

**MAJOLICA FROM PETALUMA ADOBE HISTORIC STATE PARK,
SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

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A 2005-2006 flood event at Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park exposed a pit feature comprising a “time capsule” of Mexican Republic-era material culture. In a recent paper, we attributed the feature to a deposition associated with the Miramontes smallpox epidemic (1837-1839), during M. G. Vallejo’s occupation of Rancho Petaluma. Constituents of the feature include large pieces of a Puebla Blue-on-White majolica vessel and certain other items of value. We believe these represent heirlooms belonging to a person or persons of high status living nearby that were discarded when measures for the prevention of widespread sickness were enacted.

Recently we described the salvage of materials, including high-value items, from a feature exposed in cross-section when a New Year 2005-2006 flooding event scoured the east bank of Adobe Creek, within today’s Petaluma Adobe Historic State Park, Sonoma County, California (Alvarez and Parkman 2014a; Parkman 2006, 2007a) (Figure 1). Adobe Creek is an intermittent stream flowing from the north past Petaluma Adobe toward San Pablo Bay. The creek separates servants’ and workers’ living areas from Mariano G. Vallejo’s domestic enclave perched upslope on a hill overlooking open plains.

The embankment concealed a fortuitous Mexican Republic-era “time capsule” in a feature containing interesting items suggestive of prized personal possessions, including five unusually large sherds of Puebla Blue-on-White Mexican majolica pottery. Initially appearing “pit-like,” subsequent assessment and feature measurements indicated that flooding had disturbed the forward portion of a trench situated perpendicular to the creek bank (Figure 2). We consider this distinctive feature supportive of the premise that deposition of valued domestic possessions correlated with historic emergency efforts intended to eliminate devastating effects during the infamous 1837-1839 Ignacio Miramontes smallpox epidemic. While local Californios and Chief Solano were inoculated against the disease, native servants, military personnel, and field hands or vaqueros were not. By the time the onset of the ravages to native people was recognized, many had succumbed. Documentation from the period describes attempted use of lime imported from Santa Cruz to disinfect residences and the burning and burial of fatalities, as well as abandonment of living areas, to stem the spread of the virulent disease (Carrillo 1875; McKittrick 1944:140-144; Vallejo 1914). Concurrent with these preventive measures, believed at the time to be efficacious for terminating smallpox, it appears there was at least one instance of hasty deposition of personal possessions, including heirlooms and other valued items, near the embankment of Adobe Creek (Alvarez and Parkman 2014a).

During salvage recovery of as much of the feature contents as possible, the large fragments of majolica fell clustered in soupy soil oozing out of the embankment (Figure 3). The New Year Feature (NYF) majolica sherds are in remarkably good condition, except for the largest fragment, which exhibits a darkened area of crazed and distorted glaze, as though the effect of extreme heat was limited to this spot on the vessel (Figure 4). In addition to exceeding size ranges reported for majolica sherds found elsewhere north of San Francisco Bay, five sherds fit together, resulting in restoration of two larger fragments we believe are from one vessel (Table 1; Figure 3). Additionally, sherd edges are relatively unabraded, to the degree that broken edges retain tiny, sharply jagged points, suggesting that vessel fragments lay near where they had originally fallen (Figure 5). It appears that an intact or nearly complete vessel broke when dropped into the trench and remained relatively undisturbed after deposit. Initially, it was supposed the fragments

