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The Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail:
Statement of Historical Significance

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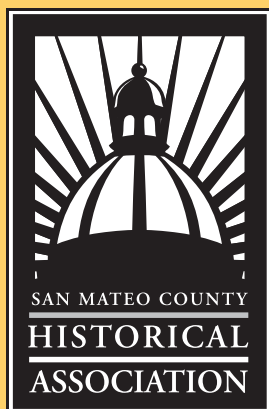


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Cover: The Portolá Expedition first saw San Francisco Bay, November 4, 1769. Section of painting by Morton Künstler, 1969.

The Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail: Statement of Historical Significance

by Jonathan Cordero, Samuel Herzberg and Mitchell P. Postel



From Sweeney Ridge, the Portolá Expedition first saw San Francisco Bay. Photo by and courtesy of Douglas Atmore.

Editor's Note

The following article is excerpted from San Mateo County's Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail Committee's "Statement of Historic Significance" authored by Jonathan Cordero, Samuel Herzberg and Mitchell Postel (2018). In turn, the Committee acknowledges the United States National Park Service for allowing extensive utilization of its *Historic Resources Study for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Mateo County* (2010) by Mitchell Postel.

Introduction

Before the Gaspar de Portolá expedition happened upon San Francisco Bay in 1769, *Alta* California was an unknown place except to native people for approximately 10,000 years. Among these native people were the Ohlones who were spread throughout the southern San Francisco Bay Region and beyond, composing 50 local tribes in many more villages. Each village had its own land and customs. Spanish

explorers recorded villages at intervals of three to five miles in most areas.¹

However, after this Spanish "discovery" of the Bay, things changed rapidly. The Ohlones who lived in what we could call San Mateo County today, were among the first in *Alta* California impacted by the newcomers by being drawn into the Spanish missions. Their culture was nearly eradicated, and the population levels of the people fell dramatically. In fact, most of coastal California became organized within this foreign system. After a comparatively few years, with the changing of hegemony from Spain to Mexico to the United States, California became known the world over. As a result, there are two distinct stories to be interpreted in San Mateo County regarding the initial Spanish contact with the indigenous people: that of the Ohlone Indians and that of the Portolá Expedition.

The Tribal World of the Ramaytush Ohlone

According to historian Alan K. Brown, prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the Ohlones of the San Francisco Peninsula, referred to as the Ramaytush, had ten tribes along the Peninsula (from north to south): *Yelamu*, *Urebure*, *Aramai*, *Ssalson*, *Chiguan*, *Lamchin*, *Cotegen*, *Puichon*, *Olpen* and *Oljon*. Every tribe controlled the land and people within its own geographical area. Within each tribal region a number of villages existed, each with its own village head and set of high status families. Tribal size varied from 40 to 500 persons.

The term Ramaytush (pronounced rah-my-toosh), is commonly used as a designation for a dialect of the Costanoan language that was spoken by the original peoples of the San Francisco Peninsula. Richard Levy first used the term in 1978, but his usage derives from J.P. Harrington's interviews with Chochenyo speakers Angela Colos and Jose Guzman. Harrington's notes that *rámai* refers to the San Francisco side of the San Francisco Bay and *-tush* is the Chochenyo suffix for people. Thus, *rámaítush* referred to the people of the San Francisco Peninsula.² Most descendants of the indigenous groups of the San Francisco Bay Area, however, refer to themselves as Ohlone, hence the phrase, Ramaytush Ohlone.

The subsistence and material culture of the Ramaytush Ohlone did not differ from other neighboring Ohlone societies. The Ohlone harvested "plant, fish, and animal resources" from the environment and acquired additional resources through extensive trade networks, including networks that extended across the San Francisco Bay to the north and east.³ A sexual division of labor existed within Ohlone society: women harvested plant foods, including acorns and seeds, while men hunted and fished. In regards to the material culture, "women spent a considerable portion of their time each year weaving baskets, which were necessary for gathering, storing, and preparing foodstuffs."⁴ "Houses were hemispherical in shape and were generally made from grasses and rushes, although some were constructed from large sections of redwood

tree bark. Women tended to wear skirts made of plant fiber, while men were generally unclothed. Women tended to have tattoos on their chins. Men had long beards with pierced ears and nasal septums."⁵

The socio-political landscape was determined in large part by the relationships between tribes and tribal leaders. As anthropologist Randall Milliken relates, "Within each tribal territory lived a number of intermarried families that comprised a small autonomous polity ... Members of the local groups hosted dances, pooled their labor during specific short harvest periods, defended their territory, and resolved internal disputes under the leadership of a headman."⁶ Of the ten tribes of the San Francisco Peninsula, the *Aramai* (whose territory was in today's Pacifica) were perhaps the most politically influential.⁷

Relations between tribes were managed by intermarriages, especially among high status families. Tribal conflict originated from infringements upon tribal territorial boundaries and from wife stealing; however, "despite their political divisions, the people of the Bay Area were tied together in a fabric of social and genetic relationships through intertribal marriages."⁸ In addition, tribes united for the purpose of ongoing trade both at the local and regional levels. Regional, seasonal fiestas brought tribes of differing languages and ethnicities together. As Milliken describes, "Regional dances provided opportunities to visit old friends and relatives from neighboring groups, to share news, and to make new acquaintances. People traded basket materials, obsidian, feathers, shell beads, and other valuable commodities through gift exchanges. Intergroup feuds were supposed to be suspended at the dances, but old animosities sometimes surfaced. All in all, such 'big times' strengthened regional economic ties and social bonds."⁹

The Ohlones of the San Francisco Bay Area shared a common world view and ritual practices. According to Milliken, "People believed that specialized powers came to them through association with supernatural beings or forces."¹⁰ One common practice was the planting of



a painted pole decorated with feathers, to ensure good fortune in the next day's hunt or other event. Prayers accompanied by the blowing of smoke toward the sky or sun and offerings of seeds and shell beads were common practices.¹¹ Any person with a special talent or gift was thought to be imbued with supernatural power. Dreams guided a person's future actions.

