

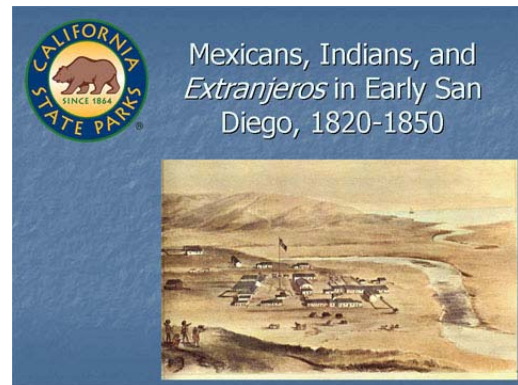
Mexican-Republic Era San Diego: An Archaeological Perspective

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(Paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference, January 13, 2006, Sacramento CA, as part of a symposium entitled “**Mexicans, Indians and Extranjeros in San Diego, 1820-1850**,” organized by Glenn J. Farris. This copy includes reduced images of the PowerPoint slides that accompanied the conference presentation)

Abstract

Extensive archaeological investigations were conducted at the north end of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park between 1995 and 1999 as part of several related improvement projects. While development and initial archaeology focused on reconstruction of the mansion built there by James McCoy in 1869, voluminous evidence of earlier occupations soon became the primary object of analysis. These data included remains of adobe buildings occupied by several *Californio* families, and significant amounts of mass-produced consumer goods. Of particular interest, however, were the substantial quantities of artifacts that testify to the ongoing presence of Native American people and technologies as integral parts of the community well into the historic period. This presentation provides an overview of the archaeological work and summarizes artifacts recovered that reflect the Native American presence in Old Town.



(Old Town San Diego, lithograph after 1850 H.M.T. Powell drawing; from Pourade 1963:131)

Introduction

Old Town San Diego one of the California’s most popular, lucrative, and controversial state park units. This decidedly urban park is located just a few miles from the heart of modern San Diego and the current Mexican border, at the intersection of several major freeways and railroad lines.

In the early 1990s, San Diego was expanding its light rail system, and Old Town was a natural hub for several lines. That development project included re-



routing streets, demolishing a number of 20th century buildings, construction of a rail station, parking lots and more, much of it on previously undeveloped land controlled by the state parks.

The presence of the new transportation hub provided stimulus to enhance this area of the park. Following a General Plan prepared in the 1970s, State Parks proceeded with an ambitious improvement plan that included much landscaping and reconstruction of a historic building for use as a visitors' center. This building was a residence originally constructed in 1869 by James McCoy, an Irish immigrant who served as sheriff and later as a state senator.



(McCoy House reconstruction, photo by Cynthia Hernandez)

These developments in Old Town included several phases of archaeological work between 1992 and 2000. The investigations exposed not only remains of the now reconstructed McCoy mansion, but even more substantial evidence of people and buildings that occupied the site during the 1830s and 1840s, while Alta California was still a Mexican province. The historical and archaeological evidence of these earlier occupants is the topic of today's papers.



(1995 excavation of adobe building foundations, Area D (Silvas parcel); probably constructed 1830s)

I'm going to give a brief historical overview of Old Town San Diego and of the archaeological work conducted there before we get into the other presentations.

History

The Kumeyaay Indians referred to the general vicinity now occupied by Old Town as *Cosoy*, although the location of the main Native American settlement at the time of Spanish contact is uncertain. One prehistoric site is record within park boundaries, although it seems to be just a light scatter of stone and shell along the periphery of the nearby marsh land.

The first permanent Spanish colonial settlement in Alta California was situated on the hillside just above Old Town San Diego. This was the San Diego Presidio and mission, established in 1769.

For the next 40 years, these religious and military institutions maintained colonial order, and Alta California persisted with relatively little direct foreign contact until the 2nd decade of the 19th C.

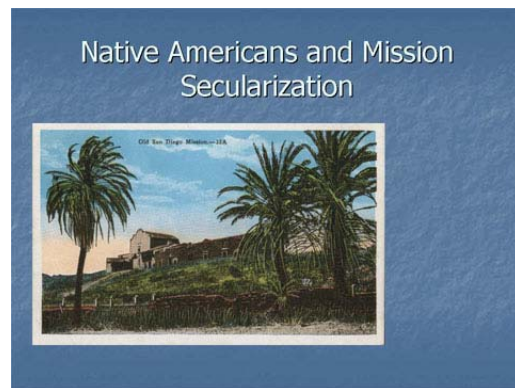
Mexico's War of Independence between 1810 to 1822 liberated the new republic from Spain and its trade restrictions. With Independence and the gradual decline of the San Diego Presidio, retiring soldiers began to obtain land grants and settle on terrace below the old Spanish fort in the early 1820s - These Spanish-Mexican soldiers and their families formed the nucleus of the Pueblo of San Diego.

