

Context: Native American Settlement to 1969



Francisco Patencio outside the roundhouse, c. 1940. Source: Palm Springs Historical Society.

FINAL DRAFT – FOR CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL

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Citywide Historic Context Statement & Survey Findings

HISTORIC RESOURCES GROUP

CONTEXT: NATIVE AMERICAN SETTLEMENT TO 1969²³

The earliest inhabitants of the Coachella Valley are the Native people known ethnohistorically as the Cahuilla Indians. The Cahuilla territory includes the areas from the San Jacinto Mountains, the San Gorgonia Pass, and the desert regions reaching east to the Colorado River. The Cahuilla language is part of the Takic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family and all the Cahuilla groups speak a mutually intelligible despite different dialects. The Cahuilla group that inhabited the Palm Springs area are known as the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. The Cahuilla name for the area that is now Palm Springs is *Sec-he*, “boiling water,” named for the hot springs located in what is currently the center of the Palm Springs business district. The springs have always provided clean water, bathing, and a connection to the spiritual world, and were used for ceremonial and healing purposes.²⁴

The Cahuilla people refer to themselves as *’ivi’lyu’atum* and are ethnographically divided into two patrilineal moieties: the Wildcats and the Coyotes. Each moiety was further divided into clans which are made up of lineages. Lineages had their own territory and hunting rights within a larger clan territory. There are a number of lineages in the Palm Springs area, which each have religious and political autonomy.

Prior to European contact, Cahuilla communities established summer settlements in the palm-lined mountain canyons around the Coachella valley; oral histories and archaeological evidence indicates that they settled in the Tahquitz Canyon at least 5,000 years ago.²⁵ The Cahuilla moved each winter to thatched shelters clustered around the natural mineral hot springs on the valley floor.²⁶ The Desert Fan Palm, *máwul*, is native to California, the only native palm tree in North America, and the only palm tree to retain its dried fronds throughout its life, creating a skirt-like appearance around the trunk. The Cahuilla used the leaves of the palm trees that grew around the around the springs to weave baskets, sandals, and thatch roofing.²⁷ They hunted some game but subsisted primarily on gathered local food plants including the fruit and seeds of the Desert fan palm, acorns, mesquite beans, seeds, wild fruit, agave, and yucca, and had an extensive trading system with neighboring tribes.²⁸

²³ The history of the Cahuilla in the Coachella Valley is critical to the development of Palm Springs and is included here as a separate context, primarily to provide background about this important component of the area’s history. There is one known built resource from the historic period that is significant for its association with the Cahuilla: the Tahquitz Ditch, remnants of which can be found on various properties. This overview history is included to inform the context statement; this narrative is by no means the inclusive story of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, or their importance to the region. For more information about the history of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, please see <http://www.aguacaliente.org/content/History%20&%20Culture/>.

²⁴ Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, “Cultural History,” *Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, A Sovereign Tribal Government*, <http://www.aguacaliente.org/content/History%20&%20Culture/> (accessed January 9, 2015).

²⁵ Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, “Cultural History.”

²⁶ City of Palm Springs, “History,” *City of Palm Springs*, <http://www.palmspringsca.gov/city-services/history> (accessed January 9, 2015).

²⁷ C. Michael Hogan, PhD, “California Fan Palm, *Washingtonia filifera*,” *iGoTerra*, http://www.igoterra.com/artspec_information.asp?thingid=90942 (accessed January 9, 2015).

²⁸ Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, “Cultural History.”

The Cahuilla lived far enough inland to avoid early contact with Spanish explorers and colonists. Gaspar de Portolà led the first European land expedition into Alta California in 1769-70, traveling with Franciscan missionaries headed by Father Junipero Serra to establish the first of California's missions, San Diego de Alcalá and San Carlos Borromeo, and the presidio of Monterey. In 1776 Juan Bautista de Anza led the first overland colonizing expedition of 30 families, totaling approximately 240 men, women, and children, from the Tubac Presidio in what is now Arizona to found a settlement at San Francisco Bay.²⁹ Both expeditions bypassed the Coachella Valley: Portolà followed close to the coast, and de Anza passed to the west of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains. As a result, the Cahuilla of Sec-he were left largely to themselves until the mid-19th century. Between 1823 and 1826, Captain José Romero established an overland route from California to Mexico. He encountered the hot spring at Sec-he and named it *Agua Caliente*, "hot water," from which the local band of Cahuilla takes its name.³⁰ The Cahuilla constructed the Tahquitz Ditch, a stone-lined canal that carried water for crops and human consumption from the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon to the village at Sec-he, possibly as early as the 1830s.³¹

