

A LANDSCAPE IN TRANSITION: A VIEW FROM SANTA BARBARA HISTORICAL MUSEUM

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Archaeological excavations at the Santa Barbara I Manufactured Gas Plant site (MGP) revealed physical evidence of colonization, acculturation, urbanization, and industrialization in the central coast region of California. The MGP site, situated in the City of Santa Barbara on Santa Barbara Historical Society property, yielded evidence of these phases of historical development reflecting the multifaceted character of Santa Barbara today. Reflected in the archaeological record are early colonial modification of the environment; changing land use strategies during the Spanish, Mexican, and American struggle for coastal dominance; residential expansion and site urbanization during the Victorian era; industrialization with the construction and operation of a gas manufacturing plant; civic improvements with the establishment of the Santa Barbara Historical Society; and modern environmental clean up through site remediation.

The historical events that led to the transformation of the Santa Barbara landscape from the inception of the Presidio in 1782 through modern times are the subjects of this paper. Historic documents, graphic depictions, and archaeological data are used to examine environmental change and view the effects of an emerging world economy, advances in technology, and shifting ideologies on the landscape. The arrival of soldiers and priests in Alta California during the late eighteenth century wrought many changes and illustrates how Old World views impacted Native material culture and the environment on which it depended. Once introduced, imported goods and technology influenced native production and subsistence. But because supply was unpredictable, change occurred slowly. By 1810, with the Mexican war of independence, shipments from San Blas ceased altogether. Largely due to a lack of manpower to control the Channel Island area, the Spanish and Mexican governments tolerated and later sanctioned British and American trade. Correspondingly, British goods appeared in the archaeological record as early as the 1790s. They quickly replaced Spanish and Mexican goods, and by the 1830s Native technology had all but faded from the local material culture.

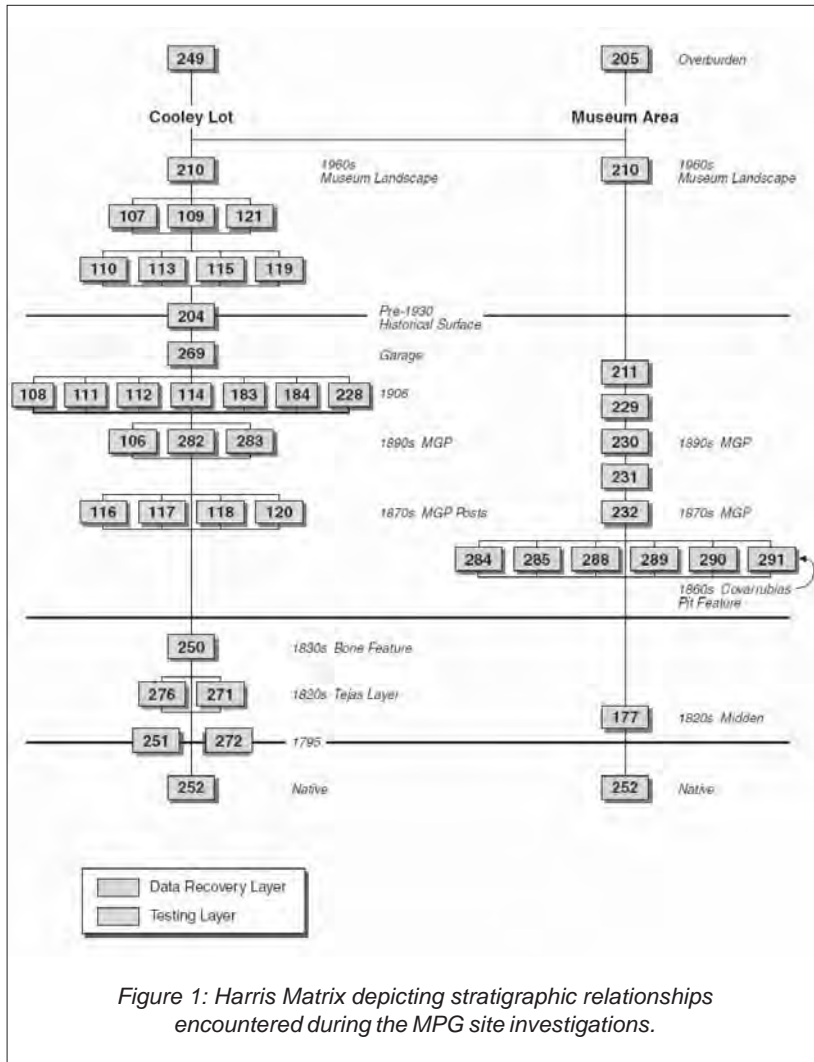
With the control of the west coast passing to the United States in 1846 (Robinson 1979:69), expansionist ideals prevailed and the Anglo-American concept of land organization was imposed on the earlier colonial order. Irregularities in the patterning of land claims were superseded by a regulated street grid. With a widening acceptance of Victorian values in the mid to late nineteenth century, preferences in architectural style shifted and new building types intruded on the landscape. As a result, Santa Barbara was ushered into the modern world. Demands for new technology and industrial development brought improved shipping and innovations such as paved streets and gas lighting. Then in the 1920s, following a devastating earthquake and a loss of many important local landmarks, the City encouraged the construction of colonial revival architecture. These changes molded the modern cityscape of Santa Barbara and are visible at the corner of Santa Barbara and De la Guerra streets. The Santa Barbara I Manufactured Gas Plant (SBI MGP) site covers portions of the Historical Society Museum property, the former Cooley and Pitman parcels, and the Covarrubias adobe lot. First investigated during remediation, the MGP site is now known to contain archaeological deposits from Presidio

