



## Romeo Pier

### Historic Structure Documentation Report

*prepared for*  
**San Mateo County Harbor District**  
504 Ave Alhambra  
El Granada, CA 94018

*prepared by*  
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This report has been prepared using the “outline format” as prescribed by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Historic American Engineering Record Guidelines for Historical Reports (2008, updated 2015).

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## HISTORIC STRUCTURE DOCUMENTATION REPORT

### ROMEO PIER, SAN MATEO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

- Location: Pillar Point Harbor, Princeton by the Sea, San Mateo County, California. Romeo Pier is located at latitude 37.502228, longitude -122.492322. The coordinate represents the base of the pier at the shoreline. This coordinate was obtained on May 6, 2017 using Google Earth. The datum is North American Datum 1983. The Romeo Pier's location has no restriction on its release to the public.
- Present Owner: The pier is owned by the San Mateo County Harbor District.
- Present Use: The pier is unused; access is closed to the public due to safety concerns.
- Significance: The Romeo Pier is eligible for designation as a historic landmark in the County of San Mateo because it reflects elements of the county's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering or architectural history (County of San Mateo Historic Preservation Ordinance Section 7732.1). The pier and the former fish cannery buildings at the foot of the pier are associated with the long history of the fishing industry in Princeton-by-the-Sea, and Half Moon Bay in general. Commercial fishing experienced a local boom in the 1940s when the pier and cannery were built; to this day it remains an important trade in the area. Romeo Pier is the oldest remaining pier in Princeton-by-the-Sea.

#### **Part I. Historical Information**

##### A. Physical History

1. Date of construction: 1944
2. Architect/Engineer: Unknown.
3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The builder was Joseph Romeo; contractors and suppliers were not ascertained.
4. Original plans and construction: As originally constructed, the pier was 760 feet long, was doubly wide for approximately 75 feet at the offshore end, and had an 18-foot driveway. The pier held heavy crane and winch equipment to unload fishing boats. A fresh water system carried pipe to the end of the wharf. The pier has been modified since that time.
5. Alterations and additions: The pier was widened in the 1960s or 1970s. A small building with a shed roof approximately halfway down the pier on the eastern edge

was removed during the 1980s or 1990s. Another building at the offshore end of the pier was enlarged or replaced with a larger building between 1987 and 1993.

## B. Historical Context

### 1. Half Moon Bay and Princeton-by-the-Sea

The land on which the communities of Half Moon Bay and Princeton-by-the-Sea developed was part of Mexican-era ranchos that were granted to prominent individuals in the mid-1800s. Rancho Corral de Tierra was divided in two, with the northern portion granted to Francisco Guerrero y Palomares, a former alcalde (mayor and magistrate) of San Francisco. Today this land would include Princeton-by-the-Sea, Montara, Moss Beach, and El Granada. The southern portion of the rancho was granted to Tiburcio Vasquez, a member of the Anza Expedition, soldier, and majordomo of Mission Dolores. Located slightly to the south, Rancho Arroyo de los Pilarcitos was granted to a military officer, Candelario Miramontes, whose last name was also applied to the rancho. This grant included what is today the southern part of Half Moon Bay, the old Spanishtown section, Arleta Park, Wavecrest, and Ocean Colony. Miramontes built an adobe in 1848 and moved his large family onto the rancho, calling it San Benito (in honor of Saint Benedict). Vasquez and Miramontes, whose homes were in close proximity to each other, hired a contractor to build seven adobe homes using Native Americans as laborers. These adobes formed the nucleus of the village that became known as San Benito, named after Miramontes' rancho. Thus, San Benito was the first name applied to the community that would later be known as Half Moon Bay (Cresson 2009).

Rancho Miramontes was surveyed and subdivided in 1863 as part of a foreclosure lawsuit for a loan. The platted town site was called Spanishtown in reference to the concentration of Spanish speakers in the vicinity. The community later took the name of Half Moon Bay as had been designated to the coastal area by government geographic surveys. The first known instance of the name being applied occurred on the 1854 United States Coastal Survey map (Cresson 2009). In 1856 San Mateo County split from San Francisco County (Manning and Crow 2004).

