

“NO CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION”

The White Supremacist Message of California’s Bear Flag and Seal¹

By Aaron Brick

ABSTRACT: The grizzly bears on California’s state flag and seal represent the state’s natural history and, less obviously, the 1846 Bear Flag Revolt against Mexico. This Manifest Destiny-inspired action was celebrated by the delegates who defined the seal at the Constitutional Convention of 1849, and then by the legislators from the Native Sons of the Golden West who established the flag in 1911. These chauvinists concealed the beliefs behind their design choices by controlling the evidence they created. This article recovers their motive—racial domination—and its vehicle, the myth that the Bear Flag Revolt created California. Activists who disrupted the Bear Flag Sesquicentennial in 1996 expressed these concerns but lacked the primary source evidence cited here. The shared history of the seal and the flag compromises the suitability of the flag and seal as state symbols.

KEY WORDS: California state flag; California state seal; California’s Bear Flag; Native Sons of the Golden West; white supremacist symbols; California’s 1849 Constitutional Convention.

The author wishes to acknowledge Alex Abella, David Brick, Brenda D. Frink, Adan Griego, Henry Koerper, Kyle Jackson, Merry Ovnick, Martin Rizzo-Martinez, and William J. Trinkle.

1 The quotation is from Maxina Ventura, Letter to the Editor, “No Cause for Celebration,” *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 7, 1996, A14.

INTRODUCTION

California's Bear Flag is one of the world's most recognized regional symbols. It depicts a California grizzly bear, an extinct, charismatic megafauna; many Californians feel proud to display this powerful animal. However, ignorance of the racializing interests that informed its creation and adoption restrains public understanding of its significance. As of this writing, state agencies' descriptions of the flag likewise neglect these implications.² Their disregard of the values encoded in the flag is harmful because it maintains a status quo that is exclusive and opposes Californian diversity.

Robert Shanafelt wrote that a flag "demands political deference," in this case from nearly forty million Californians, more of whom, today, are Hispanic than white.³ The flags flying over government buildings and the seals on official documents indicate official approval of their message. To actively interpret the bear's symbolism, today's viewers should consider the motives behind the Bear Flag Revolt and the formalization of its symbols on the state seal in 1849 and, later, on the state flag by politicians belonging to the Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) in 1911.⁴

The bear exemplifies the theory of Manifest Destiny, the expansionist entitlement to land and resources that drove the United States' westward enlargement. Under this theory, white, English-speaking, Protestant men sought to displace and replace all others.⁵ Manifest Destiny is a textbook example of white supremacist thinking, and its link to the Bear Flag has not gone unnoticed: Diana Negrín da Silva called the Bear Flag "a hidden-in-plain-sight symbol of white supremacy," and Rudy Dinarte observed that public history centered on the Bear Flag

2 California Department of Parks and Recreation, "The History of the California State Flag," https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=24644; California State Library, "State Symbols," <https://library.ca.gov/california-history/state-symbols/>; State of California Capitol Museum, "State Flag," <https://capitolmuseum.ca.gov/state-symbols/flag/>.

3 Robert Shanafelt, "The Nature of Flag Power: How Flags Entail Dominance, Subordination, and Social Solidarity," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 27, no. 2 (September 2008): 16.

4 John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 272–73, 290.

5 Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 32–33; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 28–29, 55.

Monument in Sonoma marginalizes nonwhite observers by legitimizing white rule.⁶ Nonetheless, since prevailing understandings of the flag elide its racist connotations, the origins of its symbolism must be more explicitly understood.

It would be useless to anachronistically judge past actions and beliefs. The question that matters today is how the symbolism and implications of the flag and seal align with our current values. This kind of “critical” or “strategic” presentism, according to David Armitage, can serve to “dethrone the pretensions of the present.”⁷ The pretension that the Bear Flag represents all Californians equally is weak. Examining the motivations and controversies behind this symbology reveals racial subtexts. Those who don’t learn this back story risk misunderstanding the concerns of their fellow citizens.

Applying Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s taxonomy of historical silences helps to explain the lack of consensus on the story of the Bear Flag.⁸ Instances in which racializing motives were not archived or were excluded from narratives have allowed the state’s administration and its population to adopt a sanitized interpretation of events. As we shall see, both the Bear Flaggers and the NSGW succeeded to a significant degree in quieting these concerns. While controversy over the flag and the Revolt has never been secret, past analyses have only addressed disjunctive parts of the story.

As an individual observer, I will declare my positionality. I am a white, third-generation resident of the state, who has married into a Chicano family. My California identity has always meant more to me than my national one; I grew up admiring the Bear Flag, and as a child, my mother helped me to sew one. Later, I grew interested in why our state so directly commemorates the U.S. invasion of northern Mexico.

In 2015 the Cuban-American journalist Alex Abella published an

6 Rachel Brahinsky and Alexander Tarr, *A People's Guide to the San Francisco Bay Area* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 225; Rudy Alexander Dinarte, “Remembering the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846: Today’s Narratives of Sonoma County’s Past,” (M.A. thesis, Sonoma State University, 2020), 19–20, 26–27.

7 David Armitage, “In Defense of Presentism,” in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 74.

8 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

op-ed article calling for the flag's replacement, which raised my own concern about the flag's symbolism.⁹ This article follows on his argument by identifying the periods, groups, and interests behind the flag's adoption. Explaining the motivations of the principal actors, I rely on their own words wherever possible. Here, for the first time, I explain the influence of the NSGW on the process of adoption, the flag's relationship to the Great Seal of California, and a more recent controversy over the commemoration of the Bear Flag Revolt. To honor the concerns of those most directly affected by the U.S. conquest of California, I foreground Californio and Indigenous voices wherever possible.

In the first section, I examine the context and motivations of the 1846 Bear Flag Revolt itself, paying special attention to the explanations its participants produced after the fact and how they relate to the racial and expansionist context of the time. In the second, we see how the Constitutional Convention of 1849 enshrined an allusion to the Bear Flag myth in the state's Great Seal; in the third, how the NSGW, in 1911, captured the levers of state power and installed the Bear Flag as the symbol of all California. In the fourth, I demonstrate how backlash to this symbolism has been manifested, most notably at the 1996 Bear Flag Sesquicentennial celebration in Sonoma. The sequence of events helps to explain the controversy that continues to attach to the Bear Flag, compromising its suitability as a state symbol.

THE BEAR FLAG REVOLT

Mexico ruled its most remote province, Alta California, somewhat weakly prior to the United States invasion in 1846. The immediate precursor to that invasion was the Bear Flag Revolt, an uprising by about thirty undocumented Anglo-American immigrants.¹⁰ At a time when the provincial government in Monterey was itself divided, the rebels kidnapped Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo,¹¹ former military commander

9 Alex Abella. "California, It's Time to Dump the Bear Flag," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2015.

10 Neal Harlow, *California Conquered: War and Peace on the Pacific, 1846–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 38, 47–48.

11 Editor's Note: For the place of this episode in Vallejo's life and career, see Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, *Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo: Life in Spanish, Mexican, and American California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), especially chap. 4.

of the province's northern frontier, and three associates on June 14, 1846—the anniversary of the foundation of the thirteen American colonies' Continental Army, which later became Flag Day. Three weeks after the California revolt, the arrival of the U.S. Naval Pacific Squadron made the Bear Flag action redundant.¹² Here, we examine the context of American settlers' attitudes in plotting the trajectory of the revolt's emblem towards becoming California's state flag.

The men who executed the Bear Flag Revolt adopted and acted upon nationalist, expansionist themes that were familiar across the United States. One was the ethnonym *Anglo-Saxon*, a claim to white, Protestant racial superiority.¹³ Another was the intention to occupy territory to the exclusion of other groups. The self-identified Anglo-Saxons, seeking new opportunities in California, specifically regarded Mexican people as racially compromised, lazy, and ineffective stewards of valuable land.¹⁴ These trends combined to produce a narrative that condemned Mexican Californians as unfit to control or enjoy their homeland, in contrast to American settlers, who would develop the resources spectacularly. Prominent commentator Thomas Jefferson Farnham expressed this view in his 1844 book, which may have inspired some of the Bear Flaggers to emigrate:

Thus much for the Spanish population of the Californias; in every way a poor apology of European extraction; as a general thing, incapable of reading or writing, and knowing nothing of science or literature, nothing of government but its brutal force, nothing of virtue but the sanction of the Church, nothing of religion but ceremonies of the national ritual. Destitute of industry themselves, they compel the poor Indian to labor for them, affording him a bare savage existence for his toil, upon their plantations and the fields of the Missions. In a word, the Californians are an imbecile, pusillanimous, race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country.¹⁵

¹² Harlow, *California Conquered*, 97–114; Linda Heidenreich, *This Land Was Mexican Once: Histories of Resistance from Northern California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 72–92.

