

Introduction to pio pico history essay



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When I was a child, I would pass by the Pio Pico mansion without so much as a clue as to who Pio Pico was and why he had a mansion on the border of Whittier and Pico Rivera. With time, I learned that Pio Pico was the last Mexican governor of Alta California before Mexico was fully annexed by the United States. Still, there were details about his life that I did not know, but was anxious to find out. So, for this paper, I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to find out all that I could about the life of Pio Pico and his contributions to the development of California. As it would turn out, Pio Pico led a very interesting life that is often overlooked by historians.

Early Life and Background

Pio Pico was born Pio de Jesus Pico in 1801 at Mission San Gabriel to one of the earliest families in Los Angeles. His father, a soldier, was Jose Maria Pico who had come from Mexico from the Anza expedition of 1801. Maria Estaquia Lopez, his mother, was a native of Sonora and gave birth to nine other children, Pico being her fourth. Although it is not widely known, Pico was of a mixed heritage; a combination of African, Native American, Hispanic, and European blood; in the 1790 census, Pico's grandmother was listed as a "mulata."^[1]

Early details of Pico's life are limited, if not inaccessible. However, according to Valdes y Cocom, "he seems to have been a man of little education and only moderate intelligence; fairly honest but without any gifts of statesmanship which would have qualified him for important achievements in the difficult times in which he lived."^[2] After his father's death in 1819, Pico moved to San Diego where he kept a small shop. During this time, Pico shared many occasions of gambling with friend Father Menendez to whom

he either won large sums from or lost large sums to. Mrs. Carson, a long time family friend recalls the following: “ I once met him going to the races; he had his mule panniers loaded down with silver which he was taking to bet on the horse.”[3]His love for gambling would stay with him until his death and would ultimately leave him destitute.

Prior to becoming governor of Mexican California, Pico held many different positions including being a clerk in a trial in San Diego in 1826, and senior Vocal of Assembly in 1832. He married Maria Ignacia Alvarado in 1834; together they raised a daughter and a son, although it has been said that Pico fathered a number of children out of wedlock with different women. In 1834 he served his first of two terms as governor, though he was only in office for twenty days. His second term in office lasted from March 1845 to July 1846; he fled California to Mexico after his last term. In 1848, after Mexico ceded Alta California to the United States, Pico returned to his home in Los Angeles, having moved there shortly after he was married. During this time he lived as private citizen, rancher, businessman, hotel owner, and Los Angeles City Councilman. In 1870, he built Pico House, which, for its time, was the largest and most luxurious hotel in Southern California and center of local society.[4]When Pico lost his remaining possessions and properties to loan sharks, he ended up living with his daughter, Joaquina Pico Moreno. He died in poverty in 1892 at the age of 91. He and his wife are buried at the Workman and Temple Family Homestead El Campo Santo cemetery in the City of Industry, both in poor-man’s graves.

Period of Involvement in California Affairs

The Mexican era in California spanned from 1821 through 1846, during which there were 12 different governors over 15 periods of governance. Although the Mexican era in California and the period of time that Pio Pico spent in power did not last very long, the period of time was highly eventful.

California became a province of Mexico in 1822, after Mexico won its independence from Spain. The province set up its own legislature and established a military force. But, beginning in 1825, Mexico sent a series of governors to California. Many Californians rebelled against having their affairs dictated by these outsiders.[5]Manuel Victoria, who became governor in 1831, “ ruled with a strong hand and was especially resented by the Californians.”[6]A group led by Pio Pico and others clashed with Mexican government troops in 1831, though the fighting was not severe. But the continuing opposition forced Victoria to give up the governorship and return to Mexico City. Shortly thereafter, Pico declared himself governor of California, the first of his two terms, but was forced out of office when Mexico sent yet another governor.

In 1832, Jose Figuero was sent to ameliorate the situation and to encourage the development of former mission lands. In 1835 Figuero died and was succeeded by Guterrez. A new governor from Mexico, Mariano Chico, who was quickly rejected for scandalous behavior, arbitrarily replaced Guterrez. [7]Guterrez took over again, but Alvarado, a nephew of Mariano Vallejo, seized power in the northern part of Alta California. “ Local Californios in the North, who bitterly resented the outsiders from Mexico, considered declaring independence from Mexico.”[8]Alvarado, after negotiating with Mexico, received the approval to be the official governor with land grant powers to

implement the transfer of Mission land, but was unable to fully enforce the law.

Major disagreements developed between Mariano Vallejo and Alvarado over issues including military funding, the Americans and independence. Vallejo favored seeking the protection of the United States and maintaining a strong military to control other foreign interests. “ Each complained to the Mexican government bitterly about the other, and the government in Mexico City, without consulting any one in California, finally sent a new

Governor.”[9]Micheltorena, with full land grant powers from Mexico, “ landed with his own army of pardoned convicts and was immediately caught up in a revolt by the former Governor Alvarado and General Castro.”[10]During his time as governor, Micheltorena was highly criticized for his outright refusal to implement the secularization of the missions. In 1845, Alvarado was able to force Micheltorena’s forces down towards Los Angeles where Pio Pico defeated him. The faction that Pico had been leading at the time favored independence from Mexico in conjunction with the English. In 1845, Micheltorena was forced to return to Mexico and Pio Pico once again declared himself the governor.

