

122° 02' W, 38° 04' N

Port Chicago, at coordinates 122° 02' W, 38° 04' N, is 30 miles northeast across San Francisco Bay from the city of San Francisco and a few miles up the Sacramento River from Carquinez Strait where, at the city of Martinez, the river in ages past has cut a gap through the low hills that circle the bay on all her flanks. Through that narrow, deep gorge the Sacramento makes her debouchment into the upper San Francisco Bay, at San Pablo Bay, carrying the mainly seasonal flow of her many tributaries that drain the Cascade Mountains in the north, the massive Sierra Nevada Range east along the Nevada border and, from the south, the California Central Valley from as far as the Tehachapi Mountains in southern California.

Twice a day high tides from the Pacific Ocean flood through San Francisco's Golden Gate across San Francisco Bay. At Carquinez Strait the rising tides often obstruct the diminished summer flow of the Sacramento and the pent flow of the river over millennia has formed a large tidal bay, Suisun Bay, that arches to the north just east of Carquinez Strait. Port Chicago, on the southern shore of Suisun Bay, is within the North Temperate Zone—north of the Tropic of Cancer and south of the Arctic Circle. At latitude 38' N, Port Chicago is slightly more than one-third the distance from the equator to the North Pole.

Port Chicago and most of coastal California enjoy the Mediterranean type climate, mild wet winters and dry summers with sunny days predominant throughout the year. California's Mediterranean climate results from a combination of atmospheric and oceanic conditions on the windward Pacific Ocean. In summer a vast, cool semipermanent high pressure atmospheric cell usually develops between California and Hawaii, the Pacific High. Low pressure summer storms from the

western Pacific move against the stable periphery of the Pacific High and are deflected north from the California coast to the coasts of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. During normal winters the Pacific High weakens and moves south toward the equator and winter storms flow without obstruction to the California coast from the breeding ground of North American winter weather among Alaska's western Aleutian Islands.

Summers in California are dry and winters are wet, with the heaviest 74 inches annual rainfall in the northern part of the state and 9 inches at the Mexican border. San Francisco on the coast usually receives 22 inches of rain a year; 30 miles inland at Port Chicago 16 inches are typical, of which a scant 0.03 inch is the average precipitation for July. The Port Chicago climate year-round is mild. July high temperatures range between 75° F and 92° F; rarely are July nighttime temperatures less than 55°.

At Port Chicago during July surface winds blow typically from the west-northwest with an average speed of 8 miles per hour; the annual average wind speed is 7.5 miles per hour. Port Chicago, however, has a pattern of regular afternoon and early evening wind that is not characteristic of most of the San Francisco Bay area; Carquinez Strait and the Sacramento River course provide a windgap through the hills that surround the bay and the system is a major feeder of cool coastal air to the summer-heated central valleys to the east. Afternoon summer winds through Carquinez Strait, across Suisun Bay and up the course of the Sacramento are most intense in mid- to late afternoon but diminish an hour or two after sunset when the hot, rising air mass above the solar-heated interior valleys begins to cool. These were the conditions at 10:30 PM the evening of July 17, 1944 when a massive explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine changed the course of history.

The Mediterranean climate of coastal California is so mild and carefree, and food is so plentiful that most people who are born there and those who have moved there stay there, and that has been true for 10,000 years. California was home to the largest and most varied concentration of American Indians north of Mexico. The immigration

of Asian Mongoloid peoples to North America from the northeast of the Asian continent occurred at the beginning of the present Holocene Epoch 10,000 years ago when most of the North American Continent south to the present border between Canada and the United States was covered by a massive ice cap that extended from the west to the east coast. The present western area of Alaska and the northeast Asian continent were, however, ice free. The northern continental ice sheets, as much as two miles thick, held so much of Earth's water that the world's oceans were then 360 feet lower than today; the Bering Sea was dry and provided a land bridge that joined the Asian continent from the present East Cape, Siberia, to Alaska on the North American continent.

