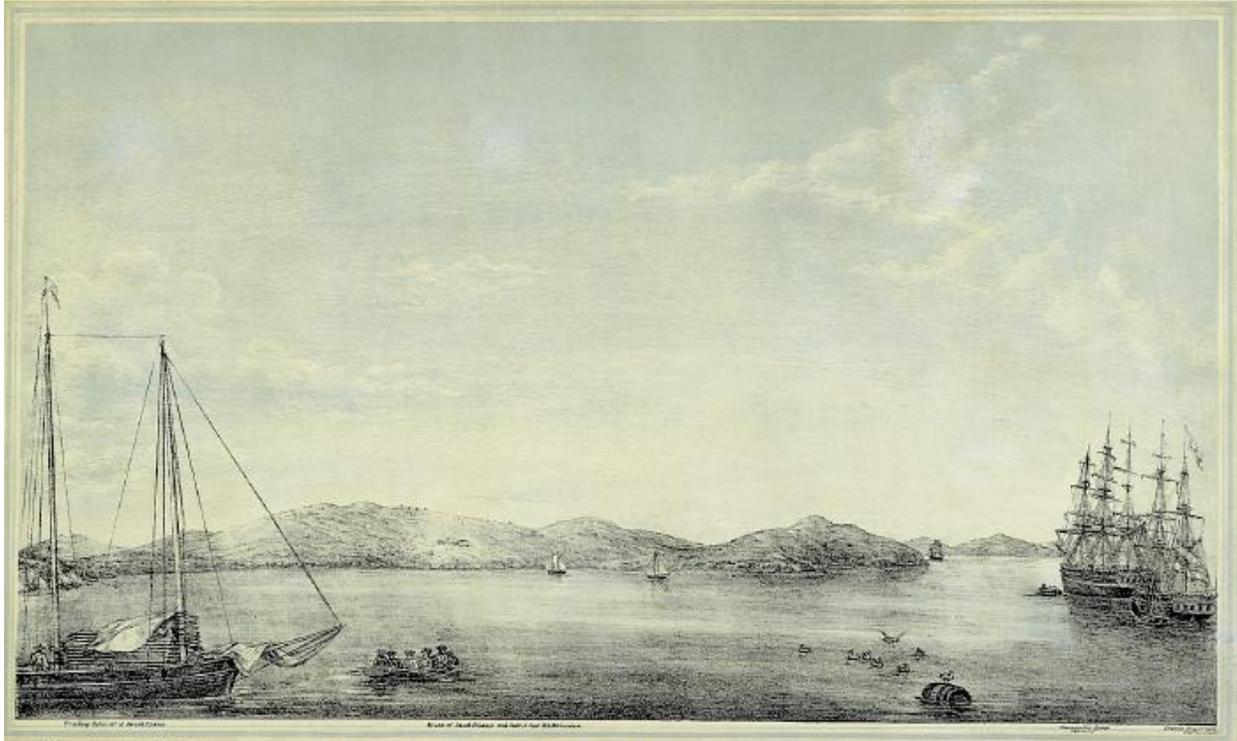


## A FRENCH SWISS DREW THE EARLIEST VIEW OF SAN FRANCISCO



An artist with Lapérouse's famous exploring team drew the earliest view of California in 1786, while in 1837 one of Napoleon's veterans, Swiss sea captain Jean-Jacques Vioget provided the earliest scene of Yerba Buena, the future San Francisco.

***How did a young French Swiss become a sea-captain?***

***What brought him to faraway Yerba Buena?***

***Who built the first two homes in the future city of San Francisco?***

Young Vioget ran away from his native Swiss village of Combremont-le-Petit at age 14 to join Napoleon's fife and drum corps. His career as a soldier was short-lived since he was barely sixteen at the time of Waterloo. An apprenticeship with a French naval engineer next steered the young man towards the sea, first the Atlantic when he traded between France, Portugal and Brazil, then to the Pacific in the 1830s, when he sailed up and down the coasts of Peru and Ecuador at the helm of the trading bark *Delmira*. In 1837, this adventuresome sailing

life eventually took him all the way up north to the small hamlet of San Francisco then known as Yerba Buena.

What did the young Vioget see in the tiny hamlet with only two homes that caused him to grab his pen and brush, and paint it? Did the hills and pastures appeal to the mountain boy, while the huge serene bay seduced the seaman? He painted this view, the earliest known of Yerba Buena probably from the deck of the *Delmira* anchored about 1,500 feet offshore in the shallows of Yerba Buena Cove, now San Francisco' downtown business center.

Perched on high ground above the water's edge, are the homes of Yerba Buena's very first settler, William A. Richardson and Jacob Primer Leese. To the left of the homes is a brush-covered gully that became lower California Street; further left is the wooded area of Punta de Rincon. Twin Peaks appears clearly in the background.

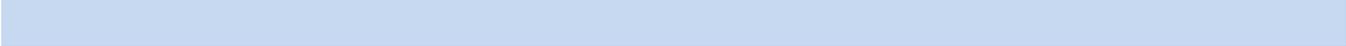
Near shore are two small craft that could be the schooners Richardson employed to carry produce from ranchos and missions around the Bay to trading vessels in Yerba Buena Cove. Two tall ships with full canvas on the right indicate the open sea and the legendary Golden Gate.

***French-American explorer John Charles Frémont named the entrance to San Francisco Bay the "Golden Gate" in 1846. He wrote in his "Geographical Memoir" of 1848: "Called Chrysopylae (Golden gate) on the map, on the same principle that the harbor of Byzantium (later Constantinople) was called Chrysoceras (golden horn)... The form of the entrance into the bay of San Francisco and its advantages for commerce, suggest the name."***

The small vessel in the left foreground is loaded with lumber protected from the weather by a lowered sail. In the right foreground, the *Delmira* is moored alongside another trading vessel. Below the Ecuadorian flag flying from her mast, Vioget facetiously added the Swiss flag, unknown in the annals of the sea... Seamen are rowing two boats to shore.

The watercolor hung in the sea-captain's cabin for two more years till he came back two years later and made the sleepy village his home. Vioget who by now spoke four or five languages rented one of the two homes on the painting. He slipped easily into the life of the small town which had by now about fifty souls, a third of them non-Hispanic "foreigners."

Vioget's impact on the hamlet would be significant. Our next stories will reveal how.



*For more on Jean-Jacques Vioget's watercolor of Yerba Buena:*

- Jeanne Van Nostrand, *The First Hundred Years of Painting in California*. John Howell Books, San Francisco, California: 1980.
- *Splendide Californie, Impressions of the Golden State by French Artists*, Book Club of California, 2001

This image is a reproduction, in the author's collection, of a lithograph by Britton & Rey based on Vioget's original watercolor

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