

EARLY HISTORY OF SAN LORENZO

The Ohlone

We first acknowledge that all of what is now called San Lorenzo is on the homeland of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area. We acknowledge and respect their connection to this region and give thanks for the opportunity to live, work and learn on their traditional homeland.



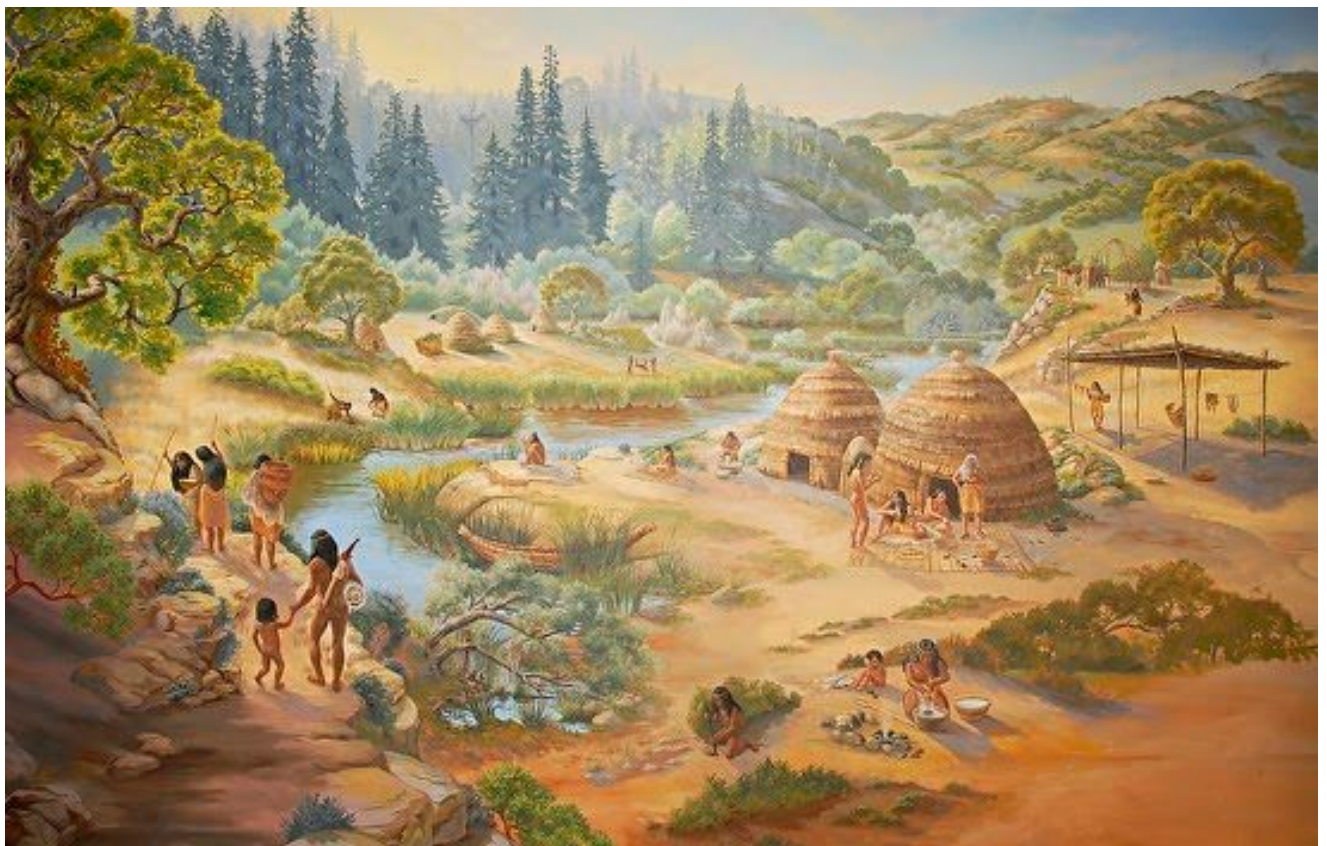
East Bay landscape, from The Ohlone Way, Malcolm Margolin, Heyday Books

For thousands of years, Ohlone people have lived in the Bay Area, along the bay, the creeks and springs. The word “Ohlone” is used today to describe the original people who live in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The word “Ohlone” describes a language group made up of many smaller tribes. These tribes have some differences in culture and traditions, but they are all connected by similar languages.

