“the shrine of their memory”
Settler Colonialism and the Construction of American Heritage at Metini-Fort Ross
1845-1906

by

Michael Buse

B.A. (hons.) Kenyon College, 2016

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

August 2019

© Michael Buse, 2019
The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

“the shrine of their memory:” Settler Colonialism and the Construction of American Heritage at Metini-Fort Ross, 1845-1906

Submitted by: Michael Buse in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of: Master of Arts
In: History

**Examining Committee:**

Supervisor: Coll Thrush

Supervisory Committee Member: Laura Ishiguro

Supervisory Committee Member: Paige Raibmon
Abstract

This paper argues that during a broader California Heritage Movement, American colonists physically and discursively constructed a singular Fort Ross Story in an effort to claim Metini, a Kashia Pomo homeland. In making this argument, this paper considers two broad historiographical questions: why did a heritage movement emerge in late nineteenth-century California, and how does a consideration of the Heritage Movement reveal longer settler colonial processes. This look at heritage work makes two contributions to scholarship about American colonialism in California. First, it provides a history of Metini-Ross after the Russian American Company’s departure (1842-1906). Second, this paper considers the meaning of heritage work in settler colonial California. Analyzing heritage work at Fort Ross within a longer history of settler colonialism reveals how the colonizers intentionally constructed stories of settler innocence and belonging, with the intent to justify their theft and resulting possession of Pomo and Miwok land.

From 1845-1885, the first forty years of American colonialism in California, settlers had little interest in history. Instead, they worked to physically take Metini-Ross from the Kashia Pomo, who had lived there for at least 12,000 years. From the late 1840s to the 1870s, American settlers poured into California and seized vast tracts of Indigenous land, initiating what has been called the California Genocide. While genocide did not end in the 1870s, colonialism took a new shape after this. One new settler colonial tactic was heritage work.

It is not a coincidence that the Heritage Movement began immediately after the most violent period of colonialism in California. At Metini-Ross, it was only by 1893 that settlers became interested in its history. After this, two interweaving threads constructed a powerful story: writers wrote and preservationists built. Novelist Gertrude Atherton and made Fort Ross
discursively significant, journalists reproduced and built upon her ideas, and heritage groups, led by the white nationalist heritage organization The Native Sons of the Golden West, physically stamped these narratives on the ground. Together, they made histories to obfuscate and consume a Kashia homeland beneath imagined layers of colonial history.
Lay Summary

This paper argues that during a broader California Heritage Movement, American colonists constructed a singular Fort Ross Story in an effort to claim Metini, a Kashia Pomo homeland. Heritage work (fiction, preservation, and non-fiction) at Metini-Ross began in 1890, immediately after the most physically violent years at Metini-Ross. Many scholars have labeled this period the California Genocide. This paper argues that the California Genocide and the Heritage Movement can be seen as different articulations of the same settler colonial project.

This makes two contributions. First, it provides a history of Metini-Ross after the Russian American Company’s departure. Second, it considers the role heritage work plays in settler colonialism. Placing heritage work at Metini-Ross within a longer history of settler colonialism reveals how the colonizers intentionally constructed stories of settler innocence and belonging, with the intent to justify their theft and resulting possession of Kashia and Miwok land.
Preface
This dissertation is an original, unpublished, and independent work by the author, Michael Buse
Table of Contents

Abstract....................................................................................................................................... iii

Lay Summary.............................................................................................................................. v

Preface ......................................................................................................................................... vi

Table of Contents......................................................................................................................... vii

Acknowledgements..................................................................................................................... viii

Introduction: An American Park on Kashia Land................................................................. 1

I: The Making of an American Place: Early Settler Colonialism at Metini-Ross............... 10

II. “Strangers in our own land:” Gertrude Atherton, The Native Sons of the Golden West, and
the Search for Settler Belonging Colonial California............................................................... 18

III. The Afterlives of Heritage: Doom and Destiny in an American Park............................ 33

Conclusion: Fort Ross Story Today......................................................................................... 45

Bibliography............................................................................................................................... 52
Acknowledgements

I produced this paper at the University of British Columbia as a guest on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam Nation. I would like to acknowledge this and express gratitude.

I would like to thank my supervisor Coll Thrush. His knowledge, mentorship, and support have been transformative. I could not have asked for better guidance. I also would like to thank Laura Ishiguro for her rigorous readings that improved this paper immensely and pushed me as a writer and thinker. Additional thanks to Paige Raibmon and John Roosa for reading and supporting this thesis.

Thanks to Lauren Peters for generously discussing Fort Ross, Unangax, and Alaska Native history with me. Thanks to Ilya Vinkovetsky for all of our conversations about Russian colonialism. Thanks to Veta Chitnev for accommodating my occasional visits to her excellent Russian classes. Thanks to Jason Wu and Tuya Ochir for all their friendly assistance in the history office. And thanks to Patrick Bottiger for, in some ways, getting this whole thing started.

I thank Russian House #1 for providing me lodging, food, and hospitality during my visit to Fort Ross. If nothing else comes of this project, I can at least now slice beets. Thanks to Hank Birnbaum, a gracious host at Fort Ross State Historic Park. The archivists and librarians at the Bancroft Library tolerated and guided my occasionally aimless perusing. Much thanks for that. And thanks to Kelly and Elizabeth for letting me join them in California during my trip, and Elizabeth’s forays as something of a personal librarian in the early stages of my research.
A huge thanks to all my non-academic editors: Lucy for reading early drafts, discussing research with me, and being there for me throughout the process. It means a lot. Thanks to Maggie for stylistic edits and support. Johnny, for giving me the English teacher reading — sorry for the jargon! And a big thank you to my mom, Susan, who has been editing with the brutality of the most seasoned copy-editors for as long as I can remember.

Thanks to all my friends in the history department who made this an enjoyable experience. That thanks is especially for my cohort. And I am particularly thankful to those in Vancouver who enabled me to not work too hard: Dane, Elspeth, Devon, Joey, Nicole, Tianpei, Dan, Rosie, Mercedes, Jihyun, and others.

The greatest of thanks to Natalia Olshanskaya. I signed up for Russian as an undergraduate after you told me you could teach Russian to a rock. That proved mostly true. Your warmth and passion have shaped what I imagine is possible in the classroom. You are greatly missed.

And, it goes without saying: thanks to my family. Mom, Dad, Bradley, Heze, Michelle, and Johnny — you all make me feel unreasonably lucky.
Introduction
An American Park on Kashia Land

“California is a story. California is many stories. As Leslie Silko tells us, don’t be fooled by stories!”

— Deborah Miranda, *Bad Indians*[^1]

California Route One twists along the cliffs, inlets, and river valleys of the Sonoma Coast. Along this scenic route, about 100 miles north of San Francisco, the highway climbs a hill, and, from its crest, Fort Ross State Historic Park appears below in a large clearing between the road and the shore. Its appearance is surprising: wooden walls surround a Russian orthodox chapel and numerous colonial buildings. Just down the coast from the walled complex, a knoll is littered with wooden orthodox graves, and, just inland, an orchard lays midway up a large hill. Cars dot a large parking lot and tourists wander through the reconstructed complex, chatting with Russian reenactors, touring restocked Russian warehouses, shuffling past Russian Orthodox iconography, and resting in the air conditioning of a large visitor center.

In the visitor center, most tourists will learn a cursory history of Russian colonialism in California: in 1812, the Russian American Company (RAC) traveled south from its base of operations in Alaska and established a small hunting and agricultural colony at this site. The colony sprawled thinly across the coast of present day Sonoma County, and was centered at Settlement Ross, a site located within the Kashia Pomo homeland Metini and near numerous Kashia and Coast Miwok villages. From 1812-1841 Settlement Ross existed at Metini with the support of neighboring Kashia Pomo and Coast Miwok. The Company used forced labor from Indigenous Alaskan coast communities (predominantly Supiaq and Unangax) and hired

neighboring Miwok and Pomo workers.\textsuperscript{2} This colony was short lived. In 1841, the Russian American Company sold its fledgling settlement and left California.

Today, this story, physically reconstructed along an iconic American highway, lures visitors: in 2010 alone the park had over 224,000.\textsuperscript{3} For many of these tourists Fort Ross seems a mysterious and trivial site divorced from American California. But a historic gaze at the surrounding landscape hints at other histories. Within the park, an American ranch house is lovingly maintained. Photos of giant lumber chutes hang in the visitor center. Half a dozen towns and rivers bordering the site include the words “timber” or “mill” in their names. Expensive getaways for wealthy San Franciscans cluster off the highway. Ten miles south of Fort Ross, at Bodega Bay, Coast Miwok names and industry scatter the shore. And some 15 miles north of Fort Ross is Stewart’s Point Rancheria, the home of the Kashia Band.

Colony Ross was an ephemeral colony on what for thousands of years has been, and continues to be, a Kashia Pomo and Coast Miwok home. What do Russian stories mean on colonized Kashia and Miwok land? And why this story? At the park, a 2014 interpretive plan ranks the significance of the historic site’s “themes”: first, the Russian American Company era at Fort Ross, second, the RAC’s influence on California history, third, “multi-ethnic relations,” and fourth, RAC technology and industry. Listed as a “secondary theme” and the fifth focus is

\textsuperscript{2} In its last decade of operation, Company operatives also took forced labor from more distant California Indian communities. But they were careful to protect relations with neighboring communities, as the existence of the fort depended upon their support.

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Fort Ross State Historic Park: Visitor Center Interpretation Project Plan} (California: California State Parks, 2014). The small visitor center and entrance to the reconstructed complex, which requires payment for entrance, received over 31,000 visitors in 2018. The majority of the park exists outside the walls and is accessible for free. See \textit{Sonoma County Economic Development Board: Visitor Report, 2018} (California: Sonoma County EDB, 2018), 23, accessed 7/15/2019, http://sonomaedb.org/Data-Center/Industry/
“Indian History: Ethnography of the Pomo Indians and Coast Miwok.” How can we historicize this identification of priorities?

As this paper will show, during a broader California heritage movement, American colonists physically and discursively constructed a singular Fort Ross Story in an effort to claim the land. This paper examines Fort Ross history to consider two broad historiographical questions: why did a heritage movement emerge in late nineteenth-century California, and how does a consideration of the heritage movement reveal longer settler colonial processes? This look at heritage work makes two contributions to scholarship about American colonialism in California. First, it provides a history of Metini-Ross after the Russian American Company’s departure. The only prior academic history of this period at Metini-Ross is a ten page 1991 article, despite the fact that, as oral history and recent archaeological work make clear, Fort Ross remained an influential and contested center of colonial life in northern California throughout the late 1800s. Second, this paper considers the meaning of heritage work in settler colonial California. Analyzing heritage work at Fort Ross within a longer history of settler colonialism reveals how the colonizers intentionally constructed stories of settler innocence and belonging, with the intent to justify their theft and resulting possession of Kashia and Miwok land.

From 1842-1892, the first fifty years of American colonialism at Metini-Ross, settlers had little interest in Metini-Ross’ history. Only by 1893, after settlers seized land, extracted resources, built capitalist structures, and began to envision settler futures at Metini-Ross, did they become interested in its history. After this, two interweaving threads constructed a powerful story: writers wrote and preservationists built. Novelist Gertrude Atherton made Fort Ross

---

4 Visitor Center Plan, 63.
discursively significant, journalists reproduced and built upon her ideas, and heritage groups, led
by the white nationalist heritage organization The Native Sons of the Golden West, physically
stamped these narratives on the ground. Together, they made histories to obfuscate and consume
a Kashia homeland beneath imagined layers of colonial history.

