

A Legacy Written in the Land: The Indigenous Story of Santa Clara Valley



Mural Honoring the History and Heritage of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe Along the Guadalupe River



What message do the descendants of Indigenous Peoples have for us?

The Morgan Hill History Trail highlights stories from the past 250 years, yet this represents only a brief chapter in the valley's much longer human history. Archaeologists estimate that Indigenous People have lived here for as long as 12,000 years, arriving near the end of the last Ice Age. Archaeologists postulate that Native peoples traveled from Asia across the Beringia land bridge, migrating south along the Pacific Coast before eventually settling in the fertile Santa Clara Valley. Here, amidst a rich landscape of creeks, wetlands, grasslands, and expansive oak woodlands, they found an abundance of plant and animal life that allowed their communities to thrive.

Local archaeological sites in the Morgan Hill area, such as those at the 9,900-year-old Metcalf Road site and the Murphy Springs site, revealed evidence that Indigenous groups have lived continuously in the Morgan Hill area for at least 8000 years. Discoveries of ground stone and flaked stone tools reflect a rich history of seasonal encampments, resource gathering, and deep cultural continuity long before European contact. By 5,000 years ago, more than 10,000 Indigenous Peoples lived between the San Francisco Bay and Big Sur, organized into dozens of tribal societies each maintaining their own defined territories, leadership, and unique dialects.

When early Spanish explorers first rode through California, they were stunned by what they saw: vast, sunlit oak savannas, gentle meadows, and an astonishing wealth of wildlife. To their eyes, it looked like a pristine, untouched paradise, a wild gift of nature waiting to be claimed. In reality, they were walking through a carefully managed landscape.

As historian Charles C. Mann reveals in *1491*, California was not an untamed wilderness, but a landscape deeply and deliberately shaped by thousands of years of Indigenous stewardship. Native communities understood the rhythms of the land intimately. They used controlled, low-intensity fire as a tool to clear underbrush, protect oak forests, encourage edible plants, and create ideal habitats for game. This thoughtful management created such extraordinary natural abundance that it sustained one of the largest non-agricultural populations in North America.

Far from being passive inhabitants, Indigenous Peoples actively nurtured the ecosystem, proving that human communities and healthy ecosystems can thrive together in balance.

That is the enduring message their ancestors leave for us today: **the land flourishes when people see themselves not as its owners, but as its caretakers.** It is a timeless lesson in sustainability, a reminder that true prosperity comes from living in harmony with nature rather than trying to dominate it.

Spanish Colonization (1769-1821)

Spanish colonization profoundly disrupted that balance. Beginning in 1769, Spanish soldiers, missionaries, and settlers brought thousands of cattle, horses, and sheep into California. The animals grazed native grasses, trampled oak woodlands, compacted the soil, and consumed acorns, an essential food source for the Indigenous and the surrounding game. At the same time, European plants such as wild oats, red and ripgut brome, mustard, radish, and bur clover spread rapidly, replacing many of the verdant native grasses and wildflowers that had sustained Indigenous communities for generations.

The Morgan Hill area became part of Spain's expanding presence in Alta California during the 1770s. In 1772, an expedition led by Pedro Fages and Father Juan Crespí camped along Llagas

Creek while exploring the region. Their campsite later became a regular stopping place for Spanish travelers moving between the growing settlements of Alta California.

To secure Spain's claim to California, the Spanish established a chain of 21 missions along El Camino Real. Beyond serving as religious centers, the missions were instruments of colonization and social control. As introduced diseases spread to villages, Indigenous Peoples were often compelled to leave their villages, accept baptism, adopt Christianity, and labor in the construction and operation of the missions and their surrounding ranches.

The Matalan people of present-day Morgan Hill and the Mutsun-speaking Unijaima of the Gilroy area were taken primarily to nearby missions, including Missions Santa Clara, San Juan Bautista, and Santa Cruz, where they were given Spanish Christian names and lived under strict mission authorities. Once incorporated into the mission system, they could no longer live according to their traditional seasonal lifeways, manage their lands as their ancestors had for thousands of years, or leave the missions without permission. Instead, many became agricultural laborers, ranch workers, domestics, and craftspeople serving the Spanish colonial system.