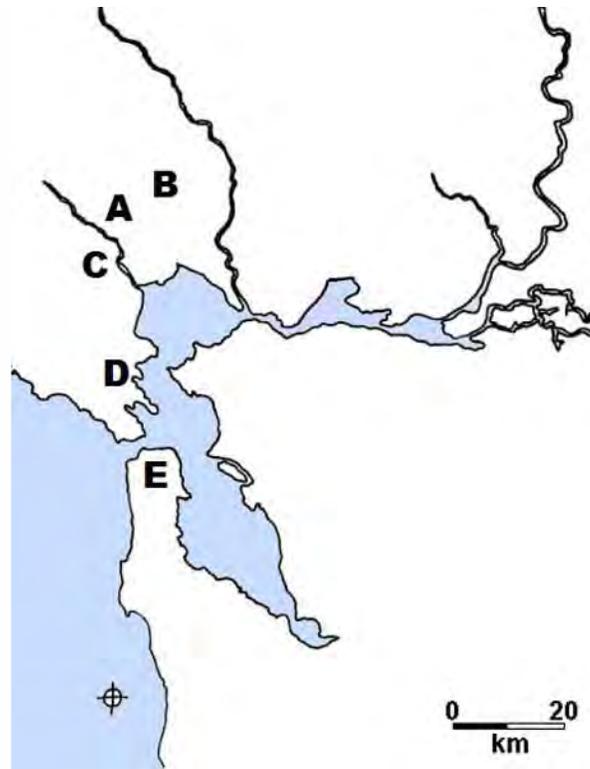


Figure 1. Location Map: San Francisco Bay area, depicting the spatial relationships between Mariano G. Vallejo's Rancho Petaluma (A), Pueblo Sonoma/Sonoma Barracks (B), Ynitia Camilo's Rancho Olompali (C); Mission San Rafael (D), and the San Francisco Presidio (E).

were from a large jar, similar to those of the times used for shipping olives, honey, or spices, then reused for storage. The size and condition of these large sherds within an assemblage noted for other items of value, as well as a documented historic context consistent with attempts to halt a ravaging disease, fortify our idea that the majolica vessel sherds represent remains of an heirloom object damaged when dropped into the open trench adjacent to Adobe Creek.

Consultation with Mexican majolica expert Ronald V. May substantiates the supposition that the sherds are from a significant vessel, very likely a prized heirloom. According to May, these majolica sherds are "classic Puebla Tradition," which retained its distinctive blue-on-white decorative style from the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century, after which time the Spanish lost control of their markets and black marketeers flooded ranchos with British, French, and American wares (Ronald V. May, personal communication 2015).

May's surprise information, however, refers specifically to the significance of a decorative element occurring in two areas of the vessel's ornamentation. Characterized as tin-glazed Puebla Blue-on-White majolica, the throat of the hand-painted vessel is decorated with a garland of cobalt blue fern-like leaves and dots between thin, light blue lines. The furled fern-like leaves and dots are repeated on the vessel's rounded belly, tucked into twists of a swirling cobalt blue ribbon surrounding stylized crowns. It is the five-pointed "crown" decoration, according to May, that imbues the NYF majolica sherds with significance (Figure 6). May suggests that the "crown" decoration on California majolica is "rare and most likely refers to the Viceroy of Mexico [i.e., New Spain]," implying vessel manufacture predating Mexico's 1821 independence from Spain. May also recalls only one other majolica sherd decorated with a similar crown in northern California, observed in the Monterey region, south of San Francisco Bay (Ronald V. May, personal communications 2014, 2015). Of the three grades of majolica items produced in Mexican factories, May describes the NYF sherds as being from a "heavy and nicely decorated jar," possibly "an



Figure 2. Exposed “pit-like” feature, apparently the west end of a trench situated perpendicular to Adobe Creek’s bank.

ornamental planter for display.” Pointing out that overall weight would make such a vessel difficult to transport, May considers that it was probably “highly valued and perhaps a ceremonial gift” (Ronald V. May, personal communication 2014).

Discussion with Professor Barbara L. Voss of Stanford University confirmed that of the sizable majolica sherds recovered from the San Francisco Presidio, none have been identified with the same or a similar crown decoration (Barbara L. Voss, personal communication 2015). Still, the vessel’s decorative crown element seemed to hint at a link to a frontier military outpost. Vallejo’s tenure at San Francisco Presidio until the 1835 transfer of presidio troops to Sonoma elevates the likelihood of the transport of such a vessel across the bay to Sonoma; then, as domestic comforts were refined, the jar was moved west to Rancho Petaluma. These intriguing conversations with Ronald May and Barbara Voss prompted us to contact other researchers with expertise in Mexican majolica studies. Consultation with Rebecca Allen, Kathleen Deagan, Larry Felton, John M. Foster, Roberta Greenwood, Jennifer Lucido, and Russell Skowronek, all engaged in studies involving northern and central California Spanish Colonial and/or Mexican Republic-era sites, stimulated an interstate search for blue-on-white majolica vessel sherds with similar “crown” decorative elements.