As scholars have noted, the proliferation of heritage work in the last quarter of the
nineteenth century was part of a national process. Across settler America, boosters and writers
created regional histories to mend the Civil War’s sectionalism and counteract the
“weightlessness” of modernity. This national process took unique shape in California. As the
heritage movement began in the 1870s, California was just over two decades removed from the
Mexican-American War and was concluding a militarized assault on California Indian lands and
lives. A small but significant body of literature has now emerged analyzing the specificities of
late nineteenth and early twentieth century heritage work in California. This literature has
overwhelmingly — and perhaps fittingly — focused on American stories of Spanish colonial
pasts. As historians have shown, Americans used Spanish pasts to affirm manifest destiny and
generate a unique regional identity. The “California Story” was a linear narrative of racial
development: California Indians led to pre-modern Spaniards led to the rugged pioneers of
civilized American California. Scholars have considered this California Story a reaction to
modernity: anglo-Americans feared urbanization, growing “immigrant” populations, and the
shifting place of women and minorities in society, and used historical production — in the forms

---


7 Pheobe Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (California: University of California Press, 2008). American colonists celebrated Spanish missions to situate “the ghosts of a small band of heroic missionaries and supposedly vanished race of California Indians” within a linear story of racial development that suggested that even before American arrival “California had participated in the ascension and expansion of the United States”.


of fiction, academic research, and tourist sites — to manage shifting power relations and popularize racist and xenophobic policy.\(^8\)

This recent scholarship has illustrated the nuances and lasting consequences of heritage work in California. But little analysis has been given to how heritage work supported stealing Indigenous land. The heritage movement occurred on California Indian land and was a continuation of a longer colonial invasion. It generated a pervasive lie that settlers inherited and belonged in California, and that California Indians simply disappeared.

Nowhere in academia are the implications of this lie more thoughtfully considered than within a burgeoning body of literature on settler colonial memory. Historicizing heritage work within longer settler colonial structures allows us to see new aspects of what heritage work meant in California. As historian Kevin Bruyneel writes, “Just as memories make a house a home, memory makes a space into a place, and in the settler colonial context placeness means belonging, appropriation, and authority for some people and displacement, dispossession, and alienation for other people.”\(^9\) In California, historian William Bauer observes that colonists used late nineteenth and early twentieth century tales about the origins of California to “justify colonialism in the state.” These “settler creation stories” constructed useful memories to transform Indigenous space into settler space.\(^10\) Settlers claimed land and then built stories that obfuscated this theft. At Fort Ross we see stories that implied colonization was righteous and

---

\(^8\) DeLyser, *Ramona Memories*. These invented stories of Spanish California were inscribed upon the landscape and generated a massive tourist industry that foundationally shaped the production of academic and popular histories.


destined, and, in doing so, rendered American colonists innocent. Colonial belonging was constructed upon this innocence, as colonists worked to tell stories that connected them to the land and established a white Californian identity. They suggested, in the words of Philip Deloria, that “[the] landscape had somehow transformed immigrants, giving them the same status as Indians and obligating them to defend the same customary liberty.” Heritage asserted to whom the past, and by extension the future, belonged.

The heritage movement began immediately after the most violent period of colonialism in California. From the late 1840s to the early 1870s, American settlers poured into California and seized vast tracts of Indigenous land, initiating a genocide that many California Indians call “the end of the world.” While genocide did not end in the 1870s, scholars generally agree that the first three decades of American colonialism mark a distinct period in California’s history. In just thirty some years the population of California Indians was reduced by 90 percent. This was intentional: from 1846-1873 settlers murdered somewhere between 9,492-16,094 California Indians. This number does not account for enslavement, starvation, environmental degradation,

---

11 The works of cultural theorist Marita Sturken and historian Boyd Cothran have been formative to my ideas about memory and innocence. Sturken considers sites of memory a common American phenomenon that aligns with market consumption. Heritage work frequently renders history a distant and isolated commodity to be experienced with the goal of “a cathartic ‘experience’ of history.” Personally “experiencing” a simplified history “enables a sense of innocence and detachment yet provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event.” Boyd Cothran expands on and applies it to nineteenth century California. He considers innocence “the absence of guilt,” and shows this “does not require inactivity or a state of perpetual loss. Indeed, actions that might otherwise be deemed sinful or wrong may be judged innocent if they are done for reasons of moral outrage, self-preservation, or naïveté or paradoxically to maintain one’s innocence.”


theft of land and water, systematic economic repression, or cultural genocide. California settlers — with the support of state and federal political and cultural institutions — explicitly attempted to eradicate California’s Indigenous population.\textsuperscript{15}

The production of settler histories in the late nineteenth century was a continuation of a singular process of removal and land theft in California. In short, heritage work and the direct violence of early American colonialism were different articulations of the same project: the dispossession and elimination of California Indians. But colonists’ stories took different shapes in different places. The “Fort Ross Story” stands out particularly distinctly. In stark contrast to narratives of pre-modern missionaries proselytizing to California Indians, heritage workers presented Russian colonists at Fort Ross as aristocratic Europeans who remained separate from the uncolonized landscape and Native Americans. As this paper shows, this let settlers trace civilized space into the state’s pre-American past to create a “deep” history of California without Native Americans. Not unlike American Viking fantasies or attempts to prove the Kennewick Man was European, the Fort Ross Story created a white heritage that preceded American westward expansion.\textsuperscript{16} American colonialism in California, by this logic, was simply a return to an already colonized space. At Fort Ross, settler occupiers, seeking permanence, claimed belonging and interweaved storytelling and construction to make landscapes fit lies.

Of course these stories were fantastical: the heritage movement spoke only to the logics and desires of settlers. As William Bauer reminds us, other stories exist, and Indigenous peoples

\textsuperscript{15} Benjamin Madley, \textit{An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873} (CT, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 14.

have always had stories that “articulate Indigenous identity, sovereignty and land.” More specifically, the Kashia, Miwok, Sugpiaq, Unangax, Sakha, and other Indigenous peoples who lived at Metini-Ross maintained and created their own stories that subverted — and existed outside of — settler tales of Metini-Ross. Indigenous stories make clear that, as Cutcha Risling Baldy writes, “these spaces, these bodies, and this land were never as ‘settled’ as was once believed.”

While the continuous presence of Indigenous peoples and their stories are essential to understanding the history of Metini-Ross, this paper does not and cannot speak to them. It also does not need to: communities have articulated their own stories for various audiences. But this paper should be read in the context of other stories existing and thriving; taken in this context, a critical analysis of the Fort Ross Story can unravel the power of a specific settler colonial lie and how it attempted to erase ongoing Indigenous connections to Metini-Ross.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One examines early American settler colonialism at Metini-Ross to analyze how the production of a Fort Ross Story related to the direct violence of early American colonialism in California. Chapter Two situates the production of a Fort Ross Story within a broader Californian heritage movement. Chapter Three shows how the Fort Ross Story transformed the manner in which colonizers imagined California’s present and future. Together, these three chapters trace a continuum of colonialism at Metini-Ross in which settler colonialism’s “logic of elimination” never disappeared, but shifted over time. Of the many settler colonial mechanisms, heritage has proved among the more quotidian, insidious,

\[17\] Bauer, *California Through Native Eyes*, 11.
\[18\] Baldy, *Dancing for You*, 17.
and difficult to identify. And heritage work amounted to more than just stories. “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us.\textsuperscript{20} “Correcting” stories is meaningless if we do not engage the ways they shape lived experience and material realities. The point of analyzing the heritage movement is to alter ongoing colonial structures that dictate who has access to land, and whose political, social, and cultural institutions are valued. Poet Deborah Miranada writes that the lie that settlers inherited the land of extinct California Indians “is a kind of evil, a kind of witchery. We have to put an end to it now.”\textsuperscript{21} Historicizing heritage reveals the mechanisms behind this “evil” and how fiction, in settler colonial America, shapes life and place.

\textsuperscript{21} Miranda, \textit{Bad Indians}, xix.
Chapter One
The Making of an American Place

Early Settler Colonialism at Metini-Ross

The Fort Ross I write of is not the Fort Ross of today. All the images are gone and cold; today it is statistically correct, clean fact established by research and history. The area heading to the stockade is usually filled with glittering cars, chattering, hurrying people being directed to what they must see and where they can find something to eat or drink — changing direction every few minutes as all our lives do today. My Fort Ross is peopled with different sorts of beings.

— Laura Call, My Life at Fort Ross, 1877-1907

This chapter is a history of settler colonialism at Metini-Ross from 1841 to 1900. It serves two purposes: first, it provides a critical history of an understudied period at Metini-Ross that illuminates the settlement’s centrality to the American colonization of northern California. Second, it lays the groundwork to situate heritage work within a longer continuum of settler colonialism. During this period, organized violence made space for the twinned processes of resource extraction and settlement. From 1843 until 1867, under Wilhem Benitz, Fort Ross was an agricultural settlement reminiscent of Russian Fort Ross. The Kashia maintained their territorial integrity despite the emergence of a genocide that fundamentally transformed power relations in the region. In 1867 James Dixon bought the site and forced the Kashia from Metini-Ross to extract timber from the region. Timber quickly disappeared, but construction, settlement, and wealth from the timber industry remained. In 1873 the Call family purchased Metini-Ross and began to envision permanent settler futures at the site, making a commercial, social, and transportation center. Only after this, in 1893, did settlers become interested in heritage, as they attempted to justify their possession of Metini-Ross.

In the early 1840s, Fort Ross was on Pomo controlled land. As such, the first active settler owner of Fort Ross after the Russian period, Wilhem Benitz, arrived in 1843 dependent

---

22 Laura Call, My Life at Fort Ross (Jenner, California: Fort Ross Interpretive Association, 1987), 1.
upon Kashia and Miwok labor and knowledge. They were able to leverage their position as the primary labor force at Benitz’s Ranch, which exuded limited influence in the early 1840s. Benitz noted in 1852 that “our work is all done by Indians, of which we have about 100 families.” Labor was scarce, and this gave the Kashia and Miwok leverage. As a European visitor to Fort Ross in 1842 explained, the Kashia were “willing to work with foreigners” but also “denied their services to the Spaniards and Mexicans out of antipathy.” Kashia and Miwok communities did not depend upon individual ranchers and interacted with the market economy on terms that supplemented traditional Kashia ways of life. In its early years, Benitz Ranch accommodated Kashia and Miwok demands by necessity.

This relationship changed as American settlement rapidly increased throughout the 1840s and 1850s. The settler colonial legal systems and military structures that colonists emplaced shifted power relations in the region. In Mexican and American California, crimes against Indians were nearly untryable in court. These crimes increased hugely after the California Gold Rush began in 1848 and occurred alongside legalized violence. Vigilante and US army soldiers in California began murdering campaigns that were condoned by the army, press, California Supreme Court, and US Senate. When California became a state in 1850, the state legislature would not ratify treaties signed between federal agents and California Indian leaders. Instead, the first act the California state legislature passed was the 1850 Act for Government and Protection of Indians. Effective for almost twenty years, this legislation legally facilitated white landowners...

---

23 John Sutter (of Sutter’s Fort) purchased Fort Ross from the Russian American Company, but was an absentee owner mostly interested in the site’s moveable assets. In 1843, Sutter sent Benitz, his employee at the time, to begin agricultural enterprises at the site. By 1945, Benitz was the outright owner.

24 William Benitz to Anthony Benitz, 1852, Benitz Family Letters, 1852-1863, letter no. x-3, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA.

removing Native Americans from their land, indentured Native American children to landowners, rendered “vagrancy” illegal, and legalized the forced labor of Native Americans who owed fines or were labeled “vagrants.” This legislation, which legalized what was essentially slavery and eradicated territorial rights, left Native Americans vulnerable — in the first five years of the 1850s settlers murdered at least 2,776 California Indians. On top of this, California’s 1850 militia acts enabled the formation of state funded white, male militia units. Over 35,000 settlers served between 1851 and 1866, and state and federal legislators raised 1.5 million dollars to fund these volunteer militias whose primary function was clearing the land of California Indians. In the 1850s, state militias killed over 1,000 California Indians. This apocalyptic mobilization of physical violence was the origin of American California.

