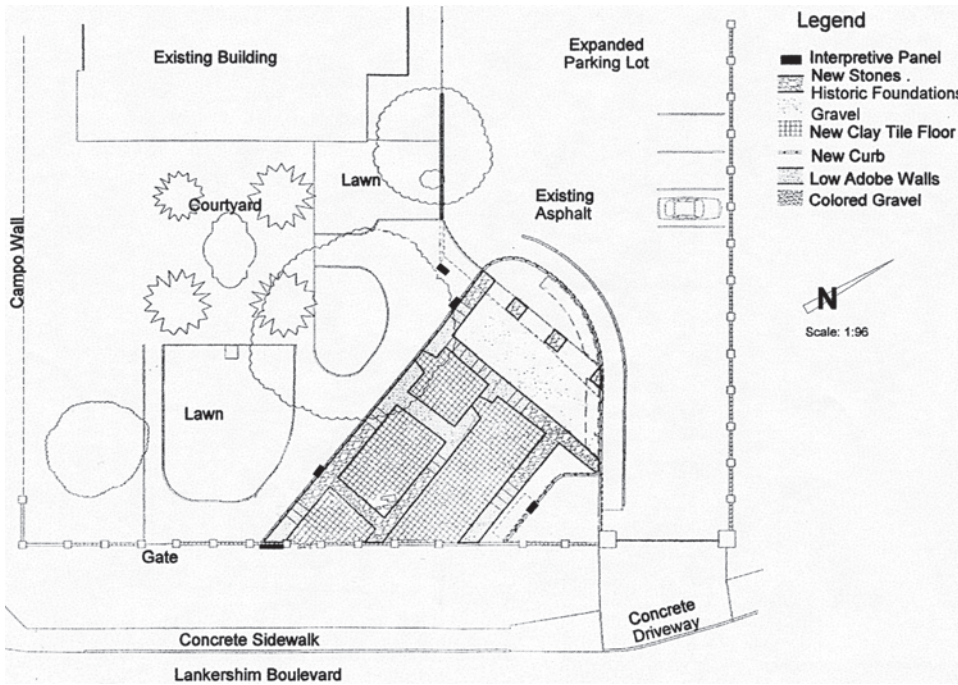


Fig. 7. Plan for interpretation.



Fig. 8. Dedication day, floor and foundations display (Photo: John M. Weiskopf).

for explanatory signage. Tiles were manufactured to match the Mission products in color, texture, and size, with occasional paw prints impressed with a cast made by a live dog. As the original foundations were made from local river cobbles, the new foundations were recreated with raw materials from the same source, and laid directly over the footprint. To help visitors grasp the nearly unprecedented length of the structure, some low courses of adobe bricks, handmade on the site, were laid at the corners to emphasize the size. The pattern of tile floors within the stone foundations was embossed on the new sidewalk and on Lankershim Boulevard for the same purpose.

Installation of the exhibit was monitored and an additional area of the adjacent parking lot was excavated after the asphalt pavement was lifted. Stone bases for pillars supporting the porch roof on the north end of the adobe were encountered where predicted, and stub walls off the northwest and northeast corners were exposed and traced as far as the accessible area permitted. The new park was officially dedicated on April 7, 2004 (Fig. 8). Until municipal funding can support more staffing, the Campo de Cahuenga currently is open every Saturday from 10 am to 2 pm with docents provided by the Campo de Cahuenga Historical Memorial Association. The Association stages annual reenactments of the signing of the Articles of Capitulation every January with dancing, costumes, and even cannon fire; arranges displays of both the history and archaeology inside the building; and schedules its use for many public meetings.

The Campo de Cahuenga is a prime example of what can be achieved when “the system” works. The process began when the environmental documents pointed out what little was known, warned that the area was archaeologically sensitive, mandated special concern during construction, and provided for the mitigation of any unavoidable adverse effects. MTA responded by requiring monitoring and as each increment of construction took place, supported the archaeologi-

cal effort to trace the walls and continue the research. The Campo adobe is now known as one of the largest secular adobes in southern California—larger even than some of the missions. It was built earlier than first thought, associated with San Fernando Mission by both the physical remains and historical research, and related to six crucial phases of history: the Gabrielino village, the Spanish mission period, the Mexican rancho period, the American acquisition period, the Butterfield-Overland stagecoach system, and the Civil War encampment for Union troops. It was ultimately buried in the relentless process of tract subdivision and development along the historic route of travel through Cahuenga Pass—El Camino Real—now Lankershim Boulevard.

Thus, the story did not end with the research and archaeology. It has been a rare event that excavation undertaken as mitigation of impacts by means of data recovery culminates in the preservation of the cultural resource. From the near-forgotten and little-visited urban park of the past decades, the Campo de Cahuenga site resumes its historic role as a destination for the public along a well-traveled highway.

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