In 1852, the Treaty of Temecula between the United States government and Cahuilla leaders set aside lands for the occupation of Cahuilla, Luiseño, and Serrano Indian tribes. Unbeknownst to the Indians, the treaty was never ratified.³² In the 1860s the Bradshaw stagecoach line began to cross the desert from Banning to the Arizona territories, stopping at the oasis of palm trees and hot springs.³³ In 1876 the Southern Pacific Railroad completed its line through the desert to Los Angeles, dividing the land for ten miles to either side of the tracks into a checkerboard of one-mile-square sections allotted alternately to the railroad and the federal government. On May 15, 1876 President Ulysses S. Grant issued an Executive Order setting aside Section 14 and a portion of Section 22, including Tahquitz Canyon, as the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation.³⁴ In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes expanded the reservation's boundaries, granting the area's odd-numbered square mile parcels for ten miles on either side of the tracks that run through the desert around Palm Springs to Southern Pacific Railroad and holding the even-numbered parcels in trust for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.³⁵

Early Palm Springs settlers, such as Judge John Guthrie McCallum, purchased land from the Southern Pacific. However, federal law prohibited the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians from selling the

²⁹ National Park Service, "The Story of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail," *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/juba/historyculture/index.htm> (accessed January 12, 2015).

³⁰ Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, "Since Time Immemorial," <http://www.accmuseum.org/Since-Time-Immemorial> (accessed May 6, 2015).

³¹ Steve Vaught, *Sentinels in Stone: Palm Springs' Historic Tennis Club Neighborhood and its Iconic Walls* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, 2015), 7.

³² Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, "Since Time Immemorial."

³³ Lynn J. Rogers, "Pioneer Courage Built Desert Center," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1939, E2, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed September 25, 2012).

³⁴ Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, "Cultural History."

³⁵ Sheila Grattan, "The Woman Leads," *Palm Springs Life*, March 2013.

land or leasing it for income. This resulted in the “checkerboard” pattern of land in Palm Springs where development was either permitted or prohibited. The reservation today occupies 32,000 acres; of these 6,700 acres lie within the city limits, making the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians the city's largest landowner.³⁶

In 1891, Congress passed the Mission Indian Relief Act. This authorized the Secretary of the Interior to make individual allotments from reservation lands. However, it wasn't until the tribe took their case to the U.S. Supreme Court (*Lee Arenas v. United States*, 1944), that they would win the legal right to have allotments approved. The success was short-lived, however, due to the need for equalization of allotments and federal laws denoting the length of leases on Indian lands.³⁷ There are currently ten distinct Cahuilla Reservations, more than any other federally-recognized Indian tribe in California.

In 1887, Welwood Murray constructed the first hotel in Palm Springs near the Agua Caliente hot spring on land leased from the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. Individuals suffering from pulmonary and tubercular conditions were drawn to the desert and the hot spring in the hope of curing their ailments. A simple bathhouse was also constructed on the site.³⁸ In the 1910s, leaders of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians demolished the rustic bathhouse located over the spring and constructed a new one in an effort to promote health-focused tourism and to generate tribal income.³⁹ In the early 1930s, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians constructed another new bathhouse in response to Palm Springs' increasing popularity with health seekers and the Hollywood film industry.⁴⁰ In 1957, the third bathhouse was demolished in preparation for the construction of the Spa Hotel and Bathhouse, completed in 1963 (100 N. Indian Canyon Drive; demolished). Built on reservation land, it was the first long-term Indian land lease in the country.