These years immediately before and after California became a state transformed Metini-Ross. In 1845, during the final years of Mexican California, a group of landowners from Sonoma and Marin counties raided Locaya, a Kashia village near Metini-Ross. On the final day of a four day slave capturing expedition that had already captured 150 Indians, the tribe was saved from an assault that could have permanently dispossessed and fractured the community, as two Kashia leaders caught wind of the expedition and warned the village. The settler legal apparatus did nothing to punish the raid: while the perpetrators readily admitted to rape, theft, murder, and enslavement, no charges were pressed. By the 1850s, Fort Ross was a site of

---

28 Reno Franklin in Sarah Gonzalez and Kent Lightfoot, *Metini Village: An Archaeological Study of Sustained Colonialism in Northern California* (Berkeley, California: Escholarship, 2018), retrieved from www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2zn2c26r. According to Kashia band chairman Reno Franklin, the two were captured and tortured, and told “that if they handed over their people [they] would let them go.” They refused and managed to
unremitting danger. A century later, numerous Kashia recalled stories of physical and sexual abuse while working at Benitz’s ranch in the 1850s and 60s. On September 8th, 1857, newspapers noted that “the citizens of Salt Point, in the vicinity of Fort Ross, hanged three Indians,” who the citizens charged with “murder, robbery, etc. committed at various times and places over the last two years.” The haphazard charges fit larger patterns of institutionalized murder in California.

For the American colonists, this meant easier access to land and labor. Benitz particularly benefited from this genocide. By the 1860s, Benitz tended livestock, potatoes, wheat, various vegetables, and an ever-growing fruit orchard, built a small timber operation, a chute and loading dock at Ross Port, and operated a brewery as well as a ferryboat on the Russian River. Further, Benitz invested in a twelve mile road, leased land to mining companies, and co-operated a fishery with Italian fishermen from San Francisco. One 1861 article compared Benitz’s power to that of “an old feudal baron.” Physical violence enabled the expansion of American Fort Ross.

save the majority of the Kashia from the attack. As Franklin notes, this story explains how “we could remain Kashia” and is “a reminder of why we are still here.”


31 According to Kashia historian Herman James, this lynching marked the moment when “the white people became numerous so that they [the Kashia] couldn’t kill anymore [in revenge].” James recounted this history in 1958. His grandmother, Lukaria, lived through this period and “said she could never forget it” and “told me that I should also tell my children.” In Oswalt, Kashia Texts, 281.

32 Gonzalez and Lightfoot, Metini Village, 18.

33 The article described Benitz landholdings as more similar to “the old Feudal Barons than anything we ever experienced before...Mr. Bennettz lives in a world by himself; having a domain...untenanted except by his vaqueros...” J.H. McNabb & Samuel Cassiday, “Jottings by the Wayside,” The Petaluma Argus, July 30, 1861.
In 1864, with growing profits but a desire to leave America, Benitz ended his tenure at Ross and moved to Argentina. Benitz sold Fort Ross to James Dixon and Charles Fairfax for $55,000. James Dixon, a settler who had spent over a decade in the California timber industry, quickly took over management from Fairfax. Dixon’s goals were simple: extract all accessible timber and then sell Fort Ross. At this time California Indians were legally obliged to live on reservations unless they owned land or were sponsored workers. Since Dixon refused to hire California Indians (instead employing laborers from the region’s growing settler population), the 1850 Act for Government and Protection of Indians stripped the Kashia of the right to live on the land that had always been theirs. Dixon used this policy to remove the Kashia from their timber rich lands near Metini-Ross, completing the colonial theft of the site.

Dixon’s timber operations transformed the physical and demographic makeup of the entire region. By 1873, Dixon employed fifty men to operate a mill that cut up to 15,000 feet of timber per day. To transport and access timber, his men built roads through Metini-Ross’ steep grades. On top of resource extraction, roads were the arteries of settler society. Settler

---

34 Benitz himself was not immune to the violence of the colonial state. After the 1845 slave-raid, Benitz expressed fear to testify against the raiders, choosing to write his testimony rather than appear in court, as the raiders “have threatened to shoot me.” Later, in 1854, a newspaper noted that “Benitz, of Fort Ross...was severely wounded by a rifle-ball. The bullet grazed his nose and glanced off the right cheek bone, immediately beneath the corner of the eye...Search was made for the perpetrator of the outrage, but without success.” Nine years later, a paper noted that Benitz’s “steam saw mill at Timber Cove was destroyed by fire...and must have been set on fire.” Benitz, understandably, feared California and wrote to his brother in 1855 that he does “not like to live with the Americans as there are very bad people amongst them and their sense of freedom is not really existing...” He even explains “if I could sell today or tomorrow, I would immediately go to another country...I would rather go to Russia then to the "soiled States”” While he profited from and contributed to the growing settler presence in California, as a German Catholic, his “Americanness” was often held in question. Sacramento Daily Union, September 25, 1854, accessed 7/19/2019: https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18540925.2.15&srpos=2&e=———185-en—20—1—txt-txIN-Benitz+fort+ross———-1; Marin Journal, November 21, 1863, accessed 7/19/2019: https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=MBJ18631121.2.14&spos=4&e=———186-en—20—1—txt-txIN-william+benitz———-1;


businesses and homes sprouted along the roadside. As a visitor to Metini-Ross noted in the Sonoma Democrat in 1873,

I have seen with admiration the immense labor performed in opening up a timbered ravine and getting out the lumber—the roads have to be graded, the shutes to be constructed, the railroads to be built, the villages to be founded for the workmen, the shops, barns, stables, etc… When the best of the timber is cut out nil has to be abandoned. Even the mill is left standing, and new roads built especially to carry off the machinery to a new location.\(^{37}\)

This was further supported by public funding that helped develop regional roads connecting to Ross Port’s timber chute. This brief period of intensive timber extraction catalyzed the dispossession of the Kashia and attracted colonial settlement, investment, and construction, all encircling Metini-Ross.

In 1873 Dixon sold 2,500 acres of Metini-Ross to George Washington Call for $35,000.\(^{38}\) The Calls arrived at Ross wealthy and ready to invest in a permanent settlement where they would raise a family.\(^{39}\) They were the first settlers at Metini-Ross who did not simply intend to extract wealth, but wished to make a permanent settler home connected to the rest of settler California. The Call’s first step was rebranding the site as a transportation center. The site’s port, roads, timber chute, and old Russian storage facilities made Fort Ross an already effective shipping site, and the growing settler population created new demands. Within a few years, nearly all goods coming to and from the region traveled through the Ross Port, with as many as 86 vessels loading cargo at Ross chute in 1877.\(^{40}\) By 1897, the Calls owned boats offering

\(^{37}\) “Fort Ross,” *Sonoma Democrat*, September 6, 1873.

\(^{38}\) Tomlin, *Ranch Era*.

\(^{39}\) Before arriving at Fort Ross, George Call had made a fortune running shows with the famous performer John “Grizzly” Adams in California, staging bear and bull fights in Latin-America, working as a subcontractor building railroads in Chile for the infamous fraud Harry Meiggs, and opening a jute factory in Valparaiso. In Chile, George met his wife Mercedes Leiva, and in 1872 they left for California with $45,000 in gold coin. Tomlin, *Ranch Era*.

\(^{40}\) Tomlin, *Ranch Era*. 
weekly trips to San Francisco with goods and passengers. As exports, imports, and travelers channeled through Fort Ross, the Calls expended thousands of dollars building and improving roads. Ross port served as the entry and exit point to northern Sonoma County, facilitating the movement of settlers and their goods to and from the region.\textsuperscript{41}

Capitalist undertakings reshaped the Kashia homeland into a settler commercial center. Most of this took place within the still-standing old Russian compound. The Calls renovated the “Governor’s House” into a hotel, the “Officers Quarters” into a saloon, a Russian warehouse into a dance hall, and used the still standing chapel, barns, sheds, and shops to support their various enterprises. Just outside the stockade, the Calls built a store, post office, telegraph office, and school. Fort Ross was, in many senses, a quintessential county center, and the Calls quintessential county leaders. On top of shipping and commerce, they sold an average of 25,000 pounds of butter a year from 1875-1899 and, by the 1880s, expanded their landholdings almost threefold, from 2,500 acres to over 7,000 acres.\textsuperscript{42} They had created an American style ranch that also functioned as a shipping, social, and commercial center. To settlers, it resembled home.

The first fifty years of American colonialism at Metini-Ross fundamentally transformed the site. What had started as a colonial agricultural project roughly resembling Russian-Kashia relationships quickly became an intensely violent site. Then, on the now empied and plundered land, the Calls built a commercially oriented settlement. But the Kashia and Miwok, despite settlers’ best efforts, did not disappear, and settlers still did not feel belonging. California was an Indigenous home and physical violence failed to change this. Instead, a new period emerged in

\textsuperscript{41} Road construction during this period was, according to Carlos Call, primarily done by Chinese laborers. This history of Chinese in the Salt Point Township and Fort Ross has not been explored but was significant. For a brief note on this history, read, Tomlin “Early Road Building Near Fort Ross” in Tomlin, \textit{The Ranch Era}.

\textsuperscript{42} Tomlin, \textit{Ranch Era}. 
which Americans sought to dissolve Native American nations, assimilate identities, and rewrite the landscape as a place of anglo-American belonging. A key part to this project was narrative, and a campaign to label California, and *Californians*, as American. As the next chapter shows, the production of history became an extension of the mass physical violence of early American colonialism.
Chapter Two
“Strangers in our own land”
*Gertrude Atherton, The Native Sons of the Golden West, and the Search for Settler Belonging
Colonial California*

...Around the shrine of their memory let us join hands...with our children and they with theirs, linking the past with the future, preserving the memories and glories of our Native Land. O, Friendship, we gather here to-night to pledge anew our devotion to thy sacred cause, to again place upon thy altar the fruits gathered by fraternity, to vow allegiance to thy service, and to go hence, consecrating our lives to thy purpose... Oh California, may thy sons be ever true to thee — true to the spirit of thy great destiny. Upon thy broad domain may the heart of the patriot ever beat with love. Under thy night stars and thy glorious golden day, may thy temples be their place of worship, thy name their guardian care.

— Native Sons of the Golden West, “Initiation Ceremony,” 1899

The creation of the Fort Ross Story began in 1891. That winter, San Francisco writer Gertrude Atherton arrived at the Call Ranch’s Fort Ross Hotel. The hotel’s beds, saloon, and brothel attracted a wide variety of clientele, but Atherton, a San Francisco journalist and socialite, garnered more attention than most. Her scandalous opinion columns, “erotic” fiction, and recent celebrity breakup with famed writer Ambrose Bierce rendered her a figure of notoriety. She came to Fort Ross fleeing this reputation and hoping to write a novel that would transform her into a “serious” artist. Atherton did not strike anyone at Metini-Ross as particularly serious. She spent her days in black gowns roaming rainy cliffs, eyeing commercial buildings, and pestering locals about history. Everyone at the ranch surely understood what Atherton was doing: she was interested in the site’s Russianness. While most settlers accepted Fort Ross as a

43 Native Sons of the Golden West Ritual Book, 1899, in Joseph R Knowland Papers, 1873-1966, Carton 37 BANC MSS 79/128c, Folder 21, Native Sons Correspondence; Bancroft Library, California. This confidential ritual book belonged to Joseph Knowland. Knowland was the California State Parks Commission Chairman, owner of the Oakland Tribune, a grand president of the Native Sons of the Golden West, a California state senator, a member of the United States House of Representatives, the founder and chairman of the California Historical Landmarks League, and the father of long-time senator and presidential candidate William Knowland.

44 As one profile of a feud between Atherton and another writer reports: “Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, who wishes it to be understood that she "is a Californian, and don't care a continental whoop in sheol whether school keeps or not,"...declared that she was an Ishmaelite, that she didn't care what people said about her, and that if she was hard-up for an item to season her letters with, she would "write up" her grandmother as a witch. More than this, she didn't want any more of the "sweet singers" back talk.” “Beauty Spurned,” Los Angeles Heral, April 24, 1889.

