

San Jose's History



San Jose's Original Inhabitants

Long before Spaniards arrived in California, thousands of Native Americans inhabited the coastal lands from San Francisco down to Big Sur. Their descendants now call themselves Ohlone, and San Jose's Alum Rock Park was once home to one of the Ohlone hunter-gatherer tribes, who were the first of many to shape the history of San Jose.



On the Trail of Juan Bautista de Anza

When the Spaniards arrived, they built a chain of 21 missions from San Diego up to Sonoma, and a series of forts. In 1776, Captain Juan Bautista de Anza was charged by the Spanish king to lead settlers from New Spain to California. After stopping at Monterey, de Anza continued north, scouting sites for the Presidio of San Francisco, Mission San Francisco de Asis, and El Pueblo de San Jose de Guadalupe, now San Jose.

El Pueblo de San Jose de Guadalupe was officially founded on November 29, 1777, the first town in the Spanish colony Nueva California. It took its name from Saint Joseph, patron saint of pioneers and travelers, and from the Guadalupe River. You can visit the last surviving adobe from the de Anza era—the 1797 Peralta Adobe at San Pedro Square Market in downtown San Jose.

Castillero and New Almaden – California's First Major Mining Operation

Before the Gold Rush, the hills around San Jose sounded with the din of mining work. The Ohlone long appreciated the red ore, cinnabar and introduced their source to Mexican military captain and mining engineer, Andres Castillero. Castillero recognized it as a source of mercury and in 1845, he began to mine ore and produce mercury ("quicksilver") in south San Jose.

In 1846, the mine changed ownership and name, becoming "New Almaden" after Spain's enormous Almaden mercury mine. By the end of the decade, Gold Rush fever demanded vast quantities of mercury to create the amalgam miners used to recover gold during mining. The New Almaden mines obliged with more than 75,000,000 pounds of elemental mercury—more lucrative than any California gold mine—and became North America's largest mercury mine.



Statehood and Education

When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded California to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, it took California two more years to become a state. San Jose was the first incorporated city in California, and served as the first capital. Not long after—in 1857—California's first public institution of higher education was founded, relocating soon after to San Jose. Originally a teacher's college, it went on to join the California State Colleges system (now California State University) in 1961. In 2007, SJSU marked its 150th anniversary and remains California's oldest state school.

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Lefranc and Masson put San Jose Viniculture on the Map

Viniculture in California began in the Mission era, with the "Mission grape" growing well in San Jose and its surroundings. In 1852, a Bordeaux immigrant named Etienne Thee first planted vineyards along the Guadalupe River in South San Jose.

His neighbor and fellow countryman Charles Lefranc later helped him graft French cuttings of Pinot, Sauvignon, Semillon, Cabernet and Grenache onto Mission root stock. Lefranc married Thee's daughter and inherited the estate, which he named Almaden for the local mine.

LeFranc then hired Paul Masson, a young Burgundian who created champagnes and table wines with Lefranc. Masson, of "sell no wine before its time" fame, gained international recognition when sparkling wine from his Saratoga La Cresta vineyard took the Grand Prix for 1914, the first American vineyard to win the coveted prize.



In the Valley of Heart's Delight: Family Farms and Cesar Chavez

Throughout the late 1800s and into the first half of the 20th century, San Jose, like the rest of Santa Clara Valley, grew on agriculture, producing orchard fruits, berries, tree nuts, and vegetables, as well as packaging, canning, and shipping it.

Northwest San Jose's Alviso area became a packager of food stuffs, with Alviso Mills milling wheat into flour in 1853. In 1906, Sai Yin Chew opened the Bayside Canning Company, which became the third largest cannery in the United States. A family-run business until the 1920s, it canned vegetables such as asparagus and spinach; fruits like plums and apricots; and prepared foods like ketchup, hot sauce, and fish sauce.

Farmer Henry Willard Coe in San Jose's Willow Glen area developed a process of drying fruit with sulfur—a boon to the local cherry, apricot, and prune industry by expanding its market beyond the distance fresh fruit could be shipped. The Valley's bounty was famous nationwide, earning it the nickname, "Valley of Heart's Delight."

Harvesting produce can be very labor intensive, and management and labor can easily conflict. Cesar Chavez understood first-hand the experience of the farm workers, having worked in agriculture from early in his life. He began organizing protests in 1952 while living in East San Jose. Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962, and raised national awareness of pesticides' effects on workers. After striking with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) against California grape growers in 1965, the two unions merged to become the United Farmworkers in 1972.

Santa Clara Valley becomes Silicon Valley (Or should it be "Steve" Valley?)

By the 1950s, soldiers and veterans of World War II began to settle in San Jose. As the population increased, businesses moved to Santa Clara Valley to take advantage of labor and good ports. Military-based aerospace and electronics comprised some of the first big industries, and so the shift from agriculture to "electroculture" began.

Fairchild Semiconductor Corporation, an early silicon transistor manufacturer, spawned many high-tech companies in the area. The Valley developed a reputation for innovation, and the technology companies' proximity to one another, which led journalist Don Hoefler to coin the term "Silicon Valley" in 1971 for his series of articles for Electronic News called, "Silicon Valley USA."

But the first seeds of Silicon Valley's electronic legacy were planted as early as the 1930s, when enterprising Stanford engineers were encouraged to create businesses such as William Hewlett and David Packard's namesake, founded in 1939. Though Hewlett-Packard would grow to be hugely influential, as an innovator and as one of the Valley's largest employers, its origins were humble: the first product was an audio oscillator, built in a Palo Alto garage.

A few decades later, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak cemented Silicon Valley's reputation as the kind of place where two guys in a garage could revolutionize an industry, creating the first Apple computer in Steve Jobs' family garage in Los Altos.