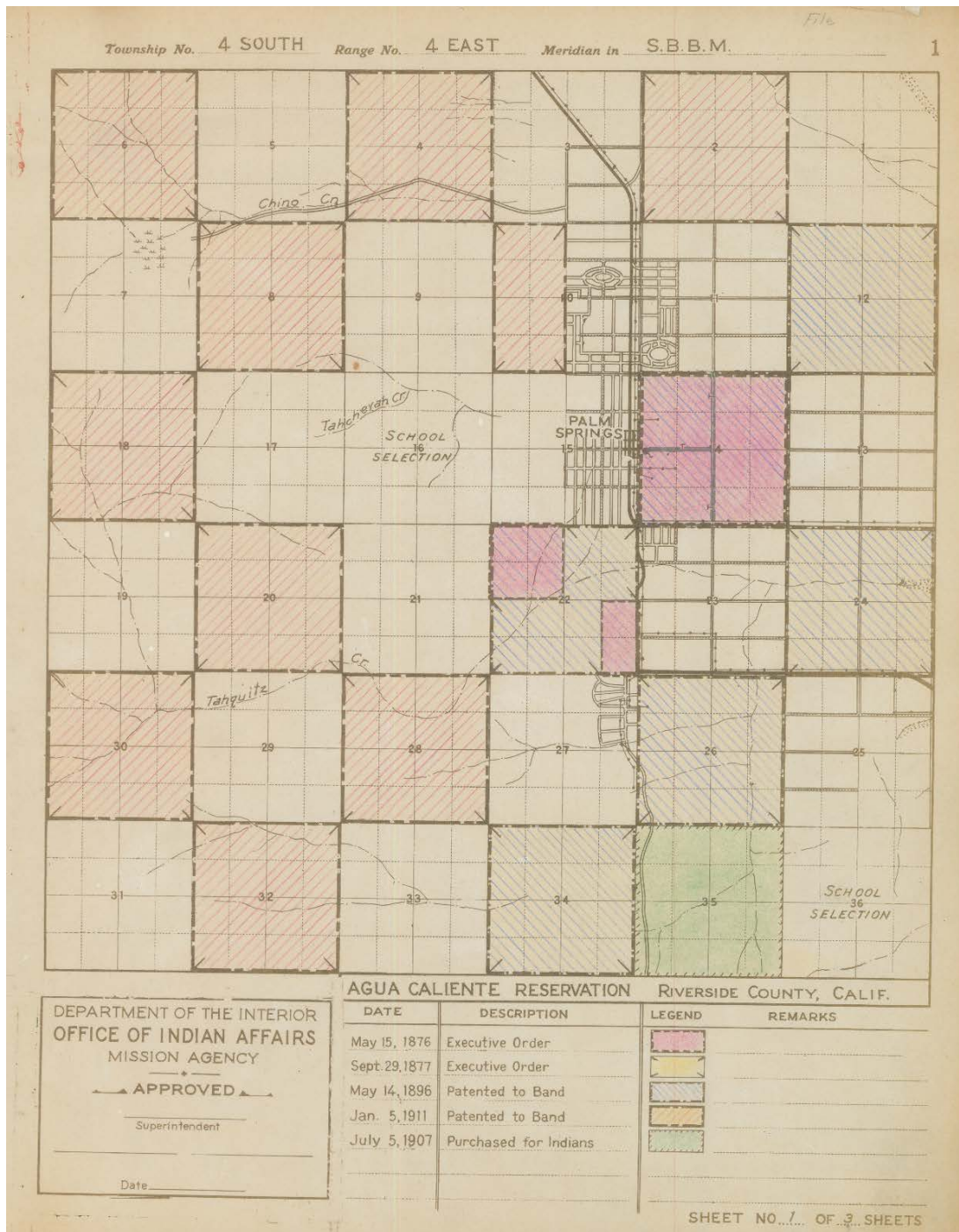
³⁶ “Palm Springs,” Los Angeles Public Library.

³⁷ These land struggles of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians came to an end when President Eisenhower signed the Equalization Law in 1959. The tribe and tribe members (allottees) could now realize profits from their lands and developed the ninety-nine-year lease.

³⁸ Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, “Since Time Immemorial.”

³⁹ Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, “Since Time Immemorial.”

⁴⁰ Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, “Since Time Immemorial.”



Map depicting a portion of the Agua Caliente Reservation in Riverside County, California, c. 1910. Source: National Archives, Record Group 75: Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Maps and Plats, ca. 1909 – ca. 1950.

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In 1951, after the death of their last ceremonial leader, Albert Patencio, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians decided to burn and not rebuild the ceremonial roundhouse (located at what is now the intersection of Arenas and Calle Alvarado), formally making a break with traditional life.⁴¹ In 1962, City of Palm Springs Resolution No. 6781 requested cooperation between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Association of Conservators and Guardians to clear lots on Indian-owned land in Section 14 for speedy re-development, frequently without informing all affected parties, including Indian landowners and Section 14's low-income residents. The demolition of Section 14 was described in a later California Department of Justice report as "a city engineered holocaust." In response, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians filed a lawsuit against the City of Palm Springs to resolve the question of who had jurisdiction over zoning of Indian lands. In 1975, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized that Indian tribes retain "attributes of sovereignty over both their members and their territory" (*United States v. Mazurie*, 1975).⁴²

NATIVE AMERICAN SETTLEMENT TO 1969: ELIGIBILITY

Today, reminders of the traditional Cahuilla society exist in the canyons, such as rock art, house pits and foundations, irrigation ditches, dams, reservoirs, trails, and food preparation areas.⁴³ Many of Palm Springs' streets are named after notable members of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, including Ramon Road, Patencio Road, and Amado Road. Archaeological artifacts discovered from this period are likely to yield information about the life and culture of the Cahuilla and neighboring Native American cultures. There are two National Register Archaeological Districts in Palm Springs, on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, that document the cultural significance of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and their importance to the history of the city. The study of archaeological resources is outside the scope of this project.

⁴¹ Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, "Since Time Immemorial."

⁴² Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, "Cultural History."

⁴³ Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, "Cultural History."

