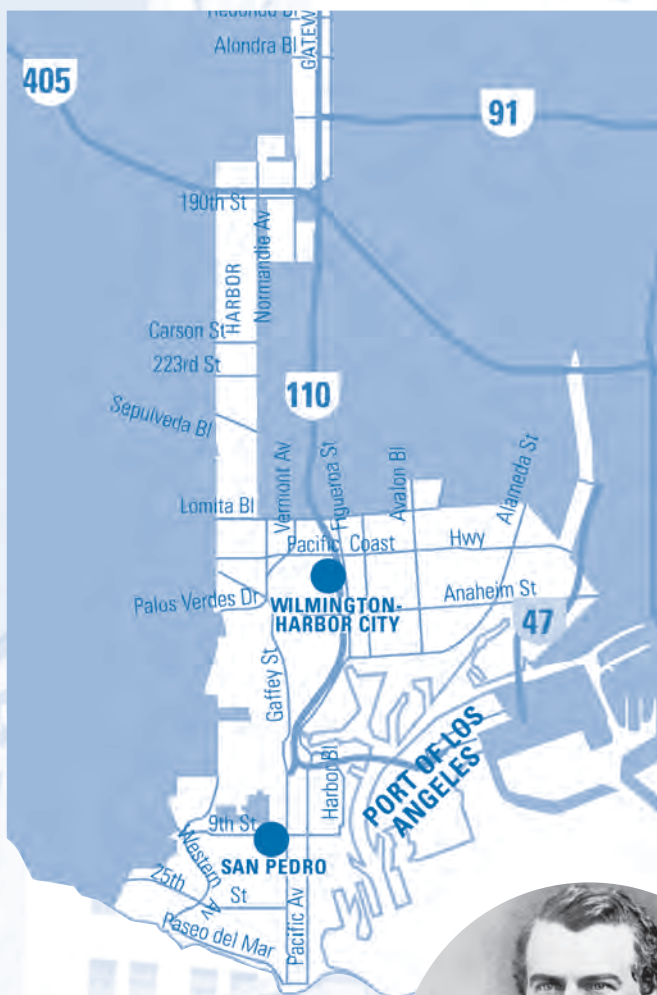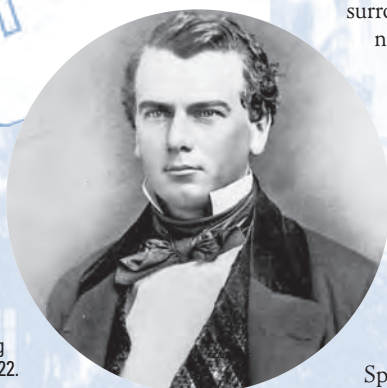# Annexing the Port Cities

Panoramic view of the Los Angeles Harbor at San Pedro in January 1906. In the foreground is the Pacific Electric Railway track, with the Southern Pacific Railroad boxcars to the rear. Various ships are seen beyond.

■ **Here's the story of how Wilmington and San Pedro were the first independent cities to be annexed into Los Angeles.**

Phineas Banning at age 22.

Photos courtesy Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Carolyn Cole, director; and the Port of Los Angeles.

In 1909, the first independent cities were annexed into the City of Los Angeles. They were Wilmington and San Pedro. Today it seems incredible to think why the City found the need to annex those two cities, so long ago, about 30 miles away. But there were reasons: The truth of the matter is that the burgeoning railroads were making a huge impact on the entire country. Along with that, San Pedro had the Pacific Ocean as its neighbor, which would be another gateway, not only to our nation, but to the entire world as a port.

In 1869, the first railroad system in the City of Los Angeles became a reality. It covered a 21-mile stretch from San Pedro to the City of Los Angeles.

By 1876, it gained connection to the newly connected Central Pacific and San Francisco rail system. Nine years later it joined with the Southern California Railroad. This system, known as the Central Pacific Railroad, made a huge impact on Los Angeles flooding the area with new migrants.