¹³ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 10, 30, 38, 93, 125.

¹⁴ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 208–12.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson Farnham, *Travels in the Californias, and Scenes in the Pacific Ocean* (New York: Saxton & Miles, 1844), 363.

The Bear Flaggers sought to “control the destiny” of California but were reticent to describe themselves in writing as racial conquerors. They did publish some claims about their motivations, especially in the newspaper *The Californian*. The only English-language paper in the territory, this was launched just after the Revolt by leading Bear Flagger Robert Semple, along with Walter Colton. Semple was a country doctor whose older brother James had served as U.S. Senator from Illinois; Colton was a naval chaplain who was appointed the new mayor (*alcalde*) of Monterey by U.S. Commodore Robert F. Stockton. These two published *The Californian* on a printing press imported during the Mexican era; their problematic typography has been normalized in the following quotes.¹⁶ Despite including a Spanish-language section, *The Californian* was beyond any doubt on the side of U.S. expansionism. In its second issue, it republished this invective it attributed to the *New York Herald*:

The stupidity and weakness of the people, and the selfishness and tyranny of their military officers and government, have reduced Mexico to the lowest grade of degradation and infamy.¹⁷

In a third issue, *The Californian* focused on land:

Her [California’s] lands, have been in the hands of but few individuals whose enormous grants discouraged emigration. These lands, without disturbing legitimate titles, will now find occupants. They will be purchased by a thrifty population, trained to habits of industry.¹⁸

The same month, Semple invited his rebel colleague William B. Ide, “Commander-in-Chief of the Troops assembled at the Fortress of Sonoma,” to contribute a text explaining their Revolt. *The Californian* published Ide’s “A Proclamation” in the paper’s fourth number. Writing in the third person, the author offered an aggrieved and fanciful rationale for the revolt, showing no acknowledgment of Mexican authority:

¹⁶ With insufficient type for the letter “w,” its text contains the construct “vvill” for “will.” George L. Harding, *Don Agustin V. Zamorano: Statesman, Soldier, Craftsman, and California’s First Printer* (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2003), 180.

¹⁷ “California—No. 1,” *The Californian* 1, no. 2 (August 22, 1846): 1.

¹⁸ *The Californian* 1, no. 3 (August 29, 1846): 2.

He also solemnly declares his object to be, first to defend himself and companions in arms, who were invited to this country by a promise of lands on which to settle themselves and families: who were also promised a Republican Government, when having arrived in California were denied the privilege of buying or renting lands of their friends, who instead of being allowed to participate in, or being protected by a republican government; were oppressed by a military despotism, with extermination if they should not depart out of the country, leaving all their property, arms, and beasts of burthen, and thus deprived of the means of flight or defence, we were to be driven through deserts inhabited by hostile Indians, to certain destruction.¹⁹

None of these claims were true. No authority had promised these men land or a change of government. The Californio general José Castro, visiting Sonoma the previous November, forgave Anglo immigrants' lack of passports on the condition that they depart in the springtime if they failed to obtain residence permits.²⁰ Despite this considerate treatment, the Bear Flaggers doubled down on their victimhood narrative. The year after their Revolt, Ide and two other "Bear Men" published in Illinois "A History of the Origin, and Completion of the Revolution" in Alta California. They provided a more specific, but completely unsubstantiated tale of the threat they claimed to face:

Information was received by Mr. Wm. B. Ide, living on the Sacramento, on the 8th June, by letter, brought by an Indian runner, that 200 mounted Mexicans were on their march up the Sacramento river, with the design of destroying the crops, burning the houses, and driving off the cattle belonging to the foreigners.²¹

Castro had called in March for soldiers to confront the unauthorized army incursion of John C. Frémont near Monterey Bay.²² The two hundred horses were not mounted, and were, in any event, being driven southwards from Sonoma towards Santa Clara.²³ The Bear Flaggers were fearful, poorly informed, and reticent about their true motivations. A

¹⁹ William B. Ide, "A Proclamation," *The Californian* 1, no. 4 (September 5, 1846): 1.

²⁰ Harlow, *California*, 94.

²¹ "The Revolution in California," *Illinois Journal* (Springfield, Ill.) 17, no. 9 (September 30, 1847): 3; *Ibid.*, no. 10, (October 7, 1847): 1.

²² Seymour Dunbar, ed., *The Fort Sutter Papers* (No publisher, 1921), Manuscript No. 8. <https://archive.org/details/transcriptoffort00kern>

²³ Harlow, *California*, 97.

few years later, Colton, no longer working with Semple, stated clearly the racial implications of their Revolt: it “set the ball of Anglo-Saxon supremacy rolling in California.”²⁴ The dissimilarity of this remark to the rebels’ previous communiqués on victimhood reflects an apparent reluctance to be quoted speaking frankly about their goals.

Ide’s public claims notwithstanding, these white, English speakers felt entitled to supremacy because they viewed Mexican people as inferior and its government as hapless. Their principal gripe was that they themselves had not immediately obtained the welcome and attractive lands that they desired. Many Anglo immigrants to California had already converted to Catholicism and received land grants, but the “Bear Men” came rather late to the party. The “freedom” they sought, and were later lauded for achieving, consisted of escaping Mexican jurisdiction—despite their insistence on remaining in Mexican territory. Philosopher and historian Josiah Royce, born in California a decade after these events, wrote critically about social themes in the U.S. conquest:

... the wicked Spaniards [*sic*, Mexicans/Californios] were assailing the inoffensive Americans at Sonoma, who needed the help of their brave comrades; the Americans had determined to be free from Spanish misrule, and had raised aloft the standard of freedom and equal rights; in a shorter form, the fun had begun,—such were notions that filled some men’s heads. Others, as we have suggested, well knew that they were there engaged as marauders in making quite an unprovoked assault on the Californians.²⁵

The threat that the undocumented Anglos were under has been mythologized over time. “It was like a death threat,” according to Betty Stevens, vice president of the Sonoma Valley Historical Society.²⁶

Just as the Bear Flaggers painted their actions in justifiable terms, so they required an appealing symbol. Although they acted to further U.S. interests, as irregulars they did not feel entitled to raise its flag, “Old

24 Walter Colton, *Deck and Port: or, Incidents of a Cruise in the United States Frigate Congress to California* (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1851), 301.

25 Josiah Royce, *California: From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study of American Character* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), 61; Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 159–60.

26 Hope Belli Tinney, “Sonoma Remembers First Steps to Statehood,” *Sonoma Press-Democrat*, June 13, 1996, D6.

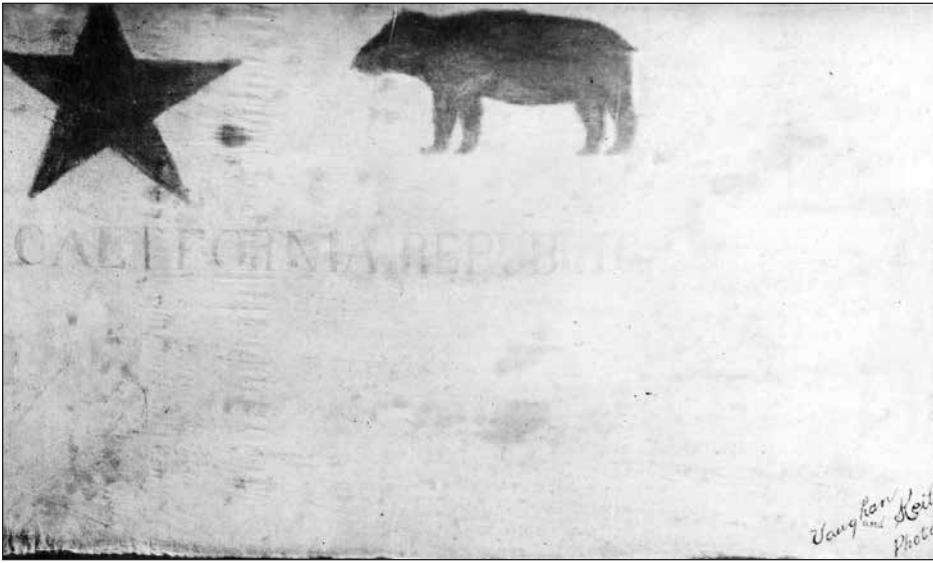


Figure 1. Vaughan and Keith's photograph of the original Bear Flag. *Negative 1182, courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.*

Glory.”²⁷ Their new Bear Flag leveraged a five-pointed star and a red stripe, both design elements in common with the U.S. flag. Some sources attribute the star to a flag used in the local elite's provisional secession of 1836, but it is dubious that the Bear Flaggers knew that history, or that they would have upheld any action by Mexicans as precedent for their own.²⁸ More plausibly, their star and stripe echoed those of the Lone Star Flag of Texas, site of a recent successful uprising against Mexican authority.²⁹ That flag also includes features of the United States flag which had appeared in earlier secessionist banners. That of the Republic of West Florida (1810) displayed a five-pointed star, and that of the Republic of

27 Harlow, *California*, 102.

28 *Flags over California: A History and Guide*, State of California, Military Department (Sacramento, 2002), 5.

