

Riotous Memories: The Contested History of Sacramento's Settler Uprising

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This morning I was early on my feet, silently and quietly visiting my friends, collecting arms, &c. Our manifesto appeared in the paper and on bills early, and the whole town is aroused. Nothing is thought or talked of but war. – Dr. Charles Robinson, August 12, 1850.



The few persons who were heard to promulgate opinions opposed to the action which the authorities have pursued, have prudently desisted from their course, and but one sentiment is known at this time among the entire community. *The Placer Times*, August 15, 1850.



Sacramento changed on August 14, 1850. For months, the insurgent Sacramento Settlers' Association had challenged both the dominant landowners and the government of Sacramento City. The Settlers' leadership included Dr. Charles Robinson, who would later serve as the first governor of Kansas, as well as James McClatchy of local journalism fame. Months of escalating tension finally exploded in a wild shootout at 4th & J Streets, a bustling intersection on the main road between the Sacramento City waterfront and the mines that drove the city's development. Two days of bloodshed rocked this young boomtown to its core. Although the authorities regained control that same day, the Settlers' eventual suppression took place amidst ongoing control of public opinion. Imposing this control has resulted in significant incoherence within collective memory and history.

This paper focuses on the initial violence at 4th and J Streets, as well as its aftermath – a contentious environment in which a distorted collective memory began to take form. But the Squatters' Riot was the culmination of a prolonged struggle. The events of August 14 were rooted in an extraordinarily fraught and complicated controversy over who had the right to sell some of the 19th Century world's most valuable real estate. Johann Augustus Sutter's purported Mexican grant has been litigated for generations, beginning with the antagonists who squared off at 4th & J and later involving the United States Supreme Court. The entire controversy is beyond

the scope of this study, which will limit itself to the history and memory of the struggle's culminating clash, as well as subsequent incidents whose connection to the Riot have been mostly forgotten. Post-Riot Sacramento City was an extraordinarily tense setting that apparently boiled with political threats and sometimes violence. Our collective amnesia about the severity of the conflict represents a fundamental shortcoming of Gold Rush history.

The Squatters' Riot was among the most memorable episodes in Sacramento's history, but the site of its first momentous gunshots remained unmarked for generations. Although a plaque belatedly commemorated the clash in 1982, the battleground still remains isolated from Sacramento's historic narrative. As with the Civil War, an incomplete military victory apparently left the losing side intact to continue its insurgency by other means. In Sacramento, this led to documented events that cannot be adequately explained by the established historic narrative. After more than 130 years, a memorial plaque offered only the following explanation:

In the street, at the corner of Fourth and J, on Aug. 14, 1850, settlers were confronted by the mayor and the sheriff. The fatalities that day and the next ended.
The Squatters Riots.¹

Remembering the Riot

The Squatters Riot was no mere riot. The summer of 1850 followed a winter of floods. By August, an organized mass movement, the Settlers' Association, was escalating its revolutionary rhetoric; their legal efforts to protect land claims had been rebuffed as the local judiciary consolidated speculators' hold on land titles traced back to Johann Augustus Sutter's supposed grant from Mexico. Meanwhile, Sacramento City's financial houses were already collapsing under pressure of a real estate bubble. A court ruling and eviction triggered the deadly shootout in the center of town, followed the next day by a bloody raid in nearby town of

¹ E Clampus Vitus, New Helvetia Chapter No. 5, *The Squatters Riots*, 1982, bronze plaque.

Brighton, in which Sheriff Joseph McKinney was among the fatalities. These clashes, collectively known as the “Squatters’ Riot,” left eight dead. The mayor was gravely wounded and departed to San Francisco, where he remained until his death amidst a devastating regional cholera epidemic. The real estate scheme known as Sacramento City finally seemed to be falling apart, under siege from disaster and disease, financial instability and human conflict.

The struggle to remember this collective nightmare has at times created contradictions between and within history and memory, as widely varying recollections and interpretations have jostled for position. The conflict was much more serious and less spontaneous than the word “riot” implies. But was it a war, as Robinson claimed? We now know that the bloodshed did not spread or persist in a way that warrants that dramatic label. But as darkness fell on August 14, a divided and terrified community seemed headed in that direction. While historians have disagreed vigorously about the justifications and impacts of the conflict, clearly something very serious had happened, with repercussions that would echo far beyond that day.

