

The Gabrielino/Tongva Indians of California
Tribal History
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The Gabrielino/Tongva Indians of California are the indigenous people of the entire Los Angeles Basin. Their traditional tribal territory encompasses the L.A. basin, with tribal boundaries extending from the Santa Susana Mountains to the east (San Bernardino County), the Pacific Ocean to the west, Laguna Niguel to the south, and Topanga Creek to the north. Other parts of their territory include the Channel Islands of Santa Catalina, San Nicolas, San Clemente, and Santa Barbara.

Gabrielino is the name given to the California Mission Indians by the Spanish Monks who, with the Tongva's help as slaves, established the Missions of California. They were named after the mission that they built, Mission San Gabriel. But long before any European contact, the Tongva, or People of the Earth, had already established their own society. The Tongva (Gabrielino) were considered one of the most wealthy, active, and prosperous tribes in southern California. They were also known as one of the most generous tribes in the region, often sharing their wealth with other less fortunate neighboring tribes. It is through the very act of generosity that would prove to be the tribe's downfall.

In pre-recorded history, the Tongva already had a major civilization in place with their own government, laws, religion, monetary system, music, art, dance, cultural exchange with neighboring tribes up and down the west coast of America, and oral history handed down from generation to generation. Originally a coastal people, the Tongva used the sea to subsist their diets. They hunted small game such as rats, lizards, rabbits and foxes. They also hunted deer and were noted for their exceptional hunting prowess.

When the Tongvas first spotted the Spanish sailing their Galleons offshore, they acted as any friendly tribe would do. Paddling out to the Spanish ships in their plank canoes, the Tongva bore the Spanish welcoming gifts of nuts, berries, acorns, and seafood. This act of kindness was immediately taken as a sign of weakness by the Spanish, who proceeded to enslave the Tongva. They were put to work building the missions. They were given a new name of Gabrielino. Thus began a period of suffering and oppression that continues to this day. The final decline of their civilization and culture had begun.

The Spanish now told the Tongva, "You are no longer Tongva, you are Gabrielino. You will no longer speak your language, you will speak ours. You will no longer be able to practice your religion, you will practice ours. We are your captors and you are our slaves." The Spanish concentrated program of genocide against the Tongva included establishing Churches and Universities on Tongva sacred sites, separating whole families to work on different missions and killing village chiefs and leaders. This deliberate extinction of Indians was so severe that a population of 250,000 was reduced to under 9000 by the late 1800's. A program so severe that only 15 per cent of their culture remains. Gone is a major portion of their language along with their culture. Gone are the days of idyllic life, living in harmony with Mother Earth and Father Sky. Yet, today, there are still survivors. Direct lineal descendants of the Tongva people, who are proud of their heritage and dedicated to preserving and protecting the legacies of their ancestors, while trying to keep alive the tribal traditions, language and culture.

One of the last sacred sites of the Tongva people is located on a high school campus in West Los Angeles. What is now known as University High School was once a major Tongva village site. Kuruvungna Springs was a self-contained, thriving Indian village where Portola and Sierra were said to have stopped. Today, the Gabrielino/Tongva people have joined together with the local community's leaders, as well as the principal and faculty members, to preserve and protect this special place which is considered to be a major historical site by the State of California. The Gabrielino/Tongva people believe that education is the key to accomplishing their goals. Their main goal is to achieve Federal Recognition by the United States. They are already recognized by the State of California and the cities of Los Angeles and San Gabriel. Other goals are establishing a land base upon which to live, and establishing a living, breathing Cultural Center. The Center would house cultural and historical resources and act as a repository for artifacts, historical documents, oral histories, photo collections, and other cultural and historical resources directly associated with the history of the Gabrielino/Tongva people. This Cultural Center would ideally be staffed by members of the tribe, some of whom could act as living history books.

The Gabrielino/Tongva Nation will not be satisfied until they are recognized as a true, sovereign body by the United States government. There are many tribal members who have dedicated their lives to seeing this happen. Only then will the nation be appeased, as it takes its true, rightful place among the other nations of the world. As our elders and great ancestors say, "We are still here, we have always been here, and we will always be here."