But before we move forward, it is important to understand the beginnings of the territory called Wilmington and San Pedro. In 1542, a Portuguese explorer, Juan Rodriguez, sailing under the flag of Spain, was known to be the first European to set foot on what would become American soil. Rodriguez sailed into what would become Rancho San Pedro. As he approached the area, he saw wildfires in the surrounding hills, producing dark plumes of smoke. He named it "Bay of Smokes," from a Spanish equivalent. The name lasted for 50 years until another explorer changed the name to the "Bay of Saint Andrew." This explorer named it for the saint whose feast day was celebrated that day. But his information was incorrect. Later, another explorer in 1734, discovered the error in the name that should have been "Saint Peter." The translation of that name became San Pedro for the martyred bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, in the fourth century.

Wilmington was originally part of the 1754 Spanish land grant of Rancho San Pedro. It was located at the site of a wharf then known as "Banning's

Landing." It was built by Phineas Banning. In 1863, the name was changed to Wilmington in honor of Banning's birthplace, Wilmington, Delaware.

Settlements in San Pedro began in 1769 under Spain. Those colonies became one of California's means to populate the future state. Trade restrictions were encouraged, but smuggling seemed to be the name of the game. When Mexico won its independence, the trade restrictions were abolished. After that, the town of San Pedro flourished.

Mexican governor Fages presented the first private land grant in Southern California to Juan Jose Dominquez in 1784. This allowed Dominquez, the member of the 1769 Spanish Portola Expedition, to graze his cattle on the 75,000-acre Rancho San Pedro. Rancho San Pedro extended from Compton to Redondo Beach to Long Beach. It also included Palos Verdes Peninsula and, of course, San Pedro.

At about the same time, Juan Capistrano Sepulveda and Jose Loreto Sepulveda, the two eldest sons of Don Jose Sepulveda, were granted a judicial decree by Gov. Jose Figueroa of 31,600 acres of Rancho San Pedro, which included the town of San Pedro. This grant was intended to settle the dispute between the Sepulveda and Dominquez families.

By 1835, San Pedro became the most important port on the Pacific coast. But the shoreline had shallow water and mud flats, causing problems. Ships ended up having to drop anchor about a mile off shore; small boats would transfer cargo and passengers to the shoreline. Often the small boats would capsize, and both passengers and cargo would land in the muddy water. During this period, the Sepulvedas built a crude dock landing near Fourteenth and Beacon Streets in San Pedro. It became known as Sepulveda Landing. Two other landing places at that time were "Deadman's Island," later dredged to become part of the current breakwater, and "Rattlesnake Island," which later became Terminal Island.

Phineas Banning, at the age of 21, arrived in San Pedro from Philadelphia in 1851. With his partner, George Alexander, they operated a stagecoach business. A year later, August Timms purchased Sepulveda Landing, then known as Timms Landing. This concerned Banning because the federal government was planning to declare San Pedro as an official port of entry with its own customhouse. Therefore, Banning negotiated with the Sepulvedas

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives

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to purchase a tract of land near Timms Landing, where he built his own wharf. In 1854, Banning, with a group of investors -- John G. Downey; Don Benito (Benjamin) Wilson, former Mayor of the City of Los Angeles; and William Sanford -- purchased 2,400 acres adjacent to San Pedro for port expansion. This land later became known as the city of Wilmington, Banning's birthplace.

In the late 1860s, Banning realized that, for San Pedro Harbor to become a center of commerce, three things needed to be accomplished: (1) build a railroad; (2) construct a breakwater; and (3) dredge the harbor to accommodate large ships and allow them to dock at the wharfs. By October 1869, Southern California had its first railroad, known as the Los Angeles and San Pedro Railroad. This was Banning's rail system. In 1872, the Southern Pacific Railroad purchased this first Southern California rail system. Southern California was now a part of the "iron-horse movement" throughout the nation. The railroads changed the course of the American lifestyle, and Los Angeles would soon become a major player on the national scene. The prior year, Congress voted an appropriation to build a rock jetty from the lower end of Rattlesnake Island to Deadman's Island.