Nearly all accounts of the Riot are derived from John Morse’s 1853 *History of Sacramento* – regarded as the city’s first formal history. Morse also founded the *Sacramento Union* in 1851 and thus played a major role in setting the tone for Sacramento’s story. But Morse’s foundational history is itself a derivative work, using extensive excerpts of earlier reporting. These extended quotations are concentrated around August 14 and its immediate aftermath. Morse thus chose to avoid making any new statements about the most contentious events of a drama to which he devoted nearly one quarter of his entire history. Nearly every word about events on or after August 12 are from extended quotations, with only minimal transitions from Morse’s own pen. One of Sacramento City’s most prominent and prolific writers chose not to add anything beyond what had already been written. This is odd.

Morse presents August 14 as the culmination of building unrest. The Settlers' Association had grown throughout the winter and spring, provoked by court actions against purported squatters in May and August. Further complicating matters, a financial crisis erupted in August, with the collapse of a real estate bubble that Morse estimated had overvalued Sacramento City properties by an aggregate 1000 percent. When their legal efforts to stop evictions reached an impasse, the so-called squatters took up arms, prepared to confront the speculators whose investments were based on Sutter's supposed Mexican grant. On August 8, a judge ruled against Association member Jonathan Madden, and seemed to deny any avenue for appeal. At this point, Morse recalls, "both parties became excited to the utmost degree" and "were holding meetings every night, and the town seemed full of wild excitement upon this question."²

The Settlers then issued a broadside proclaiming their grievances against the city's dominant landowners: Settlers' houses had been torn down amidst attacks by "riotous mobs," they claimed. Threats of violence and death were used to extort settlers to abandon their homes. False laws were issued by a legislature that had not yet been legitimized by California's future statehood. And, they concluded, these laws were used to further harass settlers who believed they were laying claim to public land. Having thus laid out the Association's case, the notice closed on a highly inflammatory note, declaring government officials to be acting as private citizens and calling settlers to "*appeal to arms* and protect their sacred rights, if need be, with their lives...the property and lives of those who take the field against them will share the fate of war."³

² John F. Morse, "History of Sacramento," in *1853-54 Sacramento Directory*, ed. Mead B. Kibbey (Sacramento: California State Library Foundation, 1997), 57-58.

³ *Ibid.*, 59. (italics in original)

After a raucous meeting attended by both sides, Madden retained control of the premises in question, which Morse described as, “a sort of garrison for the association.” The authorities issued arrest warrants for Settler leaders, and McClatchy was imprisoned. Madden was somehow evicted but recovered his home on the morning of August 14.⁴ The stage was set for a fight.

At this point Morse reproduces the news account from the *Placer Times*, published the day after the Riot: Approximately 40 “fully armed” Settlers marched to the prison ship anchored near the foot of I Street, where McClatchy was being detained. Meanwhile, the mayor assembled his own militia and pursued the Settlers to 4th & J, at which point the rebels turned and stood their ground. The Settlers reportedly fired first after someone yelled, shoot the mayor!” At this point wild gunfire broke out, resulting in roughly balanced casualties on both sides: City assessor J.W. Woodland died immediately, while Mayor Hardin Bigelow and a supporter named James Harper were wounded. Settler commander James Maloney was killed while fleeing the scene, and Dr. Robinson was wounded along with another Settler by the name of Jesse Morgan. At least two others were injured, including a minor. Immediately afterwards, the city was reportedly placed under martial law and an “extraordinary police force of 500 was summoned” to provide security. Rumors flew – most alarmingly that miners were preparing to attack the city en masse. The common council appointed a marshal and assistant, “to whom all persons desirous of making arrests were requested to apply for authority and aid.”⁵

The Memory Struggle

In an extra edition published on the afternoon of the 15th – which Morse reproduces at length – the *Times* reports Robinson’s anticipation of “war” and captures clear evidence of an

⁴ Ibid., 60-61.

⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

attempt to control public opinion. Within a day of the first violent outbreak, some unknown party was already trying to limit how people were talking about the events that were still unfolding:

The few persons who were heard to promulgate opinions opposed to the action which the authorities have pursued, have prudently desisted from their course, and but one sentiment is known at this time among the entire community. The Squatters have successfully concealed themselves, or fled. A proposition is very generally supported, to give notice to all occupying city property, as Squatters, to leave forthwith, and that their tenements be demolished, and all vestiges of their presence be removed.⁶

This description of suppressed dissent is alarming enough. But the *Times* notes another act of suppression: The sheriff had “entered the house of the surveyor of the Settlers’ Association and took possession of all records and documents found therein.”⁷ The restoration of physical order apparently required an orderly memory. And that required cutting out both physical and informational vestiges of a mass movement that had shaken the foundations of the city’s government and economy. Such an incision would likely leave scars on the collective memory.