29 “Get State to Recognize the Official Flag,” *Grizzly Bear* 10, no. 3 (January 1912): 9.

Fredonia (1826–27) in eastern Texas, used red and white stripes. Both breakaway states were attempts by English speakers to remove territory from Spanish and Mexican rule.

To these secessionist graphical elements, the Bear Flaggers added the term “Republic,” which had also been used in Texas. Ide, quoted above, made a “Republican government” prominent among his demands. Of course, Mexico at the time of the Revolt was already a republic, with all propertied men enfranchised *de jure*, if not *de facto*. The Bear Flaggers’ “republican” concept would exclude all but white men. Their use of the term echoed the earlier rebellions and attempted to aggrandize their own, more than it specified a policy preference.

Why did the men who executed the revolt choose a grizzly bear as their symbol? An anonymous statement of the era explains the bear as “appropriate to the country,”³⁰ and Ide wrote that it embodied “strength and unyielding resistance.”³¹ Certainly it was the most fearsome of the Californian animals, but its cultural symbolism for the rebels was richer. The bears fed on the cattle that embodied the wealth of the Californios, making themselves a real nuisance to the local unfenced ranching operations. Bear-hunting expeditions failed to reduce their depredations.³² Instead, in response to the easy availability of cattle, the bear population grew.³³

The men of the Bear Flag Revolt surely knew that grizzlies were antagonistic to the cattle economy. This knowledge may have led them to choose for their symbol the animal most problematic to Alta Californian society—much as they may have seen themselves. Bears and Anglo immigrants both came down from the hills. They were powerful, uncontrolled, and were about to feast on the assets of the Californios.

30 C. F. Curry, ed., *California Blue Book or State Roster* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1907), 524.

31 Simeon Ide, *A Biographical Sketch of the Life of William B. Ide* (Claremont, NH: S. Ide [1880]), quoted in N. Ray Gilmore and Gladys Gilmore, eds., *Readings in California History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), 99.

32 Tracy Storer and Lloyd Tevis, *California Grizzly* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 120–21, 126–27; Leonard Pitt, *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 29.

33 Storer and Tevis, *Grizzly*, 128–29.

In light of the threat bears posed to their herds of cattle, Hispanic settlers had not only sought to kill bears, but to capture and pit them against their bulls in violent, festive spectacles. Ed Ketchum, Tribal Historian of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, has identified a symbolic theme in these contests: the bull represented the Spanish cultural population and the bear, the Indigenous one.³⁴

Whether the Bear Flaggers knew it or not, in their choice of iconography they appropriated a major Indigenous symbol. The widespread use of bear magic in California reflects the importance of the animal to local Indigenous peoples. The Pomo people, part of whose homeland is in the Sonoma Valley, have a particularly robust mystical tradition of bear impersonation.³⁵ The Bear Flaggers also used the grizzly as a performative disguise, but unlike the Pomo, they demonstrated no interest in the well-being of the bear population.

The revolt obtained prominence in California's white-driven master narrative, but its ultimate significance is dubious. Josefina Zoraida Vázquez's magisterial history of bilateral relations does not even mention it.³⁶ Richard J. Orsi, co-editor of a book series on California's sesquicentennial, called the revolt "a paltry event involving so few people that it really had no impact in reflection of the long term distrust and cultural animosity."³⁷ For Josiah Royce, the rebellion was "unspeakably ridiculous, as well as a little tragical."³⁸

The Mexican-American War, which followed the Bear Flag Revolt, lasted two years. While deaths were few in California, both sides incurred terrible losses in mainland Mexico. In this process the United States acquired fully half of the land that had constituted Mexico at the time of its independence from Spain. Many veterans of the war on the West

34 Martin Rizzo-Martinez, *We Are Not Animals: Indigenous Politics of Survival, Rebellion, and Reconstitution in Nineteenth-Century California* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 33–34, 57.

35 Samuel Alfred Barrett, *Pomo Bear Doctors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1917), passim.

36 Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *México frente a Estados Unidos* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 32–63.

37 Joan Morris and Abby Collins-Sears, "Flap over Bear Flag Saga," *Contra Costa Times* (Walnut Creek, California), June 15, 1996, A03.

38 Royce, *California*, 61.



Figure 2. Edward Kern's sketch of Robert Semple (center) and colleagues at Fort Sutter after the Bear Flag Revolt. Edward Kern letter to Richard H. Kern, July 29 [?], 1846. HM 20649, detail, Fort Sutter Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Coast, especially those of Jonathan D. Stevenson's 1st Regiment of New York Volunteers, John C. Frémont's California Battalion, and the Mormon Battalion under Phillip St. George Cooke,³⁹ afterwards remained in the territory.

THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

In 1849 a Constitutional Convention at Monterey drew up the legal framework for the nascent State of California. The body of delegates was dominated by white men from the United States, although it represented

39 On the Mormon Battalion, see: Stephen C. Foster, "Reminiscences: My First Procession in Los Angeles, March 16, 1847," Commentary by Richard Bruce Winders, *Southern California Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 355–67.

Mexican interests better than the subsequent convention, thirty years later, would do. Of 1849's forty-eight signatories, six were Californios; seven other men already resident in the territory tended to vote with them in what David Alan Johnson called a "Californio bloc."⁴⁰ Over two-thirds of the rest were U.S. military veterans; in addition to its war with Mexico, the U.S. had been fighting Indigenous people on multiple fronts.⁴¹ The only Bear Flagger delegate, Robert Semple, perhaps boosted by his brother's political prestige, was elected president of the convention.

Among the convention's many responsibilities, it defined the Great Seal of the State of California. The introduction of a grizzly bear on the seal, which would have enduring effects, was not a foregone conclusion. At the suggestion of delegate Rodman M. Price, President Semple appointed a commission of three delegates to "receive designs for a Seal for the State of California, [and] to select one from those offered, if appropriate." The commission was comprised of Price, as chairman, along with Winfield Scott Sherwood and John McDougal.⁴² None of the three had yet spent a whole year in California, although Price, a naval officer, had participated in the occupation of Monterey in 1846.⁴³ McDougal was a veteran of the Black Hawk War as well as the Mexican-American War.⁴⁴

The committee obtained exactly one design proposal for the state seal. No information on their outreach has been located; it is possible that they determined to reach a foregone conclusion by finding only one option. Two of the three committee members were veterans of the Mexican-American War, and they obtained the work of another veteran, Major Robert Selden Garnett, for the seal. Garnett, born on his family's plantation in Virginia, had also served in the Seminole Wars in Florida, and would later go on to other anti-Indigenous campaigns in the Pacific Northwest. He would then join the Confederacy and be

⁴⁰ David Alan Johnson, *Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, and Nevada, 1840–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 117, 122; Wayne R. Shepard, ed., *Profiles of the Signers of the 1849 California Constitution with Family Histories* (Oakland: California Genealogical Society, 2020), x.

⁴¹ Shepard, *Profiles*, passim.

⁴² Journal of the Convention Assembled to Frame a Constitution for the State of California, 1849. California State Archives, Microfilm Roll No. MF6:5(31), 65–66.

⁴³ Shepard, *Profiles*, 70, 108, 119, 204–05.

⁴⁴ H. Brett Melendy, "Who Was John McDougal?" *Pacific Historical Review* 29, no. 3 (August 1960): 235.

killed at the Battle of Corrick's Ford.⁴⁵ In presenting Garnett's design, Chairman Price described it as "peculiarly appropriate."⁴⁶

While "peculiar" and "peculiarly" were more common terms then, Price's choice of adjective echoes the euphemism for chattel slavery, "peculiar institution," used earlier in the same year by Senator John C. Calhoun in his *Southern Address*.⁴⁷ Having later served as governor of his native New Jersey, Price outed himself as a Southern sympathizer by quoting approvingly about "subordination to the superior race" from Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens's *Cornerstone Speech*.⁴⁸

Instead of submitting the design under his own name, Garnett delivered it through a proxy, the convention's first assistant secretary, Caleb Lyon. Winfield J. Davis, author of an 1885 article on the seal, wrote that Garnett thought his military background might impede the reception of his design in the convention, although the predominance of veterans in the convention invites doubt with regard to his interpretation. In a contemporaneous letter to Lyon, Garnett credits him with suggesting the introduction of the grizzly bear and the grape vine from which it eats; his first draft had not included these elements.⁴⁹ Their subordinate position in the seal's composition squares with Garnett's direct report that the bear was an afterthought.

