

# Milpitas Muse

September 2025

The Milpitas Historical Society Newsletter

Volume XLVI, No. 6

**CHANGE > WEDNESDAY, SEPT 17<sup>th</sup> <**  
**AFTERNOON, 1:00 PM – 3:00 PM**  
**MILPITAS AUDITORIUM**  
**160 N. MAIN STREET, MILPITAS**

## The Presentation

### **WRITE LONG AND BEAUTIFUL LETTERS: The Vallejos' Californio Correspondence, 1846-1888**

In 2023, Professors Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz published their 2-volume, 1,456-page book entitled *Recuerdos: Historical and Personal Remembrances Relating to Alta California, 1769-1849*, which is the foundation for their presentation.

The American conquest of California and the discovery of gold shortly after dramatically changed the world in which the Mexican inhabitants of California had lived for decades.

This presentation will explore how one family, the Vallejos, tried to navigate these political, social, and cultural changes.



Francisca Benicia Carrillo, trying to raise eight children at home, wrote to him, "You say that you love me and the family so much ... why do you leave me alone for so long now that the family needs your guidance?"

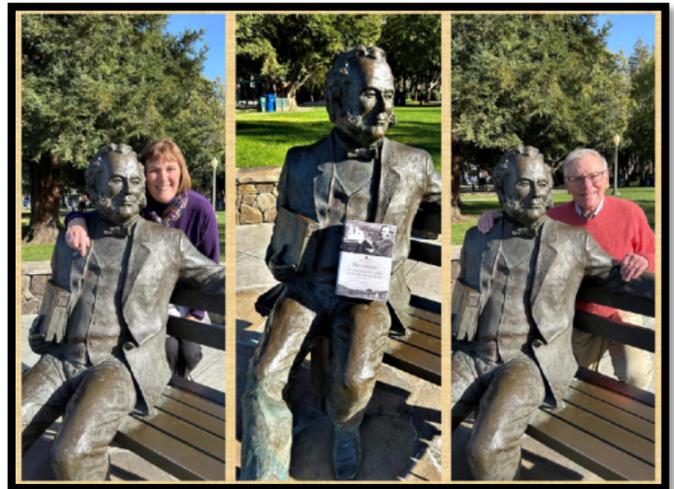


Lamenting the family's loss of property and social standing, Mariano Guadalupe wrote, "Ending up poor because the most powerful government in the world has taken over my most valuable properties is not my fault."

The Vallejo family dynamics and their daily life experiences throw important light upon an often neglected aspect of California's past.

Through their personal letters we see how the Vallejos, like many other Mexican families, struggled to raise their children in an environment they did not entirely understand, and to help each other maintain their dignity and social authority in this new world.

## Our Presenters



Rose Marie Beebe is Professor Emerita of Spanish Literature at Santa Clara University, and Robert M. Senkewicz is Professor Emeritus of History at Santa Clara University.

They have collaborated on many scholarly histories, two of which are *Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo: Life in Spanish, Mexican, and American California*, as well as *Junipero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary*.

They also are coeditors and translators of *Tesitmonios: Early California through the Eyes of Women, 1815-1848*, which was the subject of their previous presentation at our Installation Dinner event in 2017.

## NOTABLE PEOPLE

### Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo: Spaniard, Mexican, American



#### HIS ANCESTRY

Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo was a leading figure in California history. He was born on July 4, 1807 in Monterey, Alta California, which at that time was under Spanish rule.

His father, Ygnacio Vicente Ferrer Vallejo, who studied for the priesthood but instead joined the military, was a recruit in Fernando de Rivera's 1774 expedition to San Diego, where Rivera assumed command of its Presidio a year before Juan Bautista de Anza left New Spain to colonize the Bay Area.

In 1776, Ygnacio was sent north to San Luis Obispo to reconstruct buildings that had been burned by the local Chumash Indians in an uprising, after which he became *majordomo* of Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo (the Carmel mission founded by Father Junipero Serra circa 1770). In 1786 Ygnacio was stationed in Pueblo de San José and at one time served as its *alcalde*.

In 1791 he married 13-year old Maria Antonia Isabela Lugo, the first Spanish child born in Alta California, who produced thirteen children. Of them, Mariano Guadalupe was their eighth child and third son.