Facts on the ground hint at this scarring, with developments that contradict the established narrative that law and order was restored: Most notably, Robinson remained in town while Mayor Bigelow departed to San Francisco to nurse his wounds and die a few months later. Why would a battle’s purported winner leave while the loser maintained his position on the battlefield? This incongruity invites a closer look, which reveals more incongruity: Not only did the Settler leadership generally remain in Sacramento, they published a newspaper in an office overlooking the very scene of the Riot in which they had supposedly been routed!

The *Settlers’ and Miners’ Tribune* made its debut in October, just a few months after the clash. Robinson edited the *Tribune* with McClatchy – the apparent start of the latter’s storied career in Sacramento journalism. Meanwhile, Robinson mounted a successful political campaign to represent Sacramento in the state’s first Assembly. The *Tribune* published daily for one

⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁷ Ibid.

month, and weekly for another.⁸ The Settlers published overtly, with their address printed in each issue: “J Street, north side, 4 doors from 4th.” The Settlers had emerged from hiding, to “speak the truth with freedom and sincerity.” And lest anyone think this prospectus claim was a general statement, they promised close attention to the land ownership issue, which they called, “(the) absorbing and important question which has agitated this community so fearfully.”⁹ Clearly the Settlers were continuing their struggle, and had at least enough strength to maintain their position at almost exactly the site of the most serious confrontation. And despite the *Tribune*’s explicitly confrontational publication, the authorities apparently made no move to stop them.

However, the bigger struggle for memory apparently favored the Sacramento City establishment. Well before Morse published his history, a Settler leader named John Plumbe sounded the alarm about how people remembered the struggle. Plumbe’s letter to the editor of the *New York Herald* was also published in April of 1851 as a pamphlet titled “The Settlers and Land Speculators of Sacramento.” Plumbe complains that the emerging historic narrative “was furnished, originally, through the the interest and partial organs of the (speculators); and was, therefore, of course, *ex parte*, and characteristically incorrect.”¹⁰ Plumbe then offers his own dubious account of the clash at 4th and J: A quiet procession of settlers “was insulted most grossly, and then fired upon by the speculators and their allies, the gamblers; most of whom, like cowardly assassins, were concealed and sheltered in the upper stories of the houses.” No other accounts corroborate Plumbe’s version – there is certainly no concrete evidence of his claimed ambush. However, the information landscape in Sacramento was extraordinarily turbulent at the

⁸ Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West, *History of Sacramento County California*, (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 94.

⁹ Settlers’ and Miners’ Tribune, “Prospectus of the Settlers and Miners’ Tribune,” *Settlers and Miners Tribune*, October 30, 1850.

¹⁰ John Plumbe to James Gordon Bennett, April 1851, in *The Settlers and Land Speculators of Sacramento* (New York, NY, 1851), 4.

time of his writing. Plumbe's assertion was almost certainly not factual, but reliable facts were elusive enough to allow such a wild claim. For Plumbe to make such an allegation, so sharply opposed to the emerging consensus, shows that Sacramento's memory of the previous summer was still strongly contested.

This persistent contest of memory included at least one violent incident. The same month that Plumbe offered his account, *Placer Times* editor J.E. Lawrence was assaulted and threatened with death if he did not immediately depart town. Someone had reportedly taken offense at something he had written. His rivals at the *Transcript* apparently thought it imprudent to clearly identify Lawrence's assailants, but closed ranks with a declaration that, "Such an outrage as has been committed must not be tolerated."¹¹ Unfortunately *Times* issues from that month are missing, which prevents discernment of whom Lawrence might have offended, and how.¹²

A Frozen History

By the 1880s, memories of Sacramento's land struggles had somewhat stabilized. Thomas Thompson and Albert West's *History of Sacramento County, California* was published in 1880, after a generation had passed and the events at 4th & J had somewhat faded from memory. Thompson and West generally follow Morse. But while they copy Morse's placement of the *Times* account from the 15th, they omit any mention of the community having "but one opinion." They also provide no indication of the omission, leaving the reader unaware of *why* there was general support for removing all vestiges of the Settlers.¹³ This suggests that alternate understandings of the conflict had been, for the most part, successfully extinguished.

