

# AN INVESTIGATION OF NATIVE CALIFORNIA INDIAN LABOR AT THE MEXICAN RANCHO

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, culture contact studies have turned increasingly to pluralistic communities for investigating indigenous-colonial interactions. In California, apart from Russian Fort Ross and the Franciscan missions, little archaeological and historical effort has been dedicated to other colonial institutions, such as the 19th-century Mexican rancho. Yet, the multitude of Native California Indians working as laborers on ranchos suggests that these are appropriate places for researching culture change among native peoples and for understanding the role of labor in European-Native interactions. Using M. G. Vallejo's Petaluma Rancho as a case example, I will relate the archaeological and historical potential that exists for investigating the native presence on and response to the Mexican rancho. Often, research on multiethnic communities has focused on intermarriage or "acculturation" as an entry into the issue, yet the role of chosen and enforced labor has not received sufficient examination.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade and a half, the archaeological field has witnessed a rapid growth in culture contact studies. Most attention to North American culture contact has focused on the colonial phenomena of Spanish missions; Russian, British, French, and American fur outposts; some secular British and Spanish colonial settlements; and plantation slavery in the American South and Southeast. Linking all cases is the placement of different groups of people with different cultural and historical backgrounds into patterns of daily interaction, especially interactions that involve labor as a strong factor in culture change. However, some colonial communities have not been fully explored. In this context, the goals of this paper are three-fold: (1) to develop the proposition that the role of labor is central to the culture contact experience in California; (2) to propose an as of yet little studied multiethnic locus of culture contact – the Mexican rancho of Alta California; and (3) to synthesize briefly the historical and archaeological data on the Mexican rancho in relation to native labor, using Mariano G. Vallejo's Rancho Petaluma as a case example.

## PLURALISTIC COMMUNITIES

Culture contact took a variety of forms in North America, and each instance involved a unique set

of conditions and outcomes. However, one of the greatest strengths of current archaeological and anthropological research on culture contact is the focus on pluralistic communities. Multiethnic or pluralistic communities offer an unparalleled opportunity to document and track social change (Deagan 1990:297-298, 1996:154; Lightfoot 1995:201). Rather than separate native villages or predominantly European colonial settlements, pluralistic communities are an important locus of study because of the *intensity* of daily interaction on a variety of scales. In general, the two most salient interactions in pluralistic communities are intermarriage and labor relations.

First, interethnic unions or marriage can be quite common in these circumstances, and such daily relationships have been shown to provide the site for cultural exchange and mediation (Deagan 1996; Lightfoot *et al.* 1997). By far, most attention to intermarriage has derived from research on Florida and the Caribbean (Deagan 1983, 1990, 1996); Fort Ross, California (Lightfoot and Martinez 1997; Lightfoot *et al.* 1991, 1997), and other Western North American fur trading operations (Swagerty 1988). These studies have outlined the number and type of interethnic marriages that took place in the colonial setting and have given these interethnic unions priority as a locus for cultural exchange between ethnic groups (Deagan 1983, 1996; Lightfoot &

Martinez 1997). Though patterns of intermarriage render important consequences for social change, interethnic marriage does not characterize all colonial contexts. In many cases, constant interaction between natives and non-natives was predicated on the second feature – conscription or subjugation of indigenous Native Americans as a labor force for colonial operations. While interethnic unions may be significant for archaeological approaches to some aspects of household identity, the majority of native peoples associated with pluralistic communities lived in their own residential areas and often did *not* intermarry with non-native peoples. For example, though California's ranchos and pueblos had occasional marriages of native women with Mexican and *mestizo* men (Costello & Hornbeck 1989:316; Mason 1986:12-13), the pattern was not common.

Given that labor relations were a, if not *the*, dominant feature of most native and European interactions *in pluralistic communities*, anthropologists and historians must turn attention to the issues surrounding labor. This focus can draw from a number of current theoretical venues, such as the archaeological interest in the role of labor as the locus of social inequality. Though time is limited here, I will outline briefly – in question form -- what such a turn might entail: (1) What is the role of labor in cultural change or survival for native communities and individuals)? (2) How is labor scheduling used by Europeans as a form of social control, and how do natives accommodate or resist that schedule, especially in relation to the division of labor? (3) Finally, how much of the material culture of the labor task do native individuals take into non-laboring contexts, such as the household? The last question is a crucial juncture as it will allow archaeologists to track social change outside of more traditional acculturation models as it focuses not so much on the origins of material elements but on their use and context in native lives. By focusing on required labor duties and how they affect residential life, we can begin to separate material culture that represents daily work tools versus material culture that denotes an adoption of material culture by native peoples for personal use. To address these questions, it is imperative that archaeologists seek and recover native residential areas in these pluralistic communities.

