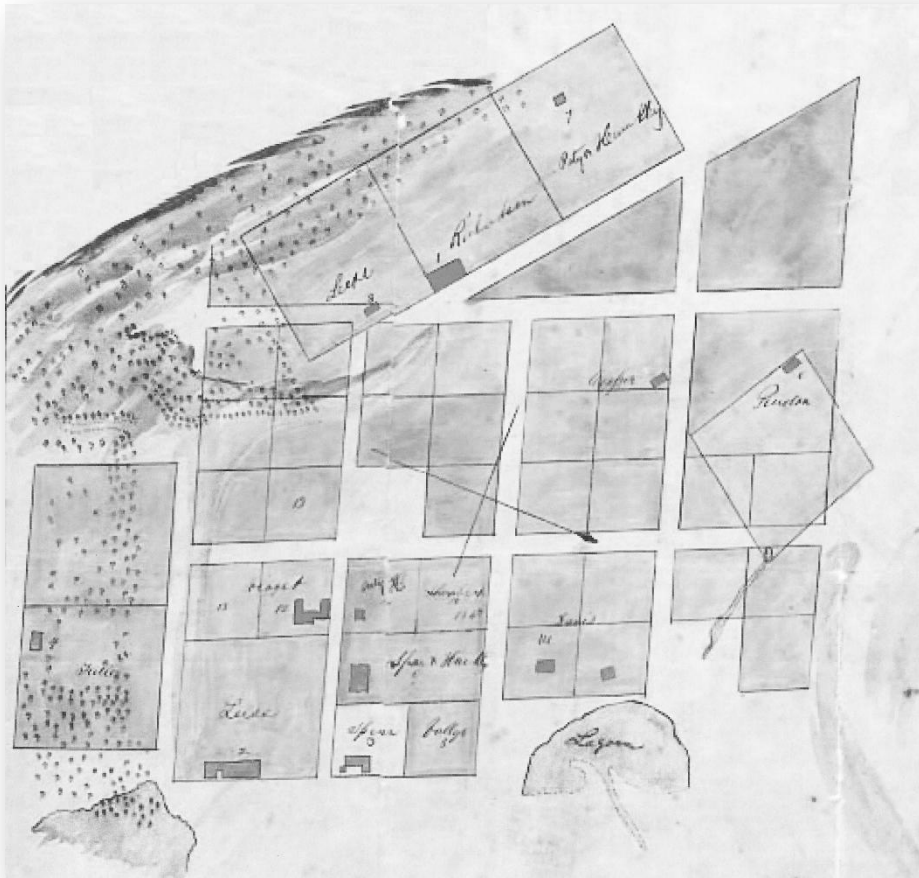


THE FIRST SURVEY AND MAP OF YERBA BUENA A.K.A. SAN FRANCISCO 1305 words

[continued from last month's story]



By October 1839, when Jean Jacques Vioget returned from sailing trips up and down the California coast between San Diego and San Francisco, and from a visit south to Callao, six more early settlers had been granted town lots (called *solares*) in the budding town of Yerba Buena. All had been issued without the slightest regard for any organized street pattern besides the old *Calle de la Fundacion*, or Foundation Street visible at an angle on the map above.

Governor Alvarado now ordered Yerba Buena's *alcade* or mayor, to have a plan drawn up. Alcade Don Francisco Guerrero approached the only man in the village with an engineering background to execute this project. Jean-Jacques Vioget recalled that in the winter of 1839-40, after he settled in Yerba Buena in Jacob P. Leese's wooden house, next to that of Captain William Richardson, he was asked by Guerrero "to make a plan of Yerba Buena, to make a town,

and regularize the lots granted formerly on said place. I had a sextant and compass; first took all the angles of each house standing, and fences, to form the diagram and to bring them in their proper place to mark the street, that every body should get his grant within the square of the blocks. The present Montgomery Street was the base of the maps for the front on the bay.”

In the 1840s, Montgomery Street ran along Yerba Buena’s shoreline. Yerba Buena Cove was filled in during the gold rush and is now San Francisco’s financial district. Brass plaques in the area’s sidewalks allow visitors to follow the cove’s original shoreline.

Vioget completed his map in November 1839. Starting at the water’s edge where Montgomery Street is now, Vioget laid out 3 blocks westward, 4 blocks from north to south. Within this grid, he drew Kearny between Montgomery and the original *Calle de la Fundacion*, (today’s Grant Avenue). Perpendicular to those, he mapped out California, Sacramento, Clay, and Washington streets, although none of these streets had as yet been named. San Francisco lore has it that he created the *Plaza* (Later renamed *Portsmouth Square*) out of a potato patch.

Was a San Francisco street ever named for Jean-Jacques Vioget?