45 Her fiction was labeled “erotic” for its depictions of independent women pursuing relationships outside of marriage.
thriving American ranch, the literary market, Atherton’s ticket to renown, wanted ruins, and she was ready to fabricate and dig for what she needed. That winter, dreaming of “the romance of Fort Ross,” Atherton snuck into the fort’s old cemetery at midnight in search of “an officer in full uniform.” She put the shovel to the dirt and dug, upturning shin bones, rotted shoes, “some buttons” and a scolding from George Call. Atherton left Metini-Ross that spring of 1891 something of a grotesque joke. In 1892, Atherton, unperturbed, published her first of many fictional stories about Fort Ross, and a decade later, at the peak of the Call Ranch’s success, George Call sold the two-and-a-half acre Russian complex for $3,000 to the California Historic Landmarks League, who quickly (in 1906) deeded the site to the Sutter’s Fort Board of Commissions — the predecessor to California’s State Parks Commission. Just like that, Fort Ross was a site of American heritage.

While this sale seems abrupt, it was actually a decade in the making. As this chapter will explain, Metini-Ross was bought, rebuilt, and marketed in an image of romance and history that Atherton created. From 1892 to the first decades of the twentieth century, writers and preservationists stitched together a Fort Ross Story. Gertrude Atherton created stories of bounded white civility in pre-American California that journalists reproduced and expanded. This made Fort Ross discursively significant. State and private preservation groups placed these narratives on the ground. This construction was a move to innocence that ignored the ongoing

48 The Sutter’s Fort Board of Commissions — the predecessor to the State Parks Commission.
49 History only expanded the Call’s power. They retained possession of the vast majority of Metini-Ross into the 1970s. Being the keepers of a historic landmark was a lucrative source of financial, social and political capital; the Calls held events in the “historic” compound, were deemed historical authorities, enjoyed the stream of visitors, and became renowned “frontier” settlers. Like every owner of Fort Ross but moreso, the Calls made massive social and financial gains.
presence of California Indians and suggested Americans did not steal Indigenous land, but, rather, inherited vacant colonial space. It was the next step in a longer settler colonial violence that began with early American colonists’ mobilization of physical violence. At Metini-Ross, settlers tried to obfuscate and consume a Kashia homeland beneath imagined layers of colonial history to lay claim to the site’s past and future.

Gertrude Atherton was, without a doubt, Fort Ross’ most influential chronicler. Her stories could not be separated from her public persona — she was trumpeted as a quintessentially Californian woman, and she was seen as offering a uniquely Californian perspective. One 1893 profile of Atherton claims her “genius” was a product “of the soil where its rare fruit has been gathered [California]” and a bloodline that “mingles opposing streams from the older states — New England and Louisiana.” Settler heritage and California soil were the roots of her reputation, a reputation that helped settlers find and embrace a nascent white Californian identity.

In 1891, Atherton completed her breakthrough work, *The Doomswoman*, in which the climactic scene occurred at the Russian fort. While Atherton would never escape controversial celebrity, this was the start of a hugely popular body of work that forever tethered her to Fort Ross. In 1890, before Atherton began publishing, Fort Ross was a historical afterthought saved for obscure academic history and local intrigue. By 1902, it was the focus of an unprecedented

---

50 Atherton’s biographer, Emily Leider, writes that “at the height of her writing career — in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth — she was praised by George Meredith and Oscar Wilde, championed by Ambrose Bierce, sought out by Rebecca West, befriended by Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, and often mentioned in the same sentence as Edith Wharton. Though she was vilified at least as often as she was acclaimed, everyone knew who she was. Prolific, controversial, outspoken, she succeeded unequivocally in attaining the visibility, marketability, and name recognition that had already become marks of renown during her lifetime” Emily Wortis Leider, *California’s Daughter: Gertrude Atherton and Her Times* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991).

preservation campaign that relied more on Atherton’s fiction than historical record. As Joseph
Knowland, the leader of California’s heritage movement, claims, Atherton “immortalized” Fort
Ross “in poetry and prose.”52 Fort Ross was deemed historic because of Atherton.

She did not choose to the site randomly. Atherton wanted fame, and the American
reading public was hungry for, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, “antiquity,” “mystery,” and
the “picturesque and gloomy wrong.” Atherton and her contemporaries bemoaned the lack of
“ruin” in “young” America.53 According to Atherton, she first recognized the potential for
regional fiction when reading an article that questioned why California writers neglected the
“picturesque” and “romantic” pre-American history of the state. Finally, she saw in Spanish and
Russian California a chance to match the success of California’s most famed novelist, regional
fiction writer Bret Harte: “Forked lightning was cracking in my skull. It illumined a dazzling
vista. Bret Harte had barely touched upon that period and its nuggets were mine.”54 In a literary
and cultural marketplace hungry for antiquity, Atherton located historical themes ripe for
reimagining.

Understanding Atherton and the construction of Fort Ross as a site of American heritage
requires situating her within a broader heritage movement. Atherton wrote in the midst of a
nation-wide heritage craze that took a particular form in California. By the mid 1870s, the United
States had forced most California Indian nations onto reservations, reduced their power, and
established the infrastructure for mass colonial settlement. Settlers began envisioning California

52 Joseph Knowland, California, A Landmark History (Oakland, CA: Oakland Tribune Press, 1941).
53 Or as Hawthorne also states, “romance and poetry...need ruin to make them grow.” Nathaniel Hawthorne, The
Marble Faun (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), preface.
54 Gertrude Atherton quoted in Emily Wortis Leider, California’s Daughter: Gertrude Atherton and Her Times
as a long-term home.\textsuperscript{55} This change was partially the result of generational shifts. By the 1870s, barely twenty years after the first American mass migration, the first generation of California-born American colonizers began coming of age. Members of this generation never lived outside California, yet were unsure how to understand themselves as Californians. At a meeting of the Society of California Pioneers in 1876, one settler griped, “already we are becoming strangers in our own land...we are still sometimes assailed by the inquiries begun twenty-seven years ago, and still asked by the unreflecting, whether we intend to remain in this country? Indeed, now another twenty seven years and we will have all gone out of it.”\textsuperscript{56} Settlers had seized land, but felt out of place. They hoped regional history could create belonging.

This quest for belonging encouraged an explosion of heritage organizations, none more important or revealing than The Native Sons of the Golden West. Its first meeting in many ways marked the start of California’s heritage movement. At San Francisco’s 1875 Admission Day parade, a yearly celebration of Californian statehood, a former army general formed a marching unit in which participation was “limited to white males born in California on or after July 7, 1846.”\textsuperscript{57} The march was a stirring success, and the unit decided — in a fashion fitting “the

\textsuperscript{55} David Glassberg, \textit{Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life} (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 170. As David Glassberg has shown, early Anglo-settlers placed their identities east of California. The first anglo-settlers’ “sense of place included an intense consciousness of where they were not.”

\textsuperscript{56} William Shaw in Society of California Pioneers, \textit{Anniversary}, 1876, 15-16.

\textsuperscript{57} One observer called this marching unit “picturesque in the extreme.” Hundreds of young men marched in “the rough miner’s garb of the Pioneer days” with “pick, pan and shovel upon their shoulders” and “that ever ready bowie knife and revolver” on their waist; “at their head was borne the Bear Flag of 1846.” Peter Conmy, \textit{The Origins and Purposes of the Native Sons of the Golden West} (San Francisco, California: Dolores Press, 1956).
fraternal boom” of the second half of the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{58} — to begin a fraternity for white men born in California, The Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW).\textsuperscript{59}

The NSGW was by far the most influential private heritage group in California, was instrumental in (and often indistinguishable from) the development of state park offices, and left behind a uniquely massive body of preservation work. While they are not the only heritage organization in California, they provide a useful lens for considering logics of preservation in California and at Metini-Ross. In the words of two widely distributed pamphlets, they formed the fraternity to ensure “the perpetuation of the romantic and patriotic past,”\textsuperscript{60} and to “emphasize every ennobling endeavor which dignifies the present and idealizes the future.”\textsuperscript{61} The Native Sons’ strategy was explicit: create place-stories that rooted settlers in the past, legitimized their present, and propelled them into the future.

Organizations like the NSGW sought and produced narratives that marked landscapes with settler place-stories: regional histories that asserted the righteousness of white power and California’s unique place in America. Usually, these stories weaved imaginary pasts into a colonial present and future. As an 1899 essay in a NSGW publication proclaimed:

Death gives the pioneer a splendid immortality; life yields the Native Son a greater power for usefulness and good...the one is near the ripening fruit of a noble past, the other is a blossom of prophecy for an exalted future. Remarkable contrast of life! Profound beauty of death! “Everything I have loved, won, and lost; all that I was and am to-day,” might say the Pioneer, “is passing from me toward the sunset.” “All for which I

\textsuperscript{59} By 1895, there were 9,000 Native Sons and their local chapters (called “parlors”) spread across the state. By 1915, there were 20,000 members. Denise Frink, “Pioneers and Patriots: Race, Gender, and Historical Memory in California, 1875-1915” (PhD Diss., Stanford University, 2010), 23
\textsuperscript{60} Conmy, \textit{Origins and Purposes}.
aspire—all that I may be,” answers the Son, “I hear in the fairy music that opens with the crimson dawn.”

At their core, these stories were land claiming mechanisms. As a Native Son wrote, “Nothing so exalts human pride as the neverfading memories of home and the thousand associations that bind man to it.” Inventing heritage was a settler colonial project to create memories of a home that, just two decades before, was not home. Such memories depended upon false narratives of Indigenous absence and settler belonging.

Fort Ross was among the first preservation projects in California. In 1902, as the NSGW grew in influence, its leader, Joseph Knowland, established and chaired the multi-society California Historic Landmarks League. In 1902, in conjunction with newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst, the Landmarks League began a massive fundraising campaign across California raising the funds to purchase Fort Ross. In 1903, the Landmarks League purchased the two and a half acre fort complex from George Call. As the following paragraphs will show, Atherton’s fictional Fort Ross in many ways triggered this purchase. At Metini-Ross, discursive work led to very real construction.

Atherton found thematic inspiration in the work of regional fiction writer Bret Harte. He was the face of California regional fiction and, in the 1870s, perhaps the most famous writer in

---

64 Today, the group is best remembered for vehemently racist anti-immigrant campaigns (directed most violently towards Chinese and Japanese Californians) in the early to mid 20th century. As historian Roger Daniels writes, “from just after the turn of the century until the onset of the great depression it was perhaps the most influential pressure group in the state… the members of the NSGW, not united by common economic ties, made no bones about the basis of their antagonism to Orientals: it was blatantly racist.” Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
America.\textsuperscript{65} While the majority of his work focused on the Gold Rush, Harte wrote the only story about Russian America before Atherton visited Fort Ross some two decades later.\textsuperscript{66} His short poem, “Concepcion de Arguello” was about the Russian diplomat Nikolai Rezanov’s 1806 visit from Russian Alaska to the presidio of San Francisco.\textsuperscript{67} There, he fell in love with the Spanish commandant’s beautiful daughter, Concepcion de Arguello. To gain permission from the Czar to marry Concepcion, Rezanov travelled back to St. Petersburg, but died traversing Siberia. Concepcion waited, and, after many years of waiting, in a still celebrated act of fidelity, joined a nunnery. This tale introduced ideas of whiteness and belonging that shaped Atherton’s imaginary Fort Ross. In Harte’s poem, the Spanish women embodied the California landscape. While awaiting Rezanov, Concepcion “heard the varying message, voiceless to all ears beside;/ ‘He will come,’ the flowers whispered; ‘come no more,’ the dry hills sighed.”\textsuperscript{68} Throughout the story, the landscape was big and empty — California Indians were absent. Concepcion, though, was intimately connected to the land. She was a metaphor for California. When the leaders of Spanish California offered Concepcion to aristocratic Russian colonists, Harte symbolically represented Spanish Californians offering the land’s future. Harte’s narrative skirted around dispossession by claiming “California” desired modern European colonizers.

