



Fact Sheet | The Establishment of El Presidio

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish colonists, the indigenous population of the bay shores and coastal valleys was estimated between 15,000 and 20,000 people divided into around 55 tribes who spoke 5 mutually unintelligible languages. In the Presidio region of the Bay Area, the indigenous tribes of the Ohlone/Costanoan called the Presidio home, with archeological evidence of their inhabitation dating back to 740 A.D.

In the late eighteenth century, Spanish occupied Mexico deployed Juan Bautista de Anza, one of the leading western path-finders, to explore and colonize Northern California. After establishing an overland route from Mexican-state of Sonora to Northern California in 1774, Anza was commissioned by the Spanish to return to California and establish a permanent settlement—with a mission and a presidio—along the pacific coast of the San Francisco Bay.

From September 1775 to June 1776, Juan Bautista de Anza led 240 colonists on a land expedition from Sonora and Sinaloa (in modern Mexico) to settle in the San Francisco Bay. On June 27, 1776, Anza arrived in San Francisco with his band of colonists, including Mexican soldiers, their wives and children, families of settlers, muleteers and cattle-drivers conducting the king's cattle and a procession of mules. Of the original party, 191 eventually settled in San Francisco with the remainder settling in Monterey.

Anza and his colonists achieved the venture of Anza Expedition, eventually establishing the new military garrison of "El Presidio," and the Franciscan Mission San Francisco de Assisi ([Mission Dolores](#)). [Los Californianos](#), descendants of these original Alta California founding families annually return to the Presidio to commemorate their heritage in "Pasados del Presidio." Today, Presidio visitors can wander along the [Anza Trail](#), which follows the direct path of the Anza expeditions—including the site where the members of Anza's expedition ended their journey, camping for two days on what Franciscan missionary Father Pedro Font described as the lake "of very fine water near the mouth of the Port of San Francisco," [Mountain Lake](#).

During the winter of 1776-1777, Anza's second in command Lt. Jose Joaquin Moraga oversaw the construction of a military camp in a sheltered inland valley, naming it the Presidio of San Francisco in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. The original Presidio consisted of a heavily armed fortification, as well as administration, training, and housing structures. El Presidio became the administrative center of a presidial district that stretched from the northern reaches of San Francisco Bay south along the coast to present-day Santa Cruz, and was responsible for defending a network of missions, pueblos, and ranchos. After the great Earthquake of 1812, the entire complex was rebuilt, and the Mesa and de Anza rooms of the **Presidio Officers' Club** are believed to date from this rebuilding. In 1821, Mexico declared its independence from Spain.

Although the Mexican flag guarded the Presidio, there was no change in personnel when the Presidio changed from Spanish to Mexican sovereignty. The history of El Presidio intersects with European westward expansion, the advancement of the enlightenment, and the entry of Alta California into the world market.

Today, the Presidio Trust honors this history each year at Pasados del Presidio, a two-day event focusing on early life and culture in the Presidio, commemorating the “birthday” of San Francisco together with Los Californianos. Pasados del Presidio celebrates the Presidio’s Spanish and Mexican history while honoring its native Ohlone heritage in a cross-cultural event that mirrors the rich diversity of Bay area today.