The consequences were devastating. European diseases, forced labor, displacement, violence, and the disruption of traditional food systems caused Indigenous populations to decline dramatically. Historians estimate that California's Native population, which may have been as high as 1 million people before European colonization, fell by more than 90 percent during the century that followed. By 1920 there were fewer than 20,000 California Indians left who registered with the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the 1928 California Indian Jurisdictional Act. As survivors from neighboring tribal groups were brought into the missions, intermarriage created new, blended Indigenous communities whose descendants continue to preserve their cultures and histories today.

Mexican Rule and the Rancho Era (1821–1848)

Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, bringing an end to Spanish rule in California. In an effort to dismantle the mission system, the Mexican government passed the Secularization Act of 1833, which was intended to return half of the mission lands to emancipated Indian families and to free them from forced labor. In practice, however, most of that land was claimed by wealthy Californio families, soldiers, and government officials rather than by the surviving Indigenous Peoples it was meant to benefit.

Beginning in the 1830s, millions of acres were divided into large ranchos and granted to Mexican citizens. In 1835, Juan María Hernández received the 8,900-acre Rancho Ojo de Agua de la Coche, encompassing much of present-day Morgan Hill.

For most Indigenous Peoples, the change in government brought little relief. Their ancestral homelands became private ranchos, and many who had labored in the missions were sent to

work on cattle ranches, often under conditions that differed little from the forced labor they had endured before. Native grasslands were transformed into grazing land for vast herds of cattle and sheep, while diseases such as smallpox, cholera, measles, and diphtheria continued to devastate Indigenous communities.

A small number of Indigenous Californians were able to secure legal title to land under Mexican law. In 1845, three Mission Santa Clara Indigenous men, Marcello, Pío, and Cristóbal, received Rancho Ulistac near present-day Santa Clara. Coast Miwok leader Camilo Ynitia also successfully obtained title to Rancho Olompali in Marin County. These grants, however, were rare exceptions. Neither Missions San Francisco, Santa Cruz or San Jose successfully issued land grants to the Indigenous Peoples.

The Mexican-American War (1846–1848) ended when the U.S. sent troops into Mexico City to force Mexico to yield much of its northern territory, which, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, transferred California and neighboring states to the United States. Although the treaty promised to honor existing land grants, the U.S. required landowners to prove their claims in court. The costly and often biased legal process stripped many Mexican and Indigenous landholders of their property, leaving most Indigenous Californians landless in their own ancestral homeland.

Early American Period (1848–1900): Catastrophe and Resilience

The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 marked another profound turning point for California's Indigenous Peoples. That same year, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, triggering the California Gold Rush. Over the next several years, an estimated 300,000 people poured into the state, bringing rapid settlement, environmental destruction, and devastating violence against Native communities.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transferred California from Mexico to the United States, but for Indigenous Peoples, the change in government brought little security. As miners and settlers claimed land and resources, Native families were forced from their homelands, while rivers, forests, and meadows that had sustained them for thousands of years were damaged by mining, logging, and intensive grazing. The San Francisco Bay became a lifeless swamp due to water cannons washing down the Sierra for gold.

The human cost was catastrophic. Between 1846 and 1873, California's Native population fell from roughly 150,000 to fewer than 30,000 people through a combination of disease, starvation, displacement, enslavement, and organized violence. Historian Benjamin Madley, in *An American Genocide*, argues that much of this violence constituted state-sponsored genocide. California funded militias attacked Native communities, while the federal government

reimbursed many of these campaigns. Between 1851 and 1859 alone, California spent more than \$1.3 million on military expeditions targeting Native Peoples.