Early settlers in the Half Moon Bay area encountered difficulties with shipping and receiving supplies due to the topography of the land. Mountain ranges prevented easy access to the area. Farmers that kept domesticated cattle and cultivated the land needed to get their products to markets; eventually stage routes, roads, and water routes were created to shorten shipping time to the large population center of San

Francisco. The advancements in transportation also brought more residents to the coast (Manning and Crow 2004).

The Ocean Shore Railroad was an influential factor in the development of communities along the San Mateo County coastline. The railroad construction began about 1906 and spurred land sales along its route. One example is Frank Brophy's purchase of property near Pillar Point, on which he built the Princeton Inn and established the town site for what is now Princeton-by-the-Sea (Cresson 2009; Half Moon Bay Coastside Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). Although originally planned for residential use, the growth of commercial fishing led to a re-zoning of the Princeton coastal area for industrial use to support maritime-related development (*San Mateo Times* 1944). The Ocean Shore Railroad failed as a business venture, and the train stopped running in 1920 (Cresson 2009).

## 2. The Fishing industry in Princeton-by-the-Sea and Half Moon Bay

The area where the community of Princeton-by-the-Sea developed was the best location for boat landings because of the protection it was provided by Pillar Point. Some of the earliest fishermen in the area were Chinese who harvested abalone and fish in shallow water in the 1850s (Stickel 2006). In 1859 James Denniston built the first private deep-water landing, as well as a warehouse. Denniston, a retired U.S. Army sergeant arrived in the area about the 1850s. He married the widow of Francisco Guerrero y Palomares (the grantee of northern Rancho Corral de Tierra). Denniston continued to work the ranch for farming and raising cattle. His landing became known as the "Old Landing". The landing was built to the east of, and ran parallel to, Pillar Point. After Denniston's Landing was completed, Spanishtown began to attract more newcomers. Items such as hay, grain, potatoes, butter and cheese could be shipped by schooner to the Bay Area from the Denniston's wharf until use of the landing had ceased by about 1890 (Stickel 2012; Cresson 2009).

Besides Denniston's, another landing existed during this period, at the southern end of Half Moon Bay, near Miramontes Point. Built by James Van Carnap, the southern landing was more of an anchorage or docking area than a wharf. Vessels that docked at Van Carnap's Landing were loaded and unloaded using a hawser stretched from a post on shore to a rock out in the ocean. Items were placed in a sling and moved along the hawser using a dragrope to reach the vessels (Stickel 2012).

A third landing was built between Denniston's and Spanishtown in 1868. The wharf was located at the site of present-day Miramar and became known as Amesport, after Josiah P. Ames, one of the men involved in the project. Amesport accommodated

coastal steamers and became the central shipping point for Spanishtown and the surrounding countryside, handling potatoes, grain, and baled hay (Stickel 2012). The pier was washed away around the year 1900 but was re-built thereafter (Stickel 2012).

Henry Cowell of the Santa Cruz cement company constructed a 1,000 foot wharf and warehouse in 1902 approximately midway between Denniston's Landing and Amesport. Cowell's wharf was used to receive steamers and to ship vegetables, grain and general freight until about 1908; afterwards it became a popular fishing spot. Eventually the wharf deteriorated; by 1940 there was only 500 feet left (Stickel 2012).

When the U.S. Fish Commission conducted its first survey of Pacific Coast fisheries in 1880, the surveyor found that fishing was not really a significant industry in San Mateo County. The coastside towns were too small to offer local markets and their connections with larger cities were so deficient that they could not compete with Monterey and Santa Cruz in supplying a large market such as San Francisco (Stickel 2006).

