

WEST
of the
REVOLUTION

AN UNCOMMON HISTORY
OF 1776

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The newcomers arrived with a panoply of strange but fascinating things: horses, cows, pigs, firearms, iron, sailing ships, woolen textiles, corn, wheat, liquor, dyes, chocolate, and a host of other goods. Equally intriguing to local residents, Spanish missionaries practiced unfamiliar and perhaps powerful rituals. Native inhabitants saw opportunity in their arrival, the possibility of appropriating and harnessing new ways of controlling and shaping the world. That promise explains why they so often welcomed the strangers—at least at first.

During the initial overland expedition to northern California in 1769, locals were "very friendly and cheerful." It was as if "they had always dealt with us," wrote one of the Spaniards. Near present-day Santa Cruz, they welcomed the strangers "with great affability and kindness." The Spanish repeated the same refrains: the Indians were of the "best disposition and temper," received them with "a great deal of hospitality and pleasure," were "anxious for them to come," and brought them "a great many large black very rich pies," which, the hungry soldiers reported, would have gone well with a spicy pipián sauce.¹⁸

When the *San Carlos* became the first European vessel on record to sail through the Golden Gate in July 1775, residents stood at the water's edge to assuage Spanish fears and encourage the crew to come ashore. Watching from shipboard, the missionary Vicente de Santa María confessed, "We summoned our courage because we had to, lest fear make cowards of us." Native peoples revealed no such misgivings. Visiting the sixty-foot ship, they were "in great delight," "marvelling" at its structure and wondering at the pens of lambs, hens, and pigeons. One of the Costanoan phrases recorded by Santa María sums up the pleasure that local residents took in the encounter: on being given a cigar, an individual aboard the Spanish vessel demanded, "Give me a light to start it with."¹⁹

To be sure, not everyone was unperturbed by the arrival of the foreigners. In 1769, the Spanish deemed one party of unwelcoming hunters to be "not in the mood." Another group of "amazed and confused" villagers north of Monterey "had no notice of our coming," though after some negotiation, the women set to work making food for the visitors, who gave them beads in return. On the shores of the East Bay, there was no such rapprochement. There, people of "evil disposition" reportedly received the Spanish "very badly."²⁰

The reasons for such variations in behavior are surely complex. In 1769, local residents may have been horrified by the enormous purple bruises covering the soldiers' skin, their bloody mouths (a result of bleeding gums), and grotesquely swollen limbs. Scurvy had set in just as the Spanish were approaching the Monterey area, and soon eight

soldiers were incapable of walking. Two received their last rites, but the fresh food gifted by locals relieved the worst of the symptoms. The emaciated soldiers survived, only to come down with fevers and severe diarrhea, caused by eating raw acorns.²¹

Moraga's founding expedition in 1776 suffered no such misfortune, and the Yelamus initially went frequently to trade with the newcomers, exchanging mussels and grass seeds for glass beads and Spanish food (excepting milk, which they refused to taste). In late August, a ship arrived with supplies for the new presidio and mission, and the Spanish began constructing a chapel and the living quarters for the Franciscan fathers. Three miles to the northwest, just inside the Golden Gate, they laid out the presidio, nearly 250 feet long on each side. Impressive in its size and uniformity, it was nonetheless made almost entirely of palisades and mud, and in 1779 heavy rains would wash away most of the structure.²²

On September 17, the day after Washington's troops held their position on Harlem Heights in Manhattan, the Spanish took formal possession of San Francisco Bay. Two missionaries performed a solemn mass, church bells were sounded, and cannons and muskets fired. The *San Carlos*, anchored offshore, responded in kind with its swivel guns. All felt "joy and happiness," wrote the missionary Francisco Palóu, though local residents vanished during the festivities and did not appear again for several days. In early October, another ceremony marked the official founding of the mission. "The only ones who did not enjoy this happy day," Palóu noted, "were the heathens."²³

Though language barriers made communication nearly impossible between natives and newcomers, the Yelamus soon realized that the Spanish intended to remain in their homelands. Ninety miles down the coast, Monterey served as an unnerving illustration of what might befall them. At Mission San Carlos, the Spanish took disciplinary actions against baptized natives that were disconcerting and even terrifying. In early 1775, for example, the Spanish spotted a convert "in actual fornication" with a colonist along the Carmel River. Both were locked up and interrogated, and the colonist was whipped. A month later,

Spanish soldiers hunted down a neophyte who had fled the mission. In December 1775, soldiers once again pursued an Indian fugitive, but he shot one of them with an arrow and escaped. Just as alarming was the fact that even the Spanish found cause to flee from the colonial outpost. When Anza reached the marshes on the outer edge of the San Joaquin Valley, his men recognized the area from earlier sorties in search of fugitive soldiers.²⁴