Oral narratives were both a form of entertainment and a means of education. The narratives typically involved Coyote, head of the animals, and the Duck Hawk, his grandson. Generally, the "narratives indicate that the present events and places in nature were determined by the actions of a pre-human race of animal beings during a former mythological age."¹²

Similar to other tribes in California, "dances comprised the main form of communal religious expression. Each local group had its own series of festivals. Every festival had its own set of specific dances, each with a unique set of costumes, accompanying songs, and choreography. During the most sacred dances, participants and costumes could only be touched by specialists since they were thought to be invested with supernatural powers. No dance cycle details were documented for any of the groups around San Francisco Bay."¹³

Spanish Exploration

Once in Ohlone country, the Portolá Expedition found the native people to be most gracious, offering food and guidance. Furthest south in today's San Mateo County they first encountered the relatively large village of *Quiroste* close to Año Nuevo. Here the Spanish saw what they called *Casa Grande*, a structure in which all 200 of the village's residents could fit inside. After that were the *Oljons* of the area around San Gregorio Creek who possessed a population of nearly 160. Further north, at Purisima Creek, were the *Cotegen*, made up of about 65 Indians. Just south of the *Aramai*, the Portolá party encountered the *Chiguan* of today's Half Moon Bay. According to mission records this tribe probably only numbered about 50 people.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as

did most of the Ohlones who met Portolá, they fed and gave directions to the expedition.

On October 31, 1769, Gaspar de Portolá and his party descended Montara Mountain and met some 25 people of the *Aramai* tribe who most likely lived at the village of Pruristac in today's Pacifica, to the east of where the Spanish eventually camped.¹⁵ (However these Ohlones may have been from a second *Aramai* village, *Timigtac*, that might have been at Mori Point.)

It is important to state that throughout Portolá's journey up the coast and especially in Ohlone lands, the Spanish used the Indian trails, even referring to them as "roads." As archaeologist James T. Davis states, early travelers and explorers in California "either received directions from Indians or were accompanied by native guides."¹⁶ Indian trails represent the earliest transportation routes in California, and these trails eventually became State Highways, public roads, and sections of today's California Coastal Trail. Trade among neighboring and sometimes distant tribal groups were facilitated by means of Indian trails. Indians usually exchanged goods by bartering or by purchasing with shell beads.

After leaving the *Aramai* and descending the discovery site on Sweeney Ridge, Portolá came across the *Ssalson* who numbered about 200 individuals. As the party moved south down the San Andres Valley, they met the *Lamchin*, the largest tribe of the Peninsula, numbering as many as 350 people. Their lands included today's Redwood City and the hill country to the west. As they moved closer to San Francisquito Creek and Palo Alto they met the *Puichun* who numbered about 250. Alan K. Brown estimated the total number of Ohlone Indians occupying San Mateo County at the time of the Portola Expedition was 2,000 "or more – approximately four or five persons to a square mile."¹⁷

Spanish interest in *Alta* California began only 30 years after the first voyage of Columbus. After conquering the Aztec empire of central Mexico, Hernando Cortés felt the tremendous wealth accumulated there could be gotten again to the north. He was reminded of medieval

tales about an island of Amazons led by Queen Calafia, from whom the “Golden State” would eventually get its name.¹⁸ Legends filtered through to him of “Seven Cities” possessing fabulous fortune and *El Dorado*.¹⁹ However, after nearly two decades of effort, Cortés’ attempts to explore northward were hampered by harsh environmental barriers and hostile natives.

In 1539, Cortés was replaced by Antonio de Mendoza whose mission was to consolidate Spanish gains in New Spain. Under Mendoza, who became the first viceroy of New Spain, Francisco de Ulloa was dispatched to further explore Mexico’s north coast. His way was blocked when he discovered that *Baja California* is a peninsula. Also that year, Mendoza sent a Christian Moor named Estevanico and a Franciscan padre named Marcos north, overland toward the center of the American West. They heard tales that indicated the Seven Cities of Cibola actually existed. While Estevanico was killed during the journey, Father Marcos returned and reported having actually seen one of the cities.

And so, in 1540, Mendoza had Vásquez de Coronado lead a well-equipped expedition with Father Marcos in tow, that ended up in western Kansas. When they reached the spot where Father Marcos had “seen” the silver city, they viewed a white washed adobe instead. Still they pressed on. The Indians they met repeated myths that encouraged the *conquistadores* to journey even farther into the wilderness; it is probable that the Indians hoped they would never return. However, they did return but with the report that no fabulously wealthy civilizations existed in the north.

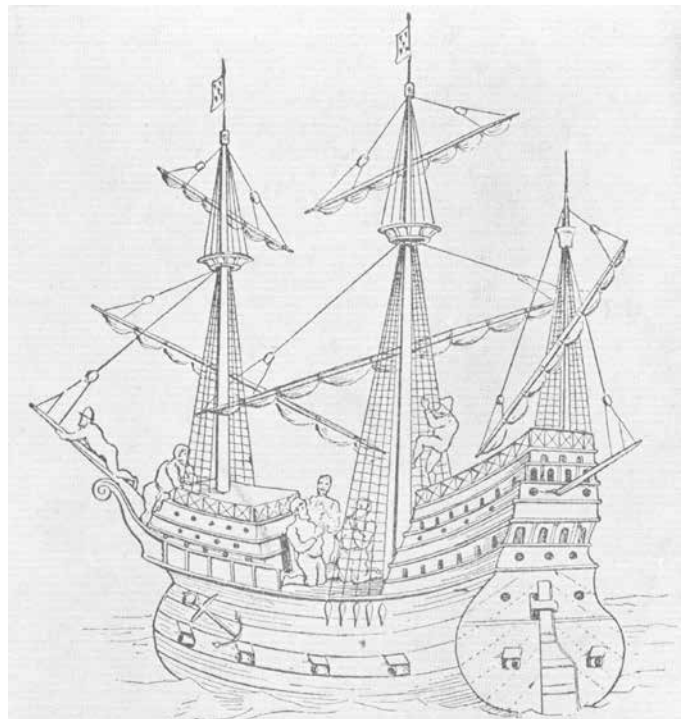
Although hardly pleased, Mendoza, in 1542, gave it another chance. This time he sent Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo (or his Portuguese name: João Rodrigues Cabrilho) with two ships, the *San Salvador* and *Victoria*. In addition to searching for wealthy civilizations, Cabrillo was also charged with finding the fabled “Northwest Passage” around North America. They left Mexico and sailed west and then north around *Baja California*. During the voyage, Cabrillo broke his arm and died on

January 18, 1543. Under a new commander, Bartolomé Ferrelo, the expedition proceeded north and nearly reached the Oregon border. They returned to port in Mexico on April 14. Of course, the Northwest Passage was not located.