However, in the late 1800s most California fishermen were able to take advantage of new technologies such as steam power and then gasoline engines, which enabled them to travel greater distances and go where fish were plentiful. Princeton-by-the-Sea slowly developed into a commercial fishing port. A Chinese fishing camp existed near Denniston's wharf around the turn of the century, and Japanese fishermen were also known to be in Half Moon Bay in the early 1900s. The Japanese introduced a new method of free-diving and the use of hard-hat equipment to catch abalone, which others sought to learn and copy (Stickel 2006).

John Patroni, the owner of a restaurant in Princeton, built a wharf in 1913 which stretched about 540 feet (Stickel 2012). It was rumored that the pier was utilized by Patroni to handle smuggled shipments of alcohol during prohibition (Cresson 2009).

World War I brought about a new demand for food supplies thus began the development of California's sardine fishery. Canned sardines and other related products such as fish oil and fish meal brought increased profits to fishermen as well as to packing houses, can-makers, box factories and boat builders. Between 1916 and 1936 demand and fishing increased. The Pacific Coast sardine harvest was the largest fishery on the west coast; the tonnage of sardines exceeded the combined catch of all other fisheries. California's statewide sardine catch reached its peak at 1.5 billion pounds in 1936 (Stickel 2006).

The fishing industry in the area of Pillar Point grew, along with fisheries statewide, in the 1930s. When the United States entered World War II new regulations on the fishing industry were implemented. In particular, foreign-born fishermen such as Japanese and Italians were affected. Passage in and out of the San Francisco Bay was restricted and younger fishermen were drafted in the war. Fishermen were restricted by the security regulations but there was an increased demand for fish from both civilian and government markets. As the war progressed the state's fisheries expanded and new processing and handling techniques were developed. Commercial abalone divers were also working the reefs in the Half Moon Bay area by the late 1940s (Stickel 2006).

By the end of World War II Princeton had transformed into a bustling fishing community and was home to three working piers, two canneries and a refrigeration plant for freezing fish. The piers at Princeton offered fuel and other fishery-related services; landings by fishermen increased (Stickel 2006). In 1949 approximately 125 fishing boats were reported to be using the Princeton harbor (Stickel 2006).

The local sardine population, however, drastically declined in the 1950s. The *San Mateo Times* reported the local sardine catch for 1951 as over 318,000 tons, but by 1954 it had been reduced to 2,562 tons. Opinions varied as to the cause – overfishing was one proposed reason but the sardines' drastic disappearance was somewhat of a mystery (*San Mateo Times* 1955). The bulk of Pillar Point's fishermen's income then came from salmon and crab. Besides fishing for commercial markets, sport fishermen were also taken out to sea in the summer months. New diving methods and technology supported the abalone divers and permitted them to expand their traditional fishing grounds (Stickel 2006).

The breakwater was finally built at Pillar Point Harbor starting in 1959 to provide the fishing fleet with a safe harbor. The Cowell and Patroni Piers were removed in 1963 (Stickel 2012). The Pillar Point Harbor started being developed, and the Johnson Pier was built, between 1961 and 1970 (San Mateo County Harbor District Report 1991). A public fishing pier was added in the 1980s (San Mateo County Harbor District Pillar Point Harbor Map, n.d.; historic aerials).

Salmon, crab and various species of rockfish continued to be harvested (Stickel 2006). In the 1970s there were also newcomers to the fishing industry in the form of refugees from Southeast Asia. The United States and other countries accepted refugees from Vietnam and many of them settled in fishing communities. These new fishermen were impacted by regulations prohibiting operation of a fishing boat by

aliens, environmental opposition to their use of gillnets and competition with the locals. Some Vietnamese fishermen did not make the transition to alternative gear types and methods due to the expense or their unfamiliarity, ceasing their fishing operations (Stickel 2006).

A decline in commercial fishing then began statewide. The number of commercial fishing vessels dropped from a high of approximately 7,000 in the 1980s to less than 2,000 in 2003. The Pillar Point Harbor also followed this trend; a report that analyzed area fisheries between 1981 and 2000 found that the number of fishing vessels at Pillar Point had declined about 40% over that time period. In the early 2000s the fishermen in the Pillar Point area were known to travel to the Monterey Bay area or to northern fishing grounds, returning to the Pillar Point harbor to unload and sell their catch. As of 2004 the harbor had three wholesale fish buyers as well as others located off the harbor. Two retail fish markets at the harbor also provided local seafood to the public (Stickel 2006).

