

# NATIVE LABORERS IN SPANISH, MEXICAN, AND RUSSIAN COLONIAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE GREATER SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

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## ABSTRACT

The organization, treatment, and compensation of native laborers in Spanish, Mexican and Russian colonies in the greater San Francisco Bay Area are considered. The purpose is to compare and contrast the labor practices employed in mission, rancho, military and mercantile communities and to evaluate how the treatment of laborers influenced encounters between native peoples and colonizers. Specifically, I compare Russian labor practices at Colony Ross with four types of labor organization commonly employed in Hispanic California: communal, convict, day (or contract), and peonage. My findings suggest that the Russians initiated a labor policy based on the short-term, profit oriented objectives of their mercantile enterprise at Colony Ross and recognized little responsibility for the overall welfare of their workers.

## INTRODUCTION

The cornerstone of Spanish, Mexican and Russian colonization of the greater San Francisco Bay Area was the exploitation of native peoples as cheap sources of labor. Hundreds of Ohlone, Coast Miwok, and Pomo peoples were recruited to serve as laborers in a diverse range of farming, ranching, military, and mercantile colonial enterprises. Hispanic colonization of the Bay Area involved the establishment of the San Francisco Presidio, five Franciscan missions (San Francisco de Asís, Santa Clara, San Jose, San Rafael, San Francisco Solano) and the San Jose Pueblo between 1776 and 1823, as well as dozens of private Mexican land grant ranchos in the late 1830s and 1840s. The Russian-American Company founded the mercantile colony of Ross and operated it between 1812 and 1841 along the northern frontier of Spanish and Mexican colonization. Colony Ross served as a California base for exploiting sea mammal furs, for raising crops and livestock, and for producing craft goods. The Russians established a mercantile center at Fort Ross, a port at Bodega Bay, three interior ranchos, and a hunting *artel* on the Farallone Islands.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the labor institutions of Spanish, Mexican, and Russian colonizers in the Bay Area with specific reference to their treatment and organization of Native Californian workers. While some comparisons of Hispanic and Anglo-American labor practices in California have been undertaken, beginning with S. F. Cook's classic study in 1943, and continuing more recently with the research of Albert Hurtado (1988), George Phillips (1990), and Douglas Monroy (1990), I am unaware of any systematic inclusion of Colony Ross in this on-going dialogue. I begin by describing four types of labor organization for native workers commonly employed in Hispanic California. These include communal, convict, day (or contract), and peonage labor systems. The paper concludes by comparing the Hispanic organizations of native workers to the Russian labor practices employed at Colony Ross.

## SPANISH AND MEXICAN LABOR ORGANIZATION

**1. Communal Labor Practices.** S. F. Cook (1943:47) viewed the Franciscan missions in California as representing a communal labor system dependent on Indian neophyte workers. According to the Franciscan ideal, individuals

contributed labor to a common pool of agrarian and craft activities, from which each individual received support in the way of food, shelter, clothing and other necessary goods. Once individual mission complexes were completed and neophytes fully indoctrinated as Hispanic peasants, it was envisioned that the land, built environment, and goods would eventually be turned over to the neophyte workers. Of course, in practice the mission system never operated as a truly communal system, as the padres remained firmly in control of labor policies, the management of agrarian and craft production, and the administration of surpluses until secularization of the missions beginning in 1833-34. There are excellent accounts of neophyte laborers in Alta California mission communities, and my purpose is not to repeat those here. Rather, I emphasize three points underlying the "communal" labor organization of the Franciscan missions in the North Bay. First, neophytes were actively recruited by Franciscan priests, and once members of the Catholic church, they became part of the mission work force. Men were employed primarily in agricultural and ranching pursuits, and as carpenters, masons, tailors, and leather workers. Women tended to household affairs, raised children, prepared foods, and produced some craft goods, such as baskets and woolen goods. Second, in exchange for their labor, the neophytes were fed, clothed, and housed in the mission complex or nearby rancherias. While the standard of living was barely tolerable in some cases, as noted by Jackson and Castillo (1995), the padres were ultimately responsible for the care and protection of their neophyte charges. Finally, the mission labor regime was not voluntary once native peoples joined the Catholic Church. They remained under the jurisdiction of Franciscan priests for the remainder of their days in the mission.