In the area around the East Bay, the language spoken is Chochenyo Ohlone. The land of San Lorenzo is on the homeland of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. In Chochenyo, Muwekma means “the People.”

The Ohlone were careful stewards of the natural resources around them. They didn't just live off the abundance of the Bay Area - they shaped the landscape to meet their needs and ensure sustainability for other life as well. They built homes and canoes of natural tule reeds. They caught fish and shellfish from the coastal waters, and caught shorebirds with nets. They harvested acorns, and gathered seeds, roots and berries from the wide variety of plants and grasses that grow in the region.



Ohlone Village, mural by Ann Thiermann for the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History.

Ohlone cultures changed over time in the thousands of years that Ohlone people have lived in the area, responding to changes and new arrivals.

Ohlone people still live and work in San Lorenzo today. Some continue traditional ways of harvesting and basketry passed down by their ancestors, just as all families remember and continue family and cultural traditions.



Basket, made and held by Linda Yamane, Rumsen Ohlone basketweaver.

The Missions

During the second half of the 18th century, from 1769-1833, Spanish explorers and missionaries moved into California, conquering lands for the Spanish king and establishing missions for the Catholic Church. The closest mission to what is now San Lorenzo was south of the area, Mission San Jose. The missions were an institution used to control the native population by converting them to the Catholic religion, while also making them less able to resist losing their land as European settlers moved in.



Mission San Jose, established in 1797. The mission was surrounded by lands for grazing cattle, and relied on fresh water from San Lorenzo Creek.

The missions were disastrous for the Ohlone of the area, many of whom lost their lives and their families, while their language and culture were suppressed. The missions impacted the region's population, land use, language, architecture, economy, and religion. Many Native Californians were forced to work at the missions against their will. Additionally, Spanish missionaries brought diseases with them that killed untold thousands of Native Californians. Prior to the California missions, there were about

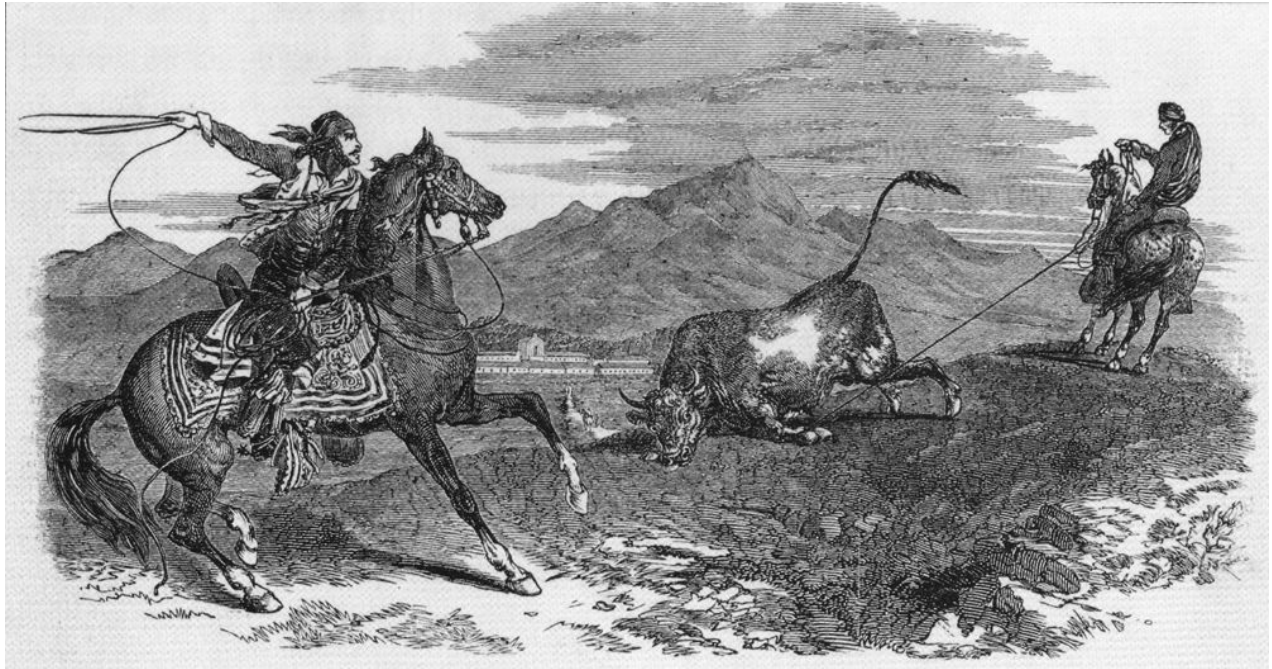
300,000 Native Californians. By 1834, scholars believe only about 20,000 had survived.