### 3. Property History

The Romeo Pier was constructed in 1944 by Joseph (Joe) Romeo, president of the A. Romeo Fish and Oyster Company. It reportedly cost \$40,000 to complete (*San Mateo Times* 1944, 1945; 1943 aerial photograph). The Romeo family was involved in the fish market in San Francisco prior to starting up in Princeton-by-the-Sea. Joe and other members of the family operated a wholesale fish business, and Joe's father-in-law was also a fisherman. Partners in the fish company included Joe, his father Carlo, brother Tony, and cousins Dominic and Albert (Charlie Romeo, personal

communication, May 19, 2016). Joe Romeo's immediate family included his wife Grace, sons Frank and Charlie, and daughter Connie. In the early 1940s the Romeos' business expanded to Princeton-by-the-Sea, as fish were abundant in the area, and acquired property east of Pillar Point (Charlie Romeo, personal communication, May 3, 2016; *San Mateo Times* 1945).

In 1944, Joe advocated for a re-zoning of existing residentially-zoned property in the community to heavy industrial in order to establish a fish cannery. At that time, Joe had recently finished constructing his 760 foot wharf designed to serve both the fresh fish trade and the cannery. It was the largest wharf in the community at the time. Two previously established wharves to the east were already leased to other wholesale fishing businesses based in San Francisco and Santa Cruz (*San Mateo Times* 1944, 1945).

When it was first constructed, Romeo's wharf was described as having an 18-foot driveway and being doubly wide for approximately 75 feet at the offshore end. It also included heavy crane and winch equipment to unload the fishing boats. A fresh water system was installed and piped to the end of the wharf. A later planned phase of construction included housing for the company's wharf manager and crewmen, and a 50' x 125' cannery building (*San Mateo Times* 1944). The Romeo cannery was completed in approximately 1946 and produced canned sardines and salmon for retail sale (Charlie Romeo 2016). The Romeo Fish Company utilized the pier and the cannery buildings in conjunction for approximately ten years, from 1946 through the mid-1950s.

The Romeos' canned sardines featured a logo that included two fish and the moniker "Charlie Boy", after Joe's son Charlie (Romeo Packing Company 2002). One of the fish was more realistic and the other was drawn more simply, somewhat cartoon-like. The latter fish was positioned upright, wore glasses, had his mouth open and seemed to be speaking the words "Umm – good!". The Romeo Packing Co. corporation filed for a trademark of the wording and drawing. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office lists the mark's first use as being in 1947, its first use in commerce in 1948, and the trademark filing date as 1949 (U.S. Patent and Trademark Office Trademark Electronic Search System 2016).

When the sardine population was decimated in the 1950s, Joe Romeo separated from the fish company. By 1954 Joe had shifted his business interests to producing fish fertilizer for the agricultural industry. The former cannery buildings at the end of the pier were then converted for use as a fertilizer manufacturing facility (Stickel 2006; Frank Romeo, personal communication, May 16, 2016). Other members of the Romeo family continued to operate the Romeo Fish Company out of San Francisco and Princeton-by-the-Sea (Frank Romeo 2016).

Another fish cannery in Princeton-by-the-Sea called Princeton Packers laid off 100 cannery workers for a short period of time and converted their packing operations from sardines to brussels sprouts in an attempt to stay in business. Subsequently Princeton Packers' cannery closed in the early 1950s (*San Mateo Times* 1955; Stickel 2006). The *San Mateo Times* reported in 1962 that the legendary Cannery Row, once called the "Fish Capitol of the World" and located approximately 100 miles south of Princeton, had experienced the closing of 17 canneries due to the collapse of the sardine fishery (Constantino 1962).

