

### 4.3 Historical Background: The Tustin Area, pre-1870

Prior to the Spanish colonization of California in the 18th century, the Acjachemen people (commonly known as the Juaneño) occupied the area that would come to contain the City of Tustin.<sup>22</sup> The territory of this Native American group stretched from northern San Diego County along Orange County’s central coast and inland as far as the Santa Ana Mountains. The Acjachemen/Juaneño had frequent interactions with the groups bordering its territory, including the Tongva/Gabrieliño and Payómkawichum/Luiseño. The non-indigenous names for all three groups refer specifically to their later Spanish mission affiliations – the closest mission to the Juaneño was San Juan Capistrano.

The Acjachemen/Juaneño lived a semi-sedentary lifestyle based in permanent villages of *kiicha*, round thatched huts built of willow and reeds. They also occupied more transitory seasonal camps throughout the year for gathering plant foods like acorns, as well as for fishing, harvesting shellfish, and hunting. The majority of the villages were concentrated along the outlets of lower San Juan Creek/Trabuco Canyon (near the current location of Mission San Juan Capistrano) and San Mateo Creek/Arroyo San Onofre (near today’s San Clemente).<sup>23</sup> These areas featured stable water sources along with a rich variety of both coastal and inland food sources, enabling populations of up to 300 people per village. Inland areas had a narrower range of food sources and tended to support smaller villages of under 100 people which were nonetheless closely tied with all the rest in a social and economic network. One historic source, a Franciscan scholar, noted two major groups within the Acjachemen/Juaneño: the “Playanos” who lived along the coast and the “Serranos” who lived inland, distinguished by differences in religious belief as well as economic lifeways.<sup>24</sup>

The greater Tustin area (including North Tustin as well as the City) is not known to have had any permanent villages, though the area had stable water sources including Santiago Creek and was well traversed by Acjachemen/Juaneño people. They are said to have called the prominent North Tustin landmark of Red Hill *Katuktu*, meaning “Hill of Prominence” or “Place of Refuge.”<sup>25</sup> This was a likely spot for temporary campsites due to the swampy, water-rich west side which inspired the Spanish-era names Cerrito de las Ranas (“Little Hill of the Frogs”) and Cienega de las Ranas (“Marsh of the Frogs”). In 1769, the Spanish expedition led by Captain Gaspar de Portola passed Red Hill on its way north from San Diego.

The local Acjachemen/Juaneño way of life saw a dramatic change in the 1770s with the arrival of Spanish missionaries and the founding of Mission San Juan Capistrano. The seventh of California’s 21 Franciscan missions, San Juan Capistrano was founded by Junipero Serra in 1776 and joined the 1771 Mission San Gabriel in disrupting the lifeways of local indigenous peoples. As was common throughout the Spanish mission system, Mission San Juan Capistrano had not

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<sup>22</sup> Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, “History,” accessed April 2020, <http://www.juaneno.com/history>.

<sup>23</sup> San Onofre Parks Foundation, “Native American History,” accessed May 2020, <https://sanoparks.org/native-american-history/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Native American History.”

<sup>25</sup> Carol H. Jordan, *Tustin: An Illustrated History* (Tustin: Tustin Area Historical Society, 2007), 10.

just religious conversion as its goal, but the strengthening of Spanish economic and military influence in California. It coerced the local tribes to become neophytes who would convert to Christianity, learn approved agricultural and ranching techniques, and provide free labor. The effects of mission influence upon the local native populations were devastating. Villages were abandoned as their residents were either relocated to the mission or killed by epidemics of European diseases against which they had no immunity. Although most of the local Acjachemen/Juaneño were forcibly incorporated into the mission system, some refused to give up their traditional existence and escaped into the interior regions of California.

The establishment of outposts and agricultural outholdings well beyond the mission's physical base helped San Juan Capistrano extend Spanish influence and accrue profits. It used thousands of acres of land between the mission and the coast to grow crops to feed the mission population and its animals, and to raise cattle for their valuable tallow and hides. The natural bay at what is now Dana Point served as its primary trading anchorage and thus as its link to the outside world. The mission expanded the many existing indigenous trails to establish a broad network of roads accessing all of its holdings and serving as the genesis of much of the area's current transportation system.