As Earth's climate warmed the ice caps melted, sea levels rose to their present depths and the land bridge was submerged, but when the Bering Sea was dry, or much lower and offered a chain of small islands now submerged, Asiatic peoples followed the rising summer sun to the east. Probably not much different from the motives of men who in historic time have left a homeland to cross the seas, those early Asiatic immigrants were at least curious to discover what lay beyond the horizon and, if modern times are a guide to Man's behavior, we can speculate they were seeking new opportunities in a new land or had been compelled to their journey by violence and oppression, environmental or other hardships of their homeland. The first men and women who made that expedition were followed by many thousands more who had learned of the new land from those who returned, for it was their descendants who during thousands of years eventually first dominantly populated North, Central and South America. Immigration from the Asian continent to North America across the Bering Sea land bridge was, however, probably not the only population source of the Americas; increasing paleogenetic evidence indicates the likelihood of trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific migrations that also occurred some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.

From the northwest area of contemporary Alaska where those early wayfarers reached North America at the end of the last Ice Age most followed a warming inland valley south that cut a gap between the great ice sheets that covered most of Canada. At the southern limit of

the glacial ice in the present area of Montana many of the immigrants moved southeastward into the American plains and from there those wanderers originated the many scattered Indian tribes who occupied North America east of California at the time the first “documented” Europeans arrived in the late 1400s. Others of those first Asian immigrants who arrived at the terminus of the glacial ice turned west following ancient rivers that flowed from the melting ice cap to the Pacific Ocean and eventually in their ramblings they found California.

Cooler and greener then, those early immigrants shared the land with the last of the mammoth and mastodon, saber tooth cats, Pleistocene horses, American camels and many other species from that time that are now extinct, but man survived and thrived in that luxuriance of nature. As the climate of the Northern Hemisphere warmed, the great northern ice covers melted, the oceans rose, North America was separated by the Bering Sea from Asia and the easier movement of prehistoric immigrants by land from Asia to North America slowed but did not cease; as Eskimos sometimes do today, those early immigrants crossed the frozen winter sea ice and during the summer thaw paddled skin boats between the continents.

By A.D. 1500, 350,000 Indians occupied California’s 156,000 square miles, mostly in the coastal areas and in the central valleys where they were established in small “tribelets” usually of no more than 100-130 persons, extended family who spoke one of the 135 Indian dialects then current in California derived from two linguistic stocks (Penutian and Hokan) that together subsumed at least 35 distinctive languages. When the first Spanish explorer to reach coastal California above the Baja California Peninsula, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, sailed into what is now San Diego harbor on September 28, 1542 the native population throughout California were established in those small extended family groups, each with a delineated territory of usually not more than 100 square miles that in the early Spanish idiom were called *rancherías*. Anthropologists and ethnographers believe that very little communication and interaction was present even between neighboring *rancherías*, but the remarkable language skills, especially of the male California Indians, when the Europeans first arrived seems to suggest at least that the young men, as might reasonably be expected, traveled

far and wide in search of trade and adventure, which necessitated the development of a considerable aptitude to learn the languages and dialects of the regions they visited. Although the adult men, women and children usually didn't travel beyond the perimeter of their individual *rancherías*, it's difficult to be persuaded that the young men didn't ramble and interact with their neighbors where they lived, and even more distantly.

The California Indians were a Stone Age people without the wheel, beasts of burden or written records; they obtained their food hunting small game, occasionally deer and elk, fishing, gathering clams, mussels and abalone along the Pacific shore, and the acorns, seeds, grains, berries, edible plants and roots that Nature provided in abundance. Agriculture was mostly unknown to the California Indians, except the cultivation of tobacco, and in the southeastern region along the Colorado River the Yuma and Mojave practiced some flood plain agriculture in manner similar to the river valley Indian cultures of Arizona and New Mexico. The Indians throughout California were superb basket-makers, arguably the best in the world, but they made no pottery except, again, in the southeastern region where the craft was somewhat known by cultural diffusion from the Indians of the Southwest.

