

petaluma adobe

STATE HISTORIC PARK

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Petaluma Adobe:

Main residence and center of activity for Rancho Petaluma - the fertile, sprawling 66,000 acre, 100-square-mile agricultural empire that helped make General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo one of the richest, most powerful men in the Mexican Province of Alta California, 1834-1846.



Pete Wilson, Governor
Douglas P. Wheeler, Secretary for Resources
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Above: Petaluma Adobe as it appeared about 1880. A rapidly disintegrating portion of the east wing was still standing.
Below: Petaluma Adobe as it looks today.

At the peak of its development, Petaluma Adobe formed a quadrangle with two wings like the one that has survived. The main entrance to the quadrangle was from the south—the side facing present-day Petaluma and Casa Grande Road, which still connects the adobe with the main landing on Petaluma Creek.

During those years when California was a thinly populated frontier province belonging to the Republic of Mexico, the economy of this region was dominated by the hide and tallow trade. Vast herds of long-horned cattle dotted the range and the number of private ranchos increased rapidly. Between 1822 and 1846, more than 800 California land grants were made to individuals by the Mexican government. Rancho Petaluma was one of those grants.

Ideally situated, with an excellent water supply, gentle climate and rich soil, Rancho Petaluma originally consisted of ten leagues or about 44,000 acres. The land grant that first established the rancho was made in June 1834 by Governor Jose Figueroa. The grantee was 27-year-old Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who was then commandant of the presidio at San Francisco. The grant was intended to reward and further encourage Vallejo's leadership in settling the area north of San Francisco Bay. In fact, the governor also made Vallejo the "military commandant and director of colonization for the northern frontier," and instructed him to move his military headquarters to Sonoma.

In a confidential letter to Vallejo at this time, Governor Figueroa made it clear that increased Mexican activity on the northern frontier was necessary to meet the threat of Russian settlement in those fertile valleys that lay just north of San Francisco Bay and just inland from the Russian establishments at Bodega Bay and Fort Ross.

In 1844, another Mexican-born governor of California, Manuel Michelotorena, confirmed Figueroa's original grant and added another five leagues to it to bring the total acreage to more than 66,000 acres. The rancho then stretched eastward from Petaluma Creek over the hills and down to Sonoma Creek, including all land that lay between these two waterways from the edge of San Francisco Bay to approximately the present site of Glen Ellen. This was only one of General Vallejo's ranchos. By 1846, he held title to some 175,000 acres including the site of the present-day cities of Vallejo and Benicia, both of which he helped to found.

Soon after receiving the original grant in 1834, Vallejo started building houses, corrals, and other needed improvements. A commanding site on a knoll overlooking Petaluma Valley was chosen for the rancho's main building. Construction of the massive adobe began in April 1836 and continued steadily over the years, but was still not complete in 1846 when California's Mexican era abruptly ended.

All of the original lumber used in the building was redwood, most of it handhewn, although some was processed by Stephen Smith's sawmill at Bodega Bay—the first steam-powered sawmill on the Pacific Coast. Only part of the walls were ever plastered and whitewashed, but the wide, covered verandas that completely encircled the house gave the adobe walls adequate protection from the weather. The original

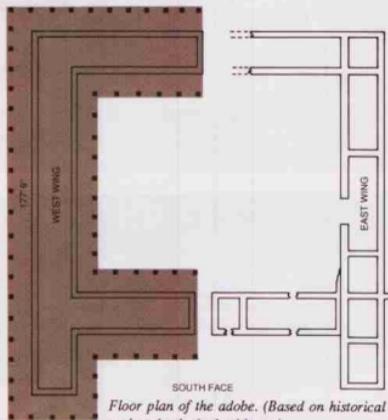
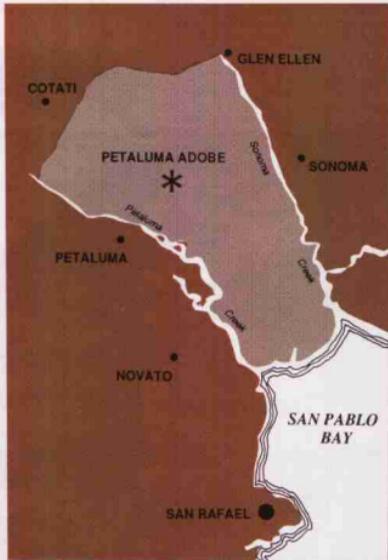
thatched roof was replaced in the early 1840s when an American immigrant by the name of George Yount was commissioned to provide handsplit shingles and put a new, all-wood roof on the adobe building. As a reward for this and other accomplishments, Vallejo gave Yount a land grant of some 12,000 acres in the Napa Valley where Yountville stands today. Since the huge adobe building was constructed over a period of years in a time when the products of the industrial revolution were beginning to arrive in California, machine-cut nails, cast-iron hinges, and glass have been found side by side with wooden pegs, hand-forged hardware, and rawhide.