Figure 3. Five Puebla Blue-on-White Mexican majolica sherds (ca. late eighteenth to early nineteenth century) from the New Year Feature.



Figure 4. Close-up of the glaze of a majolica sherd from the New Year Feature.

Table 1: New Year feature majolica sherd measurements

P1482-	LENGTH (MM)	WIDTH (MM)	THICKNESS (MM)	ADDITIONAL THICKNESS (MM)	NOTES
2-6	64	35	9.1 (bottom edge)	7.3 (top of rim)	Rim sherd refits with 2-7
2-7	80	37	9.2 (top edge)	8.7 (bottom edge)	Shoulder sherd Refits with 2-6
4-32a	57	43	7.9	9.2	Refits with 4-32b and c
4-32b	57	54	7.9	8.9	8 mm avg. three sides; crown fragment
4-32c	158	98mm	11.0 (mid-sherd)	9.2 (near shoulder)	Largest sherd; heat crazed glaze; crown; Refits with 4-32a and b

This greatly expanded communication network entitled our query “the Majolica Mystery,” and we gratefully acknowledge those who responded with negative confirmation; that is, no one had encountered a similarly decorated sherd. It did, however, lead us to Edwin Barber’s 1908 handbook on *The Maiolica of Mexico*, cited in *Maiolica Olé* (Lister and Lister 2001:119) and to a photograph of a mid-eighteenth century globe-shaped jar with what appears to be identical decoration to the NYF majolica sherds. The Barber vessel is from Puebla de los Angeles, hand-painted in traditional cobalt blue-on-white, and, remarkably, it exhibits decorative elements including three five-pointed crowns and an eight-pointed star within a flattened trefoil, and furred fern-like foliage and dots. The jar is presently in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. The “furred fern-like foliage” elements are, according to Lister and Lister (2001:86), adaptations by Mexican artisans of Chinese “wave” design motifs. These authors also suggest that the “flattened trefoil or shield” containing three crowns and the eight-pointed star