At this same time, American, British and Russian merchants were investing more heavily in trade in the Pacific and Asia. The population of San Diego increased over the next twenty years by a growing number of foreign merchants, most Americans, drawn to Alta California by the thriving trade in cow hides that provided raw material for factories of New England and Britain. Some of these merchants married into the Californio families and became permanent residents of San Diego. Their coming brought an influx of consumer good, including porcelains from China as well as the many fruits of the British Industrial Revolution.



(Henry Delano Fitch, San Diego merchant; Chinese export porcelain)

The little pueblo's numbers were also augmented by California Indians, a group who is much more ephemeral in the written record than are either the *Californios* or the foreign merchants. The demise of that other Spanish institution, the mission, by the mid 1830s put many of these Indian people literally "on the market," and many found their way into the San Diego pueblo.



(Mission San Diego, early 20th century postcard)

The Mexican Republic persisted in Alta California for only 24 years, when in 1846 the United States followed its perceived manifest destiny, invaded Mexico, and claim the province as its own. After a relative short period of "insurgent unrest", American military, political and business interests prevailed. Today we are going to focus primarily on historical and archaeological evidence of the people who lived in San Diego during the Mexican Republic era, prior to

the American occupation. But first a little background on the archaeological context from which the data we'll be discussing was recovered.

Archaeological Background

Although portions of three city blocks were subject to archaeological work associated with the Entrance Improvement project, the most intensive investigations were on Block 408, on which the reconstructed McCoy House now stands.

Historical research as well as archaeological evidence indicates Block 408 was the site of several of the earliest residences in Old Town, some of which dated to the early 1820s. When the project began, however, Block 408 was a parking lot.

The project area has been subdivided into separate archaeological sites, based largely on historic property ownership boundaries. Most of the information discussed in today papers is from 4 of these sites, identified here as Areas A through D. Glenn Farris is going to identify and discuss the occupants of these parcels in more detail in the next paper.

Area D is of particular importance, as it was the location of the McCoy House reconstruction, and therefore was the subject of the most intensive archaeological work - much of the artifactual data discussed in the following papers is derived from Area D, so I'm going to spend a little time describing the work done there.

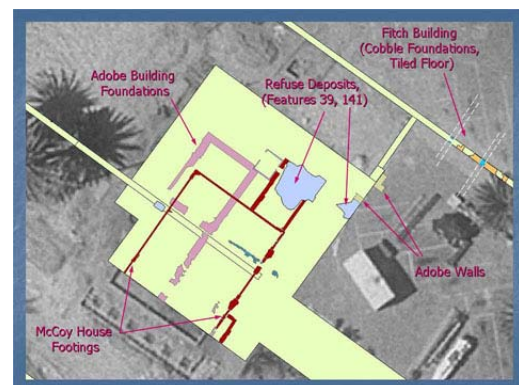
The brick foundations of the 1869 McCoy House, shown here in Red, were found to be superimposed on the remains of several smaller, earlier buildings. These are shown in lavender and dark blue, and probably represent adobe structures



(Block 408, in Entrance Improvement Project area)



(Block 408, Areas A through D)



(Block 408, major features in Area D)

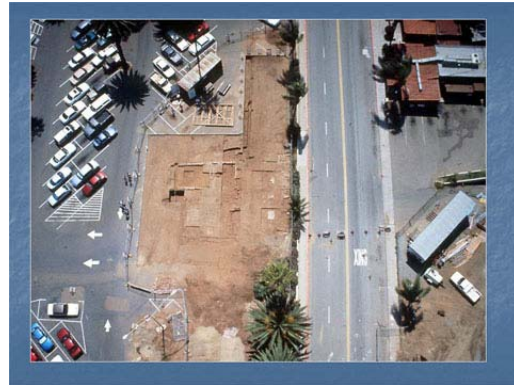
owned by Maria Eugenia Silvas prior to 1851.