The southern shore of Suisun Bay at Port Chicago and the central portion of what is now Contra Costa County in an area roughly centered on Mt. Diablo was home to the *rancherías* of the Bay Miwok Indians. The Bay Miwok were associated ethnologically with the larger language groupings of the Eastern Miwok who inhabited the delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquín Rivers east of Port Chicago and within a 200 miles wide band of territory across California's Central Valley, into the foothills and lower levels of the Sierra Nevada Range; however, the Bay Miwok in the Port Chicago area may have spoken a unique language, Saclan.

The north shore of Suisun Bay and a 100 miles wide territory northward for two hundred miles was home to the Patwin Indian grouping, whose language was linguistically related to the language of the Miwok but was a fundamentally different language; the Patwin tribelet

in the vicinity of the present city of Vallejo were known during the Spanish period as the Suisun and were considerably more numerous than the Bay Miwok. Immediately to the west of the southern shore of Suisun Bay along the southern rim of Carquinez Strait, the Carquines Indians were at home on their *rancherías*. The Carquines tribelet were the northern limit of the 40 tribelet groups of the Coastanoan Indians, known more often today as the Ohlone, who inhabited the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay as far south as the present city of San Jose, the western shore of San Francisco Bay, the San Francisco Peninsula and peninsula seacoast south to Monterey Bay. The language and dialects of the Coastanoan were fundamentally different from the language of the Bay Miwok, which is surprising considering that the entire area inhabited by those several tribelets was not much more than 1,000 square miles.

No archeological explorations have been made at Port Chicago or anywhere on the southern shore of Suisun Bay to investigate the Bay Miwok Indian past but the district was an area of Indian habitation during the previous 3,000 to 4,000 years. The impermanent, encampment characteristics of that habitation would have left few remnants to be discovered today, but before 20th century development claimed and removed them more than 400 ancient shell mounds and kitchen middens of the Carquines and other of the Coastanoan Indians were located on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. Although ethnographers believe there was little communication between even neighboring Indian tribelets it's very difficult to imagine that the Bay Miwok would not have often taken that one day walk from Suisun Bay to San Francisco Bay where those massive shell mounds were located. That one day walk would have offered the Bay Miwok an entirely different variety of food from the salt waters of San Francisco Bay and San Francisco Bay shoreline than what was available from the brackish waters of Suisun Bay.

The largest of those shell mounds, the Ellis Landing shell mound at the city of Richmond south of Carquinez Strait, was a one day walk for the Bay Miwok living among the hills and plains on the southern shore of Suisun Bay. The Ellis Landing mound was 450 feet long, 250 feet wide, 30 feet high and contained an estimated 1,260,000 cubic feet of

broken shells, principally clam and mussel varieties intermixed with oyster, cockle and abalone. The mound had been accumulated during a period of human habitation in the vicinity of that site during 3,000 to 4,000 years. A two-week excavation conducted by University of California archeologists in 1907, which explored less than one-tenth of the mound, discovered 265 manmade artifacts, 126 human skeletons and fifteen house pits. The bulk of the Ellis Landing mound was then removed to permit development of the Richmond city shoreline.

Destruction of the Ellis Landing shell mound immediately after the partial 1907 exploration of that site determined that essentially all that might have been known from archeological findings about the Carquines tribelet of the Coastanoan and their neighbors the Bay Miwok, was lost but the earliest Spanish explorers who trekked overland to the area from Monterey Bay and those who later reached San Francisco Bay by ship have provided some sketchy but important information about those Indians in diaries kept by literate members of those expeditions.

By about A.D.1300 the many distinct California Indian groups had established themselves in permanent locations where white men found them in historic times, 200 years later. The human population density per square mile of California in 1500 was at least four times that of any other aboriginal population in what is now the United States, but the year 1532, followed by the Spanish and then American settlement of California, marks the beginning of the end for most of that population.

The Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés had sailed with Diego Velázquez to conquer Cuba in 1511. From Cuba, Cortés established a Spanish colony in Mexico (New Spain), where he arrived in 1519; he then burned his ships to effectively commit his entire military force to the conquest of the Aztec Empire, which was complete by 1521. The next year he established a shipyard at Zacatula on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Ship construction without local supplies and the accustomed European materials necessary to rig and outfit a ship was extraordinarily difficult but the first vessels were completed in 1526.

In 1532 Cortés sent two small ships in exploration northwest up the coast; neither of the two returned. The following year he dispatched the

expedition that discovered Lower California, the Baja California Peninsula. The original commander of the expedition, Diego Becerra, was killed in a mutiny at sea and Baja California was discovered by the pilot of the expedition, Fortún Jiménez, who had led the mutineers. Jiménez landed at the bay known today as La Paz—an irony of identification since Jiménez and twenty of the Spanish expeditionary force and an unknown number of La Paz Indians were killed there in battle.

The traditional honor for the European discovery of Upper California is given to Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, who first sighted that land from the sea in 1542. Cabrillo had sailed from Navidad on the Mexican west coast in two small, poorly provisioned ships manned by conscripts on June 27, 1542. On September 28 he entered the harbor of San Diego, which he named San Miguel. The Cabrillo expedition then made a series of anchorages in southern California above San Diego at Catalina Island, on the coast opposite Catalina at San Pedro, northward of the Palos Verdes Peninsula at Santa Monica and Ventura, at several points along the Santa Barbara Channel coast, and on the Channel Island of San Miguel. As winter closed upon the California coast, Cabrillo rounded Point Conception but strong northwest winds prohibited progress north of Point Conception.

The expedition returned south into the Santa Barbara Channel and wintered at lee anchorage at San Miguel Island where, a month earlier, Cabrillo had broken an arm in an accident and where he died in January 1543, apparently consequent to an infection of that injury. Cabrillo's dying wish was that the crew would continue north under the leadership of the expedition's chief pilot Bartolomé Ferrolo when better weather would permit. The expedition did continue north up the west coast and when the ships turned back on March 1, 1543 the crews had reached a point off the coast of southern Oregon but had not landed north of Point Conception.

In April 1543 with the crews desperately sick with scurvy and nearly starved the *San Salvador* and the *Victoria* sailed into their home port in Mexico at Navidad. The expedition had not found evidence of an ice-free Northwest Passage, the mythic Strait of Anián that hope held

would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the middle latitudes and thus permit more rapid and less arduous passage between the oceans than the perilous Straits of Magellan at the southern tip of South America. And the expedition had not noticed the inconspicuous and often fog-hidden Golden Gateway entry to San Francisco Bay.

The next landing of Europeans on the coast of Upper California was made by the English in 1579. In 1577 with a privateer's commission granted by Queen Elizabeth, Admiral Francis Drake was named by the Elizabeth to head the first English expedition to circumnavigate the world, for the principal purpose of offering challenge to the Spanish dominance of the Philippine and Molucca "Spice Islands" trade in the Indonesian Malay Archipelago. Once through Magellan's straits Drake and the *Golden Hind* turned north up the South American west coast, plundered a few Spanish Manila galleons along the Peruvian coast, and reached the Alta California coast slightly above the entry to San Francisco Bay in June 1579. There Drake made an emergency landing to careen and caulk the *Golden Hind*, a vessel of 100 tons burden carrying 30 tons of captured Spanish treasure, mostly silver.

