



California Missions

Keeping the Past Present

California Stories

Three Thousand Irishmen



The California Stories are a collection of interesting and historical stories from early California and the California Missions written by David J. McLaughlin.



Three Thousand Irishmen

In 1845, in the waning years of Mexican rule, a Catholic priest and former missionary in British Guinea, Father Eugene McNamara (1814-1853) had a big idea which he began to promote in Mexico City.



Emigrants Leaving Ireland



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He proposed that the Mexican government should allow 3,000 families (this could amount to about 10-12,000 people) from Ireland to immigrate to California and settle along the coast of California. There were only about 75,000 people in California in 1845, so an influx of this size would boost the population significantly. Their Catholic religion would help the Irish assimilate quickly and remain loyal to the Mexican government, he argued. Fr. McNamara implied that the scheme had the backing of the British government. The Mexican authorities were receptive and Fr. McNamara was granted a land contract and encouraged to proceed.

There is no hard documentary evidence that the priest's plan had the formal approval of the British government, but Britain did have a special interest in California.



*Sir Francis Drake
(1540-1596)*

For one thing, almost two centuries earlier, during his three years (1577-1580) circumnavigating the globe, the famous British explorer Sir Francis Drake sailed along the coast of California. In May 1579 he pulled into a harbor to repair his ship, The Golden Hind, making extensive and peaceful contact with the natives.

Historians debate the exact location but it was somewhere near San Francisco. Drake claimed the land for Queen Elizabeth and named it Nova Albion. A colonizing party was dispersed by the Spanish off the coast of Brazil, and no further attempts were made by the English to occupy this land.



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However, Britain felt that if any country was to successfully follow Mexico in governing California, it had a stronger claim than any other major powers. California became more well-known to the English in the 19th century. Captain Richard Beechey (1796-1856) had visited California in 1826 during a scientific expedition to the Pacific.

In 1831 Richard Beechey published a book “*Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering’s Strait*” that stirred considerable interest in this wondrous land. Sketches made during the Beechey expedition included this pencil and watercolor drawing of the [Mission of San Carlos](#), Monterey.



Mission San Carlos by Richard Beechey, 1827



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By this time, there were already a significant number of former British subjects in Alta California, many of them with financial and political clout.



*William Petty Hartnell
(1798-1854)*

William Edward Petty Hartnell had arrived in 1822 and had become a successful hide and tallow merchant.

In 1839 Hartnell had been appointed to the politically-sensitive position of Visitator General, overseeing the administration of the former missions.

Robert Thomas Livermore arrived the same year as Hartnell. He was the first settler of Livermore Valley.

Another Englishman, William Richardson was Captain of the Port of San Francisco. He had married the daughter of the Presidio Commandante and had a close working relationship with the most powerful man in Northern California, General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo.



*Robert Livermore
(1799-1858)*

John Forster (1815-1882) arrived in Los Angeles in 1833 and was already accumulating land and considerable wealth.

Dr. Edward Turner Bale arrived directly from England in 1837 and married a niece of General Vallejo in 1839. He had received a large land grant, Rancho Carne Humana, in Napa Valley in 1841. He built a successful grist mill that supplied most of Napa Valley.

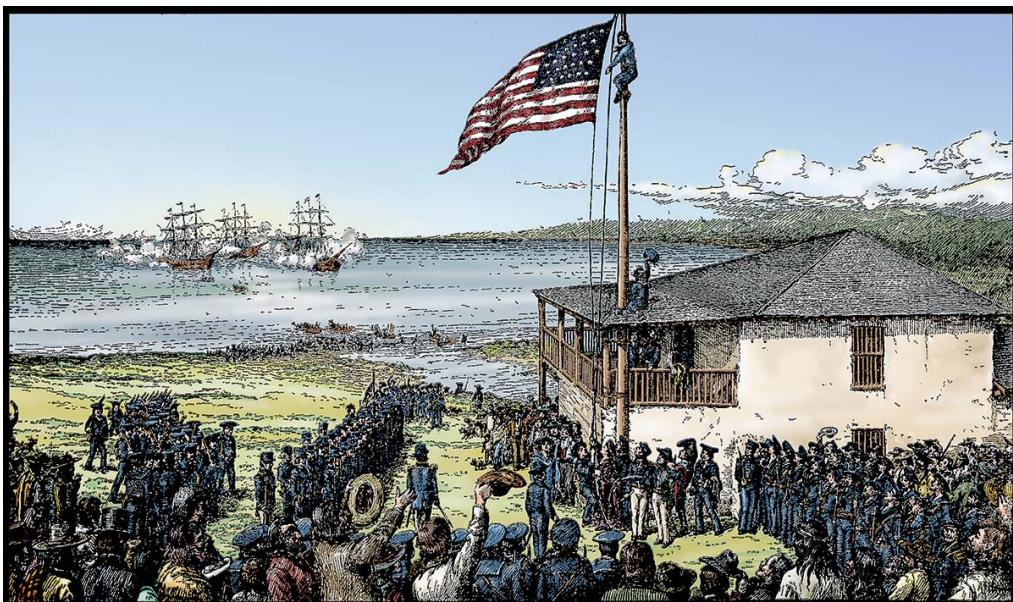


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William Workman, yet another Englishman, had organized the first wagon train of eastern settlers to Southern California in 1841, coming via New Mexico along the Old Spanish Trail.

Encouraged by these men, Fr. McNamara visited Alta California in 1846 to try to get local support for his scheme. Whatever informal British support existed, quickly evaporated when it became clear that any land for the Irish immigrants would be far inland, probably in the San Joaquin Valley. Fr. McNamara pressed ahead anyway and spent a month and a half visiting potential sites and building local support. However, while Fr. McNamara was still in California, the Americans occupied Monterey and began a takeover of the entire country.



*Raising the United States Flag in Monterey, by Alexander Harmer, colorized
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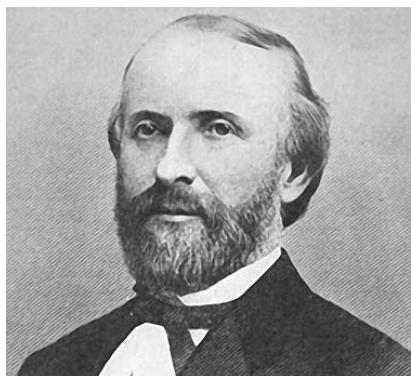


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Fr. McNamara made his way back to Mexico to continue to push his scheme but the idea was overtaken by events. He is rumored to have died at sea rounding Cape Horn sometime in 1853. An Irish historian who tried to find more about his fate concluded: "he is lost to history and left to the tender mercy of memories."

Ironically, while Fr. McNamara was pursuing his scheme, the Irish were beginning to arrive in America in increasing numbers due to the Irish Potato Famine. In October 1845, a serious blight began among the Irish potatoes, ruining about three-quarters of the country's crop. The blight returned in 1846 and over the next year an estimated 350,000 people died of starvation. The famine stimulated the emigration on a scale that made Fr. McNamara's proposal look almost irrelevant. In 1846, data shows that 92,484 Irish arrived in America and the figure doubled the next year to 196,224. While most of the Irish arrived and stayed on the east coast, hundreds made their way to California.



In less than two decades after Fr. McNamara's scheme was proposed, a man born in Ireland named John Downey became governor of California. Downey was an early emigrant to America (1818) who was drawn to California during the gold rush, although he made most of his money in real estate.

Whether Fr. McNamara was a visionary or not, the Irish certainly did make their way to California.

*Governor John Downey
1861-1862*

