

CHAPTER II

CALIFORNIA BEFORE 1846

Spanish Precedents

European presence in California began as early as 1542, when Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo landed near present-day San Diego and claimed Alta (or upper) California for Spain. This set the precedent for a Hispanic influence that would come to dominate California, in various manifestations, through the modern day. For almost 40 years, the Spanish had sole dominion over the area and its native inhabitants. However, in 1578, while in the process of circumnavigating the globe, Sir Francis Drake of England also made landfall on the California coast. He claimed the area for his royal patron, Queen Elizabeth I, and called the new land Nova Albion (or New England). The actual site of Drake's landing is unconfirmed, though speculation points to various bays scattered from the California Channel Islands to the Oregon coast, including points near Monterey. Drake's appellation was given due to the similarities that he noted between the coastal cliffs of California and those along the English Channel.¹

Despite the very early dates of these explorations, it is of interest to note that since the beginning of European presence in California the area has been most strongly influenced by two cultural entities: Hispanic and Anglo. Thus, long before European occupation of the area, the seed of Anglo-Hispanic influence in California was already planted. This became poignant as the story of Monterey and its architectural heritage progressed.

With the happenstance of this dual territorial claim and the mounting pressure exerted by other countries' world exploration, Spain felt the need to enforce dominance on its holdings. It also felt, for the first time, that its silver resources in the New World, in the form of galleons sailing the coast and mines in the region, were threatened by the presence of competitors.² An advance into California seemed like the best way for Spain to make its claim tangible.

With both economic and religious motivations, the Spanish moved to occupy Alta California in 1769, when Don Gaspar de Portola and Franciscan Father, Junipero Serra, arrived in San Diego. Representing politics and religion respectively, Portola and Serra began a campaign that would establish a physical Spanish presence in California. It took the form of twenty missions, four military presidios, and three civilian pueblos.³

When Sebastian Vizcaino had discovered a certain central California bay in 1602 and named it for the Count de Monte Rey, the viceroy of Spain, he added it to the coastal map he created from his explorations.⁴ (Figure 2) It was this map that Portola and Serra used when trying to relocate the bay for settlement. Traveling by land, they approached from the east and, missing critical landmarks, continued north to San Francisco Bay, now recognized as Portola's greatest find.⁵ Determined to locate Monterey, however, Portola made another attempt by sea. In the spring of 1770, he was successful and Monterey was officially identified and settled. The first Spanish installments were the presidio and the Mission San Carlos de Borromeo.⁶

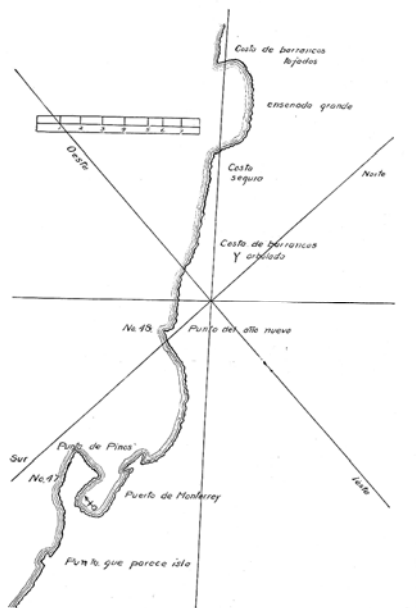


FIGURE 2: Vizcaino's map of Monterey Bay, 1602. Source: McGroarty, John S. *California, Its History and Romance*. (Los Angeles: Grafton Publishing Co., 1911), 22.

In the same year as its founding and settlement, Monterey was made the capital of Spanish California and acted as the seat of religious and civil authority. Portola became the first Governor of California, though he served only two years in that capacity. However, he advanced Spanish influence northward and made Spanish colonization in California a reality.⁷ As well as being the capital, Monterey was also the prominent port in the region. The presidio was known as the “Royal Presidio” and the church at the mission was known as the “Royal Chapel” in recognition of the fact that the King of Spain would have had personal dominion over these places had he resided in the area.⁸

Monterey was where third Governor, Felipe de Neve, drafted his “Reglamento”. This was one of the first and most prominent codes of legislation in Spanish California. It dictated orders of conduct for the presidios, provisioned troops and civilians, regulated settlement in the region, established laws in the pueblos, and promoted agriculture and industry.⁹

Perhaps because of such orderly administration of California, the region is generally described as a peaceful land of plenty during the era of Spanish rule. With access to abundant raw materials and troubled only by the efforts required to subsist, Spanish California operated independently for a lengthy amount of time on its system of far-

flung presidios, pueblos and missions. Little attempt was made at further growth or firmer establishment. However, like many territorial settlements, life in the pueblos was rugged and governors often made note of the low morals, morale and prosperity of California citizens. Some governors attempted to reform their charges; however, little progress was ever made.