In 1875, competition was transforming the San Pedro port. In Santa Monica a railroad was built to Los Angeles; it was called the Los Angeles and Independence Railroad.

Along with the rail system, a 1,700-foot wharf was constructed. Two years later, the Southern Pacific reduced its rates and drove the Santa Monica rail system to ruin. Two more competitors arose, competing with San Pedro. The Santa Fe Railroad constructed a wharf at Redondo Beach, and shipped lumber from there. On April 13, 1892, the Dominquez family sold Rattlesnake Island to a competing railroad, the Los Angeles and Terminal Island Railroad Company. The name was changed by the new owners to Terminal Island because a terminus to the rail system was established there. Phineas Banning died in 1882, but his vision of making San Pedro a major port of entry to this nation would be realized in the near future.

In 1891, a survey was commissioned for the location and the building of a deep-water port

for Southern California. The survey recommended San Pedro as the site.

Collis P. Huntington, then the head of the Southern Pacific Railroad, began a vigorous lobbying campaign to give Santa Monica Bay the harbor development. By 1893, Santa Monica with a Southern Pacific Railroad extension and a wharf was in full operation.

In 1896, a bill from Congress was approved to fund a breakwater in Santa Monica. But an amendment was passed to the bill, calling for a new commission to review the best location for a deep-water port. *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harrison Gray Otis and U.S. Senator Stephen White pushed for federal support of the Port of Los Angeles at San Pedro Bay. The matter came to a head and was settled and endorsed in 1897, by a commission headed by Rear Admiral John C. Walker. Finally in 1898, San Pedro was selected to be the Port of Los Angeles. In 1888, the War Department took control of an adjacent tract of land and added to it in 1897 and 1910. Many other facilities were established in the port area. For example, it was a

popular port of call for U.S. Navy ships. Other extensions brought the breakwater to a length of nine miles, with a 2,100-foot entrance.

The City of Los Angeles was anxious to control the development of improvements and operation of the Port of San Pedro and Wilmington. However, there was a problem. The City could not annex either site because there was no contiguous land connecting Los Angeles to these Southern cities. So, in 1906, the City purchased a long narrow strip of land, a half-mile wide, from Slauson Avenue connecting the City of Los Angeles to Wilmington and San Pedro. This strip of land is now known as the Harbor Gateway.

During the campaigning for approval of the annexation by the citizens of the two smaller cities, Los Angeles agreed to make at least $10 million on harbor improvements within ten years. Finally, in 1909, both Wilmington and San Pedro became communities within the City of Los Angeles. On Dec. 9, 1907, the Los Angeles City Council created the Los Angeles Board of Harbor Commissioners, indicating the official founding of the Port of Los Angeles.

View of San Pedro in 1882. Railroad tracks run along the docks. Lumber is stacked onto railroad cars parked on the docks.

Wilmington Warehouses, 1936.
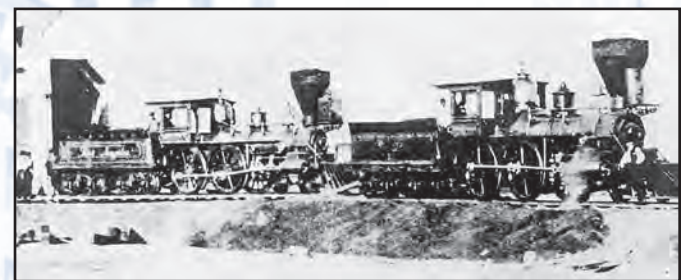
A locomotive of Banning's train, the Los Angeles and San Pedro Railroad, 1869.

Fish Harbor, 1948.