News of this astonishing behavior—which perhaps seemed far more incredible than Spanish technologies—traveled far and wide and certainly reached people living on the San Francisco peninsula. In May 1776, the missionary and explorer Francisco Garcés met an Indian who asked him in Spanish for paper to roll a cigar. “I had a suspicion that he might be some Christian who had just fled from the missions of Monterey,” wrote Garcés, “since he made signs of shooting and of flogging”—actions that the Indian must have described in detail to his hosts. (Garcés later confirmed his supposition that the cigar smoker was indeed a fugitive.) The encounter occurred in the foothills of the Sierras, well over one hundred miles from the closest mission.²⁵

Alongside those individual accounts of flight and captivity, Bay Area residents may have pieced together a general picture of the terrifying mortality rates in the missions. Except for 1774, demographic statistics are lacking for the early years of Mission San Carlos. In that year, twenty mission Indians died—a death rate of eighty-five per one thousand, which was extraordinarily high even for the eighteenth century. In later years, for which statistics are more complete, the annual death rate averaged seventy-nine for every thousand mission Indians, enough to prevent the population from reproducing itself. By comparison, in revolutionary-era Philadelphia, thirty-five of every thousand white residents died each year; for black residents, including the four out of five who were enslaved, the death rate was twice that. A grim list of often fatal diseases permeated mission life: dysentery, whooping cough, diphtheria, pneumonia, measles, influenza, tuberculosis, syphilis, gonorrhea, and the occasional devastating outbreak of smallpox.²⁶

At Mission San Antonio de Padua, about 175 miles south of San

Francisco, the year 1775 was especially deadly. The resident missionaries later compiled a grammar of the local Salinan language, and included practical sentences such as “o missina?” (Do you feel sick?) and “que^oonióyc^c zo pe^a Padre pe^a quissína” (The sick man was given medicine by the Padre). Some Indians at San Antonio de Padua blamed the Franciscans for the widespread illnesses that year. The “insolent” Salinans enticed Christian converts from the mission and sheltered them in the mountains, complained the Franciscans, where word of the frequent deaths and the suspected malevolent sorcery of the missionaries must have spread from village to village. The situation became so tense that the missionaries were unable to travel safely to native villages to proselytize.²⁷

By the time the Spanish ceremoniously took possession of San Francisco, many Yelamus had already fled across the bay or taken refuge on its uninhabited islands. Their visits to the mission became infrequent, occurring only when individuals passed by while hunting ducks on the lagoon. In December, relations turned hostile. One Yelamu man tried to kiss the wife of a soldier. Another threatened to shoot the missionaries’ cook, a native convert from Monterey. A third killed a pig that had been foraging on Yelamu land, eating the roots and seeds that local women harvested. The commanding sergeant bound and flogged the man and pursued two others who had tried to rescue their companion. The situation escalated the next day, when the Spanish shot dead one individual on the bay shore and captured and whipped two more. The Yelamus disappeared for three months. Then, in late June 1777, a full year after the Spanish had erected their tents on the Arroyo de los Dolores, a twenty-year-old named Chamís became the first local resident baptized at the mission. He was renamed Francisco.²⁸

Indians were usually “caught by the mouth,” observed the missionary Pedro Font—a statement that must be understood in the broader context of the region’s stingy environment. Scarce resources had led to a long-term trend of resource intensification in the four millennia before contact. That is, to support a growing population, native peoples increasingly extracted more calories per square mile and exerted more

energy in doing so—to the point that they had destroyed local breeding grounds for certain birds, overhunted large game, and reduced the population of sea mammals. One ingeniously designed study of a midden in present-day Emeryville, next to the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge, found that native peoples overexploited the sturgeon population, forcing residents to turn to less productive species, such as mollusks.²⁹

Perhaps the surest sign of resource intensification was the dependency on the acorn, as important to Californians as corn was to natives of the Southeast and Southwest. Though acorns are high in fat, oak tree production is sporadic, and toxic tannic acid must be leached out before the nuts are edible, as Spanish soldiers learned from hard-won experience. Given the labor investment necessary to process acorns, they were not a preferred food but a fallback exploited only after population size and density outgrew other resources. The trend in acorn consumption, and thus in resource intensification, is reflected by the increasing frequency of mortars and pestles in archaeological sites over the four millennia preceding contact. By the time the Spanish laid claim to San Francisco, inhabitants were concentrated in locations where oak trees thrived.³⁰

As a result of the scarcity of food sources, Bay Area residents suffered from dental decay, arthritis, nutritional deficiencies, and a host of infectious and deadly diseases. One study of precontact Costanoan burials in the East Bay measured bone and tooth deformations and found that 30 percent of the population suffered from nutritional stress during childhood; 25 percent were afflicted by staph infections, yaws, or nonvenereal syphilis; and over 50 percent had either anemia or vitamin B₁₂ deficiency, brought on by poor diet, unsanitary living conditions, disease, or intestinal parasites.³¹

To survive in such an environment, local residents developed a number of effective measures to extract food from the land. Though they were not farmers, they burned, coppiced, pruned, sowed, tilled, transplanted, and weeded wild plants. California, observes one scholar, was not a wilderness but a garden. On the San Francisco peninsula, inhabitants hunted and

fished, harvested shellfish, and gathered wild grass seeds, acorns, berries, and onions. Yet they had little surplus and were especially vulnerable to the environmental damage inflicted by Spanish cattle and hogs. Outside of the view of Spanish missionaries, they began to starve.³²

