

## HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

# Trabuco adobe once housed treasure

During the final months of 1818, French privateer Hippolyte de Bouchard and his two ships, both displaying the flag of Argentina, terrorized the coast of California.

Not long after conducting a particularly vicious raid on the settlement of Santa Barbara, his ships were sighted off what is now Dana



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Point.

But messengers from Los Angeles had alerted the padres at Mission San Juan Capistrano about Bouchard. Soldiers (to supplement their own admittedly meager guard) were on their way, but in the meantime certain items were hidden before Bouchard's 140 men arrived. Quickly the mission's treasures were secreted away to one of the mission's substations located on a high plateau. There, the valuables – which undoubtedly included money and jewels – were stowed within or close to the substation's adobe.

The name for this place, adjacent a creek, was officially San Francisco de Solano. But during the brief time explorer Gaspar de Portolà and his men camped at the site in 1769, one of the soldiers had lost his musket, or *trabuco*, and the name stuck.

The adobe was built around 1810. According to records, the mission's horses were raised and trained at the Trabuco outpost.

Before soldiers from Los An-



FILE PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAMMY LECHNER

**Gaspar de Portolà, a Spanish explorer and first governor of Alta California, led an expedition that in 1769 camped at the site of the Trabuco adobe.**

geles could arrive, Bouchard's men looted the mission's warehouses and damaged several of the buildings.

But the treasure at the Trabuco adobe remained safe.

Years passed. In 1822, California became a province of Mexico, following that country's independence from Spain.

Twelve years later, all mission

lands fell under civil authority. During this time, it was rumored that great wealth was buried at the adobe. Many arrived with digging implements, but while stories were told of unearthed gold coins and other valuables, it is probable that whatever treasure was once there had been restored to the mission many years before.

By 1841, a soldier, Santiago Argüello, was granted the Rancho

Trabuco. There, he and his wife raised cattle and – if records are to be believed – 22 children.

Two years later, Don Juan Forster, né John Forster of Liverpool, England, purchased the ranch.

Two years after that, his brother-in-law, Alta California's last governor, Pio Pico, took refuge in the adobe while fleeing American troops.

Ultimately the adobe and the Plano Trabuco came under the ownership of the James Flood and Richard O'Neill families.

For a while, tenant ranchers and sheepherders occupied the adobe, but eventually the area was leased out for the raising of barley. The adobe, now empty, became subject once more to treasure hunters as well as the elements, and it began to erode.

Today, what is left of the Trabuco adobe is part of O'Neill Park and enclosed within a small wooden structure visible from Arroyo Vista leading into the Tijeras Creek Golf Club. A plaque adjacent the structure honors the Portolà expedition, but visitors must use their imaginations to visualize the first home built on the mesa now occupied by the city of Rancho Santa Margarita.

Janet Whitcomb is a lifelong resident of Orange County, and has lived in Rancho Santa Margarita for 20 years. She scours local libraries, historical files and tracks down old tales to give you a glimpse into the history of our communities.

Do you know of an old story you want Whitcomb to pursue? Email [janet.whitcomb@gmail.com](mailto:janet.whitcomb@gmail.com) with details.