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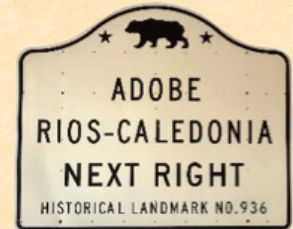


HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

RIOS CALEDONIA ADOBE

San Miguel, California



A self-guided walking tour of the Rios Caledonia Adobe

INTRODUCTION

The Rios-Caledonia Adobe is one of the oldest historical landmarks in San Luis Obispo County, designated as State Historical Landmark #936 in 1961. It is now fully restored and operated as a San Luis Obispo County Park, managed by a non-profit corporation known as Friends of

the Adobes. It's located about 9 miles north of Paso Robles on Highway 101. The History Center of SLO County holds a conservation easement over the property with the purpose of assuring protection and sound management of its historic character and features.



Aerial Photo of the Rios Caledonia Adobe site with Highway 101, El Camino Real, and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks

The Rios-Caledonia Adobe stands today as a testament to the collaborative efforts of early 20th Century historic preservation advocates. It exists only because it was the subject of one of the very first successful local campaigns in SLO County to protect our local heritage.

In the 1930s, threatened by early highway development of Route 101, a single individual stood up to protect it, and developed it as a tourist attraction. In the 1950s, the Adobe was again endangered by proposed freeway

development, but it was saved by a community that recognized its value and re-directed the highway route to the west to save it from destruction. Today, its "Friends" continue to tell the story of the Adobe for thousands of visitors each year, and with the support of the community, the Friends of the Adobes manage the park for the enjoyment and enlightenment of this and future generations. Visit the adobe ("Site 1") at the south end of the site, where we begin our tour.

SITE 1

THE ADOBE - CONSTRUCTION BY NATIVE AMERICANS & PETRONILLO RIOS - 1835-1862

We will begin our tour at the main attraction: The unique two-story adobe at the southern end of the park, built of adobe brick with original timbers believed to have been hauled by mule team from Cambria over the Santa Lucia mountains. This building, which now houses the Museum and Gift Shop of the Friends of the Adobes, was first constructed in 1835-

1936 by Native American laborers under the direction of Sergeant Petronilo Rios. Rios was an officer in the army of the Republic of Mexico who led an escolta (a small company) of five soldiers from Monterey. In 1833, Governor Jose Figueroa had assigned Rios to assume secular control of the nearby Mission San Miguel Arcángel, founded by Franciscan friars almost

40 years earlier. This “secularization” of the Mission was an inevitable consequence of the Mexican Revolution of 1821, which threw off Spanish colonial rule throughout Mexico including “Alta California” and its chain of 21 missions extending along the El Camino Real.

In 1836, the adobe was briefly given over as the home of Jose Ygnacio Franco Coronel and his family, appointed by Governor Figueroa as the civilian commissioner of the Mission. Commissioner Coronel, Sergeant Rios and their soldiers put the mission buildings and surrounding lands and livestock under the control of the secular authority of Governor Figueroa. The Franciscan friars who had built and occupied the Mission were exiled.

Within a year, Coronel and his family would move from the Adobe to Santa Cruz County, and later to the Pueblo of Los Angeles. Sergeant Rios was left to oversee the dispersion of those few Native American servants and laborers who had remained. Although these newly-appointed Mexican authorities were expected to “protect” the population of the mission, harsh conditions and scarce resources soon led to the decline of the Mission as an economic entity that served to sustain the natives. The adobe itself would be occupied by a succession of occupants that may have included Petronilo Rios and his family; however Rios was appointed Com-

mander of Artillery in the Presidio of Monterey in 1839, and by the following year he retired from the army at the age of 34. By that year, French traveler Eugene de Mofras recorded that fewer than 30 Native Americans remained in the area of Mission San Miguel.