The area adjacent to these buildings was a yard area, and yielded the largest artifact assemblages recovered. Two large, artifact-rich deposits in this yard area, shown in light blue, yield most of the faunal remains that Trine will discuss in her paper.

Depositional History and Chronology

Area D, especially the area capped by the later McCoy House, contained fairly well stratified and preserved deposits.

The yard adjacent to the buildings appears to have been eroded to a hard-packed subsoil surface while the buildings were occupied, probably as a result of intensive foot traffic and weather. Subsequent deposits were laid down on this surface, and represent occupation debris, rubble from collapse of the adobe structures, refuse disposal on the abandoned site, and probably a flood, all of which occurred well before the McCoy House was built on the site in 1869.

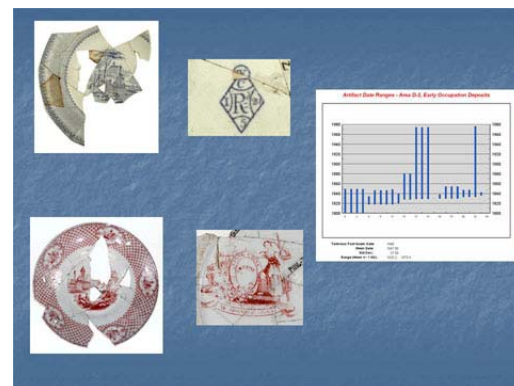


(Block 408, Aerial of Area D during 1995 excavations)

Establishing chronology for the deposits was accomplished through analysis of datable historic artifacts, most notably decorated British earthenwares.

Most of the deepest deposits in yard Area D-3, those believed to represent materials deposited while the adobe buildings were occupied, yielded artifacts that could have been deposited from the very late 1820s through the mid-1830s. The date ranges for artifacts representing later periods of building abandonment, collapse, and use of the parcel for refuse disposal are predictably somewhat later.

The artifact dates, and almost everything else about the recovered assemblages suggests construction and occupation of the adobe buildings in the 1830s, with abandonment by about 1850. This dovetails well with historical evidence, which has Maria Eugenia Silvas selling the Area D property in 1851.



(Marked British transfer-printed earthenware, date chart)

The artifacts that will be reported in the other papers in this session were recovered primarily from these 1830s-1840s deposits. The discussions of ceramics and lithics describe diagnostic materials recovered from a variety of contexts. Faunal analysis focuses on several specific artifact-rich features in Area D, as mentioned previously.

Native American Artifacts

Native Americans are relatively ephemeral presences in the written records of the Mexican Republic Era, especially after the secularization of the missions in the mid 1830s. The same cannot be said for the archaeological record, however. In the collections recovered from the Mexican Republic Era in Old Town San Diego, we have what we believe is ample, even overwhelming evidence of a robust Indian Presence. This takes the form of large volumes of Native American ceramics and flaked stone, as well as smaller quantities of other materials that suggest Native American occupants and material culture.

(The small piece of slate on right side of this slide may not be of Native American origin, but the graffiti scratched on it looks tantalizing like it may represent one of the Native American houses described on the periphery of Old Town in a number of different 19th century sources.)



Mike Sampson is going to discuss the large volume of stone artifacts recovered in his paper this afternoon. Unfortunately, Eloise Barter, who analyzed the unglazed brown ware ceramics from the Old Town deposits spends her winters in New Zealand, so is not participating in this symposium. In her absence, I'm going to present some of her key findings about this important assemblage.

The Kumeyaay Indians of the San Diego region made ceramics during the late prehistoric period. This is commonly referred to as Tizon Brown Ware, an adaptation of a term originally coined in Arizona, the expropriation of which by California archaeologists has been an ongoing subject of debate for the past half-century. These vessels most commonly take the form of undecorated bowls and jars, and are made from residual clays common to the mountains immediately east of San Diego.

Previous archaeological work in Old Town San Diego has consistently reported unglazed brown wares in deposits from the 1850s and earlier. The Block 408 work was no exception. – we recovered over 20,000 sherds, which make up approximately two-thirds of the total ceramic assemblage. There are a much

smaller number of Native American Colorado Buff Wares, apparently imported from the desert to the east.

While it was tempting to leap directly to the conclusion that the huge quantities of brown wares recovered were of Native American origin, we acknowledged possibility that at least some of these materials might reflect introduced historic traditions from Mexico or elsewhere.