For Mendoza, and the Spanish, the lessons of their efforts in the early 1540s were all negative regarding the future of lands north of Mexico. No great civilizations or fabulous fortunes existed there. Instead the environment was difficult to deal with and the Indian people had little of what they would consider wealth.

However, Spain’s progress as one of the world’s greatest maritime powers continued. By 1565, it controlled a lucrative trade from the Philippines. In 1566, Esteban Rodríguez and Andrés de Urdaneta established a reliable sea route from Manila, east across the ocean. The voyage made use of the currents and winds of the north Pacific. Ships would reach the western shores of North America and sail down the California Coast to ports in New Spain.

These Manila treasure ships or galleons risked many perils. In 1568, one was lost off Guam. Another was



Drawing of a Manila galleon.

wrecked 15 years later. Some of the ships were forced back to Manila because of violent Pacific storms.

Interest began to grow in establishing a port, as a resting place, on the California Coast.²⁰ Ships' captains were therefore given instruction to survey the coastline for a likely choice for a safe harbor. This interest was made even more pertinent in 1578, when English raider Sir Francis Drake rounded Cape Horn in his *Golden Hind*, searching to pirate Spanish treasure while exploring the Pacific for England. In 1579, he put in somewhere off the northern California coast (probably Drake's Bay) to repair his ship. Just a few years later, in 1584, Francisco Gali, with orders to explore the California coast in his Manila galleon, the *San Juan Bautista*, made landfall at Monterey and then cruised southward. Three years later, Pedro de Unamuno was in command of the Manila galleon and landed in the vicinity of Monterey after crossing the Pacific from Japan.

The final attempt by a Manila galleon to explore the Coast in the sixteenth century took place in 1595. Sebastian Cermeño aboard the *San Agustín* was returning to New Spain from the Philippines and followed the northern route, reaching California around Trinity Bay. He then worked his way south. Cermeño anchored his ship at Point Reyes, but it was hit by a storm. The *San Agustín* lost its anchor and ran around at Drake's Bay, becoming Alta California's first recorded shipwreck. The crew spent some time exploring the local area. They then left their cargo of wax and silks behind and boarded the ship's launch, called the *Santa Buenaventura*. They set sail for Mexico. Along the way members of the party took notes describing the Coast, including San Mateo County's shoreline and Monterey Bay.²¹

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, no port had been established for Spain on the California coast. Meanwhile, since the destruction of its *Armada* in 1588, Spain's strength as a great maritime power had been steadily diminishing. Recognizing the need for finding a suitable location for a safe harbor while being

mindful of Spanish military reversals, Sebastian Vizcaíno proposed to New Spain's viceroy Don Gaspar de Zúñiga y Acevedo, Count of Monte Rey, to explore the coast at his own expense in return for being awarded command of a future Manila galleon.²² The Count agreed to the deal. Vizcaíno and company were to chart and sound bays, islands, reefs and bars. They were to take solar and stellar readings, note wind directions, map locations of anchorages, reference wood and fresh water sources and establish place names with their topographical descriptions.²³

The explorers commanded three ships and a long boat. They set sail on May 5, 1602. The ships found themselves continuously in difficult sailing conditions as they battled up the coast of Baja California, sometimes separated and usually short of drinking water. They reached San Diego on November 10, after more than six exhausting months. They rested here until November 20, then landed at Santa Catalina Island, sailed through the Santa Barbara Channel, rounded Point Concepcion, caught an unusual favorable wind, sailed past Carmel Bay and, on December 16, entered Monterey Bay, which they named for their viceroy. Vizcaíno described the place as "sheltered from all winds,"²⁴ and made Monterey out to be a perfect harbor. Perhaps Vizcaíno tailored what turned out to be an exaggerated account for the benefit of the man who could give him command of the Manila galleon. Perhaps he feared that without a positive report his reward might be lost.

At first it appeared as if Vizcaíno's efforts had succeeded in getting him what he wanted. The Viceroy was pleased with the results of the expedition and liked the idea that a fine new port was named for him. However, Spanish colonial assignments were subject to change. Soon after Vizcaíno's return, Monte Rey was given a promotion to viceroy of Peru. His place in New Spain was taken by the Marqués de Montesclaros, who did not trust Vizcaíno. He revoked his Manila galleon reward and had the expedition's map maker tried and then hanged for forgery,²⁵ (although not necessarily because of his chart of Monterey).²⁶

Looking at the larger picture, the results of the Vizcaíno expedition had little immediate ramification. Not very much more was discovered from what Cabrillo had noted 60 years earlier. Spain made no moves to establish any presence along the California coast for another 167 years. The thinking was that with the winds and currents behind the Manila galleon once it reached the shores of North America, that there really was little need for a port. The normal route of return from the Philippines was to steer north to latitude 30° and find the favorable winds and then turn south as soon as seaweed was spotted, indicating land was near.

And so the California coast remained mostly a mystery. San Francisco Bay had still not been discovered; not until another expedition from Mexico to *Alta* California was sponsored by the Spanish, this one led by Gaspar de Portolá in 1769, was the Bay detected. Meanwhile, the Manila galleons were absolved of the responsibility of exploring the coast, with one exception, when Gamelli Carreir described his south bound voyage in 1696.