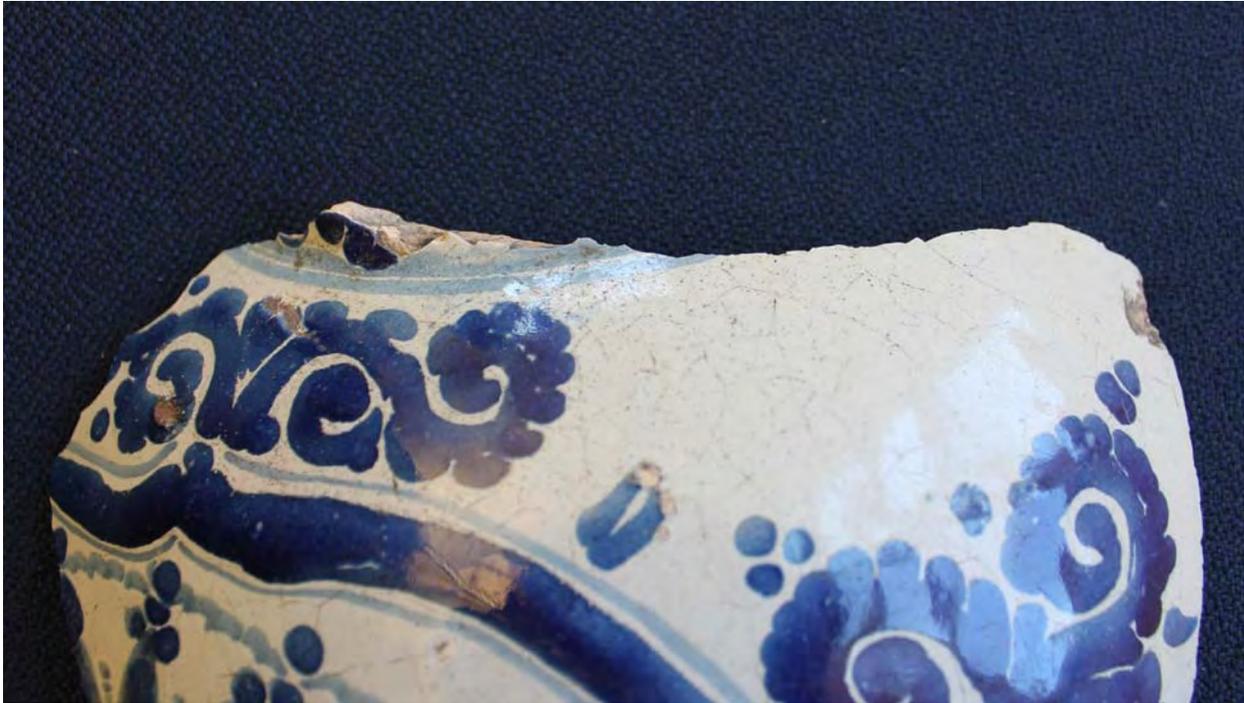


Figure 5. Close-up of broken glaze.

“is a possible allusion to the Holy Trinity and Holy Birth” (Lister and Lister 2001:121). Further, they describe the furred foliage as “hooked scrolls with dotted edges,” lacking iconographic importance; a “balloon-body contour mounted on a prominent foot with a brief, straight neck seems more Chinese than Spanish.” They also point out that “exact prototypes in either idiom are uncommon” (Lister and Lister 2001:121).

A review of art objects, particularly those dating to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and associated with the Puebla de los Angeles cathedral, revealed a number of eight-pointed stars, but few crowns. Examination of the magnificent Puebla cathedral revealed an eight-pointed star worked into the mosaic of the cathedral dome, as well as similar stars within interior cathedral shrines (Figure 7). Most notably, within the cathedral there is the “Altar of Kings” designed by Manuel Tolsa and constructed between 1797 and 1818. Celebration of the Three Kings, or Magi, who followed a brilliant star to the nativity of Christ, is a significant holiday and festival event in Puebla de los Angeles. The altar’s construction date within the cathedral coincides with the manufacture date of the Barber jar as well as the NYF vessel sherds, suggesting the altar’s influence on majolica pottery decorative elements. Are the jars commemorative of construction of the “Altar of Kings”? Coincidentally, during the same period, Mission San Rafael Archangel, founded in 1817 north of San Francisco Bay in nearby Marin County, was one of the two final Spanish California establishments.

Although design elements on the NYF majolica sherds appear to be more finely rendered than those on the Barber vessel, the relationship is unmistakable. Lister and Lister’s (2001) supposition that the crowns and star on the jar represent religious iconography seems to transfer the NYF vessel sherds from a military venue into a religious context. Questions now arise focusing on the likelihood of such a trefoil shield having been emblematic of a religious order or organization. What would be the significance of a California religious group’s insignia that Vallejo may have encountered? Could it have been attached to earlier (1833) Mexican colonists who entered the North Bay, or did the vessel arrive in the area among items dispersed from the recently (1835) secularized missions?



Figure 6. View of “crown” decorative element on majolica sherd from the New Year Feature.