Between 1851-1852, the federal government negotiated treaties with California tribes in an effort to establish reservations and quiet aboriginal Indian ownership of California, but the U.S. Senate never ratified them. Instead, the treaties were kept secret for decades, leaving many Native communities without the lands they had been promised.

Despite these hardships, California's Indigenous Peoples endured. Many Ohlone families established rancherías on former Californio ranches in places such as Pleasanton, Sunol, Livermore, and Niles. During the 1905–1906 Special Indian Census, these communities were documented as the Verona Band, now recognized as the ancestors of today's Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. Tribal members preserved their identities despite generations of discrimination, forced assimilation, and the trauma of Indian boarding schools.

The survival of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of Mission San Juan Bautista owes much to Ascención Solórsano de Cervantes, the last fluent speaker of the Mutsun language. She safeguarded her people's oral traditions and cultural knowledge, sharing them with Smithsonian ethnologist John Peabody Harrington. Her contributions became part of one of the most extensive records of any California tribal language and culture, helping lay the foundation for the tribe's cultural revitalization today.

This period remains one of the darkest chapters in California's history. Yet it is also a story of resilience. Despite extraordinary loss, the descendants of California's First Peoples continue to preserve their languages, traditions, and enduring connection to their ancestral homelands.

Modern Day: We Are Still Here

The story of the Indigenous Peoples of California did not end with the Spanish, Mexican, or American periods. Today, more than 100 federally recognized Tribes live throughout California, while many others, including descendants of the Tamien, Rumsen, and other Ohlone-speaking peoples continue to seek federal recognition and the restoration of their rights, culture, and ancestral lands. In 1905-1906, only three Costanoan-speaking communities became federally recognized: The Verona Band of Alameda County (Indians from Missions San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Jose; the San Juan Bautista Band of San Benito County (Indians from Mission San Juan Bautista/Amah-Mustun; and the Monterey Band of Monterey County (Indians from Missions San Carlos and Soledad/Ohlone Costanoan-Esselen Nation). They were placed under the jurisdiction of the Indian Service Bureau/Department of the Interior and were slated for land purchase under the landless and Homeless Congressional Indian Appropriation Acts of 1906, 1908 and later years.

For centuries, Native communities endured violence, forced removal, family separation, religious suppression, and government policies designed to erase their cultures and identities. American Indians were not recognized as U.S. citizens until 1924, and many were denied the right to vote for decades afterward. Today, many Indigenous leaders identify political erasure, the failure to recognize Native peoples, their histories, and their sovereignty, as one of the greatest challenges they continue to face.

Despite these hardships, Indigenous communities remain deeply connected to their homelands. They teach their languages, share their traditions, hold cultural gatherings, have preservation foundations and land trusts, and work to protect the lands that have sustained their people for thousands of years.

Both the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe represent examples of this work. Through partnerships with public agencies, those Tribes are restoring native habitats, reviving traditional ecological knowledge, and reintroducing Indigenous cultural burning—carefully managed, low-intensity fires that improve ecosystem health, encourage native plants, and protect important food sources such as oak woodlands. These efforts are helping reshape how California cares for its landscapes. The Muwekma have been working with Stanford University since the mid-1980's at Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, which the Tribe renamed 'Ootchamin "Ooyakma (Red Rock Ridge) in their language.

At the time of the Spanish contact, the Indigenous Peoples of the San Francisco and Monterey Bay regions include approximately 50 autonomous, but intermarried, sovereign tribes with related but unique languages, cultures, and histories. Many prefer to be identified by their own tribal names rather than by broader labels.

Their message is simple and powerful: We are still here.

By listening to Indigenous voices, supporting efforts for federal recognition, learning the history of the land we share, and becoming responsible stewards of our environment, we can help ensure that these cultures continue to thrive. This is not the end of their story—it is an ongoing story of resilience, renewal, and hope.

Indigenous Peoples of the Bay Area and Santa Clara Valley

This overview is only a beginning. To learn more, we encourage you to visit and learn directly from the Tribes themselves.

