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GOVERNOR JUAN B. ALVARADO: LIFE IN CALIFORNIA UNDER THREE FLAGS

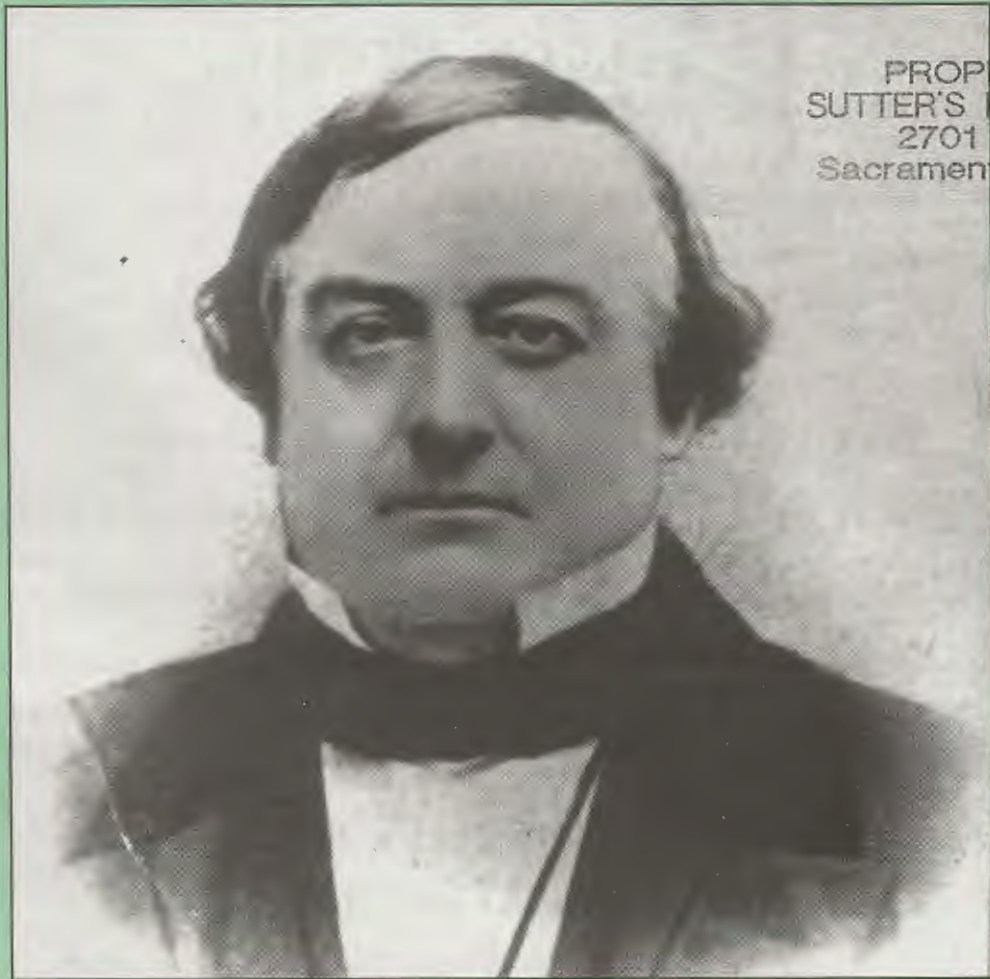
By Robert Ryal Miller

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 Governor of California, 1836-1842