Nevertheless, barring his descriptions of Monterey, Vizcaíno's charts were highly regarded for their accuracy, and his maps continued in use until the 1790s. Thus the myth of a safe harbor at Monterey was still on the minds of Spanish officials in the 1760s, when they finally got around to planning the colonization of *Alta* California.

Interest in *Alta* California was revived by José de Gálvez, who was made Visitor-General of New Spain in 1765 (a position actually superior to the Viceroy). For reason of personal ambition, Gálvez desired to give his sphere of influence the look of expansion and not decay. Citing possible foreign interest in California, he proposed occupation of that forgotten place as a defensive measure.

He not only discussed the ever-present concern of English interests, but also mentioned rumors of Russian fur trapping activity in North America. Lack of resources and the remoteness of California were finally put aside. The Spanish now felt compelled to settle *Alta* California

before a foreign interloper could. They desired that California become a buffer against possible aggression – to protect Mexico and, indeed, all its New World holdings.

The strategy in settling *Alta* California was to establish overland communications and transportation. This seemed necessary because of the power of the English Navy. Lack of enough colonists to occupy the new frontier would be overcome by making the California Indians Spanish in their religion and in their language. That and a gradual intermixing of blood with the Spanish would create a new race of people loyal to the crown back in Spain.

In order to carry out his plans, Gálvez called upon a captain in the Spanish army, Gaspar de Portolá. Born in Balaguer, Catalonia, Spain in 1717,²⁷ he was the younger son within an aristocratic family. As a young man, Portolá had no interest in joining the church or



Supposed portrait of Gaspar de Portolá in the Parador Nacional de Turismo of Arties in Lérida, Spain.

establishing a legal career, so he settled on becoming an officer in the army. He entered the service at the earliest possible age (17) at the lowest possible commissioned rank (ensign). He was involved with many military campaigns from the 1740s onward. However, promotions were slow; he was 8 years an ensign and 25 years a lieutenant before his promotion to captain, and that promotion came with an assignment that any officer in Europe would have thought a professional disaster – for a job which he did not volunteer – to permanent duty overseas to the “Army of America,”²⁸ part of Gálvez’s military buildup to oppose possible foreign aggression.

The 50-year-old officer arrived in New Spain in 1767. Gálvez gave him his first major assignment – to evict the Jesuit missionaries from the *Baja* in order to make room for the more favored Franciscans. This was a delicate assignment, and there can be little doubt that Portolá’s good family connections made him the choice for the job. It is also likely that since he was fresh from Europe, he would not have the attachment to the priests who had been in the business of building missions in the area since 1697.

By the 1760s, the Jesuits had become the target for legends about how they accumulated wealth and power where they served. While these accusations may have had truth to them in other places, in the *Baja*, they had little validity. In all of the Spanish empire, it would have been difficult to find a poorer, more inhospitable place.

Complicating matters, there was already an army captain in the *Baja*, Fernando de Rivera y Moncada, with a long record of service. He was now required to give up his governorship of the *Baja* to this newcomer, without knowing why. Sympathy for the Jesuits was manifest among the troops. A popular revolt among the people was feared, making the order of expulsion important to keep secret. Truly, Portolá’s job required a tactful touch, and that he was able to carry this job out in a subtle way can be determined by the words of one of the Jesuits. Father Ducrue wrote:

This Officer of the King arrived full of false prejudice against the Company caused by



Drawing of Father Junípero Serra.

ridiculous accusations. But then he saw the truth about California, and how false these slanders had been. He never ceased to deplore the disagreeableness of his orders, which notwithstanding he fulfilled in every detail, yet with every kindness, and sympathy for ourselves.²⁹

Portolá assigned military personnel to govern *Baja* until the arrival of the Franciscans. For Gálvez, the completion of this assignment meant he could move on to the next task. Once more he called upon Portolá to lead the effort – this time to explore and colonize *Alta* California. At this point too, Gálvez brought in the leader of the Franciscans just assigned to the *Baja*, Junípero Serra. Portolá would become the military governor of the two Californias, as Serra would become Father-President of the two. The strategy directed Portolá and Serra to begin the colonization effort at the two best harbors, San Diego in the south and Monterey

in the north. A *presidio* (fort) and mission would be established at both places and then a system or trail of missions would be placed in between the two about a day's walk apart – similar to the string of missions in the *Baja*. The principal contingent of the expedition would be on land. Again the possibility of English naval aggression necessitated good land connection, making the location of trails imperative for the future.

