

A preliminary analysis of the burials of the *camposanto* at the Royal Presidio de San Diego, Alta California

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Introduction

This paper provides a preliminary analysis of the burials at the *camposanto* for the Royal Presidio de San Diego in Alta California. As one might expect, there is some level of ambiguity in the burial and death records from the late 1700s and in the archaeological data compiled over more than a decade of excavation and analysis in the 1970s. While not presenting a complete picture of the burials and archaeological record for the presidio *camposanto*, this paper offers significant insights. The author gratefully acknowledges the pioneering work of Clinton R. Griffin and Sister Louise La Coste in compiling and translating the baptismal and death records for early San Diego.

The San Diego presidio and the chapel within it were the first permanent colonial facilities in Alta California (Figure 1). Built to be the first prong of Spanish settlements that would dot the coast of Alta California, the presidio and church complex at San Diego housed soldiers, the families of soldiers, craftsmen, Indian workers and other individuals who settled in San Diego prior to the establishment of the pueblo at the foot of Presidio Hill in the mid-1830s. Although the population at the presidio waxed and waned as troops were deployed elsewhere, there rarely were more than 70 occupants within the presidio's walls. After reestablishment of Mission San Diego de Alcalá in 1776 (following its destruction by the Tipai in 1775), the Franciscan priests and their assistants and converts left the presidio and inhabited the more extensive mission grounds.

The cemetery at the Royal Presidio de San Diego was in use from its founding in 1769 as the first mission in Alta California to as late as 1876, almost 40 years after the abandonment of the presidio fortifications. Following the founding of Mission San Diego 6 mi. east of the presidio in 1774, the majority of Hispanic settlers, Indians, and other members of the pueblo of San Diego were buried at the nearby mission. In spite of the more intensive use of the mission burial grounds, at least 204 individuals were buried at the presidio *camposanto*. The majority of these burials took place between 1790 and 1810, with a substantial decrease in burials after 1825. After establishment of Mission San Diego de Alcalá in 1774, the presidio complex reverted exclusively to its function as a military garrison and the mission building became a chapel for the presidio (Figure 2).

Archaeological excavation conducted primarily by Dr. Paul H. Ezell of San Diego State University from 1966 to 1976 uncovered the remains of approximately 120 burials, comprising 60% of the known burials. Because of continuous use of the park that overlay the burials since 1926, including irrigation and application of fertilizers, the physical state of many of the burials was very poor. Several of the burials were nothing more than powder, while others were in