After leaving the Mexican Army, Petronilo Rios would acquire a series of land grants from Mexican

Governors or private parties, as well as substantial lots in the pueblo of San Luis Obispo to the south. With two partners, Manuel Garcia and William Reed, Rios acquired Mission San Miguel and its adjoining lands from Governor Pio Pico on July 4, 1846. That date was significant: This would be the last Mexican land grant, transacted only three days before the US Navy under Commodore Sloat would arrive in Monterey and declare the end of Mexican sovereignty in Alta California. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February, 1848 would make that transfer formal,

and a few years later the new State of California would launch a legal process that ended in 1855 with the US Land Commission confirming the title that Rios and his partners had acquired.



The Rios-Caledonia Adobe sketched by Ernest Morris, 1969



Petronilo Rios

From 1851 until 1862, Petronilo Rios would make the adobe his home together with his wife, Catarina Avila Rios, and their nine children. They were all accorded American citizenship under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the US War with Mexico in 1848. Rios would prosper as an American, and in the 1851 assessment rolls, his claim to 53,280 acres almost matched that of the largest landowner in the County, Captain John Wilson (who also owned Mission San Luis Obispo). The value of his holdings exceeded \$35,000, but he never forgot his roots as a Californio under Mexican rule. In 1863, he sold the Adobe and its surrounding property to its first Anglo-American owners, and he died in May, 1870. Just before he died, he recorded a deed that cleared any claim by one of his former partners, Miguel Garcia, from the original 1845 purchase. The tragic story of Rios' other partner in the original purchase, William Reed, will be told in the Addendum below, which will focus on the nearby Mission San Miguel Arcangel, and the Reed family murder in 1848.

Explore the Museum that has been developed in the Adobe by the "Friends" group, where you will find a restored Wells Fargo office as well as re-creation of a classroom like that used in the 19th century when the Adobe served as one of the earliest educational institutions in the County. Part of the upstairs has also been restored to reflect the residence of later occupants of the Adobe.



Restored rooms in the Rios Caledonia Adobe



The restored Wells Fargo office



SITE 2

EL CAMINO REAL - LODGING/INN & STAGECOACH STOP - 1862-1885

Step outside the Adobe to the front (east side), and look to the north and south along the course of the El Camino Real – the King’s Highway. This stretch of the ancient road is one of the best-preserved segments of the original route that once stretched from Baja California and San Diego all the way to the northernmost of the Franciscan Missions of Spanish- and Mexican era California in Sonoma County.



El Camino Real on the east side of the adobe

In 1862, Petronilo Rios sold the Adobe and 160 acres surrounding it to a German immigrant, Warren Rickard, marking the first time that the site would pass out of the hands of Rios and his family. The transaction was made not from Rios himself, however, but rather from the State of California on a “possessory claim,” and Rickard soon subdivided the property, sold half of it for \$1,500, and then bought it back within two years for \$150 – the devaluation due, undoubtedly, to the devastating drought that had set in throughout the Central Coast and resulted in the death of thousands of head of cattle and other livestock.

Rickard and his brother did not remain in possession of the site for long, however: In 1868, he found a buyer in the form of a Scottish-Canadian immigrant by the name of George Butchart, who obtained the property for the sum of \$2,500. It was Butchart who is credited with applying the name “Caledonia” to the Adobe in honor of his native Scotland. The Butchart family resided in the Adobe and expanded it to operate as a hotel, saloon, store, post office and stagecoach stop after a four-horse stage began operation in 1870. The restored Wells Fargo office in the Museum represents one of the most important uses of the Caledonia, as a stagecoach stop where stage drivers and passengers could find relief and a hot meal as they continued their travel on the El Camino Real – but that was soon to change.

SITE 3

THE GROUNDS – THE RAILROAD ERA BRINGS REGIONAL PROSPERITY – 1886 – 1923

Over the course of the last decades of the 19th Century and into the 20th, the “Caledonia” became the center of thriving ranching and business enterprises.

The era of the stagecoach gave way to the “iron horse” of the Southern Pacific Railroad when it arrived in 1886, as passengers and freight were transported by rail from the townsite of San Miguel through to San Francisco. The rails would be completed south to Los Angeles by December 31, 1900 – just in time for the 20th Century.