Despite the local decline in fishing, the nationally known StarKist company was expanding to maintain increased demands. StarKist began developing a new advertising campaign for their canned tuna in 1958 (StarKist, n.d.). An advertising copywriter named Thomas R. Rogers is reported to have created a character for StarKist that became known as “Charlie the Tuna”. Rogers supposedly modeled the character after an acquaintance – a beat musician and part-time actor who called himself Henry Nemo (Holley 2005). StarKist learned of the Romeo company’s trademark on the “Charlie Boy” name and spectacled fish drawing. Subsequently StarKist approached Joe about acquiring the trademark. Since Joe was no longer operating the fish cannery or using the logo he agreed to sell the trademark (Charlie Romeo 2016).

StarKist’s Charlie the Tuna character was also animated for commercials and has become a well-known advertising symbol. Charlie the Tuna has been honored by the Museum of Broadcast Communications in an exhibit called “Salute to Advertising’s Greatest Icons”, and has been a part of the Advertising Week Walk of Fame on Madison Ave in New York City (StarKist, n.d.). Joe Romeo operated the fertilizer manufacturing business, while his brother Tony maintained and operated the Romeo pier for many years, where commercial fishermen continued to unload their catch, and fish were sold wholesale (Charlie Romeo 2016). During its heyday the pier held trucks that hauled six to seven tons of seafood (Noack 2014).

Joe Romeo’s sons Charlie and Frank eventually joined their father’s fertilizer business, which went on to produce different blends of fertilizers as well as paper plant sleeves. Known as the Romeo Packing Company, the business persists today at the same location at the street end of the pier. Joe’s daughter Connie and Charlie’s son Joey eventually joined the business as well. The company expanded its agricultural, landscape and greenhouse products to include plant foods, greenhouse shading compound, plastic plant sleeves, and decorative foil (Romeo Packing Company 2002).

The pier stayed in the Romeo family after Joe left the family fishing business and was maintained by Joe’s brother Tony (who remained a partner in the Romeo Fish Company) for several decades. It continued to be used by fishermen, and was leased to Morning Star Fisheries for about 17 years (Charlie Romeo 2016; Mallory 2012). The Romeos later leased the pier to the San Mateo County Harbor District, and then sold the pier to the Harbor District in 1996 (Midcoast Community Council 2014). It was subsequently closed to all traffic in 2002 due to safety concerns (San Mateo County Harbor District 2014).

## **Part II. Structural/Design Information**

### A. General Description

1. Character: The pier is a utilitarian structure that is generally characteristic of the property type and does not contain any unusual or rare features.
2. Condition of fabric: The pier and buildings are in poor condition; several of the wooden pilings are deteriorated or severed. A large portion of the wooden decking is damaged or missing. Due to safety concerns, public access is currently blocked by a chain-link fence at the base of the pier.

### B. Description

1. The pier, which is approximately 690 feet long, is wood-framed, has wooden decking, and is supported by round wooden pilings. Approximately halfway down the pier its construction widens, first on the eastern side, then on the western side, resulting in a varying width of 15 feet to 48 feet. Additional wooden boards laid perpendicularly across the pier likely provided additional support for vehicular traffic.

There are several buildings on the offshore end of the pier. The largest building is two stories, has a rectangular footprint, and a medium-pitched, front-gabled roof. It measures approximately 37 feet wide by 47 feet long. It is clad with horizontal wooden boards, and board-and-batten. The north elevation features a horizontal railing which supports a large sliding door, in which a single door opening has been made. The building features several rectangular window openings surrounded by wooden casings. Behind the main building, at the southern end of the pier, is one additional rectangular structure. To the north, in front of the main building, are smaller one-story buildings along the western edge of the pier. Most, if not all, appear to have shed roofs, and are clad with plyboard. In general, all of the buildings have little fenestration - mainly small windows and vents, and sliding or single entry doors. The buildings rest upon wooden foundations and are wood-framed. Mechanical equipment also remains on the pier. Along the length of the pier's western edge there are wooden supports, similar to A-frames that carry pipes from one end of the pier to the other.

