

# Golden Gate

National Recreation Area  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

El Presidio de San Francisco  
Archaeological Site Tour



Explore the Spanish colonial history and archaeology of El Presidio de San Francisco, an outpost on the 18th century frontier of northern New Spain. This self-guided tour will reveal another Presidio, whose remains lie buried just below your feet.

## The Route

**Length:** 1/3 Mile

**Number of Stops:** 7

**Time Required:** 45 min.

**Access:** Most of the route is paved with the exception of stop 4. Access to the back yard can be made through the fence gate behind Building 13.

Watch for cracked pavement and traffic at all times.

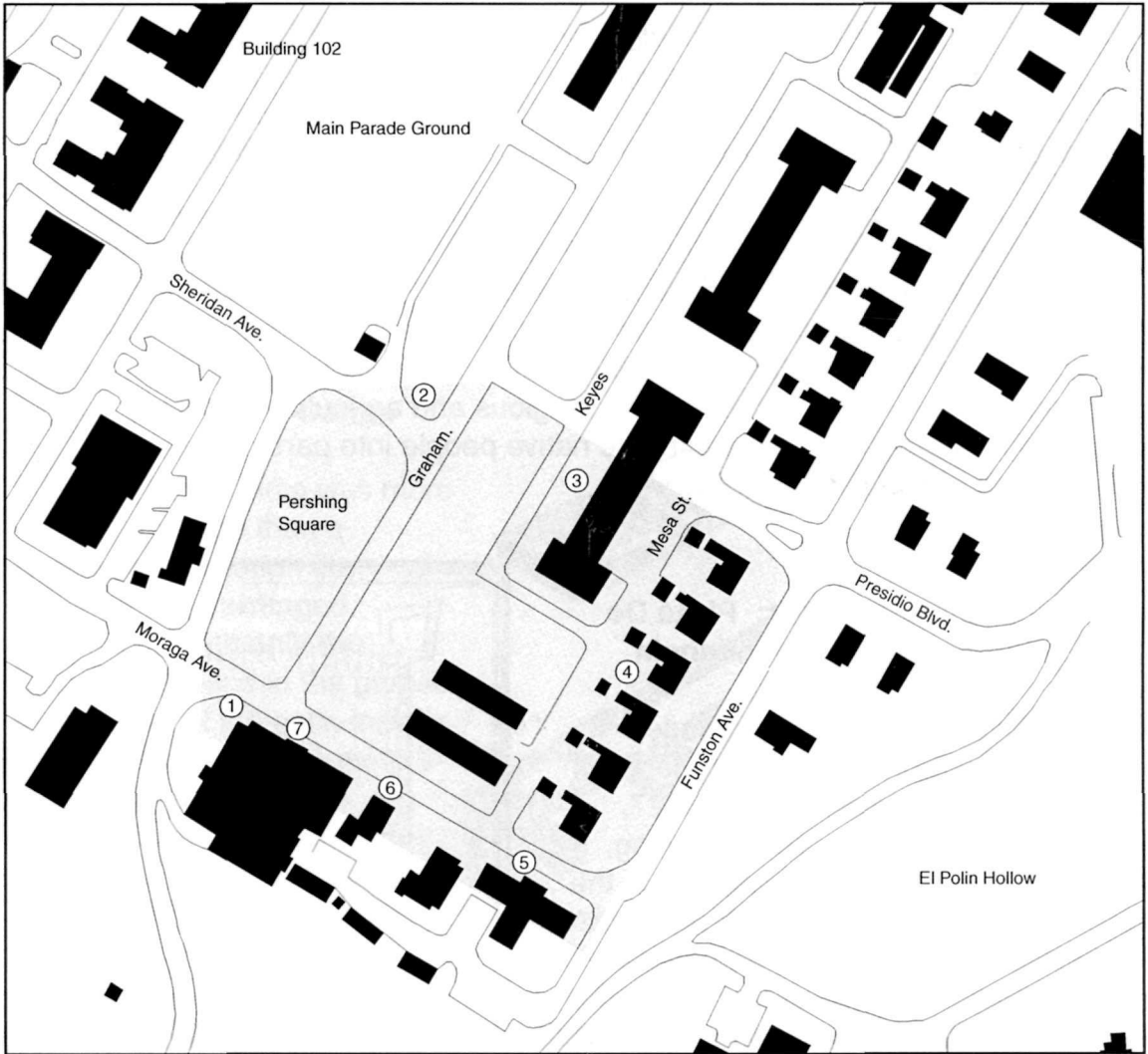
**Restrooms:** are located at the officers club (Bld 50) and the Visitors Center (Bld 102) on the Main Post.