times, the period of Hispanic transition, the Victorian era, and the advent of industrialization (Warren et al. 2002).

Three distinct Spanish-era horizons were exposed during the 2002 archaeological excavations, representing the first four decades of Presidio occupation and pueblo colonization. This Harris matrix graphically depicts the stratigraphy revealed during excavations at the MGP site. The Covarrubias Adobe was built during the third decade of site utilization. Because it fronted the main route to San Buenaventura mission, it fortuitously fell within the Haley grid and it withstood later changes, providing a glimpse into colonial-era occupation. Two pit features deposited in the 1850s in the lower courtyard are associated with the Covarrubias occupation of this landmark. The Cooley House, a modest Victorian structure, stood on site until recently. It now sits on Victoria Avenue, where it has been renovated. The gas plant itself, in operation from 1872 to 1907, is largely obscured from view today. It is now visible only as scattered fragments of solidified lampblack, coal dust, and coal tar. It was this industrial residue that prompted Southern California Edison's remediation leading to these archaeological discoveries.

What little is known about the original landscape at the time of contact comes from the first Spanish explorers. In 1542, Juan Rodriguez Carrillo described the Channel Island area as "a magnificent valley densely populated, with level land, and many groves" (Grant 1993:9). Felipe de Neve, first Spanish governor of California, provided a more detailed description in 1777. He observed impassable mountains, cliffs with no beach, arroyos impossible to cross in the rainy season, and, most of all, the numerous, culturally advanced Chumash (Beilharz 1971:111). To improve traveling conditions, pacify the Chumash, and protect the newly founded missions of San Buenaventura and La Purisima, a presidio was needed in the channel area. De Neve described the sandy beaches and rocky shores, chaparral and scrub foothills, oak woodlands, grassy sloughs, and salt marshes. He touted Santa Barbara as a beautiful, pleasant, and bountiful place.

The Presidio was built on a small hill above the beach. The site had full view of the ocean, so ships could come in close to shore yet the Presidio lay beyond cannon shot. Not long after completion, inhabitants



sought lots outside the compound walls. The closest lots were aligned to the fort quadrangle, forming the patchwork of claims south and west of the defensive walls. In contrast, the Haley street grid, laid out soon after statehood, adopted the Jeffersonian rational principles of order. Like the township and range system imposed across the U.S., the grid ensured orderly acquisition of property. The adoption of the “open grid” was predicated on a capitalistic economy where land was bought and sold as a commodity, as opposed to the usufruct land holdings of earlier decades (Kostof 1991:113). The grid crisscrossed Spanish land claims and uncompromisingly ignored established property boundaries, leaving extant buildings stranded in the middle of the street.