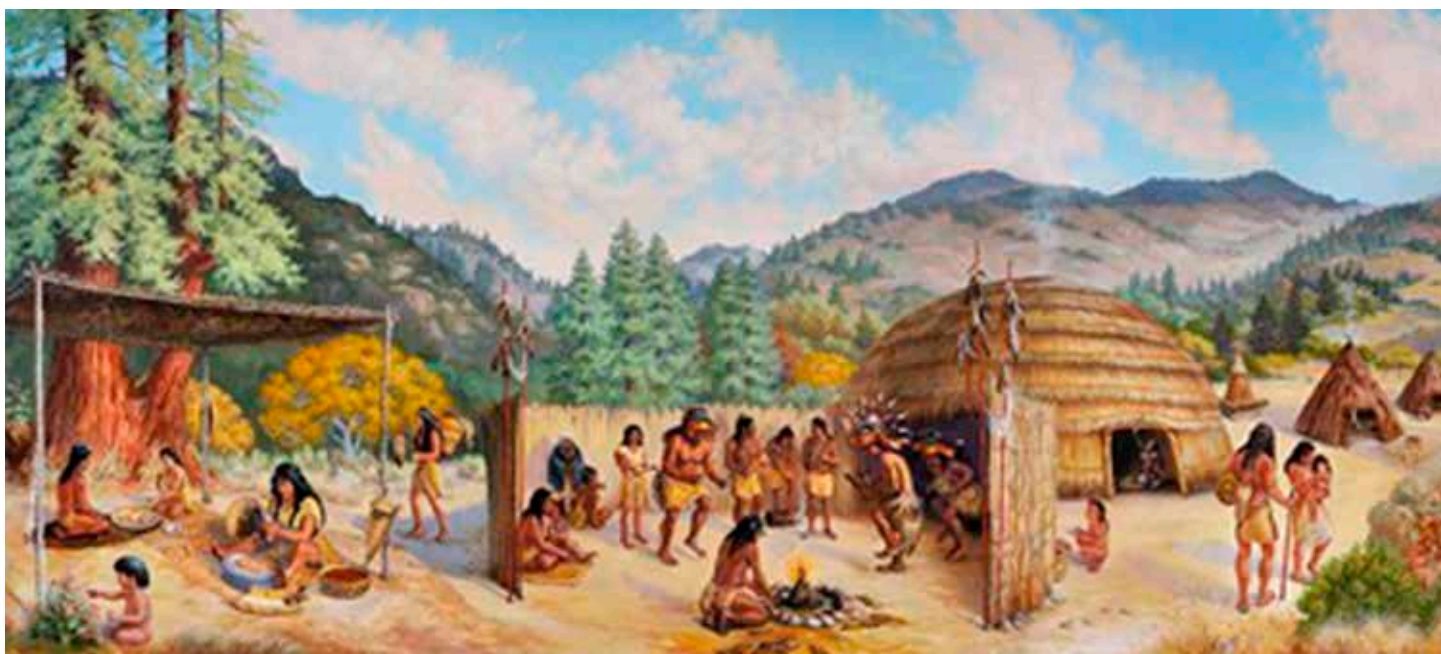
What the Spanish called the “Sacred Expedition”³⁰ started out in the early months of 1769. Three ships were assigned the duty of supplying the main body of explorers who were on foot and mule. The vessels *San Antonio* and *San Carlos* were to rendezvous with the land contingent at San Diego. The *San José* was to meet them at Monterey. The land party moved up the *Baja* in two groups. Together they consisted of a number of converted Indians to act as interpreters and examples, a few dozen soldiers, a small number of blacksmiths, cooks and carpenters, one engineer and one doctor.

The *San Antonio* reached San Diego first after 54 days at sea. Despite their reputation for accuracy, charts, drawn up during the Vizcaíno expedition, had marked San Diego too far north. The *San Carlos* arrived

three weeks later with a scurvy-ridden crew. In the meantime the land parties reached San Diego with only about half of the original 300 who had originally set out. Portolá and Serra were certainly challenged. Dozens were sick. The sole doctor had gone insane. The *San Antonio* was sent back to Mexico for supplies.

Portolá, recognizing his duties, decided to move north to Monterey as ordered with about 60 of the healthy soldiers, the party's engineer, Miguel Costansó, and Franciscan Padres Juan Crespi and Francisco Gomez. Costansó and Crespi turned out to be terrific diarists of the journey. Crespi, who had been Father Serra's student back in Spain even before Serra became a Franciscan, was particularly enthusiastic about the things they saw and the people they met. Father Serra, meanwhile, took care of the sick and founded the settlement at San Diego, establishing *Alta California's* first mission and *presidio*. The route Portolá undertook was later referred to as *El Camino Real* (the King's Highway), which is close to U.S. Highway 101 today. His aim was to meet the *San José* at Monterey. Sadly, the *San José* was never heard from again – lost at sea and lost to history.

Portolá's party anxiously scoured the coast for the



Dancing at Quiroste by Ann Theiermann, www.anntheiermann.com.

San José as they came closer to Monterey. When they actually saw Monterey Bay, the men felt that this place could not be the location that Vizcaíno had described as a safe harbor. And so, they marched onward.

On October 23, Portolá's party reached Whitehouse Creek at the southwest tip of today's San Mateo County. Here they met the *Quiroste* people, and they noted their "*Casa Grande*".

Indicative of what was most on their minds, Crespi wrote about "eight or ten Indian men" who had come over "from another village". The natives seemingly communicated to the Spanish that within three days' march there existed two harbors, "and the ship is there: Divine Providence grant it be so, and that we reach there as soon as can be!"³¹ Thus, the hope remained alive that Monterey Bay still lie ahead with the promise of provisions from the *San José*.

The *Quiroste*s sent guides along with the Spanish as they proceeded north. They crossed Pescadero Creek and then rested at San Gregorio Creek on October 25 and 26. Crespi was impressed with the potential of the land he was seeing. He felt the area north of Pescadero Creek to be "a grand place for a very large mission, with plenty of water and soil..." At San Gregorio Creek he wrote: "A good deal of land could be put under irrigation with this water; outside the valley all the hills are good dry-farming land." Crespi noted the people at San Gregorio (the *Oljons*) were "fair and well-bearded..." Their men wore no clothes. They "go totally naked, with however much nature gave them in plain view."³² Crespi was also impressed by the food offered by the Indians: "They brought us large shares of big dark-colored tamales they make from their grass-seeds, and the soldiers said they were very good and rich." These tamales or pies and other foods provided by the Indians, probably assisted the expedition with fighting its problems with scurvy.

