

# Discovery and Conquest: Colonization by the Spanish

The Chumash people were the first to settle in what is now known as Morro Bay and along the coast of California over 13,000 years ago. The Chumash were hunter-gatherers and were adept at fishing. As a result of them living near the ocean, they relied on their fishing skills to survive. They fished using “bone tridents and fish hooks fashioned from shell [and] used bait of chopped cactus for luring sardines into big baskets”.<sup>1</sup> As the natives were adapting to the land and making Morro Bay their home little did they know, a new group of people were looking to settle on their grounds.



**Early Morro Bay Settlement** circa 1890s. Image courtesy of San Luis Obispo County History Center.

Second to the Chumash, the next civilization to discover Morro Bay didn't arrive until the 1540s.

At this time, a Spanish explorer named Juan Cabrillo had embarked on a journey to find the Northwest Passage. Although Cabrillo failed in accomplishing this task, he managed to leave a significant mark on history. In 1542, while seeking the passage, Cabrillo became the first European to discover the coast of California. Speaking about Cabrillo's expedition Terry Cross of



**Cabrillo** statue in San Diego. Image courtesy of Flickr user Brian Sterling.

the Morro Bay Maritime Museum said that the ship “was the very first contact with California and with the indigenous natives of California.”<sup>2</sup> He led his crew Northward along the west coast, naming and claiming various regions for Spain.<sup>3</sup> It is through this process that Morro Bay's name was originated. While sailing along the coast, a 576 foot tall mass of rock caught his attention. Noting the resemblance of the rock's shape to the style of hats worn by the Moors of Spain, Cabrillo is credited with giving Morro Rock the name of “El Morro”.<sup>4</sup>

Cabrillo was not the first European to land in Morro Bay as his ships sailed on without stopping. That was accomplished in 1587 by Pedro de Unamuno, a Spanish navigator. Unamuno's original assignment was to guide a Spanish galleon to trade in the Philippines and return to find a suitable harbor in California. After successfully reaching and departing from the Philippines, Unamuno arrived at the coast of California. Unamuno's ship anchored at Morro Bay and the

<sup>1</sup> Gates, Dorothy L., and Jane H. Bailey. *Morro Bay's Yesterdays: Vignettes of Our City's Lives & Times*. El Moro Publications, 1982.

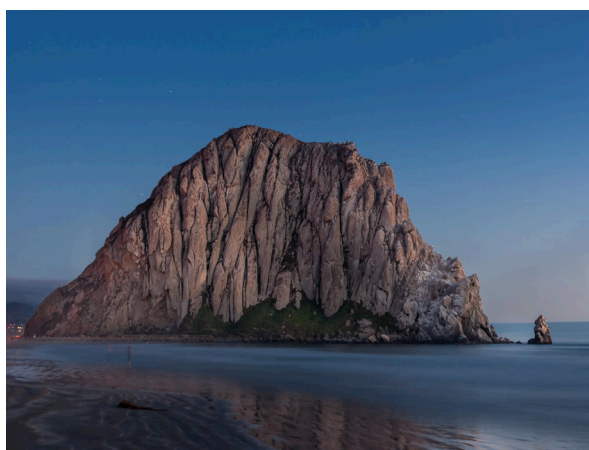
<sup>2</sup> “Replica of Spanish Galleon Arrives in Morro Bay.” *The Tribune*, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 2 Oct. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Krieger, D. (2016, October 01). Why so many explorers bypassed the Central Coast. Retrieved May 5, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Morro Bay National Estuary Program. (2016, September 30). Exploring Morro Bay History.

landing party made a brief expedition into the surrounding land. While there, they planted a cross made out of sticks to signify Spain's claim to the region. Two days after landing on solid ground, the Spanish encountered the native people of the territory and had a brief skirmish. The Spanish suffered one casualty and several injuries while the natives suffered more deaths. After this battle, Unamuno decided to move on to the next portion of the California coast, thus ending the first European landing in Morro Bay.<sup>5</sup>

Following Unamuno came Gaspar de Portola, and his exploration up the California Coast. As governor of Spanish-ruled Baja California in 1767, Portola oversaw the area and was respected by his people. With the Spanish Government further expanding settlements into Alta (Upper) California, Portola, Miguel Costanso, and Fathers Juan Crespi and Junipero Serra decided to lead an expedition from San Diego to San Francisco Bay from 1769 to 1770; one by land and one by sea. The Chumash welcomed Portola's team with open arms as Father Crespi wrote, "About sixty-five persons came to see us as soon as we arrived, and presented us with a sort of porridge... and everybody liked it very much".<sup>6</sup> Portola's land group of 64 interacted with The Chumash and other native tribes, in addition to establishing new settlements and missions along the California coast. About halfway into the journey, the group came across one of many bays. However, this bay was different; There was a giant rock in the sea. Coming upon this looming entity, Portola's expedition realized this was the famous *El Morro*. Costanso and Father Crespi are said to be the first Europeans to set foot on the Morro Bay Rock. Portola's expedition was the start of Spanish influence throughout California. In addition to the multitude of missions along El Camino Real from Father Serra's mission to spread Catholicism, the first two Spanish presidios were built in San Diego and Monterey.



Morro Bay Rock at night. Image courtesy of Flickr user WaFp.

The combination of all these missions of conquest by the Spanish and the centuries of different rule under different governments and cultures has shaped Morro Bay to the town it has become today. The United States has obviously played an enormous factor in the cultural and societal regions of Morro Bay, however, the diffusion of Spanish culture into the heart of Morro Bay remains. First, this is evident in the language around the region. Clearly, we can see that the names of many places around the city such as a beach and even a park are named after the original "Morro". The Spanish influence on language has also affected many words in

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<sup>5</sup> Historical Landmark, Declared by the Filipino American National Historical Society, California Central Coast Chapter (October 21, 1995)

<sup>6</sup> Gates, Dorothy L., and Jane H. Bailey. *Morro Bay's Yesterdays: Vignettes of Our City's Lives & Times*. El Moro Publications, 1982.

English and changed the way that people speak in Morro Bay. We can also see the Spanish influence in the cuisine of Morro Bay apparent in the multiple Spanish restaurants around the city. From language to foods, the Spanish conquest and colonization of Morro Bay had an enormous impact on the future of California and has helped shape the city of Morro Bay to the small yet beautiful town we know today.

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