Garnett and Lyon's seal, the only available option, proceeded to discussion on the convention floor. The presence of the bear emerged as the principal concern of the delegates, and the division that emerged revealed the beginning of the debate over its propriety as a state symbol. According to Davis, who did not identify his sources, "[t]he bear was added chiefly to gratify [convention delegate] Major J. R. Snyder and the men of the Bear Flag Revolution, much to the chagrin of General Vallejo and the native Californians, who supposed that it was intended

45 Arthur M. Bergeron, "Robert S. Garnett (1819–1861)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Humanities, (December 22, 2021), <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/garnett-robert-s-1819-1861/>.

46 Rodman M. Price, "Report of Committee on a State Seal for California," 1849. California State Archives, 1849 California Constitution Convention papers, Document X.

47 John C. Calhoun, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 26 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 239.

48 Charles Merriam Knapp, *New Jersey Politics during the Period of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Geneva, NY: W. F. Humphrey, 1924), 53–54.

49 Robert Selden Garnett to Caleb Lyon, September 30, 1849. HM 46545, Robert Selden Garrett letters, 1849, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



Figure 3. Engraving of the Great Seal of the State of California, from *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1855), 805.

to immortalize” the Revolt. It is unclear whether Lyon acted as an intermediary for Snyder with regard to the introduction of the bear; no communications between them have been located. Davis chalked up Snyder’s support for the Bear Flaggers to an aggressive check of his passport in 1845.⁵⁰ Snyder also had friends who had been in the Bear Flag Party—he was the one who nominated Semple for the post of the Convention’s president—and he later retired to Sonoma.⁵¹

Lyon, a poet and dandy who later served as governor of Idaho, was noted for his capacity for “endorsing the view of whichever side he happened to be dealing with.” Although as governor he did an admirable job of hearing Indigenous concerns, he also donated to a scalp bounty fund and embezzled \$46,418 meant for the Nez Percé people.⁵²

⁵⁰ Winfield J. Davis, “The Great Seal. History of the State of California’s Coat of Arms,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 14, 1885, 6.

⁵¹ Johnson, *Founding*, 40; Calendar, *The Major Jacob Rink Snyder Collection of the Society of California Pioneers* (San Francisco: The Northern California Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), 7; Shepard, *Profiles*, 124.

⁵² Merle W. Wells, “Caleb Lyon’s Indian Policy,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1970): 196–200.

The convention came just three years after the Bear Flag Revolt, so the bear on the seal is easy to interpret as an homage to it. Certainly Price, in charge of the seal committee, knew that Semple, who had appointed him, would be flattered by a recognition of his small uprising. Although the Bear Flag Revolt was still fresh in the minds of at least some delegates, the legislation describing the seal did not mention it. Perhaps as a result, not all those who have written about the bear on the seal have tied it to the Revolt; art historian Peter J. Holliday reported, without citation, that the bear “symbolizes strength and independence.”⁵³ Nonetheless, as on the original Bear Flag, this bear’s attitude is *stantant* instead of *rampant* or *passant*,⁵⁴ the postures that are more common in European heraldry.

Ongoing debate over property rights provided some Anglo emigrants with another reason to honor and elevate the Bear Flag Revolt. Squatters whose claims dated between the 1846 Revolt and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo two years later may have hoped that recognition of the so-called Bear Flag Republic would strengthen the legal case for their tenancy. In addition, land grants made by the last Mexican governor, Pío Pico, after the Revolt could then be considered completely invalid.

When Price introduced this design, his colleagues offered two amendments to remove or diminish the bear. Oliver Meredith Wozencraft proposed “striking out the figures of the Gold Diggers [*sic*] and the Bear, and introducing instead bags of Gold and bales of Merchandise.” This idea did not attract support. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, the principal target and captive of the revolt, then introduced another amendment: “Resolved that the Bear be taken out of the design for the Seal of California, or if it do remain that it be represented as made fast by a lazo [*lasso*] in the hand of a Vaquero.” These suggestions went to the heart of the power relations at issue: Vallejo used the Spanish words in his proposal that the bear should either not appear at all or be subject to Hispanic control. The strategic ambiguity of his proposal made it more

53 Peter J. Holliday, *American Arcadia: California and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xviii.

54 Heraldic terms: *stantant* = standing in profile with feet on the ground; *rampant* = *rearing* on hindlegs in profile, with foreleg or forelegs extended; *passant* = profile with the farther forepaw raised.

popular than Wozencraft's, but it too failed, in a vote of 16–21.⁵⁵ No compromise was located, so the unrestrained bear received the approval of a weak majority.

The convention's recorder did not identify the members voting each way on this amendment. However, support for Vallejo's amendment was clearly not limited to Californios, nor even to the Californio bloc. Convention President Semple and the seal committee members probably voted the other way. The votes of eleven absent delegates could easily have changed the outcome.

Later in the same session and by the exact same margin, the new seal was adopted as the state's coat of arms.⁵⁶ The identical 21–16 split suggests that a large minority of the convention members in attendance may have been displeased with the seal's suitability. The importance of the grizzly bear to the nascent state was barely agreed upon, but its legitimization as an official symbol had begun.

Garnett's role in creating the state seal has proven divisive. In 1957 the United Daughters of the Confederacy, apparently in reaction to the progressive decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, installed a bronze plaque in Monterey commemorating the officer and his allegiance to the Confederacy.⁵⁷ In 2017 the City of Monterey replaced it with a similar plaque omitting mention of the Confederacy; unknown persons replaced that one in 2020 with a piece of cardboard reading, "Celebrate real heroes. No place of honor for racists." The city decided to neither investigate nor replace the plaque.⁵⁸

55 John Ross Browne, *Report of the Debates in the Convention of California on the Formation of the State Constitution in September and October, 1849* (Washington: John T. Towers, 1850), 323; *Journal of the Convention Assembled to Frame a Constitution for the State of California, 1849*. California State Archives, Microfilm Roll No. MF63 (31), 95.

56 *Journal of the Convention Assembled to Frame a Constitution for the State of California, 1849*. California State Archives, Microfilm Roll No. MF63 (31), 96.

57 Asaf Shalev, "There Was a Confederate Monument in Monterey, But People Only Noticed after It Was Removed," *Monterey County Weekly*, July 4, 2019.

58 Asaf Shalev, "Monterey Won't Replace Colton Hall Monument That Was Torn Out over Confederacy Connection," *Monterey County Weekly*, June 18, 2020.



Figure 4. The United Daughters of the Confederacy's 1957 bronze plaque in Monterey commemorating Robert Selden Garrett. *Courtesy of readtheplaque.com; detail, squared and enhanced; CC-BY-4.0.*

THE CALIFORNIA STATE FLAG

The Native Sons of the Golden West, a patriotic civic group founded in 1875, was largely responsible for the officialization of the Bear Flag in California. The NSGW was founded, in part, to celebrate a rose-tinted vision of California history, downplaying racial violence in favor of an heroic, white origin story.⁵⁹ Jim Newton called the organization “an aggressive proponent of white supremacy”; Michael Buse called it a

59 Starr, *Americans and the California Dream*, 120; Brenda Frink, “Pioneers and Patriots: Race, Gender, and Historical Memory in California, 1875–1915” (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2010), 18, 23–24.

“white nationalist heritage organization.”⁶⁰ In 1920, its Grand President succinctly pronounced that “California was given by God to a white people, and with God’s strength we want to keep it as He gave it to us.”⁶¹

The redefinition of terms—making clear who was in and out of power—was part of Manifest Destiny and the white supremacist program of the NSGW and other patriotic societies.⁶² Such groups claimed the words “native” and “pioneer” for themselves, ignoring contemporaneous pioneers of other ethnicities.⁶³ The toponymic holonyms “America” and “California” were similarly appropriated by the hegemonic power. As Eduardo Galeano complained, this left Latin Americans to occupy a “subAmerica, a second-class America, of nebulous identification.”⁶⁴ While Spain and Mexico had administered two Californias, Upper and Lower, in the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, only the Mexican one was left with an adjective.⁶⁵ “Mexican-American” citizens and residents of the United States found themselves in an analogous situation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the NSGW was principally concerned with opposing the immigration and rights of Chinese and Japanese people. Carey McWilliams wrote that it “was to anti-Oriental agitation in California what the KKK was to Southern racism, albeit in a somewhat more decorous manner.”⁶⁶ The editorial content of its monthly publication, *Grizzly Bear*, railed against the presence of Japanese people in California, and particularly “the evil which countenances the attendance of JAPANESE MEN at public schools with WHITE GIRLS.”⁶⁷

60 Jim Newton, *Justice for All: Earl Warren and the Nation He Made* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 74; Michael Buse, “‘The Shrine of Their Memory’: Settler Colonialism and the Construction of American Heritage at Metini-Fort Ross, 1845–1906” (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 2019), 4, 23.