Descriptions of the California Indians inhabitant in the locality where the *Golden Hind* put in at the present Drake's Bay, recorded by members of the crew, have permitted anthropologists to identify those Indians as the Coast Miwok group whose territory included the present Drake's Bay, about forty miles north of San Francisco at the present Point Reyes National Seashore, and Bodega Bay twenty miles further north. The point on the coast where Drake put in is sometimes disputed, but his journal reports he landed in a bay marked by "white banks and cliffs," which characterize the coast at Drake's Bay but not further north, where some scholars advocate the *Golden Hind* put in. Those beautiful shoreline cliffs at Drake's Bay, brilliant on a clear sunny day, reminded Drake of the white cliffs of Dover on the southeast English coast opposite the French port of Calais. Drake named California, *Nova Albion*—New England—and claimed the land in the name of Queen Elizabeth.

The tribelets on their *rancherías* in the area of San Francisco Bay and the California Central Valley were usually no more than a group of

neighboring villages, usually with a central village in a permanent location, which was the political and social center of the tribelet, and three or four smaller *rancherías* that were periodically moved a short distance when the homes had deteriorated and the location was degraded by the unsanitary consequences of temporary habitation. Although from a somewhat unsympathetic European cultural viewpoint, one early observer of the coastal California Indians reported, “When the collection of bones and other food refuse thrown on the floor became too offensive, and the fleas and other vermin too numerous even for the Indians, they merely set fire to the house and built a new one in another spot.” There is, however, a tendency in the opposite direction of cultural evaluation to idealize the “Noble Savage.” Between the extremes, which no doubt did exist, lay the daily existence of the average Indian family in widely varying circumstances of personal and social accomplishment.

The anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber wrote, “The Californians were shorter and smaller skulled than the Indians of the eastern shore of the continent, but were superior in these respects to the Aztecs and the Mayas. They had not the copper complexion, the aquiline features, nor the proud bearing usually associated with the American Indian, but were flat-nosed and broad-faced, with an apathetic carriage.” The apathetic carriage and lack of proud bearing that Kroeber found among the California Indians at the beginning of the 20th century is not, however, reported by the earliest Spanish explorers who found the Indians energetic, with great endurance as dancers and runners, proud and self-confident individually and culturally. When Kroeber met the California Indians their culture had been destroyed and the original population of self-sufficient people had been reduced to beggary by mass murder, disease, starvation, alcohol, and all the consequent mental and emotional hurts and harms that those conditions had produced, in manner very much akin to the circumstances of African-American enslavement before the Civil War and the social, political and economic consequences to African-Americans during more than 100 years following the Civil War—and with all the same ethnocentric prejudices in place necessary to deny the humanity of the subjugated and the enslaved.

However, considering that the Indians of California in their primitive state were essentially a Stone Age people, absolutely without education in our sense, there is more logic to be amazed at their capacity to acquire the various branches of knowledge than to be shocked by their lack of it. Those of the Indians who came in contact with the first Spanish learned with astounding rapidity to speak and pronounce Spanish clearly and accurately. Contemporary Europeans and later linguists who studied the languages and dialects of the California aboriginals, when those languages were still current, found the languages and dialects spoken among the Indians to provide a syntax and vocabulary as complex as any Indo-European language, whether employed by the Indians in physical description, conceptual elaboration, or the abstract metaphysics of ontology and cosmology.

The Indian catechumens under instruction in the Spanish Catholic missions easily learned to read music and to sing concordantly, and in the church chorals they learned to intone the Latin with impeccable accuracy. Their ability to acquire mechanical arts is witnessed in the magnificent remains of the mission church buildings from the Spanish period that were erected by Indian workmen under the direction of the padres. The Franciscan missions provided industrial schools in which the Indians rapidly acquired skills in carpentry, weaving and agriculture. Without experience of any domesticated animal but the dog prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the California Indians quickly became herdsman of whom it was said there were none better in the world. However, the often perverse and vicious treatment the Indians received when in the care of the padres in the mission settings must be remembered as a brutality comparable to any that one segment of humanity has imposed upon another.