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Governor Juan B. Alvarado

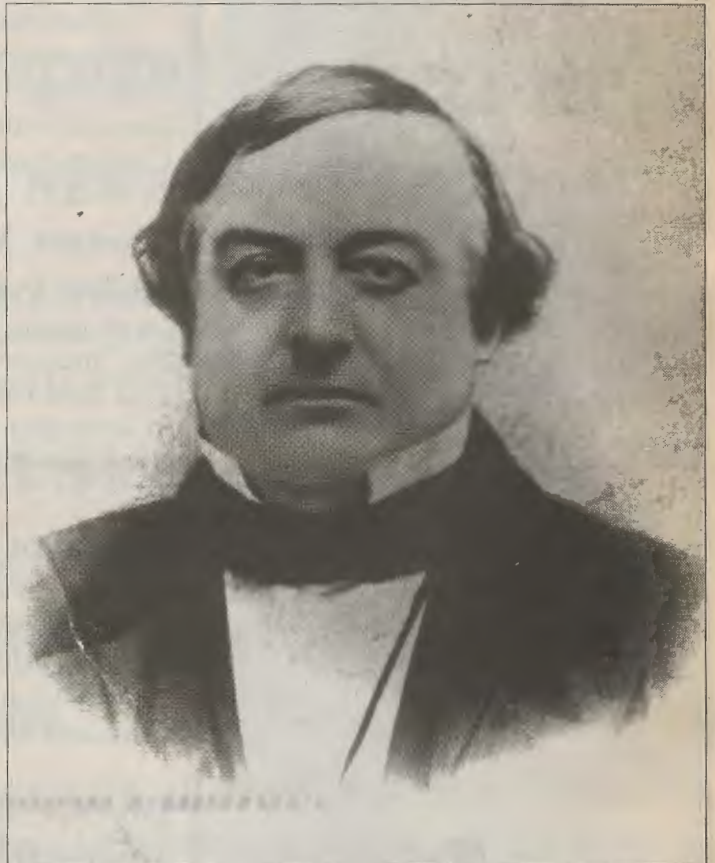
Life in California Under Three Flags

By Robert Ryal Miller

Courtesy San Pablo Historical Society

Although Juan Bautista Alvarado was California's youngest governor and the only chief executive in the Mexican era to serve his entire six-year term, this colorful figure is little known or remembered today. Born in 1809 to the union of two military families of Spanish ancestry--his father was Sergeant Francisco Alvarado, and his mother, Josefa, was the daughter of Sergeant Ignacio Vallejo--he grew up in the Presidio at Monterey, which was then the capital of Alta California. After his father died when Juan was only three months old, his mother moved back to the Vallejo home, where her son was raised with an uncle about the same age, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, and the two became lifelong associates. During his lifetime, Juan saw three different flags fly over the public buildings of California: the Spanish red and gold banner with lions and castles was supplanted in 1821 by the red, white, and green tricolor of Mexico when that former Spanish colony gained its independence; then, in 1846, as a consequence of the U.S.-Mexican War, the Mexican flag was replaced by the American Stars and Stripes. Alvarado served as governor between 1836 and 1842, but before and after those years he was an influential figure in California.

Alvarado's principal career was in the Mexican government civil service. First serving as secretary of the diputación, he later emerged as the most prominent member of this territorial legislature. He also was a customhouse appraiser. Then, at the age of twenty-seven, he became governor, gaining the executive office through a revolution he organized that toppled the dictatorial governor, Colonel Nicolas Gutiérrez. During Alvarado's first years as governor, he had to contend with revolts by southern Californians who proclaimed their own candidate for governor and who wanted the capital moved to Los Angeles. Don



Juan B. Alvarado
Governor of California, 1836-1842

Juan joined the cavalry units that rode south to put down the uprisings, and when they finally triumphed, he returned to Monterey to address other problems facing the territory. As the first civilian governor--his predecessors had all been career army officers--he emphasized civil pursuits such as education, cultural affairs, the court system and private property rights. He promoted the construction of a new government building outside the walls of the old presidio; called El

Cuartel (the Barracks), the two-story adobe structure provided space for government offices as well as housing for soldiers. Alvarado fostered education, giving assistance to the existing schools and establishing a new school at Monterey, for which he provided the building, furniture and equipment as well as monthly salaries for the teachers whom he recruited from Mexico. He also was responsible for establishment of the first supreme court for California and appointed its first judges.

Phasing out of the Franciscan missions was an important problem inherited by Alvarado. A decade earlier, the Mexican government had decreed a policy of gradual secularization, a process embracing three aspects: The Indians would be freed from religious control and encouraged to form their own towns; mission lands and herds were to be divided with a portion set aside for the Indians and the rest for the government, which could then grant parcels of land to deserving citizens; and the Franciscan missionaries were to be replaced by secular parish priests, whereupon the old mission chapels would become parish

churches. Secularization had proceeded haphazardly until Alvarado issued comprehensive regulations for the administrators. Responding to the laws of the Mexican government, Alvarado transferred hundreds of thousands of acres of public property (former mission lands) to private individuals, awarding more ranch grants than any other governor. And unlike other chief executives, he did not give himself any land, either openly or through an intermediary, an omission he must have regretted later. This vast transfer of land had a tremendous impact, transforming California from a poverty-stricken frontier garrison state, headed by a military elite, to a pastoral civilization and prosperous economy based on widespread private ownership of ranches and farms.