61 Grand President William P. Canbu, quoted in Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 79.

62 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 56–58.

63 Frink, *Pioneers*, 1, 11, 23. Frink sums up the NSGW’s definitions of “pioneer” as “a white man who had arrived in California before 1850,” and “native” as “any white man born in the state of California, whatever his parentage.”

64 Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1971), 4.

65 This is true both in U.S. and in Spanish usage. “California” refers principally to the one in the U.S.

66 Carey McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 107.

67 “Politics Appears to Come before Home Interests,” *Grizzly Bear* 8, no. 5 (March 1911): 8.

The organization did, however, admit some prosperous Californio members. Hispanic California was seen as a romantic historical era rather than a current threat like Japanese immigration.⁶⁸ The NSGW located California's origins in the U.S. conquest over Mexico, which put Californio society squarely in the past. Like the Bear Flaggers, the Native Sons subscribed to the view that white English speakers were morally destined to control and populate California. Clarence M. Hunt, editor of their newspaper, flatly stated that:

The California that we honor on Admission Day, the American California, had her beginning in the town of Sonoma, in Sonoma County, where, on the 14th day of June, 1846, a small band of Americans, known as the Bear Flag Party, raised the flag of the "California Republic," and proclaimed the end of Mexican rule in California, this spot of earth Supremely blessed.⁶⁹

In other words, Mexico was not part of "America," and only upon the triumph of the Bear Flag Revolt did California receive God's approval. The Revolt and California's Admission Day, September 9th, bookended the NSGW's origin story for California, the two dates encapsulating its transition into one of the United States. The most convenient and appealing visual icon of these events was the grizzly bear. It was always their preferred emblem: their first parade (1875) incorporated a stuffed bear cub, and their official newspaper was called *Grizzly Bear*.⁷⁰ The playwright of "Under the Bear Flag," a "romantic military drama" staged in Burbank in 1907, dedicated it to the organization.⁷¹ Their perspective was popular even outside the group; the Los Angeles City Council adopted an official seal in 1905, which is still in effect, featuring the Bear Flag in one quadrant.

The project of the state's official adoption of the Bear Flag was spearheaded by NSGW member James B. Holohan, an orchardist and state senator for the Twenty-Ninth District, covering Santa Cruz and San

68 Frink, *Pioneers*, 12–13, 54; David J. Weber, "La incorporación del sudoeste americano: aportación del sudoeste hispano a la historia de Norteamérica," in *España y Estados Unidos en la era de las independencias*, Eduardo Garrigues and Antonio López Vega, eds. (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2013), 54.

69 Clarence M. Hunt, "California's Admission Day: Why It Has Been Declared, and Is Celebrated as, a Holiday," *Grizzly Bear* 25, no. 5 (September 1919): 3.

70 Souvenir and Official Programme Native Sons of the Golden West, September 9th, 1890 (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker & Co., 1890), 26, 28.

71 "New California Play," *Grizzly Bear* 1, no. 1 (May 1907): 38.



Figure 5. A romanticized, fictionalized illustration dated 1896 of the “Raising of the Bear Flag in California . . .” a half century earlier. *Author’s collection.* See also *California State Archives, Old Series Trademark Collection No. 2692.*

Mateo counties.⁷² The leading newspapers of Santa Cruz and Watsonville endorsed his candidacy in 1908, *Santa Cruz Surf* editor Arthur A. Taylor stating as Holohan’s priorities the establishment of the State Redwood Park (Big Basin) and the “aid of Good Roads.”⁷³

Newly elected to the state senate, Holohan was a delegate to the NSGW’s 1909 Grand Parlor at Marysville, which adopted the Bear Flag as “the State emblem.”⁷⁴ A plan to reflect this principle in state law quickly arose, with a five-member *Committee to Recommend Legislation*

⁷² *The Journal of the Senate during the Thirty-Eighth (Extra) Session of the Legislature of the State of California 1910* (Sacramento: W. W. Shannon, 1911), 2.

⁷³ “Arthur A. Taylor Writes of Holohan,” *The Pajaronian* 41, no. 35 (October 22, 1908): 2.

⁷⁴ “Delegates to Marysville Grand Parlor,” *Grizzly Bear* 4, no. 6 (April 1909); “Marysville—Grand Parlor Supplement,” *Grizzly Bear* 4, no. 6 (April 1909): 16; “Synopsis of Marysville Grand Parlor Proceedings,” *Bear* 5, no. 1 (May 1909); “Grand Parlor Supplement,” *Grizzly Bear* 5, no. 1 (May 1909): 1.

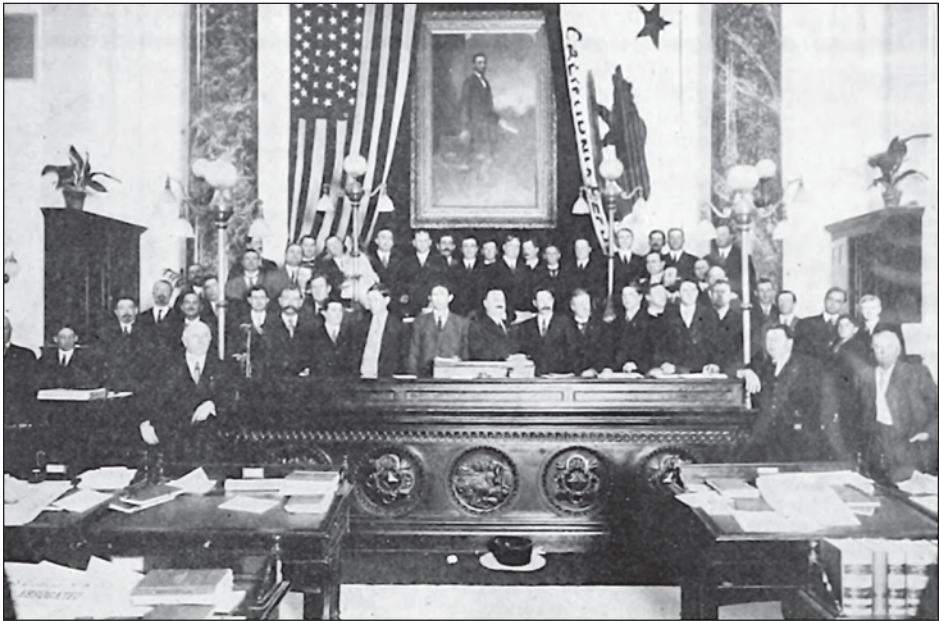


Figure 6. NSGW members serving in the California state government, posing in the Assembly chamber. *Photographer: B. M. Hodson. Grizzly Bear* 10, no. 3 (January 1912): 9.

Designating Bear Flag as Official State Flag of California serving at the pleasure of the Grand President.⁷⁵ The committee, whose key member was Holohan, probably composed the brief text which would soon become California law. This specified that the official flag center the bear, which would now appear *passant* upon green grass.

The Grand Parlor of 1910, held at Lake Tahoe, resolved to promote the adoption of the Bear Flag as state flag.⁷⁶ Also in 1910, the NSGW parlor of Petaluma acquired the ruined adobe and grounds where the Bear Flag Revolt had taken place.⁷⁷ Happily for the NSGW, the state

⁷⁵ "Grand Secretary's Official Notice No. 3," *Grizzly Bear* 5, no. 4 (August 1909): 18; "Grand Secretary's Official Notice No. 3," *Grizzly Bear* 7, no. 4 (August 1910): 16.

⁷⁶ "Official Flag for State," *Grizzly Bear* 8, no. 4 (February 1911): 8.

