

How a War Over Eggs Marked the Early History of San Francisco



Lizzie Stark on the Other 1848 Rush for Riches in
California

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Egg dishes are a flavor of home. We want them the way our fathers or mothers or grandparents made them. An egg conjures memories of learning to cook for many of us, since making eggs is perfect for teaching a kid. Even if one disdains a straight scramble, the egg is a key ingredient in many comfort foods, including pancakes and birthday cake.

For all these reasons, eggs carry a certain nostalgia. They remind us of paradise lost—the childhood that is done, the beloved elder chef who is buried, the metabolism that once tolerated syrupy breakfast carbs. And nostalgia has power. Would you kill to return to a yolk-kissed moment when a caregiver served up love on a plate? Some men would. And, indirectly at least, some men did during the Egg War of the Farallon Islands.

The Egg War began unofficially in 1848 with the Gold Rush. San Francisco started the year with a mere thousand souls, but over the next twelve months the population rose to twenty-five thousand. The city experienced scarcities of women and of food, particularly protein. Scaling up farms to provide for the local population proved harder than it seemed. Nobody could get large groups of chickens to survive there, and the technical solutions to this problem were decades off. Without chickens, of course, there could be no eggs. And without eggs, there could be no cakes, morning scrambles, pancakes, puddings, or muffins. As Napoleon once put it, “An army marches on its stomach,” and a rootin’-tootin’ army of miners in the Wild West doubly so.

As gold poured into the city, the prices for fresh eggs skyrocketed. Out in the field, a single chicken egg might sell for \$3, while in the city that same egg fetched the still exorbitant price of \$1. Even without accounting for inflation, \$12 to \$36 per dozen eggs is ridiculously expensive. If we account for inflation, the miners paid something astounding—more like \$427 to \$1,282 per dozen. This explains the origins of Hangtown Fry rather well. According to legend, a guy who had struck gold wandered into the El Dorado Hotel in the mining supply camp of Hangtown (so nicknamed for its penchant for stringing up criminals). He threw down a bag of gold and demanded the most expensive meal the chef could make—which turned out to be oysters and

eggs. If someone could bring good fresh eggs to San Francisco Bay, he would more than make his fortune.

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By most accounts, the first people to strike it rich were “Doc” Robinson and his brother-in-law Orrin Dorman. Doc, a pharmacist from Maine, had figured out that the Farallon Islands, home to hundreds of thousands of screaming seabirds, might provide enough eggs to finance a new pharmacy. So Doc and Orrin hopped in a boat and set sail for the Farallones, about thirty miles outside of San Francisco Bay.

As a location, the Farallones are pretty cursed; they are the sort of place a third-grade boy would make up to impress and gross out his classmates. Although to call them “islands” is a bit grand—they are jagged rocks of various sizes that stick up above the water. Those rocks are a legendary site of shipwrecks. Since Sir Francis Drake set foot on the islands in 1579, mariners have referred to the group as the Devil’s Teeth, for their appearance, the rough seas that surround them, and their tendency to chomp on ships.

One of the smaller islands is known simply as “the pimple,” a rock six meters tall and sixty-five meters wide, with a whitehead of bird droppings on it. The sea salt blasts the rocks, and white crystals crunch underfoot on some of them. Before the Europeans arrived, the Ohlone people called the Farallones part of the land of the dead, specifically the part meant for the bad, dead people.

If these weren’t enough of a deterrent, great white sharks infest the seas surrounding the islands, which is unusual since great whites tend to only travel solo or in pairs. But around the Farallon Islands, they gather in numbers up to 150 sharks. It probably has to do with the large population of pinnipeds that also populates the Farallones.

Once home to fur seals and sea otters until Russian and Boston fur merchants decimated local populations in the early 1800s, the islands also played home to elephant and harbor seals, as well as several species of sea lions—a

veritable buffet for the great whites. The kelp flies, of course, also came to lunch on the pinnipeds. And kelp flies number among nature's vilest creatures. I will let journalist Susan Casey explain. For unfathomable reasons, she spent weeks on a rickety yacht moored offshore of the largest island in the 2000s while reporting for her shark book titled after the archipelago:

They were at their peak now, a carpeting plague, crawling up pants legs and down shirt fronts, overwhelming a person's every moment outside. And these flies were not the cleanest insects—their preferred habitat is the inside of a seal's anus. The anus flies spent their time in one of three ways: tormenting us, tormenting the poor seals who had to house them in such an inhospitable place, and copulating with abandon in giant fly gang-bangs. This morning I'd counted a vertical stack of thirteen flies.

I personally draw the line at anus flies.