### Introduction:

Before this land was claimed as Alta California by the Spanish Crown, native people had called it home for over 8,000 years. Archaeological studies suggest that the earliest ancestral Costanoan [also known as Ohlone] sites known in San Francisco date back to 3,000 B.C.; the earliest on the Presidio is about 600 years old. Before European settlement, native people, including Ohlone, Coast Miwok, Patwin and others are estimated at over 26,000. San Francisco proper was occupied by the Yelamu, a tribal grouping living in seasonally occupied villages in the area.

In 1769, Spain ordered the occupation of the northern frontier of coastal *Nueva España* [New Spain]. This order was designed to preempt similar movements by England and Russia, all vying for a piece of America's western coastline. Don Gaspar de Portolá was sent to reconnoiter Alta California, resulting in the discovery of "*el brazo del mar*" [the arm of the sea], now known as San Francisco Bay. "The port of San Francisco...is a marvel of nature, and might well be called a harbor of harbors... I saw none that pleased me so much as this. And I think if it could be well settled like Europe there would not be anything more beautiful in all

# The Route Map



- ① Southwest Corner: Plaza De Armas, 1776 Comandancia
- ② 1792 Comandancia, Northwest Corner
- ③ Northern Front: Main Gate
- ④ East Side: Soldiers Quarters
- ⑤ Southeast Corner: Presidio Outliers
- ⑥ South Side: 1820 Comandancia, 1780 Chapel
- ⑦ 1815 Officers Quarters, American Period "Comandancia"

the world, for it has the best advantages for founding in it a most beautiful city." (Pedro Font, 1776).

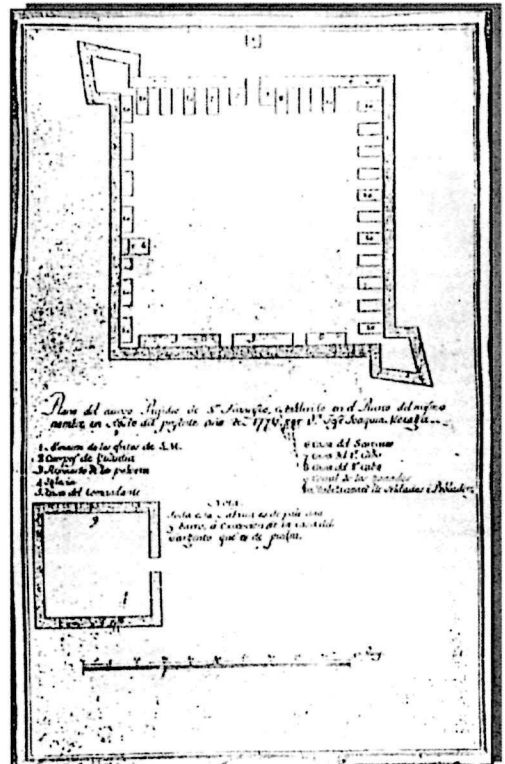
The plan to occupy Alta California followed with the construction of San Diego Presidio and Mission in 1769, and Monterey Presidio and Mission San Carlos in 1770. The Presidio and Mission of San Francisco, established in 1776, as part of the historic colonizing expeditions of Captain Juan Bautista de Anza.

Settlement in colonial California encompassed three major Spanish institutions - the presidio, the mission, and the pueblo. Presidios were fortified military villages that were employed on the borderlands of the Spanish Empire. Four presidios in Alta California were established to hold and ensure the pacific subjugation of this frontier for the crown. Pueblos were communities designed to spread Spanish culture under the Crown. Missions were religious and agricultural centers designed to congregate and indoctrinate native people into participants in Catholicism and the colonial state.

