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Loveliest of Places: A Study of the Pre-Mansion Historical Resources of Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

Gregory G. White
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Parks and Recreation, Cultural Resources Division, 2015
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In this installation of California State Parks' *Publications in Cultural Heritage* series, Gregory G. White addresses a challenge faced by heritage managers world-wide; the author broaches the issue of managing and interpreting for the public a heritage site with multiple historical components and a diverse community of historical actors. White recommends a more holistic management and interpretive plan for the Bidwell Mansion, a Gold-Rush era rancho site located in Chico, California. Currently, the management program of this California State Historic Park narrowly focuses on one early California couple, John and Annie Bidwell, and the Victorian style mansion they had built at Rancho de Arroyo Chico between 1864 and 1868. Despite the current focus, Rancho de Arroyo Chico has a history more nuanced than just one of socially prominent Americans and their Gold Rush

fortunes. Specifically, White recommends expanding the interpretive program to include a focus on both the "Original" ranch (1849–1886), and the importance of the native laborers and communities at the ranch. This interpretative program recommendation is woven through chapters organized into four main sections: (1) Introduction and Context; (2) The Historic Evidence; (3) The Archaeological Evidence; and (4) Conclusions and Recommendations.

In the first section, "Introduction and Context," the author provides a general background of the site, including locational information, descriptions of the natural landscape, flora and fauna, and a summary of the ethnographic literature on the Valley Maidu tribe (Konkow). In "The Historical Evidence," the publication's second section, the author provides a detailed investigation of the historical documentation and photographic record of John Bidwell's Rancho de Arroyo Chico operation. This section makes outstanding contributions, identifying the deep history of this "frontier" community, highlighting the history of the Maidu peoples in this area and their complex associations with Rancho de Arroyo Chico, and describing the chronological development of the ranch between 1849 and 1868. It is in this section that the author identifies the research theme of the study: to describe the complex components, in time and space, of Rancho de Arroyo Chico.

In part three, "The Archaeological Evidence," the author summarizes the results of three previous archaeological investigations conducted by CSU Chico

within the State Historic Park. White summarizes the field methods involved in each excavation in detail, describing grid systems, number and size of units excavated, and screening methods. White also attempts a descriptive summary of the artifact assemblages recovered from each excavation. The author is restricted by the level of effort put into the previous studies and the scope of his monograph. Consequently, the presentation of artifactual data is very general, variable, and only relevant to the proposed research themes concerning chronology in very limited ways.

The author concludes (in part four) that none of the architectural or structural features identified through the archival research were uncovered during the three previous archaeological excavations, the site has been disturbed by cut and fill events and modern landscaping, and that most of the artifacts recovered from the archaeological investigations are representative of the period of Rancho Expansion and Development (1852–1868). Despite this, the author argues that previous archaeological investigations recovered artifacts within the site's A-horizon midden that could potentially provide a greater understanding of Rancho de Arroyo Chico prior to the construction of the mansion (1864–1868). The strength of this work lies in the author's ability to highlight the complicated history of this important heritage site, and to urge State Parks to move their interpretive program in a more inclusive direction, one that incorporates the indigenous experience.

As constructive criticism of this important study, I offer the following comments. First, research themes are very limited and are confined to the chronology of Rancho de Arroyo Chico. While such themes are foundational to

future work, they restrict the potential of the archaeological evidence. Although the author sets up a historical narrative that could lead to more complex research themes concerning how Maidu peoples working at Rancho de Arroyo Chico were connected to broader economic, social, political, and religious indigenous landscapes, or the theme of “sites of refuge” (e.g., Mechoopda), these themes were never articulated, much less addressed through archaeological evidence. This limitation is likely due, as the author states, to the fact that such tasks were outside of the project scope. However, the author misses the opportunity to emphasize research themes that have multiple implications for future growth of scholarship in the field of colonial and frontier research throughout North America. Second, while White makes an important and well-supported argument that the Bidwell Mansion State Historical Park should expand their interpretative program, he doesn't provide suggestions for *how* this might be accomplished. Again, this is likely beyond the scope of the project, but its absence is still apparent. To start with, as existing inclusive interpretative programs throughout California will attest (e.g., the Kashaya Pomo Interpretative Trail at Fort Ross State Historic Park), consultation with appropriate stakeholders—descendent communities—is an essential component. While the archaeological data certainly provide evidence of land use prior to the period of expansion and development, and should be exhibited as part of the Park's interpretive programs, the archaeology should not take precedence over other sources of information, such as oral histories. The effective management of this complex landscape and its resources must, above all, be directed by a collaborative, negotiated management plan.