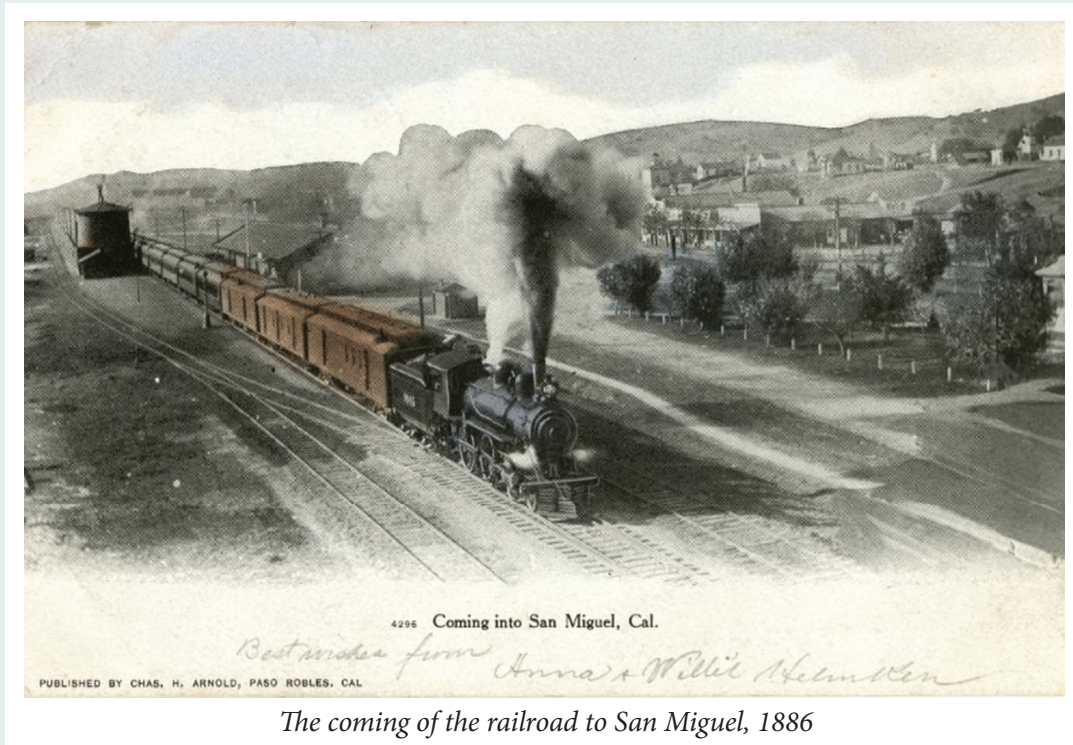
By the early 1900s, the townsite of San Miguel to the north hosted over 40 businesses including doctors and lawyers, groceries and feed stores, blacksmiths, livery stables, and two large flour mills.

The Caledonia would serve as an office for the first physician to serve the San Miguel region, Dr. George W. Jenks, who operated out of a horse and buggy. C.A. Jenks, a grandson of Dr. Jenks, was born in the Adobe in 1888. It also served as a residence for several families; as a school room; as a mattress making and upholstery shop; and as a dressmaking/tailor shop. By 1895, the Fred Telford family lived in the Adobe and operated a dairy farm on the 160 acre site.

In 1903, the land and the adobe became the home of a family of Swedish immigrants headed by Alfred (or Axel) Nygren

and his wife Anna, with an infant daughter Elsie. Their second daughter Lillian and third daughter Anna would be last children to be born in the Caledonia, and the Nygrens would be the last family to live in the adobe. Axel and Anna Nygrens moved their daughters to a newly-built wood frame home just to the west. That home would need to be moved further west in 1931 to accommodate the two-lane Highway 101 to go through in its new alignment, and again in 1954 when 101 became a four-lane freeway.

The Nygren family would reside on the property, if not in the Adobe itself, until World War II. They would see enormous changes to the property during their long tenure. The most significant of these changes took place as the railroad gave way to the newly paved State Highway constructed in 1915 along the old route of the El Camino Real. That alignment would bring far more visitors to the Caledonia – and, in 1923 a new buyer who carried a vision for a major new visitor-centered tourist attraction at the historic adobe.