In 1839 Don Juan Alvarado was engaged to marry Martina Castro, whose family owned the large Rancho San Pablo on the eastern shore of San Francisco and San Pablo Bays. He was thirty years old and Martina was almost twenty-five, an advanced age for a California bride of that era. They chose August 24 as the date and Mission Santa Clara as the wedding site, but

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Martina Castro de Alvarado, Circa 1854

Don Juan did not appear for his wedding; instead, he sent his half brother as proxy. Two reasons have been suggested for his failure to show up: First, and most likely, one of his periodic bouts of drinking had rendered him unable to function. Years later, Alvarado said that affairs of state had detained him in the capital--that Captain Cyrille Laplace of the French navy had requested a meeting to discuss important matters about the future of California. The Alvarado marriage was fruitful--during their subsequent years of married life, the Alvarados had nine children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Don Juan also fathered five daughters, born to his mistress, Juliana Francisca "Raymunda" Castillo.

In 1840 Governor Alvarado was involved in the "Graham affair." Informed by several sources that a

group of foreign settlers were plotting to take over the government, Don Juan ordered the arrest of all foreigners who had entered the country unlawfully, except those who were married to California women or were well known and had some honorable occupation. Isaac Graham, a backwoodsman from Tennessee who had set up a whiskey distillery and drinking place about twenty miles northeast of Monterey, was denounced as the head of the conspiracy. Graham and about one hundred foreigners were arrested, half of



Isaac Graham

whom were soon released. After conferring with a judge, who pointed out that the majority of the prisoners had come into the country without passports and thus could be deported legally, Alvarado determined to send the men to the mainland of the west coast of Mexico for trial. Forty-five prisoners, about half of whom were Americans and the others British-born, were put aboard a Mexican bark and shipped under military guard to San Blas, from where the prisoners were marched to Tepic to stand formal trial. After the British consul and an American lawyer and jour-

nalist named Thomas Jefferson Farnham intervened on the prisoners' behalf, twenty-eight of the men were freed but banished from Mexico; Graham and the others were held for further hearings which lasted for five months. Finally, the prisoners were found not guilty, were promised compensation for the loss of property and time, and were sent back to Monterey. The Graham affair had international repercussions that haunted Alvarado for several years.

During Alvarado's governorship, California was in a precarious position—it was a target for acquisition by France, Great Britain and the United States, yet it was neglected and unprotected by a weak Mexico. Although he was aware of the successful movement for independence in Texas after a great number of Americans had moved there, Alvarado was helpless to stop the arrival in California of Yankees who came overland and by ship. By granting a large tract of land at the junction of the Sacramento and American rivers to John Sutter, Don Juan hoped that this entrepreneur, who had become a Mexican citizen, would control the flow of Americans and enforce Mexican laws. In October of 1842, when Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones of the United States Navy, mistakenly believing that Mexico and the U.S. were at war, demanded the surrender of Monterey, Alvarado was forced to capitulate.