One of the first things Pico did as governor was to begin redistributing mission land for secularization. Admittedly, he acquired much of the land for himself, friends, and family; for this, he has come into criticism many times. Though these last grants were the final acts of developing former mission lands under Mexican authority, his land grant authority was not ratified by Mexico, leading to many of his grants later being rejected.[11]Next, Pico

moved the capital of California from Monterey to Los Angeles where he had built several homes.

Of great concern to Pico was the growing problem of Americans in California. Pico saw their presence as a constant reminder of the threat of American invasion. Despite having laws that threatened deportation of American immigrants who would not adopt Mexican citizenship and become Catholics, Pico felt powerless.[12] On many occasions, Pico suggested that California declare independence from Mexico and then allow itself to be annexed by the French or English, believing that this would be the best option to preserve the Californio way of life. Aghast at the continued exploration of John C. Fremont, Pico Stated: “ What are we to do then? Shall we remain supine, while these daring strangers are overrunning our fertile plains, and gradually outnumbering and displacing us? Shall these incursions go on unchecked, until we shall become strangers in our own land?”[13]

Pico’s battle against the Americans ended in 1846 when American troops invaded California. Unfortunately, Pico was unable to obtain a commitment of troops from Mexico City; he, consequently, was only able to muster a poorly armed militia. Determining the situation to be near hopeless, Pico fled south. “ Before leaving, he rapidly sold off 12 million acres of public land (including Catalina Island) at ridiculously low prices to raise money for the war and keep as much land out of the hands of Americans as possible.” Thus, ends Pio Pico’s involvement in Alta California’s affairs.

Evaluation of Significance in California History and Conclusion

Admittedly, Pio Pico was not involved in California affairs for a long period of time. Nearly all the magazines have contained, at various times, "write-ups" of the Pico family, and attacks or defenses of his administration.[14] Still, there are a few key events that helped to further the development of the state for which Pico was responsible and would not have taken place without him. The events in question are as follows: 1) the development of a heterogeneous population 2) the secularization of the missions; and 3) the unification of Mexicans and Mexican politics, and 4) the creation of Los Angeles as a major city.

As already mentioned above, Pico was of mixed race. In the past, both Mexicans and African-Americans have hailed the man as their hero.[15] It goes without saying that Pico's own racial status was a precursor to the racial makeup of Los Angeles, as we know it today. Because Pico's family was one of the earliest to come to Los Angeles, it shows that people of different races inhabited Los Angeles from the very beginning. This shows that the influx of different races in the Los Angeles area did not happen overnight, making it more difficult to argue that Los Angeles belongs to any one racial community. Also, I believe it is highly significant for both the Mexican and the African-American communities to see one of their own in a position of power.

Although the secularization of the missions became a law prior to Pico's terms in office, he took the initiative to see to it that the missions were done away with. As a political scientist, I know full well that a law is only a law in

the books; it is not until a person applies the law that it becomes a law in action. Take for instance, the Civil Rights movement. During Reconstruction, African-Americans had been granted the right to vote, however, this law was never allowed to be an active law in the Southern states. With the Civil Rights movement, protesters fought not for new laws, but for the application of laws that had been created a hundred years prior. Pico (partially by taking the mission land for himself) was able to finalize the destruction of the missions, thus eliminating century old infrastructure that had been led to the demise of the Native American population in California.

Also, Pico was one of the only men capable of unifying Mexican Californians. It has been noted that, out of the 12 different governors of California during the Mexican period, only two or three were competent; the others were incapable of governing and were extremely corrupt. I would have to say that Pico was one of the few competent governors of his time. Prior to his terms in office, the Mexican inhabitants refused to be ruled by a governor who came from Mexico City. This reluctance for leadership made the area susceptible to countless revolts against the government. When Pico became governor, he helped to bring local and regional politics to people who had fought so long against other leaders.

Lastly, while in office Pico moved the capital of California from Monterey to Los Angeles. As a resident of Los Angeles, I find this very significant. Had Pico not moved the capital to Los Angeles, the city might not be what it is today. Those who have immigrated to Los Angeles may not have decided to come to Los Angeles if Pico had not initiated its development. I cannot imagine a California without the Los Angeles we know today. Pico did not end

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his work in Los Angeles after he left the position of governor. He continued to be involved in Los Angeles affairs, even creating the Pico Hotel, which (as mentioned above) was the biggest and most beautiful hotel of the time. Ever since Pico's time, there have been many projects to develop and beautify Los Angeles. Had Pico not moved the capital to Los Angeles, I do not think that others would have had a vested interest in Los Angeles as they do today. For whatever reason, Pico felt that Los Angeles was a better location for a capital (perhaps it being his birthplace and longtime home prompted this) and for this, we must take note.

Unfortunately, Pio Pico did not serve in office for very long. He held out against the Americans for as long as possible, fleeing California when it became apparent that the United States would be successful in its attempts to annex California. There are many that are very critical of Pico, arguing that he was a chronic drunk and gambler who hoarded land for himself and other family members. Others say that he was an amazing man responsible for many great things, including the secularization of the missions. I believe it is easy to argue one's case either way. Clearly, Pico was a man with somewhat of a controversial side. As the Mexican Era in California quickly came to a close, it is impossible to judge whether or not Pico could have accomplished anything bigger for his country. Pico is easily forgotten as having played a significant role in the development of California, partially due to the fact that California's Mexican history is easily forgotten. Alas, there are very few things to remind us of his presence in California affairs of yesteryear. El Ranchito, Pico's last remaining mansion, is one of the few proofs of the existence of Pico; even more, the mansion is one the last

standing artifacts which acknowledges that California was once part of Mexico.