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**Emperor Norton I:
The Rise of a
San Francisco Cultural Icon
1859 – 1880**

By

Dieter Martin

**Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**


Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

Advisory Committee


Chair, Dr. Kevin Leonard


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Dr. Roger Thompson

Master's Thesis

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Date 05-15-2009

**Emperor Norton I:
The Rise of a
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**A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts**

**By
Dieter Martin
May 2009**

Thesis Abstract

The California Gold Rush had a profound effect on the emerging city of San Francisco. Extreme highs and lows in the economic environment created an atmosphere in which the city's citizens were used to hardship and adversity. These conditions, combined with the importance of the newspaper industry explain the emergence of an eccentric individual such as Emperor Norton. Although he began his career in San Francisco as a prominent businessman, it is his later life as the self declared Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico which is most remembered today. Joshua Norton's career as Emperor mirrored that of San Francisco itself. His proclamations are remarkably insightful and forward thinking for his time and provide a picture of the city in the 1860s and 1870s. However, by the twentieth century, Norton came to be seen as a symbol of San Francisco and the tolerance the city was seen as expressing towards others. The enduring nature of Emperor Norton in San Francisco's memory is a testament to his popularity, both during his life and the subsequent creation of his symbolic persona.

Acknowledgements

In undertaking a project of this scope and magnitude it is common to be in debt to many individuals and groups for their support and encouragement. This case was no exception. My advisor Professor Kevin Leonard was especially helpful and patient in the giving of his advice and time. The other two members of my committee, Professors Rand Jimerson and Roger Thompson were also invaluable to the process. Any successes in my work can be attributable to them, while any errors or omissions are my own.

Many academic and research institutions assisted me in my research. Without their help this thesis would almost certainly not have been possible. The California State Library History Room provided a great deal of their time in locating biographical information on Emperor Norton, as well as access to their extensive collection of California newspapers on microfilm. Several other institutions also assisted in my research, such as the Society of California Pioneers, the California State Archives, the California Historical Society and the University of Washington. My thanks go out to you.

Last but not least, the understanding and support of my parents, family and friends in this process cannot go unmentioned. They were at all times empathetic and forgiving of the many demands on my time in all stages of the creation of this thesis. My debts to you are too many to mention. Thank you.

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Introduction

Emperor Norton was a famous and popular San Francisco eccentric. During his lifetime he was mentioned in works by well-known writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain. Although the public's attention to Norton has fluctuated since his death he continues to be known in the Bay area even today.

Joshua Abraham Norton proclaimed himself Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico in 1859. Born in London in 1819, Norton spent much of his early life in South Africa. After receiving a bequest of \$40,000 from his father's estate, he traveled to San Francisco in 1849. He was initially quite successful in business but lost his fortune attempting to corner the local rice market.¹

Since then depictions of Emperor Norton have been unusual in their frequency and popularity for one who might have lived a relatively unrecorded life. On September 1, 1856, the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported that Joshua Norton's debts were over \$55,000, while his assets equaled only about \$15,000.² Norton, a prominent businessman of San Francisco, had become bankrupt as a result of his speculations in the rice market. This brief mention of his financial difficulties represented the beginning of his appearances in the newspapers of California.

Emperor Norton and his depictions in the various forms of media may at first seem to be an unusual topic for study. In the almost 130 years since Emperor Norton's death, he has continued to be an enduring symbol of San Francisco's reputation of tolerance and benevolence. Also, evidence exists that the San Francisco newspapers not

¹ William Drury, *Norton I, Emperor of the United States* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1986), 7.

² *Sacramento Daily Union*, September 1, 1856, 2.

only created Norton's popularity, but continued to capitalize on it in an effort to increase their readership.

Instead of existing on the margins of popular culture and society, Emperor Norton quickly became part of the mainstream. Rather than challenge social mores, Norton actually served to reinforce the limits of acceptable behavior. Through his eccentric behavior he helped to define the boundaries of what the public would permit.

The research process for this thesis was an informative one. Due to the famous San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, a large number of primary sources and artifacts were destroyed or lost. However, many newspapers of the period, such as the *Alta California*, *San Francisco Bulletin*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and many others provided a wealth of information on Emperor Norton's proclamations and daily habits. They have been used extensively in the creation of this thesis. The California State Library and the California Society of Pioneers deserve special thanks for their help in researching this extraordinary individual. The State Library maintains one of the largest collections of newspapers on microfilm in the state and proved invaluable to conducting research on Emperor Norton. The Society of Pioneers archives were likewise useful, as they provided considerable biographical information on the subject.

Biographies of Emperor Norton are surprisingly few, given the long and vibrant interest of the public in his past. Only two major works have been written on the subject. Allen Stanley Lane's *Emperor Norton: The Mad Monarch of North America* and William Drury's *Norton I, Emperor of the United States* are the only two substantial works on the subject. Little information is available on Lane, beyond the fact that he wrote his work in 1939 for a relatively minor publishing house. For many years Lane's book remained the

only major biography of Emperor Norton. William Drury, a columnist for the *San Francisco News Call Bulletin*, became interested in Norton while working for that paper. At first glance, Drury's background as a newspaper correspondent served him well in his analysis of the papers to which Norton submitted proclamations. However, while Drury used these many newspaper sources, he did not provide footnotes for his work. This is perhaps because his book was written for a popular audience and was not intended as a scholarly work.

While both Lane and Drury recounted many of the popular accounts of Norton's life and noted that many of them are of dubious authenticity, they did not attempt to explain the reasons why the more sensational accounts of Norton's life endured while others did not. Also, there was little detailed analysis of the differences found in the various media accounts of Norton. They both seemed to be more concerned with creating an account of Norton's life that appealed to a wide public audience rather than conducting a detailed analysis of the historical sources.

Beyond the biographical works by these two authors, Norton has appeared in a variety of scholarly, historical and popular periodicals over the years. These are useful in determining how his persona has changed in the public's eye. Also, some of these articles contain studies on aspects of his life, such as the extent to which Emperor Norton lived on public assistance.

I have endeavored to answer several questions over the course of this thesis. First, the thesis will attempt to determine the reasons for Emperor Norton's acceptance by the newspapers and the public. Secondly, it will explore how depictions of him in newspapers and periodicals reflect larger trends in San Francisco's history. Finally, the

thesis will ask how others interpreted Norton's proclamations and how and why perceptions of him changed over time. All of these questions serve to produce a more complete picture of Emperor Norton and how he affected San Francisco history.

The chapters of my thesis are organized chronologically. The first chapter provides an analysis of Emperor Norton's many proclamations and how they were presented in newspapers. This serves to show not only what editors and writers of these publications thought of Norton but also how the public felt about him. The chapter also focuses on how Norton evolved from a successful Gold Rush businessman in 1849 to one of the growing number of eccentric characters for which San Francisco became known.

Newspapers in the 1860s and 70s operated very differently than they do today. Most of them were very small, often with only four or six pages. Also, the practice of what is known today as yellow journalism was common among the publications of the day. This included widespread sensationalism, scandal mongering, and other unprofessional practices. The principle of journalistic objectivity was rarely found in newspapers of the nineteenth century. Norton's depiction in these newspapers often reflects this trend.

Chapter 2 focuses on Norton's later years from about 1875 to his funeral in 1880. This funeral, more than any other event, served to cement Norton's enduring appeal and popularity. Attended by over 10,000 people, it remains one of the largest in the city's history. Also, many are unaware that he received a second funeral in 1934, which served to reinvigorate interest in his life. By the last years of Norton's life, rather than having been pushed to the edge of society, he had actually become accepted by the majority of

the city's inhabitants. He was seen as both an amusing local character and also as a mouthpiece for commenting on many important issues of the day.

Emperor Norton's appearances in the media since his death are the focus of Chapter 3. Remarkably, rather than fade from popular memory as might be expected after his second funeral, Norton remained an important part of San Francisco culture. Research into his depiction in television, film and even comic books helps to explain the longevity of his appeal up to the present.

In the years since his second funeral in 1934, Norton became a symbol not just for the city's citizens, but also more specifically for various counterculture and minority groups in San Francisco, the whole nation and even beyond. These include the satirical group E. Clampus Vitus, the LGBT organization called the Imperial Court, the Emperor Norton Bridge Committee, and many micro nations throughout the world. Chapter 3 goes into detail as to how Norton evolved into a symbolic image for many of these groups.

Joshua Norton's background and that of the city of San Francisco are important in understanding the setting under which depictions of him were created. On September 17, 1859, San Francisco acquired an Emperor when Joshua Norton's first proclamation was published in a local newspaper. Little did anyone know at the time that his reign from 1859 until 1880 would have such an impact on the city. He commanded no armies and did not rule in an absolute sense, yet Joshua Abraham Norton had a subtle influence on the citizenry of early San Francisco. Although some remember him as only the most famous of the city's cadre of "characters," Norton was much more than that. He had a noticeable role to play in San Francisco being viewed as a tolerant city. Like many

others, when Norton arrived in 1849 he became an ambitious merchant. Yet ten years later he declared himself Emperor of the United States. At the height of his reign, his fame spread throughout the nation as well. At the time of his death in 1880 few questioned the importance of one who had over 10,000 people at his funeral.³

Strongly connected to the background of Joshua Norton is the early history of San Francisco itself. In 1848 the town of Yerba Buena had just a few hundred people. Later it was named San Francisco after the Catholic Saint Francis. At the time of the American annexation in January of 1847, California was a frontier outpost, sparsely populated by Mexicans, with a small number of settlers of other origins. Added to these settlers were the indigenous inhabitants of the state, which included the many different tribes of Native Americans. American immigration to California was slow but steady before the discovery of gold.⁴

Due to its location near a sheltered deep-water harbor and nearby natural resources, San Francisco was in a perfect location to become a major U.S. city. It was a logical place for a seaport and a center of trade, even if the rush for gold had never happened. The gold rush accelerated the process of settlement in the area. However, it would have been difficult to predict the emergence of a subculture of eccentrics, of which Emperor Norton became the most famous.

The possible reasons for Norton's popularity among San Franciscans vary, although it is clear that he had a great effect on the city's residents and the nation at large. He appeared in countless newspapers, literature (including Mark Twain's *Huckleberry*

³ Drury, 201.

⁴ Samuel Williams, "The City of the Golden Gate," *Scribner's Monthly* 10, no. 3 (1875): 266.

Finn and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Wrecker*) as well as other media of popular culture. Unlike some other cities, San Francisco took a special enjoyment in celebrating its unusual characters. After all, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, "San Francisco is a mad city, inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people."⁵ Emperor Norton placed himself within that class of special people found in every city which demanded attention and in his case even respect from the residents. Kipling added, "according to ancient tradition, the village eccentric and the village idiot are touchstones, lucky tokens, somehow; although they sometimes rave, they are to be protected. Norton I, self proclaimed Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, placed himself within this tradition."⁶

However, Norton's fame went well beyond that of the "typical" everyday eccentric and became a national phenomenon. Emperor Norton's popularity was such that it has only been in the last two or three decades that his fame has begun to wane, although even today Emperor Norton inspires a variety of emotions in the citizens of San Francisco, ranging from amusement at his strangeness to outright pride that their city was host to such an unusual personage. His name even appeared in the city directory of 1862 as "Norton, Joshua (Emperor), dwl, Metropolitan Hotel."⁷

The role of eccentrics in the emerging urban areas of the nineteenth century American West is an area that has received little scholarly attention. This is partly due to a belief that they are perceived as not being a topic of serious study. However, the omnipresence of eccentric "characters" in almost every early urban area provides

⁵ Rudyard Kipling, quoted in Alice Thibeuau, "The Emperor's Folly," *San Francisco Magazine*, July 1984, 35.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "This Emperor Did Wear Clothes," *Manuscripts*, 49, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 8.

credence to their important role. Businesses benefited from their patronage in the form of increased visibility from these media articles and often posted signs in their windows proclaiming that certain eccentrics visited them. In the case of San Francisco, popularizing eccentrics also provided an image of the city as a tolerant, vibrant place where all people are accepted. The sheer number of newspaper and magazine articles celebrating Emperor Norton provides proof to his role in providing this sort of image.

Emperor Joshua Norton I of San Francisco may be the most famous example of this phenomenon of glorifying eccentricity in American history. Beginning as a prominent businessman and merchant who lost his fortune in rice speculation, he declared himself Emperor of the United States on September 17, 1859.⁸ Eventually, his fame reached far beyond that of just his home city and extended to the national level. This was especially important to San Francisco after the initial flurry of the Gold Rush, as it had become more and more important to attract new business and industry needed to replace the declining mining concerns. Thus, Norton's presence in the papers had a definite effect on creating interest in the city on a regional and even national level. Although some believed that he lived undeservedly at the expense of those willing to indulge his commands for royal "taxation," most of the city's residents actually took pride in the fact that it was their home that hosted such an unusual character. Norton and his fellow eccentrics were not just tolerated, but actually celebrated and welcomed by the city at large. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Wrecker* notes the special traits held by San Francisco and its citizens:

Of all our visitors I believe I preferred Emperor Norton, the very mention of whose name reminds me I am doing scanty justice to the folks of San Francisco.

⁸ Drury, 58.

In what other city would a harmless madman who supposed himself emperor of the two Americas have been so fostered and encouraged? Where else would even the people of the streets have respected the poor soul's illusion? Where else would bankers and merchants have received his visits, cashed his cheques, and submitted to his small assessments. Where else would he have been suffered to attend and address the exhibition days of schools and colleges? Where else in God's green earth, have taken his pick of restaurants, ransacked the bill of fare and departed scathless? They tell me he was an exacting patron, threatening to withdraw when dissatisfied...⁹

However, San Francisco was by no means the only city to be influenced by eccentrics. Robert Ernest Cowan, in his book *The Forgotten Characters of Old San Francisco* said this on the topic of eccentrics: "all cities have had that singular class of eccentric individuals commonly and generally known as 'characters.' Of these San Francisco has had perhaps more than her fair share."¹⁰ The presence of an unusually large number of such people in San Francisco's formative years of 1860 to 1885 is explained by several factors. No one of which could account for their emergence, but taken together provide an explanation for the appearance of so many such individuals.¹¹ First, the city was attempting to catch up with the massive influx of settlers brought by the Gold Rush. Second, the emergence of two major vigilance committee movements and the divisions brought on by the Civil War had left the city deeply scarred by internal strife. Third, an economic depression brought on by a decline in the Gold Rush also put strains on the city's people and services. The decline of gold prospecting caused not just miners but many businessmen who depended on them for their livelihoods to fail. Most

⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Wrecker* (Edinburgh: Cannongate Classics, 1996), 89.

¹⁰ Robert Ernest Cowan, *The Forgotten Characters of Old San Francisco* (San Francisco: Ward Richie Press, 1938), 3.

¹¹ While it is not so unusual that there were eccentric characters in San Francisco, as almost every city has people of this kind, it is noteworthy that so many of them became well known, both within the city and in the nation at large, and that most of them appeared in the same general time period of 1860 to 1880.

of these unsuccessful prospectors and businessmen left for better fortunes elsewhere or attempted to rebuild their former holdings. In San Francisco's case, a small number of these people became the "characters" that walked the city's streets for many years.

Economic turmoil and the loss of fortunes is an especially plausible explanation for the increase in the number of eccentrics in San Francisco. Beginning in 1853, oversupply combined with other factors brought about a severe economic depression for local businessmen. Many thousands of people were unable to continue in their chosen trades. Robert Chandler, writing for the periodical *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* postulates that the hardships experienced by those in the business world were a major cause of mental breakdown. He stated that "in 1864, the *San Francisco Business Directory and Mercantile Guide* reflected upon the influence of California's volatile business climate on 'Local Insanity.' It argued that 'the hurry and excitement which prevails throughout the State, and keeps the mind constantly stretched to its utmost tension, coupled with losses and crosses in business, in many cases produce the most melancholy results.'"¹²

Thus, by the time that Joshua Norton took the title of Emperor in 1859, the majority of San Francisco's residents were well accustomed to hardship and uncertainty. Chandler added that Norton was seen by many as representing "the vast majority of gold-seekers who failed to make a fortune in the new El Dorado of California."¹³ Many people began to see him as a symbol of the down and out miners and businessmen who remained after the troubling economic and social period of the 1850s, when the city was

¹² Robert J. Chandler, "A Journey to the Imaginary Empire of Norton I," *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1996), 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

forced to redefine itself after the initial flurry of activity during the gold rush. Stories of falls from grace and the fragility of wealth and power have always had a special appeal for many people, from the ancient Greeks and Romans up to modern times. Norton's story is no different, as a feeling of sympathy for the underdog was decidedly present.¹⁴

Other authors have provided research on the origins of eccentric behavior. Catherine Caulfield's book, *The Emperor of the United States and Other Magnificent British Eccentrics* provides an excellent introduction in explaining the enduring appeal of eccentricity in both American and British society.¹⁵ While Caulfield is not a professional historian, her work as a journalist and researcher for the BBC provides a good basis for analyzing the history of eccentrics in Britain and the United States. In her work, she states her opinion on the nature of eccentric behavior. "The extent to which an individual or a society can tolerate or even encourage differentness is a significant measure of its strength, its confidence, its intelligence."¹⁶ Eccentricity was distinct from madness in that it represented only a minor deviation from social norms. A total rejection of law and tradition would put such behavior into another realm of rebellion, mental illness and criminality.¹⁷ Therefore, unusual behavior is to be encouraged, since it tests the bounds of acceptable behavior. Ironically, eccentricity also helps to precisely define what is and is not permitted.

Britain possessed a similar tradition of tolerance for eccentricity. However, it was for very different reasons than can be found in San Francisco of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Catherine Caulfield, *The Emperor of the United States & Other Magnificent British Eccentrics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

Unlike the creation of San Francisco's small class of "characters" largely as a result of economic and social instabilities, the eccentric tradition of Britain was created by the aristocracy as a reaction to their gradual loss of power and status. Caulfield adds, "deprived of real power by the development of a strong monarchy that took financial and military affairs into its own hands and of financial omnipotence by the growth of the merchant class, the aristocracy managed to retain its privileged position not by threat of force, but by developing distinctive patterns of behavior that set it apart from the rest of the population."¹⁸ As the parvenu rich began to emulate these patterns of conduct, increasingly restrictive forms of behavior began to emerge among the "true" aristocrats. This new standard of acting "gave an opportunity for an eccentric few, by following their own internal codes, to shock or amuse people and by their transgressions to define the limits of the public code."¹⁹ While the eccentric tradition of San Francisco was largely a reaction to the wild fluctuations of the economic climate, this earlier form of behavior exhibited in Britain cannot be ignored, as Joshua Norton was himself a British immigrant and would have been aware of Britain's history of aristocratic social behavior.

Some prominent individuals have supported eccentricity as a means to better understand the limits of the human condition. Caulfield mentions the work of John Stuart Mill. In Mill's essay, *On Liberty*, he argued that "for as long as mankind is imperfect, different opinions and varieties of character should be given free scope as experiments in living. Diversity was a pre-condition of evolution, genetic or behavioral. Mill thought eccentricity desirable in an age of conformity, simply as an example of freedom."²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

Even so, strange or odd habits and proclivities in individuals are not always easy to live with, though in Norton's case he gave the community every opportunity to adjust to his unusual behavior. Furthermore, he was given a form of endorsement by most of the city's newspapers and magazines that helped the public see him as a legitimate public figure. He was observed by many to be altogether normal, except for his belief that he was an Emperor. Benjamin E. Lloyd, a journalist and contemporary of Norton's, wrote that "he was a good conversationalist, he will talk readily upon any subject, and his opinions are usually very correct, except when relating to himself."²¹

For some time very little was known of Joshua Norton's early years, as so much concerning him is shrouded in San Francisco's folklore. Despite this, it is important to explore these early years and the background of the city before venturing into his "reign" and its effect on San Francisco.

Joshua Norton was born in Scotland in 1818 or 1819. Rather than being descended from French royalty, as was later suggested, Norton's parents were working-class British citizens of Jewish background. His father, John Norton, was a farmer and trader. In 1820 John Norton left Britain for the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa with his wife Sarah and his two small sons, Joshua Abraham, one year old, and Lewis, age four. That same year 4,000 of their fellow British citizens settled in the same area of South Africa.²²

John Norton became a fairly important figure in the communities of Grahamstown and Angola Bay (now Port Elizabeth) near the Cape. In 1838 he

²¹ Benjamin E. Lloyd, quoted in *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*, 20.