¹¹ *Placer Times*, "A Dastardly Attack," *Placer Times*, April 14, 1851.

¹² The CDNC, which is a fairly comprehensive collection, holds no specimens of the *Times* after June of 1850, at which time the city's land conflict was escalating towards violence.

¹³ Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West, *History of Sacramento County California*, (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 53.

However, the revision of the Squatters' Riot continued. In 1885, Josiah Royce produced a long account for *Overland Monthly* – which he falsely claimed was the first account to date. Prone to wear a thick interpretive lens, Royce framed the struggle as part of the maturation of the West's nascent society. In Royce's telling, the squatters were "distinctly revolutionary" and the forces of "anarchy" as well.¹⁴ Royce dismissed the Settler's Association as an opportunistic cabal in which "each man voted himself a lot."¹⁵ Although Royce does not offer much new detail regarding the events or aftermath of August 14, he seems to indicate that Sacramento was simply embarrassed: "A tacit consent to drop the subject was soon noticeable in the community... There was a decided sense, also, of common guilt. The community had sinned and suffered."¹⁶

Royce's interpretation is odd enough. But the following year came a truly bizarre treatment of the Riot, by no less than Hubert Howe Bancroft, whose *Works* serve as a foundational text for most Western history. His *History of California* provides sometimes excruciating detail; its sixth volume devotes nearly 800 pages to the decade beginning in 1849. But Bancroft essentially skips one of the state's most complex and challenging episodes of this period. His official narrative provides only a single dismissive page, nonsensically blaming the matter on "men from the Missouri border, who had no knowledge of Spanish grants." But then he strangely chose to "append a condensed account" – a footnote stretching for six-and-a-half pages. Stranger still, this account provides extensive and mostly sympathetic detail of "squatter trouble" that lasted for years and spread throughout California.¹⁷ By burying the actual history –

¹⁴ Josiah Royce, "The Squatter Riot of '50 in Sacramento: Its Causes and Its Significance," *Overland Monthly* VI no. 33 (Sept 1885), 226.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁶ Royce, 246.

¹⁷ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California, Vol. 6.* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888), 328-335.

cutting edge scholarship, it seems – in a footnote that contradicted the main text, Bancroft both revealed and perpetuated a profoundly muddled memory.

Very few primary sources have survived to remind us of how the Settlers' Association saw itself. Some printed materials have been reproduced by Morse and others, and we may hope these were accurately transcribed. But almost nothing seems to have survived of the Association's original documentation. The sheriff's seizure of their office and materials could explain some of this absence – it is safe to assume that McKinney did not carefully preserve the collection for posterity. Still, it is curious that most of the movement's publications have evaded the historic record. If nothing else, Association propaganda would have been interesting souvenirs of a particularly dramatic episode of one of the West's best-studied periods. We might expect a smattering of Association broadsides to have been mailed back east to illustrate the excitement of the Gold Rush. And, over the years, it would seem that some of these would have filtered back into archival collections. But original Settler propaganda is exceedingly rare.

The Bancroft Library in Berkeley is the archival legacy of one of West's most prolific collectors. Yet its holdings apparently include only a single Association specimen – part of a collection of frontier printed material illustrating the technical outcomes of printing, rather than focused topical collection of materials relevant to the Settler movement. This unique surviving broadside has unfortunately been defaced with comments seeking to falsely and flagrantly recontextualize it: A note in pencil claims that it provides “concrete evidence of the determination of the mob to defy law and order” notwithstanding the document's clear content: an appeal to law, the Settlers' Association rules and regulations, a list of officers and their terms,

and even a business address.¹⁸ A mob may arguably have formed on August 14, but this document captures a durable and reasonably professional organization, as well as a laughably clumsy attempt at historic revision. If anything, this altered artifact provides concrete evidence of an extremely distorted memory.

Modern scholarship regarding the climax of Sacramento's early land struggle is also scant. The two most significant studies are Dennis M. Dart's 1979 masters' thesis and Mark Eifler's 2002 *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento*. Both works exhibit evidence of distorted memory, which suggests that the early accounts have held up to historic scrutiny, which has nonetheless been unable to resolve those accounts' profound inconsistencies. In any case, these sources provide a view of how the Riot has been seen in the modern era.