During the 1830s and 1840s, the adobe was nearly twice as large as it is today. The portion of the building that remains standing today was matched by another wing so that the whole complex formed a quadrangle around a central courtyard. Historical photographs, archeological investigations, and various historical descriptions of the old building all indicate that the missing wing of the building contained many rooms and was roughly equivalent in size to the portion of the building that remains today. It is estimated that about 85% of the present walls and 20% of the woodwork is original.

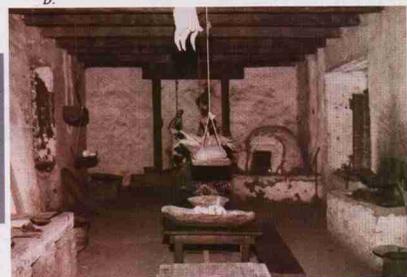
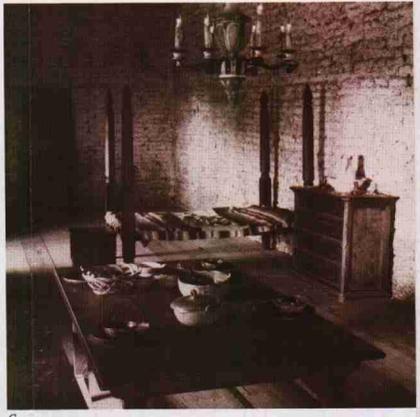
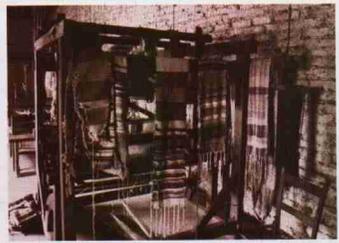
The main economic activity of the rancho revolved around the hide and tallow trade. The mild climate and luxuriant grasslands of California made cattle raising extraordinarily easy and profitable. As a result, cattle hides became so common an item of exchange that they were often referred to as "California bank notes." Rancheros throughout California used the tallow—rendered from the fat of the slaughtered cattle—and hides to trade with the English, American, and other foreign merchants whose ships cruised the coast of California. In return, the rancheros obtained many kinds of manufactured goods and other commodities from the U.S.A., Europe, the Orient, and other parts of the world.

But Rancho Petaluma was far more than just a cattle ranch. Hundreds of Indian laborers lived on the ranch and worked at the trades they had learned at Sonoma Mission. They tended large herds of horses, sheep, and cattle. (As many as 3,000 sheep were shorn each year.) They also planted and cared for great crops of wheat, barley, and corn, which they

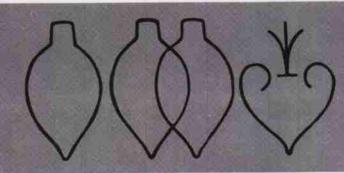
Rancho Petaluma was by all accounts the largest and richest privately owned Mexican estate north of San Francisco Bay and one of the most important in Alta California. Exact boundaries of the rancho were of great debate especially after U.S. takeover of California in 1846. The above map is based on Vallejo's ownership claim as filed with the federal courts in 1852.



Floor plan of the adobe. (Based on historical and archeological evidence.)



A. The Sala or Dining Room.
 B. The Spinning and Weaving Room.
 C. Majordomo's Room.
 D. Stove in Kitchen.
 E. The Kitchen.
 F. Vallejo Home, near Sonoma.
 G. The Toscano Hotel and Sonoma Barracks, Sonoma State Historic Park.