[Muwekma Ohlone Tribe](#)

The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe's ancestral homeland spans most of the San Francisco Bay Area, including all of San Francisco and San Mateo counties, most of Santa Clara, Alameda, and Contra Costa counties, and parts of Napa, Santa Cruz, Solano, and San Joaquin counties. Their territory centers on the southern Bay Area, including the Morgan Hill region.

The Muwekma are composed of the known surviving Indigenous lineages of the Bay Area who trace their ancestry through the Missions Dolores, Santa Clara, San José, and Santa Cruz as well as through the historic Verona Band of Alameda County. Their roots in the region extend back more than 10,000 years. Since they were first recognized in 1905-06, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was removed from the list of California tribes awaiting the purchase of land for their home through the Congressional Appropriation Acts. The Bureau of Indian Affairs special agent and superintendent of the Sacramento Indian Agency, Lafayette A. Dorrington, without the benefit of any needs assessment, removed 135 tribes from that list in 1927, just before the passage of the 1928 California Indian Jurisdictional Act.

Despite their continuous presence in their homeland and generations of U.S. military service, spanning World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraq, and present-day conflicts, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe remains without federal recognition. Although the Department of the Interior and Bureau of Indian Affairs formally determined on May 26, 1996, that the Tribe had previous unambiguous federal recognition, full recognition has not been restored. Since formally reorganizing in 1980, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe has continued to advocate for federal restoration while actively preserving and revitalizing Ohlone culture, language, and identity.

Today, the Muwekma Ohlone people remain an active Indigenous community in the Bay Area, maintaining deep ties to their ancestral lands and continuing efforts to sustain their heritage for future generations.

[Amah-Mutsun Tribal Band](#) [Amah Mutsun Land Trust](#)

The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band currently has an enrolled membership of nearly 600 BIA documented Natives. They are the previously recognized tribal group listed by the Indian Service Bureau (now known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs) as the "San Juan Band." All lineages comprising the "Amah Mutsun Tribal Band" are the direct descendants of the aboriginal Tribal groups whose villages and territories fell under the sphere of influence of Missions San Juan

Bautista (Mutsun) and Santa Cruz (Awaswas) during the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.

[Amah Mutsun Exhibit](#) The exhibit, located in the Morgan Hill Museum, tells their story from creation to present day.

[Chitactac-Adams Heritage Park](#), located six miles west of Gilroy along the banks of Uvas Creek, sits on the historic site of a major Mutsun village named *Chitactac* ("place of dance"). For generations, Indigenous peoples thrived here through deep, respectful stewardship of the local ecosystem.

European contact reached the village on March 24, 1776, when the Juan Bautista de Anza expedition camped nearby at Llagas Creek. Following this period, community members from Chitactac were eventually brought into Mission Santa Cruz.

In 1989, ethnohistorian Alan Leventhal and the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe—working through Santa Clara County Parks—initiated archaeological recovery and educational interpretation at the site. The Muwekma Ohlone also engaged leadership from the Amah-Mutsun Tribal Band, and together the two tribes collaborated to restore and develop the heritage park.

Today, the park is recognized as one of the most significant rock art sites in Northern California, where visitors can view bedrock mortars and unique concentric-circle petroglyphs left by this ancient community. [Ohlone Life at Chitactac](#)

[Esselen Tribe of Monterey County](#) The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County is a Tribal Group working toward continuing cultural traditions and preserving the cultural heritage of the historic tribes that are located within Monterey County. The Esselen Tribe is a small group of Indigenous Hokaan speaking People who have inhabited the Santa Lucia Mountains and the Big Sur coast from Carmel Mission South 40 miles to Pacific Valley for over 6,000 years.

[Ohlone/Costanoan Esselen Nation](#) The Ohlone/Costanoan Esselen Nation, along with the Amah-Mutsun Tribal Band and the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe were previously federally recognized tribes identified by Special Indian Agent Charles E. Kelsey of San Jose.