²² Allen Stanley Lane, *Emperor Norton, the Mad Monarch of America* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1939), 19.

established a successful ship chandlery and general merchandise store and also acted as an agent for shipping interests in the region. Although his family was of Jewish background, he was observed to be very contemptuous of his faith.²³ In fact, John Norton had very egalitarian views when it came to religion, viewing them all as valid in their own way. He even advocated the creation of a universal religion for all peoples.

As a young man, Joshua Norton worked for his father in his various ventures until his unsuccessful attempt at opening a business of his own in 1844 at the age of twenty-two. John Norton, now a widower, died in August of 1848, leaving his own business in bankruptcy. A few weeks later young Joshua heard of the discovery of gold in distant California, inspiring him to leave for the promise of riches and also to escape the bad luck that seemed to be on his heels. Taking the little money his father had left him along with his own savings, Norton chartered passage around the Horn to San Francisco by way of Rio de Janeiro on the small Dutch schooner *Franzeska*.²⁴

When Joshua Norton stepped off the ship in November of 1849 at what is now Montgomery Street, he found few of the landmarks that modern Americans would associate with the city. Rather than the metropolis of today, the newspaper *The Sacramento Union* described it as “a mushroom of tents and shanties. If you [slipped from the wet] slippery planks you sank to your waist in mud. A sign stuck in the mire at one corner warned poetically: ‘This Street Impassable, Not Even Jackassable.’”²⁵ The

²³ Irena Narell, *Our City, The Jews of San Francisco*, (San Diego: Howell North Books, 1981), 80.

²⁴ Lane, 20.

²⁵ “America’s Own Hitler,” *Sacramento Union*, April 27, 1939, 4. The title of this article is curious, as the writer appears to be referring to Norton like an American Hitler. A possible explanation is that both Norton and Hitler had some of the traits of dictators, even though Hitler was elected.

city remained a giant huddled mass of makeshift dwellings only in the early stages of becoming a city.

In the years to come, San Francisco struggled to assimilate its diverse population and develop the institutions and services that were necessary for a settlement of its ever-growing size. The lack of adequate fire prevention alone caused devastating fires in the first ten years after the discovery of gold, with the 1851 conflagration being one of the worst. These and many other problems created the need for expanded city services.²⁶ All of the problems that older eastern cities had faced were present in the City by the Bay, but they developed at a truly frenetic pace. They included extreme poverty even in times of plenty for many of the citizens, the preeminence of real estate speculation over good planning, public complaints over the lack of services that were not funded, and many other difficulties.²⁷ The city waited until many years after the gold rush to attempt to address these problems. One writer, Richard Dillon remarked on the frantic pace of development. “For Jim Marshall’s discovery of gold that day (January 24, 1848) in the South Fork of the American River blew open a bottomless Pandora’s box whose lid had never since been found, much less closed.”²⁸

Everywhere the craze for gold had seized men’s imaginations. Had Norton arrived in the autumn of 1848, rather than 1849, he would have found a most puzzling picture. For all of the widely publicized expansion of the population, the city was nearly empty. Almost all of its male population had departed for the gold fields. A year later, when Norton’s ship arrived in port, he was greeted by the sight of numerous abandoned

²⁶ H. W. Brands *The Age of Gold* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 258.

²⁷ Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco: From Hamlet to City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), xxx.

²⁸ Richard Dillon, *Humbugs and Heroes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), xi.

ships resting on the beach for want of a crew. The majority of the sailors were taken up with gold fever and made their way to what they believed to be easy riches.²⁹

The Gold Rush resulted in a huge expansion in the population of San Francisco as well as the whole state of California. At the time of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in January of 1848, the population of San Francisco was less than a thousand individuals. Ten years later it had fifty times that number.³⁰ The discovery of gold resulted in California being admitted as a state in 1850.

Like many merchants who made the long journey to California, Norton realized that it was much easier and safer to make a profit through the enterprises and opportunities created by the vast influx of peoples than to prospect for gold himself. In this assumption he was by no means alone, as many traders traveled to San Francisco with the intention of making their riches through supplying the miners with needed equipment and provisions rather than by undertaking the dangers of mining themselves. One study of early San Francisco mentions Sam Brannan, an early merchant of the city who, "in the first manifestation of the insight that would be responsible for the most durable fortunes of the Gold Rush era, guessed that as much money might be made from the miners as from the mines."³¹ The dry goods salesman Levi Strauss arrived in this group of enterprising merchants and later became well known for his famous style of pants.³² Along with these generally reputable traders, suppliers, and miners came a large number of more unsavory types, such as saloon and brothel owners, and bushwhackers, who had

²⁹ William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865 to 1932: Politics, Power and Urban Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13.

³⁰ Issel and Cherny, 24.

³¹ Brands, 43.

³² Issel and Cherny, 13.

a sideline of ambushing travelers on the road.³³ For every genuine miner there were several people doing their utmost to separate him from his money, whether legitimately, through providing supplies and services, or through outright thievery and murder.

Most of the people arriving during the Gold Rush had little money. Norton came with the substantial sum of \$40,000 to build his business and increase his fortune.³⁴ It is unclear how he acquired this money, as he and his father finances had hit major financial difficulties in South Africa. Whatever its source, the money allowed him to reverse his run of bad luck and become an important figure in real estate and shipping. Before long, Norton had acquired three of the four corner lots of Sansome and Jackson Streets.³⁵ He eventually ran his relatively modest fortune into the respectable sum of a quarter of a million dollars. It was then that he became involved in the rice industry. Norton invested in the creation of the first rice mill in California on one of his corner lots and a cigar factory on another. In the 1850s it was difficult to transport rice to San Francisco, as it could take from three to six months to arrive. Due to this the rice market was very volatile. Bob Chandler, writing for a periodical stated “astute businessmen such as Norton took charge of varied cargoes, sought out buyers, and sold the merchandise for a percentage of the sale price.”³⁶

Joshua Norton’s eccentricity was known even prior to his time as Emperor. During Norton’s ten years as a merchant of the city, he was observed by his friends and colleagues to possess very strong views on the subject of government, and more

³³ Lane, 33.

³⁴ “Joshua W. Norton,” *Pony Express Magazine*, February 1955, 1.

³⁵ “What Do We Want? The Emperor Norton Bridge!” *California Territorial Quarterly*, 59 (Fall 2004): 34.

³⁶ “A Journey to the Imaginary Empire of Norton I,” 17.

specifically on the superiority of an absolute monarchy over a democracy. Norton believed that a democracy was too unpredictable a method of governance and that a king or queen could much better care for the needs of the people. Acquaintances and friends on the street actually called him “emperor” as a kind of nickname. One San Francisco writer noted “they used the word freely, half in joke, half seriously. They would meet him on the street and grin and say, ‘How are you, Emperor?’”³⁷ He always greeted them fondly, never correcting them in the title they used. A 1946 periodical, *What’s Doing*, adds “that was all that was needed to tip the scales. In his half demented state, he accepted the title in all seriousness. There is no doubt but that he was sincere in this as in everything that he did.”³⁸ While Norton always accepted this friendly nickname, it was not for some years that he entirely took it to heart and officially declared himself emperor.

No doubt Norton’s beliefs on the need for an absolute monarch were strengthened by the frequent outbreaks of violence and crime that occurred in the 1850s. Brought on by the Gold Rush, the growth of the city was at an accelerated rate and the crime rate was higher than most frontier towns. Lawlessness appeared in waves throughout much of the decade of the 1850s, resulting in two major vigilance committees being established in 1851 and 1856. Lane notes in his biography on Norton that in 1851, “one hundred murders had been committed within a few months’ time, but to date not a single culprit

³⁷ Samuel Dickenson, *San Francisco Is Your Home* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 142.

³⁸ “The Reign of Emperor Norton the First,” *What’s Doing*, November 1946, 25.

had been legally executed.”³⁹ It was small wonder that many felt any effort put forward for law and order was welcome, no matter how illegal or questionable.

Added to the murders and thievery were the ever present outbreaks of fire, which were usually blamed on one criminal group or another. While some arson did in fact occur, accidental outbreaks were just as common. After the fire of May 4, 1851, few wanted to look to the more obvious causes of the disaster, namely the difficulties of creating city institutions in non-ideal circumstances and the great indifference of the public for the general welfare of their community.

Instead, during a public meeting to try to address the disaster of the May fire, the people decided to form a Committee of Vigilance to attempt to curb the rash of crime. Rather than blame themselves for a lack of city services, blame for the fire was placed at the feet of the numerous gangs operating in the city at the time, such as the “Sydney Ducks.” In many ways, the committee of 1851 proved to be only a rehearsal for the one that developed in 1856. However, at its height it numbered about 500 individuals, mainly from the merchant class. Local traders apparently did not want the working class or foreigners to have much of a hand in the organization of the committee, since they did not permit them to hold positions in the organization. Perhaps they thought these other groups might steer the Vigilance Committee in a direction not to the liking of those in the merchant class. However, there is evidence that the majority of the city’s citizens supported their activities.⁴⁰

Only three days after its initial founding, the Committee caught a Sydney man named Jenkins trying to steal a safe. He was quickly found guilty and executed in a

³⁹ Lane, 34.

⁴⁰ Lotchin, 193.

closed trial without a lawyer, as the group did not allow many of the standard legal rights of accused persons, such as habeas corpus and the right to search only with a valid warrant. In addition, the Vigilance Committee sometimes assaulted those who were seen as interfering with their activities. While it was said by some that initially the Committee of Vigilance had some effect on deterring crime, there are numerous instances where even on the days immediately following a hanging or other punishment, acts of gross criminality did occur. Lotchin writes, “it seems clear, therefore, that the Vigilantes’ effectiveness has been overrated. So has their moderation and fairness.”⁴¹ The desire for virtue combined with extensive power over others seldom meshed well, resulting in widespread abuse of the Vigilantes’ mandate as defenders of the public good. The group was strangely selective in determining which of the many violent crimes should be considered for their attention. Undoubtedly, in some cases members used the group’s power to intimidate or eliminate rivals and enemies.⁴²

At the time of the creation of the first Vigilance Committee, Norton was left in an awkward position. While he deplored the arbitrary justice the Vigilantes exemplified, he was also a prominent businessman of the town and was expected to join. As its idealistic charter impressed him and since he recognized the need for law and order, Norton joined the Vigilance Committee as number 339, in order of enrollment. However, he was always opposed to the worst excesses of the group’s lack of due process. By the middle of September 1851, the group had hanged four men and deported thirty more, all without the benefit of a lawyer publicly recognized judge, or the use of any legitimate legal proceedings. Norton’s contribution to the group was his resolution “that no criminal shall

⁴¹ Ibid., 197.

⁴² Ibid., 201.

be sentenced until he or she shall have an opportunity of pleading guilty or not guilty and assigning his or her reasons why judgment should not be passed.”⁴³ In the end, Norton came to the realization that the Vigilance Committee was necessary, as he believed it would have a lasting effect on crime.

Despite the troubles introduced by disastrous fires and vigilance committees, Norton’s success became so pronounced in the areas of real estate, importing goods, and commission sales in the three years after his arrival in the city that he saw the possibility of doubling his fortune by cornering the entire rice market. The commodity market was even more volatile than usual in the burgeoning Gold Rush city, but Norton was confident in his abilities of predicting cost and demand. He bid twelve and a half cents a pound for several cargoes of rice and at first the price increased dramatically.⁴⁴ Norton’s rice holdings soon reached the high price of thirty-six cents a pound and he had nearly reached his financial goal. Unfortunately, at that time two large ships carrying the staple arrived unexpectedly and glutted the market. One writer on early San Francisco wrote, “prices fell below cost; the rice market crashed, taking related investments with it in domino fashion. Despite extensive litigation Norton was unable to collect major debts which might have saved him, and he had to sacrifice his real estate holdings. Almost overnight, he was ruined.”⁴⁵

Norton’s troubles turned out to be only a part of a larger economic trend in San Francisco at the time. The economic fortunes of San Francisco in the 1850s saw many rapid-fire booms and busts for local merchants and the city as a whole, which were only

⁴³ Lane, 38.

⁴⁴ “A Journey to the Imaginary Empire of Norton I,” 18.

⁴⁵ Dillon, 275.

partially due to the fortunes of the gold prospecting industry. The depression in the early 50s was actually caused more by errors in the oversupply of goods and overestimating the duration of the craze for gold than by national economic patterns.⁴⁶

Rather than attempt to rebuild his fortune, Joshua Norton was busy with litigations against him and failed in his attempts to gain employment as a commission salesman for other, more successful firms. During the years between 1853 and 1859, the only mentions he received in the press regarded the legal proceedings brought against him by several parties involved in his disastrous rice scheme. Among them were the Ruiz Brothers, who sued for some \$20,000 owed them for nonpayment of their cargo. For two and a half years Norton was locked in one suit after another, which drained his already depleted resources and distracted him from any attempts that he might have made at reestablishment of his businesses.⁴⁷ Norton lost most of these legal cases, and by 1856 he was financially ruined. However, he wasn't alone, as the commerce in San Francisco was disastrous in 1855 and 1856; only one merchant in ten was still in business by the end of that time.

Added to this state of economic depression was the occurrence of a new Vigilance Committee in 1856, which targeted the criminal element. They also went after corruption in civic affairs, which was handicapping any attempt at economic recovery. Reports differ on whether the group was successful, but it is likely that it only had a temporary effect on curbing lawlessness and governmental corruption. Probably due to his financial hardships, there exists no evidence that Norton officially joined this later group of

⁴⁶ Issel and Cherny, 15.

⁴⁷ Lane, 45.

Vigilantes, as he had by this time joined the ever-growing numbers of failed Gold Rush businessmen.⁴⁸

It was this group of failed merchants, far more than all the destitute miners, which contributed to creating the small class of eccentrics that were so prevalent from the mid-1850s through the 1870s. Partly because of a need for levity after the experiences of the Vigilance Committees and partly due to the economic downturn, San Francisco experienced an unprecedented period of interest in this class of people, with Emperor Norton being the most famous.

After 1856, Norton languished in unsuccessful attempts at commission sales in jobs given to him by colleagues who had taken pity on him, remembering his former success. In the end, however, his financial hardships made it impossible to continue without taking extraordinary means. Lane writes, “in 1856 there were not quite so many bankruptcies as in 1855, only 146. But one of them, unfortunately, was that of the English Jew who had begun his business career in San Francisco seven years before with such high hopes.”⁴⁹ Norton’s remaining assets, such as his few remaining real estate holdings, were sold in an attempt to cover his many debts.

When Norton’s first proclamation appeared in September of 1859, tensions throughout the nation were rapidly becoming more and more heated between the North and South. Although California was affected far less than the rest of the nation by these uncertainties, it was not entirely free from the strife that engulfed the country. At the time of Norton’s “coronation,” the city was in mourning following the death of Senator David Broderick (an anti slavery man), at the hands of Judge David Terry, (a supporter of

⁴⁸ Lane., 49.

⁴⁹ Lane., 50.

slavery.) During the duel between the two parties as a result of a political altercation, Broderick fired his pistol into the ground, while Terry shot his into Broderick. The Senator languished for several days before finally expiring from his wounds. Broderick had been well liked by the public, despite the fact that even California had begun to split into northern and southern camps. As a result, on the day when Norton decided to assume his title, the city was in a state of mourning.⁵⁰

The question remains as to what the origin was of Joshua Norton's decision to make himself Emperor. Whether he can truly be thought of as belonging to San Francisco's larger tradition of eccentrics is subject to debate as well. Many have asked these questions ever since the fateful day of September 17, 1859, when Norton ascended the steps to the *San Francisco's Bulletin* newspaper with his famous introductory proclamation. One historical journal notes "in many directions the mind of Norton was unusually clear, and at all times he was remarkably philosophic."⁵¹ Many commented that his mind was almost entirely sound, except in the area of believing he was emperor. Due to the widespread acceptance he later received from the public, some even doubted whether that belief was flawed. This did not stop speculation on the cause of his eccentric behavior, however. It was most likely brought on by the stress of losing his entire monetary fortune. His earlier proclivities toward absolute monarchy were no doubt a contributing factor and certainly determined the form and tone of his later eccentricity. Joshua Norton began his famous and illustrious career when he decided to let California and the world know of his momentous decision by delivering his first proclamation.

⁵⁰ "A Journey to the Imaginary Empire of Norton I," 18.

⁵¹ "Eccentrics of San Francisco," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 2, no. 3, (1923): 240.

Today, many regard him as part of one of the most unusual chapters in American history.⁵²

Joshua Norton became a popular character in San Francisco history for several reasons. On the one hand, the city was especially accepting of eccentrics after the financial downturn in the late 1850s, when many people lost fortunes but were still remembered for their more prosperous days. In addition, Norton was unusual compared to many other eccentrics in that he was articulate, had a gift for writing shown in his proclamations, was interested in the political happenings of the city, and attended many local cultural, political and religious events. He also was known as a very kind man, searching for the peaceful end to conflicts.

There was another important element that aided in Joshua Norton becoming such a noted citizen of the city. Unlike the twenty-first century, in which there are numerous means of communication, during the mid and late nineteenth century San Francisco had few ways for its citizens to acquire the news of the day, and they depended primarily on newspapers and periodicals. The numerous newspapers in the city were inexpensive and they all vied for readers. Publishing something unusual brought in readers, and Norton's proclamations were certainly unique. All of these elements combined to create a perfect setting in both time and place for Joshua Norton to become a notable and famous character of the city.

It can be seen from the history of San Francisco leading up to this point that Norton's eccentric behavior appeared at a very opportune moment in the city's history. If it had appeared much earlier than 1859 San Francisco would have been too caught up in

⁵² "America's Own Hitler," 4.

the Gold Rush to pay much attention to this unusual local character. Had Norton's career begun any later, the city would have likewise become too well established as an urban center to take notice of him. For a relatively brief period from 1855 to about 1875 San Francisco became a place that was especially welcoming to eccentric characters. In the following chapters I will expand on this and other characteristics of Norton's emerging persona.

Chapter 1: Emperor Norton's Proclamations

“Ay, but thou talk’st
As if thou wert a king.”
“Why so I am, in mind;
and that’s enough.”⁵³

A middle aged man walked into the office of the *San Francisco Bulletin* on September 17, 1859, and placed a piece of paper on the desk of the editor. Thus began the reign of Emperor Joshua Abraham Norton. What caused the people of San Francisco to later regard him with such affection and reverence during his life and for over 10,000 citizens to attend his funeral? In the years to come, two narratives of Norton’s life emerged, a popular version derived from the newspapers and magazines of the day, while another contained some of the less well known facts stemming from research of primary sources. Each of them provided a picture of who Norton was and how he was perceived by the public.

A small number of authors, such as William Drury and Allen Stanley Lane, have written biographies exploring the life of Emperor Norton. William Drury wrote his major work on Emperor Norton in 1986. He became interested in the subject of Norton while working as a columnist for the *San Francisco News Call Bulletin*. Drury’s book is the better of the two works in terms of research, as he included both a bibliography and an index.⁵⁴ However, little information is available on Allen Stanley Lane, the author of *Emperor Norton, the Mad Monarch of North America*. Written in 1939, Lane’s work was not as well written as that of Drury. While a bibliography was included, it was not

⁵³ William Shakespeare, *King Henry the Sixth*, Part 3, Act 3, Scene 1 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son Company, 1925), 653.

⁵⁴ William Drury, *Norton I, Emperor of the United States* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986), 221.

nearly as comprehensive.⁵⁵ Drury and Lane can be considered representative of most writers on the subject of Norton, as it appears that their primary motivation was to tell his story as it was revealed in primary sources but also to include folk tales and legends that have grown up around the Emperor.

Be that as it may, few authors have delved very deeply into the remarkable insights that Norton had in such varied topics as politics, religion, and race relations that were of great importance both in his time and the modern era as well. While some of his proclamations were of a humorous nature, the majority showed unusual forward thinking that was far ahead of his time in terms of reform and progress. The more than 100 notices that he issued to the press covered a wide array of subjects and revealed the beliefs of a man who was far from being just an eccentric character, as he was often portrayed in the local and national newspapers. Also, far from being the benevolent ruler that only had his subjects' welfare in mind; Norton was actually more concerned with preserving an efficient and orderly society through a monarchy, even if at times this was contrary to the people's short-term benefit. He saw the maintenance of an orderly country to be the best way to ensure individual citizens' rights, as well as to further the most efficient society possible.