1

### Southwest Corner: Plaza De Armas, 1776 Comandancia

José Joaquín Moraga, under orders from Anza, came here with 193 colonists and soldiers on June 27, 1776. Because of strong winds and fog, Moraga decided to relocate away from the site selected by Anza - near the present Golden Gate Bridge - to the spot you are now standing. With the assistance of pilot Jose de Canizares of the supply ship San Carlos, a square palisade of mud, and stone 92 *varas* [roughly 90 yards] on a side was laid out. Shipmates from the San Carlos help construct an *almacen* [warehouse], *comandancia* [commandant's quarters], and an *iglesia* [chapel], while the soldiers and their families worked on their own dwellings. On September 17th, 1776 a



Moraga's 1776 Map of El Presidio de San Francisco  
Spanish Colonial Research Center, Santa Fe, National Park Service

mass was performed as a formal dedication of *El Presidio de San Francisco*.

Presidios followed similar structural plans throughout the northern frontier. Conceived as a square garrison of adobe buildings faced inward toward a *plaza de armas* [central plaza] In 1778, Moraga was asked by Governor Felipe de Neve to complete the plan he had submitted as most of the dwellings were "mere huts." Future construction was ordered to be of adobe brick on stone foundations.

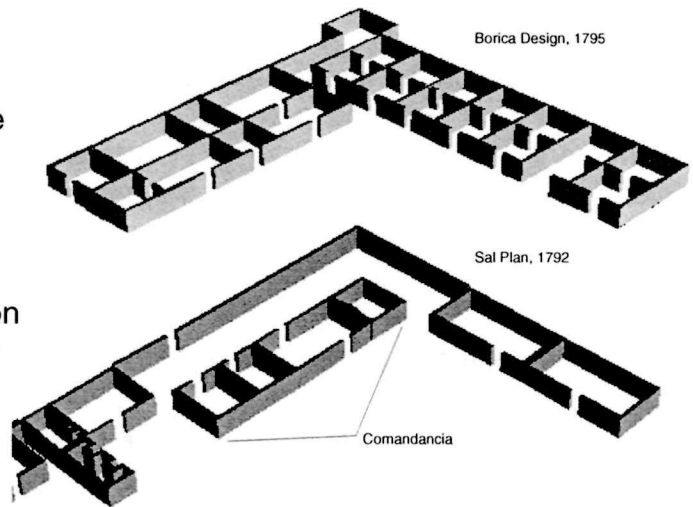
If you were standing in the southwest corner of the 1776 Presidio, you would be at the comandancia, the quarters of José Joaquín Moraga, commander of the Presidio from 1776 to 1785.

2

### 1792 Comandancia, Northwest Corner

The Presidio was more a village than a fortification, although the buildings were arranged defensively. With only two cannons supplied to the garrison for defense of the gate, initially the bay defenses were more a facade of strength. One exploded in a training exercise, the other suffered from lack of

powder. When Captain George Vancouver, of the British Frigate H.M.S. Discovery, entered the gate in 1792 he fired his cannon to salute the Spanish flag, but there was no response from the Presidio. This breach of etiquette caused confusion until a soldier from the Presidio requested gun powder to return the salute. When Spanish officials heard of this show of weakness, artillery and new fortifications were ordered for the site. Six of the bronze guns sent, cast in the 17th century in Lima, Peru, remain on the Presidio today. Two can be found at the entrance of the Officers' Club, two near the flagpole on Pershing Square, and two outside Stilwell Hall on Crissy Field.



Formal fortifications were under construction by 1794 including the Castillo de San Joaquín (near Fort Point) and Batería de Yerbabuena (at Fort Mason). Plans

to reconstruct the Presidio were developed in 1795-1796, officials choosing a new site near the modern Golden Gate Bridge. The work was never funded, but portions of the plans may have been built over the years. According to legend, the 1863 powder magazine (Building No. 95) next to this location, may have been built from stone recycled from the Presidio.