## THE MEXICAN RANCHO AS A COLONIAL INSTITUTION

As noted, the Mexican rancho was not generally associated with interethnic unions. As such, the native presence on the Mexican rancho must be seen primarily in the context of labor regimes and negotiations. The Mexican rancho as it existed in 19th Century Alta California is an ideal case for investigating pluralistic communities, inequality, and the role of labor in native and European/Mexican interactions. However, its potential is little tapped from an archaeological perspective, though it has received interest in historical studies (Hurtado 1988; Monroy 1990; Phillips 1980). The traditional distinction between historical and prehistoric archaeology further exacerbates the problem as post-contact native sites, neither prehistoric in a temporal sense nor historical in a diagnostic "European materials" sense, may be overlooked because they sit between the distinctions or because they cross-cut them (Greenwood 1989:460).

Due to limited time, I must assume that the general structure and history of the rancho are common knowledge. Two characteristics can be considered primary in understanding the Mexican rancho: (1) economic focus on agriculture, livestock, and manufacturing for both self-sustenance and trade and (2) reliance on the labor of Native California Indians. Both were inextricably intertwined. However, I will not detail the economic aspect, as the second characteristic – the use of native labor – is the concern of this paper. There is no question that the ranchos operated primarily by the labor of native peoples (e.g., Sánchez 1986:19; Rawls 1984:20-21), but the documentary evidence is less than abundant on the native workers. Because of this, the native aspect of 19th Century history is not being told. Thus, archaeology may be one of the only ways to retrieve and analyze these Californian histories (Costello & Hornbeck 1989:320).

The available data suggest that native peoples may be represented archaeologically in two ways: the recovery of items made and used by them within the rancho context and the recovery of residential debris and structures. The former evidence predominates in the literature, and it generally includes (1) brown ware pottery – e.g., variants of the Tizon Brown Ware type, or more broadly, Southern California Brown Ware – recovered from southern California contexts and (2) items of European-produced material culture

modified into traditional native forms. Of the specific items, locally-produced Brown Ware constitutes the strongest yet sometimes the most elusive evidence of native presence at or near many of the rancho sites (Frierman 1992:19), including Olivos (Greenwood 1989:461), Ontiveros (Frierman 1982), Los Cerritos (Evans 1969), Bandini-Cota (Greenwood *et al.* 1983), Yorba-Slaughter (Greenwood *et al.* 1988), Aros-Serrano (Frierman 1987; Greenwood *et al.* 1987), and Hugo Reid (Wallace & Wallace 1958). Similar to the recovery of indigenous ceramics, archaeologists have also recovered other materials that have been attributed to native individuals. To collapse together all ranchos, archaeologists have excavated soapstone vessels, shell beads, groundstones, and flaked stone and glass tools. Beyond an attribution of native laborers to the production of particular artifact classes, few archaeologists have focused on the residential or midden areas associated with the unequivocally present but little documented natives on the ranchos. As such, I would like to briefly highlight the current work at Mariano G. Vallejo's Rancho Petaluma that is directed explicitly to the recovery of native residential areas. The results are preliminary at this point, but they provide tantalizing directions for my ongoing fieldwork at the Petaluma Rancho site.

### THE RANCHO PETALUMA

In 1834, Mariano G. Vallejo received the Rancho Petaluma land grant in what is now Sonoma County as repayment for his services to the Mexican and provisional Alta California government. By 1843, Vallejo's rancho lands occupied over 66,000 acres. By this time, many of the Coast Miwok of the area had moved to Bay Area missions. Today, the Petaluma Adobe, which represents half of the main structure once used for manufacturing and living on the rancho, is protected with about 40 acres in Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park (Fig. 1). Archaeological work in the late 1950s and early 1960s served to locate the foundations for the rest of the main adobe house (Gebhardt 1962; Treganza 1957) and for the corrals northwest of the house (Clemmer 1961). Little work has been completed outside of these areas, probably due in part to the lack of significant historical documentation on other outbuildings (see Gebhardt 1962:18-19). The only reference to outbuildings of any sort at the rancho, aside from the corral adjacent to the main house, was a survey map from the late 1840s. Though the land survey was designed to

demarcate the boundaries of Vallejo's landholdings, it did include two buildings across the stream from the adobe. The longer structure has been suggested as a possible housing complex for native laborers (Bowman & Hendry 1940:312; Schuyler 1978:77), and I am currently testing this possibility.