After 1800, trade was conducted with various foreign parties like the Russians and Americans, however, some tension developed with the proximity of such outsiders to Spanish territory.¹⁰ Trade with foreigners was also considered disloyal to the crown, but it was secretly condoned since total reliance on local production and official supply ships from Mexico was not possible. Despite this interaction, Spain never escaped its distrust of foreign parties. It was this, and the encroachment of revolutionaries and insurgents from South America, who had already thrown off Spanish rule, that most threatened Spanish control of California.

Though somewhat removed from any unrest taking place in Mexico, the repercussions of revolution eventually telegraphed to the California settlements. Early in 1821, Agustin de Iturbide, who had once been a loyal cavalry officer of the Spanish crown, proclaimed independence in Mexico.¹¹ It took only a year for the break with Spain to be instituted in California. Various skirmishes had occurred in ports

along the coast and growing revolutionary sentiments were heard in the pueblos. Then in 1822, the *San Carlos* sailed into Monterey Bay flying the new Mexican flag and demanded that control of California be transferred to Mexican power. The transition was a subdued event, with little real resistance. With the raising of the new flag, California entered the next period in its history.¹²

Mexican Independence

California's Mexican period was short lived, lasting only about 25 years, but the cultural developments that took place during that time have arguably had the greatest impact upon the history and long-term development of California as a place. No longer subjected to the rule of a distant monarchy, Mexicans in California – or Californios, as they were called – enjoyed an existence that was almost idyllic in its peacefulness, prosperity, and general state of status quo.

With this idyll came a certain amount of apathy, however. When first instituted, the new government had given hope that California would join international trade, but as years passed California continued to rely on its basic hide-and-tallow economy. It supported its own people and foreign trade grew marginally through the production of those goods, but little real progress was achieved. For a time Monterey was the only

official port of entry to California, which forced Californios elsewhere to practice free trade of their own volition.¹³ Much of this was orchestrated by merchant houses in the United States that benefited greatly from having this sure source of raw materials, not widely available in the east, which they could trade for finished goods from the urban centers of America.¹⁴

Surprisingly, the missions dominated much of the hide and tallow production, though Mexican politics was shunting the religious institutions into increasingly secular niches. With such decrees as the Colonization Act of 1824 and the Supplemental Regulations of 1828, private citizens were given the ability to own land in California. This foreshadowed the Secularization Act of 1833, which then took mission lands and made them available for settlement and agricultural uses. The missions' hide and tallow trade was also disseminated among private citizens and this resulted in a class of *nouveaux riche* Mexicans, who used their new wealth to further develop the settlements. They tended to build larger, more fashionable, Spanish style homes.¹⁵ Ranchos, vast private estates for family living, ranching, and agriculture, thus took the place of the Franciscan missions as the dominant social and economic influence in California.¹⁶

The ranchos supported a somewhat luxurious and wealthy society; however, it is of interest to note that many immigrants to the

region during the Mexican period were convicts and cast outs sent to California by the Mexican government.¹⁷ This alone may have injected a certain rebelliousness into Californio society, but the fact that existing Californios felt the Mexican government to be fractured and unsound further instilled a mentality of unrest in the region.

In 1844, an edict was issued from Mexico that prohibited all trade between California and any foreign parties. With California prospering from such trade, the reaction was negative. Though trade continued illicitly and the status quo was maintained, friction between Mexico and America increased. Many Mexican Californios supported the Americans in the dispute, for they too benefited from foreign trade in California and found Mexican rule increasingly arbitrary and repressive.

The Mexican-American War started in May of 1846, well outside of California, and news was slow in reaching the Mexican territory. Despite this, Californio sentiments sparked their own conflict in June of that year, resulting in the Bear Flag Revolt. Americans around Sacramento and Sonoma lead an armed uprising and established the bear flag as their symbol of independence from Mexican rule and to proclaim their loyalty to the United States.¹⁸ It was a purely isolated event, independent of any actual military plans, but it indicated the political atmosphere in California and was an almost ironic prelude to the arrival of Commodore John Sloat in Monterey that July.