⁷⁷ Crystal Shoaf and Sara M. Skinner, *Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park Environmental Living Program: Teacher's Resource Handbook 2007–2008* (California State Parks, 2007), 77.

election in November put its members in a position to formally install the flag. Holohan was reelected to a second term, and Hiram Johnson triumphed as governor.⁷⁸ Johnson's parlor, to which he paid quarterly dues of \$3.30, honored him with a reception that cost \$252.60.⁷⁹

The Native Sons lost no time in pursuing their project. Governor Johnson gave his inaugural address on January 3, 1911. On the 12th, Holohan introduced his short Senate bill formalizing the Bear Flag. After three readings on the floor, the bill passed on the 20th by a vote of 30–0.⁸⁰ Ten days later, the Assembly also passed the bill, by 58–0.⁸¹ Johnson signed it into law on February 3, exactly one month into his administration.

Although not every legislator voted, the bill saw lopsidedly favorable outcomes in each chamber. Such tallies were common at the time. No proposed amendments or objections appear in the Senate or Assembly Journals; apparently, no appreciable controversy attached to the measure or its quick passage.⁸²

The new legislation defining the flag carefully made no mention of the Bear Flag Revolt nor of Anglo-Saxon domination, although these themes were still prominent in NSGW discourse. The same month, member and former San Francisco mayor James D. Phelan, himself a Catholic of Irish extraction, spoke as construction began on the new parlor hall. He urged listeners to “inform our fellow countrymen, who sympathize with Anglo-Saxon civilization and the dominance of the white race,” of the threat he saw in Asian immigration.⁸³ In 1913 the Legislature approved \$5,000 for an heroic Bear Flag monument in Sonoma Plaza, which was sculpted by NSGW member John MacQuarrie and installed by the local chapter; Hiram Johnson presided over its unveiling.

78 “Get State to Recognize the Official Flag,” *Grizzly Bear* 10, no. 3 (January 1912): 9.

79 Bancroft Library, Hiram Johnson Papers BANC MSS C-B 581, part 1, box 9, Letters to Johnson, Native Sons of the Golden West, 4 letters, 1910; Center for Sacramento History, Native Sons of the Golden West Collection MS0062, Record Book Sunset Parlor 1909–1913, 130, 148.

80 *Journal of the Senate*, 321–22.

81 *The Journal of the Assembly during the Thirty-Ninth Session of the Legislature of the State of California* 1911 (Sacramento: W. W. Shannon, 1911), 411.

82 *Ibid.*, and *Journal of the Senate*, 1911.

83 “Phelan Pleads for Exclusion,” *San Francisco Call* 109, no. 85 (February 23, 1911): 2.

Its plaque commemorates the Bear Flaggers' achievement of "the freedom of California from Mexican rule."⁸⁴

Phelan and Johnson both went on to serve in the U.S. Senate, where they continued to advance racist policies. Phelan's reelection slogan was "Keep California White"; the Johnson-Reed Bill of 1924 banned immigration from Japan. In the view of Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, "Johnson and his supporters would see their life's [sic] work crowned with Executive Order 9102 on March 18, 1942, interning California's Japanese-Americans in desert concentration camps."⁸⁵

The NSGW's appropriation of the term "native" was still evident in 1943, when the Supreme Court declined to hear the organization's appeal seeking to deprive Japanese Americans of birthright citizenship.⁸⁶ Woody LaBounty has observed that the NSGW's notorious racism may have contributed to "the decline of Admission Day," a once-significant holiday that is no longer much noted.⁸⁷ The NSGW finally amended its constitution in 1967 to open membership to non-white Californian men.⁸⁸ Its old reputation persists, though; West Sonoma County Union High School District only removed its three NSGW plaques from school walls in 2022 after hearing from students like KatieAnn Nguyen, who asked: "If the group that donated these very plaques were openly racist towards Asian Americans, then, as an Asian American, how can I begin to feel welcome at this school?"⁸⁹

84 "Bear Flag Monument," *Grizzly Bear* 15, no. 5 (September 1914): 13; "Bear Flag Monument," *Placer Herald* 62, no. 42 (June 20, 1914): 5; "Bear Flag, Native Sons Come Together Again," *Sonoma Index-Tribune* (Sonoma Valley, California), June 14, 1996, A20.

85 Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 36–37.

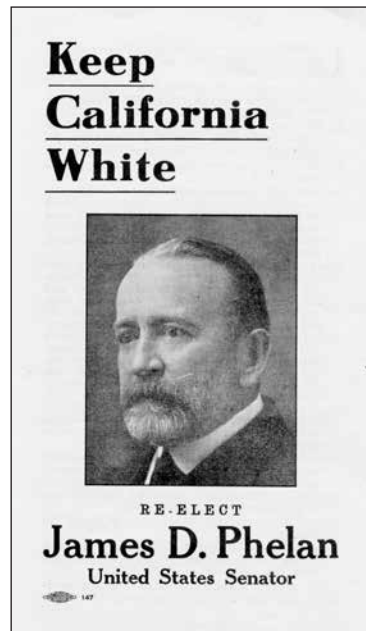
86 "Supreme Court Refuses Review of Nisei Citizenship," *American Civil Liberties Union-News* (San Francisco) 8, no. 6 (June 1943): 1; Greg Robinson, "Regan v. King," *Densho Encyclopedia*, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Regan_v._King/.

87 Woody LaBounty, "Admission Day: A Closer Look," *OpenSFHistory*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.opensfhistory.org/osfhcrucible/2017/09/04/admission-day-a-closer-look/>.

88 Peter T. Conmy, "Chinese Native Sons," *The Native Son* (San Francisco) 61, no. 1 (June-July 2022), 11. This is a bi-monthly publication of NSGW, succeeding after the *Grizzly Bear*.

89 Quoted in "West County School District to Remove Plaques after Students Voice Concerns," *The Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, California), May 5, 2022.

Figure 7. James D. Phelan, a former mayor of San Francisco, served in the U.S. Senate, 1914–1921. He was a strident opponent of Japanese immigration, as this flyer from his unsuccessful re-election campaign in 1920 indicates. *Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, SFH MSS Box 10, Folder 12.*



THE BEAR FLAG ALTERNATIVE

For the “California Bear Flag Centennial Celebration” in 1946, the Sonoma Post Office offered a commemorative cachet, and Governor Earl Warren participated in a ceremonial flag raising at Sonoma Plaza.⁹⁰ Front-page newspaper reports from the next day indicate no hint of protest or dissent, nor do they mention Mexico or racial tensions.⁹¹

In San Francisco, Russian muralist Anton Refregier was then painting a 27-panel work that would shortly bring the controversy to light. In the words of geographer Gray Brechin, the artist “chose to paint California’s history as a series of class and racial contests”—including an image of the Bear Flaggers raising their banner while the Mexican one lies crumpled at their feet. When the Mexican consul objected to

⁹⁰ “Fifty Years Ago,” *The Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A21.

⁹¹ “West of Old Passes in Review before Bear Flag Fete Audience,” *Oakland Tribune* 144, no. 166 (June 15, 1946): 1, 3; “Bear Flag Hoisting, Colorful Parade Feature Centennial Celebration at Sonoma,” *Petaluma Argus-Courier* 18, no. 272 (June 15, 1946): 1; “Warren Speaks at Flag Ceremony,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News* 91, no. 142 (June 15, 1946): 1.

this display of subjugation, the artist agreed to whitewash the flag on the ground.⁹² Its green and red stripes are now only slightly visible.

As the 1996 sesquicentennial approached, sensitivities were more evident. Historian Jim Rawls presciently warned in May of that year that the anniversaries of the Bear Flag Revolt should now be approached differently: "Today our remembrance is tempered by the voices of the victims of those foundational acts. Celebrating such events now may lead only to social disharmony and resentment."⁹³ Such voices indeed spoke out. Nancy Ovalle, an activist and organizer, explained her outlook in a letter to the editor of the *Sonoma Index-Tribune*:

Personally speaking, I have always felt uncomfortable with the connotations related to the Bear Flag Revolt, as it celebrates a destructive and genocidal era in history. As a Chicana of indigenous descent, I hate to be reminded of the darkness of Manifest Destiny every time I visit Sonoma Plaza or anywhere in Sonoma these days. I hate to see the Bear, a sacred totem to many of us, be used to symbolize this event.⁹⁴

The Bear Flag Sesquicentennial Committee, planning a large event to take place in Sonoma in 1996, tried to take these concerns into account. It clarified in its mission statement that "[t]he word *commemoration* is to be use[d] for the entire event, rather than *celebration*—for this is a commemoration of all cultures and turning points in California's history, and not a celebration of anyone, or any time, over another."⁹⁵ This well-intentioned point had a limited effect on the actual event. César Lajud, the Mexican consul in San Francisco, was invited to speak for three minutes, including his introduction. The schedule allocated an amphitheater for a "Bear Flag Alternative" event—the day after the principal speeches.