The second comandancia of the Presidio was located on the western side near the northwest corner. In 1792 it was described as:

"...the commandant's house ...was about 30 feet long, 14 feet broad, and 12 feet high; and the other room, or chamber, I judged to be of the same dimensions, excepting its length, which appeared to be somewhat less. The floor was of the native soil raised about three feet from its original level, without being boarded, paved, or even reduced to an even surface; the roof was covered in flags and rushes, the walls on the inside had once been whitewashed...the windows, which are cut in the front wall, and look into the square, are destitute of glass...the furniture consisted of a very sparing assortment of the most indispensable articles, of the rudest fashion, and of the meanest kind; and ill accorded with the ideas we had conceived of the sumptuous manner in which the Spaniards live on this side of the globe.

3

### Northern Front: Main Gate

You are standing at the *puerta principal* [main gate] of the Presidio. Imagine this gate as a symbol of the role the Presidio played in the Bay area to control native people, build communities, and secure the frontier from foreign incursion. The Presidio was responsible, along with Franciscan missionaries, in founding Missions at San Francisco (1776), Santa Clara (1777), San José (1795), San Rafael (1816), and San Francisco de Solano (1824); civil pueblos [towns] at San José (1777), Villa de Branciforte (1797), Yerba Buena (1835), and Sonoma (1835); and numerous ranchos established in the Spanish and Mexican periods. Most of the time soldiers were outside these walls operating as *escoltas* [guards] for these Hispanic



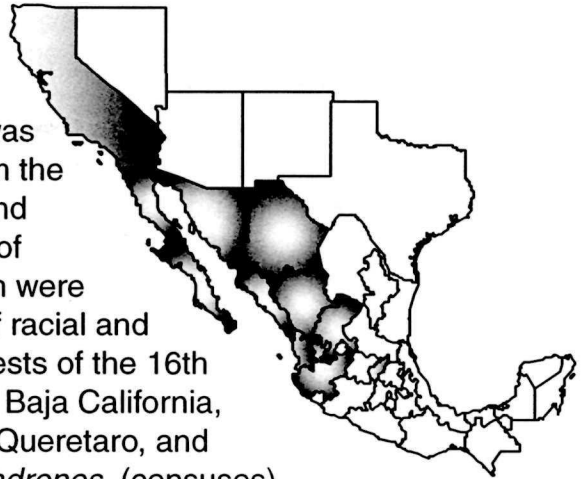
1791 Sketch of *soldado*  
Museo Naval, Madrid

communities, leaving the Presidio village often. In 1828-29, a major native revolt was led by Estanislao, a Lakisamne Yokut who had become the *alcalde* [mayor] of the native population of Mission San Jose. He withdrew from the Mission in 1828 with hundreds of native followers into the upper San Joaquin Valley, fortifying his native village with a complex stockade. His message to Father Narciso Durán of the Mission was: "We are rising in revolt...we have no fear of the soldiers, for even now there are very few, mere boys." The first punitive expedition from the Presidio was defeated in battle. By 1829, young Lieutenant Mariano Vallejo overwhelmed the Yokut village with cannon fire, native auxiliaries, and soldiers from Monterey and San Francisco. Few of the rebels survived. Estanislao himself managed to escape and was subsequently given sanctuary by Duran, and pardoned.

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#### East Site: Soldiers' Quarters

El Presidio de San Francisco was settled by people originally from the colonial provinces of Nayarit, Xalisco, and Sinaloa, all are along the Pacific coast of Nueva España. People from this region were already the product of over 250 years of racial and ethnic mixture resulting from the conquests of the 16th century. By 1790, new immigrants from Baja California, Sonora, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Durango, Queretaro, and Zacatecas had joined the ranks. The *padrones* (censuses) of the Presidio varied from 200 to 360 people over the years and women and children (70% of the population in 1798) were often in the majority with soldiers assigned duties throughout the region. San Francisco usually had the smallest garrison of the presidios of northern California.



The original occupants of the Presidio land have been called the *Yelamu*, and numbered about 160 people when the Spanish arrived. Living at that time in what is San Francisco's Visitation Valley, Mission, and Marina to Land's End districts. Among their villages were *Sitlintac*, *Chutchui*, *Tubsinte*, *Amuctac*, and *Petlenuc*, the last in the vicinity of the Presidio. Mission records suggest that they had close social ties with other Ohlone/Costanoan tribes including the *Huchiun* of the East Bay and *Pruristac* near Pacifica.