However, based on Norton's proclamations to the newspapers, he also believed that an absolute monarchy, while it would produce the greatest benefit for the most people, did not help everyone. Contrary to what many writers and biographers have stated, he often dictated that order and stability should be maintained, even if it did not benefit smaller interest groups. If one looks at the history of San Francisco beginning

⁵⁵ Allen Stanley Lane, *Emperor Norton, The Mad Monarch of North America* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1939), 283.

with the Gold Rush in 1849 to Norton becoming Emperor in 1859, with Vigilance Committees, lawlessness, and great economic upheavals, it is not difficult to understand the instability to which he referred. Nor is it hard to see why an individual might come to believe that another form of government would bring about a more orderly society.

The perception of Norton by the city's citizens is also significant because it differed greatly from that of the many other eccentrics in San Francisco at the time. The obvious intelligence, foresight, and good sense of Norton contributed to his being more than tolerated but actually accepted by the city as a whole. While the people did not seriously believe in him as an Emperor, they likely did want to believe in the possibility of his more stable society, based on San Francisco's troubled economic and social history.

It would be foolish to think that the media of San Francisco paid so much attention to Emperor Norton and devoted such newspaper space to him only out of a desire for increased circulation and profits. While the city's newspapers did exploit Norton's fame to a certain degree, his uniqueness among the city's eccentrics and his many admirable qualities ensured that he was remembered long after the others had been forgotten. Also, for the city's citizens, Norton symbolized whimsy, stability and an upset of the traditional social order.

From late 1852 at the time of Norton's financial ruin to 1856 there is little mention of him outside the occasional report that he was locked in litigation over his many debts. Also, it is unknown where Norton lived from late 1856 until September of 1859, though he occasionally advertised in the *Alta California* for the sale of coffee, beans or some other commodity. He apparently subsisted in this way during these years,

though it would have been far below the standard of living to which he had been accustomed in his days as a prosperous merchant. Norton's fortune and finally his reputation as a successful businessman had disappeared.

At the time of Norton's first proclamation in 1859 the city was no stranger to eccentric characters. San Francisco had a reputation for tolerance of eccentric and unusual behavior. Whether this reputation was deserved is difficult to determine, as an argument could be made in either direction. However, it is readily apparent that the city had long had a well publicized population of strange characters. The *Alta California*, a contemporary newspaper, even spoke of the city's reputation for eccentricity. "Probably no town of the same size in the world has as many public individuals, who have become noted for their peculiarities, as San Francisco."⁵⁶ While a complete list of San Francisco's notable characters is beyond the scope of this thesis, a brief overview of some of the more familiar eccentrics is valuable in seeing how they contrasted with Joshua Norton.

One of Norton's chief rivals for the attention of the public and the eccentric who bore the greatest resemblance to the Emperor was an individual known as George Washington III or George Washington Coombs. He also sometimes called himself "The Great Matrimonial Candidate." His given name was Frederick Combs, a photographer who came to California the same year as Norton in 1849. He possessed a slight resemblance to the first president, which he accentuated by dressing in a colonial costume complete with a three cornered hat, powdered hair, coat, waistcoat and knee breeches. Like Norton, he took his role seriously (though he had none of Norton's circumspection)

⁵⁶ *Alta California*, November 16, 1864, 1.

and in 1860 opened a phrenology parlor, which met with some success. In 1867 he left California for reasons unknown, later writing a book on his supposedly stupendous accomplishments.⁵⁷

Emperor Norton's other contemporary eccentrics ranged from Oofy Goofty, a onetime circus freak who offered people the right to strike him with a club for the price of fifty cents (as he claimed to not possess any feeling in portions of his anatomy), to the King of Pain, who made a living selling bogus miracle tonics to passersby and claimed that they rendered him impervious to cold. What is important to note is that, while these strange individuals of the city were eccentrics, none of them possessed Norton's moral sense, skill at writing, awareness of current events, or concern for the public.

After his extended absence from the public eye in San Francisco, Norton reappeared in the entries of the *San Francisco Bulletin* on September 17, 1859, which reported his famous first proclamation:

Have We an Emperor Among Us?

The world is full of queer people. This forenoon, a well-dressed and serious looking man entered our office, and quietly left the following document, which he respectfully requested we would examine and insert in the *Bulletin*. Promising him to look at it, he politely retired, without saying anything further. Here is the paper:

At the peremptory request and desire of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and now for the last 9 years and 10 months past of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these United States, and in virtue of the authority thereby in me vested, do hereby order and direct the representatives of the different States of the Union to assemble in the Musical Hall, of this city, on the 1st day of February next, then and there to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is laboring, and thereby cause confidence to exist, both at home and abroad, in our stability and integrity.

⁵⁷ Robert Ernest Cowan, *The Forgotten Characters of Old San Francisco* (USA: Ward Richie Press, 1938), 7.

Norton I,
Emperor of the United States

17th September 1859.⁵⁸

There are many important aspects of Norton's personality and beliefs apparent in this passage. First, Norton states that his "ascension" has taken place at the request of a large majority of the citizens of the United States. His basis for this belief is probably due to the comments and jokes that he sometimes received from his friends and colleagues after they learned of his opinions regarding an absolute monarchy. At times they jokingly called him Emperor after Norton told them "if I were Emperor of this nation, there would be changes."⁵⁹ It is interesting that Norton claimed popular support for his taking on the title of Emperor in his initial proclamation. While it is unclear on what he was basing this claim of support, it is in keeping with the tradition of needing to legitimize the governing authority. All governments, including Norton's, have attempted to prove that they were lawfully created rather than appear to rule solely by force.

The Emperor's initial announcement was significant in other ways. Norton's first proclamation was the last time in which he used his first name as it is found in the body of his text, becoming the only monarch in history to go by his last name instead of his first. Also, when Napoleon III's troops invaded Mexico in 1861, Norton proclaimed himself "Protector of Mexico."⁶⁰ This is related in the notes of the Bohemian Club, a group that was founded in post-gold rush San Francisco by various journalists who wished to bring a greater sense of culture and refinement to what they saw as a backward

⁵⁸ *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 17, 1859, 3.

⁵⁹ Lorena Ann Olmstead, "The Reign of Emperor Norton the First," *What's Doing*, November 1946, 25.

⁶⁰ Andrew G. Jameson, "San Francisco's Emperor Norton I," *Bohemian Club Library Notes* 119 (Summer 2002): 4.

town lacking in sophistication. They often wrote on topics of interest and curiosity in their yearly newsletters, and Norton was a popular subject.

In a similar manner to his views on the troubles affecting the United States, Norton felt it his duty to protect Mexico from the evils it was experiencing. He perceived Mexico, like the United States, as having been mismanaged with an inefficient government. “Whereas, it is an undoubted truth that Mexico is entirely unfit to manage her own affairs, the country being in a constant state of internal distraction, anarchy and civil war, and whereas His Imperial Majesty Napoleon III, is throwing his protecting arm around unfortunate Italy, we consider it our duty to shield and protect bleeding Mexico.”⁶¹ Emperor Norton always took great pride in his self-proclaimed titles and never failed to include them in all his correspondences.

Norton’s comparison between himself and Napoleon III stems from the French monarch’s campaign in 1859-60 to expel Austria from northern Italy and bring about the unification of Italy. Beginning in his youth, Napoleon III had always wished to bring about Italian nationhood, as well as to remove Austria from Lombardy and Venice. After a brief war he was partially successful, also gaining for France the areas of Nice and Savoy in the bargain.⁶² In a similar fashion, it seems Norton wished to have a relationship with Mexico. His desire to protect “bleeding Mexico” is a reference to the War of Reform, a civil war between Conservative and Liberal elements that eventually ended in President Benito Juarez’s victory on January 1, 1861. Norton’s involvement in the conflict appears to be an attempt for him to compare himself to his fellow monarch

⁶¹ *San Francisco Bulletin*, January 18, 1860, 3.

⁶² David Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), xviii.

Napoleon III. Norton wished to protect Mexico and ensure its independence, though he was disappointed later by the decisions of Spain, France, and Britain to intervene in late 1861. Almost a decade later, the title Protector of Mexico was dropped during the reign of Maximilian, when Norton then declared, “it is impossible to protect such an unsettled nation.”⁶³

In his initial proclamation, Norton also states that he wishes the representatives of all the states of the Union to assemble to discuss making changes to the existing laws so as to lessen the evils under which the country is laboring. It is not difficult to recognize some of the evils Norton is referring to in this statement. By September of 1859 the country was approaching civil war between the North and South, although the pivotal event of the 1860 presidential election had not yet occurred. Tensions were already high in California. Senator Broderick, the well respected anti-slavery California politician who fought a duel on September 13, 1859, with California Supreme Court Justice and slavery proponent, David S. Terry, had finally died of his wounds the previous day, with many newspapers bordering their columns in black in sympathy for the slain man.⁶⁴

San Francisco and California as a whole had received almost equal numbers of settlers from the North and South, which resulted in a clear divide in the slavery issue that became even more important in the years to come. Although the state did not take part directly in the war, its citizens had very settled attitudes on both the issues of slavery and states’ rights, resulting in a divisive climate.

Added to these issues were the many other problems of a frontier city such as lawlessness, lack of city services, the economic downturn in the wake of the gold rush,

⁶³ Robert Ernest Cowan, *California Historical Society Quarterly* (October 1923): 239.

⁶⁴ Drury, *Norton I*, 58.

and racial tensions. Therefore, Norton's claim that San Francisco and the country as a whole were suffering from a plague of troubles was not an unusual one. The city's serious need for more public services in sanitation, fire prevention, police and roads was matched by a lack of interest in providing them in even the most rudimentary fashion. As mentioned in the introduction, Roger W. Lotchin's work, *San Francisco: From Hamlet to City*, discusses the difficulties faced by city planners in San Francisco's early years. Efforts to provide the many services that modern urban areas view as essential were largely absent. This was due to great indifference on the part of the populace and an unwillingness to provide even the most basic resources and revenue. These ranged from sanitation, roads and medical facilities to many other necessary institutions.⁶⁵ The city had increased from a population of about 1,000 in 1849 at the beginning of the gold rush to about 50,000 ten years later.⁶⁶ These facts made the settlement of the city very slow and disorderly, even by the standards of other American frontier towns.

Other local difficulties also contributed to Norton's statement that the country was suffering from evils in need of amelioration. The urban economy had experienced enormous fluctuations in the years leading up to Norton's declaring himself Emperor. In fact, Norton's own financial ruin was in part caused by the climate of rampant speculation and risk. This was somewhat due to the volatility of an urban market dominated by the gold rush and its aftermath. As much as 90 percent of the trade in San Francisco was controlled by suppliers from outside the State of California. After the frenzied activity of the gold rush, the natural tendency was for oversupply, which later

⁶⁵ Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco: From Hamlet to City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 164.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

caused a severe recession after the Panic of February 1855.⁶⁷ Add to this the instability brought by the frequent fires and vigilance committee uprisings, and San Francisco had all the indicators of the evils that Norton referred to in his initial proclamation.

Initially the newspapers' coverage of Norton before his historic initial proclamation was not substantial. Beyond Norton's involvement in the economic life of the city, his coverage in the media fluctuated. He was occasionally mentioned in the *San Francisco Bulletin* and *Alta California* in his capacity as a prominent local businessman, both in the days of his greatest success and also in Norton's subsequent financial ruin. It was reported briefly that his debts greatly outweighed his assets immediately following his failed bid to corner the local rice market. Despite this relative lack of media coverage in the early part of his career, it is clear that the local media played a major role in creating and maintaining the figure of Emperor Norton after the publication of his first proclamation.

The newspapers' reasons for printing Norton's proclamations were probably two-fold: a demand for entertainment from the public and the profit resulting from increased sales. In the years immediately following the founding of the city, before it had access to the railroad and telegraph lines, there was a great demand for any form of news. This was related in a monograph found in the library of The Society of California Pioneers. "In the early days, before railroads or telegraphs disturbed the quiet of San Francisco, we rejoiced in our street characters. The interval of two weeks between the arrival of a steamer with the Eastern mail would be monotonous if it were not relieved by some local

⁶⁷ Ibid., 56.

entertainment.”⁶⁸ This demand for diversion and amusement, combined with the resulting increase in circulation and profit, was probably what motivated the early newspapers to print Norton’s many issuances.

Philip Ethington, in his book *The Public City*, explored the rise of the newspaper industry from 1850 to 1900. Initially, the amount of capital outlay necessary to start a newspaper was fairly small. An important daily paper could be established for as little as a few hundred dollars with a staff of only six or seven. This contributed to the initial large numbers of papers in many North American cities. However, over time the costs of maintaining the latest equipment as well as the pressure of competition forced the number of papers down.⁶⁹ The pressures of competition were a major factor in creating the climate of sensationalism that was part of the reason for the popularity of Norton’s proclamations and the reason for the editors’ willingness to print them. According to Ethington, sensationalism in the news, which was defined as a reliance on unusual stories of crime, sex, or the bizarre, had been a part of journalism since the eighteenth century. At its heart was a desire to attract additional readers, and Norton provided a convenient means of doing so.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, there exists little evidence beyond Norton’s own submissions to the newspapers as to his reasons for proclaiming himself Emperor. The primary reason appears to be his belief that were he put in a position of authority he was capable of correcting many of the local and national problems that were affecting San Francisco and

⁶⁸ *Bummer and Lazarus: An Historical Dog Story*. A small monograph in the library of The Society of California Pioneers, San Francisco. No indication as to author, publisher, or date of publication. Possibly printed in 1890s.

⁶⁹ Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City, The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 309.

the nation. However, contrary to what some biographers have believed, Norton did not act solely out of altruism towards his subjects. In several of his proclamations, while they counsel restraint and mercy towards others, the Emperor acted as much out of a desire for order and stability as he did for compassion towards his fellow citizens. This will be seen in the following selected proclamations.

Emperor Norton's regular activities in San Francisco's public settings were what aroused the interest of many of the city's citizens and also made the articles in the city's newspapers regarding Norton so popular. This popularity can be demonstrated by the fact that they were printed for more than twenty years. When considering that most newspapers were only four or six pages in length at the time, it is notable that Norton maintained people's interest in his activities for so long. B. E. Lloyd, a contemporary of Emperor Norton and a local writer in many periodicals and pamphlets, detailed the Emperor's daily habits, opinions and beliefs. "He is a good conversationalist, and from having free access to all libraries and reading rooms, keeps well posted on current topics. He will talk readily on any subject, and his opinions are usually very correct, except when relating to himself. He is more familiar with history than the average citizen, and his scientific knowledge, though sometimes mixed, is considerable. Of evenings, he may be found at the theater or in the lecture room, a cool observer and attentive listener."⁷¹ This statement implies that to at least some San Franciscans he was regarded as being a well educated, sensible individual with insights into the needs and problems of the city's inhabitants.

⁷¹ Charles F. Adams, *The Magnificent Rogues of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Pacific Books, 1998), 44.

The public read his proclamations in the newspapers, but the Emperor's appearance was the subject of amusement. According to Gene Hammond in the magazine *Westways* there were never any indications that he was publicly ridiculed. "The sight of the stocky, bearded man striding up Market Street, resplendent in his blue uniform with tarnished gold epaulettes atop the tailcoat and a broad red stripe running down either trouser leg, was the cause of much winking and nudging, but nothing more."⁷² It seems unusual that Hammond could make such a statement, as he did not live during Norton's time and does not cite the sources he used to come to this conclusion. It is entirely possible that Hammond is merely repeating the statements of other second hand sources. However, there is no evidence from the newspaper articles of the time that he was ever verbally attacked in public. Beyond the occasional jokes in the local papers, the Emperor was only subject to an odd wink or whisper, never open insults.

Several times Norton's royal uniform became worn and shabby. It serves as a statement to the people's esteem that he was provided with a replacement on at least four occasions, once as an official act of the Board of Supervisors, once by the Fire Department, and at least twice by the contributions of the local newspapers or private citizens.⁷³ During the Civil War he periodically wore the uniforms of both the North and the South. According to William Drury's book *Norton I, Emperor of the United States*, Norton alternated the wearing of the uniforms of the North and South to show his impartiality towards both sides. He regarded himself as the sovereign of the whole nation and did not wish to take sides.⁷⁴ Photographs present in Drury's book coming from the

⁷² Gene Hammond, "Emperor Norton of the United States," *Westways*, August 1949, 5.

⁷³ Hammond, 6.

⁷⁴ Drury, 58.

Bancroft Library collection support the contention that Norton wore the uniforms of both sides.⁷⁵

On most days Emperor Norton was seen either walking the streets collecting contributions for his always dwindling funds, attending a large political event in Sacramento, or patronizing one of the city's dramatic or musical events, at which he expected to be received as an "imperial patron" at no charge. On Sundays he alternated in attending various church services so as to encourage his subjects both to attend themselves and also to demonstrate religious tolerance. As is related in the *Bohemian Club Library Notes* by Andrew G. Jameson, Norton once informed a Methodist minister that it was his "duty to encourage religion and morality by showing myself at church but to avoid jealousy I attend them all in turn."⁷⁶ He even attempted at one time to abolish the Sunday Law, which prohibited shops from doing business on the Sabbath, out of consideration for the disadvantage this gave to Jewish merchants who observed a different holy day. He believed this was necessary until a universal religion could be established for all peoples.⁷⁷ While Jameson's statements cannot be verified through original sources, they are definitely in keeping with Norton's previously stated tendency not to show favoritism towards particular groups.

This is similar to the way in which he wished to avoid favoritism towards the North or South. Just as with political divisions, Norton wanted to bring about as unified a nation as possible, whether this was in terms of politics, religion, or race. He seems to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 109c.

⁷⁶ Jameson, 7.

⁷⁷ Jameson, 7.

have been largely unconcerned with the difficulties this presented. Such a plan shows how Norton wished to disregard the wishes of the few in favor of the many.

Norton was often vague on the subject of his supposed royal background. However, many of his contemporaries spoke of his resemblance to several European royals. The *San Francisco Daily Evening Mirror*, one of the many newspapers of the time, commented on this. “He bears a striking resemblance to a picture we have seen of George III, and what is still more remarkable, has, as that monarch had, a tuft of hair upon the tip of his nose.”⁷⁸ This comparison with the British monarch is possibly a joke at Norton’s expense, as George III was known to have suffered from mental illness during part of his reign. At other times Norton was compared to Louis Napoleon, and speculation even existed that Norton was his son. However, this stretches the bounds of credibility, since Napoleon III was only about eleven years Norton’s senior. It is almost as if the writers of the newspapers believed the rumors that were started on Norton’s behalf as to his royal parentage, or at least wished to exploit them for the benefit of their own paper and those who were predisposed to believe such fabrications. Naturally, it is also possible that they were making fun of Norton as well.

The Emperor’s proclamations from the 1860s do not appear nearly as often as those of the decade following, which could indicate a possible rise in popularity in his last decade of life. However, several can be found from the time immediately after Norton’s first proclamation, the period when further evidence of a decline in national unity became apparent. Numerous examples of this decline could be named, from the

⁷⁸ *San Francisco Evening Mirror*, December 3, 1860.

conflicts in Kansas, the duel of Broderick and Terry, to the attack upon Senator Charles Sumner by Representative Preston Brooks in the Senate chamber.

The Emperor's fears that animosities were increasing between the two factions were further confirmed by the uprising of John Brown at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, on June 3, 1859. At this time California was not yet connected to the telegraph lines and so people had to wait about three weeks while a stagecoach from St. Louis delivered the news to San Francisco. Opinion on the event in San Francisco was largely divided, as California had almost equal numbers of settlers from the North and South. The Emperor's attitude towards Brown's uprising was that the man was insane and should not have been hanged by Governor Wise of Virginia on December 2. He instead believed that Brown should have been sent to an asylum for treatment. Further, Norton stated in his proclamation "that I do hereby discharge him, Henry A. Wise, from said office, and appoint John C. Breckenridge, of Kentucky, to said office of Governor of our Province of Virginia."⁷⁹ It is unclear why Norton chose this candidate to replace Wise, because given Breckenridge's well-known pro-slavery stance he would likely have judged Brown the same as Wise had done. It might have been because Breckenridge did not own slaves or have a personal investment in the institution. He saw an attack on slavery as an attack on property, and so was moderately pro-slavery when compared to some Southern leaders.