Dart offers a problematic description of the Settlers in the battle's aftermath. On the one hand, he claims that clash "shocked Sacramentans and wrenched from them any sympathy for the squatter movement...(which) never regained a glimmer of their old militancy." But in the same paragraph he notes that, "Sacramento settlers, like their brethren throughout the state, gained real power – political power." He also makes the confusing claim that people were willing to "let the courts determine the fate of Robinson and others arrested after the riot, and subsequently, most charges and indictments melted away." Ironically, his footnote for this latter claim cites the aforementioned footnote by Bancroft.¹⁹

Eifler depicts a more complicated Riot aftermath. Calling the Settlers "largely discredited and leaderless," he claims that Sacramentans "remained somewhat sympathetic to the settlers'

¹⁸ Sacramento Settlers' Association, "The Sacramento City Settlers' Association, believing the ground, generally, in and around Sacramento City, to be Public Land..." (Sacramento, CA, 1850).

¹⁹ Dennis Michael Dart, "Sacramento Squatter Riot of August 14, 1850," (MA thesis, University of California, Davis, 1979), 53.

cause but condemned the association itself and the violence it wrought.”²⁰ Eifler does grapple with the contradictions of the latter claim in the face of Robinson’s successful political campaign to represent the community in the first State Assembly, writing, “Public opinion also began to turn against the great speculators and their own violent response to the squatters’ violence,” such that “neither the squatters nor the speculators carried much authority in the city.”²¹

Eifler’s thorough treatment of the Settlers’ land struggle is part of a broad examination of the city’s early development. His wide-ranging monograph covers a variety of topics, from the logic of the city’s geographic placement to its seasonal economic cycles. He also includes a chapter titled, “The Death of Frederick Roe,” which yields important clues about the social and political dynamics swirling through Sacramento in the months after the Riot. Roe’s lynching initially seems to be well outside the memory of 4th & J, but ultimately leads back to Sacramento’s growing climate of repression: After gaining the upper hand in a fight with a fellow gambler who accused him of cheating, Roe allegedly murdered a bystander who intervened to stop a savage beating. Neither Roe’s crime nor his punishment occurred at a site of relevance to the Squatters’ Riot, and Roe’s misdeeds fit squarely into common expectations of what would have provoked lynch law in Gold Rush California. It is true that Eifler’s account of Roe’s lynching supports his claim of a fragile civic order. But Eifler apparently missed a long-hidden primary source, which reveals a deeper pattern of suppressed memory that began on August 14.

The *Transcript’s* initial post-Riot claim of “but one sentiment” in a community that had been at war the previous day is highly suspicious. And Eifler’s recollection of a prisoner’s

²⁰ Mark A. Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 156.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 160-61.

“battered condition” when he was brought back to town, bound to a horse, may have captured an element of whatever inspired dissenters to “prudently desist.” These two observations from August suggest that the rougher side of the West was on display in post-Riot Sacramento City. We should therefore be on the lookout for evidence that the Riot’s earliest memory formation took place in an atmosphere of vengeance and terror.

Eifler’s recollection of Roe catches a glimpse of the arrival of “Judge Lynch” on February 25, 1851. Eifler’s chapter on Roe intends to illustrate Sacramento’s fitful progress from chaos towards order. Unfortunately, the actual aftermath defies such a progressive resolution. Eifler misses the true historic importance of the city’s second major outbreak of mass political violence, which was an important bookend to the events of the prior August. But he unearths – perhaps unwittingly – an ugly scar in the collective memory forming in the wake of the riot:

The silence of that night remained nearly unbroken. Although *Sacramento Transcript* editor F. C. Ewer reported the lynching in painstaking detail, his account is nearly the only evidence remaining of what happened that day and night. Though Sacramento residents wrote of the Squatters’ Riot in letters, journals, pamphlets and memoirs, they remained silent on their thoughts and feelings about the death of Frederick Roe.²²

Supposedly nobody recorded any thoughts about one of the most controversial public happenings imaginable – the extrajudicial execution of a community member. Even John Morse declined to comment, calling the winter of 1851 “delightful” and then summarizing the following two years with a disjointed list of news items. He skipped through March and began with an April 5 observation of high water and, “Green peas in market.”²³ So almost the entirety of our collective memory is therefore derived from a single source, the *Transcript*. Such problematic concentration of knowledge becomes more alarming when we note that Ewer’s own account describes how he was initially on Roe’s “jury” until he decided to withdraw in order to provide a

²² Ibid., 188.