Arriving on the 2nd of July, 1846, the *Savannah* brought Sloat and the American colors to Monterey at the behest of Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft. (Figure 3) Bancroft's orders stated; "if you ascertain with certainty that Mexico has declared war against the United States, you will at once possess yourself of... and blockade or occupy such other ports as your force may permit."¹⁹ After a few days of negotiations, the California territorial leaders conceded their power and on July 7th, the American flag was raised over the Monterey Custom House, ending Mexican rule and making California part of the United States.²⁰

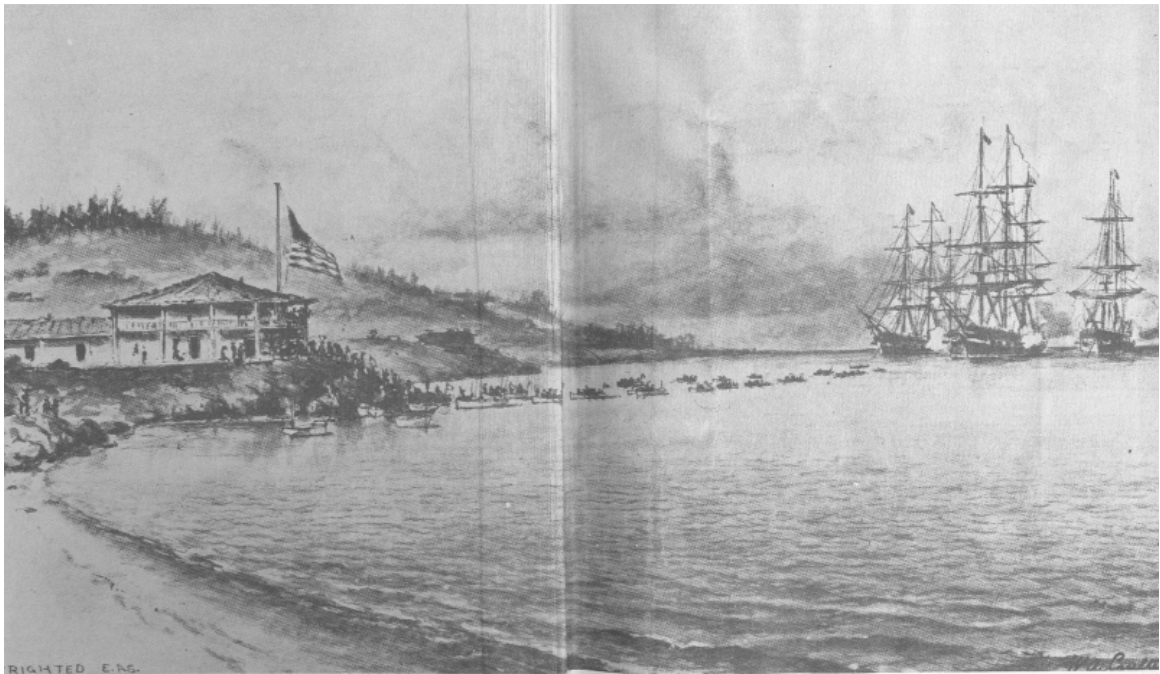


FIGURE 3: Sloat's landing at Monterey. Source: Underhill, Reuben L. *From Cowhides to Golden Fleece: A narrative of California, 1832-1858*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1939)

In this way, California became part of the United States without ever having been a true American territory or colony first. After Mexico relinquished control, California immediately became the 31st state of the Union.²¹ To smooth that transition, Commodore Sloat proclaimed:

I declare to the inhabitants of California that, although I come armed with a powerful force, I do not come among them as an enemy to California; on the contrary, I come as their best friend, as henceforward California will be a portion of the United States and its peaceful inhabitants will enjoy the same rights and privileges as the citizens of any other portion of that territory... They will also enjoy a permanent government under which life, property, and the constitutional right and lawful security to worship the Creator in the way most congenial to each one's sense of duty, will be secured... the country will rapidly advance and improve in both agriculture and commerce... A great increase in the value of real estate and the products of California may also be anticipated....the country cannot but improve more rapidly than any other on the continent of America.²²

With this confident good will and optimism, the people of California did not feel animosity toward American control, especially since they were allowed to retain their existing leadership and way of life. With Mexico unable to compete with American offerings, control by the United States was welcomed in California and has prevailed ever since.

American Presence

As it pertains to this study, the critical phase in this quickly evolving history lies in a somewhat nebulous zone, just before the

successful American conquest of California, when Mexico ruled, but American presence set the pace of society and culture. It was a time before Sloat's promises had been made, but there was not yet a war between Mexico and the United States. In this short period of time, a certain equality and cooperation prevailed between all inhabitants of California; Mexican or American.