The coming of the railroad to San Miguel, 1886

SITE 4 RESEARCH ROOM - HIGHWAY/TOURISM ERA - 1923 - 1964

Mr. Charles Dorries was a visionary entrepreneur who gave the Adobe and its 6-acre grounds a new life and a unique identity for most of the 40 years that he would own it. While his home would remain in Southern California, Mr. Dorries devoted most of his energies and decades of his life to restoring the deteriorated Adobe, landscaping the site and developing it as a tourist attraction. It was Mr. Dorries who would fight the State Division of Highways

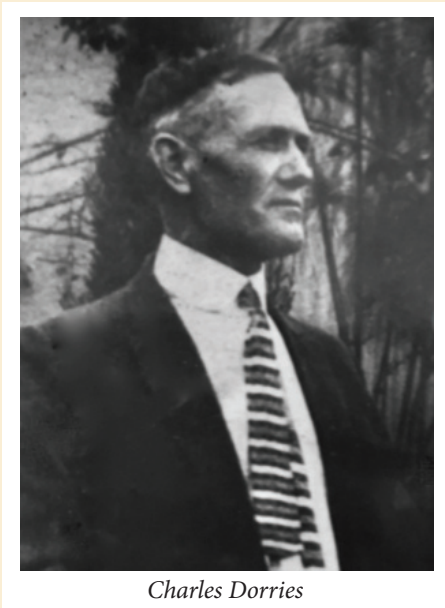
to save the Adobe from two successive projects to widen and relocate Highway 101 during his stewardship.

Charles Dorries was a veteran of the 1898 Spanish-American War and had spent 15 years as a real estate agent in Los Angeles. His plans for the Adobe were remarkably far-sighted for the time, seeing its potential as a museum and a monument to the early 19th century settlers of the region.

In 1927, Mr. Dorries added a room to the Adobe that now serves as the visitor entrance and gift shop. In 1930, he constructed this separate adobe building which was dedicated in 2016 as the Wallace Ohles Research Library and the office of the Friends of the Adobes. It's open on Fridays.

Charles Dorries also added landscaping, garden walls, and other features to the site to attract motorists on newly-designated Highway 101. Look for these elements on the grounds that illustrate how Mr. Dorries developed the site with “points of interest:”

- **Gas Pump:** Used from 1923-1954.
- **Rose Garden:** Constructed as a memorial to Mrs. Beulah Turnbow Mathews of San Miguel
- **Wishing Well and Rock Wall:** Visitor attractions added by Mr. Dorries.
- **Aviary:** Built by Mr. Dorries to accommodate his German canaries.
- **Water Cistern:** Built to collect rain water for use on the site.
- **Eucalyptus Tree:** See the massive tree which is believed to predate Mr. Dorries’ time.



Charles Dorries

In 1931, the State Division of Highways recognized the need to widen the narrow right-of-way of Highway 101 to accommodate the growing volume of traffic along this important coastal route. The logical solution would have been to simply demolish the Adobe, as the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks were an impenetrable barrier to the east. According to an article in the March, 1931 issue of California Highways and Public Works, it was the “policy of the



Antique gas pump

Division of Highways to conserve ... historical landmarks,” and as soon as the matter was brought to the attention of the District Office, ways and means of preserving this edifice were studied. It was suggested that a retaining wall might be constructed under the front of the building, or that the building be moved back, but upon investigation of the structure, it seemed doubtful whether either of these methods could be carried out with seriously endangering the old adobe toward which time and the elements had not been too kind.

Ultimately, it was decided to entirely re-align the highway to the west side of the Adobe – even though this new right-of-way required that the Nygren family move their own home to make way. Mr. Dorries had secured his first victory over the threat of highway development – but not his last.

