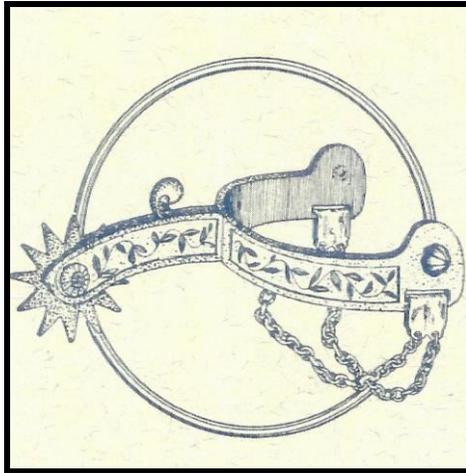


Ranchos and Ranches

The San Ramon Valley from 1830 to 1870

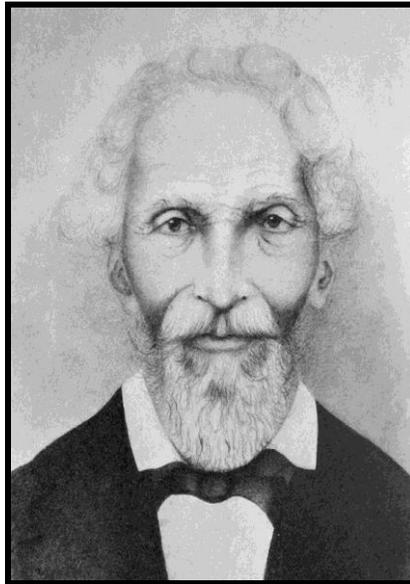


With Mexican independence from Spain in 1821, the mission era ended and Alta California's rancho period began, bringing dramatic changes throughout California. In 1833 two ranchos were carved out of Mission San Jose's land in the San Ramon Valley. And, beginning in 1846, Americans came to California in ever-increasing numbers. Gold was discovered in January of 1848, barely two weeks before Mexico ceded California to the United States after the Mexican-American War.

Mexican Ranchos

The San Ramon Valley in the 1830s looked much as it had when it was part of Mission San Jose's grazing land. Cattle and sheep dotted the landscape and only few permanent structures existed. The Mexican government granted two valley ranchos to retired soldiers in the early thirties, both called Rancho San Ramon. The southern one (over four square leagues -- eventually more than 20,000 acres) went to Jose Maria Amador while the northern two leagues were granted to Mariano Castro and his uncle Bartolo Pacheco.

All three of these men had been soldiers and were descendants of first generation Spanish California settlers, known as Californios. Jose Maria Amador was born in 1794 at the San Francisco Presidio, was a soldier and Indian fighter from 1810 to 1827, and served as the major domo (administrator) of Mission San Jose for 15 years on and off. He was well acquainted with the San Ramon Valley and probably began living here in 1826. His grant lands included all of today's city of San Ramon east to Tassajara Valley and extended to 1580 on the south.