The party proceeded north. At Pillar Point a somewhat frustrated Costansó wrote:

We could not tell...whether we were far away from Monterey or close to it. We were

frequently rained upon; our provisions were running out and the men's ration reduced to a mere five flour and bran cakes a day...; the decision was made to slay mules for the soldier's rations, but they (the soldiers) refused it until needed for a greater want.³³

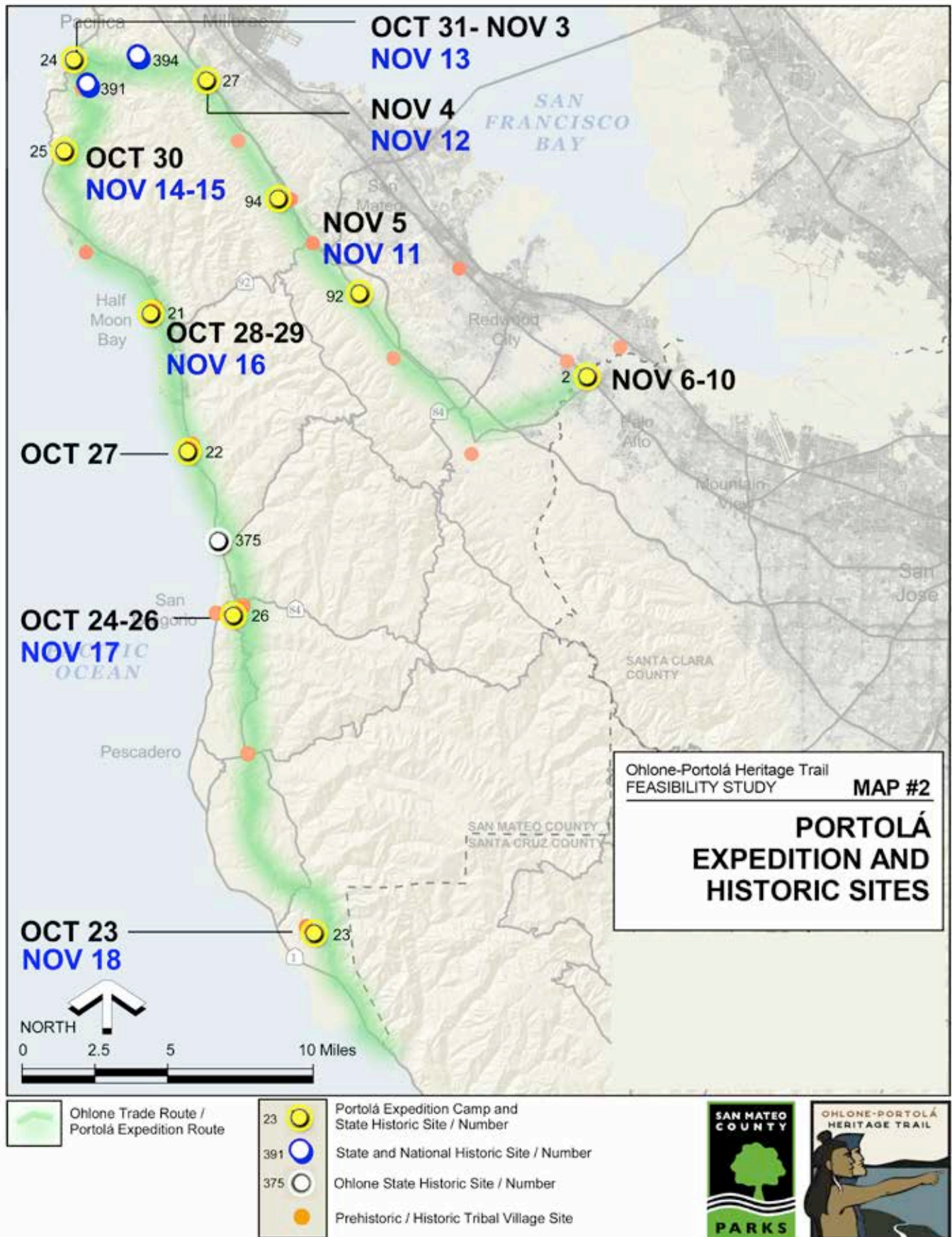
Here they rested a day. Crespi, looking south at Half Moon Bay, was again positive about what he was seeing: "(this) would be a fine place for a town." At Martini's Creek he recorded that the party named it *Arroyo Hondo del Almejas* for the deep creek and its musselbed. He also noted seeing *farallones* (island rocks) "in front of us."

On October 31, the party began its climb of either San Pedro or Montara Mountain. When they got to the top, Portolá noted that "25 heathens came up." These were the *Aramai*. Here Portolá dispatched Sergeant José Ortega with eight soldiers to move in advance of the main body. Meanwhile Costansó studied the *Farallones* to the west and determined that "the Port of Monterey had been left behind."³⁴ That night they made camp in the San Pedro Valley. Crespi wrote about this place:

Shortly after we reached here there came over to the camp a good-sized village of very good well-behaved friendly heathens, (who)...brought us a great many... tamales... There must be many villages...for we have seen many smokes from here; mussels are also very plentiful here, and very large... Many deer have been seen upon the hills here... Bear tracks and droppings have been seen...our sick men since we left the creek of La Salud (Waddell Creek in Santa Cruz County) have been improving more every day....³⁵

On November 2, Costansó recorded how a group of the soldiers asked permission to go deer hunting. Some of these:

went a good distance from the camp and so far back up into the hills that they came back after nightfall. These men said, that...they had seen



an enormous arm of the sea or estuary which shot inland...that they had seen handsome plains all studded with trees, and the number of smokes they had made out...left them in no doubt the country must have been well peopled with heathen villages.

Thus these hunters became the first Europeans to see the San Francisco Bay, most probably somewhere atop coastal hills now known as Sweeney Ridge. The other intriguing thing about this account is the reference to the “number of smokes” (from village fires), indicating the Bayside was “well peopled”.

On Friday, November 3, Costansó reported on a party of scouts who were sent up to the ridge line. They returned at night firing their guns. Crespi tells us that they had “come upon a great estuary.” Some seven villages were close-by, and they saw “many lakes with countless geese, ducks, cranes and other fowl...” However, the camp became more excited with the news that Indians, encountered by the scouts, said that a ship was anchored in this estuary. Some felt they had found the *San José* and Monterey after all. However Costansó and Crespi realized that the existence of the *farrallones* so close-by, indicated that this body of water was something else.

The next day, Saturday, November 4, the main party moved up the hill on an Indian path, perhaps close to today’s Baquino Trail. At Sweeney Ridge, they beheld the San Francisco Bay. Portolá wrote: “We traveled three hours; the entire road was bad. We halted without water.”³⁶ Obviously, the commander was not impressed.