Though no documents of Vallejo's have been located that speak *directly* to the numbers of natives present nor to their origins or living arrangements, there are interesting references. Vallejo (1941:2) claims to have had "only 200 men" for plowing, but in describing the prominent ranchos of northern California, he states that "[s]ome of the haciendas had more than one hundred Indian servants" (Vallejo 1875:259). William Heath Davis comments that Vallejo had "several hundred men" for plowing tasks in addition to the "uncivilized Indians, known as 'gentiles'" that he used as assistant plowers and harvesters (Davis 1929:135) and that Vallejo housed and fed 600 vaqueros and laborers (Davis 1929:136). Nicolas Carriger states that Vallejo had Indian men running oxen pairs in exchange for a scant amount of clothing and food to support a family (Carriger 1874:131). George Simpson, on a visit to a camp of about 300 of "Vallejo's [sic] Indians," noted that "as to clothing, they are pretty nearly in a state of nature; as to lodging, their hovels are made of boughs wattled with bulrushes in the form of beehives . . . ; and as to food, they eat the worst bullock's worst joints, with bread of acorns and chestnuts, which are most laboriously and carefully prepared by pounding and rinsing and grinding" (Simpson 1847:177).

As for my archaeological goals, I seek to recover the type, variability, and use of residential structures by the native peoples. Did all of the native peoples working on the rancho live in adobe dormitories, or did they reside in traditional conical houses? Because no archaeological projects have focused on this aspect of rancho life here or elsewhere, I have had to start from scratch. Therefore, the results are only preliminary. To recover the native lives at the rancho, I have instigated a nested series of archaeological techniques over the past year. Pedestrian survey, geophysical techniques, test units, and surface testing units have served to delimit the future excavation of probable native residential and midden contexts, located about 100 m east of the reconstructed adobe house.

Pedestrian survey served to locate residential debris at two major loci, mainly near the proposed adobe structures. The midden includes glass beads, shell beads, obsidian flakes, bottle glass fragments, iron nails, European/American ceramics, burned and unburned bone, shell, and charcoal. The midden area matches most of what Treganza noted in 1958. Following archival and surface survey work, geophysical survey was initiated to probe the subsurface potential of various areas of the Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park, focusing primarily on the field with the projected buildings. Magnetometer and electromagnetic conductivity surveys have located a wealth of subsurface anomalies. The electromagnetic conductivity survey was accomplished using an EM-38, and the magnetometer survey was conducted with a Geometrics 858 Cesium Gradiometer. Though both instruments located distinct cultural anomalies in the surveyed area, the magnetometer allowed heightened resolution of linear features. That is, the image has shown what appear to be walls or wall foundations as well as numerous other strong and complicated patterns. As with most remote sensing, full interpretation requires ground-testing. Therefore, following the analysis of part of the geophysical data, I have begun test excavations to uncover the nature of the anomalies. Two excavation units have been completed over the probable wall, as identified in the magnetometer image, and the results are positive. Both units recovered a cobble footing, the latter definitely underlying about 20 cm of melted adobe wall. In addition, one unit had a burned feature abutting the wall, and it contained burned bone, charcoal, burned earth, glass fragments, metal, and a tile fragment. Though other manufacturing activities might produce this type of feature, it appears to be perhaps residential.

The current goal is to crosscut the building by trench excavation followed by horizontal spatial exposure after walls have been delineated. Regardless of the function(s) of this structure,

residential areas must have been in the vicinity given the artifactual materials on the surface, and I will employ appropriate excavation strategies to recover them. Currently, I am placing surface testing units in the midden to determine the general composition (as revealed through its surface manifestation) and generate spatial maps of the distributions as a guide to the actual excavation. In any event, all evidence points toward a definite native presence on the Rancho Petaluma.

