

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Mason: *The Census of 1790: A Demographic History of Colonial California*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mb0s64c>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 21(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Crosby, Harry W.

Publication Date

1999-07-01

Peer reviewed

[s]aw house floors, sweathouse floors, earthen mounds, stone paved courts and dance floors, rock and earthen enclosures, and cemeteries still marked with rock slab gravestones, whalebone, and wooden planks.

It is to these features that Benson devotes her attention in the final chapter. Benson develops a six-point model of the internal structure of a typical protohistoric and historical Chumash village. The model is based primarily on Bowers' many observations and on those of other early investigators, including Schumacher and Font. The model includes suppositions concerning the relative arrangement and topographical positioning of dwellings, cemeteries, and ceremonial complexes.

Benson compares the model to information developed from later archaeological sources, including D. B. Rogers and a variety of published and unpublished reports. She finds a comparatively close fit, with several notable exceptions, between the model's predictions and the findings from excavated protohistoric and historical sites on the mainland coast. A much poorer fit is found between archaeological information from inland sites and the model. She discusses a number of important issues in detail, in particular the variability in the size of sweathouses and the nature of the mounds and earthen enclosures that Bowers observed only at interior sites.

Benson has provided to our research community a valuable service and we should be grateful. She diligently sought out original documents, ably edited, annotated, and cross-referenced the notes, and developed a useful model to guide future archaeological work and the reinterpretation of existing data. The work would have been improved by a greater effort at integrating the book's various parts. But the notes are a starting place. Serious investigators will need to consult the original notes, since important information has been redacted in the interest of site security.

REFERENCE

Blackburn, Thomas C., and Travis Hudson
1990 Time's Flotsam: Overseas Collections of

California Indian Material Culture. Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 35.



The Census of 1790: A Demographic History of Colonial California. William Marvin Mason. Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 45, 1998, vi + 133 pp., 11 figs., 9 maps, \$29.95 (hard cover), \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by:

HARRY W. CROSBY

1277 Silverado, La Jolla, CA 92037-3713.

Many California history buffs, and even a number of studious researchers, betray a misperception of the state of our knowledge of Spanish colonial California, especially the early years. In fact, readily available primary and secondary sources for the period are largely restricted to two subjects: (1) accounts of missionaries, mission foundings, and mission affairs, and (2) accounts of military/political leaders and their activities in support of missions or in carrying out explorations. By the time of Mexican Independence (1821), missionaries and military men were losing their primacy in Alta California affairs. Soldiers and Indians were taking back seats in the local economy and in local politics.

The emerging demographic force in the area was made up of *gente de razón*, Hispanic secular folk, who served neither church nor state, although many were descendants of the soldiers and mission servants who powered the Spanish conquest carried out in 1769 and the decade or two thereafter. By the 1830s and 1840s, when Americans and other foreigners arrived on the

scene in large numbers, the *gente de razón* were established socially and economically to the point that they completely dominated the letters and memoirs of the visitors. Today's reader, however, is usually at a loss to bridge the apparent disconnection between the early Indian/mission/soldier presidio scene and that of vast ranches, sea trade, and an active, secular Hispanic social life.

Mason's present work contributes a solid, valuable plank for use in building a better view of the origins of the *gente de razón* and their presence from the first days of Spanish occupation. His is the kind of research needed by anyone who wants to know about the origins and circumstances of California's Hispanic population; it will serve aficionados, historians, and genealogists alike.

The title of Mason's work is deceptively restrictive and the subtitle is deceptively inclusive. The census of 1790 is presented in full and is preceded by a useful history and two other important rosters of Hispanic settlers: another census of Alta California, that of 1775, and a list of the colonists recruited by Capitán Fernando de

Rivera in 1781. In addition, the author provides an unusually detailed analysis of the racial make-up of those counted in the 1790 census and an equally important and useful sidebar on race and caste on the frontier of northwest New Spain, as Mexico was then called. All of the above is welcome, but it must be said that it falls somewhat short of the promise of *A Demographic History of Colonial California*, but that is a small matter when one considers what the work is and does.

Mason's professional experiences have made him perhaps California's foremost authority on individual *gente de razón* of the colonial period. We are fortunate that he here records some of what he knows to provide a great deal of information about individuals that would otherwise be exasperatingly difficult to amass. For years, I have regretted, and publicly expressed my regret, that so much work has been done by unaffiliated individuals studying the *gente de razón* of Alta California for personal reasons—usually genealogical—but leaving us no useful record of their discoveries. This work breaks with that unfortunate tradition and appears as an answer to my prayers and, it is my belief, to those of generations to come.