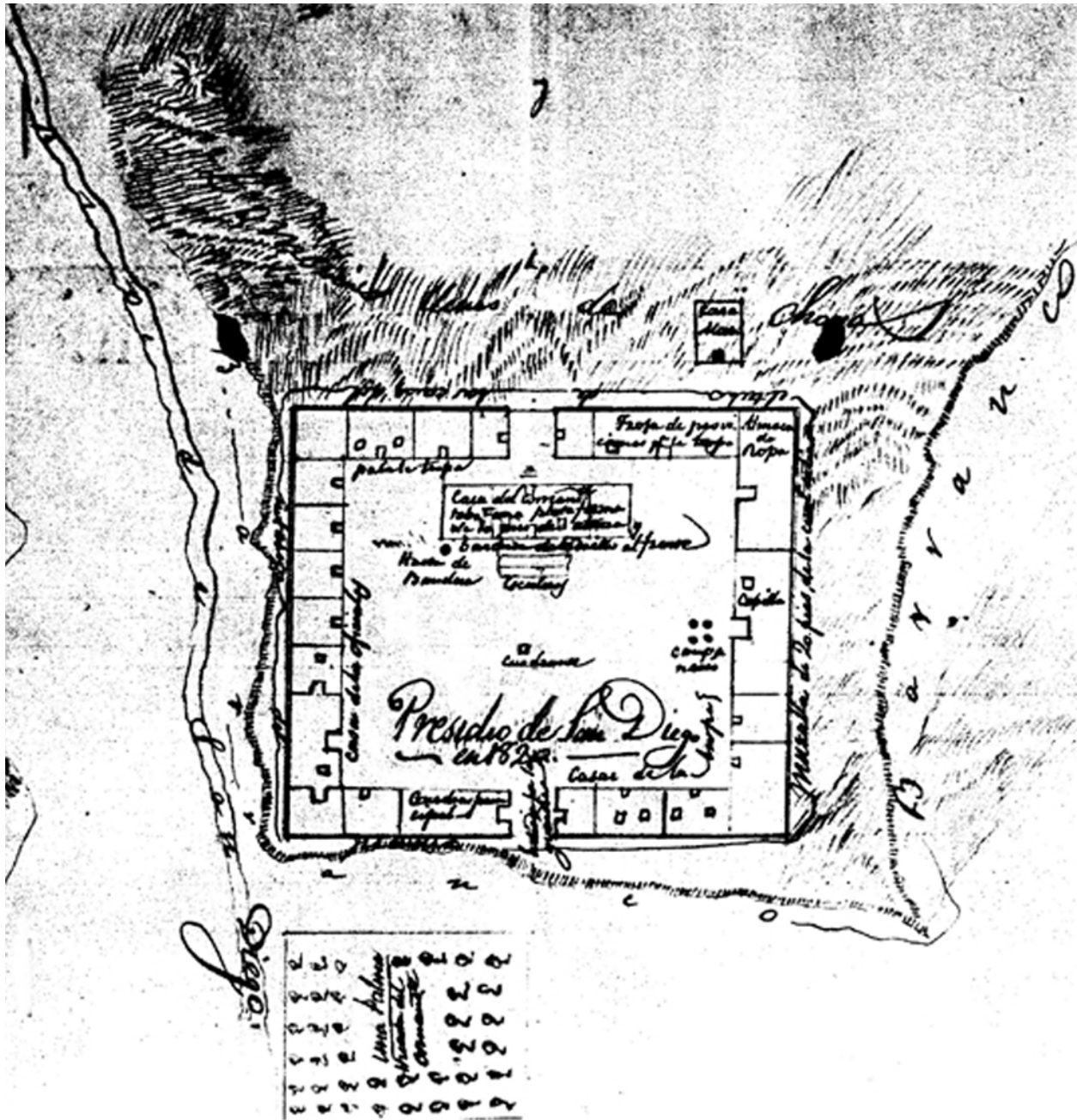


Figure 1. The plan of the San Diego Presidio completed by General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and dated 1820.

remarkably good shape. An apparent pattern of better preservation appears to be associated with those burials that were without a coffin. It has been speculated that the wooden coffins served as a type of trap for water and chemicals, thus speeding up the process of decay and deterioration. By contrast, a body wrapped only in cloth or in a blanket would have allowed for moisture and chemicals in the soil to pass around the cadaver.

Population

Based on the burial records, of the 204 persons buried at the *camposanto*, the largest