## CONCLUSION

As this paper has demonstrated, the Mexican rancho offers an unparalleled opportunity for archaeological and historical work on native-colonial interactions in 19th-century California. The historical records suggest that large numbers of native peoples worked at these ranching and agricultural institutions and in noticeably variable conditions of living. However, apart from few projects, the potential remains untapped by archaeologists and historians. This is especially unfortunate not only because the documentation exists on some aspects of native life in the rancho operations, but also because this colonial context offers a special case of native labor regimes that may have had profound impacts on historical and modern native life. Similarly, more attention is required on the native labor aspect of pluralistic communities in conjunction with (but not excluded from) analyses of interethnic unions and marriage. Much remains to be done to make definitive statements on issues raised in this paper, but hopefully I have made it apparent that the issues are there and begging for archaeological attention. This part of California Indian history must be told.

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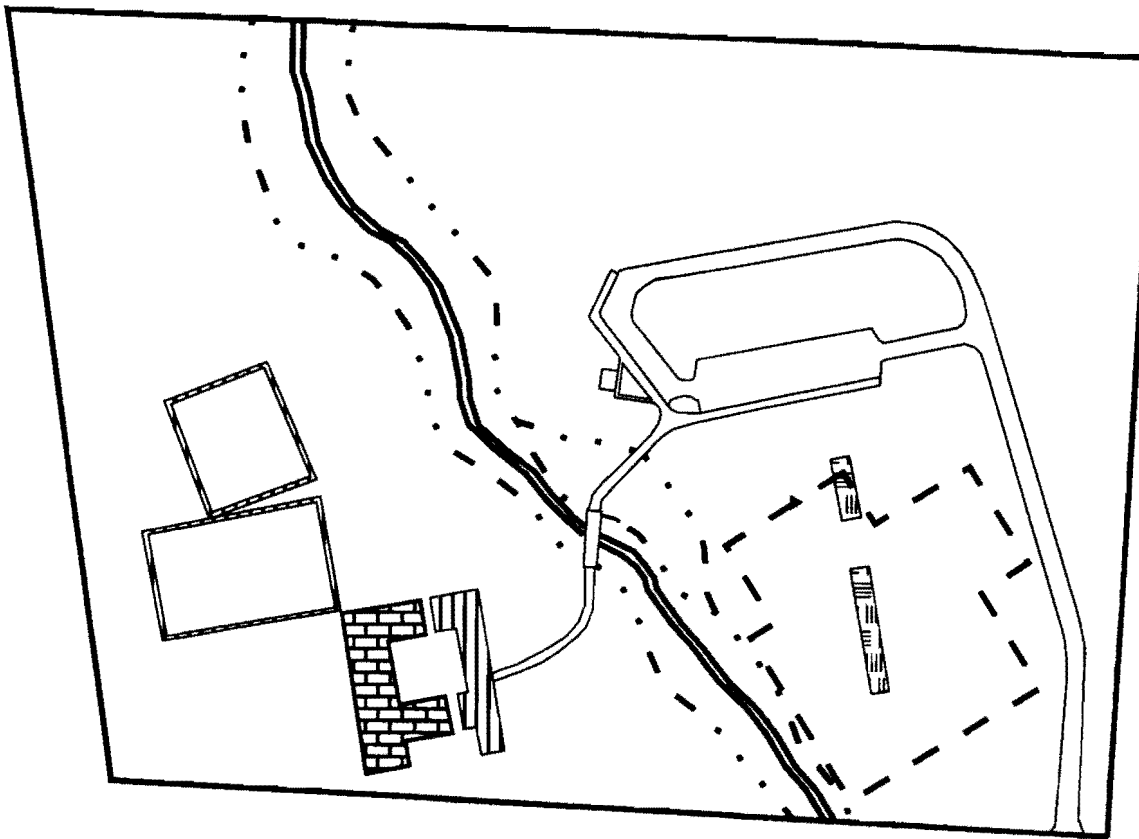
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LEGEND











-  Extant structure
  -  Structures or foundations recovered archaeologically
  -  Projected structures based on 1840s survey map
  -  Park boundary
-  Geophysical Grid
  -  Adobe Creek (Arroyo Lema)
  -  Stream bank
  -  Roads, paths, and parking lots (note that the path to the Adobe is the one prior to June 1996)
-  N
  -  50 m

Figure 1. Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park with relevant modern and archaeological features. See text for details.