

Field Guide to Coronado History: The Marine Mayor

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By Bruce Linder

Many communities would consider it an oddity that a retired Marine major general would rise to become their mayor. In Coronado, such an event is not a peculiarity at all but a badge of honor – and a pleasant reflection on the city’s extensive Navy and Marine Corps heritage.

Major General Joseph Henry Pendleton (June 2, 1860 – February 4, 1942) wasn’t just any Marine Corps general. He was the single individual most responsible for first bringing Marines in large numbers to San Diego and Coronado and establishing their enduring footprint here. Surprisingly, there are more active duty Marines stationed in San Diego County today than navymen.

And, yes, our mayor is the namesake for San Diego’s well-known Camp Pendleton.



Pendleton was an 1882 graduate of the Naval Academy, had duty in the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and was in command of expeditionary Marines during campaigns in Nicaragua before coming to Coronado.

His unique association with Coronado began in 1914 with command of the Fourth Regiment of Marines. The Fourth Marines had first been sent to Coronado briefly in 1911 at what was called Camp Thomas. Under Pendleton’s command, the Fourth Regiment returned to North Island and established a new and larger

encampment, Camp Howard, along the shores of Spanish Bight.

Pendleton, affectionately known as “Uncle Joe” to his troops, quickly became the “face” of Marines in California. He masterminded the Marine Corps’ very public involvement with both the San Francisco and San Diego Panama expositions; he spoke at civic events around the state and commanded San Diego’s Marine Barracks.

In early 1916, Colonel Pendleton and his wife, Mary Helen, bought an undeveloped lot at 745 A Avenue and moved a house to the property. He added a large veranda or piazza to the home in 1922 after a costly house fire and gave the home the name “Penhaven.”

When the United States occupied the Dominican Republic in 1916 to restore order, it called upon Pendleton to command all Marines ashore and promoted him to Brigadier General. Pendleton ultimately served as Military Governor in Santo Domingo.

Pendleton later commanded the Second Advanced Base Force at San Diego, the Department of the Pacific at San Francisco and the Fifth Marine Brigade while being promoted to Major General.

With his retirement in June 1924, at the age of 64, the Pendletons returned to Penhaven where Uncle Joe became active in Coronado community affairs including serving on the School Board and as President of the Coronado Civic Club (a then-powerful voice in city politics).

In June 1928 Pendleton was elected Coronado’s mayor by a vote of the city council upon the sudden illness of the incumbent. One of his first votes involved not a major issue of politics or finance but the purchase of a new police motorcycle to replace a machine that had been taken on an unauthorized run down the Strand. “When 96 mph had been attained,” Council minutes record, “the machine froze up.” The price approved for the new motorcycle, \$465.

More seriously, Mayor Pendleton took strong advocacy positions for a tunnel under the bay to Coronado (instead of a bridge), for a new beach state park at the southern end of the Silver Strand, and for more shade trees along city streets. He also led the charge in the sometimes-bitter disputes between San Diego and Coronado.

Fondly remembered for his easy-going but correct manner, for his stirring patriotism, for dinner parties at Penhaven and balls at the Hotel Del, Pendleton graciously declined to run for reelection. After leaving office, the City Council thanked him warmly for his “efficiency and impartiality,” and, ultimately, authorized the naming of Coronado’s Pendleton Road in the General’s honor.

Major General Joseph Pendleton died quietly at Penhaven in February 1942 at age 81.

One particular moment involving the mayor was later remembered by a reporter. It provides an interesting window into the thinking of a good-natured and optimistic man who stood at the unusual nexus of small town mayor and commanding general. “The air was full of planes Monday,” Mayor Pendleton offhandedly mentioned to the reporter. “They were flying all around us while the Council was in session and a couple of times we had to pause so we could hear what was going on. But we don’t mind, they are music to our ears.”

That tiny quote also reminds us that some things never seem to change in Coronado.

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