Since 1990, the U.S. Army, National Park Service, and Presidio Trust have been working towards unraveling the archaeology of El Presidio de San Francisco and better understanding the history of this frontier community on the "northern frontier." Work has been conducted with many organizations, including Woodward Clyde Consultants, Cabrillo College Archaeological Technology Program, and the Department of Anthropology at U.C. Berkeley. Most recently, U.C. Berkeley has conducted detailed excavations of the archaeological remains of the eastern side of the site, a location void of structures in 1792, but possibly the site of housing for the Catalanian Volunteers sent to augment troops in 1796.

5

### Southeast Corner: Presidio Outliers

By the 1820s the Presidio community began to expand outside of the walls surrounding the plaza. Farmsteads were apparently built to the west of El Presidio and to the south in a small valley with rich springs along the trail to Mission San Francisco de Asís. Early images of this valley, suggest it was the location of the Presidio's gardens and a dam was built south of the *ojo* [spring] probably to provide water for irrigation.



Mision San Francisco de Asis, 1880s

Here, at El Polin, Marcos Briones and the Miramontes family all constructed homes, and it's is said that Russian sailors constructed a timber house for Juana Briones near here. Apolonario Miranda and his family resided nearby at Ojo de Agua de Figueroa. During this time, the Presidio was visited by the Russian American Company, Hudson's Bay Company, and American traders from Boston and elsewhere. Dmitry Zavalishin, 19 year old Russian lieutenant on the frigate Cruiser, left a journal of his visit between 1823-1824:

*...as the danger of attack from savages diminished or, at least, came to affect only the more remote missions, they began to permit outside buildings at the presidios, and as a result it became necessary to make passageways through the heretofore blank outer wall. Lately even Russian expeditions have had bakeries attached to the outer wall for the baking of both fresh bread and extra*



*rusks for a cruise. This is how San Francisco's presidio became a rather formless pile of half-ruined dwellings, sheds, storehouses, and other structures. The floors, of course, were everywhere of stone or dirt, and not only stoves but also fireplaces were lacking in the living quarters. Whatever had to be boiled or fried was prepared in the open air, mostly on cast bricks; they warmed themselves against the cold air over hot coals in pots or braziers. There was no glass in the windows; some people had only grating in their windows. The entrance door to some compartments (for example, to the president's [commandant's] room) were so large that one passed from the interior courtyard to the outside through the wall on horse-back.*

*Since my duties required a permanent room ashore where all who had to do business with me could present themselves, one room in the president's quarters was remodeled for me by our frigate's craftsmen in the European style with a wooden floor, glass-paned windows, and European furniture. In it was put a spare copper hearth from the frigate. During my off-duty hours this room became a gathering place for female company, who came there with work. Generally the president's room was occupied after his move to Monterey ( he was formerly commandant at San Francisco) by his married sister, who lived here with her husband and daughter, and furthermore it served for balls that the Russian officers gave for Californian society.*

## **6** South Side: 1820 Comandancia, 1780 Chapel

In 1780 construction was underway on this site for a new chapel. Previously, Mission San Francisco had refused to send priests to tend the Presidio population until a suitable church was erected. It lasted until 1812, when it was destroyed by an earthquake. After this, people would travel to the Mission for services.

Excavations conducted by the Archaeological Technology Program of Cabrillo College between 1996-1999 helped us in the unfinished process of finding where historic documents and archaeological truths meet. Here the subsurface remains of the western foundation of the chapel can be seen as well as those of the adobe building inside the Officers' Club.



Personal cross found at 1780 Chapel excavations

To the east would have stood the last comandancia of the Presidio in the 1820s and 30s. Here the region was controlled by Luis Antonio Argüello, Ignacio Martinez, Jose Antonio Sanchez, and Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Here decisions were reached creating the pueblo of Yerba Buena in 1835, with Francisco de Haro as its first alcalde. Here Vallejo ordered the abandonment of the Presidio, for a new northern frontier post at Sonoma.