How were new grants recorded in Yerba Buena in the 1840s?

What was the common language between Vioget, Sutter and Nicolai Rotchoff of Fort Ross?

The plan Vioget submitted to Guerrero was based on careful personal observation and draftsmanship. But since the distances were measured in traditional Californio style with two men on horseback bearing lengths of chains measured in *varas* (33 inches segments), Vioget himself knew his measurements were not completely trustworthy. They were however quite sufficient for the time and the plat served its purpose quite well: names of new grantees were simply added onto the map once the grants were approved.

As a result of his attempt to include every existing home in the general map, and of other considerations of sunlight and wind, the streets on his map were not quite at right angle, they were off by two and a half degrees. There may have been more than the practical need to include all existing lots into the grid. Early pioneers Barry & Patten observed in their memoirs of 1850 that had

Vioget's design been kept, it would *“as a sanitary proposition, have been much better for the city's inhabitants. Every house would have had an equal share of sun upon its front and rear during the day. Political scheming, that bane of republics, changed the plan to give one of its party favorites a job, causing in this particular instance, injury to the health of thousands. Vioget's wisdom and experience sought to obviate and prevent this harmful condition of things, for he knew the value of the sun's light and heat in San Francisco, where he had lived much of the time since 1837, and noted the isothermal needs.”*

Whether or not a 2.5 degree difference might have significantly changed sunlight exposure for these homes, Vioget's basic plan gave birth to the physical layout of our town as it is today.

That fall, Governor Alvarado granted Vioget a square lot in the village he had just surveyed, probably in payment of his services. By May 1840, Vioget applied and received his naturalization as a Mexican national. He built a house for himself at the corner of Clay and Kearny streets, then next door, a tavern where traders, trappers and rancheros gathered. “Vioget's House”, the first tavern on the west Coast, was described as a place where *“a hearty welcome and a cup of delicious coffee await visitors at any hour.”* According to early pioneer John Henry Brown, its *“billiard-room was at that time the headquarters for all strangers in the city, both foreigners and Californians. All persons wishing to purchase lots would apply there: as the first map of surveyed land was kept in the bar-room, the names of those who had lots granted were written on the map.”*

One of Yerba Buena's earliest settlers, the popular tavern-keeper married Maria Benavides, the daughter of one of the old Mexican governors, and a widow by whom he had two sons. He acquired land grants in Sonoma and Marin counties. He became a good friend of John Sutter with whom he corresponded in French and for whom he mapped New Helvetia, and with Nicolai Rotchoff who spoke French with him as well: Vioget was a witness to the sale of the Russian establishment of Fort Ross to Sutter.

The gold rush brought the Swiss sea-captain fame and fortune: an honored member of the Vigilance Committee, he was by 1851 worth \$50,000. It also robbed him of what he loved most:

peace. Called to testify in favor of his rancho friends in front of the Land Commission, he retired away from San Francisco's mad boom to San Jose.

Throughout his life in California, Vioget remained a most congenial host, a resourceful settler, and a creative artist who even painted the ceilings of his parlors with tasteful designs. In the words of Barry & Patten, he remained a man “*so modest, earnest and fascinating in conversation, always imparting some new and useful knowledge; eager as a child to gain a scrap of information; and withal, a wonderful way of drawing from you, by no effort of your own, better things than you imagined yourself capable of saying –the most intoxicating of all flatteries. [...] In stature he was about five feet eight and a half inches, and possessed of a good average avoirdupois. He carried his head a little inclined, like one listening; his hair was short, plentiful and very gray; he wore a full, gray ‘old guard’ moustache; and up to the last day that we saw him, he wore the old Californian costume –the short blue jacket and black pants.*”

By “Old Guard”, of course, Barry & Patten referred to Napoleon's elite troops that made the motto “*The Old Guard dies but does not surrender*” famous the world over.

Vioget was obviously too modest for history –and for San Francisco—to remember him: not a single of San Francisco's streets bears the name of this early pioneer and city founder who so believed that some day a healthy and prosperous city would spring up on Yerba Buena's shores. A failure to honor an important San Francisco city founder, if there ever was one!

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

- Theodore A. Barry & Benjamin A. Patten. *Men & Memories of San Francisco in the Spring of 1850*. San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Co., 1873.
- John Henry Brown, *Reminiscences and Incidents of the early Days of San Francisco*. San Francisco, Calif.: Mission journal publishing co., 1886
- Ralph Herbert Cross, *The early Inns of California*, San Francisco: Cross & Brandt, 1954

Vioget's map of Yerba Buena was reproduced from Dr. Chalmers' book *French San Francisco*. The original of the map is at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The chain and sextant Jean-Jacques Vioget used for his survey can be seen at San Francisco's Society of California Pioneers.

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