Coast Miwok in the area of Drake's Bay, the Lake Miwok in the area of Clear Lake and the Eastern Miwok, including the Bay Miwok in the Port Chicago area, were Penutian-speaking peoples whose languages are now extinct. The Penutian grouping of American Indian languages was spoken in various areas along the West Coast from British Columbia to central California and also, inexplicably, by the Zuñi of central New Mexico, 1,000 miles to the east. Penutian, one of two language phylums among the aboriginal California Indians, consisted

of four recognized language families, comprehending 23 distinct languages of which seven were spoken by the Miwok at Drake's Bay, Clear Lake and from the southern shore of Suisun Bay (Saclan language?) across the California Central Valley and into the Sierra Nevada Range; also among the Penutian-speaking California Indians were the Bay Miwok's neighbors on the north shore of Suisun Bay, the Patwin, and the Maidu, Wintun, and Yokut. Penutian-speakers apparently came from the north. Except present-day New York City, the diversity of languages spoken among the California Indians vastly surpassed the diversity of any other world area of comparable size.

By 1848 when the United States acquired California the estimated 350,000 native population of California del Norte (Upper or Alta California, above the Baja Peninsula) present in 1500 had been reduced to 100,000; between 1849 and 1855 the massive influx of fortune-seekers from every part of the world during the California Gold Rush resulted in the death of 50,000 California Indians by disease, ruthless massacre of entire native settlements, the willful destruction of the Indians' food stores and occupation of their acorn-gathering grounds. By 1880, 20,385 survived. In 1910 the anthropologist Kroeber estimated a native California Indian population of 16,000. The United States Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1933 put the number at 21,977. By 1970 the U.S. census had increased the number to 91,018, on and off reservations, and today some 150,000 California Indians are counted, although their once clear ancestral identity among the state's ethnogenic groups is essentially lost.

In September 1768 Gaspar de Portolá, a Spanish officer of the Catalán Dragoons and newly commissioned governor of Spanish California with some 100 foot soldiers and cavalry trekked 500 miles north from San Diego and reached Monterey Bay on the coast 60 miles south of San Francisco Bay. The following year on November 4, 1769 Portolá and party were the first Europeans to see San Francisco Bay, from the hills south of the present city of San Jose. Following the march from Monterey Bay to the southern fringe of San Francisco Bay Portolá returned to Monterey Bay and then to San Diego.

By March 1772 the existence of San Francisco Bay was established but the narrow and often fog-shrouded Golden Gateway into the bay from the Pacific Ocean had not yet been entered by any reported European ship. By March 1772 Gaspar de Portolá had been ordered out of California to Mexico. His successor, Pedro Fages, again from Monterey Bay, mounted an expedition up the east shore of San Francisco Bay, known as the Contra Costa, in search of a land route to Point Reyes on the seacoast north of San Francisco Bay. Fages, his small military troop and the diarist of the expedition, Fray Juan Crespí, moved up the Contra Costa past the present site of Berkeley. From Berkeley the Golden Gate was clearly visible across the bay and Fages charted the position of that single entryway into the bay, which information on August 5, 1775 would guide the first recorded European ship to her entry into San Francisco Bay, the Spanish ship-of-war *San Carlos*.

Along the way up the Contra Costa the Fages party encountered without hostility the inhabitants of the Coastanoan Indian tribelets and *rancherías* of that area, descriptions of whom Fray Crespí sketched among his diaries. Although the Fages party were the first known Europeans to pass upon the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay Fray Crespí, apparently with some humor, noted that among those Contra Costa Indians were men who, with their black beards and taller stature, much resembled the Spaniards. Since beards are unknown except among a few of the California Indians in the far north, who exhibit some scant facial hair, it is intriguing to imagine the romantic conte of a Spanish ship that entered upon the bay but never returned to home port, or the salvaged members of a shipwrecked crew a generation or more earlier who had found their way to the Eden-like *rancherías* of the Contra Costa where they were, no doubt, received as minor gods until their human nature showed the contrary to be true.