²³ John F. Morse, “History of Sacramento,” in *1853-54 Sacramento Directory*, ed. Mead B. Kibbey (Sacramento: California State Library Foundation, 1997), 70.

journalistic report. We might also wonder why Ewer's account was reproduced – headline and all, with only minor changes – in two consecutive editions of the paper.²⁴ Were there no additional developments in the 24 hours following the collapse of law and order in a city racked by insurgency only six months earlier? A quiet news day seems unlikely.

Another perspective might greatly enrich our understanding of events. For example, what was printed in the *Sacramento Daily Index*? This obscure newspaper had been launched in December. Edward C. Kemble's 1858 history of California journalism recalls that after Rowe's death the *Index* "condemned the action of the people and was very severe against lynch law." And within weeks, the *Index* had gone out of business.²⁵ Fortunately for modern historians, the Library of Congress now provides a database of newspaper holdings. While only a few scattered *Index* specimens remain in California, the New York Historical Society holds 21 issues. These include February 26, 1851, the day after Roe's lynching. And what's more, the lead story reports conditions reminiscent of the city's previous collapse of civic order:

Already have men ventured to declare that law is non-existent, and that the people are to govern themselves hereafter, by the dictation of the mass, while others have not scrupled to threaten the denouncers of yesterday's proceedings, with a like visitation of the vengeance of the public will.²⁶

So dissent was reportedly discouraged after both the August clash and the February lynching. This reveals an ongoing environment of menace, with attempts to control the formation of memory about two major collective traumas. These dark moments in early Sacramento may be entirely unrelated, but the apparent continuity between them – as well as the subsequent attack on Lawrence – suggests an overarching dynamic in the city during the months following the Squatters' Riot. This threatening pattern, in turn, points to a potential reason why the site of 4th &

²⁴ Sacramento Transcript, "Immense Excitement! Lynch Law at Last!!," *Sacramento Transcript*, February 27, 1851, 1.

²⁵ Edward Kemble, "The History of California Newspapers," *Sacramento Union*, December 25, 1858, 6.

²⁶ Sacramento Daily Index, "The Long Agony," *Sacramento Daily Index*, February 26, 1851, 2.

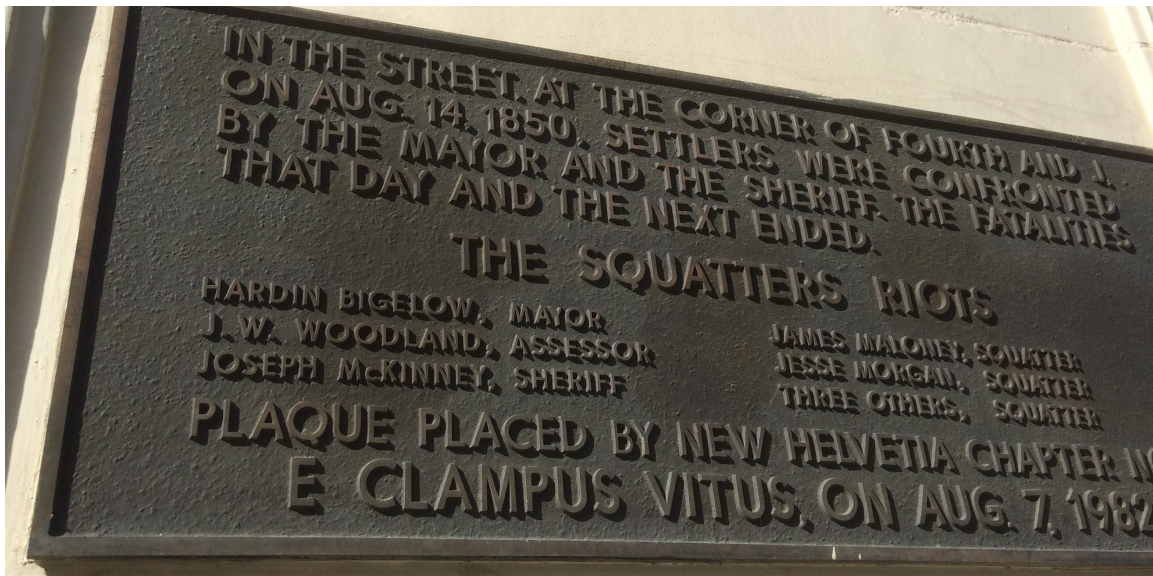
J apparently remained without commemoration for well over a century: Dissent was dangerous. Sacramentans did not simply remain silent in the wake of the Riot. They were silenced.