Into the tumultuous, shark-infested, kelp fly-ridden water, Doc and Orrin sailed. They landed on the largest rocky outcropping, which is less than a fifth of a mile square. There, they came face to face with the overwhelming fact of life on the island—its birds. Hundreds of thousands of seabirds—gulls, cormorants, auklets, puffins, petrels, and most important, the common murre. These shrieking, squawking birds, packed shoulder to shoulder among the cliffs, laid great volumes of eggs onto masses of weeds and likely comprised more than half a million nesting pairs. Importantly, the common murre outnumbered the other seabirds. A type of guillemot, the common murre dresses all in black, save for its white belly.

Each year, female murrens lay a single pear-shaped egg with a tough shell. The eggs have background colors in the greenish blue range, with darker brown-black pencil squiggles and dots atop. Roughly twice as large as a chicken egg, with a bright red yolk and a white that stays translucent when cooked, murre eggs made a fine substitute in baked goods. When not eaten absolutely fresh, though, they leave an aftertaste of old fish. Eat a thoroughly bad murre's egg, and rumor had it that you'd spend three months getting the flavor out of your mouth.

Doc and Orrin scrambled up those slippery, excrement-covered cliffs and filled their boat with eggs. On the harrowing journey home through rough seas, they lost almost half their booty. But when they arrived in San Francisco, their half boatful of eggs fetched a small fortune of \$3,000 (something like \$100K in 2020 money). Doc Robinson used his share of the profits to build a pharmacy and the Drama Museum, a theater where he delighted locals with his impressions of New Englanders. He went on to become a pillar of the nascent theater community. But the trip had so terrified him and Orrin that nothing could persuade them to return. Word of their profits, though, spread quickly. The egg rush had begun.

Within a week, eggers swarmed the Farallones seeking their fortune. One enterprising collection of six men promptly formed the Pacific Egg Company (also known as the Farallon Egg Company, or simply the Egg Company) and, in keeping with the land-grab ethos of the time and place, staked their claim on the largest island. They fought off their foes, erected some outbuildings, and soon established brutal methods for gathering eggs. First, they'd rampage through one section of the egg fields, breaking every egg in sight, which ensured the freshness of the next day's harvest.

Their crews had specialized gear—rope-soled shoes, often with spikes driven into them, to help them gain purchase on slippery cliffs. The egg man's uniform also included climbing ropes and special vests made of flour sacks with a drawstring waist and holes cut for the head and arms. Eggers deposited their cargo into a deep slit in the vest's neck, which allowed them to carry up to eighteen dozen eggs without a basket. On the cliffs, keeping hands free was key. When fully laden, the eggers resembled lumpy Santas and would return to a collection point at the base of the cliffs. They would kneel deeply over a basket, almost as if praying, and let the thick-shelled eggs pour from their chests.

The work required desperation or nerves of steel, probably both. The company employed up to twenty-five men at a time, often new immigrants with little to lose. The treacherous egging season ran from May to mid-July.

A simple slip on the cliffs could send a worker into the shark-infested brine. And then there were the gulls.

According to an 1874 *Harper's* article on the eggers, "These rapacious birds follow the egg-gatherers, hover over their heads.... The egger must be extremely quick or the gull will snatch the prize [the egg] from under his nose. So greedy and eager are the gulls that they sometimes even wound the eggers, striking them with their beaks." To avoid frequent scalp injuries, many of the eggers carried clubs, which they swung around their heads. With the Pacific Egg Company in control of the largest island, local fishermen and other fortune-seekers ventured out to the smaller boulders. A local newspaper ran a story on one such pair that ended up stranded on a rock for six weeks in 1899. Stormy seas foiled at least three rescue attempts, leaving the men to survive on raw eggs and the meager supplies rescuers could land. Returned to safety, one of the emaciated castaways told the local newspaper, "I will never again be able to look at a murre egg without disgust. We have had several fights with the sea lions." A dramatic drawing of a man with a bat fending off a ferocious pinniped accompanies the story.

Throughout the 1850s, the Farallones' yearly egg season brought armed struggles as the Pacific Egg Company vied for control of its veritable gold mine. It fought off gangs "armed to the teeth," according to an 1859 *Alta California* article. Battles raged on land and sea, as hijackers attacked boats ferrying eggs to the mainland.

One group of rival eggers spent several days hiding in their boat inside Great Murre Cave beneath the largest island, where guano continuously rained down on them and the ammonia buildup killed several men. A government force sent into the fray in 1860 found themselves so outnumbered and outgunned that they "thought it prudent" to return home without engaging.

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If it wasn't rival gangs of eggers testing the egg company, it was the government. In 1855 the US government seized the land and built a

lighthouse there. It refused to recognize the egg company's claim to the land but allowed it to keep up its rapacious methods so long as it didn't interfere with lighthouse business.