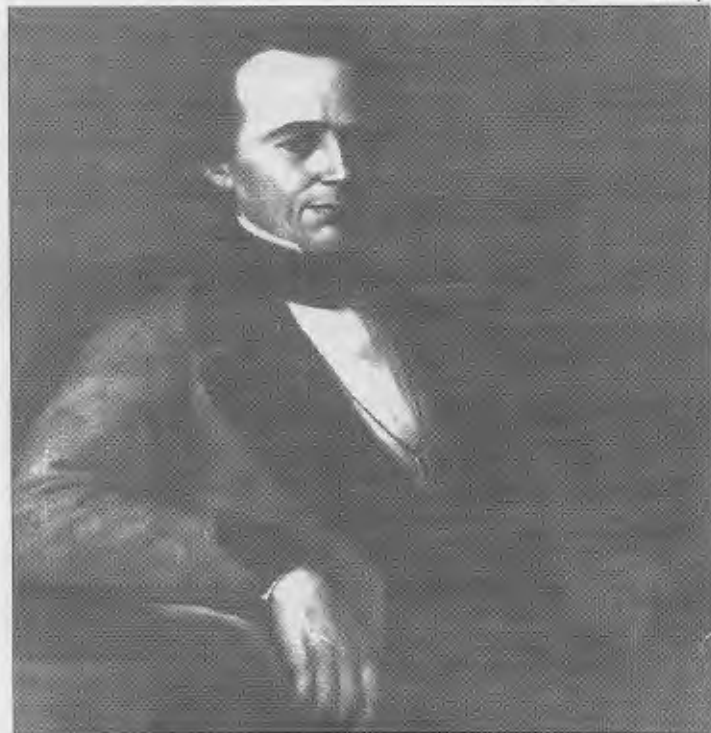
Courtesy U.S. Naval Historical Center



Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones

late. The next day, Commodore Jones admitted his mistake and invited Don Juan to a ball, but the governor was on one of his habitual drinking binges and could not attend. Two months later, Alvarado was replaced as governor by General Manuel Micheltoarena.

The Bancroft Library



General Manuel Micheltoarena

Alvarado and other residents of Monterey soon became disillusioned with Micheltoarena, and especially with the 280 *cholo* (scoundrel) soldiers he brought with him. The governor quartered his officers in private homes, a practice not previously known in the territory, and he could not control the drunkenness and criminal activity of the soldiers, who committed numerous robberies, stabbings and attacks on women. At least half of these soldiers were former convicts who had been recruited from Mexican prisons, given early release to go to California. Domestic discontent came to a head in mid-November of 1844 when Don Juan and others initiated a revolt against the governor. Their goal was to force the battalion of *cholos*, and perhaps their general, to leave California. At the end of the month, the governor took to the field with about 150 soldiers and two or three pieces of artillery, determined to crush the rebel army of about 220 men under Colonel Jose Castro with Alvarado, a militia colonel, as second in command. Finally, Micheltoarena signed a peace

treaty agreeing to send his *cholo* soldiers back to Mexico. But he reneged on his word and recruited armed volunteers, including John Sutter, Isaac Graham, and other foreign settlers to supplement his army. On February 20, 1845, the governor's forces confronted the rebel army, including Colonel Alvarado, in the San Fernando Valley northwest of Los Angeles. After some cannonading, Micheltorena capitulated and soon left California with his *cholo* troops. One of the first acts of the new governor, Pío Pico, was to appoint Alvarado as administrator of customs in Monterey.

The stirring events of 1846, culminating in the U.S.-Mexican War, were momentous for California and for Juan Alvarado. Although most history books state that Alvarado took no part in that war, he was an active participant for a short time. When he learned of the American takeover of Monterey on July 8, 1846, Don Juan was a colonel in the militia, camped in San Juan Bautista with California troops that had been mobilized to oppose the Bear Flag revolt. With a contingent of cavalrymen he then rode to Los Angeles where the men planned to carry on the war. After Governor Pío Pico, General Jose Castro, and other officials abandoned the cause, Alvarado and a contingent of soldiers rode north to San Luis Obispo, where in mid-August, he and others were captured by a detachment of Captain John Frémont's California Battalion. Paroled under his word of honor that he would not again take up arms against the United States, Alvarado returned to Monterey, where he spent the remaining months of

the war.

After the Americans took control of California, the former Mexican governor lost his pension and political prestige in the old capital, so he decided to move his family to Rancho San Pablo. This 17,000-acre spread on the east side of San Francisco Bay belonged to his wife's family, the Castros. Don Juan, his wife, and their three young children moved in with Martina's mother, and they continued to maintain their principal residence in the adobe ranch house for the rest of their lives. Five additional children were born to the Alvarados there. Martina's brothers and their families occupied other houses on the rancho; although they raised some wheat, vegetables and fruit, their principal occupation and income was derived from caring for large herds of livestock.