Costansó was more descriptive:

...our Commander determined to continue the journey in search of the harbor and vessel of which the scouts had been informed by the heathens, and in the afternoon we set out... going along...the shoreline...until we took to the mountains on a northeast course. From their height we (saw) the great estuary....³⁷

Certainly, Crespi was the most loquacious:

About one o’clock in the afternoon we...

went over some pretty high hills, with nothing but soil and grass, but the grass all burnt off by the heathens. Beyond, through hollows between hills, we once more came to climb an extremely high hill, and shortly (saw) from the height a large arm of the sea, or extremely large estuary.³⁸

He estimated that this body of water to be “four or five leagues in width in some places, and in others two, and at narrowest it may be a league wide or more.” A league for these explorers was a rather inexact measurement that could range in actual distance from 2.5 to 4.5 miles. Crespi continues with the view to the north: “About a league and a half or two leagues from where we were, some mountains were made out that seemed to make an opening, and it seemed to us the estuary must go in by there, and as if there were a sort of harbor there within the mountains; we could not see clearly, as the mountains, which were high stood in the way.” In other words, Crespi was describing San Bruno Mountain and Mount Tamalpais behind it. Because of these mountains the party could not locate the outlet of the Bay to the Pacific.

Portolá then made a fateful decision. Still in search of the *San José*, instead of proceeding north and finding the “Golden Gate”, he ordered his party east down Sweeney Ridge toward San Bruno and then south through the San Andreas Valley in the direction of Millbrae. Costansó wrote that with the estuary “on our left hand,” they “...travelled through a hollow...in which we stopped at sunset, in the cluster of live-oaks, which fringed the skirts of the high hills on the western side.” Crespi described the place they camped, probably around U.S. Interstate 280, just west of Millbrae: “...we set up camp at the foot of these mountains, close to a lake where there were countless ducks, cranes, geese and others.”

The next day, Sunday, November 5, the column of discovery continued. Costansó wrote:

We skirted along the estuary, upon its western side not within sight of it since we were separated from it by hills of the hollow...The

country was well-favored: the mountains we were leaving to the right...showed themselves topped with handsome savins, with scrub oak and other lesser trees.

They were continuing to travel south, down the hollow later referred to as the San Andreas Valley, following adjacent to the path of the future Interstate 280. Crespi commented on the abundant animal life:

Tracks have been encountered of large livestock here in this hollow, which...must have been made by bears, as droppings have been seen belonging to (them)... Also a great many deer have been seen together, while the scouts aver that when they explored here they succeeded in counting a band of 50 deer together.³⁹

After marching about four and a half hours they came to rest near a creek (due west of Burlingame) and were visited by three natives – most probably *Ssalson* people. They were, according to Crespi, much like Indians previously met on the Peninsula, “very well-behaved:

with gifts of black pies and a sort of cherries.”

Portolá’s exhausted group marched another day trying to get around the estuary. They made it as far as San Francisquito Creek, near present-day El Camino Real at the border between San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Here, near a tall tree that could be seen for miles around (*Palo Alto*), they made camp, and Portolá ordered Sergeant Ortega with a few soldiers to continue the search. The scouting party proceeded south, then east, then north, around the Bay, but did not travel far enough up the eastern bayshore to spot the Golden Gate or, of course, the *San José*. On Friday evening, November 10, they returned to camp “very downcast,”⁴⁰ according to Costansó.

The gloomy report prompted Portolá to convene a council of his officers. Somehow the expedition had missed Monterey, and the sick and exhausted party was at its end of endurance. They then broke camp and retraced their steps to Sweeney Ridge, then the San Pedro Valley and on down the coast, eating their mules along the way.⁴¹ At Monterey Bay, they again could not come to grips that this was the place described by Vizcaíno. On returning to San Diego, most of the party revealed that they had not been much impressed with what they had seen. It seems only Father Crespi knew that something significant had been found at this great estuary: “It is a very large and fine harbor, such that not only all the navy of our Most Catholic Majesty but those of all Europe could take shelter in it.”⁴²

Back in Mexico, opinion sided on Crespi’s side of things. Early in 1770, under orders to continue his work, Portolá sent Serra, Costansó and his second in command, Pedro Fages, on to Monterey by sea in the *San Antonio*. He set out overland again with just 12 soldiers, leaving only eight to guard San Diego. He finally realized that what the first party had twice walked by was Monterey Bay. California’s second mission and second *presidio* would be established in the area. In the meantime he sent Fages north to try to figure out what it was that they had seen at the end of the first expedition. Fages and a small group of soldiers marched north-east



Portolá Expedition by Fred Sinclair, Jr., 1981.

via an inland route, reached the San Francisco Bay and made it far enough up the east bayshore to be the first Europeans to see the opening of the Bay at the Golden Gate.

Still, Gaspar de Portolá, the sophisticated Spaniard of noble blood, saw little in all this. He thought that if the Russians really wanted this God-forsaken part of the world, of which he had grave doubts, that they should have it as punishment for their aggressive ambitions.⁴³ He was soon recalled to Spain, retired and never came back to the Americas.

Why had not the Golden Gate and San Francisco Bay been discovered previously? The California coast had been charted and charted again. Cabrillo's crew, Drake, Vizcaíno and the many Manila galleons had sailed right on by. Certainly the persistent fogs of the Golden Gate could have hidden it from some. Most sailors, with or without fog, desired to sail west of the Farallon Islands to avoid catastrophe, making a discovery unlikely. Mostly though, the Golden Gate was difficult to see, even close by. Presently the famous Golden Gate Bridge marks the spot. Without it, the Gate is disguised. The opening itself is small. Moreover, the islands of the Bay, with the East Bay hills as a backdrop, give the appearance that the Gate is but another rocky cove along the Pacific Coast.⁴⁴

Thus the discovery was made by the first European land party to reach the Bay region, and the location of the event is today known as Sweeney Ridge. With the aid of San Mateo County historian Frank Stanger, California historian Herbert Bolton, of the University of California, after years of research, confirmed the location of the discovery site in 1947.⁴⁵ The site at Sweeney Ridge was designated a National Historic Landmark on May 23, 1968.⁴⁶

Historians have long hailed the discovery as crucial to the development of the Peninsula and surrounding areas. Had not Portolá happened upon "the great estuary," it may have taken many more years before a land party might have encountered San Francisco Bay, further retarding the march of events of the Spanish

California period.⁴⁷ While Monterey was established in 1770, it only lasted six years as the Spanish northernmost outpost, for in 1776, the mission and presidio at San Francisco were established as a direct result of the discovery of the Bay.

