

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Juan Antonio Maria Gilroy

Today we will continue a story of "What American first settled in California?" We have already named Thomas W. Doak, who took the name Felipe Santiago, and settled in San Juan Bautista. Others who arrived even before Doak, but were not Americans, were John Gilroy and John Groem, a Scotchman and an American who died the day he landed.

There was an American youth by the name of Daniel Call, who landed at Santa Barbara later in the year 1816. Little is known of him. Bancroft writes that Daniel Call landed from the vessel Atala. In 1836 it is known that he had a wife and two children.

As many as a dozen foreigners, including Joseph Chapman, an American, are known to have reached California before the end of 1818. Previous to the time of the American conquest in 1846, numerous young Americans had come to California to settle, most of them becoming American citizens and marrying into prominent Spanish families. Among the descendants of some of these mixed families are many useful citizens in various parts of California and in Monterey in particular.

Bancroft admits in his History of California, 1825-1840, that John Gilroy, a Scotch sailor, was the first foreigner to settle in California. He was left sick at Monterey by the Isaac Todd. His real name was John Cameron, but having run away from home as a minor, he changed it to avoid being arrested and sent back. His parents moved to England when John was very young; and indeed, he often claimed to be a native of Sunderland, England. In September of 1814 he was baptized at San Carlos Mission by Father Sarria as Juan Antonio Maria Gilroy.

Four years later Gilroy asked Capt. Guerra at Santa Barbara to petition the viceroy his desire as an "American cooper" for permission to remain in California and to marry. The petition was granted in 1819; and two years later he married Maria Clara de la Asuncion, daughter of Ignacio Ortega, at San Juan Bautista Mission in San Benito County.

That same year he accompanied Capt. Arguello in his famous expedition "to the Columbia" as a guide, or rather, as an interpreter for American intruders. Bancroft says that the next we hear of him was in 1833,

when he obtained naturalization papers, producing certificates that he was a soap maker and millwright of good character, with wife and four children, having also some livestock on San Isidro rancho.

This rancho was granted the same year to the Ortegas. Gilroy owned a league of it on which he built an adobe house and where he spent the remainder of his life. His name appears on Larkin's books from 1834 when his age was given as 45. In 1835 he was auxiliary alcalde at Los Ortegas.

In 1851 Gilroy wrote to his family in England for the first time and Bancroft claimed to have the original reply to that letter as given to him by Valentine Alviso. It was written by Gilroy's brother, Alexander Cameron, tanner, at Newton Heath, near Manchester, dated June 9, 1852.

According to the letter Alexander was glad to learn that he had a brother living, for his father, mother, and the other brothers were all dead. John Gilroy was an "honest, good-natured old sailor-ranchero, well liked by everybody, much too fond of his grog and cards, careless and improvident, and as powerless in the hands of land-lawyers as were the natives themselves," according to Bancroft's research.

Gilroy lost all his land and cattle, but he lived to see his old rancho the site of a flourishing town, which bears his adopted name, Gilroy. He died as poor as when he landed in California more than half a century before, in 1869 at the age of 75 years.

(To be continued)