

Milestones in California History—

The 1846 Bear Flag Revolt: Early Cultural Conflict in California

The California experience has been one of constant cultural confrontation. Although the Europeans' conquest of indigenous peoples was not a new story in the New World, the cultural conflicts did not end with the coming of Spanish explorers and missionaries and the destruction of native culture. California has had a constant influx of newcomers who brought new social and cultural traditions to intermix with older, settled groups. As a result, California's population today is one of the most culturally diverse in the world.

One hundred fifty years ago in the little town of Sonoma, north of San Francisco, one of the classic cultural confrontations in California history took place. On June 14, 1846, thirty-four American settlers stormed the home of Colonel Mariano Vallejo, commander of the northern military district in Mexican California, demanding his surrender. These farmers, carpenters, teachers, and mountain men, fearing expulsion from California by Mexican leaders, decided to act first by taking Sonoma and declaring California an independent republic. To their apparent surprise, Colonel Vallejo invited the leaders to join him for a drink and to discuss the terms of his surrender. After a lengthy session that resulted in the inebriation of most of the party's leaders, this brief "revolt," marked by the raising at Sonoma of a homespun banner featuring a bear, succeeded without a single gunshot or drop of blood.

This event, known as the Bear Flag Revolt, marked the beginning of the end of Mexican rule in California. It also illustrated the cultural differences between the Mexican population of California and the incoming American settlers. Seventy years of Spanish and Mexican settlement had resulted in a population made up primarily of californios, people of mixed Spanish/Mexican/Indian descent, born in California, who owned a large percentage of the land as a result of huge Mexican land grants. Although the province was technically governed by Mexico, the californio lifestyle was pastoral and independent, with an economy based on cattle and horses raised for trade with ships from all over the world.

Although Europeans and Americans had trickled into California earlier, by the early 1840s American settlers were arriving in greater numbers and finding conditions culturally and legally unfamiliar, with most of the land already owned but not visibly occupied. At first, the californios helped many of the starving immigrants who crossed the Sierra, but many American settlers began ignoring established land claims, and tension resulted from conflicting cultural philosophies. The Americans' entrepreneurial attitude and disdain for local customs were alien to the californios. The large ranchos, fiesta-filled lifestyles, and mixed racial origins were alien to the Americans.

On the other hand, californios were also generally dissatisfied with Mexican leadership and continual political upheaval.



The Bear Flag Monument, above, erected in the late nineteenth century, stands in Sonoma Plaza at the site of the 1846 skirmish. Courtesy Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau.

Mexican governors came and went. California's physical isolation made it difficult to attract settlers or establish effective colonial control. Annexation by the United States seemed the most logical solution, and some californios, including Vallejo, were ready to welcome the American government, as long as their property and way of life were not threatened.

John C. Frémont, an American military explorer and surveyor leading an expedition sponsored by the United States government, had been ordered to leave California in May 1846 by the comandante general of California, José Castro. Heading north, Frémont stirred up settlers in the Sacramento Valley, which probably instigated the Bear Flag Revolt. After the "revolt," Frémont returned and took command of the settlers. His authority to act was later denied by the United States, and the circumstances of his involvement remain controversial. On July 7, 1846, the American flag was raised at Monterey, and the short-lived California Republic in Sonoma died a quiet death.

The californios failed to mount any substantial military response to the American invasion because of economic and geographical limitations, lack of loyalty to Mexico, and infighting among their leaders. Although the Bear Flag Revolt was an independent action by settlers with no official sanction from the United States government, and was insignificant in relation to later military events in the Mexican War, it illustrated the tense conditions in California that allowed for the easy acquisition of one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the world.

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