During analysis we look closely at a number of variables, including vessel form, manufacturing methods, and paste composition, among others, to test the alternate hypotheses as to the traditions represented by the unglazed brown wares. We also looked closely for any evidence that might suggest any evolution of prehistoric traditions that might be taking place in the historic pueblo setting.

Our conclusion is that most of the brown wares recovered in Old Town overwhelmingly reflect the prehistoric ceramic traditions. They are made of what appear to be local clays, using paddle and anvil techniques. The vessel forms represented, about evenly split between bowls and taller pots with constricted openings, are generally indistinguishable from those used by the Kumeyaay prior to contact.



(Vessel reconstruction photographs and drawings; pot with restricted rim, open bowl, vertical bowl)

In sum, it looks like Indian bowls and pots were being used as extensively as cooking vessels throughout Old Town through at least the 1840s – we speculate that they were being produced by Indians, and probably for the Indians who provided much of the labor in the Californio households in Old Town, as will be discussed by Glenn Farris in the next paper.

There are, however, a few tantalizing hints that subtle changes had begun to appear in the local ceramic tradition, and that some new traits, perhaps derived from other Mexican borderlands traditions, were being introduced.

It appears that a higher percentage of the vessels were used for cooking than is typically the case in late prehistoric assemblages, where they served as storage vessels as well as cook pots.

There are only about half as many decorated sherds among the brown wares as are present in prehistoric assemblages. Even there, these are overwhelmingly plain wares, but we speculate that there may have been even less impetus to decorate these wares once they were being produced for use in non-Native contexts.

Eloise found that the vessel walls of the Old Town brown wares tend to be somewhat thicker than those from comparable late prehistoric assemblages. While speculative, this might suggest that the level craftsmanship involved in production was declining.

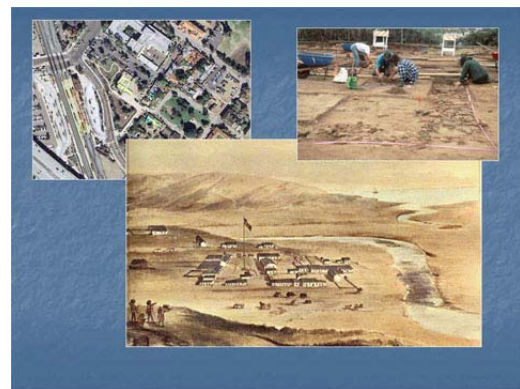
There are also a few pieces that suggest new manufacturing methods. One of the paste groups that Eloise was able to differentiate shows clear evidence of use of organic temper, probably manure. Some of the brown wares also display a distinctly reddish rind which we initially believed was a slip, but now believe may be the result of changes in traditional firing and cooling procedures.

We've found a very few specimens that seem to demonstrate new vessel forms being produced with traditional brownware pastes and methods. These include two foot rings, and a couple of handle fragments which may have been copied from Mexican or other imported vessels.

Concluding Comments

One might ask “why should we find the presence of Native American material in these historic contexts particularly noteworthy?” That’s a fair question – we probably shouldn’t find them surprising... One of archaeology’s strengths however, is proving the obvious, or more properly, what should be but often is not obvious.

I think that’s the situation with the Native American presence in Old Town San Diego in the 1830s and 1840s, at least as it is interpreted for the public park visitor. Our interpretation tends to be very linear and segmented – Indians preceded Spaniards who preceded Mexicans who preceded Americans, and ne’r the twain shall meet. The presence of blatantly huge archaeological facts like 10s of thousands of pieces of Native American ceramics in context stereotypically consigned to Mexicans or Americans may help break down some of those artificial interpretive boundaries.



Another of archaeology’s strength’s is in generating questions that it cannot answer, but which no one had bothered to ask previously. In this case, the presence of Native American artifacts and the foundations of otherwise undocumented Mexican Republic era buildings helped formulate new questions that can be addressed by taking new approaches to existing archival records. Examples of this are provided in the next paper, in which Glenn Farris provides new insights into some of the people who lived in Old Town San Diego in the 1830s and 1840s, and who were responsible for the archaeological evidence we’ve been reviewing.

Illustration citation:

Pourade, Richard F.

1963 The Silver Dons. The History of San Diego, Volume Three.
The Union-Tribune Publishing Company, San Diego.