#### MARIANO'S EARLY PATH TOWARD PROMINENCE

The prominent careers of that era were in the Church hierarchy, or an officer in the army, or as an important landowner. Mariano's oldest brother, José Ygnacio, went into the priesthood. His older brother, José de Jesus, distinguished himself in the military.

The majority of colonists were poorly educated if at all; literacy was quite rare, even among the grantees of ranchos. This is because formal education in Alta California was generally poor with very limited availability.

Mariano, however, was provided a special pathway. He was one of three teenagers who were provided a better education with access to newspapers and official documents from Mexico City, and all three would become notable in early California history.

In 1822-23, at the age of 15-16, Mariano became the personal secretary of Luis Arguello, the new Spanish Governor of Alta California, when news arrived in Monterey of the establishment of Mexico, a revolution that had started when Mariano was only 3 years old. A Viceroy's royal authority for the appointment of governors in New Spain was now replaced with that of the Presidenté of Mexico. Mariano, born a Spanish Californio, was now a citizen of Mexico.

In 1824, when only 17, Mariano began his career in the Mexican Army as a mere cadet, but he rose to the rank of corporal in 1825 (including an appointment to the territorial legislature,) then promoted to sergeant in 1826, and soon followed by the rank of *alférez* (today, a second lieutenant).

#### SECULARIZATION BROUGHT CHANGE

While Mexican independence in 1822 was a landmark event, it was 1833 that started the major social changes in Alta California. Up until 1821-1822, only about 30 ranchos were given by the Governor, but those grants were restricted to authorizing the *use* of land during the grantee's lifetime, land that was not reserved for the Church's needs or for the Pueblos where most colonists lived.

Beginning in 1833, however, a Governor's land grants provided title with permanent ownership of the land with the only restrictions being that it could not be rented to others and that it was used solely for cattle raising and agriculture. Under Mexican administration, anywhere from several to eight hundred land grants were issued; this range is quite wide depending on the "documentation" referenced by historians.

José Loreto Higuera's 1821 *Rancho Tularcitos* land grant was Spanish, thus both rare and at that time ownership retained by the King. José Maria de Jesus Alviso's 1835 *Rancho Milpitas* land grant was Mexican, in which ownership was transferred to the grantee and both inheritable and saleable by family members.

## MARIANO'S CAREER BECOMES MORE ILLUSTRIOUS

In the early 1830s, Mariano was promoted to the rank of *teniente* and Commandante of Presidio de San Francisco. In 1834, after passage of the Secularization Act, he was assigned the task of closing Mission San Francisco Solano, the newest of the Missions (with nearly 1,000 neophytes or converted indigenous people) located in what was regarded as the "frontier" north of San Francisco and San Rafael with few colonists but many indigenous people.

In his role as administrator Mariano awarded small sections of land to native family groups (about 33 acres each, as prescribed in the legislation), and he then allocated an extremely large portion of the former Mission land to *Rancho Petaluma*, which he personally received as a land grant from Mexican Governor José Figueroa in 1834.

Commandante Teniente Vallejo suddenly was a large landowner (with about 44,000 acres) who then worked to bring other Hispanics north to colonize that remote region with the aim of preventing the Russians based at Fort Ross from expansion inland. At the same time he had to deal with significant hostilities from angry local natives who had understandably come to resent the loss of their ancestral land. His solution was to close the Presidio in San Francisco and move its military forces into this northern region to expand Presidio Sonoma, significantly strengthening his territorial control.



*The Hacienda at Rancho Petaluma*

In 1836, after an insurrection led by Vallejo's nephew, Juan Alvarado, against the new but unpopular Governor Nicolas Gutierrez (who had assumed office upon the death of Governor José Figueroa in late 1835), Mariano Vallejo was promoted to the rank of *colonel* and became Commandante General of the "Free State of Alta California" by his nephew, now the new Governor. Both promotions were confirmed by the federal government in Mexico City.

## STORM CLOUDS SWEEPING IN

In 1846, John C. Fremont, with 60 heavily armed men, traveled to Monterey to meet with Thomas O. Larkin, United States Consul to Mexican Alta California as well as confidential agent to U. S. President Polk. They discussed the hostilities in Texas as well as the future of California, but then Fremont lied to Commandante Castro about the real purpose for his presence in Alta California.