A Vague Memorial

Sacramento's lone monument to this pivotal event does little to jog the memory. In 1982, a simple plaque was placed on the corner of the California Fruit Exchange building. This commemoration was temporally segregated from the time of the events by a delay of well over a century. It was also segregated from the city's historic memory, and from the event itself. The modern intersection of 4th & J would be unrecognizable to participants in the riot – urban renewal removed all traces of 19th Century Sacramento, and even the 1914 Fruit Exchange is a lonely holdout from Sacramento's earlier days. The Riot site is also spatially divorced from Sacramento history: The heritage district of Old Sacramento now lies on the other side of a massive freeway, a parking garage and an off-ramp. Even if a consumer of Gold Rush history managed to pick their way through this maze of automobile infrastructure, 4th & J is a forlorn and hostile place, built mostly to serve cars entering the city. Rather than a site for reflection, the Riot site is a place to pass as quickly as possible.

After all this change and delay, what was finally remembered about the Riot? Not much. The plaque fails to explain the causes or outcome of the confrontation. It offers only, “The fatalities that day and the next ended” – an ungrammatical string of words, as though the writer ran out of room. Apparently not much could be committed to writing, especially in the durable medium of bronze. But although the plaque says almost nothing about what it actually commemorates, it does include a prominent description of its provenance in the largest text size utilized: “Plaque placed by New Helvetia Chapter No. 5, E Clampus Vitus, on Aug. 7, 1982.” E Clampus Vitus is sometimes referred to as a “historical drinking society or a drinking historical

society.” Its motto translates from Latin as “I believe it because it is absurd.” The Clampers, as they are called, tend to focus on strange and obscure history, rather than the more familiar fare promoted in places like Old Sacramento. The Clamper approach to history is playful and boozy. At first glance, Sacramento’s unmarked gunfight would be a classic Clamper memorial.²⁷



But why did the Clampers install such a plaque, a week before the event’s 132nd anniversary? Why was the plaque’s most prominent information about the installation of the plaque itself? A lack of published announcements leaves these questions unanswered, and suggests minimal concern about educating the public. The only notice of the commemoration was apparently printed on the day of the installation, as one of eight events promoted as part of an announcement of History Week in the *Sacramento Bee* – a newspaper launched by Association leader McClatchy, lest we forget. Although the week’s theme was “Our Pioneer Heritage,” only the barest information was provided about recognition of this impactful event involving the pioneer most closely linked to the existence of the *Bee*: “Dedication of a plaque

²⁷ Branson-Potts, Hailey, “The Clampers: A historical drinking society or a drinking historical society?” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 2017.

commemorating the Squatters Riot of 1850,” was written, along with the time, location and sponsor.²⁸ Nothing more is provided. It is as though the Clampers needed an absurd commemoration for History Week, chose the Squatters’ Riot, and then failed to decide what to say before the libations took effect.

A Contested Memory

But Sacramento’s memory issues are much bigger than the Clampers’ inability to agree on coherent plaque wording. Why is such a profoundly momentous episode so poorly remembered? What does this apparent amnesia tell us about the state of post-insurgency Sacramento? As illustrated above, the Squatters’ Riot and its aftermath were an extraordinarily messy and contentious episode. This essay has only scratched the surface of how and why the Settlers’ Association eventually left the scene. Were the Settlers eventually beaten and then pushed to the margins of Sacramento’s collective memory and history? Or did they succeed in politics and then integrate into later known movements, despite a reign of terror in their hometown? Either way, our poor memory most likely relates to the Sacramento struggle’s lack of decisive resolution. As in the Civil War, an incomplete military victory left the losing side intact to continue its insurgency by other means. The Sacramento authorities’ military victory on August 14 was inconclusive. Casualties were approximately balanced. Settler leadership was wounded and imprisoned, but mostly intact. The sheriff’s death in an ambush at Brighton the next day further weakened the city’s position. Law and order was hardly restored.