**2. Convict Labor Practices.** Native peoples convicted of crimes against the Spanish or Mexican state provided important sources of labor for secular and military communities (Hurtado 1988:38; Monroy 1990:71,150). The Presidio of San Francisco employed a number of Indian prisoners in hard labor constructing fortifications and other work at the military post (Langellier and Rosen 1996:112, 113, 140). The prisoners included runaway neophytes and gentiles (or non-

Christian Indians) accused of cattle or horse stealing, murder, and treason.

**3. Day or Contract Labor Practices.** Day laborers represented another critical source of labor for secular and military communities in Hispanic California. Some of the day laborers were neophytes provided by mission padres who served as labor contractors for nearby presidios and pueblos before secularization. Monroy (1990:71-72) notes that the neophytes were paid a small wage, about two reales a day, which was credited to the mission account. In addition, the neophyte workers received food and clothing for services including, "field work, personal service, adobe making, general repair and maintenance, and other construction work, and blacksmithing." Campbell (1977:66) also notes that presidio soldiers sometimes used neophytes as laborers and military auxiliaries without permission from the mission priests.

Secular and military communities recruited gentiles as day laborers as well (Cook 1943:49; Monroy 1990:100-111; Phillips 1990:34). Presidio soldiers stationed at San Francisco and settlers of the San Jose Pueblo employed gentiles as contract workers to perform specific tasks (e.g. Milliken 1995:104). For example, in 1825, a plan was implemented to improve presidio defenses by hiring "vagrants, evil-disposed persons, and if need be, Indians" at a low wage to relieve the soldiers of such menial tasks (Langellier and Rosen 1996:151). Gentiles were also employed to harvest crops at the San Rafael and San Francisco Solano missions, in which each family received a small quantity of agricultural produce in return for their labor (Smilie 1975:29). Spanish labor policies dictated that gentile workers were to be compensated for their labor, and they were usually paid in kind – with food, clothing or goods (Milliken 1995:76,104). However, cases are reported where gentiles were coerced to work by force or threat of force (Milliken 1995:104; Monroy 1990:71,104).

**4. Peonage Labor Practices.** The peonage labor system as defined by Cook (1943) and others, is really a variant of day or contract labor that flourished in Mexican California after the secularization of missions. The creation of the Mexican Republic in 1821 resulted in two

significant changes for policies governing the use of native laborers in the Bay Area. The first involved the emancipation of neophytes, beginning in 1826, and culminating with the secularization of the missions in 1833-34 (Jackson 1994:43-49). Former neophyte workers were no longer under the authority of Franciscan priests, but now were regulated by secular policies regarding labor compensation and treatment. Second, the Mexican Republic expanded greatly the number of private ranchos. The Mexican Colonization Law of 1824 and Supplemental Regulation of 1828 specified a procedure in which Mexican or naturalized citizens could petition the governor for grants of 1 to 2 leagues (4,400 to nearly 50,000 acres) (Becker 1967:59). Of the approximately 800 ranchos granted between 1822 to 1846, less than 30 were established prior to 1833 (Greenwood 1989:457; Hornbeck 1978:383-384). The vast majority were granted after secularization when mission lands were carved up into many separate private holdings. Along the northern frontier of the Bay Area most ranchos were created in the late 1830s and 1840s (Hornbeck 1978:385).