The Emperor's response to this incident at Harper's Ferry supports the theory that Norton was mostly concerned with maintaining order. This was in opposition to the belief that he almost always acted only as a merciful ruler. An overly lenient leader would have simply pardoned Brown, resulting in almost certain outrage from the South

⁷⁹ Drury, 57.

and most of the North. Norton's words on the matter of Brown and other proclamations suggest that he was mostly concerned with the creation and maintenance of the most efficient, orderly, and just society possible, however improbable it was that such might be brought about through submissions to the newspapers alone.

Following Norton's issuance of his beliefs on the matter of Brown's arrest and execution, the Emperor sought to deal with what he perceived as flaws in the structure of the nation's federal government. After he declared himself Emperor, Norton's views on democracy became even more critical. For example, in many instances Emperor Norton displayed his views on the relative merits of monarchies and the disadvantages of republics. He was greatly disturbed by the news of the dethronement and exile of Isabella II of Spain in September of 1868. Norton regarded the event as an unfortunate step towards anarchy and disorder for Spain, which in some ways proved true, as Isabella's removal forced Spain to seek a possible successor in Prince Leopold von Hohenzollern, a situation that was one of the causes of the Franco-Prussian War. On December 19, 1868, Norton issued his proclamation on what the best form of government is for a nation:

First: That an Empire is profound tranquility and prosperity provided the Government is impartial and pure.

Second: That a Constitutional Monarchy is the next best form of government, because the King is like a judge or independent power between the two parties.

Third: That a Republic is anarchy. Prey of one party against the other causes mobs, factious parties and improper influences of those political sects on the Government, and that the citizen has not that protection in his person and property that he is entitled to by paying his *pro rata* of the expenses of the Government, and ends, eventually, in making its citizens the Ishmaelites amongst other nations.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ "Queen Isabella and the Spanish Difficulty," *Alta California*, December 19, 1868, 1.

Thus, Norton saw his adoption of the title of Emperor to be the natural extension of his belief in monarchy. He believed that a Republic was by definition chaotic and undesirable as a system of government. He felt so strongly on this point that many of his early proclamations were attempts to abolish the existing government. He dissolved the Congress, offices of the Executive Branch and finally the Republican and Democratic parties, since Norton felt that they caused internal dissention and disorder.⁸¹ In observing the tumultuous events of the Civil War and Reconstruction as well as other problems facing the nation, it could be argued that such a change in government would have benefited the nation. This was Norton's main reasoning for his many calls for change from a republic to a monarchy. His reference to Ishmael, found at the end of the proclamation is connected to the Old Testament son of Abraham, who was left behind in the wilderness. Norton probably means this comparison to imply that the American people will be excluded from the rights and protections that are their due from paying the government their share of its expenses.

Norton's beliefs in other areas were also unusual. Unlike his beliefs on monarchy, which changed little over time, his stance on women's suffrage fluctuated over the course of his reign. Norton signed an October 1878 petition to the California Constitutional Convention calling for an amendment "that no citizens of the State shall be disfranchised on account of sex." However, Norton later attended a lecture on women's rights where he gave a speech on his own views on the subject. Chaos must have ensued when he told the assembled women to "go home and mind their children."⁸² This was

⁸¹ *San Francisco Herald*, August 14, 1869, 3.

⁸² Patricia E. Carr, "Emperor Norton I," *American History Illustrated*, July 1975, 19.

not an unusual position for a man to take in the nineteenth century, as major changes in women's role in society did not take place until long after Norton's time. However, the Emperor's views on this topic do show that he was not always the benevolent figure that he was often shown to be. He had set views that at times did not mesh well with many of those he saw as his subjects and he was not afraid to voice them.

Similar in complexity to his beliefs on woman's suffrage were his views on the rights of minorities. Bret Harte, an American author and poet best known for his accounts of pioneering life in California, wrote in the *San Francisco Magazine* of Norton's proclamation concerning the rights of the Chinese. "[Norton] deplored living in a time when Chinese evidence was legally inadmissible at court. There was then, as Bret Harte wrote 'that famous California law, that a pagan was of necessity a liar, and that truth only resided in the breast of the Christian Caucasian.' The Emperor annulled that law by proclamation in 1868, three years before the state did."⁸³

Although most of Norton's actions towards his Chinese subjects could be seen as those of a benevolent monarch, his primary mission was always the maintenance of an orderly, efficient society, whether or not that was possible through altruistic means. While the Chinese Exclusion Act was not passed until about two years after Norton's death in 1880, discrimination against the Chinese was nevertheless high in the years before the act's creation. On February 10, 1872, Norton argued that the Chinese should give up their religion, as it was at odds with the Christian faith:

To the Chinese residents of America! Believing that a nation is sure to be cursed by disease, famine and death, which permits false gods to be worshipped; and considering that your idols are such, and that the good and pure moral teachings of Confucius are taught in your schools to your children, which are totally at

⁸³ Alice Thibau, "The Emperor's Folly," *San Francisco Magazine*, July 1984, 36.

variance with this mode of religious worship: and whereas a great deal of the prejudice existing against your country and people would be eradicated by you worshipping the great Creator above in your private residences; now therefore we, Norton I, Dei gratia Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, do hereby command you to appoint some appropriate day to gather your wooden gods and idols, and send them to your churches in China, and let America have all the benefit of a pure worship.

Signed and sealed this 8th day of February, 1872

Norton I.⁸⁴

It is important to note that Norton does not imply that he believed the Chinese religion inherently inferior; he only says that it is contrary to that of the majority of the nation's citizens. Norton probably noticed that the United States was primarily a Christian nation, and due to the divisive nature of religion believed that it was preferable for minority groups to dispense with their cultural ties as much as possible in the interests of a more unified country. In this case he appears to believe that Confucianism is a more desirable belief system than that of other Chinese religions. However, he does state that the Chinese immigrants should accept a religion already practiced in San Francisco, thus avoiding some of the discrimination directed against them. This is quite significant, because Norton is implying that the Chinese immigrants' right to their own religious beliefs should be secondary to the need to assimilate into American society. He believes that by adopting a European religion such as a form of Christianity, they will avoid much of the prejudice they had been encountering.

The issue of labor relations is also reflected in Norton's proclamations. The influx of Chinese workers meant that other workers had to compete with them for jobs, as their willingness to work for lower wages made them highly sought after for lower end positions. Norton's view was that the overall prosperity of the city and specifically that

⁸⁴ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, February 10, 1872, 2.

of labor benefited by the presence of the Chinese, as manufacturers were able to produce their products more cheaply, which he saw as outweighing the costs to individual workers. The Emperor was also concerned regarding the United States' relations with China itself, as news of the mistreatment of its people in America could damage foreign relations. He warned "to all whom it may concern, that the eyes of the Emperor will be upon anyone who shall council any outrage or wrong on the Chinese."⁸⁵ By this notice in the *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, Norton appears to be warning others that he will not tolerate any persecution of the Chinese. Clearly, Norton was opposed to discrimination, as he regarded himself as the ruler of the whole nation and did not wish one group to victimize another. However, he was not necessarily taking the side of the Chinese, as it was primarily factory owners and the railroads that directly benefited from the inexpensive labor of the Chinese. It is possible that Norton believed that a benefit to the wealthy merchant class was advantageous for all the other economic groups in the long term. Due to his background as one of the city's early businessmen, it is not difficult to understand why he took this position.

Norton did not restrict his proclamations to only the Chinese minorities. He also issued a notice calling for the protection of all newly arrived immigrants. San Francisco and California as a whole had vast numbers of people arriving, first as a result of the Gold Rush and later for the many expanding industries and opportunities the region offered. Norton ordered the opening of the Mechanics Pavilion for the processing of these immigrants and the conducting of their business. On April 21, 1875, he also proposed the distribution of sufficient funds to aid them in reaching their final

⁸⁵ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, February 1, 1873, 1.

destinations to be repaid by bond when they were able to do so.⁸⁶ Norton recognized that like many recent arrivals in a foreign country some would attempt to take advantage of them due to their ignorance of local customs and practices.

Norton's desire for an orderly society is also reflected in his views on labor strikes. Like his proclamations calling for the dissolution of many of the country's governmental institutions due to the discord that they caused, Norton also saw workers' strikes as detrimental to the public good, regardless of whether the workers felt them necessary. In a proclamation Norton issued in 1870, he gave his views on the topic:

Whereas, complaints have been made that the public service is at present impeded and inconvenienced by reason of dissensions between the proprietors and operators of the Western Union Telegraph Company: Now, therefore, in order that the public interest may not be injured, We, Norton 1st, Dei Gratia, Emperor, et cetera, do hereby command, that the operators forthwith return to their duties and that the matter of salary in dispute be referred to competent arbitration.

Norton I.⁸⁷

As is detailed in Bliss' expansive history of labor relations in *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform*, the record of interactions between management and employees in the Western Union Telegraph Company was far from a harmonious one. A systematic policy of wage reduction was undertaken by management through a system of training young boys in the use of the telegraph equipment and then firing or waiting for the retirement of the more qualified adults. This had the effect of causing a reduction of wages of about 40 percent from 1870 to 1883. Also, some employees were blacklisted so that it was almost impossible for them to get work elsewhere in the country. The Telegraph Company also fired workers suspected of involvement in the union. While such strikes were

⁸⁶ Robert Ernest Cowen, Anne Bancroft, & Addie L. Ballou, *The Forgotten Characters of Old San Francisco* (San Francisco: Ward Ritchie Press, 1938), 100.

⁸⁷ California State Library, Bio Info File (Sacramento, CA, January 5, 1870)

occasionally resolved through arbitration, as Norton suggests in his proclamation, it was far more common for the telegraph union to eventually bow to pressure from the owners and management of the company.⁸⁸

The telegraph unions were relatively weak, sometimes with only about 50 percent of the workforce following through on California strikes that were called. In the case of the 1870 strike, the reasons for its failure are detailed in Downey's book *Telegraph Messenger Boys*. There were many reasons the newly formed union, the Telegraphers Protective League, failed in gaining concessions from management. It occurred during the slow season when Congress was not in session. Also, management was able to bring in workers from the railroad telegraph offices that were willing to cross picket lines, and finally the TPL was especially weak in numbers and financial backing. However, this was not the end of the struggle, as strikes periodically occurred, with one of the largest in 1883, three years after Norton's death.⁸⁹

Based on Norton's proclamations, he generally supported what he saw as the easiest means of restoring the public good, even though the interests of the general public and those of the workers were not always the same. In the case of the telegraph workers, Norton believed that the workers should trust in the arbitration of an independent party such as himself to decide the best course of action. He saw himself as one who could resolve the conflict between the management of the Western Union Telegraph Company and the striking workers union, The Telegraphers Protective League. The poor history of arbitration between labor and management did not seem to have dissuaded Norton in his

⁸⁸ William D. P. Bliss, *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1908), 1211.

⁸⁹ Gregory J. Downey, *Telegraph Messenger Boys, Labor, Technology and Geography 1850 to 1950* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 171.

belief that the dispute could have a reasonable resolution. Once again, Norton is primarily interested in maintaining an orderly society. In the case of this labor conflict, he took a very optimistic view that if the telegraph workers returned to work arbitration would give them a reasonable resolution to their demands. This is especially naïve in that it meant the workers gave up their biggest means of influencing management, the collective loss of their labor. Norton's views in this and other cases were fairly unrealistic. Norton's opinions regarding relations between owners and workers suggested that he thought workers should trust in independent arbitration to settle their grievances, rather than resort to an extended strike with all of its attendant difficulties.

In addition to his somewhat naïve nature, it has been stated in some periodicals that Norton often issued proclamations without knowledge of whether they were ever carried out. This reaction is surprising, given the amount of ample evidence from Norton that he was aware of the extent that his orders were obeyed. On August 17, 1872, he stated in the *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*:

Whereas, it is necessary for the perfect repose of our Empire that all royal decrees be duly respected until revoked or annulled; and whereas, we issued a decree of banishment against George Francis Train some months ago, which said decree has never been rescinded; therefore we do hereby decree that the United States authorities have him arrested and confined in Fort Alcatraz, if he does not leave California within ten days from this date.⁹⁰

While it is not known why Norton attempted to banish the noted businessman and author, George Train (it is possible he was angered by Train's attempt to usurp Norton's title by proclaiming himself the Dictator of America),⁹¹ it is clear from this passage in the *San*

⁹⁰ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, August 17, 1872, 3.

⁹¹ Allen Foster, *Around the World with Citizen Train* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2002), 217.

San Francisco Pacific Appeal that Norton was quite aware of his own actions, those of his “subjects,” and the end result.

To further his aim of providing genuine communication to those he thought of as his subjects, Norton endorsed the *San Francisco Pacific Appeal* as his favored newspaper. “Being anxious to have a reliable weekly imperial organ, we, Norton I, Dei Gratia Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, do hereby appoint the *Pacific Appeal* our said organ, conditionally, that they are not traitors, and stand true to our colors.”⁹² It is unclear why Norton chose this paper as his preferred instrument of communication. It is possible that the Emperor noticed that the *Appeal* typically printed his proclamations without alteration, as opposed to other papers such as the *Alta California*, which often added small prefaces to his notices such as “we are commanded, on pain of death and confiscation of all our personal property and real estate, to publish, without comment, the following proclamation.”⁹³ Aside from being mildly amusing, in adding this passage the editors of the paper are clearly violating the prohibition to publish the proclamation without comment. Also, it is almost certainly not a genuine threat from Norton, as he never issued a proclamation demanding a persons’ death or confiscation of property, although he did call for Train to be imprisoned. The other papers that were known to regularly publish Norton’s proclamations did not ever mention threats of execution for defiance of his orders.

Unlike many other monarchs, Norton did not believe in keeping his position to the detriment of the United States or the country of his birth, Great Britain. He even stated at one time that he would give up his position if it prevented harm to the country. “Norton

⁹² *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, January 7, 1871, 1.

⁹³ *Alta California*, February 9, 1866, 1.

I, does not desire that the sovereignty here and that of the British Empire should come into conflict. The Emperor would rather sacrifice his personal position, or interests, than that either nation should lose thereby.”⁹⁴ This represented at least one instance where he suggested that he is not only concerned with the maintenance of order but also the well being of his subjects.

In many cases Norton viewed altruism and supporting order and stability as one and the same. One example of this trend is Norton’s approach to the Modoc Indian conflict. It serves as further evidence that in his mind altruism and a desire for order can coincide. This was demonstrated by his proclamations regarding the Modoc War in 1872 and 1873, an Indian conflict that broke out in southern Oregon and northern California between the Modoc Tribe and the United States Army. As with most conflicts between whites and Native Americans, the primary causes were the loss of land and the clash of cultures. However, the specific cause was rooted in the massacre of 1852 at Bloody Point, when the Modoc killed 65 whites. Later at a peace parley the whites killed 41 Modocs in retaliation. Hostilities continued until the tribe was convinced to briefly move to a reservation also occupied by the Klamath tribe. Tensions between the two groups caused the Modocs to leave the reservation, eventually resulting in a conflict with the U.S. military. Arthur Quinn’s book, *Hell with the Fire Out: A History of the Modoc War* shows the typical course that agreements took between Native Americans and whites. “Treaties would be kept on the American side only until the Americans wanted Indian

⁹⁴ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, April 13, 1872, 1.

land, and then the American government would find it lacked the will to enforce its own will.”⁹⁵

During this war Norton again offered to mediate on behalf of the two parties, though sadly as with the case of his offer during the Civil War, the authorities again declined his offer of assistance. The conflict proved to be the last of the Indian Wars to take place in California and Oregon. Norton was convinced that if the two sides could only be brought to the negotiating table the conflict between them would quickly be resolved. He commanded “Governor Booth to escort the Indian envoys to the scene of warfare, and if possible induce the Chiefs to come to San Francisco and smoke the Calumet with the Emperor.”⁹⁶ (In this case, a Calumet refers to a Native American smoking pipe, sometimes known to whites as a peace pipe.)

Further, the Emperor commanded that all Native Americans involved in the conflict be captured as prisoners of war. He also prohibited them from being killed, except in extreme circumstances. This last part was emphasized later when he asked that one of the Modoc prisoners be pardoned. Most of all, Norton was concerned with the need for the United States to be just in its dealings with the Indians. He probably saw this as the easiest way to maintain a stable society in California. In his proclamation on April 19, 1873, he stated: “I do hereby command the capture, as prisoners of war, of the Modoc Tribe, they be civilized from barbarism, and prohibit their being killed as unnecessary, except in extreme cases.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Arthur Quinn, *Hell with the Fire Out: A History of the Modoc War* (Winchester, MA: Faber & Faber, Inc., 1997), 31.

⁹⁶ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, January 25, 1873, 1.

⁹⁷ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, April 19, 1873, 2.

A modern interpretation of the passage might take exception to the Emperor's description of the Native Americans as barbaric, as it showed that at least to some extent his belief system was rooted in the mindset of the nineteenth century. Despite this, Norton followed several days later with a further proclamation that placed some of the blame for the conflict with the government representatives to the Modoc people. "Whereas it is our intention to have publicly punished, before as many of the Indian chiefs as can be assembled together, all the Indian agents and other parties connected with frauds against the Indian tribes and the Government, in order to satisfy the Indians that in future the American people intend to act justly toward them."⁹⁸ Norton's beliefs regarding the promotion of fair play for the Native Americans were unusual in an age when most whites saw the Native Americans only as obstacles to westward expansion. The Emperor thus acted as a moral example to others, even on matters that were not widely agreed upon at the time.

Perhaps Norton's most famous proclamation was the one in which he ordered a bridge constructed spanning San Francisco Bay to Oakland. In a proclamation on March 23, 1872, he ordered "that a suspension bridge be built from Oakland Point to Goat Island, and thence to Telegraph Hill, provided such bridge can be built without injury to the navigable waters of the Bay of San Francisco."⁹⁹ What is most unusual is that this is one of a very few proclamations that was actually carried out, though not for many years. Construction on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge was begun on July 9, 1933, and completed on November 12, 1936. While many claims are made today as to Norton's remarkable foresight in planning this project, his proclamation likely had little to do with

⁹⁸ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, April 26, 1873, 1.

⁹⁹ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, March 23, 1872, 1.

the decision to construct the bridge fifty-three years after his death. However, it does remain one of the most well known facts about Emperor Norton.

Norton addressed many other issues in his proclamations in addition to the ones mentioned here. He was very knowledgeable and well read on a wide variety of topics. His other concerns included the railroads, shipping, fiscal finances, agriculture, public health, and the establishment of a universal religion. Almost no topic escaped his notice, and despite his eccentricity many respected him as an expert on a variety of subjects. For example, a lesser-known fact about Norton was that he claimed to have created a number of inventions for the benefit of the nation. He had a proposal to build a model for a railroad switch that he claimed would make the rails safe and more efficient.¹⁰⁰ Also, he invented a snow-melting machine for the purpose of increasing the city's water supply. Unfortunately, the banks refused to fund his inventions, even though he long claimed that they already owed him substantial amounts of money from his days as a merchant.¹⁰¹

While the Emperor was at times ridiculed in the newspapers in small ways, his "subjects" also supported him. The public had great affection and even admiration for him, even if some mocked him at times. Emperor Norton's subjects displayed their opinions of him in several ways. In one instance on January 21, 1867, he was mistakenly arrested while reading his newspaper at the Palace Hotel. The hotelier grew upset at Norton's threadbare uniform and the effect it would likely have on his guests and ordered him to leave. (The owner was either unaware of the Emperor's identity or did not realize the extent that he had ingratiated himself into the public's psyche.) Before long a local police officer, one Armand Barbier, came to arrest him. The police force at that time was

¹⁰⁰ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, September, 14, 1872, 1.

¹⁰¹ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, December 16, 1871, 2.

divided between the regular police, paid by the city, and the local police, paid by various property owners. As Barbier was a local officer under private employ, he was unaware of Norton's special status in the city.

The charge of vagrancy hardly held water, as Norton had a small amount of money and a place of residence. When the charge was changed to lunacy, George Fitch of the *Bulletin* produced an impassioned editorial:

In what can only be described as the most dastardly of errors, Joshua A. Norton was arrested today in the Palace Hotel. He is being held on the ludicrous charge of "Lunacy." Known and loved by all true San Franciscans as Emperor Norton, the kindly Monarch of Montgomery Street is less a lunatic than those who engineered these trumped up charges, as they will learn when His Majesty's loyal subjects are fully apprised of this outrage. Perhaps a return to the methods of the Vigilance Committees is in order. This newspaper urges all right thinking citizens to be in attendance tomorrow at the public hearing to be held before the Commissioner of Lunacy, Wingate Jones. This blot on the record of San Francisco must be removed.¹⁰²

Even Fitz Smythe of the *Alta California*, a paper that at times made fun of the Emperor, reminded his readers "that Norton was in his day a respectable merchant, and since he has worn the Imperial purple has shed no blood, robbed nobody, and despoiled the country of no-one, which is more than can be said for his fellows in that line."¹⁰³ This statement by Smythe suggests that he believed that most monarchs had a history of shedding much blood in the defense of their titles and goals. While the newspapers were the primary voice of protest, indignation was not just voiced by journalists, however, as many San Franciscans were likewise outraged by his detention.