### C. Site Information

1. Romeo Pier is oriented in a northwest to southeast alignment, and is parallel to Pillar Point, located approximately one-third of a mile to the west. The Pillar Point Air Force Station is located on the point. The blocks north of the pier are developed

primarily with industrial and commercial uses, and a lesser amount of residential use. An undeveloped marsh area lies between them and Pillar Point.

Romeo Pier is accessed from Princeton Avenue, through a driveway that runs between the Romeo Packing Company buildings; however, the foot of the pier is currently blocked by a chain link fence. Beneath the pier, the beachfront features rock rip-rap. The Romeo Packing Company complex consists of five large buildings to the east of the pier (mostly fronting Princeton Avenue) as well as a small building at the foot of the pier, and a small building west of the pier fronting Princeton Avenue. Along the beachfront to the west of the pier and to the east of the Romeo Packing Company are contemporary, two-story homes.

### **Part III. Sources of Information**

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**Part IV. Project Information**

The Historic Structure Documentation Report was prepared by Rincon Consultants Inc. in May 2017 on behalf of the San Mateo County Harbor District, as partial mitigation for impacts resulting from the demolition of the Romeo Pier located in Pillar Point Harbor, Princeton-by-the-Sea, San Mateo County, California. Shannon Carmack, Architectural Historian, served as the project lead and oversaw the preparation of this report. Susan Zamudio-Gurrola, Architectural Historian, assisted in the preparation of this report and conducted the HABS-like photography of the subject property. The location map was prepared by Allysen Valencia, GIS Analyst. Rincon Principal Joe Power reviewed this report for quality control.



Imagery provided by National Geographic Society, ESRI and its licensors © 2016. The topographic representation depicted in this map may not portray all of the features currently found in the vicinity today and/or features depicted in this map may have changed since the original topographic map was assembled.

