

A History of Villa de Branciforte

Defending the Early Mexican Frontier in Santa Cruz

by Phil Reader

Branciforte

The idea for the settlement of the Villa de Branciforte was an outgrowth of tensions between Spain and England over possession of lands in the Pacific Northwest. The province of Alta California in the late 1700s was located on the frontier of the Spanish empire in the Americas. Being sparsely settled, it was vulnerable to attacks by Spain's enemies.

Plans were drawn up to create a hybrid community on the strategic north side of Monterey Bay, which was to be populated by soldier-settlers who could be called upon to defend the interests of the crown in California. The plan featured a central plaza surrounded by neatly arranged streets, public buildings and homes.

Upon arrival the settlers were to find waiting for them a comfortable adobe house, all necessary farm implements, two horses and yearly cash grants until such time as they became self sufficient.

The settlement was to be named in honor of Don Miguel de la Grua Talamanca, the Marques de Branciforte, then the Viceroy of New Spain (Mexico). A party was sent out to survey the site and on July 24, 1797 the Villa de Branciforte was formally dedicated.

Finding the Settlers

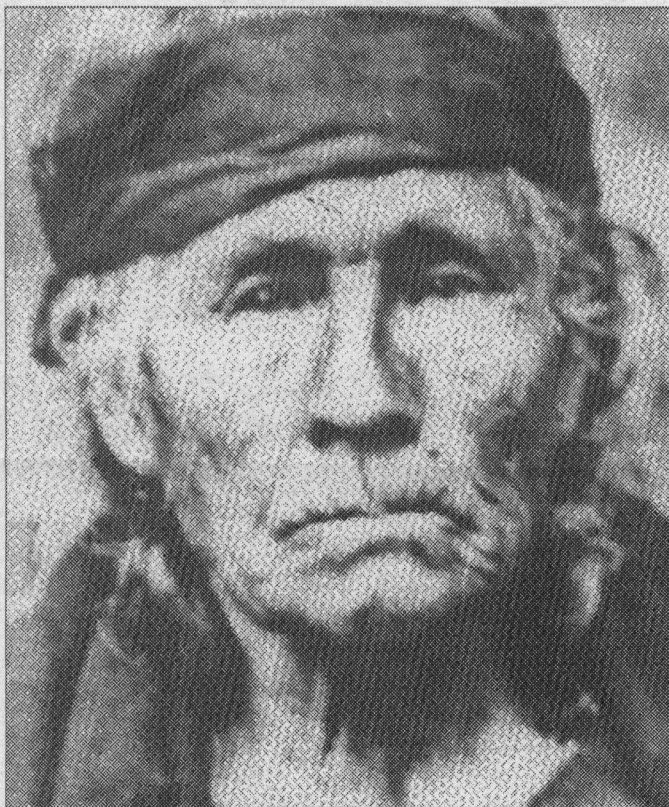
The next step was to recruit settlement settlers. Flyers were sent out to numerous areas in New Spain attempting to attract skilled workers, tradesmen and soldiers. The net result was just eight settlers, all from the Guadalajara region and most with backgrounds in petty crime. Few possessed any of the craft or trade skills necessary for survival in a frontier environment.

To think that such an unrealistic plan could be carried out in such an isolated frontier region was, at best, a fantasy.

When the paltry band of settlers arrived at the site of Branciforte, the promised adobe houses were not waiting for them, nor were the farming implements or any other supplies. They had to make do with what they found at hand, constructing crude shelters of

the foundations for a future village were being laid.

Over the years, as the settlers began to acquire the necessary skills for building a stable community, more substantial housing began to appear. Well-constructed adobe homes popped up along Branciforte Avenue, down on the flats between the San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek, in Live Oak and Aptos as well



Once a great beauty, Josefa Perez was reduced to begging in old age. This is the only known photo of any of the Perez family.

mud and sticks in the fashion of the Indians.

The civilian authorities at the provincial capital at Monterey offered little except a list of directives as to what the settlers could or (more aptly) could not do. They never offered the material help with which to do it.

In light of these many obstacles it is amazing that the tiny Villa survived the first 20 years of its existence. At first the settlement remained a rude assemblage of mud and stick huts strung out along what is now Branciforte Avenue, but

as the Pajaro Valley.

This progress led to a jump in population with several groups of newcomers coming from New Spain and other parts of Alta California.

By 1799 the Villa contained 70 souls. Among the new citizens were Jose Maria Perez and Macdonio Lorenzana, whose descendants remain in the area to this day.

Early Settlers

Perez married Margarita Rodriguez, the daughter of another early settler and ex-soldier. However, Perez was

soon drafted into the Spanish army serving with the garrison at the Presidio of San Francisco. Upon his return to the Villa, he applied for and received an Alcalde grant for land in Branciforte.

The Perez land holdings ran from the Villa down to the San Lorenzo River. Their home was up on Water Street hill, while their farm and grazing lands were down on the flats of Ocean, May, and Market Streets.

Perez died in 1832, and among his children the oldest son Juan Perez received the land on which the Santa Cruz County Government Center is now located. During the Mexican period, there was a large two-story adobe and bullfight ring located there. The roofless second floor of the adobe was the scene of many of the colorful celebrations known as fandangos over the years.

Juan, who served a hitch with the Mexican army, was a tough sullen character who was very anti-Yankee. During the 1870s, he rode with the bandito Tiburcio Vasquez along with his cousins, the Rodriguez brothers.

His sister Josefa de Jesus Perez, the oldest Perez girl, possessed remarkable beauty. She was a "fandango girl" who sold her favors for pairs of silk stockings and brightly colored long flowing scarves. But she chose her husbands poorly, and because of their antics she was banished from the Villa on occasion. In old age, after she had lost her beauty, she became a street character who begged for food from door to door.

Brother Cornelio Perez Turns Judge

Brother Cornelio Perez was the most prominent member of the Perez family. He held the important position of "Juez de Campo" during the Mexi-

can period and American times. The Juez, or judge, was the official who arbitrated any disputes which arose over brands or cattle ownership during the rodeos.

But like others of the Perez family, Cornelio, who was always colorfully dressed and superbly mounted, had a wild side. In 1847, he was carrying on an illicit affair with Barbara Gomez, who lived in a cabin down in Arana Gulch with Pedro Gomez, her very jealous husband.

In early July, Pedro returned home and surprised the two during an intimate tryst. Cornelio bolted out the back door and rode swiftly into Branciforte, leaving poor Barbara to her fate. Pedro strung his wife up to a rafter and stabbed her to death. The American authorities up at Mission Hill quickly tried him, and he died in a hail of gunfire at the hands of his wife's relatives.

Branciforte Now a Footnote in California History

For many years Cornelio Perez' adobe was a landmark in old Villa de Branciforte. His homestead at the corner of Branciforte and Water Streets was one of about 20 adobes, most of which were positioned up and down Branciforte Avenue, a wide boulevard which also doubled as a race track.

But the unique social structure and lifestyle of Branciforte and the ranchos was doomed by the westward advance of the dreaded "Yankees" during the late 1840s.

A mere decade following statehood in 1850, most of the land was in the hands of Americans. Villa de Branciforte remained a township until 1905, at which point it was annexed by the city of Santa Cruz, becoming just a footnote in California history. ■