Attendance at a public hearing proved to be unnecessary to argue the Emperor's case to the authorities. When the particulars of the arrest became known to the court

¹⁰² *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, January 21, 1867, 1.

¹⁰³ *Alta California*, January 21, 1867, 1.

Norton was immediately released with a formal apology.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the whole incident was a great embarrassment for both Barbier and the court before which Norton appeared. It proved to be the only instance where he was charged with a crime. George Fitch and Fitz Smythe's articles appear to be genuine appeals for the Emperor's release and reminders to others of his noble bearing, without any of the humor occasionally included in references to Norton. Many newspaper reporters and to some degree the public as well exhibited affection and respect towards him. It is unlikely that any of the other city eccentrics could have managed to be released from the city jail if they had been arrested.

Throughout most of his reign, Norton's subjects often humored and honored him by acknowledging his title and bowing to him in the street. As early as 1862 and as late as 1875 he is listed in San Francisco's City Directory with the occupation of Emperor, which is significantly not accompanied by quotation marks that would suggest the listing should not be taken literally.¹⁰⁵ This implied that at least in some circles the idea of Norton as an Emperor, even though a humorous and eccentric one was firmly entrenched at a very early period of his tenure. The directory presented only the facts of an individual's name, address, and occupation. Listing a San Francisco eccentric by his assumed position was quite unusual and definitely set Norton apart.

The sheer number of Norton's submissions that were published by the newspapers proves several things. First, the public continued to be interested in his proclamations. Second, over the course of the twenty and one half years that he reigned, the newspapers profited substantially from his submissions or they would certainly not have printed

¹⁰⁴ *Alta California*, January 23, 1867, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Henry G. Langley, *San Francisco City Directory* (San Francisco: Commercial Steam Presses, Valentine & Company 1862), 298.

unpopular ones for so long a period. Finally, although opinion was mixed as to Norton's state of mind, his popularity extended even to the halls of government, where he was asked on at least one occasion his opinion in the state capital of Sacramento and was also given paid relief from California to replace his threadbare uniform.¹⁰⁶

The question as to whether the Emperor was exploited by the newspapers is difficult to determine. They clearly benefited from the relationship far more than he did, although Norton was apparently not interested in monetary gain beyond his own immediate needs. Yet, it is clear his fame was the result of his proclamations being printed since without the newspapers' patronage the public would have been largely unaware of him.

Despite the respect displayed towards him and the benefit he gave to editors and businessmen, some newspapers did take the opportunity to make jokes at his expense, as is related in the *California Historical Society Quarterly*. "The proclamations which were issued as jokes are easily to be recognized. Norton had no part in them as they were the work of the conscienceless wags and amiable villains of the times. One of these fictitious documents was issued in observance of the forty-sixth birthday of the Emperor:

Owing to unsettled questions between His Majesty Maximillian I, El Duque de Gwino, The Tycoon, the King of the Mosquitos, the King of the Cannibal Islands, &c., the usual display of bunting on foreign shipping and on public buildings, in commemoration of our 46th birthday, will be omitted.
Feb. 4, 1865.

Another proclamation was to the effect that the Emperor contemplated marriage, but to avoid arousing jealousy among the fairer sex, he played no favorites and they were to

¹⁰⁶ Original Bill File AB 20, *A Bill for the Relief of Emperor Norton*, (Sacramento: California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, 1871-72), E 6574 Bx2,

decide for themselves which one of them should be Empress.”¹⁰⁷ This passage is important in that it points out that editors fabricated some of the notices that claimed to be by Norton. This was likely to promote the newspapers and produce a more colorful story. Comments by editors before his printed proclamations were mixed, with some being respectful and others making light of the Emperor’s position. However, there exists no account of there being a lack of interest in Norton’s daily activities. Whether humorous or serious, he inspired the notice of the city’s residents.

Emperor Norton’s beliefs were more complex than many writers on the subject have indicated. While it is easy to see him as only a benevolent, altruistic figure, he was primarily interested in creating and maintaining an efficient, orderly and just society. Norton believed that this would sometimes be to the detriment of some smaller ethnic, economic or social groups, though it benefited the majority of citizens. His proclamations covering the years 1859 to 1880 give insight not only into the mind of a very articulate and knowledgeable man, but also into the events of a time of great change and turmoil for the nation during and following the Civil War. However, his death and funeral had an even greater effect on the citizens of San Francisco than any event of his life, and would be remembered and commemorated right up to the present day.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Ernest Cowan, 240.

Chapter 2: Emperor Norton's Later Years and Funeral

All things come to an end. Emperor Joshua Norton's reign began in 1859 with the publication of his first proclamation and did not end until January 8, 1880, when he died on a street in his beloved city of San Francisco. His proclamations were published for over twenty years, and during that time he became a well-known figure on the streets of the city as well as at the many functions he attended, but his funeral is the most amazing part of this story. Chapter two will describe that event, the public reaction to his funeral, the many stories surrounding this unusual individual, and the social climate that encouraged Emperor Norton's life to be known by so many.

Newspaper and magazine articles that dealt with Norton's eccentricity and fame tended to be far more popular than those discussing his poverty and his difficult lifestyle. At first, this was probably because San Franciscans did not want to be reminded of their city's turbulent past. Later, at the time of his death, it was likely just far more pleasant to read about a person who had managed to create a niche for himself through the city's generosity than to read about someone who shared many of their same difficulties. Emperor Norton's death and funeral proved to be especially important in the continuation of the more colorful and sensational accounts of his life. They brought him even greater fame and cemented many of the beliefs regarding him that continue to this day.

At 8:15 p.m. on January 8, 1880, Emperor Norton collapsed while walking at the corner of Dupont and California Street. A police officer was nearby and left to seek assistance to take him to the City Hospital, but before he returned Norton had died of what was then called "sanguineous apoplexy," or what is more commonly called a heart

attack.¹⁰⁸ His funeral was one of the largest in San Francisco history, with over 10,000 people attending.

According to the newspapers of the time, such as the *Alta California*, the reaction among San Francisco's citizens to news of his death was one of deep sadness. "Perhaps there is not a resident, young or old, who was not aware of his untimely end, and deplored his loss with more or less feeling."¹⁰⁹ In fact, the *San Francisco Morning Call* attempted to elevate him to a very lofty status indeed. In comparing him to other monarchs, the paper suggested that "perhaps he will rise more than the peer of the most of them. He has a better claim to kindly consideration than that his lot forbade him to wade through slaughter to a throne, and shut the gates of mercy on mankind."¹¹⁰ This statement is similar to that made by other papers that he was one of the only kings to maintain his rule without any hint of violence. It is also an example of the manner in which newspapers attempted to raise Emperor Norton to the level of a national figure.

The subsequent investigation into various aspects of his personal life revealed much about the man who reigned for almost twenty-one years. This inquiry looked into the items that he had on his person at the time of his death, the autopsy that was conducted, and the contents of his apartment. Many misconceptions about his life were proved false, but surprisingly these revelations had very little effect on the way he continued to be perceived by the public. It demonstrates the resiliency of a popular version of his life. Also, it shows how difficult it can be to change the ingrained beliefs in a famous figure after their stories have become firmly rooted.

¹⁰⁸ *Alta California*, January 9, 1880,1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *San Francisco Morning Call*, January 9, 1880.

After his death near California and Dupont Streets, the dead wagon arrived to take him to the city morgue. It appeared at first that he was to be given a pauper's funeral, as this was typical of those without relatives or wealth to pay for a more impressive service. However, there were many merchants and early pioneers who remembered him from his days as an original Forty-Niner and business associate. The *Alta California* noted that "one of these, Mr. J. G. Eastland, a Pioneer, volunteered to raise a collection to pay the expenses of a decent burial, and under his directions the old man was placed in a freeman's grave, if not a royal tomb."¹¹¹ Most of the collection was raised from members of the Pacific Club, a gentlemen's association for San Francisco businessmen, many of whom remembered Norton from his days as one of their members.

The Emperor's autopsy at the city morgue revealed several facts. The cause of death was confirmed as sanguineous apoplexy, although other sources list the cause of death as a heart attack. The term apoplexy referred to any sudden catastrophic event characterized by a loss of consciousness, movement, and sensation. Upon examining the brain, the coroner did not find any overt evidence of abnormality. Several medical men present also commented on the fact that the Emperor's brain weighed fifty-one ounces, an ounce and a half above normal.¹¹² It is unclear why an autopsy was conducted, as there was no evidence that Norton died under suspicious circumstances. Most likely it was conducted out of simple curiosity, as he had no immediate relatives present to object to any such procedure being performed. Also, it is not known if those present expected to find anything unusual in the autopsy findings. In any case, there must have been enough interest in the results to have them printed in the *Alta California* newspaper, a further

¹¹¹ *Alta California*, January 11, 1880, 1.

¹¹² *Alta California*, January 10, 1880, 1.

testament to the public's continuing fascination with the Emperor, even after his death. Also, the items found on Norton's person at his death belied his widely perceived high living standard and are important in understanding the public's perception of him. He had in his possession a small gold piece, five dollars in silver, and a franc piece of 1825.

Emperor Norton's funeral took place on January 10, 1880, just two days after his death. It is remarkable that the news of his death spread so quickly among San Francisco's residents. The importance and power of the newspapers at this time is evident by this rapid dissemination of information.

While his grave was not entirely fit for an emperor, the attendance at the viewing of the Emperor's corpse and the following service was clearly royal, as it remains one of the largest funerals in San Francisco history. Between 10,000 and 30,000 people arrived to view the body and pay their final respects. As further evidence of his popularity among children it was reported in a historical journal that "a lady, well known and of high station, with her own fingers pinned upon the lapel of the sleeping monarch a beautiful boutonniere of hyacinth and a spray of fern, remarking quietly that Norton had been kind to her when she was a child and he was in the heyday of his success."¹¹³ She was also mentioned in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "One [of the mourners] was the daughter of a former well known citizen and officer in the city government. This lady appeared in deep mourning and betrayed the deepest feeling of any who gathered about the bier. When she was a little girl he used daily to present her with flowers, which at that time were very costly."¹¹⁴ Thus the many mourners were not composed of only the curious, as some

¹¹³ *California Historical Society Quarterly* 2 (1923-24): 244.

¹¹⁴ *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 1880, 1.

writers had supposed, but included those who had personally known Norton and felt affection and respect toward him.

The crowd that arrived to view the body proved so large that the service had to be delayed for half an hour, at which time the people waiting outside needed to be turned away. The interest in the funeral had been greatly underestimated, so only a small room had been secured for the purpose. The coffin was almost completely obscured by the many floral arrangements. An Episcopal minister, Rev. N. L. Githens, read the funeral service and his youth choir sang “Nearer, my God to thee.” A prayer was offered, followed by a benediction. The body was placed in a hearse and driven through a lane surrounded by throngs of people.

Curiously, for all the huge crowds present at the service, few followed the body to its resting place. A group of about 30 people arrived at the cemetery to witness the last rites and burial. The relatively small number of people at Norton’s final burial suggests several things. While a small number of the mourners probably knew him personally, such as former business associates and the woman noted for having interacted with him when she was a girl, most probably went to the funeral out of simple curiosity. By all accounts Norton had regularly walked the streets of the city to perform what he saw as his royal function. The far greater number of mourners that did not attend Norton’s last rites likely came from this larger group of people that he met either on the street or in passing at one of the many government or academic events that he attended. However, the huge number of these people taking the time to attend even the early part of Norton’s funeral service is a testament to the vast popularity he must have achieved.

The influence of this fame was demonstrated in other ways on the day of his funeral. No gravestone had been provided, so a collection was again taken for the purpose from local businessmen.¹¹⁵ A further piece of evidence of the public's dedication to Norton was to be found at his grave marker. Significantly, in a similar fashion to his listing in the City Directory, it simply read his name and title, without any quotation marks to be found on the gravestone. It is unknown whether this decision was the work of those who paid for the funeral, or was arrived at by the mortuary that carried out the carving of the stone. However, it stands as another example of the extent to which the people embraced Norton's life.

Soon, additional legends began to surround both Norton's career and death. It was widely believed that his funeral was marked by a total eclipse of the sun. Curiously, there is some basis in fact for this claim. There was indeed an eclipse, though it took place a full day after Norton's funeral and more than two days after his death. Also, as it was observed from San Francisco, the eclipse was only a partial one.¹¹⁶ It was, however, possible to view a total eclipse at other locales in the United States. As so often happens, the facts of the event in question did not prevent later writers and biographers from attributing this astronomic event as being of supernatural significance. Actual attendees at Norton's funeral were certainly aware that the later partial eclipse did not coincide with the Emperor's death or burial, so its inclusion as part of the Norton mythos is likely that of later writers on the topic. However, over time it is possible that the two events became linked together as the memories of eyewitnesses became more distorted. Therefore, such popular beliefs were not formed overnight, but were created over many years. Emperor

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *Alta California*, January 11, 1880, 1.

Norton stands as an example of how a local figure of moderate prominence can rise to great popularity through the influence of able writers and promoters.

When one considers the historical and social context during Norton's later years and funeral, several conclusions come to light. In 1859 newspapers and periodicals were the primary means of communication. Having Norton's proclamations printed meant many people read his words. Also, about ten years after Norton declared himself Emperor, the first westbound train arrived in San Francisco in September 1869, just four months after the historic last spike was laid at Promontory, Utah. This event created a direct link between the east and west coasts of the nation, vastly reducing travel time for people and goods. The completion of the telegraph lines to the West also made it faster to receive news from the East. A year later, in 1870, San Francisco became the tenth largest city in the United States. During that period, San Francisco's population increased from less than a thousand to about 234,000.¹¹⁷ By the time of Norton's death in 1880, the city was totally different from its humble past when the U.S. took control of the town in 1846.

The Comstock Lode, a rich vein of silver ore near Carson City, Nevada, affected San Francisco almost as much as did the Gold Rush. While the mines for this bonanza were almost 150 miles from the west coast, 90 percent of the supplies for the mines came from San Francisco, along with all the necessary financial backing. A boom based on mineral wealth was a mixed blessing, however, as the ups and downs of the Comstock mines also tended to cause chaos with San Francisco's economy. By 1880, the year of

¹¹⁷ Rand Richards, *Historic San Francisco: A Concise History and Guide* (San Francisco: Heritage House, 1995), 288.

Emperor Norton's death, the Comstock mines were largely depleted of silver, causing another economic downturn.¹¹⁸

During this time of great change and growth in San Francisco Emperor Norton and his proclamations had become well known. It must be remembered that in 1859 the newspapers were the primary way for people to learn what was happening in the city, and there were many of them. When the editor decided to publish Norton's first proclamation, he truly created the Emperor.

Taking these events into account, it is easy to see why Norton was seen as something of a pleasant anachronism by the late 1870s. The city had grown up around him from its small beginnings in 1849 at the start of the Gold Rush to the metropolis that it became by 1880. No doubt in the last years of his life many saw him as a bittersweet reminder of the boom and bust times the city had experienced. A great number of newspapers, not only in San Francisco but also across the nation, marked his death with articles in their publications. In some ways, Norton's death marked an end to the era of the mining boom in the West and the start of what came to later be called the Gilded Age, since for some it was a time of opulence.

When one considers the events that occurred during the latter half of Norton's reign in the 1870s, it is not difficult to see why some elements of his life are remembered far more than others. The first accounts focus primarily on the popular version of his life. This version of Norton's past makes many assumptions. It was thought the Emperor enjoyed free meals in all of San Francisco's restaurants and that he corresponded with world leaders. Also, he was long associated with the two dogs Bummer and Lazarus.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

The other version required more research into his past. It revealed that while Norton had an unusual career as a self-proclaimed, unrecognized ruler and eccentric, he nevertheless suffered from severe poverty and everyday difficulties. However, the fact that both versions have survived up the present is a testament to the enduring nature of this unusual individual.

No one conducted an interview of Joshua Norton during his lifetime, so what is known comes from his proclamations and the articles written about him. However, even if the veracity of the sources' depiction of events cannot be fully determined, they still offer insight into how Norton was viewed as a public figure. While it could be expected that Norton would be perceived as a figure on the margins of society, in actuality he can be seen as someone who helped define the limits of acceptable behavior through his eccentricity.

After Norton's death it was learned that he lived in a tiny apartment, a sad contrast to the belief spread by newspapers of the opulent lifestyle they claimed that he enjoyed. His lodging was extremely small, with little in the way of furniture or amenities. He resided at the same lodging house on Commercial Street for nearly seventeen years, always insisting on paying his rent by the day. Upon his death, the Spartan nature of his residence was widely reported in the papers. He had pictures of several European monarchs and heads of state on his walls, along with an extensive hat collection. His other clothing was quite threadbare, which reminded one of the occasional petitions he sent to the city asking for a new wardrobe. It can be verified that he received \$250 from the State of California in 1871 or 1872 to replace his ragged

uniform.¹¹⁹ This was the only recorded contribution that the government ever gave him. Thus, nothing was present that suggested that he lived in anything approaching luxury. Despite this solid evidence to the contrary, the accounts of his presumed easy life continued right up to the present in numerous popular magazines and tourism pamphlets. It was still thought that Norton lived a life of relative ease, if not outright wealth, as a result of the contributions he received from local businessmen, regular citizens, and former acquaintances.

The story put forward in most newspapers was that he had the pick of the bill of fare for nearly all restaurants without charge, due to both his popularity and the prestige that came with being patronized by the Emperor. While this may have been true in very rare instances, in most cases Norton received free meals at the free lunch counter where many residents of the city also ate. In most taverns and drinking establishments of the city there was a tradition of offering a table near the bar with small snacks and sometimes sandwiches free for the patrons who had purchased drinks.

There are other examples of the Emperor's poverty. During the Civil War years he did not yet have the level of popularity he possessed in the late 1860s and 1870s. Norton posed for a photo during this period, showing that he weighed very little and apparently did not even have the means of obtaining regular meals. There were definitely lean years in the early period of his reign.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ A Bill for the Relief of Emperor Norton I, 1871-2, Original Bill File AB 210, E 6574, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento.

¹²⁰ William Drury, *Norton I, Emperor of the United States* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1986), 109.

It was also widely believed that he received gratis tickets at the theater, ferries, trains and other city and state services. In some cases this was true, but it ignores the many instances where the Emperor was refused what he believed to be his due in exchange for his patronage. There is one instance of a ferry refusing him passage, which was shortly followed by one of Norton's demands for action to defend his rights. Also, there is at least one example of a time when he was refused entry to the theater, as evidenced in this later proclamation:

Let the Emperor have his royal prerogatives or close up the Theatres. Whereas, rebellious subjects take advantage of the absence of our Imperial guard, and occasionally have the audacity to refuse us admittance to the theatres; now therefore we Norton I, Dei gratia Emperor, etc., do hereby command the closing of any theatre which may persist in insulting the dignity of our office by refusing us admittance.¹²¹

Emperor Norton clearly did not have the unanimous support of business owners. While it is mentioned many times in more popular magazine articles and Stevenson's *The Wrecker* that he had a free run of almost all businesses in San Francisco, this is a definite example of an exception to this belief.

While the Emperor was generally held in some esteem by the public, there were examples of merchants and city officials failing to recognize his status and refusing him the privileges he believed to be his due, as in the cases of the ferry service and the theaters. The *Alta California* states in their article on Norton's funeral that "the Emperor had the entrée to most all places of amusement here, but when refused was polite and inoffensive."¹²² They also mentioned that Norton was always polite when he was refused

¹²¹ *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, June 8, 1872, 1.

¹²² *Alta California*, January 9, 1880, 1.

the several hundred million dollars that he sometimes requested from local bankers, “being perfectly contented with a two or four bit piece.”¹²³ Even the newspapers that promoted his supposed affluent lifestyle admitted to his being sometimes refused free service and revenue by his subjects.