Harte clumsily introduced vague themes of youthful land and cultured Russians: Atherton expanded, popularized, and cemented them. Her first works after her visit, the \textit{Doomswoman} (1892) and “Natalie Ivanhoff: a memory of Fort Ross” (1893), prominently featured Fort Ross

\textsuperscript{65} His biographer claims “Harte’s ‘discovery that California was full of fiction made almost as much a stir as Marshall’s discovery that the state was full of Gold” Gary Charnhorst, \textit{Bret Harte: Opening the American Literary West} (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 39.


\textsuperscript{67} Bret Harte, “Concepcion de Arguello,” March, 1872.

\textsuperscript{68} Harte, “Concepcion”.
and jumpstarted her literary career, and Fort Ross and Russian colonists would remain essential to her fiction and journalism thereafter. These stories infused Fort Ross with colonial heritage. While Atherton popularized this idea, preservationists physically produced it. Examining the discursive and physical construction of Fort Ross’ stockade and chapel reveals how and why Atherton’s florid and tragic narratives of aristocratic colonists in pre-American California were physically constructed.

Atherton’s Fort Ross was, before all else, a military fort set apart from the landscape. The walls of Fort Ross, she insisted, contained colonial space. Outside the walls was uncolonized wilderness. For Atherton, this conceptualization was the seed of romance: aristocratic white space tragically incommensurate with pre-American California’s uncolonized wilderness. She placed Fort Ross “miles away from even the primitive Spanish civilization,” on a “lonely knoll” between “the sunless forest and the desolate ocean.” The ocean’s “sterile crags and futile restlessness” imbued the landscape with death.69 Suicide and shipwrecks scattered her tales. The forest was dangerously alive — it teemed with darkness and animals. To accentuate this danger and contrast, Atherton’s Fort Ross was heavily militarized. Atherton wrote of walls with “mounted cannons...behind the iron-barred gates” and always “paced by watchful sentries.” Within these walls were buildings “occupied by the governor and officers” where “all was luxury, nothing to suggest the privations of a new country.”70 This contrast of “old world” luxury within the walls, and a dangerous uncolonized “new world” outside the walls became a defining trope of the Fort Ross Story.

---

69 Atherton, Romance of Fort Ross, 58.
Atherton used royal Russian women to further juxtapose civility and wilderness. Russian women’s vulnerability outside the walled fort suggested pre-American California was unfit for white femininity, the bedrock of colonial civility. Fort Ross’ harsh environment led to hysterical despair: suicide, a consistent theme in Atherton’s work, always awaited Russian women on the cliffs they were “addicted to roving.”71 Dangerously desirous Native American and hispanic characters scattered Atherton’s tales, including her reoccurring character “Prince Solano,” a caricatured Indian chief, who, in numerous stories, was "smitten with [the] blonde loveliness” of a Russian Princess and planned to “storm the Fort by night, spike with arrows all who resisted and...snatch the beautiful princess from the ruins and carry her off to his mountainlair.” In one of Atherton’s stories, the Russian colonists leave California in response to this plan.72 While Native Americans occasionally appear in Atherton’s tales of California, she never places them within the walls of Fort Ross. Fort Ross is decidedly European. The military walls provided a clear but fragile contrast between the colonial space and an uncolonized landscape, creating a fictional space of aristocratic history in pre-American California.

Journalists and preservationists found this juxtaposition immensely appealing, and reproduced Atherton’s vision. In an 1893 article published alongside an Atherton story, a journalist claimed Fort Ross was “the best garrisoned, best armed, and strongest fortress in California.”73 Descriptions of settlement usually began with the “heavy fortified” “redwood” “twelve feet [tall]” walls. An 1898 article insisted, longingly and inaccurately, that the walls saw “some hot fighting.”74 Stories of war-worn walls were consistently reproduced. This shaped

71 Atherton, “Ivanhoff.”  
72 Atherton, “Romance of Fort Ross.” The Russian governor decided afterwards that “all things considered, it was time to go.”  
74 “An Historic Spot,” Healdsburg Tribune, September 1, 1898.
preservation work. When preservation began in 1904, the walls were in relatively good condition.\textsuperscript{75} As newspapers noted, the “old stockade” still surrounded the fort; as a result, it was not until 1917 that serious preservation work began.\textsuperscript{76} Fittingly, in 1917 the state appropriated $1500 dollars to rebuild “the old entrance site and portions of the stockade.”\textsuperscript{77} In 1925, another bill for $2,500 passed unanimously to “reconstruct the old stockade.”\textsuperscript{78} Further state-funded projects in 1930 and 1954 led to the complete reconstruction of the stockade.

All these measures were taken despite the fact that, as any historian of Russian colonialism would tell you, Fort Ross was not a military settlement. But “forts” evoke broader colonial myths, and, as scholar Dwayne Darnold claims, “[symbolize the] civilizing process” by “transplanting a four-cornered version of European development into the heart of the wilderness.”\textsuperscript{79} Even the name “Fort Ross” is misleading — as E. Breck Parkman observes, the site was usually called Selenie Ross (Ross Settlement) or Koloniia Ross (Colony Ross) rather than Ostrog Ross (Fortress Ross). This differentiates Ross from other settlements in Russian America and Siberia that were built in the style of military “ostrogs.”\textsuperscript{80} Because of this mistranslation, “the defensive aspects of Colony Ross have been over-emphasized in both the priority of reconstruction and interpretation.”\textsuperscript{81} This is a telling “error” that Atherton’s narratives


\textsuperscript{76} “The Past Reminiscent,” \textit{Sonoma Democrat} (Santa Rosa), July 17, 1897.

\textsuperscript{77} “Legislative News,” \textit{Colusa Herald}, April 24, 1917.

\textsuperscript{78} “Plans Rebuild Old Fort Ross,” \textit{Madera Tribune}, January 28, 1925.

\textsuperscript{79} As Donald shows, the Fort is a slippery symbol: “when criticism arises, myth can be withdrawn and attention can be shifted to the sign as simply an artifact in a literal or material sense.” So, when criticized, it can be said Fort Ross’ walls are “real” history. The wall can play both roles — material and symbolic—depending on what is most useful. “The fort, then, is a mythic sign that initiates, substantiates and, through its density, hides the teleological story of the development of the nation.” Dwayne Donald, “Forts, Colonial Frontier Logics, and Aboriginal-Canadian Relations: Imagining Decolonizing Educational Philosophies in Canadian Contexts” in \textit{Decolonizing Philosophies in Education}, ed. Ali A. Abdi (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013).


\textsuperscript{81} E. Breck Parkman, “Fort and Settlement: Interpreting the Past at Fort Ross State Park,” \textit{California History 75}, no.4 (winter, 1996).
and the preserved stockade supported. An overemphasized stockade accentuated the tension between colonial order and uncolonized wilderness.

Atherton further developed this project of creating white space by constructing European culture at Fort Ross. Compared to other settler histories of pre-American California colonies, Atherton’s Fort Ross was a place of unusual luxury. She consistently emphasized what she framed as superior class and racial characteristics. The women were “beautiful” with “faultless blondinity,” “blue-gray” eyes, and skin so white it was “transparent.”\textsuperscript{82} The men were enlightened leaders of “commanding stature” and the “highest breeding.”\textsuperscript{83} Within Fort Ross’ walls, they enjoyed an oasis of aristocratic whiteness, best embodied in the governor’s house and orthodox chapel. Atherton described the governor’s house as an “abode of luxury” with “thick carpets,” “arras,” “books and pictures and handsome ornaments,” chairs “designed for comfort as well as elegance,” a “dining table,” and the “finest damask,” all of which “glittered with silver and crystal.” Furniture concealed the landscape: “rich curtains [hid] the gloomy mountain and the long sweep of cliffs.” Atherton described the chapel as similarly ornate. It was “magnificent within; the pictures were in jeweled frames and the ornaments were of gold and silver.”\textsuperscript{84} On the outside, its “belfry” and “cupola” dominated the landscape. Both the chapel and the governor’s house depicted a European aristocratic tradition that allowed “the gay congenial band of exiles to forget that they were not...in the Old World.”\textsuperscript{85} For Atherton, Fort Ross was an elite European space planted in pre-American California.

\textsuperscript{82} Atherton, “Ivanhoff,” 269.
\textsuperscript{83} Gertrude Atherton, \textit{Rezanov} (1908), 9.
\textsuperscript{84} Atherton, “Romance,” 58.
\textsuperscript{85} Atherton “Ivanhoff,” 267.
This motif of European space shaped the physical and discursive construction of historic Fort Ross. Soon after Atherton began publishing on Fort Ross in 1893, newspapers called for preserving the “fast decaying relics”\(^86\) of the “queer old Russian chapel.”\(^87\) George Call, surely aware of these shifts, capitalized on changing perceptions. In 1888, the chapel served Call Ranch as a hay barn and horse stable. By 1898, George Call — ever one to recognize a business opportunity — had repaired the cupola and belfry, rehung the door, and replaced the windows.\(^88\) Further, he turned it into a hodge-podge museum, with, according to an 1898 newspaper article, “benches, altars, and candlesticks… Russian swords, a twenty four pound cannon ball, grapeshot, and other historic relics.”\(^89\) In a decade, the Calls stopped using the chapel for utilitarian purposes, and instead made something they imagined to fit a Russian past.

Every year, it would seem, the chapel grew more historic. This trend only accelerated after the California Landmark’s League purchased the site and preservationists rallied funds for the orthodox chapel. A 1911 article claimed the chapel was “one of the most historic landmarks in the county.”\(^90\) Elsewhere, fundraisers claimed “the relic” was “one of the most important and unique in all American history.”\(^91\) This led to significant preservation efforts. Five years after California’s 1906 earthquake toppled the Russian chapel, the NSGW organized a “church

\(^{86}\) “ Preserve the Fort,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa), April 29, 1903.
\(^{87}\) Laura Bridge Powers, “Landmarks League appeals to Californians to lend a hand,” *San Francisco Call*, April 15, 1904.
\(^{89}\) An 1888 article claims “the chapel has been ruthlessly turned into a stable.” “An Historic Spot,” *Healdsburg Tribune*, September 1, 1898.
\(^{90}\) “Help Needed to Save Old Fort Ross Chapel,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa), October 5, 1911.
raising” effort, funded through local papers.\(^92\) The building was further rehabilitated in 1916-1917, when $3,000 were raised in the state legislature to rehabilitate the chapel and open it to the general public. By 1922, when Carlos Call (the son of George and Mercedes Call) hosted the NSGW’s Sebastopol and Santa Rosa parlors to paint the church and dine outside, the reconstructed chapel was a venerated landmark.\(^93\)

Today, as in 1902, the chapel is among California’s most iconic sites. Even more so than the stockade, historians suggest this was a peripheral site constructed late in the settlement’s existence. So what was the appeal? Settler preservationists stressed that this was a still existent pre-American civilized space, and as such, in Atherton’s words, “unlike anything in modern California.”\(^94\) The Fort Ross chapel told a distinctly different story of California than the state’s Spanish mission chapels. Missions were not fully “civilized” spaces — they were potent symbols of Christian colonization and developmental histories of California. The reconstruction of mission chapels outside settlement walls stressed that they were culturally and racially heterogeneous spaces. Their preservation suggested the expansion of European culture into Indigenous landscapes.\(^95\) Missions fit developmental narratives where Spanish colonization was seen as a developmental stepping stone on the way to American California.\(^96\) Fort Ross’ chapel, on the other hand, existed outside linear developmental narratives of California. Preservationists did not consider it a symbol of expanding European culture, but, instead, as something apart from California’s development — a fact stressed by the chapel’s insulated placement within the

---

\(^{92}\) “Another Boost for Old Chapel,” *Press Democrat*, October 6, 1911.

\(^{93}\) “Natives Visit Old Fort Ross,” *Press Democrat*, October 24, 1922.

\(^{94}\) Atherton, *Romance of Fort Ross*.