Such lack of resolution impedes creation of memorials. Historian Karen Cox argues that public square monuments to the Confederacy signify ongoing control by the men who carried on

²⁸ Sacramento Bee, “History Week Takes Root in Sacramento,” *Sacramento Bee*, August 7, 1982.

the work of white supremacy.²⁹ Although the Settlers clearly continued their fight in Sacramento, no evidence suggests that they were strong enough to successfully place and defend a permanent monument. But why was nothing erected to mark the city's retention of control? If the establishment's narrative were true, we might expect to see, say, a statue of Mayor Bigelow at 4th & J. But it appears that neither side ever attempted to raise a monument. Perhaps nobody placed a monument at this site because nobody dared.

However, if we accept that the Bancroft footnote's assertion, Settlers remained a powerful force in town, capable of successful political organizing – if not control of local government and the streets. Before the dark days of 1851, they might have believed they were winning – although perhaps not confidently enough to plant a durable memorial at the actual site. Although a newspaper office not a traditional monument, the first functional memorial may have been the *Settlers' and Miners' Tribune*. The paper's offices were close to the site, but just far enough away to allow some face-saving for the authorities. Despite a threatening environment, the Settlers sought to establish memory on their own terms. They returned to the scene of their purported crime and proclaimed their hold on the moral high ground. Regardless, the *Tribune* had a greater effect on collective memory than any plaque could have had; on a regular basis, the Settlers broadcast that they were still present and still fighting. They tried to help Sacramento remember what had happened and what was at stake. And judging from Robinson's election, they were successful. Robinson claimed as much years later, writing of Sacramento's importance to the fight for Free Kansas: “The squatters had obtained all they ever demanded.”³⁰

²⁹ Karen L. Cox. *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*, 48.

³⁰ Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), 57.

Whatever their profound differences, both sides of the conflict were generally American nationalists, who needed to establish Sacramento as an orderly place within the framework of American expansionism. Both sides were counting on California's admission to the United States, hoping that federal authority might vindicate their cause or at least protect their interests. Anthony Smith notes that, "nationalists must prune (the past) for their purposes and use a very selective memory for the tale they wish to impart."³¹ Sacramento City's promoters in particular wanted and needed nationalist legitimacy to give themselves cover and the force of law to put down the waves of resistance that apparently continued well into the 1850s. So they had to forget their suppression of the Settlers' uprising and an apparent crackdown on dissent, which reflected poorly on a purportedly democratic community.

Whatever actually happened in 1851, the Settlers were eventually absorbed back into Sacramento's body politic. Barbara Gannon asserts that the Lost Cause mythology prevailed because reintegration of the South into the nation's "imagined community" was more important than remembering how Union soldiers saved "the real community of the United States."³² So it is possible that Sacramento's lack of memorial infrastructure was a mutual concession. Both sides likely recognized that erecting a monument would be highly inflammatory and could spark renewed escalation of the still simmering conflict.

Sacramento's apparent collective amnesia seems part of a larger pattern of forgetting its early land struggles in order to move beyond the conflict. Ultimately, it took time for passions to cool the point that anyone might successfully raise and keep a monument at 4th & J. As Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, an event's significance – how it is remembered – needs time to

³¹ Anthony Smith, "The Ethnic Origins of Nations," in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 231.

³² Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 187.

emerge. It must be “dead enough to have only historical interest”.³³ The turmoil and repression revealed here prolonged the agony, and other yet-undiscovered turmoil may have followed that of 1851. In any case, by the time that the Riot was sufficiently dead, its memory had become so confusing and painful, so tangled up with other traumas, that no one wanted to reopen the old wounds. So Sacramento moved on.

But moving on didn't change the past. Nor did it erase the community's trauma. The above research is a modest first step in sorting out what happened and how it impacted Sacramento. But it appears that the Settlers – far from being vanquished – remained a serious threat to Sacramento City's establishment. So a tense *détente* took hold. People more or less agreed to accept the riot narrative already set forth by Morse. But Sacramento's history never really wrestled with what came after the riot – the threats, the lynchings and the constraints on speech. This nightmarish twist seems to have traumatized a young community, triggering collective amnesia. Unless we count the *Settlers' and Miners' Tribune* as a memorial, more than a century passed before anyone managed even a confusing plaque. Most likely, nobody stuck a monument at 4th & J because nobody *could*. It was too raw at first. Then everyone just needed to forget about the matter for a few generations. But by now the Squatters' Riot is well and truly dead. We can remember now.

³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Truth and Method,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 182.

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