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Finding Mid-Nineteenth Century Native Settlements: Cartographic and Archaeological Evidence from Central California

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Abstract: Historical maps have the potential to aid archaeological investigations into the persistence of Native American settlements during the mid-nineteenth century, a time when many Native communities disappear from archaeological view. Focusing on Tomales Bay in central California, we evaluate the usefulness of historical maps as a way to discover and interpret archaeological deposits dating to the period, with the aim of better understanding indigenous patterns of residence at the transition from missionary to settler colonialism. In particular, we focus on diseños and plats created to document Mexican-era land grants as well as early maps produced by the General Land Office and United States Coast Survey. Although we note inconsistencies regarding the inclusion of indigenous settlements on historical maps, our case study offers an example of how archaeologists can employ historical maps and targeted archaeological ground-truthing to discover sites that are poorly represented in the historical and archaeological records.

Keywords: Historical maps; Mexican land grants; General Land Office; United States Coast Survey; indigenous persistence

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