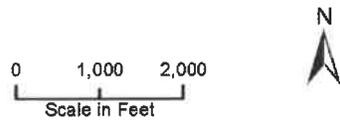


Figure 1: Vicinity Map

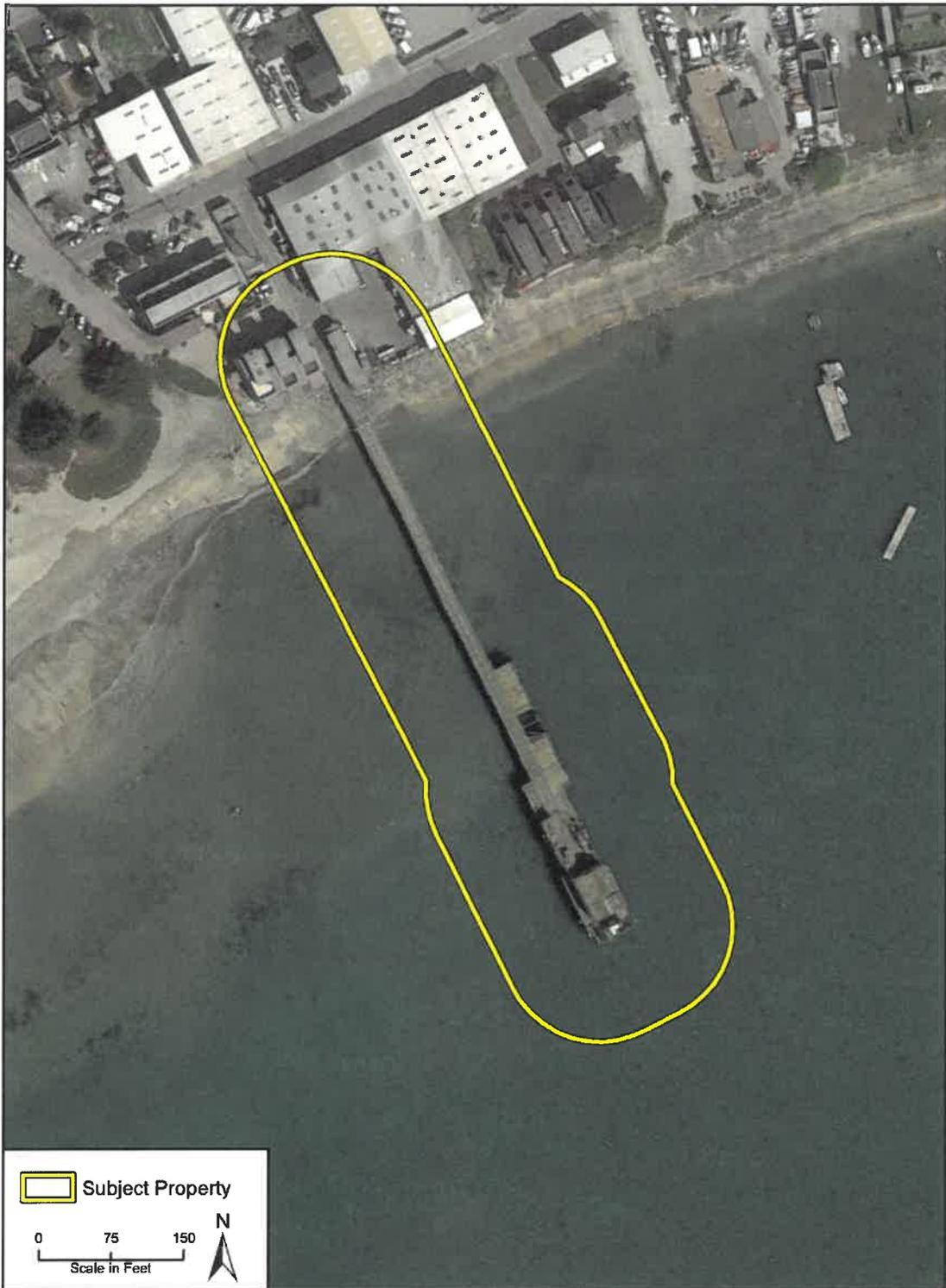


Figure 2: Location Map



Figure 3: View of Romeo Pier on April 2, 1946 (Source: Robert L. Wiegand Coastal Slides Collection, MS 2008/1, Water Resources Collections and Archives, University of California, Riverside).



Figure 4: Aerial view of Romeo Pier, 1972. Copyright 2004 Kenneth & Gabrielle Adelman (Source: CaliforniaCoastline.org 2017).

Property name: Romeo Pier  
City: Princeton-by-the-Sea (Half Moon Bay)  
County: San Mateo  
State: California  
Photographer: Susan Zamudio-Gurrola  
Date of photographs: May 12, 2017  
Location of original digital files: Rincon Consultants, Inc., 180 N. Ashwood Ave, Ventura, CA 93003  
Number of photographs: 17

Photo #1 View of pier; camera facing southeast  
Photo #2 View of pier; camera facing southwest  
Photo #3 East side of pier, closeup; camera facing southwest  
Photo #4 East side of pier, closeup; camera facing southwest  
Photo #5 West side of pier, closeup; camera facing southeast  
Photo #6 West side of pier, closeup; camera facing southeast  
Photo #7 Buildings on offshore (south) end of pier; camera facing southeast  
Photo #8 Buildings on offshore (south) end of pier; camera facing southeast  
Photo #9 Buildings on offshore (south) end of pier; camera facing southwest  
Photo #10 Structural framing system, closeup  
Photo #11 Pilings closeup; camera facing east  
Photo #12 Fencing at base (north) end of pier; camera facing northwest  
Photo #13 Decking and buildings on offshore (south) end of pier; camera facing southeast  
Photo #14 Base of pier and access driveway; camera facing southeast  
Photo #15 Surrounding setting; camera facing west towards Pillar Point  
Photo #16 Surrounding setting; camera facing northeast  
Photo #17 Surrounding setting; riprap on beach under base of pier; camera facing northeast