Prior regional Mexican Republic-era archaeology in Sonoma and Marin Counties, within reasonable proximity to Petaluma Adobe, reveals little in the way of comparable representation of Puebla Blue-on-White majolica. At Sonoma barracks, east of Rancho Petaluma, two small sherds from a possible “nubbin-footed ink stand” are described as having cobalt blue lines and dots “inside a concentric border of light blue” decorating a white ground (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1977:115-143). North of Rancho Petaluma, in the city of Santa Rosa, a 2006 excavation did not identify majolica ceramics at the Carrillo Adobe on former Rancho Cabeza de Santa Rosa, granted in 1837 to Vallejo’s widowed mother-in-law (Roop and Wick 2008). South of Rancho Petaluma, in Marin County, excavation of the Camilo Ynitia adobe at Olompali State Historic Park remains unreported. However, the adobe home, most likely constructed in the late 1820s or early 1830s, was built and occupied by Ynitia, the last headman of Olompali, and prior to the 1843 granting of Rancho Olompali to him. The adobe is known to have been in place in 1834, and presently it is the oldest standing residence north of San Francisco Bay (Carlson and Parkman 1986:239; Parkman 2007b:2-3). The proximity of Rancho Olompali to Mission San Rafael Arcangel, founded in 1817, suggests that interaction between the two establishments could have resulted in transport of this vessel from San Rafael to northerly destinations prior to or shortly after the 1835 secularization of the mission.

Steve Silliman’s extensive excavation within the Rancho Petaluma servants’ and workers’ residential area, east of Adobe Creek and not far from the NYF, revealed that earthenware and stoneware dominate the recovered ceramics assemblage; no majolica sherds are reported (Silliman 2000, 2002). Silliman (2000:366) suggests that the limited ceramics and the lack of evidence of intentional modification of these items point to site residents adopting “ceramic goods primarily, although not necessarily exclusively, as containers and vessels rather than acquired bits and pieces as raw material.” Within Vallejo’s domestic enclave, upslope and west of Adobe Creek, an assemblage of surface-collected ceramic



Figure 7. Eight-pointed star on the cathedral dome, Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico. After Gustavo Aviles, Puebla Cathedral 2010. Accessed June 23, 2015.

fragments reflects all periods of occupation into the late nineteenth century but lacks a single fragment of Puebla Blue-on-White majolica (Alvarez and Parkman 2014b). This, of course, does not negate the possibility that Blue-on-White majolica could be represented in subsurface deposition yet to be revealed.

Clearly, only a slim record exists suggesting that Puebla Blue-on-White majolica objects made it into non-mission, domestic use north of San Francisco Bay. At Rancho Petaluma, NYF sherds from a large majolica vessel, possibly a ceremonial gift, and other unique items of value such as a clamshell disk bead manufacturing kit (Alvarez and Parkman 2014a), rare glass trade beads, a phoenix button, a bone button, a variety of unusual metal objects such as equine tack accoutrements, knife blades, a woman's ring, and gun parts, as well as numerous sherds of decorated refined earthenware, Chinese export porcelain, and stoneware, present a seemingly different pattern than is represented in results from investigation of Vallejo's servants' and workers' residential compound (Alvarez and Parkman 2014a; Silliman 2002).

Considering Silliman's (2000) investigation data from near the NYF and comparison of the two assemblages suggest that the area east of Adobe Creek provided space for a multilayered cultural, social, and service structure among residents. We reason that since services of trusted servants and craftspeople could be required at any time, their households would be closest to Vallejo's domestic enclave. Farm hands and laborers with limited specializations, such as construction, probably lived in the residential zone farther from Vallejo's home. The next lower status group living within the compound but near the fringes probably included itinerant seasonal workers and/or vaqueros who usually remained with the herds but no doubt were required to visit rancho headquarters from time to time.



Figure 8. Selected artifacts from the New Year Feature.

In summary, we consider the presence of these large Puebla Blue-on White majolica sherds and other items of value, including a clamshell bead manufacturing kit, glass trade beads, ceramics, buttons, and unusual metal objects, to represent prized possessions, if not heirlooms (Figure 8). They appear to be the belongings of people living sufficiently close to Vallejo's Petaluma adobe home to fulfill trusted positions of domestic service, such as child care, that imbued individuals with status somewhat higher than others in the servants' and workers' residential area. In the frenzied effort to remove contamination throughout the living area during the 1837-1839 Miramontes smallpox epidemic, these valued possessions were deposited hastily and forgotten.

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