Deceived, Castro permitted Fremont's band to stay the winter in San Joaquin Valley, but later ordered Fremont to leave immediately when he discovered Fremont was engaged in suspicious and unauthorized activities in the Salinas area.

In May of 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico. In June an American militia headed to Sonoma and engaged in the now famous Bear Flag Revolt that included the "arrest" of General Mariano Vallejo despite assurances in his home that he favored the American takeover of Alta California.



LACHRYMA MONTIS,  
RESIDENCE OF GEN. MONTGOMERY



The famous California Republic flag replaced the flag of Mexico in the town square of Sonoma, along with some unwarranted actions against prominent Alta Californians before the 1846 War with Mexico would cease with the official signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

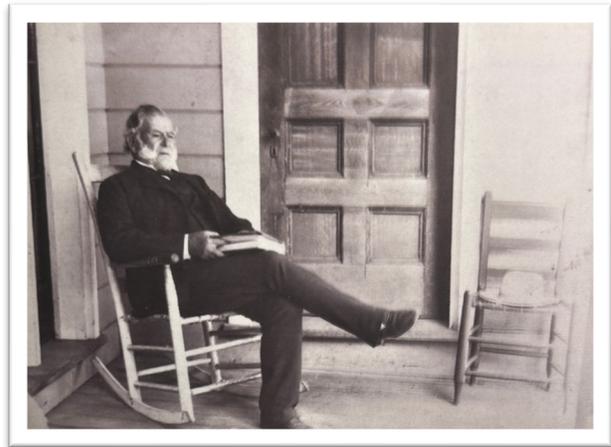
Leaders of the Sonoma revolt had privately negotiated a peaceful agreement with General Vallejo when they realized that he was more of an asset to the future of California than a problem. But outside his home, however, an impassioned mob reversed that agreement and transferred him to Sutter's Fort where he was imprisoned and treated poorly, from which he became very sick with malaria. When he was allowed to return to his home in Sonoma, he was a mere shell of his former self, weighing less than 100 pounds.

### **BECOMING A PROMINENT AMERICAN**

Before the "new" California could achieve statehood, much work needed to be done. The 1849 Constitutional Convention of Monterey was held to write a state constitution (written in both English and Spanish), and Mariano Vallejo was an important participant representing those earlier residents whose land ownership needed to be recertified by the U. S. Land Commission. Many Californios would lose their land grants outright if denied or by piecemeal sales of their land grants if confirmed. Even the prominent Vallejo saw his own holdings greatly reduced by the legal treachery during the retitling proceedings.

In 1850 Vallejo was elected to the California Senate, where he was a voice for the full integration of the "old" Californians with the new Californians, something that was explicitly pledged in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago but fell short in its implementation.

In his struggle to restore his former wealth, Vallejo tried numerous things and often was frustrated in the attempt. He left his family behind while trying to make some business deals in New York City that generally did not materialize in the way he had hoped. His extended absence was a severe strain on his family and wife. On his 84,000-acre Rancho Suscol, he founded the town of Vallejo on the Carquinez Straits to become the state capitol, (which did happen but not permanently). As a real estate development, that project fizzled when the capitol moved away. However, the town eventually would become an important port for the Bay Area and home to Mare Island Naval Shipyard in the modern era. Vallejo also founded the town of Benicia that he named to honor his wife.



Finally Vallejo authored a five-volume history to document the events in his tumultuous life that our two presenters have labored to translate and edit as *Recuerdos: Historical and Personal Remembrances Relating to Alta California, 1769-1849*, and then to author their own commentary on the transformation of a way of life that was early California.

*Written by Joseph Ehardt, September 2025.*

**My research invovled examining many historical sources, but especially informative was the book by Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, *Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo: Life in Spanish, Mexican, and American California*, University of Oklahoma Press.**

### **Hare Our Society's Contact Information**

You can contact the Milpitas Historical Society:  
 - by mail at 160 N. Main St., Milpitas CA 95035  
 - by email at [tmhs@milpitashistoricalsociety.org](mailto:tmhs@milpitashistoricalsociety.org)  
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 -by land-line at 1-408-262-1776 (Bill)