Artist's rendering of Native Californians being forced to help build a new Mission.

The Mexican Land Grants

From 1808 to 1821, while missions were still being established in California, Mexico was fighting a war for independence from Spain. In 1821, Mexico won, and declared independence from Spain. Mexico then took over the mission lands and properties and gave them to Mexican soldiers as a reward for having proven themselves during the war.



Vaqueros with Mission San Jose and Mission Peak in the background, from a William Smyth watercolor in 1826.

The land around what is San Lorenzo today was given as three separate land grants to three different Mexican soldiers as a reward for their service. Rancho San Lorenzo Baja covered 6,688 acres and was granted to Francisco Soto, so it became commonly known as the Soto Rancho. Francisco Soto's grandfather had come to California with the Anza Expedition in 1774. Rancho San Lorenzo, next to the Soto Rancho, was given to Guillermo Castro. Francisco Soto was married to Barbara Soto, Guillermo Castro's sister. A third land grant, given to José Estudillo, was called Rancho San Leandro.



1878 area map, showing boundaries for Rancho San Leandro & Rancho San Lorenzo

In 1848, after a two-year conflict between the U.S. and Mexico over territory, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. The treaty called for

the United States to pay \$15 million to Mexico, while Mexico in turn signed over to the U.S. a vast amount of land in the west, including all of the California territory, most of what is now Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Colorado and roughly half of New Mexico. It also set the boundary of Texas at the Rio Grande. Mexicans already living in those areas were given a choice of either relocating to Mexico or staying and becoming American citizens.

The Gold Rush and “Squattersville”

Just as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was being signed, gold was found in Sutter’s Mill near Sacramento. Once word of the gold discovery got out, a tremendous surge of people from around the world flooded into California seeking a quick fortune.



California gold miners, ca. 1850s

In 1850, California became a part of the United States. Many of the thousands of miners who came out during the Gold Rush found that mining for gold was incredibly hard work. Against common belief, only very few made any money. Plenty of disappointed miners discovered that the soil around future San Lorenzo was very rich and fertile, and so they settled in the area and tried their luck at farming instead.

The United States government allowed people to live on any “unclaimed” land they could find. This practice was called “squattening”. According to the law, anyone who “improved” the property - by building houses, adding fences and/or planting crops - could claim it as his or her own. Large sections of open land in central California were available to squatters, but the land that makes up San Lorenzo today was not open for settling. San Lorenzo soon had so many squatters that it gained the nickname

"Squattersville." Much of this land had already been claimed and lived on by the local Ohlone for generations. But Ohlone claims to the land were ignored by Mexican and American settlers.

The land that "Squattersville" sat on was actually part of the three Mexican land grants: Rancho San Lorenzo, Rancho San Lorenzo Baja, and Rancho San Leandro. The U. S. Government had said that it would honor the claims of the Mexican land grants, but the process was slow in practice. Francisco Soto, Guillermo Castro and José Estudillo spent years in court trying to defend their land claims from squatters. Francisco Soto passed away in the early 1850s, and his widow, Barbara Soto, continued to pursue her legal claims to the land. Eventually, the squatters were forced to either move out or buy the land they were squatting on. But the expensive legal battle and the sheer volume of new settlers meant that the era of large Mexican land grants was essentially over, as the area filled in with smaller houses, farms and towns.

San Lorenzo through the Years

Over time, many more groups of people came to San Lorenzo and settled in the area. Each group has left their mark on the land. The Muwekma Ohlone shaped the land through controlled burns and careful harvesting of natural resources, and continue to create and celebrate in their ancestral homelands. The impact of the Spanish missions can be clearly seen in the many Spanish-language place names of the area. The Mexican land grants shaped current place names and boundaries, for example the towns of San Lorenzo, San Leandro and Castro Valley (named for Guillermo Castro) all trace their names back to the time of Mexican land grants. Each group of people has left their own impact on the area. Moving forward, from Portuguese and Italian cannery workers and Japanese-American nursery owners to today's Latino and Filipino families, many more groups of people continue to shape the present and future of San Lorenzo.