

THE OHLONE

Long before the arrival of the first Europeans, the South Bay was home to a large native population—numbering 10,000. They had occupied the Bay Area for thousands of years divided into 40 tribal settlements: the Tamien, Chochenyo, Matalan, Sagan, Ohlone and many others. Today, descendants call themselves “Ohlone”—the tribe which held out the longest against European acculturation.



The Ohlone lifestyle can be described as “hunter-gatherer” as they did not cultivate crops or herd domestic animals but instead hunted native game as needed and took advantage of naturally available foods. They lived in numerous settlements of 200 to 500 persons spread throughout the broad “Valley of Oaks” enjoying a diet of fish, shellfish, water fowl, venison, bear, acorns, rabbit, and wild berries. From the tule reeds found near water’s edge they made their houses and watertight boats and they wove baskets from the native sedge grasses. As expected, disputes over resources/territory sometimes erupted between settlements. Ohlone religion revolved around elaborate ritual dances with dancers wearing colorful, iconic costumes and tribal members communing in the tribal sweat lodge—for ensuring good hunts, healing illness and expelling impurities.

This way of life had sustained the Ohlone for thousands of years, but following their 1769 encounter with the Spanish explorers, things were to change drastically—going from traditional hunter-gatherers to an agrarian society; from holding strict tribal identities to having blended “mission” identities; from their native world view to becoming, at least outwardly, Catholic Christian converts and citizens of the Spanish Empire. How could this happen?

Although pockets of resistance always existed, the local Ohlone were generally more open than many to the newcomers. The Franciscan approach here was through attraction rather than conquest and the process of assimilation unfolded over time without the level of violent skirmishes of other areas. One significant, but unintended, environmental motivator for choosing to join the missions was the increasing scarcity of native game & natural foods brought about by the padre’s imported herds of cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, and goats. Over-grazing of the native grasses and growing displacement of the native game gave the missions an increasing monopoly over the local food supply. Eventually, the new trade skills of ranching, farming, tanning, adobe brick & tile making came to be seen as necessary skills for survival.

By European measures: productivity, converts, and prosperity, Mission Santa Clara proved an early success. Yet, early on, waves of epidemics: chiefly small pox and measles decimated the Ohlone population. Sadly, by 1830, Ohlone numbers had dwindled to 2,500. Mexican independence from Spain in 1822 accelerated the collapse of the mission system. The successive floods of prospectors and pioneers from the Eastern U.S. and unscrupulous wheeler-dealers pushed the remaining Ohlone to the margins of California society.

However, the Ohlone people did not disappear. Numerous family groups have reclaimed their heritage and are seeking Federal recognition in our time.



FROM MISSION TO UNIVERSITY

The story now turns to Mission Santa Clara de Asis, the 8th mission in the chain of 21 Franciscan missions established by Padre Junipero Serra. It was first founded January 12, 1777 on the banks of the Guadalupe River (just north of Hwy 101 near the Mineta International Airport runway) and it was the first to bear the name of a woman, St. Claire of Assisi, an early companion of St. Francis. Flood, fire and earthquake forced five relocations until the Mission finally settled on this site in 1822.



From the start, Mission Santa Clara was meant to serve as the sister mission to Mission Dolores in San Francisco. The Spanish Viceroy Bucareli's grand design intended Mission Dolores (and its Presidio) to protect the mouth of San Francisco Bay while Mission Santa Clara was to anchor the South Bay receiving goods and services meant for the new Pueblo of San Jose.

The South Bay Area was an excellent location for a mission. Judging by the measure of converts and productivity Mission Santa Clara was an early success. Its baptismal registry boasted more baptisms than any of the other 21 missions.

With the secession of Mexico from the Spanish Empire in 1822, the 21 missions were thrown into disarray. The King of Spain and his Viceroy, the traditional sponsors of the Franciscan missions were thrown out and the fledgling Mexican government had little resources or interest in supporting such distant missions. Almost immediately, the government secularized all 21 missions and withdrew the Spanish Franciscans who were loyal to the King of Spain.

With insufficient funds to maintain the complex, and a single priest to operate the mission as a parish church, the mission fell into serious decay. In 1850, newly appointed Dominican Bishop Joseph Alemany approached a Jesuit priest, Fr. John Nobili, S.J. to see about turning Mission Santa Clara into a college. This meant transferring the Mission parish from Franciscan ownership to Jesuit ownership so on March 19, 1851, Mission Santa Clara and its adjacent lands became the first college of higher learning in the new state of California.

In 1861, Santa Clara College President, Burchard Villager, S.J., embarked on a rebuilding campaign to upgrade the campus' decrepit buildings. He enlarged the Mission and gave it a new facade. For a while, the Mission boasted a dual bell tower, Italianate facade made of wood (similar in style to St. Joseph's Cathedral in San Jose). A devastating fire in 1926 totally consumed this remodeled mission. The current Mission was rebuilt, not in the style of the remodeled, Italianate mission but in the idealized neo-colonial style fashionable at the time. With references drawn from actual historical photographs, they resurrected more of the original 1825 single bell tower structure. This is the structure you see today: similar in length, but more than twice as wide as the 1825 Mission and built of steel reinforced concrete rather than adobe brick.

Today Mission Santa Clara continues to serve as a spiritual heart and student chapel for Santa Clara University.