As noted, foreign (that is, non-Spanish) presence in California had been scarce and strongly discouraged by its Hispanic occupants. During the Mexican period, this changed, however. In 1821, only 20 foreigners resided in Alta California, but by 1845, the number had increased dramatically to 680.²³ The integration of other nationalities into California society was less prevalent than it would become during the Gold Rush of 1849, but it increased nonetheless, and the Mexican Californios exhibited less of the xenophobic attitudes that their Spanish predecessors had possessed.

The majority of foreigners came to California due to the economic opportunities described previously. Merchants saw a prime situation for themselves acting as intermediaries for trade between California and the rest of the world. Richard Henry Dana, experiencing Mexican California as a seaman on a trading ship in 1835, described the circumstances:

Having more industry, frugality, and enterprise than the natives, [the Americans] soon get nearly all the trade into their hands. They usually keep shops, in which they retail the goods purchased in larger quantities from our vessels, and also send a good deal into the interior, taking hides in pay, which they again barter with our ships. In every town on the coast there are foreigners engaged in this kind of trade, while I recollect but two shops kept by natives.²⁴

While the American merchants were intent on these economic dealings, they essentially became citizens of California themselves. Many did this literally; by marrying into prominent Mexican families, buying property, adopting Mexican culture, establishing households as well as business ventures, and sometimes even converting to Catholicism. They were seen as uniquely different from the Mexicans; reserved, shrewd, but with great integrity. “Their very freedom and frankness were wrapped in a protective armor”, but they were largely admired and accepted by the more flamboyant Californios.²⁵

Even before Sloat had ever made his speech regarding the impending advancement of society and improvement of commerce in California, American merchants were priming the pump. Boston was their focal point for business and was the best American market for California’s hides and tallow. In exchange, they supplied the Californios with the accoutrements that their society so appreciated. Fine clothing and luxuries were in high demand and American merchants made

almost as much profit from bartering these items within California as they did exporting hides to America.

Without established financial institutions in California, monetary holdings were often based in the East, but they were entirely subject to the active trading and bartering done on the West Coast. Bank checks did not exist, but notes and drafts were readily exchanged, as were “bills of exchange” from the Eastern accounts themselves. Debts were typically carried and passed around for lengthy amounts of time, but a certain integrity existed among California traders and none worried that debts would not be settled eventually.²⁶

Though they didn't fit the rugged pioneer image associated with so many early settlers, these merchants acted as the advance guard for further American encroachment. They were in California to do business, but their communications to the East and demonstration of the land's prosperity attracted others, who came by ship and over land to make their own claims and reap California's rewards.

The numbers of wagon trains traveling to California were many in the mid 1800s. The Mexican government required passports of foreigners entering the territory, however, leaders like Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo tended to waive the requirement in favor of expediting and encouraging migration to California. He was a noted admirer of

democratic government and thought highly of the United States and its people for this characteristic.²⁷

These subsequent settlers were a breed apart from the well-established American merchants. They were often referred to as “invaders,” as the early merchants never were. Though the merchants worked to establish American influence, they assimilated into the culture around them. The later settlers did not and even the merchants thought of them as trespassers. They were not prone to integrate into Mexican society and they were insular; bringing family and home with them, remaining American citizens and Protestant, and intermarrying only with other American settlers. They settled primarily on inland claims that the Mexicans had little desire for and, though they made up a meaningful part of the American population, they participated relatively little in the bustling, progressive, dynamic Californio society that existed in places like Monterey.²⁸

Thomas O. Larkin in Monterey

Thomas Oliver Larkin, arguably the most prominent of American merchants in Mexican California, managed to embody the mindsets of both types of American settler. (Figure 4) He very squarely fit the description of merchant entrepreneur, with business dealings all

along the California coast and in Boston. He arrived relatively early, in 1832, and became well established, with stores and other ventures in Monterey and an active travel schedule that regularly took him throughout California and Mexico. Yet, unlike many of his peers, he gravitated more toward the disposition of the later settlers. He staunchly retained his American citizenship, he did not convert to Catholicism, and he married an American woman who he met on his first voyage to California.

With these unique characteristics, Larkin was something of an island in Californio society, but he was also its centerpiece. It is unarguable that he dominated the town of Monterey. He respected the Californios, but not their Mexican government.²⁹ Because of this, he was willing to work with the governmental leaders in Monterey to better the state of politics in California. Larkin was their equal and worked along side them as an American liaison. He presided over commerce, becoming involved in the affairs of customs and trade regulations at the port of Monterey and acted as a bank for the California government, collecting and disbursing money out of his house.³⁰ He also provided the town with basic goods and services both necessary and luxury, including such novelties as a grog shop and a bowling alley.³¹ In this way, he provided not just subsistence for the community, but culture. This made him a force in Californio society.