With secularization and the proliferation of private ranchos, former neophytes had several options (Costello and Hornbeck 1989:304; Jackson 1994:49-50; Phillips 1990:33). They could petition for their own land grants, although few appear to have been awarded (Hornbeck 1978:385-388). They could move to pueblos, such as San Jose, Yerba Buena or Sonoma, and hope to find employment as day laborers, servants and cooks. They could join Indian relatives in the hinterland and distance themselves from Hispanic communities. Finally, they could become part of the peon work force on ranchos (Hornbeck 1978:385). For example, after secularization most of the neophytes from mission San Francisco Solano were serving as household servants or day laborers for Salvador Vallejo and Antonio Ortega at the Sonoma Pueblo, or were employed in nearby ranchos, most notably Mariano Vallejo's extensive Petaluma Rancho established in 1834 (Smilie 1975:62,84). Still other neophytes from mission San Rafael and possibly mission San Francisco Solano are reported to have moved to Fort Ross to serve as laborers for the Russian-American Company (Jackson 1994:51).

Most research on the peonage labor system in Alta California has focused on southern California ranchos (Cook 1943; Greenwood 1989; Monroy 1990). I expect that the on-going archaeological and ethnohistorical study of Vallejo's Petaluma Rancho by Stephen Silliman, as reported in this symposium, will begin to balance this regional bias, along with Hurtado's (1988) recent examination of John Sutter's New Helvetia Rancho. From the outset, it is important to recognize that the specific system of Indian peonage probably varied from rancho to rancho, depending largely on the practices of individual rancho owners. Suffice it to say that the basic components of Indian peonage were fourfold. First, native laborers were dependent upon the rancho owners for a place to live, for food, for goods, and for security (Cook 1943:50; Phillips 1990:37-38). They received from their patrons rations of food, including beef, butter, corn, beans, squash, chile, etc. (Monroy 1990:150). In return, they provided a wide range of labor for the patron, with men typically serving as vaqueros or ranch hands and women as household servants, cooks, and nannies (Cook 1943:53; Smilie 1975:84). Second, natives were often recruited or brought to the ranchos in large family or even tribal units and were usually allowed to live together in their own rancherias often with relatively minimal interference (Cook 1943:50). Third, in theory the peon laborers were not slaves or chattel, but could leave the rancho at any time (Monroy 1990:185). Recruitment of the peon labor force was supposedly voluntary. In reality, there are many examples of force employed in the recruitment and retainment of rancho workers. The best known example in the North Bay is Vallejo's use of Indian war captives on his Petaluma Rancho, and his supplying other nearby ranchos with captured native laborers as well (Hurtado 1988:47-48). Sutter also forced native peoples to work for him when labor was in short supply (Hurtado 1988:57-58). Finally, a complex network of hierarchical, social, and fictive kin relations and obligations developed between some rancho owners and their workers (Monroy 1990:100-101). For example, cattle received by the neophytes for their service in Mission San Francisco Solano after secularization were mostly entrusted to Mariano Vallejo on a share basis, with proceeds from the hide and tallow trade used by the Indian shareholders to buy blankets, cooking

utensils, etc. (Smilie 1975:66; Vallejo 1994:43). Vallejo and his family also served as godfathers or godmothers for Indian workers' children (Smilie 1975:84).

### RUSSIAN LABOR PRACTICES AT COLONY ROSS

The Russian-American Company employed Native Californians in similar kinds of tasks as did the Spanish and Mexican colonists, primarily as laborers for harvesting crops, tending livestock, and producing bricks and other goods. Yet Russian labor practices differed in many respects from those employed in Spanish or Mexican Alta California. In understanding these differences, it is important to stress that the Company was not interested in settling California with permanent colonists, nor was it interested in proselytizing or teaching local native peoples about European culture and the Russian Orthodox faith. Rather, the mercantile enterprise was primarily concerned with making profits for Company shareholders. I think the short-term, profit oriented objectives of the Company dictated, in large part, the labor practices of its managers and their rather indifferent, somewhat callous, treatment of Native Californian workers.