The federal government fixed pay for all lighthouse keepers at a paltry \$450 to \$600 per year. Not bad if you lived in the East, but in the inflation-happy epicenter of the Gold Rush, domestic servants could earn nearly that in a month, plus room and board, and all without having to live in a nightmare hellscape of guano and bird shrieks. Nerva N. Wines, the first lightkeeper, who served from 1855 to 1859, became a stockholder for the egg company and let them run amok so long as he received his dividend.

His successor, Amos Clift, had a better scheme. Clift had taken the job for the express purpose of commandeering the eggs. As he wrote in a letter to his brother, "If I could have the privilege of this egg business for one season, it is all I would ask [and] the government might then kiss my foot." Clift boldly leased egg-gathering rights to various parties and remained the keeper through the season of 1860, when the Lighthouse Board fired him for corruption. Without Clift managing the many competing parties, the conflict heated up.

It started off with the egg company posting signs barring the lightkeepers from certain parts of the island. Next, eggers busted up government roads, and an armed group captured four lightkeepers and tried to eject them from the island. Later that same year, someone assaulted an assistant lightkeeper. The situation had gotten more out of hand than usual, and the government struck back.

The regional superintendent of lighthouses, Ira Rankin, had a pragmatic streak and realized that so long as the egg rights to the land were up for grabs, the assaults, stabbings, intra-egger battles, and graft would continue. So he decided to crown the original egg company ovary overlords of the Farallones and to hell with whether it was technically legal. (On paper, at least, the land belonged to the US government.) And Rankin would support the egg company using government power.

A freelance egger named David Batchelder took powerful exception to this move and made repeated, armed attempts to take the island with increasingly large numbers of men, Italians, a detail the papers loved to include. During the start of the 1863 season, he and his men built a house and a stone fortification on the island. Rankin responded with an armed customs ship that laid siege to Batchelder's operation. The government removed four men, five shotguns, a rifle, and assorted other weapons. But Batchelder was not easily deterred.

Two weeks later, he returned with at least thirty men, who captured several Pacific Egg Company employees. Again, the same customs ship arrived and landed three boats of men to round up the egg rebels, plus their arsenal of twenty-one firearms. At some point, Rankin realized that a few lightkeepers must be in league with Batchelder, so he sent a sternly worded letter threatening to fire anyone assisting the upstarts. Rankin also ordered the customs ship to patrol nearby waters, questioning any boat headed to the Farallones and boarding it if necessary.

Batchelder was rumored to be gathering forces for another try. On June 3, 1863, three sloops dropped anchor off the coast of the main island. They contained Batchelder, twenty-seven armed men, and a four-pound cannon. Isaac Harrington, the egg company foreman, met the boats at the landing, a wooden derrick built over the inhospitable shoreline. He howled across the waves that the rebels would land "at their peril," and Batchelder yelled that they would come ashore "in spite of hell."

Everyone spent a tense night, the egg company men camped on the landing and Batchelder's men carousing in their boats. At daybreak, the rebels sent one boat in for a landing, and everyone opened fire. When the gunshots and feathers settled twenty minutes later, one of the company men was dead with a hole blasted through his stomach, and Batchelder's men beat a hasty retreat, leaving a sloop behind. Five of Batchelder's men had injuries, including one shot through the throat, who died at a hospital a few days later.

After Batchelder's grand defeat, the rivalries among egg gangs died down, though tensions between the Pacific Egg Company and lightkeepers remained

high for several more decades until an 1881 executive order barred commercial collection on the islands. Twenty-one soldiers arrived to evict the egg company from the land permanently. Informal egging and selling by the lightkeepers continued till the end of the century but eventually ceased as the rising supply of chicken eggs made it far less profitable.

The Farallon egg trade lasted for a half century, with tragic ecological consequences for the birds. Estimates vary from source to source, but at the beginning of the egg rush, the company likely shipped around 900,000 eggs per year. Fifty years later, that number was closer to 150,000 eggs shipped, a sixth as many. The unchecked smashing and stealing of murre eggs had a predictable effect, decreasing the murre population by about 95 percent, from a high of 400,000 to 600,000 before egg gathering to a lean 20,000 birds at the trade's conclusion.

Later environmental degradation—multiple oil spills, shipping lanes, falling numbers of tasty sardines, to say nothing of an underwater nuclear waste dump—further diminished the number of murre to a mere 6,000 by the 1950s. Since then, thanks to conservation efforts, numbers have greatly recovered, hitting 100,000 in 2000 and 250,000 to 300,000 in 2020.