\(^{95}\) Further, late-nineteenth century narratives presented the Spaniards themselves as racialized and pre-modern others (footnote).

\(^{96}\) See Kropp, *California Vieja*. 
militarized walls. If Spanish missions existed in a developmental teleology concluding in American colonization, then Fort Ross’ chapel ignored American Indians, skipped development, and echoed Atherton’s fantasy of turn-of-the-century America: a cultured white space separate from Indigenous pasts and presents. It surely did not supplant more popular Mission narratives, but its appeal came from a different source. It provided a different move to innocence for settler California: a romantic tale that ignored the ongoing presence of California Indians and suggested Americans did not steal Indigenous land, but, rather, inherited vacant colonial space.
Chapter Three  
The Afterlives of Heritage  
Doom and Destiny in an American Park

“When we go, we will take [Natalie’s body],” said Rotscheff to his distracted wife.  
But when they went, a year or two after, in the hurry of departure they forgot her until too late.  
They promised to return. But they never came, and she sleeps there still, on the lonely knoll between the sunless forest and the desolate ocean.


While Chapter Two explored how writers and preservationists constructed a historical past at Fort Ross, the appeal of Fort Ross was not only historic. This chapter is about how settlers understood the meaning of Russian Fort Ross in an American state. Writers blurred temporal borders with stories of ghosts, biblical fates, and sexualized landscapes, allowing their Fort Ross Story to seep into the deep past and distant future. These stories did not make truth claims, but were shrouded in hearsay, speaking to the emotional resonance of Fort Ross to American settlers.

---

Atherton, “Ivanhoff,” 4. This comes in Atherton’s second fictional story of Fort Ross. The story explains the history of Natalie Ivanhoff, a Russian princess who haunts American Fort Ross. In this scene that explains Ivanhoff’s death, her lover, an exiled Russian prince, arrives at Fort Ross by surprise and plans to run away with her. They meet clandestinely at midnight within the Fort Ross windmill (recently reconstructed by the Fort Ross Conservancy) and have the following exchange:

"You look like the moon queen," he said. "I missed your hair, apart from yourself."

She lifted her chin with a movement of coquetry most graceful in spite of long disuse, and the answering fire sprang into her eyes. She looked very piquant and a trifle diabolical. He pressed his lips suddenly on hers. A moment later something tugged at the long locks his hand caressed, and at the same time he became conscious that the silence which had fallen between them was shaken by a loud whir. He glanced upward. Natalie was standing with her back to one of the band-wheels. It had begun to revolve; in the moment it increased its speed; and he saw a glittering web on its surface. With an exclamation of horror, he pulled her toward him; but he was too late. The wheel, spinning now with the velocity of midday, caught the whole silver cloud in its spokes, and Natalie was swept suddenly upward. Her feet hit the low rafters, and she was whirled round and round, screams of torture torn from her rather than uttered, her body describing a circular right angle to the shaft, the bones breaking as they struck the opposite one; then, in swift finality, she was sucked between belt and wheel. Mikhailof managed to get into the next room and reverse the lever. The machinery stopped as abruptly as it had started; but Natalie was out of her agony.  

Her lover flung himself over the cliffs, shattering bones and skull on the stones at their base. They made her a coffin out of the copper plates used for their ships, and laid her in the straggling unpopulous cemetery on the knoll across the gulch beyond the chapel.

“When we go, we will take [Natalie’s body],” said Rotscheff to his distracted wife.  
But when they went, a year or two after, in the hurry of departure they forgot her until too late.  
They promised to return. But they never came, and she sleeps there still, on the lonely knoll between the sunless forest and the desolate ocean.
in twentieth century California. At the heart of the Fort Ross Story was a tension between Russian doom and what was presented as white success. As I will argue, heritage workers made stories that claimed white nationalism as a colonial project succeeded (whiteness included aristocratic Russians), while Russia as a colonial nation failed. Examining the discursive construction of the Fort Ross’ orchard and cemetery reveals the complications of this claim, as settlers rendered the site an ongoing Russian project bequeathed to Americans.

The Fort Ross Story promised colonial futurity in California. Colonial space, in these stories, was irrevocably and eternally productive. This did not just set Fort Ross apart from Indigenous California, but also worked to write California Indians permanently out of the space’s future. This is best seen in Atherton’s novel *Rezanov*, a retelling of Bret Harte’s “Concepcion de Arguello.” In it, Atherton plays on the juxtaposition of whiteness and wilderness to show the promise of colonialism. Atherton’s aristocratic hero, Rezanov, tells the Spanish beauty Concepcion "I wish I had a sculptor in my suite. I should make him model you, [and] label the statue 'California'."98 Concepcion, an embodiment of California, contained an “unawakened inner life” that Rezanov’s cultured Europeanness unleashed — Rezanov made Concepcion’s “individuality, long budding, burst into flower.”99 Once this innerlife was realized, Concepcion was a colonial fantasy: “magnificent, audacious, incomprehensible … a woman sublimated. Every husk of tradition has fallen from her.”100 In the story, Spanish and Native American California had previously prevented Concepcion’s growth. This improvement now strengthened European Rezanov, helping rid him of the unmasculine trappings of aristocratic civility. In her presence, he “throbbed...with a pagan joy...the keen wild happiness of youth.” California

99 Ibid, 95.
“excited the elemental truth in him” and he “[dreamed] as he had dreamed in a youth.”

Perhaps most tellingly, upon meeting Concepcion, Rezanov became “conscious of a novel fascination in a sex to which he had paid no niggard's tribute.” Their gendered developments fed off one another: Rezanov, the colonizer, became virile and full, Concepcion, colonized California, fathomless and beautiful.

This symbiotic relationship between Concepcion (California) and Rezanov (Europe) promised colonial belonging. As a contemporary observed, Rezanov’s “old world grace...is made native there by this bright, deep, fond girl.” It is “made native” through a process of gendered improvement — to become fully realized, feminine California needed the male colonizer, and the male colonizer needed feminine California. This gendered image suggested the colonizer belonged — California only became California with masculine colonists.

These gendered logics of colonial futurity structured the discursive construction of the Fort Ross orchard. Before the late 1890s, Fort Ross’ modest orchard of some 280 fruit trees was unpruned and unkempt. The Calls had little interest in its history and Benitz’s larger commercial orchard was located outside the Russian space. George Call claimed the trees were “very old and mossy, and are not very thrifty.” The orchard’s history was unimportant and its fruits, by most accounts, small, bitter and “very inferior as far as quality is concerned.”

In the late 1890s, with Fort Ross’ rising profile, this changed. An 1897 newspaper article on apple production in California noted that the Fort Ross orchard “is still bearing” and the infamous apple pest, the

---

101 Atherton, Rezanov, 14.
102 Ibid, 53. Youth is fetishized throughout: Rezanov is old (like Europe), and Concepcion young (like California). Atherton spends many pages rationalizing and celebrating the lovers’ vast age difference.
103 Ibid, iv.
104 George Call in “Orchard Management Plan: Fort Ross Historic State Park” (Sonoma County, CA: National Park Service, April, 2015)
105 National Park Service, “Management Plan”
Codlin Moth, “never made its appearance there.” A tale of fertility grew. A 1904 newspaper article celebrated that the “famous old apple orchard... yielded a large crop of apples this season.” In 1908, two papers claimed the “ancient trees... planted by the Russians 145 years ago [actually 65 years]” were “loaded with... a crop of the very best apples grown anywhere.”

In what was becoming a yearly ritual, papers in 1915 eagerly exclaimed the trees “still bear.”

By 1920, a legend had taken shape. Supposedly, when first planted, “the trees were blessed and an inhibition pronounced that they should never die, neither should the crop of apples fail at harvest time.” A myth of “eternal life” was reiterated throughout the 1920s. As such, it must have come as no surprise when in 1927 the prominent Berkeley entomologist E.O Essig — after savoring the orchard’s now “delicious juicy fruit” — claimed “the preservation of the living trees planted by the Russians should be undertaken before it is too late... It is nothing less than criminal to allow the present progress of decay and despoliation to continue!”

Why did Russians trees eternally bearing fruit titillate settlers? Better yet, how did the bitter fruit become delicious? Settlers were interested in what the fruits had to say about colonial permanence. The orchard’s flavor and productivity asserted a familiar settler colonial narrative: California's landscape was bountiful, but wild, and needed male settlers to harness its

---

106 “Apples on the Coast of Sonoma and Mendocino Counties,” Pacific Rural Press, March 27, 1897.
108 “Ancient Fruit Trees,” Healdsburg Tribune, September 17, 1908.
“Tree Bears Fruit at 145 Years Old,” Press Democrat, September 11, 1908.
113 Frink, “Pioneers,” 150. As historian Brenda Frink shows in her analysis of Sequoia preservation in California, trees “pointed simultaneously to the past and to the future and to California’s deficiencies as well as to its promise.”
potential. Once settlers harnessed its potential, the landscape was forever improved from its natural disorder. This spatial improvement was demarcated with fencing, but outlived the decay of the physical boundary. An 1893 report notes that during the Russian period the orchard “was planted with flowers and kept in good order” and surrounded by “a plank fence eight feet high… to keep out the Indians and Aleuts.” A 1922 Berkeley history thesis claims the “original fence” was crumbling and “overgrown by moss.” The colonized space, even once the fence fell, distinguished itself from the surrounding chaos: even unkempt, the Russian orchard kept producing. It could not be removed.

The orchard’s organic colonial ruins were sensual land claims that positioned Anglo-settlers as righteous recipients to Fort Ross’ colonial past. The male colonizers’ seeds — usually from other continents — were planted in the supposedly fertile feminine landscape, producing an idealized colonial space and burying Indigenous landscape beneath historical, yet still colonial, plants. It claimed belonging through permanently colonial space. When colonizers supposedly maximized the land, they wrote their seeds as permanent parts of the landscape.

But the orchard’s success was underwritten with doom. These articles stress that the garden survived, but also that the Russians were gone and the fences had crumbled. Why stress doom? The exoticism and intrigue of Russian nobility perishing in a remote American outpost fulfilled the genre expectations of regional fiction. But more importantly, it affirmed American innocence. Fort Ross, vulnerability suggested, was a colonial project that Russians began in a

---

114 As historian David Glassberg explains, California historical societies tried to “present the history of the land in such a way that [they] can place [themselves] as its possessors and guardians.” Glassberg, *History*.
117 Further, the orchard is placed in the area of Metini-Ross’ California Indian neighborhood, and, more specifically, Metini Village. It is worth considering how the nearby presence, and perhaps ongoing visits, of the Kashia influenced preservationists insistence upon “Russian space.”
deep past but Americans completed. As such, their successes were shared. But so were their losses. White victimhood imbued all celebrations of the fort and the land it was upon.\textsuperscript{118} Doomed, romantic, and white history was emplaced in California and made accessible to settlers hungry for heritage.

If the orchard showed how Atherton considered Fort Ross a permanently improved space absent of Indigeneity, Atherton’s use of the dead furthers this project. Settler tales of haunting connected a tragic aristocratic pre-American past with an American present. In these stories, the \textit{Russianness} of the land never quite left. Haunting at Fort Ross initially appeared in Atherton’s first short story and journalism piece on Fort Ross. In the article, Atherton tells of the first American settlers at Fort Ross, a young couple struggling to work the land. With growing debts, they feared failure and prepared for the worst. Then, “one night he and his wife suddenly and simultaneously awoke to behold a tall, gray, venerable Russian looming out of the dark. ‘Plant potatoes!’ cried the apparition in a loud voice. ‘Plant potatoes!’ and he vanished.”\textsuperscript{119} The couple made a fortune off potatoes. Russian ghosts wanted the American couple to succeed. Further, the ghosts offered knowledge that showed intimate ties to the land. As Colleen Boyd and Coll Thrush claim, ghosts can provide “a spectral genealogy linking settlers to new places.”\textsuperscript{120} In Atherton’s article, ghosts provided deeply emplaced and supportive ancestors to American

\textsuperscript{118} As Karl Steele writes about White north Americans celebrating Viking heritage, “…usefully, this was a history of failure. The Norse had come, and then, it seemed, they had gone. Or had been made to leave. White Americans could thereby imagine themselves as victims… With works like this, we are made to hear that white America had always belonged, that it has always been embattled, and that its expansion into North America was nothing but the return of what had, in a historical sense, always been there”

\textsuperscript{119} Atherton, “Romance of Fort Ross.”

colonists, affirming the Americans’ belonging at Metini-Ross and earlier colonial success on the land.