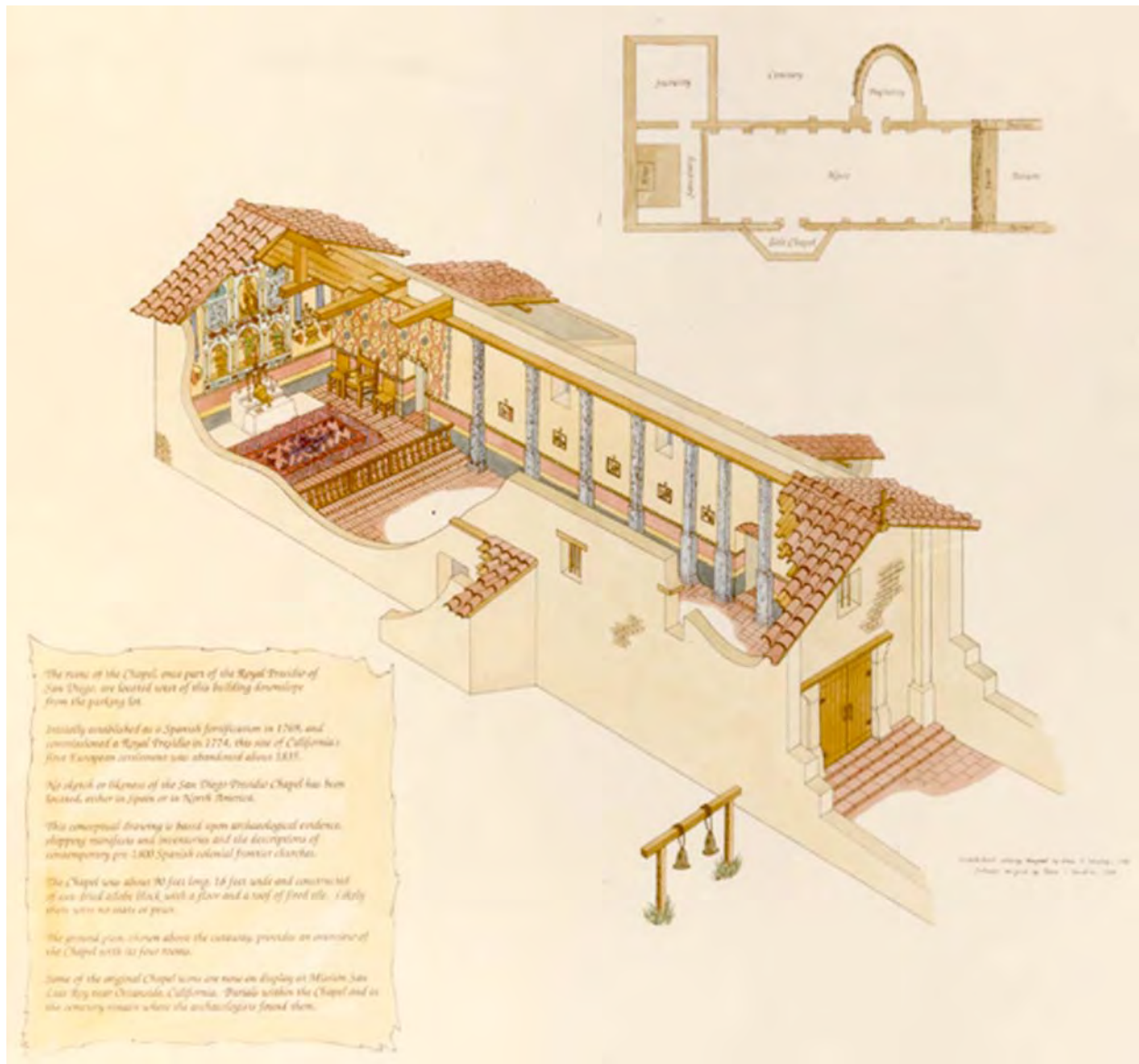


Figure 2. Rendering of the presidio chapel.

category was subadult and child burials, comprising 48% (n = 97) of the total. This figure is a reflection of the sheer number of children who lived at the garrison with their Hispanic fathers and Indian mothers. The second highest grouping was the 84 adult Hispanics, with males comprising 57 of the 82 for 70%. This high percentage of males could be expected, given that the presidio was a military garrison with a predominantly male population. Twenty-two of the burials were adult Indians, and 64% of these (n = 14) were male. The female Indians were largely wives of the Spanish and Mexican soldiers and, less frequently, workers. Only three of the recorded burials at the *camposanto* were Anglo-Americans: Natalia Fitch, Henry Delano Fitch, and (possibly) José Francisco Snook.

The ethnic character of the deceased at the presidio accurately reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity of early colonial San Diego (Williams 1996, 2004). The 1790 census for the presidio indicates that 52% of the occupants identified themselves as *españoles* (which includes

person born in the Americas); 10% were racially mixed *quebrados*; 16% were mulattos; 9% were American Indians; 9% were coyotes and the remainder were non-Spanish Europeans and mestizos (Mason 1998). One interesting aspect of ethnic and racial identification on the California frontier is that over time many racially mixed individuals gradually (through self-reporting) became more “pure” and less *quebrado*/mestizo. This change in ethnic and racial classification is no doubt an attempt gain status and to separate oneself from the *indio* population.

With the exception of Francisco Gómez, a native of Seville, Spain, no one buried at the presidio was a first-generation European. The majority of the deceased were, based on the death records and the various census data, Hispanic of often mixed blood, including Spanish/Indian, Spanish/African/Indian and Spanish/African backgrounds. By the time of settlement at San Diego in 1769, the Spanish colonial world had witnessed more than 250 years of ethnic blending. Even Natalia Fitch, the child of Henry Delano Fitch, was the offspring of his American roots and Josefa Carrillo Fitch’s Hispanic heritage. For the most part, the Indians of pure blood who were buried at the presidio were local Kumeyaay, while other members of the indigenous population were often mixed bloods from the interior of Mexico or Baja California. Kumeyaay people buried at the presidio came from a wide range of villages throughout the San Diego region and clearly reflect the success of conversion at many villages and the failure to convert Kumeyaay at others. The villages most represented in the death and burial records were those closest to the presidio, including Soledad, Apusquel, Ystagua, Rincon de Jamo and Las Chollas. Indians from the missions of Baja California included natives from Mission San Miguel, Mission San Ignacio, Mission San Gertrudis, Mission San Fernando de Velicatá and Mission San Xavier.