While the Presidio was founded as a military outpost, it also offered living quarters for the soldiers and their families. By the late 1780s, the Presidio served as “a trading station, a supply depot, and a religious center for settlers, making it the focal point of [residential] activity in Santa Barbara” (Harris 1993:1). With the population steadily increasing and the completion of all Presidio buildings, new construction was limited to beyond the Presidio compound. In 1795, the first adobe was built approximately 15 m from the southeast corner of the quadrangle. As the pueblo grew, more structures, like the Tryce Adobe built in 1812, appeared. Soon Presidio Avenue developed west of

the compound. It was along this thoroughfare that MGP deposits formed.

Archaeologists exposed an organic midden in front of the Museum (Figure 2). At the base of what appeared to be a ditch was a fired clay lens, perhaps the result of clearing brush and/or construction of an aqueduct channel. Upon abandonment of this ditch in the late 1790s to early 1800s, domestic fill accumulated rapidly, and abundant faunal remains, low-fired earthenware, and fragments of imported ceramics were discarded. Brownware and Mexican redware dominated, majolica was found in moderate amounts (Figure 3), while Chinese porcelain and British earthenware were recovered in low quantities. Also found were chipped stone debitage, worked bone, steatite bowl fragments, and shell disc beads. This deposit began to accumulate shortly after construction of the first residences but terminated by the 1810s, as indicated by the near absence of British ceramics. The largest constituent of the midden was domestic faunal remains.

In 1822, control of Alta California passed to Mexico. During this period the population steadily increased and the pueblo became the core of the community. The typical Santa Barbara house was a one-story adobe with a gabled roof covered in asphaltum or tile; some were whitewashed, others were not. All the while, midden was slowly accumulating in the Cooley lot east of Presidio Avenue. Three distinct features were identified, including two tile concentrations and a bone-filled midden. The tile concentrations were deposited above the original Spanish grade. Recovered artifacts included glass trade beads, Mexican ceramics, Chinese porcelain, and British earthenware, but majolica dominated. Evidence of an ephemeral structure represented by clay mottling, a posthole, and asphaltum formed a transitional surface above the tile concentrations. The bone midden capped this surface. Evidence suggests that the ephemeral structure was open and similar in construction to a ramada. An open-air kitchen would have been a welcome relief during the summer, allowing the heat from cooking to dissipate. Once abandoned, this structure would have quickly fallen into ruins and domestic refuse accumulated above the remains. This deposit contained domestic artifacts including abundant British ceramics. The recovery of a Phoenix button provided the *terminus post quem* (TPQ) date of 1835. Further occupation of the Cooley Lot did not occur until the mid-1870s.

In 1848, when possession of the west coast passed to the United States, major changes occurred resulting in the urbanization of the landscape. With the imposition of Haley’s street grid, American street names were adopted. During this period, the ancient lagoon, El Estero, was drained and filled. This opened the waterfront to subdivision and Stearn’s Wharf was built connecting the community to eastern markets in 1872. In the mid 1800s, the Carrillo Adobe still fronted Santa



Figure 2: Organic midden deposit found during excavation in front of the Santa Barbara Historical Museum.

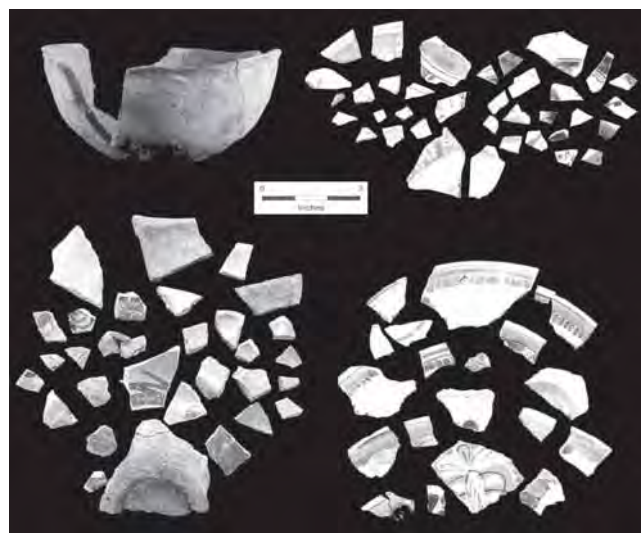


Figure 3: Brownware, Mexican redware, and majolica found associated with the midden deposit.