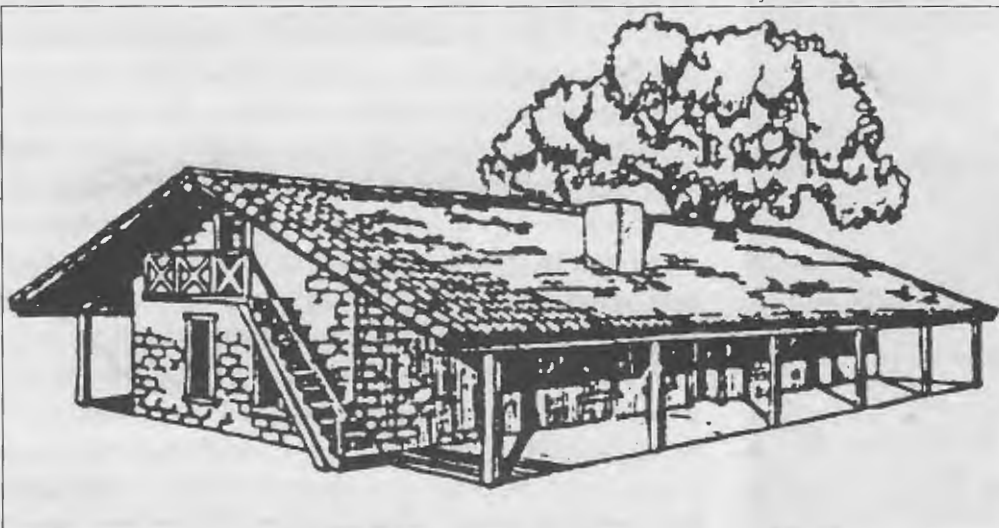
The last thirty years of Alvarado's life were spent in litigation over ownership of Rancho San Pablo. There were lawsuits to establish a clear title, bitter conflicts between Martina and her brothers over the division of the land, and claims by squatters and persons who had purchased parts of the rancho. Although Don Juan died in 1882, legal appeals concerning the rancho land were not settled until a decade later. Meanwhile, the Alvarados and Castros lost most of their land—much of it to lawyers who agreed to perform their services for a portion of land.

The historic Alvarado adobe home lasted until it was razed in 1954, but in the 1970s, a replica of the structure was rebuilt on the historic site in San Pablo.

It serves as a museum, open to the public, where visitors can see where and how the Alvarados lived. Some of their original furniture, photographs, and personal possessions are on display, and the adjacent library of the San Pablo Historical Society contains documents and data about the Castro and Alvarado families.

When he was sixty-seven years old, Juan B. Alvarado wrote a history of California, covering the years from his birth to 1848. The account, embracing 1,250 numbered leaves written

Courtesy San Pablo Historical Society



Sketch of reconstructed Alvarado Adobe in San Pablo, California

in five volumes, was never published; it is one of the treasures of the Bancroft Library at the University of California. Based on this valuable manuscript and supplemented by other contemporary sources, the author of this article has just completed the first biography of Alvarado. The book, published by the University of Oklahoma Press, is now available. It is titled, *Juan B. Alvarado: Governor of California, 1836-1842*.

About the Author:

Robert Ryal Miller, who received his A.B., M.A., and Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Berkeley, is professor emeritus of history at California State University, Hayward. Author or editor of twelve books and many scholarly articles, he has given public lectures on California history topics at the California Historical Society, the Society of California Pioneers, the Oakland Museum, the Presidio of San Francisco, and local historical societies.

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Juan Alvarado Governor of California, 1836-1842

By Robert Ryal Miller

Juan Bautista Alvarado (1809-1882), a brilliant and ambitious politician, led California to transitory independence from Mexico in the decade before the American government took over the future state. In this biography of California's first civilian governor, Robert Ryal Miller illuminates much of the history of the Mexican period and the transition to American rule.

Aided at first by his young uncle--Commandant Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo--Juan Alvarado led two armed revolts against Mexico, declaring himself governor of California at the age of twenty-seven. His administration emphasized education, cultural affairs, the court system and private property rights. During his term in office--he was the first governor to serve a full six years--California was transformed from a poverty-stricken frontier garrison state to a proud pastoral economy based on widespread private ownership of ranches and farms.

This informative account of Alvarado's life is based primarily on the 1,200-page manuscript that he dictated in 1876 to an agent of historian Hubert Howe Bancroft and on his "Notes on California History," prepared in connection with a lawsuit over ownership of the 17,000-acre Rancho San Pablo (northeast of San Francisco), where Alvarado lived for more than thirty years after he left office. (University of Oklahoma Press)

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