North of Berkeley, the Fages expedition reached the mouth of Carquinez Strait through which the Sacramento River enters San Francisco Bay. The expedition party were the first Europeans to see the upper reach of San Francisco Bay, known as San Pablo Bay on the north shore of which lies the present city of Vallejo opposite the island that would be the first west coast naval base of the United States, Mare

Island. In 1942 the Port Chicago Naval Magazine would be established as an administrative annex of the Mare Island Naval Yard and Magazine.

From Carquinez Strait, named by derivation from Karkin, the name of an Indian village in that region at the present site of the town of Martinez, the Fages party moved across the hills and gullies of the rough terrain on the south rim of the strait to the southern shore of Suisun Bay. On the opposite rim, Fray Crespí noted the presence of several Indian villages, which would later be recognized as the southern most population of the Patwin, separated from their southern neighbors, the Carquines and Bay Miwok, by the Sacramento River.



Captain Fages is credited with the European discovery of Suisun Bay and as the party moved along the grassy plain of the southern shore, at the site of the present Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, they passed "five large villages of very mild heathen . . . [where the party] were well received . . . and presented with some of their wild food." From Suisun Bay the Fages expedition followed the southern bank of the Sacramento a few miles past the present site of Port Chicago to the confluence of the San Joaquín River with the Sacramento, at which point Fages determined the river and the river delta obstructed a direct land

route to the north and the party returned to Monterey in some duress, lacking adequate provisions, across what is now central Contra Costa County.

The *San Carlos* had entered first upon San Francisco Bay on August 5, 1775, but San Francisco Bay and most of the west coast were then essentially uncharted and remained as unaffected by European culture

as during the previous millennia. On the east coast an extensive rural and urban mechanized, industrial civilization and culture had developed, principally of the British and French variety. The British colonies eleven months later would declare themselves independent of the British crown. In April 1776 the Spanish naval captain José de Ortega sailed into San Francisco Bay and conducted the first extensive exploration of the bay along the area of the present city of San Francisco and somewhat south, and on the opposite shore along the Contra Costa north to Carquinez Strait.

The records of the Ortega survey include the most complete early descriptions of the Coastanoan and Bay Miwok Indians, which were followed by the picturesque observations of the diarist of the 1810 Moraga expedition that reconnoitered much of the surrounding territory. Other diarists in the early 1800s recorded perceptive accounts of the villages, inhabitants and the culture of the Carquinez Strait and Suisun Bay Indians of both shores, but there is sadly very little but anecdotal sketches of that lost culture that lived so long where a National Memorial now commemorates those men later killed and injured in the Port Chicago explosion.

Before their ruin, the Carquines Indians, the Patwins and the subgroup of the Eastern Miwok, the Bay Miwok of the Port Chicago area were strong and brawny, intelligent and a joyful race who loved and sang and danced and worked and died there, and it is fitting that those strong men who loved and sang and danced and worked and died in the Port Chicago explosion were preceded in that place by men of equal stature and character. Of the Indians in the immediate Suisun Bay area we know only Chief Solano of the Suisun (the Patwin), portrayed in the diary of the 1840s Mexican-born California pioneer General Mariano Vallejo as “A fine figure of a man, six feet, seven inches in height and broad in proportion.” Solano County on the northern shore of Suisun Bay was named in honor and recognition of Chief Solano. The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial on the southern shore of Suisun Bay was established by the United States Congress to commemorate the sacrifice and contribution to the nation’s World War II efforts of those 320 strong and dedicated civilian men, the officers

and enlisted men of the United States Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard who died July 17, 1944 in the massive Port Chicago explosion.

Photographs and illustrations credits.

Detail, “Map of the great harbor of San Francisco, 1781.” Source: *The First Spanish Entry Into San Francisco Bay, 1775, etc.*, John Galvin, editor. San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1971; p. 104.

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