The clearly festive "commemoration" began with opening "ceremonies." Its schedule was dominated by white-oriented patriotic elements such as a reunion of descendants of the Bear Flag Party, an Army National Guard Band concert, a "Raising of the Bear Flag Ceremony by

92 Gray Brechin, "Erasing Art and History," *Living New Deal*, September 27, 2017, <https://livingnewdeal.org/erasing-art-history/>.

93 Jim Rawls, "150 Years since the Bear Flag," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 7, 1996, A-17.

94 "Learn Who We Really Are," *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A16-17.

95 "What the Bear Flag Mission Statement Says," *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A18.



Figure 8. Anton Refregier's "Raising the Bear Flag," 1946–1948. LC-DIG-highsm-20857, The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs, Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Native Sons of the Golden West," and a "Fly Over by the Republic of California Air Force followed immediately by the Sonoma Childrens' [sic] Chorale performing 'God Bless America.'"⁹⁶

A congratulatory letter sent by President Bill Clinton, although tempered with inclusive language, obviously proposed to "celebrate" the rebels' "courageous action."⁹⁷ NSGW Grand President Frank Milani, on stage to raise the Bear Flag, "chastised historians for rewriting history... [and] called the men true heroes."⁹⁸ Taking this report at face value, the anger with which Milani called out the demythologizing trend perversely underscores its significance.

For the author and activist Betita Martínez, "[t]he current climate of hatred for immigrants is encouraged by celebrating the Bear Flag."⁹⁹ Maxina Ventura, a local who wrote a letter to the editor, accused the

96 "A Bear Flag Bonanza!" *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A18; "Bear Flag Sesquicentennial Media Information," Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives, Elizabeth "Betita" Sutherland Martínez papers, box 79, folders 3, 4.

97 Bill Clinton, [proclamation], June 14, 1996. Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives, Elizabeth "Betita" Sutherland Martínez papers, box 79, folder 3.

98 Morris and Collins-Sears, *Flap*, A03; "Bear Flag, Native Sons Come Together Again," *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A20.

99 Elizabeth Betita Martinez [sic] "Raza Protest: A Day of Lies and Hate," *Raza Teca* (San Jose, Razateca Publications), July/August, 1996, 29.

organizers of a farce: “Of course the Bear Flag commemoration is a celebration; to try to couch it in other language is mere folly.... Please, organizing committee, admit the truth. If you’re around in 50 years, don’t repeat such a display. This is no cause for celebration.”¹⁰⁰

Protesters assembled at the event to raise their concerns about representation, civil rights, and education policy. Nancy Ovalle, quoted above, led a group called the Bear Flag Resistance Committee. Organizer Jaime Gutierrez said, “[W]e’re here demonstrating [against] the arrogance and audacity of celebrating genocide.”¹⁰¹ The remarks of activist Gabriel Hernandez were paraphrased in the *Contra Costa Times*: “[T]he Bear Flag is a symbol of racial intolerance and hatred. To honor it . . . is to demean many people.”¹⁰² These activists organized to decry and oppose white supremacy.

The protest aimed to disrupt the opening ceremonies and the speech of right-wing Governor Pete Wilson. The governor had previously championed the xenophobic ballot initiative Proposition 187, which sought to withhold public services from undocumented immigrants; it passed but was stayed on appeal. The *Index-Tribune* reported “tension caused by noisy protesters beating drums and shouting through megaphones.”¹⁰³ The protesters also carried whistles. When Wilson spoke, praising the Bear Flaggers for seeking “freedom,” he “was cut off by the overwhelming noise.”¹⁰⁴ According to Martínez, one “could barely hear Governor Wilson drone on as he spoke to celebrants gathered in the plaza. Cries of ‘Deport Wilson!’ were very audible, however.”¹⁰⁵ (Wilson’s remarks are still inaudible today; staff at the California State Archives could not locate a copy of his speech.¹⁰⁶)

Some observers—the celebrants—were upset. A newspaper editorial decried “a paid group of agitators” who sought to cause “an incident

100 “No Cause for Celebration,” *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 7, 1996, A14.

101 Patricia Henley, “Event Draws Protest,” *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 18, 1996, A1, A12.

102 Morris and Collins-Sears, *Flap*, A03.

103 Elizabeth Bell, “Bear Flag History Relived: Thousands Participate in Weekend Events,” *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 14, 1996, A1.

104 George Snyder, “City of Sonoma Celebrates Bear Flag amid Protests,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 15, 1996, A16; Brahinsky and Tarr, *People’s Guide*, 224–25.

105 Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multicolored Century*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998), 226–28.

106 Lisa C. Prince, Personal communication, September 15, 2022.

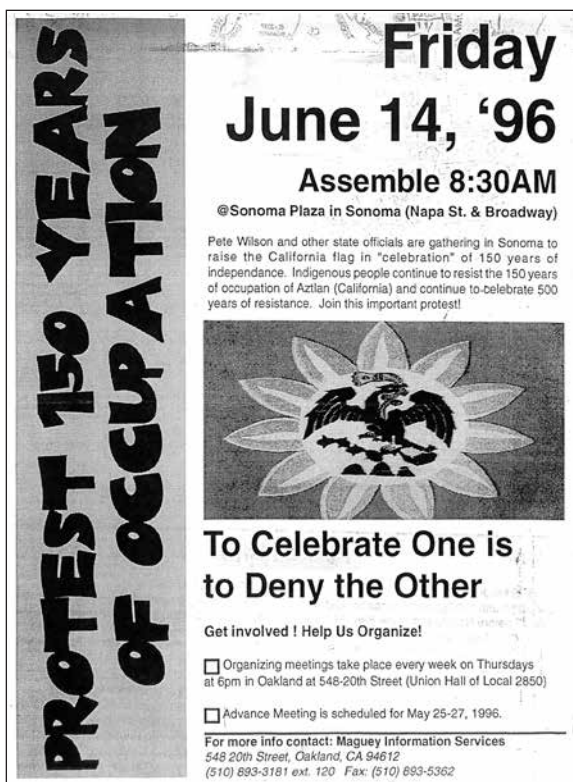


Figure 9. First page of the invitation packet for the Sesquicentennial protest, *Protest flyer, M1854, box 79, folder 3. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.*

which would embarrass the governor.”¹⁰⁷ Martínez, in her notes, quoted an unidentified white woman at the event as saying, “I don’t feel these Oakland protesters should be here.”¹⁰⁸ This speaker used the same racializing framework embodied in the flag and denounced by the protesters: that an Other must not interfere with the Anglo-Saxon, Sonoma-oriented vision of state heritage. Even while identifying the Other as Californian, she denied it rights over the historical narrative by ascribing it to famously nonwhite Oakland.

¹⁰⁷ RML, “Bear Flag Reflections,” *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 18, 1996, A14.

¹⁰⁸ Undated notes, Stanford University Special Collections and University Archives, Elizabeth “Betita” Sutherland Martínez papers, box 79, folder 3.



Figure 10. Photo by Annie Wells of protesters confronting historical reenactors at the Bear Flag Sesquicentennial in Sonoma. *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*, June 16, 1996, A1, Detail. Courtesy of the Sonoma Valley Historical Society.

The disquiet was anticipated by law enforcement, who had an agreement with the protest leaders.¹⁰⁹ The *Index-Tribune* reported the presence of fifty officers from the police departments of Sonoma, Santa Rosa, and Rohnert Park, plus the California Highway Patrol and the Sonoma County Sheriff's Tactical Team, some in riot gear. One reflected that "there was a lot of the crowd that was ready to take the protesters' heads off—even the older people." Another officer videotaped those in attendance.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ George Snyder, "City of Sonoma Celebrates," (1996).

¹¹⁰ Henley, "Event," A1, A12; Elizabeth Bell, "Cops Face Rowdy Crowds with Poise: Protest Provides Training for Officers," *Sonoma Index-Tribune*, June 21, 1996, A5.

DISCUSSION

It is easy to view the bear as a noble example of California nature: the megafaunal analog to the charismatic megafauna, the redwoods, that the NSGW actively sought to preserve. Unlike the redwoods, no available evidence shows that they sought to preserve bear populations or habitat. Ironically, these white settlers and their “native son” descendants upheld their supremacy so thoroughly that they extinguished their very symbol, and in so doing, enhanced its mythical status. No living person has ever seen a California grizzly bear in the wild. To an uninformed onlooker, the bear on the flag may seem noble, natural, traditional, and even disconnected from human history.