FIGURE 4: Thomas Oliver Larkin. Source: Underhill, Reuben L. *From Cowhides to Golden Fleece: A narrative of California, 1832-1858*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1939), iii.

In the 1840s, as the number of American settlers in California grew and tensions with Mexico increased, many foreign governments felt the need to appoint resident consulate officials in California, particularly the United States. After a mistaken attempt by American Commodore, Thomas Catesby Jones, to occupy Monterey in 1842, the need for an American authority in California became a priority. Larkin was already known as the leading American citizen in the territory and so he was appointed Consul to the United States; a position that he was the first and last to occupy. A year later, he was also given the responsibility of acting as a “confidential agent” for the United States, a job that required him to keep a sharp but discrete watch on British and French activities in the region. With the growing unrest between Mexico and the United

States, there were suspicions that these powers would try to seize control of California and make it their own colony. Larkin was appointed to see that this did not happen.³²

With such political and economic prowess, it is easy to see why Larkin, situated in the capital at Monterey, was a preeminent Californian. “[I do] not look on Mexicans so ill as many foreigners do,” he wrote in an 1846 letter to his wife, “I have lived long with them not to have some good feelings for them, and believe they return that feeling toward me.”³³ In noting this and other sentiments expressed by Larkin about his time in Monterey, it is clear that he held a great affection for California and its people; both Mexican and American. Later in his life, he worked to promote organizations like the Society of California Pioneers, for Americans who had been living in California prior to American conquest. With great nostalgia, Larkin recounted how he began to “yearn after the times prior to July 1846 and all their honest pleasures and the flesh pots of those days. Halcyon days they were. We shall not enjoy their like again.”³⁴ It is likely that many of his American compatriots, living in Monterey at the time, had the same feeling about the era and place that had brought them such great success. These people’s affection for the place, as well as the rich cultural atmosphere, political drive, and social dynamics that they inspired, set the scene in colonial Monterey. (Figure 5)



FIGURE 5: "Harbour and City of Monterey, California 1842" by Charles Gildemeister.
Source: Hague, Harlan and David J. Langum. *Thomas O. Larkin: A Life of Patriotism and Profit in Old California*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), cover.

Notes:

¹ Gutierrez, Ramon A. and Richard J. Orsi. *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 87-88.

² Ibid., 113.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Landi, Lisa Michele. "Monterey: A Meeting Place of Architectural Traditions of Southern and Northern California, 1769-1920." (MA thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1995), 55.

⁵ McGroarty, 119.

⁶ Landi, 55.

⁷ McGroarty, John S. *California, Its History and Romance*. (Los Angeles: Grafton Publishing Co., 1911), 119.

⁸ McGroarty, 103-104.

⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰ Ibid. 138-39.

¹¹ Richman, Irving Berdine. *California Under Spain and Mexico, 1535- 1847*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 227.

¹² McGroarty, 148-49.

¹³ Gutierrez, 130.

¹⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁵ Brak, Mark L. *Domestic Architecture in Hispanic California, The Monterey Style Reconsidered*. Edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Vol.4, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 171.

¹⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹⁷ Ibid., 300.

¹⁸ Ibid., 322.

¹⁹ University of Arizona, Conquest of California by Fremont and Sloat, 23 June 1998, available from http://southwest.library.arizona.edu/hav1/body.1_div.8.html; Internet; accessed 10 August 2004.

²⁰ Underhill, Reuben L. *From Cowhides to Golden Fleece: A narrative of California, 1832-1858, based upon unpublished correspondence of Thomas Oliver Larkin, trader, developer, promoter, and only American Consul*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1939), 118.

²¹ McGroarty, 239.

²² *Ibid.*, 242.

²³ Gutierrez, 136.

²⁴ Dana, Richard Henry. *Two Year Before the Mast*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 100.

²⁵ Underhill, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁷ Gutierrez, 315.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁹ Hague, Harlan and David J. Langum. *Thomas O. Larkin: A Life of Patriotism and Profit in Old California*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

³¹ From tour of Larkin House given by California State Parks docent. 3/24/04.

³² Gutierrez, 319.

³³ Hague, 85.

³⁴ Perhaps Larkin's most famous quote. (Hague, 227-28)