At rare times the newspapers recognized the Emperor’s impoverished circumstances. “His living was very inexpensive. He occupied a cheap room and boarded at cheap restaurants. He was temperate in habits.”¹²⁴ However, examples such as this that recognized Norton’s poverty are rare, and based on how his persona developed over time, they did not usually enter the public consciousness. Little evidence exists for Norton’s actual sources of income. While he received small amounts of money from his former business associates and the sale of his bank notes, it is unclear how he supported even his modest lifestyle.

Whatever the source of Norton’s income, other unusual examples of his depictions in the press exist. Emperor Norton was many times associated with two dogs named Bummer and Lazarus. There are several possible explanations for this association. They were contemporaries, and Bummer, Lazarus, and Norton were among the most well known popular figures in the city at the time. It was simply convenient to group them together. However, substantial evidence exists that Norton not only did not keep them as pets, but that he did not keep pets at all. There is the incident of his anger at seeing himself pictured in the store window. Cartoonist Edward Jump’s image depicted him eating at a lunch counter with Bummer and Lazarus looking on expectantly, waiting

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ *Scrapbook 13*, Emperor Norton Bio Info File (San Francisco: Society of California Pioneers), 47.

for food. Norton's only recorded display of anger was at this drawing of himself with these two dogs, strongly suggesting that he did not look on them with much affection. Secondly, there was no evidence found in his tiny apartment that he ever kept pets. Finally, there are no accounts from the time of Norton's life of Bummer and Lazarus accompanying the Emperor anywhere.

The most likely explanation for Bummer, Lazarus and Norton being associated together is the story put forward by Fremont Older, a prominent editor in San Francisco in 1934. The account he told in the *San Francisco Morning Call*, fifty-four years after the Emperor's death, is of his visit to the city in 1873, more than ten years after the death of the two dogs. William Drury quotes the passage in his biography of Norton. Older claims that "when they were living they followed him everywhere, and the three were welcome in all of the saloons, where the 'Emperor' fed himself and the dogs from the free lunch counter."¹²⁵ When Older was visiting Van Bergen's saloon on Sansome Street near Clay, he also claimed that he saw the stuffed corpse of Lazarus in a glass case. The Emperor was there as well, "eating at the lunch counter. Suddenly he turned his old wild eyes on the stuffed figure of Lazarus. The tears rolled down his cheeks and mingled with the crackers and cheese he was munching. 'My old friend,' he said, in a trembling voice."¹²⁶

This sentimental story takes many liberties with Norton's story in order to maintain a reader's interest. However, Older did not know the Emperor well. Based upon his account, he had not even done much research when he wrote the piece. In 1873, the only time that Older was in the city during the Emperor's lifetime, he was there for a

¹²⁵ Drury, *Norton*, 121.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

very short time, since he had to leave to take up the management of several newspapers around the country. These included the *Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada, and later the *Redwood City Journal*. Yet, Fremont Older had a good reputation as an editor and writer as a result of his past coverage of local government corruption and scandal. This made it difficult for others to dispute his claims of having known the Emperor. Also, based on the accounts in the local newspapers, the body of Lazarus seemed to journey from tavern to tavern in San Francisco, when in actuality it remained preserved at the same drinking establishment for all of the time it was on display, Van Bergen's bar on Sansome near Clay Street.¹²⁷ Older's account is only one of many such examples of reporters and writers exploiting the Emperor's reputation for their own gain, a practice that likely began with the publishing of Norton's first proclamation on September 17, 1859.

Another example is found in a newspaper fragment from a nineteenth century scrapbook. It reported that Norton's correspondence and possible marriage with Queen Victoria was entirely genuine, not realizing that such letters to royalty were the work of joking editors. "Queen Victoria was his most exalted correspondent, and perhaps the most ambitious, for according to the telegrams discovered upon his body at the time of his death, she had proposed marriage with him as the best means of welding the bonds of friendship between the United States and England."¹²⁸ This story was most likely created for the amusement of his readers.

According to the press, Norton received several telegrams from European heads of state as well as some from Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. Several such

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ *The Dead Emperor*, Emperor Norton Bio Info File, (San Francisco: Society of California Pioneers), 1.

telegrams were supposed replies to suggestions that Norton had given to other heads of state. One in particular is an amusing story that was written by Leo Rosenhouse writing for the magazine the *California Highway Patrolman*. It stated that Lincoln received a message on December 22, 1862, on an important matter occurring in the West. The account conveyed that a nervous aide gave the President a message showing that Emperor Norton had abolished his office as well as that of the Vice President and the Speaker of the House. Rather than become angered by such a threat to his authority, the President was amused and said “the man is quite harmless. The nation could use some levity in this time of stress. Let’s not make fools of ourselves by hurting a man who utters only words and has no army or force to show his intended might.”¹²⁹

Although this account is almost certainly apocryphal, it does raise an important point regarding the confidence in the United States during the Civil War. Despite Norton’s many proclamations dissolving various institutions of the California and national government, he was never imprisoned or brought up on charges of treason, even at the height of the War Between the States. It is significant that in the midst of this conflict and after, no evidence exists to suggest that anyone saw Norton as a threat to national unity. Fabricated telegrams such as these, while false, do help to explain some of the feelings that people had towards Norton.

After Norton’s death copies of dispatches from some of the royal houses of Europe were found. According to an article in the *Alta California*, these letters were “the handiwork of joking telegraph employees. Norton was fond of speaking of these dispatches received from the crowned heads and dead heads of Europe, and was

¹²⁹ Leo Rosenhouse, “Emperor Norton: He Claimed the United States as His Domain,” *California Highway Patrolman* 34, no. 8 (October 1970): 12.

particularly delighted at the prospect of wedding Queen Victoria, and blending the two nations into one. Yet he never lost sight of the Mexican interests, and was in almost daily communication with the President.”¹³⁰ Another newspaper article also states that the telegrams were jokes from employees of the telegraph office. They were “fictitious telegrams from sundry potentates, all written on genuine telegraphic blanks, and delivered to him probably by persons who meant Norton no harm and did him none by catering to his delusion.”¹³¹

Another story points to Norton’s influence as being significant enough that Oakland began to specifically attack him in the *Oakland Daily News* during the period in which Oakland and San Francisco were vying for control of the Bay. The newspaper issued several false proclamations attempting to discredit Norton by ascribing to him a plan for a bridge that would reach the Farallon Islands from San Francisco.¹³² However, three years later Norton issued a completely sensible order for a bridge connecting the two sides of San Francisco Bay. The rivalry between the two cities is interesting, as both sides sought to use Norton as a means of indirectly attacking the other, which is a testimony to Norton’s fame and popularity and the extent to which both sides saw him as a symbol of San Francisco.

Stories such as these increased the public’s interest in him beyond the activities in which he was normally engaged, such as writing his proclamations that were published by the press. It is important to note, however, that even when Norton was alive there was very little attempt to gain an accurate picture of the man.

¹³⁰ *Alta California*, January 9, 1880, 1.

¹³¹ *Scrapbook 13*, 47.

¹³² *Oakland Daily News*, August 18, 1869.

Also, contrary to widely held beliefs, the Emperor did not generate large amounts of revenue from his bonds, which actually did not come into circulation until the early 1870s. This is possibly because it was at this time that the monetary support he had been receiving from various parties began to dry up.

At the beginning his lodgings were paid for by William Lane Booker, the British Consul to San Francisco. After Booker withdrew his support, some of Norton's former business associates picked up the slack until the early 1870s. Fred R. Marckhoff, writing for the quarterly magazine the *Calcoin News*, a publication produced by the Numismatic Association, did an analysis of the number and type of Imperial scrip that Norton issued up until his death. He concluded that the Emperor managed to subsist on a very modest budget, even by the standards of the time.¹³³ In late 1879, the last year of his reign, many of the Emperor's issued bonds were to come due the following year. According to Drury's biography Norton "overcame the difficulty by issuing a new set, payable in 1890, with interest at four per cent per annum, and which he exchanged for the old ones, also giving bonds for accrued interest."¹³⁴

While the extent that Norton received monetary support from his former business colleagues is difficult to determine, the amount he took in from his Imperial bonds seemed to be less than a dollar a day. According to both Marckhoff and also Dr. Robert J. Chandler of the *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*, San Francisco experts on Emperor Norton, while larger denominations of bonds did briefly exist, he sold on average a fifty-cent bond six times per week. This indicates that the purported large amounts that the Emperor lived on were grossly exaggerated. During his lifetime Norton's bonds were not

¹³³ *Alta California*, January 11, 1880, 1.

¹³⁴ Drury, *Norton I*, 109.

worth the paper on which they were printed. However, after his death, the opposite ironically became true. Today, they frequently fetch \$2,500 to \$3,500 on the collector's market, which would have made them a sound investment, though not in the way that Norton anticipated, as he likely considered his bonds to be legitimate.¹³⁵ Norton most likely believed the bonds issued by his Imperial government were of value, although they did not go very far in covering the expenses of the Empire.

In contrast to newspapers, some of the earliest examples of Norton's depiction after his death in literature were in the works of Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson. These two works are Stevenson's *The Wrecker* and Twain's character of the King in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both writers seem to have seen Norton as primarily an entertaining curiosity. In Stevenson's work he expresses his belief that it was only in a city such as San Francisco that Norton could have been accepted and celebrated. "In what other city would a harmless madman who supposed himself emperor of the two Americas have been so fostered and encouraged?"¹³⁶ The work is largely responsible for creating the idea that the Emperor ate free at the finest restaurants. In the novel Stevenson gives what became the popular version of Norton's daily activities. "Where else, in God's green earth, having taken his pick of restaurants, ransacked the bill of fare, and departed scathless? They tell me that he was even an exacting patron, threatening to withdraw his custom when dissatisfied; and I can believe it, for his face wore an expression distinctly gastronomical."¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Fred R. Marckhoff, *Calcoin News: Quarterly Magazine of the California State Numismatic Association* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1961): 95.

¹³⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Wrecker* (Edinburgh: Cannongate Classics, 1996), 89.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

Twain's character of the King, however, appears to have been created in homage to Emperor Norton, although it is not meant to represent the actual person. In Twain's book, Huck and Jim meet two men, referred to as the Duke and the King, who join them on the raft. One makes the claim of being a noble Duke, while the older gentleman trumps him by presenting himself as the long lost Dauphin, the son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. It doesn't take long for Huck and Jim to realize that the two are frauds, but they realize that the King seems to feel consoled when those around give him the royal rights to which he feels he is due, such as calling him "Your Majesty" and waiting on him first at meals. "So Jim and me set to majestyng him, and doing this that and t'other for him, and standing up till he told us we might set down. This done him heaps of good, and so he got cheerful and comfortable."¹³⁸

This passage suggests several things regarding Twain's view of Norton and how he presented the character in his novel. First, he appears to believe that the primary reason for Norton's claim to royalty is some past misfortune or mishap, likely the loss of his fortune through rice speculation. Also, while it is clear that Twain included the character only for literary purposes, he does not bring any attention to the real Norton's many efforts on behalf of the citizens of San Francisco. Finally, Twain mainly sees Norton as an amusing character that can be adapted for use in his novel, and not as a fully researched historical figure.

It is noteworthy that the local and national newspapers, as well as books and periodicals, used very few eyewitness, first-hand accounts in documenting Emperor Norton's appearance and activities. The large number of misconceptions and

¹³⁸ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2006), 128.

exaggerations that surrounded Norton remind us of the difficulty that historians experience in attempting to separate the more popular accounts of a person's life from those accounts that may have been overlooked.

The trend of newspapers to exaggerate or alter the facts of Norton's life tells us that the standards of journalism were very different in the later part of the nineteenth century. The idea of a separation of the news and editorial pages in the press was not yet clearly established. Also, papers were much more blatantly associated with a particular political party than is the case today. For example, the owners of some papers even founded their own parties, as was the case with the De Young brothers in the late 1870s. The two brothers, Charles and Michael De Young, were founders of the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, now owned by the Hearst Corporation. They founded their own party, the New Constitution Party, which campaigned for the creation of a new Constitution for the State of California. In 1879 they also opposed the election of Issac Kalloch as mayor of San Francisco, due to his stance on this issue.

Their actions are illustrative of the character of the press at the time. Kalloch, a Baptist minister, was an easy target for slander. The *Chronicle* suggested that he was involved in an affair, to which he responded with accusations of the de Youngs' mother's involvement in the running of a brothel. This proved to be too much to bear for Charles de Young, as he waited for Kalloch to exit the Metropolitan Temple and shot him, wounding but not killing him. The following year Kalloch's son entered the offices of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and killed Charles de Young at his desk. The whole

incident is an example of the open unscrupulousness of the newspapers in the later part of the nineteenth century.¹³⁹

In light of such events, it should not be surprising that journalists exaggerated and changed stories such as that of Emperor Norton. Although he was not the target of violence, as was Kalloch, he clearly was the recipient of distortion in the media. This trend of presenting only a limited view of Norton's character continued right up to the present day, as shown in the media sources available after his funeral in 1880.

This creation of colorful stories surrounding Norton was by no means an isolated phenomenon. Many public figures have had myths develop around them. For example, William Travis, Davy Crockett, and Jim Bowie, the principal leaders in the defense of the Alamo, had so many folklore stories built around them that it has been difficult to separate the myth from what is verifiable in the historical record. In a similar fashion, Marie Antoinette has often been cited as having said, "let them eat cake," in reference to the French peasants who were unable to afford bread. However, there exists little evidence that she ever made such a statement. A more credible source for the origin of the quote is Jean Jacques Rousseau's work *Confessions*, in which he refers to a great princess making the famous statement, who is most often thought to be Marie Therese, Antoinette's mother, as her daughter was only about ten years old at the time of the work's publication.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 281.

¹⁴⁰ Burton Egbert Stevenson, ed., *The Home Book of Quotations, Classical and Modern* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1967), 1571.

During Emperor Norton's lifetime the public's sentiments of compassion and amusement underwent a gradual and profound change as time passed. Norton's generally even-tempered nature, together with the lucid views that he proposed, caused this to occur. Unlike many eccentrics in the city, Norton always displayed a consistency in his manners and habits. Also, the kindness and forbearance with which he dealt with his misfortunes gained increasing affection and respect.

People were willing to believe the stories about him. The public in both San Francisco and other parts of the nation genuinely connected with Emperor Norton's life and enjoyed hearing and reading about it, based on the fact that the articles about him ran for so long. It is likely that for most readers the image of a prosperous Emperor Norton was much more enjoyable than a poor one. A lack of emphasis on his poverty in the newspapers is not surprising. Reading about Norton was a means of forgetting or downplaying the memory of the turbulent years of the 1850s as well as those difficult times continuing up until his death.

After Norton's death on January 8, 1880, the idea that he had had an easy life gradually developed. The press was instrumental in creating this image of Norton. At first their coverage, other than his proclamations, represented only an artificial caricature of the Emperor and did not resemble the man himself. The press tended to focus on the better known portions of Emperor Norton's life, such as his supposed pets and receiving free meals, rather than the more well supported facts surrounding him. This was probably done to give the readers, worried about labor strikes and economic upheaval, an entertaining, lighthearted subject to enjoy. Even so, it was amazing that the city's publications published Norton's proclamations for more than 20 years.

Biographies of Norton are surprisingly rare, with only two comprehensive works having been completed. Allen Stanley Lane's book *Emperor Norton, the Mad Monarch of America*, while entertaining and interesting, focuses primarily on those incidents that have entered into popular culture and is therefore difficult to use as a source for this chapter and will be addressed in chapter 3, which will deal with Norton's effects on San Francisco's memory of the Gold Rush and the 1860s and 1870s. However, William Drury's well written biography, *Norton I, Emperor of the United States*, does touch on several points that had not been mentioned by previous biographers: the extent to which Norton affected tourism in the city and the degree to which writers neglected to back up their claims on the Emperor with primary sources and eyewitness accounts. Even so, neither of them focuses sufficiently on the extent to which Norton's story was embellished and exaggerated at the time of his passing and the years following it.

What is most unusual regarding the period immediately following Emperor Norton's death was not the fact that a complex and detailed myth developed around him but that this myth was so long-lasting. The mythology surrounding Norton was largely unaffected by revelations after his death and research conducted by reporters and writers up to the present time. While a variety of possible reasons for this phenomenon present themselves, one explanation for the persistence of the folklore surrounding Norton is that it was simply much more interesting and engaging than the reality of his life.

Many today are unaware that the Emperor had a second funeral on June 30, 1934. One of the reasons for this service was that the Masonic Cemetery in which the Emperor had been interred for more than fifty years had been scheduled for decommissioning. The *San Francisco Chronicle* coverage of his reinterment at the Woodlawn Memorial

Park at Colma on June 30, 1934, shows how Norton's story had not yet been forgotten.

The article's author believed that while Norton was not taken completely seriously, San Francisco felt affection towards him as a local eccentric:

This city by the Golden Gate pauses long enough, in these sorely troubled times, to pay homage to the memory of an emperor who was no emperor, except in his imagination; to a ruler who was no ruler, except in his harmless pretensions; to a king who was no king, except to two nondescript dogs which followed him about the streets of early day San Francisco as his sole retinue; to a regal splendor that was a complete, but lovable, sham.¹⁴¹

This acceptance of Norton's more sensational accounts in print is further revealed by the continuation of the belief that he subsisted primarily from the imperial scrip that he issued as legitimate currency, as well as receiving free meals at all of the city's restaurants. One newspaper wrote, "what little money he needed, he obtained on notes he would issue by royal decree. He had the free run of all public eating places, and invariably was bowed out graciously."¹⁴² The more legendary aspects of Norton's story had become well established by this time.

By 1934 the worst effects of the Great Depression were widely felt throughout most of the nation, with widespread unemployment, poverty and despair. It is likely that the second funeral of Norton especially appealed to people from this era, as he had come to represent a whimsy and amusement that was badly needed during that period of economic hardship. Also, the fact that Norton had a reputation for receiving free meals from the finest restaurants probably struck a chord with people in 1934, some of whom experienced hunger and lines at soup kitchens. Therefore, for those reading the

¹⁴¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 30, 1934, 1.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

newspaper accounts of Norton's second burial and funeral, he symbolized a brief escape from the difficulties of the time for those people living during the Depression.

Even so, it is unusual that Norton received so much attention so long after his death. Amazingly, even though it had been more than fifty-four years since the Emperor's first funeral, the Pacific Club (which later became known as the Pacific Union Club) still remembered the Emperor and even set up a small Emperor Norton Memorial Association to honor him. Though it was smaller than the original funeral service, there were still several hundred people in attendance, complete with a twenty-one-gun salute by a detachment from the third battalion of the 159th Infantry and funeral dirges played by the municipal band.¹⁴³ A twenty-one-gun salute is usually only given to royalty or national presidents. Speakers spoke of Norton's character and habits, noting that he was never known to make inordinate demands of his subjects and that he was well liked by San Francisco's inhabitants. Interestingly, three of the city's notables placed wreaths on the new grave. They included John McLaren, Superintendent of Parks, representing the Mayor, William H. Crocker, a banker who personally remembered the Emperor from his youth, and Judge Charles A. Shurtleff, president of the California Pioneers.¹⁴⁴ The Society of California Pioneers is an historical society founded in 1850 for the purpose of advancing knowledge of early California history. Based on the actions of these individuals and those who attended the second funeral, the enthusiasm for the Emperor was not confined only to the fringe elements of San Francisco's citizens.

Remarkably, the mythology of Norton had changed very little in the 54 years since his first funeral. Much like the contemporary newspapers of Norton's time, during

¹⁴³ *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 1, 1934, 1.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Norton's second funeral the *San Francisco Chronicle* supported many assumptions and misconceptions regarding the Emperor that had entered popular culture. The *Chronicle*, like other publications, did not concern itself with conducting in depth research, being more interested in promoting a sensational, larger than life mythology of Norton. In its July 1, 1934, edition it continued the tradition of portraying Norton in a humorous light. When mentioning the circumstances of Norton's loss of his fortune, the *Chronicle* noted that "there were no tall buildings in San Francisco from which he could throw himself in those days, so he contented himself with proclaiming himself Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, the escape into insanity."¹⁴⁵ At the time of this article's publication in 1934, the use of psychiatry had become the established form of treatment for the mentally ill. This can be contrasted with the practice of confinement that existed during the asylum era. The comment made here that insanity was an alternative to suicide possibly reflects this change in attitude.