The 1769 episode encouraged more exploration. In 1772, the new military governor of California, Pedro Fages, went north from Monterey as he did in 1770, except this time he took along Father Crespi and penetrated much farther north and then east. In a failed attempt to get around the Bay, he charted the landscape deep into the East Bay and discovered Suisun Bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

From the descriptions of 1772, the Spanish could now begin to put together the keys to the military protection and commercial promise of *Alta California*. They could now envision that if the Golden Gate was navigable, then access to the greatest natural harbor on the west coast of the Americas could be gained. Because the Gate was so narrow, the entire San Francisco Bay might be sufficiently defended from the bluffs nearby against a naval threat. Advancing that train of thought, if the Golden Gate could be controlled and utilized, and if the Bay could likewise be controlled and utilized, then the deep waters of the Delta could



Father Crespi's map of the San Francisco Bay, 1772.

be used by ships to sail into the interior of California. Further exploration indicated if the Delta could be sailed, then the Sacramento River might be navigated to the north and the San Joaquin River to the south. In the era before railroads, when maritime shipping was universally the most important type of transportation, these realizations had great significance.

It had all started with the Bay discovery in 1769. Although Spain lacked the personnel and resources to fully exploit the situation, and the later Mexican authorities were even less able to take advantage of it, after the United States military take-over of California in 1846 and the Gold Rush that followed three years later, the Americans were. They fortified the Golden Gate with a variety of forts and gun emplacements before the Civil War (1861-1865). The port and City of San Francisco grew in population and economic importance so that by the end of the nineteenth century it could be considered the "Imperial"⁴⁸ city of the American West. For thousands of years, California had existed as a difficult to reach place, inhabited by a native people unknown to the rest of the world. From Portolá's chance discovery of the Bay forward, all would change. This California would become within 200 years the most populated, economically powerful and culturally influential state within the most important country in the world.

Spanish Missions

While the Spanish government and military seemed incapable of gaining momentum in *Alta* California, the Catholic Franciscans made remarkable progress. Before he died in 1784, Serra had supervised the establishment of nine missions and the baptism of 5,300 souls.⁴⁹

Reflecting upon this rapid change, the Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians* declares: "Traditionally, California Indians have been portrayed in history as a docile primitive people, who openly embraced the invading Spaniards and were rapidly subdued. This simplistic contention adds little

to a realistic understanding of native history in California and undoubtedly is derived from crude feelings of racial superiority on the part of its advocates."⁵⁰ The relationship between the Spanish and the Indians was not always a peaceful co-existence. Rather, the history of California Indians is the story of an attempt to survive a series of invasions and the hardships that ensued. The rapidity and completeness of the sweep of these people into the Church seems extraordinary. Randall Milliken in his 1995 study, *Time of Little Choice*, explains that this transformation resulted because of the shattering by the Spanish of the balances that had made Ohlones so successful in an unchanging world. While Spanish livestock took over the pasture land, Spanish law prohibited the Indians from burning brush to provide grasslands for the animals they hunted. Spanish diseases depleted local populations and broke the pattern of teamwork among the people. The survivors simply had not enough hands to continue the old ways. Stronger groups, less effected originally, could temporarily dominate their weakened neighbors.

According to Milliken the people "lost faith in the feasibility of continuing their traditional way...",⁵¹ and, sadly, once the decision was made to be taken in by the Church "...they left behind a major portion of their identity."⁵²

Meanwhile the thought of any defensive alliances that the people might forge to oppose the Spanish was impossible. The Indians of Central California, simply did not think of themselves as a single people.

Worst yet were the diseases that the Spanish brought with them, of which the Indians had no immunity. At *Misión San Francisco de Asís*, up to 30% of a population might die in a bad year. The high death rate combined with a low birth rate among the demoralized people was a disturbing trend to contend with for the padres. It is important to note that the major epidemics in California were still to come. The first measles epidemic did not hit until 1806. Sickness among the Ohlone was severely compounded by the austere living and working conditions imposed by the Spanish

resulting in the drastic population declines.

In the end, the story of the Ohlone people is not a happy one. By 1810, all of them had been taken into the missions. Of the 17,000 people that once made-up this culture, few were left after 41 years of contact with the Spanish.⁵³

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Notes

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The San Mateo County Historical Association is leading various aspects of the interpretive program for the Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail project which is guided by a committee of county, state, federal and tribal representatives which will explore the best ways to design and interpret the path that Gaspar de Portolá took during his expedition of the San Mateo County coast and the San Francisco Bay. This work will include telling the history of the Ohlone people who lived in the area.

The anticipated 90-mile Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail alignment through San Mateo County will be created using segments of the California Coastal Trail, existing sidewalks and/or trails through lands of Peninsula Open Space Trust and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, State Parks and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and County Parks. Some route segments will be identified through working with willing private property owners and Caltrans.

An interpretive multi-use recreation and automobile route, it will honor the region's California Indians and the Portolá Expedition.

Dr. Stanger Legacy Society



Dr. Stanger at Millbrae excavation site, 1944.

Dr. Frank Stanger was the first executive director of the San Mateo County Historical Association. Among his accomplishments, he opened the organization's first museum and started publishing *La Peninsula*.

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Pruristac Village, Amy Hosa and Linda Yamane, 2019. The painting was created for a mural in the Sanchez Adobe Interpretive Center, which is nearing completion.