It is said that when Vallejo was commandant at the Presidio he was almost excommunicated from the Catholic church for purchasing illicit literature, including works by Voltaire and Rousseau, in the dead of night, from traders. His life long companions, Juan Alvarado and Jose Castro were also implicated. By the end of the affair, greater freedom of thought was allowed by the church, fireworks lit the streets of Monterey, and some celebrated their new found rights.

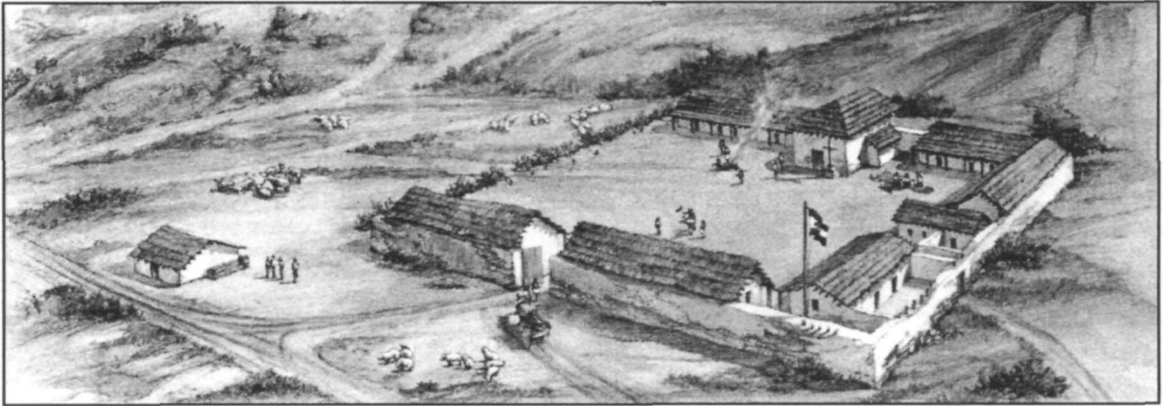
There have been many comandancia buildings at the Presidio. No archaeological study has clearly identified any one of them. History suggests there were at least three. In a similar way, the historical archaeology of the Presidio remains largely unexplored. Studying the complex physical and social history of this frontier colonial post is an important part of the Presidio as a National Park.

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### **1815 Officers Quarters, American Period Commandancia**

The Officers' Club is the oldest and most revered building in the Presidio of San Francisco. It will always remain an icon of the three flags that have flown over this land since 1776, and of the histories that people believe echo through its walls. Within these walls are the last vestiges of an adobe building which scholars believe to date from about 1815, when the entire Presidio quadrangle underwent fundamental changes overseen by Commandant Luis Argüello.

*"Once, when he and his men were returning to the presidio at sunset after a day on horseback, he stopped on the crest of the low ridges that overlook the military square. From that vantage point, he pointed out to them all of the homes were in poor condition. He suggested that, if they agreed and were willing, the homes could be quickly and completely destroyed and then tastefully rebuilt around a larger square, which would provide each house a larger lot and a better appearance.*



El Presidio in 1792

*"One of the sergeants, with whom he would discuss nonmilitary matters or converse informally as if he were his own nephew, answered that his sergeants, corporals, and soldiers had never demonstrated any other desire than to do the captain's bidding. Therefore, he would soon see them all working on the project he wished to complete. Since everyone was in such a good mood, the new presidio square was sketched out by dawn the next morning. Sergeants, corporals, and soldiers were appointed to begin to break ground and lay the foundation as soon as they could obtain the assistance of the Indians. Other men were appointed to go to the spot named Corte de Madera de San Rafael to prepare different types of timber. The captain appointed himself as director of this project." (Antonio Maria Osio 1851)*

Following the American occupation of the Presidio in 1846, the Presidio quadrangle and some of its colonial adobe buildings, including this Mexican period Officers' Quarters, were reused by the U.S. Army. The building soon became the Presidio headquarters and was nicknamed the "commandancia," a name that remains today. When it was remodeled in 1934 additional confusion arose with the assumption that it was the restoration of the original 1776 commandant's quarters. Ruins of earlier construction beneath this building may date back to the Presidio's founding when José Joaquín Moraga commanded.

This guide was prepared by:  
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Marina



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El Presidio de San Francisco, 1868

## Would You Like to Know More?

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