The single-spade brand on the left above, belonged to Vallejo's father. Vallejo himself used the double-spade brand on mules. The rather elegant, V-shaped, open-spade with fleur-de-lis was used on cattle.

harvested and stored in the adobe both for local use and for trade purposes. Other crops such as beans, peas, lentils, and other vegetables were grown in abundance for daily use on the rancho.

In addition to storage space, the great adobe housed a variety of processing and manufacturing operations. Carpeting, blankets, and other materials were woven, clothing was made, and blacksmiths turned out horseshoes, spurs, handmade nails, tools and other metal items. Nearby, a tannery produced finished leather for use in making saddles, bridles, and other leather goods.

The so-called "Bear Flag Revolt" brought a sudden end to the rancho's great period of prosperity under General Vallejo. In June 1846, Vallejo himself was captured by the Bear Flaggers and held prisoner for several weeks at Sutter's Fort. Meanwhile, the rancho was stripped of its horses, cattle, and other provisions by John C. Fremont who was then in the north Bay Area outfitting his "California Battalion" for the campaign against Jose Castro, Andreas and Pio Pico, and other native Californians who had decided to resist U.S. takeover of California. Along with horses, cattle, and supplies, the rancho also lost much of its labor force as many of the Indians ran away at this time and never returned.

Ranching activities were resumed once the political situation settled down somewhat. Under U.S. rule, however, it was not possible to operate the great rancho in the old way. In September 1850, Vallejo leased it out to a group of French colonists, and in subsequent years other arrangements were made in an effort to salvage some part of the rancho investment. In 1857, faced with an ever increasing number of "squatters," and plagued by other legal and financial problems, Vallejo decided to sell the adobe and some of the land around it. During the 1860s, serious consideration was given to using the site as a new campus for the fledgling University of California. After a survey and much discussion, however, another site was chosen. Vallejo subsequently sold off his holdings in the area for rancho purposes. Thereafter, in the hands of various owners, the big adobe began to fall into disrepair and semi-abandonment.

In the spring of 1880, when Vallejo was 72 years old and living in comfortable but much reduced circumstances, he decided to travel over the hills from Sonoma and take a look at the old adobe. Shortly afterward, he described his trip in a letter to one of his sons. "I ordered a picture taken of what was

my old house, which I had not visited for some thirty years and, although almost in ruins, it nevertheless doesn't fail to show what it was in those days.... It is a sad memory, but one bows to that which says that 'all is perishable in this world.' I compare that old relic with myself and the comparison is an exact one; ruins and dilapidation. What a difference between then and now. Then youth, strength, and riches; now age, weakness, and poverty."

In 1910 the old adobe was purchased by the Petaluma Chapter of the Native Sons of the Golden West who managed to preserve the remaining half of the building until 1951. That year the people of California took title to the building. Shortly afterward, a great wind storm carried away the roof and left the adobe walls exposed to the weather. Responding to this emergency situation, park system employees quickly devised temporary protective measures to keep the adobe walls from melting, and then early in 1952 replaced the roof, and began an ambitious, long-range program of restoration and historical interpretation. Today the building is a registered national history landmark, and is listed as state historical landmark number 18. Many of the rooms have been furnished with authentic, rancho period furniture and equipment. Exhibits in the visitor center make it possible to visualize some of the early-day rancho activities that once took place here. The building is open to the public almost every day of the year. Arrangements for guided tours for school and other groups should be made by contacting the park staff at least two weeks in advance of your proposed arrival date.

About Your Visit

Authentic furniture and interpretive displays in Petaluma Adobe make it possible to visualize many aspects of life on Vallejo's sprawling rancho, but it should be remembered that the center of activity in this region during the 1830s and 40s was over the hills in the town of Sonoma. Vallejo himself lived on the rancho for only brief periods at certain times of the year. He relied on his *majordomo*, Miguel Alvarado, to oversee day-to-day activities on the rancho. Your visit to the Old Adobe will therefore be more meaningful and enjoyable if you also visit Vallejo's home and headquarters in the town of Sonoma. Today, those buildings as well as several others including Sonoma Mission make up Sonoma State Historic Park. They are about a 20-minute drive from Petaluma Adobe.

