

The Gabrielino-Tongva People in and Near Culver City

If there is a single location in and near Culver City that represents the Gabrielino-Tongva people, it is what we now call Ballona Creek, as well as the banks of the creek and the wetlands. For thousands of years, until 1839, both the creek and a nearby village were known as Guashna.

The Gabrielino-Tongva, the First Peoples of Culver City, have resided in the area since time immemorial, enduring and thriving in their ancestral homeland.

The Gabrielino-Tongva ancestral territory encompasses a vast expanse, extending north to Topanga, reaching to the southern banks of Aliso Viejo Creek, eastward into Riverside and San Bernardino and west to the Channel Islands of Santa Barbara, Santa Catalina, San Clemente and San Nicolas.

Culver City reaches into the Tongva village site of Guashna. During the Spanish Colonial Mission period (1769-1833), the Tongva people were forcibly removed from Guashna and placed 22 miles northeast to reside at the Mission San Gabriel. There, they were subjected to Spanish assimilation, no longer allowed to practice their Tongva culture and lifestyle.

This process involved re-naming the tribe to be “Gabrielino,” separating families, eliminating their customary diet, attire, and language, and prohibiting the practice of their ceremonies. Their forced labor created a financially thriving business for the Mission.

By 1818, all of the Tongva had been completely removed from Guashna. During recent land developments, numerous large burials were discovered and dated to the Mission period. Many of the deaths were due to European disease the Spaniards had inadvertently brought during first contact.

To encourage land development, Spain claimed the area, and subsequently issued grants, giving Guashna to the Machado family. By the time the Mission system failed, the Tongva became displaced, and could not return to Guashna for sustainability. The Mission experience transformed the Tongva from completely self-reliant, to dependents of the colonizers.

In 1839, while under Mexican rule, Guashna would be renamed Rancho La Ballona. In 1917, Henry Culver purchased and developed the land we now know as Culver City.

Today, five Gabrielino-Tongva bands are recognized by the [California Native American Heritage Commission](#) (NAHC), a nine-member body whose members are appointed by the Governor. The recognized tribal bands are: Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California, San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians Gabrieleño/Tongva, Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, Gabrielino-Tongva Tribe, and the Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians—Kizh Nation.

Of the five Gabrielino tribes, the Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Band are the direct lineal descendants of Guashna, as reflected in Mission records. They maintain an active presence in the preservation of the land.

The Tongva did not have a written language but rather a sophisticated process of passing down oral literature memorized word for word by bards and storytellers in the Tongva language.

Settlements were on the bluff tops overlooking Ballona and at the base of the bluff and lagoon edge. The Tongva at Ballona had a diverse diet of lagoon fish, sharks, rays, small mammals, seeds, shellfish, waterfowl, berries, native grasses and other plants. Food was processed with scrapers and ground stone near the lagoon edge. Large hearths were erected at the top of the bluffs for cooking.

The Ballona Tongva were a seafaring people who constructed redwood plank canoes (ti'ats) lined with asphaltum. These ti'ats were utilized for ocean fishing (using shellfish hooks) and trade along the coast and to the islands of Catalina, San Clemente, Santa Barbara, and San Nicolas. Guashna was also the site of bead production, which was used in trade. Some traded items coming into Guashna were soapstone (steatite) from Catalina and obsidian from as far away as the Eastern Sierras.

Ocre, a reddish-brown clay, was used as sunscreen. Women crafted their clothing from grasses and sea-otter pelts, and their hair was parted in the center with bangs. Wood or bone hairpins were used to secure both women's and men's hair back during various tasks. The importance of cleanliness was part of the Tongva culture and daily bathing before dawn was customary.

The Tongva people are widely known for their exceptional basketry skills. Basket water bottles were lined with asphaltum which made them water tight.

Presently, the Tongva community is actively engaged in the cultural revitalization of their language, botanical cultivation, basketry, and ti'at building.

Memorials for the Tongva burials can be found at Loyola Marymount University and Discovery Park.

In 2021 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors commissioned a lengthy report that its Native American authors titled ["We Are Still Here," a "Report on Past, Present and Ongoing Harms Against Local Tribes."](#)

"First Peoples are a vital part of the Greater Los Angeles County community today and into the future," the authors state. "Local tribes are still here, and they have not left their ancestral lands despite centuries of harm and systemic oppression.

"Harms continue to stem from land theft and seizure. Harms can not be discussed only as part of history." The report organizes the ongoing harms into the categories of "Cultural Knowledge Denied," "Continued Denial of Identity," Continued Denial of Existence," and "Erasure Through Terminology and Word Choice."

The report's authors continue: "Throughout the 1800s, the U.S. was on a mission to eradicate Native American Tribes. Between 1851 and 1852, the U.S. Government Treaty Commissioners signed what would become known as the '18 lost treaties.' The treaties set aside 8.5 million acres in California for Indian reservations and pledged to compensate Tribes for ceded land. Much of the land set aside was highly sought after by white settlers, and after increased pressure from California representatives, the U.S. Congress never ratified the treaties, and they were forgotten.

"These centuries of displacement, enslavement, incarceration, and genocide from successive waves of settlers—the Spanish, the Mexicans, and then Americans— mean that most local Tribes don't hold the present-day titles to their ancestral lands."

In 2024 the Culver City City Council adopted a Land Acknowledgement that the mayor reads at the beginning of each city council meeting.

Culver City Land Acknowledgement

The City of Culver City formally acknowledges that the land we inhabit today is the ancestral land of Indigenous peoples who have lived here for millennia. The tribes who have historically inhabited, and

continue to inhabit, this region include the Gabrieleño Band of Mission Indians - Kizh Nation, the Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California, the Gabrielino Tongva/San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, and the Gabrielino Tongva Tribe.

This region holds profound historical and cultural significance for these tribes, who called it home long before the arrival of settlers.

The City of Culver City honors the Gabrieleño people—past, present, and future—and recognizes their enduring connection to this land as its original caretakers. We are committed to supporting and uplifting the Gabrieleño people and to fostering a deeper understanding of the histories and identities of all Indigenous peoples in this region. We encourage all residents and visitors to join us in respecting and caring for this land. The City affirms its support for the rights of these Indigenous communities and for the preservation of their cultural legacies.

For more information

[Ballona Discovery Park](https://ballonadiscoverypark.org/) <https://ballonadiscoverypark.org/>

[Native American Heritage Foundation](https://nahc.ca.gov/) <https://nahc.ca.gov/>

[Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Council](https://www.gtioc.org) <https://www.gtioc.org>

[Gabrileno-affiliated tribes](https://nahc.ca.gov/cp/p14tongva/) <https://nahc.ca.gov/cp/p14tongva/>

[Gabrielino Tongva history](https://nahc.ca.gov/cp/tribal-atlas-pages/gabrielino-tongva-nation/) <https://nahc.ca.gov/cp/tribal-atlas-pages/gabrielino-tongva-nation/>

[“We Are Still Here,” a “Report on Past, Present and Ongoing Harms Against Local Tribes.”](#)