While a newspaper could not be expected to bring the same level of attention to detail or scholarship that a biographical work might, the lack of awareness of some of the facts is surprising, considering that many of the realities of Norton's life were brought to light immediately following his death. Yet, it is perhaps not so unusual, as it mirrors the coverage of the Emperor by the media when he was alive.

Newspapers were not the only publications to support this view of the Emperor's reburial. *Time Magazine* also covered the event in a similar fashion. The article briefly covered many of the habits and events for which Norton was especially known, although several were altered to appear more unusual and entertaining. For example, in addition to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

mentioning the frequent misconception that Norton could receive free meals at any restaurant in the city, *Time Magazine* also associated Bummer and Lazarus with him as his personal pet dogs.¹⁴⁶ This was a very common mistake made by the public and even many writers covering Norton wrote that the two most famous dogs in the city's history were his pets.

Yet, without the newspaper industry publishing his proclamations, writing about the man and notifying the public of his death, Joshua Norton would have been quickly forgotten by most of the public. Norton was a most unusual San Francisco character, intelligent, educated, and up to date on the happenings in his beloved city. Above all, he was consistent in his behavior, unlike the wide assortment of other San Francisco eccentrics. It was largely due to the actions of the press that he was not forgotten. However, it was individuals such as Robert Louis Stevenson writing after Norton's death that ensured his enduring appeal. If it had not been for such writers, Emperor Norton would likely have faded from the public's perception. Drury and Lane have touched on the fact that Norton did not live in luxury. However, they did not recognize that Norton's supposed major sources of income, the bonds that he issued and free gratuities from the public, were greatly exaggerated by the press. While it is likely that Norton received some assistance from these sources, it was probably only a portion of his income. Even the revelations after his death would fail to dispel the myths that were already growing around the Emperor. In fact, it would not be until well after his death that the majority of the fallacies surrounding Norton were created, as his myth began to enter popular culture

¹⁴⁶ "Emperor Reburied," *Time*, July 9, 1934.

and attention to the evidence of Norton's life grew less and less important to the public as opposed to his manufactured persona.

It would be easy to simply dismiss the many misconceptions and fabrications regarding Norton as the work of newspapermen and other writers. However, they do offer a great deal of insight into the beliefs of not only the writers of the articles but the public as well. Norton's funeral clearly affected the people of San Francisco deeply enough for them to attend in large numbers. Even so, based on the accounts that were written by the newspapers, they were not interested in stories about his poverty. San Franciscans found the image of the clever eccentric that lived off of the generosity of his fellow citizens far more appealing. This was because it not only gave them an amusing character to read about in the paper on a daily basis but also allowed them to feel good about themselves as residents of a city that was generous, accepting, and tolerant enough to include a person such as Emperor Norton in public life for more than twenty years. While evidence of his poverty was at times mentioned, this was rare compared with accounts of his more colorful eccentric behavior. However, it would not be until some time after Norton's death that many of these stories would enter into the public's consciousness.

Chapter 3: Emperor Norton's Influence on Popular Culture

The fact that Norton is remembered today when so many other eccentrics have been forgotten is illustrative of how he was different from other similar San Francisco figures, such as George Washington III and Oofy Goofty. Unlike other eccentric individuals, he showed both a consistency in his beliefs, however unusual they might be, as well as a dignity and concern for his city. In addition, he was intelligent, well read and articulate. Keeping this in mind, an exploration of how Norton was perceived in the period after his death up to the present is useful in understanding the perception of his persona as it changed over time. Several aspects of his story have been neglected in the years since his death and two funerals. His extreme poverty and the many fraudulent proclamations made in his name have been largely neglected in sources pertaining to Emperor Norton. It is likely that this is because writers and journalists did not see these aspects of his story as particularly appealing to their readers. They probably believed that creating a more colorful account of his life was the best way to capitalize on Norton's emerging myth.

Indeed, Emperor Norton's portrayal in popular culture in the years since his death and two funerals is indicative of the process that a prominent individual can go through from being a famous figure to that of a local icon who comes to be seen as primarily symbolic in nature. The more dramatic version of Norton's life, or what could be called his "myth," is much more visible and widely covered in the media than the difficulties he faced on a daily basis. Today, this process of transformation of the perception of Norton has reached the point that the Emperor is often used only as a means of boosting sales for a product or service. There are Emperor Norton Sourdough Snacks and an Emperor

Norton Sundae at Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco. One of the ferry boats providing tours of Alcatraz Island is the Harbor Emperor, with a bust of Norton on the prow of the ship. These can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon of many prominent historical personages changing over the years into individuals bearing only cursory resemblance to the evidence found in contemporary and primary sources.

It is often difficult to separate the historical evidence from material that has entered the popular folklore of a region. For example, the defense of the Alamo during the Texas Revolution is of such significance to Texans today that popular opinion has colored the events to a great degree. The primary participants, such as William Travis, James Bowie, Davey Crockett and Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna have taken on characteristics in the popular imagination that often have little support in the primary sources of the time.

Many magazine articles about Norton tend to support this trend of writers often taking previous material at face value rather than conducting extensive research of their own. It can easily be seen in the articles found after Norton's death that many of them merely restate material previously introduced by earlier authors instead of making an effort to thoroughly verify the stories using primary sources.

Thus, Norton is presented in a variety of ways in the period from 1928 to the present. In the publication *Plain Talk Magazine*, written shortly before his second funeral in 1928, all of the traits of what could later be called the Norton Myth are found. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the writer, like many others, attributes Norton to having the dogs Bummer and Lazarus as his pets, loving and caring for them. Also,

Norton is attributed to enjoying free meals at a variety of fine restaurants, including the dining cars of the Central Pacific Railway Company.¹⁴⁷

The general outline of Norton's story is often repeated in a variety of magazines of the twentieth century, sometimes word for word. In many cases it leads one to wonder whether there was possible plagiarism involved amongst the writers of these magazine articles. However, some articles do reveal important points not found in the others. For example, the *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* made a detailed analysis of the extent to which Norton subsisted on the imperial currency that he issued. It shows that Norton earned on average less than a dollar a day through the use of these notes.¹⁴⁸

Some magazine sources deal with more current events. Another magazine article from 2004 in the *California Territorial Quarterly* depicts the recent effort to have the Bay Bridge connecting San Francisco to Oakland renamed the Emperor Norton Bridge. An organization known as the Ancient and Honorable Order of E. Clampus Vitus has been the most persistent in calls for the renaming of the bridge. This group has been described as a fraternal order that was created in mockery of more well known groups such as the Masons and other fraternal orders. The group was originally founded during the mining booms of the nineteenth century but almost died out by the beginning of the 1900s. It was revitalized in the 1930s by San Francisco historian Carl Wheat, who called the Clampers fraternity "the comic strip on the page of California history."¹⁴⁹ The Clampers are well known for installing plaques in various places in California having

¹⁴⁷ David Warren Ryder, "Norton I, Emperor of America," *Plain Talk Magazine*, January 1928, 28.

¹⁴⁸ Dr. Robert J. Chandler, "A Journey to the Imaginary Empire of Norton I," *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*, Spring 1996, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Dr. Robert J. Chandler, "What Do We Want? The Emperor Norton Bridge! When Do We Want It? Now!" *California Territorial Quarterly*, Fall 2004, 29.

unusual historical significance. On February 25, 1959, members of the group attempted to erect just such a plaque commemorating Norton's proclamation to build the Bay Bridge.¹⁵⁰

Indeed, much of the recent interest in Emperor Norton stems from the effort to rename the bridge. Dr. Robert J. Chandler also mentions other attempts that have been made to have the bridge renamed. For instance, on January 8, 1998, the anniversary of Norton's death, D. McQueen of KKSF Radio said that "the bridge should really be named for the farsighted Emperor Norton, who commanded in 1872 that a bridge be built linking San Francisco and Oakland."¹⁵¹

Also, *San Francisco Chronicle* cartoonist Phil Frank became vocal in his support for the renaming of the bridge. His cartoon strip "Farley" was perhaps a fitting forum for such a cause, as its main character, Baba Rebop, is depicted with a long beard and distinctive hat, also exhibiting behavior that would have put him in good stead with the majority of San Francisco's eccentrics.¹⁵² In over a dozen of Phil Frank's strips he included material educating the public on both the history of Emperor Norton and California history in general.

City Supervisor Aaron Peskin also voiced his support for the renaming of the bridge. He picked up Phil Frank's idea and brought it before the Board of Supervisors, where it was approved by an 8-2 vote. Peskin stated that he believed people visited San Francisco because of its natural beauty and unusual social history. Peskin went on to say that "Emperor Norton was a model San Franciscan, extolling the virtues of tolerance,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Suzanne Herel, "Emperor Norton's Name May Yet Span the Bay," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 15, 2004, A-1.

compassion and embracing diversity in our community. Emperor Norton is an important figure worthy of this distinction.”¹⁵³ While the drive to change the name of the bridge was not ultimately successful (it was not approved by the California Legislature), it did cause attention to Norton and his history to increase dramatically in California as a result of this movement and its coverage in the city’s newspapers.

Even so, E. Clampus Vitus, or the Clampers as they are known, have gone beyond the bridge proposal in their perpetuation of Emperor Norton’s myth in popular culture. He is much honored by the group, who see him as an embodiment of their ideals. In fact, the Clampers’ motto is “Credo Quia Absurdum”—“I believe it, because it is absurd.” In the interests of honoring Emperor Norton, ever since 1980, every January 8 the members of four of the California chapters of E. Clampus Vitus meet at Old Molloy’s Tavern in Colma, with a visit to Norton’s grave and a banquet of beans and bread. Since the original meeting, the event has become part of Clampers’ annual tradition. A prominent member of the group, Pat “Aloycious” Sweeney, Noble Grand Humbug of the Mountain Charlie chapter, stated that “California, then and now, has been a haven for people who don’t necessarily walk the beaten path. It’s a place where individuality is not squelched.”¹⁵⁴ Sweeney also added this about Norton: “he marched to his own drummer and everybody else pretended they could hear the music, just because they wanted to be part of the band.”¹⁵⁵

Based on these examples in both recent magazines and newspapers, it is easy to see how the more crowd pleasing version of Norton has become popular over the years.

¹⁵³ Herel, “Emperor Norton’s Name May Yet Span the Bay.”

¹⁵⁴ Matthew B. Stannard, Clampers Toast Emperor Norton, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 13, 2002, A-27.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Clearly he has become a symbol of the tolerance and celebration of diversity that is perceived in San Francisco and California as a whole, regardless of whether such a reputation is deserved or not.

However, it has not only been in the newspapers and magazines that this phenomenon can be found. A fair number of both fiction and non fiction books exist with Emperor Norton as the subject. Curt Gentry's book, *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California*, hypothesizes what would happen if a major earthquake caused California to fall into the Pacific. It also details what might be lost if this occurred. Gentry has his own take on the tradition of fraternal and social organizations, such as E Clampus Vitus. "The more selective the club, the more who queued up to join. E Clampus Vitus was born of reaction. Its membership requirements consisted of any male with a sense of humor and the price of a round of drinks could join."¹⁵⁶ In contrast to the seriousness of the Elks and Masons, the Clampers were essentially a drinking and fun making society, although the group has had a passion for erecting monuments to little known figures from California history, such as Norton.

Gentry mentions Norton as part of California's history and relates much of the state's gold rush past. He differentiates San Francisco from Los Angeles in that the Bay City is more connected with its past. "The first time you did something in San Francisco it was a great pioneering effort, the second time it became an old San Francisco tradition. Too, they had a habit of enshrining their eccentrics, those larger than life individuals who somehow managed to perpetuate San Francisco legend."¹⁵⁷ Eccentrics are again seen as

¹⁵⁶ Curt Gentry, *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 55.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

primarily figures of folklore rather than as distinct individuals. Gentry does take note, however, that eccentrics are often idealized. “At the same time they had a tendency to honor the eccentricities and forget the accomplishments, or to imbue with loveable qualities after death a neurotic who had been insufferable in life.”¹⁵⁸ It is unusual for an author to be aware of this tendency. At times the media glamorizes eccentrics as being more charismatic than is found in historical sources. However, this realization is not common in other books written on the topic.

There are other aspects of Gentry’s book that apply to Emperor Norton. For example, he mentions that at the time of the book’s publication in 1968, there still existed a tradition of at least some former mining settlements such as Jackson serving lunch or dinner at bars and saloons at a minimum price. This “free lunch” tradition in California provided much of the basis for the claim that Norton ate gratis at San Francisco drinking establishments.

The Clampers are not the only organization to honor Norton. The Imperial Court system, one of the oldest predominantly gay groups in the country, was established in 1965 largely through the efforts of Jose Sarria, an American drag queen and political activist. The organization spends much of its time raising money for various charities through large annual fancy dress parties and smaller events held throughout the year. They are known for giving each other elaborate titles such as Duchess and Empress. Jose Sarria was noted for objecting to being called the Queen of the Ball by the Tavern Guild at a fundraiser. He said that he was already a queen, and that they would have to do better than that. “To the new title, the ever clever and campy Jose added, ‘Her Royal

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Majesty, Empress Jose the First, the Widow Norton.’ In the slightly off kilter world of bohemian San Francisco, Jose thus legitimized his claim to the title Empress. He was, after all, the loving widow of the Emperor.”¹⁵⁹ Sarria did not stop there, however. He also inaugurated an annual memorial service for his departed “husband” at Norton’s cemetery at Colma.

In addition, Jose Sarria involved himself in the lighting of the Bay Bridge in celebration of its fiftieth birthday in 1986. Thousands of lighted bulbs were placed throughout the bridge along the cable support lines. Sarria had prepared for the occasion by dressing himself in a Victorian widow’s black for his observance of imperial mourning. In anticipation of the lighting of the bridge, Sarria called out for a sign that Norton was still watching over the city and its people. “Suddenly, the bridge burst into light, its graceful outlines twinkling with thousands of starlike points of light. It swept like an artist’s brushstroke to heaven. The now silhouetted widow nodded to the dramatic message from beyond, and stated with a grave smile, “Joshua has heard my call.”¹⁶⁰

Jose Sarria’s adoption of Emperor Norton as a symbol of LGBT culture is in keeping with how he has been used by other groups such as the Clampers. Norton is seen as an everyman who can be utilized by almost anyone in attempts to popularize their cause or group. Numerous organizations, especially in San Francisco, have used Norton in this way.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Robert Gorman, *The Empress is a Man: Stories from the Life of Jose Sarria*, (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

However, it has been suggested that groups such as the Clampers and the Imperial Court have actually reinforced social conventions by their very acts of mocking them. In this way they serve to define the limits of acceptable behavior by appearing to defy them. In Natalie Zemon Davis' book *Society and Culture of Early Modern France* she details many of the aspects of misrule and how it was seen in sixteenth century France. "It is sometimes expedient to allow the people to play the fool and make merry," said the French lawyer Claude de Rubys at the end of the sixteenth century, "lest by holding them in with too great a rigor, we put them in despair."¹⁶¹ Elaborate Fool Societies, also known as Abbeys of Misrule, were formed to make fun of various individuals and groups. The mocking of political and religious leaders during carnival times was meant to renew the social order, but not lead directly to further political action. Thus, the intention was not only to provide a safety valve for popular discontent but also to mark the bounds of acceptable behavior. While the traditional events of misrule lost much of their popularity by the eighteenth century, they did allow the lower classes to voice their political complaints. Davis states that carnival "can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order."¹⁶²

Many festivals of misrule such as the Feast of Fools have their origins in ancient pagan annual events, such as Saturnalia, which in Roman times was marked by a reversal of traditional social roles, when slaves and masters switched places and jest and tomfoolery was typical. Stephen Nissenbaum's book *The Battle for Christmas* details much of the history of the holiday and how it has become transformed over the years

¹⁶¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97.

¹⁶² Ibid., 123.

from a semi-pagan celebration to the commercial event we know today. Christmas was an especially difficult holiday to Christianize, due to the decision to place the official date of Christ's birth so close to the date that traditionally was assigned to the old pagan holiday.¹⁶³ Between 1659 and 1681 it was actually illegal to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts due to the perceived lawlessness it was seen to encourage.

It is interesting to note that Norton shared some of the characteristics of the Christmas revelers in the seventeenth century. He upset the traditional social order when he declared himself Emperor even though he had no claim to such a title. Also, although he did not call it such, Norton requested hand outs from the public. While the poor at most times of year owed deference to the rich and powerful, during the Christmas season the poor demanded the right to gifts from the upper class. They marched into the houses of the wealthy, extorting food, drink and sometimes money. In effect, the poor of seventeenth century New England were demanding to be treated as if they were wealthy.¹⁶⁴ Norton also was known for asking for handouts, or "imperial taxes," as he called them. While Emperor Norton was far more polite in his activities than the seventeenth-century Christmas revelers, it is possible that his activities were part of a continuation of this defunct tradition. Some of the gifts that Norton received, such as free food at saloons and bars have been revealed as part of the everyday traditions of these establishments and were actually available to all patrons, not just the Emperor. However, the fact that Norton is remembered in a similar fashion to the old traditions of Christmas

¹⁶³ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996), 8.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

is a testament to his enduring appeal as someone who is seen to upset traditional social roles.

In this vein, many aspects of how Norton is remembered today are rooted in the folklore that surrounds him. It is often difficult to separate these sources from those that are more verifiable. However, they do reveal much just by the fact that they are remembered at all. For example, although it cannot be supported by first hand evidence or primary sources, a very famous and widespread account exists regarding Norton's active defense of the Chinese. During one of the race riots that occurred in the 1860s, Norton supposedly intervened by stepping between a mob of whites and the group of Chinese. He recited the Lord's Prayer, upon which the rioters quietly dispersed.¹⁶⁵ While this account is most likely apocryphal, the fact that the account has entered into the popular consciousness is a testament to how highly Norton has come to be regarded.

The coverage of Norton since his death has not just been confined to newspapers, magazines and books. In the area of the stage, his life has been dramatized in the form of a play, at least two musicals and an opera. Also, the Sweet Adelines, a female barbershop chorus, put on an Emperor Norton Show in late 1979. One of the members, Edna Mahler, expressed how she felt about the man. "I've always been an Emperor Norton nut myself. He was so typically San Francisco."¹⁶⁶ For better or worse, Norton is seen as a symbol of the city. The musical *Emperor Norton: A Command Performance* is a good example of a theatrical production with Norton as the central subject. The play, performed in 2002 for the Bohemian Club, celebrates Norton as symbolic of the city of

¹⁶⁵ Mark Moran & Mark Scurman, *Weird U.S. Your Travel Guide to America's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets* (New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing, Inc., 2004), 152.

¹⁶⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 1979, 40.

San Francisco. “And then there is the spirit of San Francisco, that shimmering city where all things are possible. That clever young fellow, Sam Clemens, once remarked that, to know a city, you have to observe the style of its funerals and know the manner of men they bury with most ceremony. Well, gentlemen, for Emperor Norton the whole town turned out, and they gave him the grandest procession the great City has ever seen.”¹⁶⁷

While highly dramatized and fictionalized, the musical does a good job of reflecting how Norton has come to be seen today.

Emperor Norton’s presence can even be found as a way to promote and sell food and beverages. There was once an Emperor Norton Sundae at the Ghirardelli Square ice cream parlor.¹⁶⁸ In 1995, the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company had a box of Emperor Norton Non-Pareils. After Norton’s name was added to the chocolate box, representatives of the company reported that sales increased by 300 percent. Julie Davis, the Assistant Brand Manager at the company, stated her belief regarding whether the increase in sales could be attributed to the inclusion of Norton’s name. “It may have had something to do with the new design on the front of the boxes, as well as our increased distribution efforts. Even if he did not single handedly account for the increase in sales, the Emperor has definitely added some great San Francisco history and humor to our line!”¹⁶⁹ Norton is seen here as a fun, entertaining way to attribute a product as being part of San Francisco’s history.

¹⁶⁷ Howard Guy Ervin III, *Emperor Norton: A Command Performance* (San Francisco, CA, Bohemian Club, 2002), 54.

¹⁶⁸ Herel, “Emperor Norton’s Name May Yet Span the Bay.”

¹⁶⁹ William R. Coleman, “This Emperor Did Wear Clothes” *Manuscripts* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 13.