Although the Tustin area lay within Mission San Juan Capistrano's sizable sphere of influence, it is not known to have experienced any mission-related construction and no resources dating to this early historic time period are known to exist. It did see private land ownership relatively early in its history: in 1810, The King of Spain granted Spanish soldier José Antonio Yorba Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, comprising 62,516 acres of land which today contain the communities of Tustin, Santa Ana, Orange, Olive, El Modena, Costa Mesa, and part of Newport Beach.<sup>26</sup> The area that would become Tustin lay near the southeastern edge of the rancho.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, what is now California became a part of Mexico, and large parcels of Spanish lands saw changes in ownership and use. Land use patterns in Mexican California were predominantly defined by a system in which the government issued expansive land grants, or ranchos, to prominent, well-connected families as a means of encouraging settlement and bolstering California's lucrative hide and tallow trade. The missions, meanwhile, waned in influence and were ultimately desecularized and abandoned. In the Tustin area, the Yorba family continued to own the 1810 Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana. The Mexican Governor of Alta California granted Rancho Cienega de las Ranas to José Sepúlveda in 1837 and enlarged it to include the Rancho Bolsa de San Joaquin in 1842; together, the two ranchos formed Rancho San Joaquin. In 1846, the governor granted José Yorba's son Teodosio Yorba Rancho Lomas de Santiago. This rancho and Rancho San Joaquin both bordered the older Rancho Santiago, and Cerrito de las Ranas served as an important survey point in establishing the three ranchos' legal boundaries.

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan 2007, 13.

In 1848, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War and established California as a United States possession. It also provided for the retention of private lands by their original Mexican owners, though this provision came under swift assault after gold was discovered in 1849 and California became a state in 1850. Eager would-be landowners contested the validity of many of the area's valuable land grants, leading to years of litigation and the eventual selloff of lands to pay debts. Many of the larger ranchos were divided into smaller parcels to pay bills and settle legal disputes. In the case of Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, a disputed partition by the heirs of the Yorba family (including the family of Juan Pablo Peralta, Yorba's nephew) dragged on in the courts for twenty years.<sup>27</sup>

Between the legal fees and the repercussions of a severe two-year drought which killed off most of their cattle, the Yorba and Peralta families found themselves in dire financial straits. They began selling off portions of their holdings to Americans eager to obtain a piece. Adjacent rancho owners found themselves in the same situation, resulting in the sales of Rancho San Joaquin and Rancho Lomas de Santiago to Irish immigrant James Irvine and his partners in 1864 and 1866, respectively. In 1866, the Peralta family sold one of many tracts from Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana to Isaac Johnson and Jonathan E. Bacon; the two deeded some of their property to their attorneys as payment for legal services.<sup>28</sup> Just two years later, Johnson and Bacon sold the rest of the land to Nelson O. Stafford and entrepreneur and Tustin namesake Columbus Tustin.



Columbus Tustin, ca. 1870. Tustin Area Historical Society.

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<sup>27</sup> Jordan 2007, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

Columbus Tustin, born in Pennsylvania in 1826, was part of a westward-moving family of 11 that emigrated to Illinois, then Oregon, Sacramento, and finally Petaluma, California.<sup>29</sup> He stayed in Petaluma as an adult, marrying Mary Cleveland in 1855 and raising a family. Tustin pursued a variety of business interests, including farming, investing in mining operations, and building carriages. It was in that last line of work that he met Nelson O. Stafford, a Vermont-born carriage maker, blacksmith, and aspiring real estate investor. In 1868, Stafford and Tustin journeyed south and partnered to purchase Bacon and Johnson's "undivided 1/64<sup>th</sup>" of Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, some 1,360 acres for a total of \$2,500 each.<sup>30</sup> They returned to Petaluma as owners of the land that would become Tustin, albeit as owners awaiting the final results of the rancho's protracted legal battles.

When the legal dust settled later in 1868, Stafford and Tustin were recognized as the official owners of their 1,360 acres; they proceeded to partition the parcel into 520 acres for Stafford and another business partner, John Fritsch, and 840 acres for Tustin, who paid Stafford \$400 for the extra acreage.<sup>31</sup> The stage was now set for a city to (eventually) arise.

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<sup>29</sup> Jordan 2007, 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*