[Costanoan Rumsen Carmel Tribe](#) The Rumsen (historically called *Costanoan* by Spanish colonizers) are a group of Native American people indigenous to the Central Coast of California, specifically the Monterey Bay area, Carmel River Valley, and the lower Salinas Valley. They are one of eight primary linguistic and regional subgroups within the broader Ohlone family.

References

Books & Magazines

- **Escobar, L., Field, L., & Leventhal, A. (1999).** *Understanding the composition of Costanoan/Ohlone people.* San Jose State University.
- **Leventhal, A., Field, L., Alvarez, H., & Cambra, R. (1994).** *The Ohlone back from extinction.* In L. J. Bean (Ed.), *The Ohlone past and present: Native Americans of the San Francisco Bay Region* (pp. 297–336).
- **Mann, Charles C.** *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus.*
- **Milliken, Randall.** *A Time of Little Choice: The Disintegration of Tribal Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1769–1810*
- **Panich, Lee M. (2021).** *Narratives of Persistence Indigenous Negotiations of Colonialism in Alta and Baja California*
- **Smithsonian Magazine.** ["DNA from 12,000-year-old skeleton helps answer the questions: Who were the first Americans?"](#)

Lectures, Videos & Presentations

- **Gould, Corrina, Dr. Eve Tuck, and Dr. Wayne Yang.** [Colonization, Decolonization and Rematriation on Ohlone Land.](#) Presentation by Lisjan Ohlone spokesperson Corrina Gould in coalition with Diablo Valley College's Student Equity Speaker Series: Indigeneity.
- **Hylkema, Mark.** [Indigenous History in the Bay Area, Part 1: Overview.](#)
- **Hylkema, Mark.** [California during the Spanish and Mexican Colonial Periods.](#)
- **Leventhal, Alan.** [Muwekma Ohlone Prehistory, History and Heritage.](#) Hosted by the Loma Prieta History Museum in conjunction with the Loma Prieta Community Foundation for the Loma Forum.
- **Leventhal, Alan.** [8,000 years at the Murphy Springs Site, Morgan Hill, California.](#) Hosted by the Santa Cruz Archaeological Society.
- **Rizzo-Martinez, Martin.** [History and the Ohlone People with Martin Rizzo Martinez.](#) Presented by the CA State Parks Historian II and Tribal Liaison for the Santa Cruz District. An informative talk outlining indigenous history, politics, and stewardship practices geared toward docents and educators.

Academic & Institutional Research Guides

- Santa Clara University. [*Ohlone Research Guides*](#).
- Santa Clara University Community Heritage Lab. [*How should I talk about Native heritage and culture?*](#)
- Santa Clara University. [*Ohlone History Working Group \(OHWG\) Report*](#)
- Santa Clara University. [*SCU Native History Tour*](#).
- Stanford University. [*Cultural Burning Returns to Jasper Ridge*](#)

Reports, Articles & Media Projects

- [*Bay Area's Muwekma Ohlone tribe struggles to get official recognition from U.S.*](#)
(News feature/Media report).
- [*Final Report on a Portion of the Hoontach Ka'nat' tak Place of the Ancient Spring Site*](#)
(CA SCL 671 Murphy Springs)
- [*Muwekma Ohlone Tribe | The Past, Present, and Future Stewards of Coyote Valley*](#)
(Tribal publication/Community spotlight).
- [*Reclaiming Our Stories: Voices of Indigenous Peoples of California*](#). A collection of public podcasts, documented memoirs, and academic initiatives centering California Native scholars, storytellers, and oral histories to reclaim cultural narratives.
- [*We Are Still Here*](#). A historical overview detailing the history of the Santa Cruz Indians and their involvement with the Santa Cruz Mission.

Cultural Exhibits & Parks

- [*Native America Garden*](#) (Villa Mira Monte History Park, Morgan Hill CA). A living exhibit featuring approximately 30 plants native to California traditionally used by Indigenous Peoples for food, medicine, basket weaving, dyes, hunting, fishing, and ceremonial purposes.