The deceased who found their final resting place at the presidio *camposanto* included an Indian sailor from Mission San Xavier, several soldiers from throughout Baja California as well as San Blas, and soldiers from the mainland including Guadalajara, Cocula, Magdalena and Sinaloa. Other burials include soldiers’ wives and mothers, children, two successful American merchants, a blacksmith and a carpenter (both killed in the 1775 Ipai uprising), several Indian prisoners, at least one Indian who was executed at the site in 1824, and an Indian rebel leader from the village of Pamo. No members of the clergy are buried at the site, although the remains of Father Luis Jayme, who had been buried at the presidio following his murder by Kumeyaay rebels in November 1775, was later disinterred and reburied at the Mission San Diego de Alcalá.

Morality data

The death records typically provide only minimal information about the cause of death at the presidio, with little more than the name, gender, and age provided in the mission records. San Diego was hit by some form of epidemic diseases (probably smallpox) in the 1806-1808 period and again in the mid-1820s; the death and burial records reflect the ravages of disease. With a typical death of three to four persons per year (out of a population of between 50 and 100), the years 1806 and 1808 stand out with death of five and 10 respectively. This period had the third highest death rate of all periods in Spanish colonial San Diego history and occurred at the same time as the second highest death rates throughout Spanish California.

A forensic study conducted on a portion of the burials, combined with the death records, offers a glimpse into the mortality data (Howard 1975). The average age of death for adult Hispanics was 42 years of age, and the average age for adult Indians was 38 years of age. The four year difference is probably not statistically significant and may reflect the slightly older

population of Hispanics who resided at the presidio. The forensic data indicated that the causes of death varied from childbirth to musket ball wounds, arrow wounds, possible diseases, and other unstated causes. The blacksmith Joseph Arroyo and the carpenter Urselino were killed by Ipai in the 1775 insurrection at Mission San Diego de Alcalá and buried at the presidio. Arroyo's death record notes that he died from arrow wounds to the groin area.

Disposition of the burials

The vast majority of the burials were situated with their heads to the east in a supine position. Average depth of the burials was 4-6 ft. below ground surface at the time of burial. Positioning of the arms was typically crossed across the pelvis region, and crossing of the legs was uncommon. Placement of the head to one side occurred but was rare. For the burials in the *camposanto* proper, there was evidence of severe disturbance caused by the excavation of later burial pits. It is probable that over the more than five decades of use as a burial ground, markers became displaced or lost and the grave diggers, probably lower-ranking soldiers, would have dug into previous graves before realizing their mistake. In some instances, it appears that the bones of previous burials were pushed aside to make room for another burial.

Persons of some ascribed status were buried within the church itself, typically in the nave area, although one individual was buried beneath the altar platform itself, one was buried in the southern baptistery (Figure 3), and at least three burials were in the northern side chapel, including the two children of Felipe Romero (Figure 4) (Carrico 1973). Of the 20 burials in the church, the majority were adult males, although the young children of the presidio blacksmith, Felipe Romero were buried in the side chapel. Henry Delano Fitch, an important American merchant and sea captain, and his daughter Natalia were buried in the front entry to the nave after abandonment of the mission chapel (Figure 5). Unlike the Spanish- and Mexican-era burials, the Fitches were buried in redwood coffins with formal hinges and their initials were carefully defined on the coffin lids by brass tacks. It is probable that non-Christianized Indians who died in the presidio prison or were executed were not buried in the consecrated grounds of the chapel.

Supplies and nonfunctional goods were at times rare in colonial San Diego. When compared to the more successful presidios and missions at Santa Barbara and San Francisco, San Diego endured shortages and struggled to maintain itself on La Frontera. For this reason, funerary goods were common but were simple rather than ornate. The most common artifacts were religious: crucifixes and rosary beads. Necklaces, bracelets, metal broaches and rings were also noted. Small amounts of coinage were also noted.

Conclusions

While there is much to be done with the data from the archaeological excavations and archival materials, this study has provided some interesting insights into the nature and composition of the historic burial ground at the Royal Presidio of San Diego. As would be expected, the persons who died at the presidio and are buried there represent a cross-section of the early population of colonial and postcolonial San Diego. The major cultures that reflect early San Diego are present, including Spanish, mestizo, Indian, American, and African-Indian. The low to moderate economic status of this remote presidio is reflected in the sparseness of burial goods and the practice of non-coffin burials. The presence of a high number of subadult burials



Figure 3. Burial in chapel baptistery.

documents the harsh reality of the times with the death of young children and youths as a common occurrence. Some level of social status is reflected in the interment of some individuals (largely male) within the chapel itself. Deaths and burials at the Royal Presidio de San Diego dropped off dramatically after 1825, reflecting the gradual movement of retired soldiers and their families to the new settlement at the foot of Presidio Hill and the overall decrease in the garrison at the presidio.

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Figure 4. Felipe Romero children burial.



Figure 5. Burial of Natalia Fitch.

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