Barbara Street. Don Carrillo built the house in 1818 following his marriage to Concepción, sister of Pio Pico, then the Spanish Governor. José Maria Covarrubias, secretary to Pico, married Don Carrillo's daughter, Maria, in 1853 and the adobe became their home. It was at this time that it became known as Casa Covarrubias. Two pit features found in the lower courtyard were filled during this period of occupation. Artifact analysis identified a TPQ date of 1853 based on a British manufacturer's mark. Yet most of the recovered ceramics dated to the late 1700s–early 1800s, including majolica, Canton ware, pearlware, shell edged, and single colored transfer prints. Likely, the two pit features from which this material derived represents a “clean out” episode of the Carrillo home when Maria and José occupied the residence. Heirloom items such as the painted pearlware and shell edge sherds were discarded and a few contemporary items found their way into the trash pits.

Figure 4: Santa Barbara manufactured gas Plant depicted on an 1886 Sanborn Insurance Company map.



With the Covarrubias Adobe as a backdrop, the gas plant was built and the Cooley House was erected (Figure 4). Their addition represents acceptance of new cultural values and the emergence of an urban, industrial society (Hamilton et al. 2002:57). The first municipal lighting program took effect two years after the founding of the Gas Light Company in 1872. The remnants of the plant were found beneath the Museum parking lot. Built between 1872 and 1875, the early gas works consisted of a retort house and purifying room, a gas holder, a coal house, and an office/storage building. Construction finally severed the Covarrubias Adobe from its colonial origin, the now-vanished Presidio.

The Cooley House was built in 1875. It originally was a two-story frame dwelling, constructed with a front-facing gable and porch. By 1892, a one-story wing was added to the east elevation and the porch was extended. Two years after building the house, Edward Gillett sold the property to Henry Emigh. Henry and his family resided there until 1887, when it was sold to Vicente Leyva Feliz. The Leyva Feliz family and daughter Mary Cooley retained the property until the 1960s. Archaeological evidence suggests that the property was inextricably linked to the gas plant. Two features were found on the Cooley Lot in 2002 that contained MGP residues as well as contemporary domestic artifacts from the Leyva-Cooley period of occupation. These features included a privy and trash pit. During the early 1890s, a coal shed was built extending across property boundaries and up to the edge of the house.

In 1901, the gas plant was sold to the United Electric, Gas, and Power Company, which continued to operate the plant before selling to Edison Electric in 1903. In 1906, Edison built a new gas works elsewhere, and a year later the SBI shut down (Shoup 1988:15, 18). Residential debris found in association appears to have been deposited at the time the plant closed or as a result of improvements made by the Cooley family. Remediation exposed the remains of MGP structures, gasholders, two construction episodes, and large industrial machine

parts. Two additional privies found in the Cooley lot date to 1907, the year that the MGP plant ceased operation. Both privies were filled with ash, burned construction rubble, and domestic artifacts. Perhaps a fire in the house prompted site improvements and installation of indoor plumbing.

Santa Barbara County purchased the property in 1941 and leased it to the Santa Barbara Historical Society in 1962. At this time, the Historical Society erected the current structure, designed by Robert Ingle Hoyt. The structure was built to resemble a nineteenth-century hacienda (Marsh 1965). The Museum was dedicated in February 1965 and now stands as a tribute to local colonial development.

Historic documents revealed that the Presidio, pueblo, and mission were built in rapid succession during the 1780s. Documents, however, provide little detail about settlement outside the Presidio walls. Deposits along De la Guerra Street show a rapid accumulation of midden containing ceramics of local manufacture with limited access to European goods. Spanish colonial policy forced residents to build outside the compound by the 1790s. Lot configuration, ancient tree-lined property boundaries, and the street grid reflect Spanish, Mexican, and American values. Irregularities in Haley's street grid, such as at the corner of Santa Barbara and De la Guerra streets, reveal the resistance to this change. When the Cooley House was added, it effectively sealed the Presidio-era deposits and protected them from later construction. Following a fire in 1992, the house was boarded up and finally moved in preparation for remediation. Once again the landscape changed, although remediation ensured the survival of the house, integrity of the Museum grounds, and continued preservation and recovery of archaeological deposits.

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