The Company brought a multi-ethnic labor force to Colony Ross from the North Pacific composed primarily of Russians, Creoles, and Native Alaskans who served as managers, artisans, skilled craftsmen, and specialized sea mammal hunters. This imported workforce was either paid on commission or received daily or yearly salaries in scrip, a parchment token that could be exchanged for goods in the Company store (Tikhmenev 1978:144). In contrast, the Native Californians were viewed as a cheap pool of unskilled workers who could be recruited on a task-by-task basis. They were paid primarily in kind for their services, with items including food, tobacco, beads and clothing (Kostromitinov 1974:9; Wrangell 1969:211). While recruitment was supposedly voluntary, when labor shortages developed during the harvest season, Russian managers were not above capturing agricultural workers by raiding Pomo communities (see Wrangell 1969:210-211). Furthermore, Pomo and Coast Miwok women married to Colony Ross employees evidently had to petition the Company

to be "allowed" or "released" from service in order to return to their native villages, even after their spouses had died or moved back to Alaska (Istomin 1992:6-7).

The Company recognized three different categories of Native Californian workers: *kaiurs*, day laborers, and women married to Company employees. *Kaiurs* were slave laborers and war captives employed by the Company in its North Pacific colonies for heavy work. As these former slaves began to decline in number, their ranks were filled with people who had committed offenses against the Company. Similar to convict laborers in Hispanic settlements, Native Californians were conscripted as *kaiur* laborers when they stole livestock or murdered Native Alaskan workers (Lightfoot, et al. 1997:3). In the Kuskov 1820-21 census, eight Native Californian men were listed as *kaiur* laborers at Colony Ross, including one Coast Miwok man (and his Kashaya Pomo wife) who was serving time on the Farallon Islands *artel*. Day laborers at Colony Ross functioned in a capacity similar to those in Hispanic California. They were hired or detained for specific tasks, such as harvesting wheat crops. They lived in nearby rancherias during the period of work, and were paid in kind for services rendered. Finally, Native Californian women married to or cohabiting with Company employees, including Russian, Creole and Native Alaskan men, appear to have been obligated to perform some kind of compulsory service for the Company while residing at Ross (see Lightfoot, et al. 1997:5). Based on our excavation of the Native Alaskan Neighborhood at Fort Ross it appears that Pomo and Miwok women in inter-ethnic households may have been producing various birdskin parkas, sea mammal *kamleikas* (waterproof outer garmets) and other goods for the Company.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Russian managers at Colony Ross employed two labor practices that were commonly used in Hispanic California – conscription of native troublemakers as prison laborers, and contracting natives as day workers for specific tasks. However, the communal and peon labor systems that dominated Hispanic-Indian relations in Alta California were not evident at Colony Ross. There were no systematic

attempts to assimilate the Native Californian workers into Russian culture at Colony Ross. Furthermore, Russian managers tended to leave the spiritual affairs of the Native Californians alone, and they apparently did not establish close social relations and reciprocal obligations with their workers either, in contrast to the padres and some of the Mexican rancho owners. Eyewitness accounts at Colony Ross indicate that the Pomo and Coast Miwok workers were sometimes mistreated, working long hours for very little compensation that often consisted of "bad" food (Wrangell 1969:210-211). In contrast to the communal and peonage labor systems, the Russian managers recognized no obligation to support their Native Californian laborers. Significantly, correspondence from the 1820s indicates that Native Californian women and children left at Ross while their Native Alaskan mates were hunting received no assistance from the Company, and that some families "ran away

out of hunger and the others endured terrible privation" (see Khlebnikov 1990:131-132). The results of recent archaeological investigations at the Native Alaskan Neighborhood and outlying Kashaya Pomo villages, as reported by Antoinette Martinez in this symposium, strongly suggest that native workers were responsible for feeding and clothing themselves and for producing or obtaining from fellow workers and relatives most of their material culture (Lightfoot et al. 1997; Martinez 1996). There is little evidence that the diverse range of European, American and Asian goods shipped to Colony Ross were destined for Native Californian (or Native Alaskan) consumption. Rather it appears most of the goods (with the exception of glass trade beads) were earmarked for trade with Spanish and Mexican settlements to obtain wheat, beef, tallow and other agricultural products for the Russian-American Company's North Pacific colonies.

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