They had nowhere to go. They would not take “a step outside of their respective territories,” according to Anza, “because of the enmity which is common among them.” Font observed that villages often fought each other for access to mussel beds, and one Costanoan proved the point by showing off a fresh arrow wound in his leg. The neighboring tribelet, Font deduced, was “very fierce.” When one Indian arrived at Anza’s encampment near the Carquinez Strait with a scalp dangling from the end of a pole, Font stated the obvious: it “smelled like warfare.”³³

Since then, archaeologists have confirmed that violence was widespread in the Bay Area. At one burial site in central Silicon Valley, fully 17 percent of the skeletons bear signs of healed fractures and penetration wounds—a rate higher than that found anywhere else on the continent. At another site on the southeastern side of the bay, skeletons reveal that facial and skull wounds were common and that injury by projectiles was unusually high compared to other precontact North American populations. Though the Yelamus drew on their alliances as best they could, their flight across the bay was a desperate response to a dire situation.³⁴

Chamís’s baptism was “to the greater honor and glory of God,” wrote San Francisco’s missionaries, the culmination of their yearlong labors among the heathens.³⁵ For local residents, by contrast, the ceremony was one defeat in a debilitating struggle that had begun when the Spanish arrived with their portable altar in June 1776.

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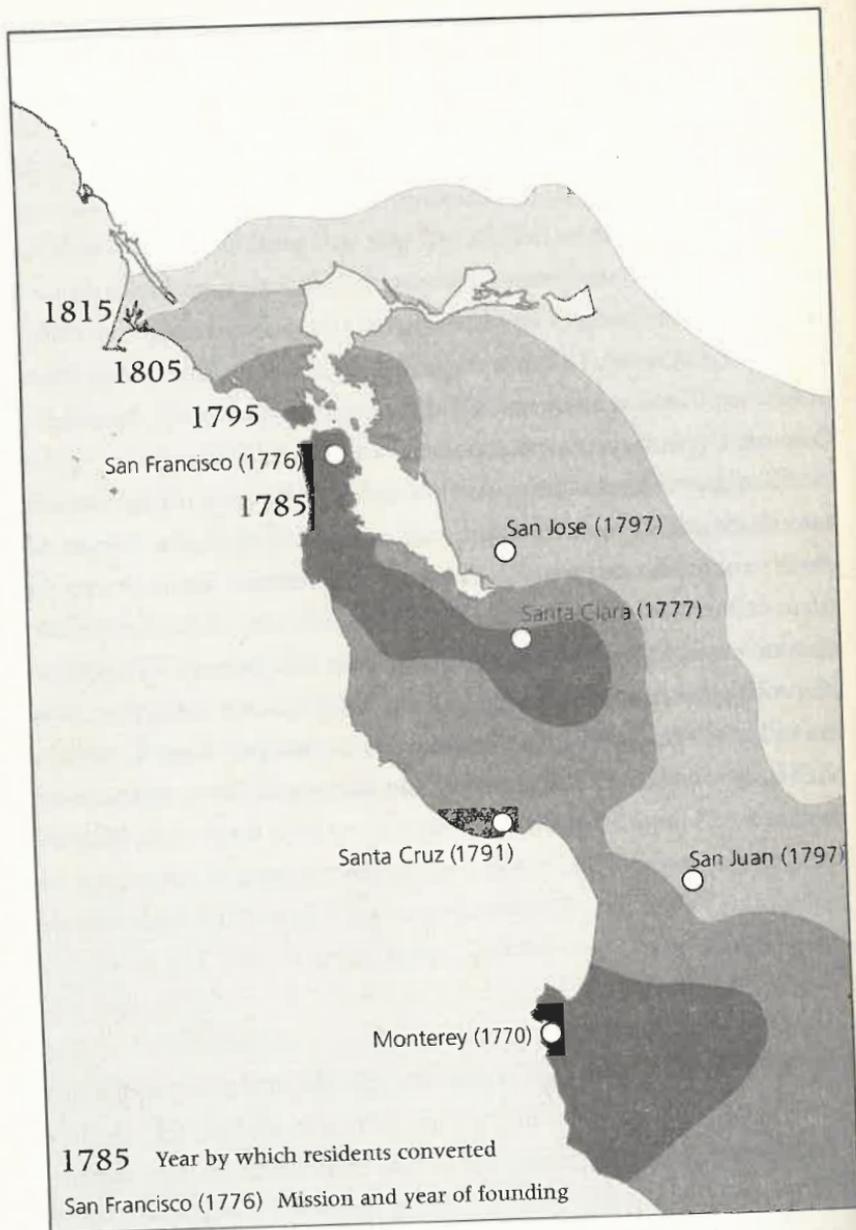


FIGURE 10 The San Francisco Bay Area, with Spanish missions founded before 1815 marked by circles. The shaded areas show the progression of Indian conversions.