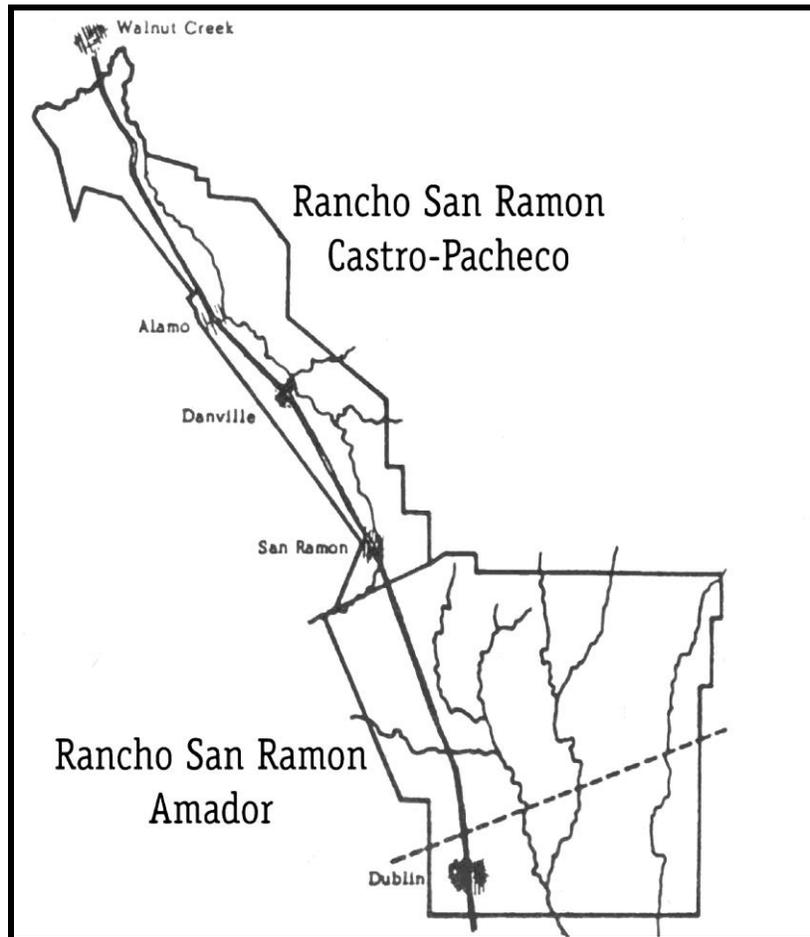


Jose Maria Amador

Amador's ranch headquarters was a small version of a mission. At its peak he ran 300-400 horses and 13-14,000 cattle there and planted large vineyards, orchards and vegetable gardens. His 150 workmen produced leather goods, cloth, ranch equipment and other products. He paid Indians and Mexicans the same, unlike some rancheros, and praised the Indians' skills. He built several adobes over the years, including an enormous two-story one for his large family. Married three times, he had at least 22 children.

The Pacheco-Castro San Ramon Rancho (sometimes called the Valle or Las Juntas) was closer to Mt. Diablo and had serious problems with hostile Indians on the foothills who took their horses and cattle. The Californios built seasonal homes in the south part of their grant and corrals in the middle but neither lived in the San Ramon Valley full time. They came for cattle round-ups and slaughters and supported vaqueros in what became Danville and

Alamo. Pacheco's son Lorenzo inherited the southern half of the grant and, when he died fighting the Indians in 1846, his widow Rafaela and children inherited it. Castro sold some of his northern half to Domingo Peralta in 1843.



Early in 1844 Castro and Pacheco agreed to the Romero brothers' application for a grant north of their property, extending from Alamo over the hills to Tice Valley. It was called the Rancho El Sobrante de San Ramon. This sobrante or "leftover" piece of land was granted to them subject to a final measurement which never was done. Later the brothers sold the Alamo portion to the Garcias. Because the Romero grant was never correctly measured and title papers were lost in the 1850s, their ownership was not confirmed by the American courts.

The economy during the Mexican period was based on the hide and tallow trade. Amador, in an 1875 interview, said that he had regular contracts for his hides, taking "50 oxen over the pass to Alviso" where he traded hides for goods imported from all over the world.

The disposition of both Ranchos reflected their diverse ownerships and history. As more and more Americans arrived, Amador sold the northwest league to Leo Norris. The date was 1850 and the transaction was the first clear sale of land from a Mexican Californian to an American in the San Ramon Valley. Each of Amador's land transactions with Norris, with Michael Murray and Jeremiah Fallon (1000 acres in 1852) and with James Witt Dougherty (10,000 acres in 1853) was relatively straightforward and confirmed successfully by American courts. His literacy and maturity may have contributed to these clear titles; he was likely fortunate in the honesty of the buyers as well.

From the start there were controversies surrounding the northern San Ramon Rancho. Horace Carpentier, a notorious American lawyer, sharpened his land acquisition skills in Oakland, then turned to Contra Costa County. Over the years, by one means or another, he acquired the entire San Ramon Rancho (Castro-Pacheco) holdings.

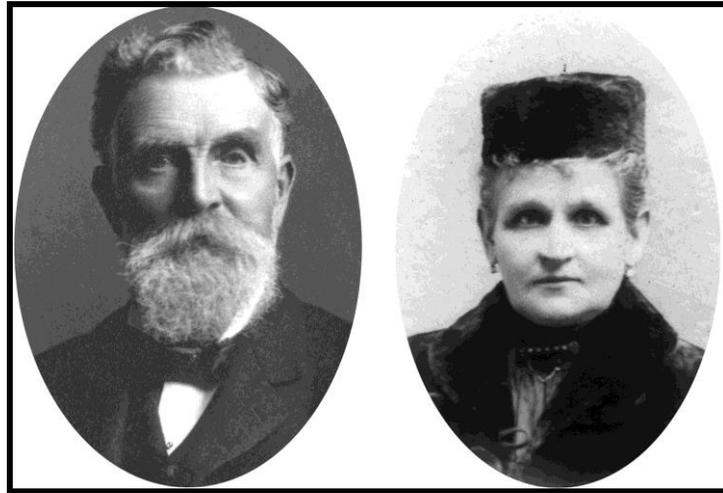
The Americans Arrive

In 1846, as part of the American immigration to California, several of the Valley's first settlers arrived. That year Joel Harlan and his future wife Minerva Fowler, Leo and Mary Jane Norris, and Mary Ann and John Jones survived the challenging journey to the Mexican territory. They lived San Jose for a time, choosing to avoid a foggy and inhospitable Yerba Buena (later San Francisco).

After the Gold Rush began in 1848, these and other pioneers used their earnings from the gold mines and other enterprises to move to the Valley, by squatting or buying land or grazing rights from the owners. Most of them were farmers or had been trained with skills to support a rural economy. Many Americans felt the land would provide an excellent living and looked available. Throughout the new state, some simply helped themselves to Mexican rancho.