Haunting became an essential feature of the Fort Ross story. In Bret Harte’s magazine *The Overland Monthly*, an article on Fort Ross claimed “there is even a ‘haunted chamber,’ where the ghosts walk at night.”

Atherton, in her article, stated Fort Ross “is encouragement for the Occultists.” “The place was said to be haunted by several generations of ghosts,” “apparitions of red-headed dwarfs,” and a dead lover who “in the moonlight, [would] let down her hair (golden) and moan loud and long.”

Laura Call, who was born at Fort Ross in 1877, was afraid of nearby mines as a small child: “I feared I might meet something very eerie, not of this world. I was sure there was a ghost or a witch or something of that sort there...I looked fearfully but kept tight hold of the posts on the porch so that if a witch came, it would have to take the whole house if it took me.” For Laura Call, it was only after her fascination with “fairies and ghosts” that she learned of “the heretofore unreal existence of the ‘Russians’” and “that Fort Ross had a history.”

Ghosts were a medium for engaging a Russian past in the American present.

At Fort Ross, ghosts were a vehicle to assert innocence. Unlike the majority of American colonial ghost stories, Fort Ross stories lack Indigenous ghosts. Haunting temporally saturated Fort Ross with whiteness and implied Americans were inheriting an incomplete, but permanently white, colonial space from an aborted Russian past. Haunting positioned America and Fort Ross within a singular colonial project, and merged an imagined Russian past with an American present. Americans, Russian ghosts said, shared their history, and, as such, belonged. This was a

---

121 Greene, “Fort Ross,” *Overland Monthly*
strategic sleight of hand that allowed a deep history to be written of the space surrounding Fort Ross entirely absent of Indigenous people. It sacrificed the triumphantly linear narratives of Spanish christianization to create a space temporally saturated with whiteness.

This connection to a Russian history allowed settlers to feel they belonged. In 1893, *The Overland Monthly* longingly claimed that at Fort Ross “traditions are abundant” and “all the people have stories to tell of the ancient days.” The journalist continued that if “traditions and ivy are said to grow well in but one place on the Atlantic seaboard of this country, at Newport. On the West Coast...Fort Ross alone seems to fit it well.” History marked the people, and made them Californian: “even the smallest toddler...will pick up one of the rusty hand-wrought spikes of curious shapes that are part of the soil in places, and tell you that ‘the ‘Ooshians made that’.124 This article suggested a “venerable” heritage at the site marked Americans with a localized identity. As Laura Call wrote, after learning about Fort Ross’ history, “never again did I feel unimportant. How triumphant I felt. What a wonderful height I suddenly possessed.”125 Settlers at Fort Ross used history to feel exceptionally and uniquely Californian.

Russian doom undergirded this localized identity. This can be seen at the Fort Ross cemetery, where writers wrote of the tragedy of Russian disappearance. As Atherton described in her 1893 article, “on a lonely knoll between the forest and the gray ponderous ocean, flanked on either side by wild beautiful gulches, are fifty or more graves of dead and gone Russians, with not a line to preserve the ego, once so mighty.”126 Even more revealing, in Atherton’s tale *The Doomswoman*, written during her stay at Fort Ross, she placed the graveyard “on a knoll so bare and black and isolated that its destiny was surely taken into account at creation...The forest

125 Call, *Fort Ross*, 19.
seemed blacker just behind it, the shadows thicker in the gorges that embraced it, the ocean grayer and more illimitable before it.” “Natalie Ivanhoff is there in her copper coffin,” Atherton wrote referencing a fictional exiled Russian princess, “forgotten already.”

Why this emphasis on the melancholic failure of aristocrats? Or, to return to an earlier chapter, why would Gertrude Atherton rob a grave? This interest in cemeteries is common in American history, and settler graverobbing is something of a national pastime. As Sarah Kavanagh has claimed, settlers use cemeteries as a means for “planting an Indigenous extinction narrative into the American land itself.” Cemeteries frequently imply Native American extinction by placing their bodies in deep pasts disconnected from the present. These “extinction myths allowed Europeans and their descendants to claim and adopt an American identity that, without these myths, belonged to Native peoples.” This was different at Fort Ross. Settlers did not require the colonial trope of the vanishing Indian at the cemetery. They mourned Russian disappearance, and by doing so rendered the site’s Indigenous pasts and presents so distant they were unspeakable. The deep past, they implied, belonged to dead Russians, not Native Americans. At Metini-Ross, Americans hid the settler colonial project beneath vacant Russianness.

Combining tragic tales of failed Russian colonization and triumphant stories of American manifest destiny was complicated. It required contradictory claims: that the broader project of white colonization in California could have failed, and that American colonization was destined. This supposed California history was both contingent — it could have gone differently — and

---

127 Atherton, *The Doomswoman.*
fated. Atherton’s Fort Ross reflected this complicated tension and showed that Russians could be doomed and still pave the way for white inheritance. She weakly gestured towards alternative histories where California became Russian, but only to further highlight tragedy. In Atherton’s previously mentioned work, Rezanov, Concepcion (a metaphor for California) observed that “were Russia a nation of Rezánovs, what opposition in California against the tide thundering down from the north?” Concepcion, looking over San Francisco’s sprawling emptiness, “could picture a great city covering that immense and almost deserted space... a flourishing colony when the Russian bear had devoured the Spanish lion.” She dreamed of marrying Rezanov in a civilized Californian state. But, Concepcion’s dream of a modern California was impossibly pinned on Russian colonists. Russia was not quite ready, and Concepcion’s dream would only be realized “when she and her lover were dust.”129 This vision offers provocative alternative histories but, however provocative, still guaranteed Russian failure.

For settlers, the idea that another “civilized” colonial power could have succeeded in taking America was immensely appealing. Joseph Knowland, the leader of the Native Sons of the Golden West, the California Landmark’s League, and the California Parks Commission, recognized it with a sense of wonder: “with the passing of years and in the light of present world events, the attempts of the Russians to obtain a foothold in California offers opportunity for wide speculation concerning the potentialities of the moment had it been aggressively and successfully pressed. The course of California and possibly American history might have been changed.”130 Even today, contingency stirs historians of Fort Ross, and with good reason — as James Clifford writes in his fascinating “Fort Ross Meditation,” Fort Ross is a space to “disarticulate

129 Atherton, Rezanov.
130 Knowland, Landmark History.
California,” to consider “alternative futures… breaking the spell of inevitability.”

But what “alternative futures” do we acknowledge? Settler contingency narratives do not envision Fort Ross as uncolonized — or decolonized — Metini. They still promise colonial success. There is a logical dissonance at play here. The appeal of the Fort Ross Story lay in it suggesting the broader white colonial project could fail, and also suggesting success was guaranteed. This allowed readers to enjoy romantic stories of white victimhood, while also suggesting California had always been fated to be colonized. It allowed them to meld together an identity of heroic colonizer, and, in a sense, native Californian. This should be no surprise. As Philip Deloria shows, such fallacious slips are the stuff of settler American identity. When settlers “[refuse] to synthesize the contradictions between European and Indian” they can “[hold] them in nearperfect suspension,” and “have their cake and eat it too.”

At Fort Ross, a dense tangle of paradoxical structures and stories did not crush colonial foundations, but instead obfuscated their origins and naturalized white settlement.

Eventually, the Fort Ross Story completely saturated what settlers imagined possible at Metini-Ross. Tragedy and romance became the dominant emotions associated with the site. As Laura Call mourned near the end of her memoir, “where did it all go, that romantic glamor, the wonderful sunsets from Sunset rock, the limitless sea whence the Russians had vanished?”

Fort Ross, she wrote in her old age, was “never gone from my dreams and memories,” before ending her memoir with a melancholic poem she wrote in 1899. In it, Call dreamed of home, describing the landscape and the dead Russians beneath it:

...and pass the gulch, upon the steep
   Where Russian warriors now sleep

---

132 Deloria, Playing, 185.
133 Call, Fort Ross, 23.
a tall shaft doth its vigil keep
At old Fort Ross

The watch towers crumbling with decay
Lean where their builders sailed away
With low — bowed head they seem to pray
o’er souffelt loss…

...Where ever I may chance to roam
In crowded street, by ocean’s foam
My heart will still remember home
and old Fort Ross…134

At Fort Ross, some two decades of physical and discursive construction dressed a Kashia
and Miwok place as a settler home.

Conclusion

The Fort Ross Story Today

2012 marked the bicentennial of Russian Fort Ross. In celebration, the Fort Ross Conservancy — run by Russian oligarch Victor Vekselberg’s Renova Group — hosted a Fort Ross Bicentennial Gala at San Francisco’s City Hall. Considering the relative obscurity of Fort Ross, this has been the source of recent controversy rooted in a longer funding scandal. In 2009, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed major budget cuts to the California State Park system, putting some seventy parks, including Fort Ross, at risk of closure. The news reached Russia quickly. Kremlin officials reached out to Victor Vekselberg, the billionaire chairman of the Russian conglomerate the Renova Group, whose assets included TNK-BP oil (a joint asset with BP oil) and RUSAL aluminum productions (the biggest aluminum company in the world at the time). Russian officials suggested Vekselberg create a fund for the site, and Vekselberg and Schwarzenegger quickly reached an agreement. Two years later, Fort Ross was one of California’s best funded parks, helping provide the framework for a new trend of privatizing state parks across the country.

In 2019, this arrangement entered the news again. Federal investigators, looking into Michael Cohen’s payments to Stormy Daniels on behalf of President Donald Trump, found shady dealings between Cohen, Vekselberg, and Trump’s cabinet. The United States Government has blacklisted and sanctioned Vekselberg, andongoing, the park’s funding is at risk. Vekselberg paid Cohen $500,000 for “real estate consulting,” that, most analysts agree was a “pay-to-play” scheme with the Trump presidency. From 2001 to 2015, Renova Group and its parent company, Columbus Nova, spent a combined 1.7 million on Washington lobbyist. Since 2008, the Renova Group has spent $34.5 Million on “social investments” in the United States. Many of these ties strangely encircle Fort Ross. As numerous journalists have noted, since Vekselberg took over, Fort Ross State Historic Park has become a shared financial cause for numerous corporations and institutions looking to do business in Russia and with Vekselberg. Funding has come from Chevron Oil, PepsiCo, Cisco Systems, Stanford and MIT (Vekselberg and these institutions plan to fund a “Russian Silicon Valley” outside Moscow), and American billionaire Steve Schwarzman, creator of the Blackstone Group and former chairman of Trump’s Strategic and Policy Council.

2012’s Bicentennial Fort Ross Gala, hosted by Vekselberg in San Francisco’s City Hall, offers a concrete snapshot of the power involved. Vekselberg hosted this black-tie event, with seats starting at 2,500 dollars, after having already invested 1.7 million dollars in the remote historic park. Invitees supped on borscht and venison, the Mariinsky Theater Orchestra recorded a special Tchaikovsky performance, shown over images of Fort Ross. Members of the Bolshoi Theater Opera performed live. Amongst the 150 prominent guests were federal and state senators (Dianne Feinstein offered a speech), Russian and American ambassadors, the Russian minister of culture (Vladimir Medinsky), VMware founder and current CEO of Google’s cloud business (Don Greene), a former Pepisco CEO, and an MIT chairman and CitiGroup CEO.

