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HIST 109 Friday

Historical Interpretations

11/2/12

Cabrillo National Monument

Sprawling across Point Loma on quite possibly one of the most beautiful areas of San Diego that I have seen, lays the Cabrillo National Monument. This area was designated for a National Monument in October of 1913, but a statue was not installed until 1939. The area was also designated as a California Historical Landmark in 1932, and was added to the National Register of Historic Places and became a national park site in 1966. The Cabrillo National Park site has four areas of interest: the old Point Loma lighthouse, the tide pools, the World War II era military installations known as the Coastal Defense of Fort Rosecrans, and the Cabrillo statue and museum. However, on your way down Cabrillo Memorial Road to the park site, you cannot help but notice the modern military installations along the way, and you cannot ignore the vast expanse of gravesites that is Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. On my way out of the park, I made the effort to stop for 15 minutes and just take in the green grassy cliff side that was marked with white gravestone, one after the other, after the other, as the sun gleamed down upon the Pacific just beyond the graves. Military veterans from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom are interred here, many of whom died in combat.

Nearby Ballast Point in the San Diego Bay is where Captain Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo of the Spanish Armada became the first European to set foot on what is now the west coast of the United States in 1542, in what is now the city of San Diego. In addition to being the first landing

site by Europeans, the Cabrillo park site was an extension of Fort Rosecrans. The current military installation north of the park is now known as the U.S. Navy Submarine Base - Point Loma. Coastal defense was a priority for the U.S. Military after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by the Japanese, which some historians argue was the breaking point for the United States in jumping into the war. I checked out the Radio Control room that had been converted into a military history exhibit. The exhibit maintains that life in San Diego after the attack on Pearl Harbor was a scary time, with the military on high alert, and citizens staying indoors at night listening to the radio for news updates. Also in the small room were the original telescopes and radio equipment used by the military, and the shell of one of the bombs that would have been used to fire at enemy ships.

Also on the site is the Old Point Loma Lighthouse, a fixture of San Diego scenery since 1855. Lighthouses in our modern times are almost completely out of use, as maritime technology has advanced leaps and bounds in the areas of navigation and tracking ships. The Old Point Loma Lighthouse served as a way to guide approaching ships around the point and into the bay. It was in service until 1891, when a new lighthouse was built at a lower elevation, and less susceptible to the fog. I found the Lighthouse exhibit to be the most fascinating. The living quarters carefully recreated the scene from the late 1800s period, including canned goods in the kitchen, a bible on the end table in the living room, playing cards on the kitchen table, and dolls and toys in the children's room. The nearby Assistant's quarters now serves as a museum exhibit for lighthouse technology. Also, the lens from the "New Point Loma Lighthouse" was placed on permanent display here when the Coast Guard removed it from the corroding tower in 2002. According to the exhibits, life for Captain Israel, the lighthouse's first keeper, and his family,

and the assistant, was normal for its time. The exhibit states that Mrs. Israel was always in the kitchen, and on most afternoons, the Captain would be playing cards on the kitchen table. The children – Israel’s two sons and his niece – would play guitar and banjo in their room and read. Later the lighthouse was used as a snack shop for soldiers during the coastal defense time of World War II.

The monument and museum was next on my visit. The monument was a beautifully carved statue overlooking the San Diego Bay. A plaque commemorating the 1542 landing is also there. The museum was probably my least favorite portion of the exhibit. While the map of the Spanish conquest and the detailed drawing of what a typical ship would have been was interesting, the exhibit seemed to portray the Spaniards in a more favorable light, while the native peoples of the area were portrayed in a negative light. Much was written about Cabrillo and the Spanish conquest of the native peoples in spreading Roman Catholicism. A small picture of Bartolome de las Casas was actually featured in the exhibit, which caught me by surprise. Then again, it was small enough to miss at first glance. Bartolome, the Spanish priest who spoke out against the ill treatment of natives by the Spanish conquistadores was recognized as a saint by the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches after his death. The natives were represented a corner of the museum, with a grass hut replica, and a sign stating that “Indians today use blenders and other modern appliances to grind corn to make maize.” To me, that was a jab at the Native Americans. It’s already enough to know that these people were forced into assimilation and forced to take on the religion and culture of the Spaniards, but to throw that statement in there is just the icing on the cake. It’s an obvious favorable slant towards the Spaniards.

Overall, I enjoyed my visit to the Cabrillo park site. I was definitely more interested in the military installations and the lighthouse. I think my disinterest in the Cabrillo monument itself and the museum are from what I know in our lessons in class about the cruel treatment of the natives by the Spanish who landed here on the west coast. As a person of Native American heritage, memorializing the utter takeover and destruction of Native culture is not only uncalled for, it is clearly one sided. However, also being of European heritage, I can see the purpose of memorializing the 1542 landing. But the museum itself was definitely cheering on the mission of the Spaniards. I would have like to have seen more about the native peoples represented instead of grass huts and maze. But the scenery and amazing ocean views definitely overshadowed the museum's bias, and made for a great afternoon.