One new settler was Robert O. Baldwin, who bought land near Danville with his gold earnings in 1852 and married Mary Cox whose father owned land just south of him. He and other early transplants

from the mid-West learned to dry farm by taking advantage of the mild, wet winters to grow crops in the spring. Although John Marsh had grown wheat on his ranch for years, Baldwin and Elam Brown of Lafayette and Baldwin were credited with being "the first to prove the wonderful adaptability of California soil to wheat culture in our county." (Munro-Fraser)



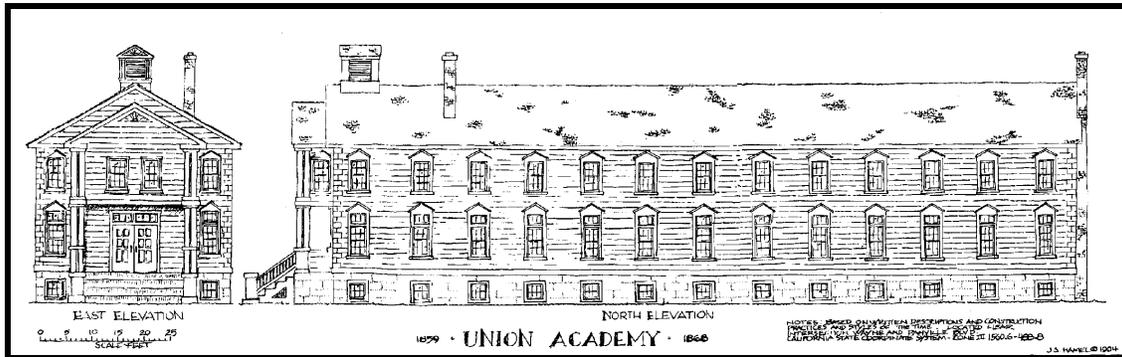
Robert and Mary Baldwin

The weather was a constant concern. For example, 1861-2 was an extremely wet year. San Ramon's George McCamley wrote in his farm diary: "rain all day", "rained all day and all last night. Creek very high. The whole county flooded." (Jan. 9, 1862) Like other valley agriculturists, he produced a wide variety of crops, including wheat, potatoes, peas, beans, cabbage, squash, spinach, apples, and hay.

Post offices, stores, churches and schools were started in the valley's three small villages. Alamo's post office was established on May 18, 1852 with John M. Jones as postmaster, Samuel Russell became San Ramon's postmaster on November 20, 1852 (discontinued then re-opened in 1873) and, on August 31, 1860, Danville's post office was established with hotel owner Henry W. Harris as postmaster. David Glass started a trading post in northern Alamo in 1852, the first recorded store in the area.

Education for valley youth began with home schools such as ones hosted by the Stones, Norrises, Howards and Harlans. One rancher in Tassajara near Alamo Creek hired a young man, Bret Harte, to tutor his four boys in 1856. Settlers hired and boarded teachers for

both home and new one-room schools. To go beyond grammar school, students needed special tutors or boarded in Oakland or San Francisco.



For a brief period from 1859 to 1868 a high school, the Union Academy, existed in the Valley. Sponsored by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Academy was a boarding and day school which provided an excellent education based on the San Francisco School Department's curriculum and prepared students for college as well.

Silas Stone, Robert Love and John M. Jones were leaders in this enterprise. A two-story building with basement, it was important to the Valley residents both in the education it provided and in its physical dimensions. It burned down during school vacation in 1868.

The valley settlers were focused on making a living as farmers and ranchers in this period, but they were active beyond their ranches as well. Several helped to found and run the Contra Costa Agricultural Society in 1859. Topics of conversation included the need for a railroad, the lively week-long annual evangelical meetings at the Alamo-Danville border, Fourth of July and May Day parties, and land title controversies in the former Castro-Pacheco rancho. Finally, in 1866, the residents of Alamo and Danville bought their land free and clear from Carpentier, with many of them bitterly complaining that they had paid for it twice.

In the 1868 Great Earthquake struck. Estimated at 6.8, it destroyed the large adobe church at Mission San Jose, awakened John Muir in Yosemite, and damaged brick buildings in Alamo and Danville. Charlotte Wood's mother told her that in Sycamore Valley "the branches of the old oak swept the earth with its force... and chimneys turned half way around."

The decades between 1850 and 1870 were years of challenges and satisfaction for the new settlers of the San Ramon Valley. American laws, cultural expectations and sheer numbers eclipsed those of the Mexican Californians. Fortunately many of these early settlers, both Mexican and American, are still remembered with names on streets, communities and schools.

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Pictures

Drawing of spur and Union Academy by John Hamel, Courtesy, Museum of the San Ramon Valley

Jose Maria Amador, Courtesy, The Bancroft Library

Ranchos map and Baldwin photographs, Courtesy, Museum of the San Ramon Valley

Written by Beverly Lane to accompany the 1994 exhibit mounted by the Museum of the San Ramon Valley: Ranchos and Ranches. Edited 2014