In addition to these products, the Columbo Baking Company in Oakland produces Emperor Norton Sourdough Snacks. There also exists an Emperor Norton Lager, created by the San Francisco Brewing Company. All of these foods and beverages serve as examples of how Norton has both become part of the city's popular culture and has been embraced as a symbol of San Francisco. The person as a product of folklore has been separated from his more mundane historical roots. In addition, all of these products support the contention that the use of Norton's name today is seen as a means to boost sales. A belief exists that using Norton as a mascot for a given product will be beneficial as a marketing tool.

Emperor Norton's coverage in fiction is also an important part of how he is seen today. Often, writers treat Norton as only an amusing character with some roots in American folklore. Seldom do they attempt to bring attention to any of his less well-known traits. One exception is Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. It is widely regarded as one of the most acclaimed and award winning comic series of the 1990s, exhibited a mix of both the historical Norton and his folklore side. Gaiman's fantasy short story, "Three Septembers and a January," is perhaps one of the more well known examples of Emperor Norton in fiction. It depicts Norton's reign by showing him in four different events of his life. The story opens with Norton in 1859 contemplating suicide. He is secretly observed by two anthropomorphic entities who are part of the family of beings known as the Endless. Morpheus is the incarnation of dream and imagination, and his younger sister is

Despair. She challenges Dream to a contest to see whether Morpheus can keep Norton from the realms of Despair, Desire, or Delirium before death claims him.¹⁷⁰

The story proceeds with Dream giving Norton the idea of proclaiming himself Emperor. “I have given him what many mortals have lived and died for, sister. I have made him king.”¹⁷¹ In the end Norton passes all of the tests put before him and is content with being only an Emperor. Despair comments that “I would seem to have failed. You’re a pitiful madman, a Tom o’ Bedlam, dying in the gutter in the rain, but you never despaired.”¹⁷² The story is perhaps one of the most interesting presentations of Norton in fiction. At the same time that he is shown as a comical figure, he also exhibits a subtle nobility in his manner and actions. In an afterword to the story, Gaiman mentions both the popular events attributed to Norton and some of which the public is less aware. For example, he relates how Norton ordered the Bay Bridge to be built, as well as his support for the Chinese residents of the city. However, he also mentions popular misconceptions such as the belief that a solar eclipse marked the date of Norton’s funeral and that Mark Twain and he were friends. (Although Norton and Twain were contemporaries and their lives in San Francisco overlapped for some years, there exist no firsthand accounts of them being acquaintances.) All in all, Gaiman’s story is a good example of Norton in fiction and is evidence that authors tended to use those facts that fit their story and ignore or invent the rest. This contributed to creating the popular version of Norton that we know today.

¹⁷⁰ Neil Gaiman, *Sandman # 31: Three Septembers and a January* (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 22.

Neil Gaiman's story, like much of his work, borrows extensively from many different bits of ancient mythology and modern folklore. As Emperor Norton has entered into American folklore to a significant extent, this depiction of him is entirely understandable. The author presents a very favorable portrayal of Norton and even references Hebrew folklore at the end of the story. When Death comes to claim Norton at the end of the story, she relates a story of the Tzaddikim, thirty-six virtuous men and women by whose grace God allows the world to continue to exist. They also are the recipients of a large portion of the world's suffering. Death states that she has met many kings and queens while performing her function and that out of them all she prefers Emperor Norton. The story of the Tzaddikim is in fact part of Hebrew tradition and is also related as part of a novel called *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwarz-Bart. It chronicles the history of a Jewish family from the time of the Crusades to the Second World War. In the novel there are several references to the concept of the Tzaddikim.¹⁷³ However, Neil Gaiman's story in the *Sandman* is a good example of an author that makes use of the popular version of Norton's history but also adds his own fictional elements to the story.

There exist other examples of Norton in fiction that are also worthy of attention. He is used in Dianne Day's mystery novel *Emperor Norton's Ghost*, in which the series heroine, Fremont Jones, attends a séance that channels the spirit of Norton. His ghost assists them in solving the crime that Jones is investigating.¹⁷⁴ The Emperor has

¹⁷³ Andre Schwarz Bart, *The Last of the Just* (Scanton, PA: Atheneum House, Inc., 1960), 4.

¹⁷⁴ Dianne Day, *Emperor Norton's Ghost* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 1.

appeared in other works of literature, but almost always as a figure of amusement or whimsy.

Norton has also entered the realm of television and film. The 1956 movie *Around the World in Eighty Days* showed an actor, dressed in regalia quite similar to Norton's, accompanied by the two dogs Bummer and Lazarus in a torchlight parade during the San Francisco sequence of the film. While the appearance of Norton's character in the film is very brief, it is possible that the film makers believed that viewers were familiar enough with Norton's history so that a further explanation was unnecessary. The 1950s show *Death Valley Days*, which advertised Pacific Coast Borax Soap, featured an episode about Emperor Norton. In one interesting scene a local printer is asked why he produces Norton's money free of charge, to which he replies that it "humors him and does not harm." The closing sequence of the show has the wistful words "only in California was the Empire recognized."¹⁷⁵

He even appeared in the popular television show *Bonanza*, which had an episode entitled "The Emperor Norton." In it Norton comes to the Ponderosa pursued by authorities who want to have him committed. Ben Cartwright, one of Norton's old friends, has Mark Twain testify as to Norton's sanity. Highlights of the episode include Norton demanding to know why safety at a local mine is so poor and ordering the construction of a bridge over an impassible gorge.¹⁷⁶ The episode does a good job of bringing a colorful American figure to the attention of an audience that may not have heard of him. Also, it is a reminder that eccentricity is no block to intelligence.

¹⁷⁵ *Death Valley Days*, Episode 376, June 15, 1956.

¹⁷⁶ *Bonanza*, "The Emperor Norton," Season 7, Episode 225, February 27, 1966.

However, certain inconsistencies with historical research exist in the episode. For example, Norton is shown as having an accent of German or possibly Austrian origin, when there is no evidence that he ever spent a significant amount of time in either of those places. The show also gives Norton even greater credit for the construction of the Bay Bridge. Not only is he shown as the one who initially calls for it to be built, but he is also shown to be the bridge's designer and architect. While it has been reported that Norton did dabble in inventing such items as a railroad switch and other items, he never took on anything as monumental as the planning of a bridge as large as the one spanning San Francisco Bay. The show obviously takes some liberties with the source material, but it is surprisingly true to many of the facts of Emperor Norton's life. It should also be remembered that television shows can seldom be relied upon to provide serious historical research, as their primary purpose is to entertain. Yet, they do sometimes serve as a means to pique interest in a given subject and lead to more serious inquiry.

Emperor Norton's depiction in *Bonanza* and *Death Valley Days* as well as popular comics and magazines suggest that he is beginning to become famous beyond the confines of San Francisco. While he is still identified with the city, the fact that he is shown in locations outside the Bay area implies that people are seeing him as a national figure as well as one principally of the American West. Norton's defense of workers' rights and the need for public works in *Bonanza* show that he is thought of in the folklore of the whole United States and not just San Francisco. It is also likely that Norton is being used as a means of reflecting the values and concerns of the time in which these television programs and periodicals were being produced. For example, Norton's depiction in *Bonanza* defending the workers, while similar to his actions in many sources,

definitely reflects the idealistic beliefs present in many westerns from the 1960s and 1970s. Also, the kindness he receives from most of San Francisco's citizens in the *Death Valley Days* program also shows the optimistic views present in much of the television programming of the period.

It is significant to note that Norton was by no means the last prominent eccentric in San Francisco's history. Many others have taken on the mantle of an unusual character. For example, Low Yee, a Chinese merchant in San Francisco's Chinatown at the turn of the twentieth century, was known as "The Emperor of Chinatown." Arriving in the city about twenty years after Norton's death, around the year 1900, Low Yee amassed a few hundred dollars through his business ventures. Wishing to return to China with as much money as possible, he risked it all at the fan-tan table and lost.

While his financial reversal was somewhat smaller than that of Emperor Norton, his reaction to it was quite similar. Low Yee became convinced that he had not only won at the gambling table, but that he had become an Emperor and the streets of San Francisco were his kingdom. He especially enjoyed waiting outside the Hall of Justice near Kearny Street at 12 p. m. and 6 p. m. for the changing of the police shifts. Waving his stick and speaking loudly "Come forth, my guard!" he imagined that he was controlling the patrolmen filing past with the wave of his cane. While he was typically dressed in shabby clothes, he regarded them as being made of the finest silks and gold.¹⁷⁷ Low Yee's story is remarkable in the number of parallels it has with that of Norton. It is open to speculation as to whether Low Yee was aware of Norton, but it seems likely,

¹⁷⁷ *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 1946, 12.

since the Emperor had only been deceased for twenty years upon his arrival in San Francisco. Unlike Norton, Low Yee's ultimate fate is unknown.

One prominent eccentric that is active today in San Francisco is Frank Chu. Unlike Norton's consistent belief that he was the legitimate sovereign of the United States, Frank Chu's beliefs are haphazard and difficult to understand. Chu started his protest against past and current U.S. presidents sometime around the year 2000. He claims that he was cheated by President Clinton out of money owed him for starring in a major Hollywood film, who also slandered the people of the "12 galaxies," with which Chu believes he was somehow connected. His hand held signs used in the almost eight years of protesting have frequently changed, and he has used the space on the opposite side as add space purchased by various companies and businesses. Frank Chu has become something of a minor celebrity in San Francisco, with a bar named the 12 Galaxies in reference to him.¹⁷⁸ However, his beliefs do not reflect the rationality or sensibilities that were displayed by Norton in the nineteenth century.

Emperor Norton has even been embraced in the realm of religion. Discordianism is a modern religion that posits that chaos is all there is and that order is an illusion. It is sometimes called a parody religion, though there is some disagreement as to what extent. Discordians name Norton as the only begotten son of Eris, the Greek goddess of strife and discord.¹⁷⁹ While the religion is almost certainly a means of satire against more established faiths, its honoring of Emperor Norton is significant in that it further demonstrates the extent of his presence in popular culture.

¹⁷⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 6, 2005, PK-17.

¹⁷⁹ Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia* (Diggory Press, Ltd., 2007), 23.

Interestingly, Emperor Norton has also been embraced by micronations. These entities have some of the characteristics of actual countries, but are unrecognized by any world government or major international organization. In some cases they are formed as a joke, but at times some go to extraordinary lengths to attempt to establish their legitimacy, such as issuing their own passports and currency. They can be as large as a small island, or as small as a person's house or bedroom. In many cases they are composed of only one person or family group. The nation of Lovely, which consists of a small flat in one of London's suburbs and founded by the comedian Danny Wallace, has even petitioned the U.N. for recognition. January 8, the anniversary of Norton's death in 1880, is today often celebrated by many micronations as Emperor Norton Day. Also, his likeness appears on many "currencies" of micronations around the world. This phenomenon is an example of how Norton is popular not just in San Francisco and California, but also worldwide.¹⁸⁰

Thus, Norton has been embraced by San Francisco and the world. While at times his popularity has waned, it has never vanished entirely. He has become symbolic of not just tolerance and care for others but also of whimsy and amusement. It is likely that his fame has endured partly because of this aspect of humor. While on one hand he is respected as a part of San Francisco history, he is also seen as a fun way to celebrate that same history of eccentricity. Also, at times Norton can be seen as a means of ignoring or white washing the more unpleasant aspects of San Francisco history, such as its history of ethnic, social and economic turmoil.

¹⁸⁰ John Ryan, *Micronations: The Lonely Planet Guide to Home-made Nations* (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet Publications, 2006), 31.

The less well-known realities of Norton's life have not been entirely lost. However, the popular version is much more visible today, with the use of Norton in a wide array of products, services, literature and annual celebrations. It remains to be seen whether some of the lesser-known aspects of his life, such as his extreme poverty will ever gain greater awareness. The reality is that Norton was an articulate, intelligent and curious individual whose only eccentric belief was that he was an Emperor. In San Francisco today, Emperor Norton has entered into the realm of American folklore, making it difficult to separate the popular version of his life from that which is supported by original sources. However, it is unlikely that he will disappear from popular culture anytime soon, as his life is celebrated not only by the larger public, but also by such disparate groups as the Imperial Court and E. Clampus Vitus. Emperor Norton will continue on as a figure of amusement and curiosity for the people of San Francisco and the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

During the summer of 2008 while attending a conference in San Francisco, quite by accident I visited the Allen Paul San Francisco Brewing Company Bar and Restaurant. Much to my delight there was an Emperor Norton Lager offered on the menu, in addition to a large picture of him on the wall of the establishment. While this seems of relatively minor importance to the larger theme of this thesis, it is indicative of how visitors are exposed to a part of San Francisco history unknown to many of them.

San Francisco went through an unbelievable growth spurt while Joshua Norton was living in the city. During the period of Norton's residence from late 1849 to early 1880, San Francisco grew from a small town of about 1,000 to a major U.S. city of more than 230,000 with all the problems that surround such a rapid rise in population. The financial ups and downs caused many businessmen to make and lose their fortunes. A small number of these individuals became the eccentrics of San Francisco. These people and Norton in particular were tolerated because they were remembered for past successes in business. Emperor Norton was also an important part of the young city of San Francisco's creation of its own urban culture. After emerging from intermittent periods of serious economic and social upheaval, San Francisco residents needed a source of amusement in order to forget their problems, however momentarily.

Emperor Norton's first published proclamation in 1859 was the first step to him becoming a well-known eccentric in the city and later in other parts of the country as well. He possessed qualities not found in most of the eccentrics of the day. He was very aware of the issues of the day, had a gift for writing that articulated his views in a coherent fashion and possessed qualities and views popular with the citizens of the city.

He believed in the maintenance of law and order and at the same time saw beyond what the average citizen believed. For example, he felt the Chinese and Native American populations should be treated with respect and dignity.

Yet, these qualities did not alone create the Emperor Norton known to so many. During his life in San Francisco there were very few means of communication. The most popular and inexpensive were the newspapers and they competed in being the first to print the news of the day. When Norton gave his first proclamation to a local paper in 1859 the editor printed it because it was unique and might pique the interest of his readers. It also should be noted that there are no recorded interviews with Emperor Norton. The newspapers wrote about him and printed his proclamations and somehow felt that was sufficient. Since editorial columns were not a part of these papers, the public had no way of knowing fact from fiction concerning this unusual character.

While he was a well known figure in the late nineteenth century, it is quite amazing that today Emperor Norton continues to be celebrated in San Francisco and to some extent in the entire nation. There are two versions of Emperor Norton's life and the difference between them is significant in how he is remembered. The popular version embraced by the public at annual events includes his proclamation on building the Bay Bridge and receiving free meals. The more carefully researched one uses primary sources which revealed Norton's life of poverty including the small amount he received from the sale of his bank notes. These other lesser-known traits included Norton's early life and his poverty as Emperor. It is likely that journalists and other writers did not think that certain elements and details of Norton's story would appeal to their readers. As they were attempting to create a story for a popular audience, this was not unusual. In

periodicals today, very little attention is given to these lesser-known aspects of Norton's life, which also involved his intelligence and clear, articulate writing skills. His beliefs were not unusual other than those pertaining to himself and his "royal" status.

Herbert Asbury's popular books on true crime such as *The Barbary Coast*, which mentions Norton and *Gangs of New York*, are good early examples of this trend of writing more popular versions of individuals that have entered into the folk stories of a region.¹⁸¹ While Asbury drew a great deal from first-hand accounts and sources, his books also included many inaccuracies and errors that were likely overlooked in the interests of making the works more accessible and marketable to the public. Writers such as Luc Sante, a more recent true crime writer have been critical of Asbury's work. Sante describes Asbury's book as "cobbled from legend, memory, police records, the self aggrandizements of aging crooks, popular journalism and solid historical research."¹⁸² Therefore, while Sante claims that some of Asbury's work is based on credible sources, much of it is seen as being of a rather dubious nature.

The effect that eccentrics have had in creating the identity and folklore of a locality is a subject that has not received much scholarly attention. While the activities of these "characters" can be linked to past analyses of misrule, such as Stephen Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas*, the author mainly centers his study on the history of the holiday of Christmas.¹⁸³ Likewise, Natalie Davis' work, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, does not focus to any degree on the specific role of

¹⁸¹ Herbert Asbury, *The Barbary Coast* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1933), 1.

¹⁸² Luc Sante, *Low Life, Lures and Snare of Old New York* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991), 363.

¹⁸³ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1996), 1.

eccentricity in the testing of social boundaries. Eccentrics make up a distinct area of study that has not been sufficiently explored.¹⁸⁴ Catherine Caulfield's book, *The Emperor of the United States of America and Other Magnificent British Eccentrics* touches on the tendencies of such people to define and test the boundaries of accepted social conventions.¹⁸⁵ However, much more could be done to expand on this theme.

Norton is an excellent example of the tradition of eccentricity. While he was much more lucid and consistent in his beliefs than many such people, he still stands for many as a symbol of how an unusual person can be tolerated by society as a whole, regardless of whether that person's beliefs coincide with those of others. Whether San Francisco deserves this reputation of tolerance is a matter of some debate, but it is clear from the evidence that many saw Norton as a pleasant example of this aspect of the city.

Norton's proclamations detail a desire for the betterment of not only San Francisco but also the nation. In numerous instances he spoke out for the rights and welfare of his subjects. However, at other times he also voiced a concern for the preservation of law and order rather than a specific desire for his subjects' welfare. This interest in order is perhaps in keeping with what Emperor Norton saw as his role as a monarch. Regardless of the motivations behind his proclamations, it is clear that Norton found it important to be vocal on many social and political concerns that others seldom addressed.

It is unfortunate that no personal interview of Emperor Norton was ever recorded. While his plentiful proclamations show much of his mindset and beliefs, they do not

¹⁸⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 1.

¹⁸⁵ Catherine Caulfield, *The Emperor of the United States of America and Other Magnificent British Eccentrics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 1.

provide the insight that a professional interview conducted by a journalist might have provided. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the newspapers were much more interested in Norton as a popular figure for their readers than as a person with more complicated views on the issues of the day.

Norton's two funerals only added to his fame and to the enduring nature of his story. In researching the events surrounding his funerals, I found that the popular version of Norton's life and the one that can be traced to original sources are often at odds with one another. However, it is important to remember that both of these versions offer valid accounts of Norton's life. The popular account details how the public at large has come to see the Emperor, while the version that employs more in depth research serves to bring many lesser known facts to light.

Norton's presence in much of San Francisco's culture over the last fifty years is remarkable for a figure that at first glance seemed to be in danger of being forgotten. His appearance found in games, food, festivals and other products demonstrates his enduring appeal. The manner in which Norton is presented today is indicative of the process that the myth of eccentric and famous people sometimes go through as they enter popular folklore. In Emperor Norton's case it is likely that he has been used in part as an attempt to forget San Francisco's past of social, racial and economic unrest. Yet, it is extraordinary that he continues to have such enduring appeal with the public.

When considering Emperor Norton today we must remember that further exploration and research into his life and times do not invalidate his popularity as a public icon in plays, music, literature, television and other forms of media. Future

biographical works would do well to consider both the popular version of his life as well as its equally important, lesser-known facts.

Robert Louis Stevenson's stepdaughter, Isobel Field, a contemporary of Norton who claimed to be quite familiar with him, gives an excellent account of how she viewed the Emperor. The following quote from her autobiography stands as an example of how some San Franciscans must have seen him:

We had seen Emperor Norton come on board, the crowds making way for him quite seriously and bowing as he took his seat. I never saw anyone laugh at or ridicule Emperor Norton though he was an eccentric figure in his rusty uniform with gold epaulettes, cocked hat and feather, belt and sword, and his old knobby cane. Indeed I thought when I read in my history books of an Emperor that it meant such a figure as the poor demented man that all San Francisco guarded and humored. He had been a respected citizen who lost his fortune on the stock exchange. Everybody sympathized with him so much that when he appeared in his fantastic uniform and declared himself to be Emperor of America nobody had the heart to contradict him. He was a gentle, kindly man, and fortunately found himself in the friendliest, most sentimental city in the world, the idea being "let him be Emperor if he wants to." San Francisco played the game with him.¹⁸⁶

In this paragraph, Field sums up the views that San Franciscans had towards Norton.

They simultaneously found him amusing but also respected him. Citizens sympathized with his plight because they themselves had gone through difficult circumstances.

Finally, San Franciscans enjoyed thinking of themselves as belonging to the most welcoming, tolerant city in the world. Emperor Norton is likely to continue to be a symbol of San Francisco in the many years to come.

¹⁸⁶ Isobel Field, *This Life I Have Loved* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941) 67.

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