The NSGW periodical *Grizzly Bear* published an uncredited poem in 1909 declaring that “We want to see, / These flags galore; / And let people know / What they stand for.”¹¹¹ This doggerel does not get around to stating that the flags stand for the supposedly foundational role of the Bear Flag Revolt. By establishing facts on the ground—actually on the flagpole—future Californians like us might share the group’s vision. Even at the time of its adoption, the Native Sons were concerned about public commitment to the meaning of the flag. As member and Assemblyman, Frank M. Rutherford observed in 1911:

A flag, gentlemen, after all is but the outward or the external representation of certain principles or designs actuating men united for a common purpose. The nobler and the higher the purposes for which they are banded together, the greater the honor due the flag. The greater the devotion to those principles, the greater will be the love and the honor for the flag. Any variation from such principles must necessarily result in a corresponding variation in the sentiments towards the flag.¹¹²

He was correct: respect for the moral foundations and the symbols and rituals of an institution are deeply interlinked. To question the premises, significance, or representativeness of the Bear Flag Revolt raises questions about the Bear Flag itself.

The official establishment of the flag implicitly declared for posterity that the Revolt was the most foundational moment of California

111 “Wear Your Button,” *Grizzly Bear* 6, no. 2 (December 1909): 29.

112 “Get State to Recognize the Official Flag,” *Grizzly Bear* 10, no. 3 (January 1912): 9.

history—a claim not upheld by facts. In Texas, the story of the Alamo underwent a related process of “fabulization.” In each case, Anglo resistance to Mexican sovereignty was glorified as honorable and essential. In this way, the flag represents only the white settlers of California. This state is not at all unique in having problematic emblems. Alabama, for example, is saddled with a coat of arms that celebrates the Confederacy.¹¹³ Other official symbols with racist origins, such as the flags of Massachusetts, Mississippi, and the Republic of South Africa, have previously been overhauled or replaced.

A positive counterpoint to the Bear Flag is the flag of New Mexico, another of the states created in the land taken from Mexico under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Both flags were adopted in the first decades of the twentieth century, and both are common visual markers of identity, used in clothing and tattoos, among other contexts. Quite unlike the bear, the red-on-gold Zia sun design is multitudinous and even decolonial, referring visually to the state’s Puebloan and Spanish heritage.

The North American Vexillological Association’s “Good Flag, Bad Flag” guidelines say a flag should “relate to what it symbolizes.” New Mexico’s flag represents that state’s history and demography much better than California’s does. Mexican Americans, prominent in both states, may see in the New Mexican flag a recognition of their own mestizo roots, which predate the era of U.S. domination; the Bear Flag, promoting a rebellion against their Mexican roots, does the opposite.

Future proposals for change or replacement of California’s Bear Flag are therefore worthy of debate. Any agreed change should increase the relevance and respectfulness of the state flag to all Californians. One angle would be to adopt an Indigenous image of a bear, which could dethrone the myth of the Bear Flag Revolt while providing a degree of continuity. Consider the 8,000-year-old “Chipped Stone Bear” of San Diego County, the State Prehistoric Artifact.¹¹⁴ To be clear, no survey

113 Kyle Whitmire, “How a Confederate Daughter Rewrote Alabama History for White Supremacy,” *AL.com*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.al.com/news/2022/02/how-a-confederate-daughter-rewrote-alabama-history-for-white-supremacy.html>.

114 Henry C. Koerper and Malcolm F. Farmer, “A Bear-shaped Crescentic from Northern San Diego County, California,” *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 9, no. 2 (1987): 282–88.

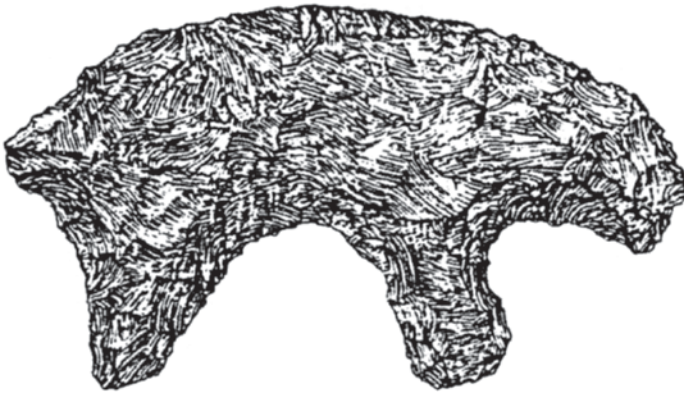


Figure 11. Lithic illustration by Joe Cramer of the Chipped Stone Bear, California. *Courtesy of Henry Koerper.*

on the propriety and appeal of this icon has been conducted. Clarence Brown, a Kumeyaay elder, advocated for the reburial of the artifact.¹¹⁵

There is a nineteenth-century precedent for the approval of a more representative flag in California. Juan Bautista Alvarado recorded an outsider's view of Indigenous neophytes' reaction to their first view of the Mexican flag:

. . . they were very great admirers of the eagle and as they saw an eagle on that painted flag, they shivered with pleasure since they considered the triumph of the eagle, their venerated bird, to be their own. . . .¹¹⁶

Debate over people's proper representation is an ongoing process. One scholar, Albert Hurtado, has written that the members of the Bear Flag Party were undocumented immigrants who "felt threatened and marginalized," and therefore, today's Mexican immigrants might share their Bear Flag as a symbol.¹¹⁷ Although he acknowledged the flag's link

115 Philip de Barros and Janet Eidsness, "Native American Programs Committee: Successful Forum at Annual Meeting," *Society for California Archaeology Newsletter* 33, no. 2 (June 1999): 6–7. Koerper and Farmer, "A Bear-shaped Crescentic," 282–88.

116 Juan Bautista Alvarado, "Historia de California, 1876," vol. 1, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS C-D 1, 210.

117 Alberto Hurtado, "Their Flag, Too," *Boom: A Journal of California* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 52–53.

to Manifest Destiny, his view of its meaning is too apologetic. The Bear Flaggers and the Native Sons of the Golden West, the principal agents responsible for the flag, sought to establish white supremacy in order to obtain and preserve their own privileges. Their worldviews implied the disempowerment of Mexican-Americans, a theme that has by no means disappeared from public discourse, as white supremacy is still a matter of great concern. The journalist Erin Aubry Kaplan wrote in 2022 that “[t]he culture of white supremacy has gone fully mainstream.”¹¹⁸ The most recent former president of the U.S. called Mexican immigrants “rapists”; the 2019 mass murder in an El Paso, Texas, Walmart targeted “Mexicans” and killed mostly Latinos who were U.S. citizens.

CONCLUSION

Californians often interpret the grizzly bear as a noble emblem with no particular connection to any moral concerns, but to do so is to remain oblivious to its problematic history. This article recovers the stories of the bear designs and their adoption, which undermine their present moral legitimacy. The evidence demonstrates that the creation and adoption of the state’s Bear Flag, in particular, were motivated by men seeking to support and advance the self-interests of white American newcomers over the interests of the state’s Californio and Indigenous residents. The design elements and the theme of the Revolt’s 1846 flag refer to uprisings against Mexico; the bear on the seal was proposed as a state symbol by an Indian fighter and later Confederate general, and brought to the constitutional convention by a committee dominated by veterans of the U.S. War on Mexico. It was challenged by Californios and their allies who sought to either remove the bear from the seal or put it under the control of a Californio. In 1911, a club of jingoists who believed Mexican rule to be inherently inferior and illegitimate, succeeded in installing a bear on the state flag as our symbol. Today, celebrating the conquest of California is exclusionary, yet the state continues to represent itself by referring to the mythologized Bear Flag Revolt.

118 Erin Aubry Kaplan, “Donald Trump Is (Still) President of White America,” *Politico*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/11/20/donald-trump-culture-white-supremacy-00069597>.

Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps the historian who did the most valuable work on nationalist mythologies, once said that “we historians are today the first line of defense against the advance of dangerous myths.”¹¹⁹ The Bear Flag myth is that a small band of white men from the United States righteously liberated California. It grew entrenched through the self-serving silences of historical actors, and the uncritical complacency of generations of Californians who saw nothing objectionable about a majestic grizzly bear. The danger of this myth is that it perpetuates a nineteenth-century racial hierarchy, denying our Indigenous and Mexican heritage and pitting us against our neighbors. The state’s diverse population is not only unrepresented but actually contradicted by this flag.

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119 Nuria Azancot, “Eric Hobsbawm: ‘Los historiadores somos la primera línea defensiva contra el avance de los mitos nacionalistas peligrosos,’” *El Español*, March 15, 2007, https://www.elespanol.com/el-cultural/letras/20070315/eric-hobsbawm/g249697_o.html.