Ross within dominant American histories, this was a strangely glamorous night with a shockingly influential guestlist. Perhaps most notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin and American secretary of state Hillary Clinton sent prepared statements to be read. These statements provide a window into the intrigue of Fort Ross for Russian and American elites today. Putin was particularly to the point: “the creation of the first Russian settlements on the coast of Northern California not only opened a direct route for development of the vast territories” but should “become a symbol of spiritual ties, friendship and trust between our two countries and peoples.” Putin celebrated Fort Ross as “a milestone in our common history.”

Earlier that year, he released a joint statement with American president Barack Obama celebrating the bicentennial. They together claimed Fort Ross “underscores the historic ties between our countries.”

It is worth asking: what historic ties are they talking about? American and Russian interactions at Russian Fort Ross were negligible. Instead, it seems these leaders are celebrating that America and Russia colonized the same plot of land and, as Putin articulates, “opened a direct route for development of the vast territories.” This is a colonial lie — the land did not need “development,” and the “vast territories” were American Indian lands — that shows just how alive the Fort Ross Story remains. American settlers constructed Fort Ross as part of a prolonged effort to claim California and eliminate Kashia and Miwok communities. A colonial genocide.

---


stole land at Fort Ross before white nationalist Americans purchased the site, seeking, explicitly, to create “romantic” histories that connected them to the landscape and made California an Anglo-American place. And this project is incomplete. California still is a Native American place, and in no sense did settlers succeed in destroying the Kashia or the Miwok, or their ties to their homelands. To show this, this conclusion offers a brief and superficial history of the Kashia from 1850 to the present, and a consideration of recent Indigenous resurgences around Metini-Ross. The barest facts alone reveal that Metini-Ross is still Kashia land and the project of making California a settler space is ongoing.

The Kashia have maintained a strong presence on their homeland despite enduring Spanish, Russian, and American colonialisms. The first large scale invasion of their ancestral territory occurred during the mass American migration of Fort Ross’ Benitz era. In response to the genocide that arrived with American colonialism, the Kashia tightened their community and developed the spiritual and communal center, Metini Village (different than Metini, which refers to their larger homeland), adjacent to Fort Ross. Numerous other villages continued to exist, but this was a place where the band came together to develop political and cultural strategies to survive an emerging genocide. This effort to protect Kashia culture, land, and people with communal and spiritual centers continued when Dixon acquired Fort Ross and dispossessed the Kashia of Metini Village. The Kashia created another communal and spiritual center on their ancestral territory at the ranch of Charles Haupt (a settler who married into the Kashia community). By 1915, as California’s “Indian policy” shifted, the Haupts began writing with

---


139 Sarah Gonzalez and Kent Lightfoot, “The Study of Sustained Colonialism: An Example from the Kashia Pomo Homeland in Northern California” *American Antiquity* 83, no.3 (July 2018), 439.
federal agents for a legally promised Kashia Rancheria. Throughout negotiations, under the
guidance of Kashia spiritual leader Anne Jarvis, the Kashia refused any offers away from their
traditional homeland. And in 1916 the Kashia prevailed, acquiring the 40 acre Stewart’s Point
Rancheria, which, over the next century, spiritual leaders such as Anne Jarvis and Essie Parish
made into a site of cultural thriving and decolonial importance.

The Kashia have more than survived the genocidal attacks of an American state bent on
Indigenous assimilation and disappearance. To this day they remain on their ancestral territory.
Recently, in 2015, the band purchased 700 acres of coastal land near their rancheria, officially
(re)claiming a sacred site previously stolen by American settlers.⁴⁰ This purchase has been part
of a prolonged process of (re)claiming Kashia land, and, according to Kashia chairman Reno
Franklin, will hopefully provide the transactional framework for more (re)claimation across the
state. On this land, the Kashia hope to create an interpretive trail that tells history from a Kashia
perspective. This is a clear response to the singular colonial tales popularized during the Heritage
Movement. But while settler education is important, this (re)clamation is primarily about the
Kashia, not settlers. As Franklin writes, “When we danced on that property for the first time, it
was probably the most powerful moment that our tribe has experienced in the last 100 years—to
have the sound of our clappers and our whistles, and hear the wind through the feathers of our
dancers ...That was the moment when the land was ours.”¹⁴¹

---

⁴⁰ I follow Cutcha Risling Baldy’s framing of “re” within parentheses: “In putting (re) in parenthesis, I am able to
more fully demonstrate that Indigenous peoples are not just claiming and writing in the present, but they are
participating in (re)vivification that builds a future with the past, showing how these epistemological foundations
speak to a lasting legacy that is both ancient and modern.” Baldy, we are dancing for you, 8.
¹⁴¹ Reno Franklin quoted in Deborah Utacia Krol, “How This Tribe Got Their Coastal California Lands Returned”
Yes Magazine, April 2, 2018.
This resurgence has changed Fort Ross State Park. Since 2012, the Kashia have become influential partners at Metini-Ross, asserting their own understandings of what the place means: the band (re)made a dance circle outside the stockade, have organized and operated Metini Day, and participate and lead numerous interpretive events and academic studies. A dance group comprised of Kashia tribal members, the Su Nu Nu Shinal, who have been performing for decades, have brought Kashia song and dance back to Metini and also toured across Russia. And the Kashia are not the only Indigenous peoples reshaping the historic site. This year, in 2019, Unangaʻi historian Lauren Peters organized the sixth annual Alaska Native Day, which for the first time was attended by Sakha (Indigenous Siberian) tribal members. This year’s Alaska Native Day, which celebrates all Alaskan coast communities that were affected by Russian colonialism, was also attended by Unangax, Supiaq, Dene’ina Athabascan, Haida and Tlingit tribal members. In the past, Inupiaq and Yupik people have also attended. The histories told at this event celebrate these various Indigenous cultures and histories, but also illuminate the horrors of Russian colonialism in Russia, Alaska, and California.\(^2\) While the Fort Ross Conservancy initially funded this event, funding was withdrawn after critical histories of Russian colonialism were vocalized.\(^3\) Recently, according to some, understanding has grown between the parties, and more space has been made for various histories of Metini-Ross. The efforts of

---


\(^3\) The Fort Ross Conservancy does continue to offer in-kind help, provide insurance, hire life-guards for the boat race, and organizational assistance. But all costs are covered through grass-roots fundraising and grant writing. Sponsors include: Unalaska Corporation, Aleut Foundation, Agnes Larsen Darnell Scholarship, Sealaska Heritage, CALaska Culture, Alaska Native Sisterhood, Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Rachel Langford (artist), Maria Tkachuk, Natalie Imeshev, Lauren and Mitch Peters, Pacific Northwest Aleut Council, Aleut Pribilof Islands Association, Native Village of Afognak, Rene Edelman Azarra, Trust for Mutual Understanding, Alliance for Traditional California Arts.
Peters and others to tell histories of Fort Ross from Indigenous perspectives highlights the difficulties and possibilities of revisiting this historic site.\textsuperscript{144}

The effects of the heritage movement have been particularly clear for the Coast Miwok. The California Story enabled a settler colonial effort to erase their existence as a nation in the past and present. The American federal government revoked federal recognition for the Coast Miwok with the 1950s Termination Act, claiming the Coast Miwok were not a historic people. This was, as scholars have shown, based upon the settler colonial “California Story” and shows the present day harm fiction enables.\textsuperscript{145} It was not until 2000 that the federal government recognized the Coast Miwok as a people, when prolific scholar, writer, and chairman of the Federated Coast Miwok, Greg Sarris, helped gain federal recognition for the Miwok as part of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria (which encompasses all Miwok bands).\textsuperscript{146} This recognition is a hugely significant correction of dishonest history and policy, and provides access to federal services, land, legal rights, and a (still difficult) route to reacquire tribal materials that museums and academics have taken over the years.\textsuperscript{147}

But, even without recognition, the Coast Miwok were still Coast Miwok. Likewise, while recent work with Fort Ross State Historic Park has been incredibly significant, history reveals the resiliency of the people and stories that intersect there. Indigenous histories have historically

\textsuperscript{144} The presence of the Sakha further highlights some of the difficulties at Fort Ross and the ironies of its funding. The Sakha Republic is rich in mineral wealth and natural resources. This has led to extensive resource extraction on Sakha land, and, despite generating massive wealth, very little returns to the Sakha. Instead, the Sakha suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation. This degradation not only damages their homeland, but also makes subsistence livelihoods — which many Sakha practice — difficult. Victor Vekselber and the Renova Company, the lead funder of Fort Ross State Historic Park, profit massively from Siberian resource extraction. \textsuperscript{145} See Kent Lightfoot, \textit{Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). \textsuperscript{146} Greg Sarris, “Leadership,” accessed July 31, 2019, https://greg-sarris.com/tribal-work/#Leadership. \textsuperscript{147}https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/coast-miwoks-fight-for-recognition-DCvoXpbNMUG663ULzmQ5hQ/
survived despite colonial attention. Still, recent funding and activities at the park have been useful and important, and provided avenues for tribes to tell their own stories and practice their own cultures on stolen land. Fort Ross can and should reflect Indigenous histories and futures.

Scholar Audra Simpson writes that “Indian sovereignty is real. It is not a moral language game or a matter to be debated in ahistorical terms.”\(^{148}\) Settlers created the Fort Ross Story to conceal this. Narrow histories that do not acknowledge that Fort Ross was and is a colonial site on Indigenous land are not only unjust, but also ahistorical. Recently, the park has done important work to destabilize a tale created by white nationalist colonizers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And these changes have supported territorial and political changes. They matter. But the heritage movement runs deep in settler histories and California’s parks. Hopefully park officials will continue to expand recent work to fund, support, and give space to Indigenous histories of Metini-Ross. Historian Ann Stoler suggests that “ruins” can be “sites that animate both despair and new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected collaborative political projects.”\(^{149}\) At Fort Ross, “ruins” of Russian and American colonialism sit on Pomo land. The bids for entitlement should be clear. Recognizing who reconstructed Fort Ross State Historic Park and why they did so is a chance to make meaningful change in who has access to the site. Critically historicizing Fort Ross Historic Park is a start towards, in the words of scholar Jodi Byrd, taking “the cacophonies of colonialism as they are.”\(^{150}\) Studying Fort Ross State Historic Park, and the Heritage Movement in general, is a chance to historicize the uneven access and power relations that mark most California historic landmarks today.


Bibliography:

Archive:
Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, California.

Newspapers:
Blade Tribune
Daily Alta California
The Petaluma Argus
Sacramento Daily Union
Sonoma Democrat
Press Democrat (Santa Rosa)
Healdsburg Tribune
Pacific Rural Press
Healdsburg Enterprise

Atherton, Gerturde. Before the Gringo Came. New York, New York: J. Selwin Tait, 1894

———. The Doomswoman. New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1892


———. “The Romance of Fort Ross.” California Illustrated Magazine 5, no.1 (December 1893)

Baldy, Cutcha Risling. We Are Dancing For You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women’s Coming-of-Age Ceremonies. Washington: University of Washington Press, 2018


———. We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California’s Round Valley Reservation, 1850-1941. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009

Boyd, Colleen and Coll Thrush, editors. Phantom Pasts, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in


California State Parks. *Fort Ross State Historic Park: Visitor Center Interpretation Project Plan*. California: California State Parks, 2014


Frink, Brenda Denise. “Pioneers and Patriots: Race, Gender, and Historical Memory in California, 1875-1915.” PhD Diss., Stanford University, 2010


———. “The Study of Sustained Colonialism: An Example from the Kashia Pomo Homeland in Northern California.” American Antiquity 83, no.3 (July 2018)


Harte, Bret. “Concepcion de Arguello.” March, 1872


Krol, Deborah Utacia. “How This Tribe Got Their Coastal California Lands Returned.” Yes Magazine. April 2, 2018


Waseurtz, G.M. *A sojourn in California by the King’s Orphan. The travels and sketches of G.M. Waseurtz af Sandels, a Swedish gentleman who visited California in 1842-1843*. San