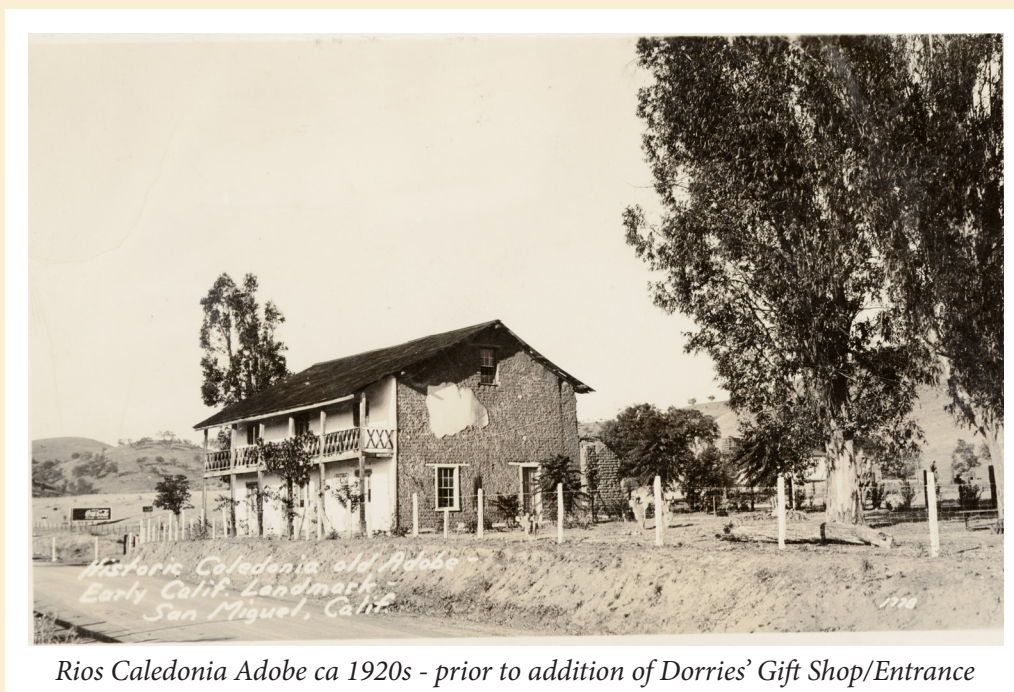
In 1955, the State proposed to develop a full limited-access freeway on this section of Highway 101, and Mr. Dorries again went into action and prevented the bulldozers from swallowing up the building, even though this phase of highway development encroached on the site and required that a new entry be developed from the north where the “old” highway intersected with a new intersection serving the south end of San Miguel. For Mr. Dorries, however, it was a pyrrhic victory: Ironically, just a year later he suffered a serious car accident and was disabled. His deteriorating health and advanced age led to a sad neglect of the site, and he died in 1968. By the

mid-60s, there was serious question as to whether the Adobe could be saved; the roof over the second floor had collapsed and much of the interior had been vandalized and ransacked.

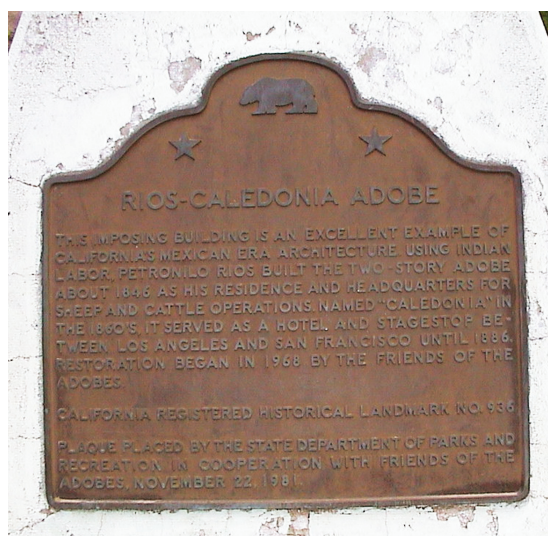
Fortunately, in 1964 a group of local residents persuaded the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors to purchase the six-acre site and designate it as a unit of the County Park system. In 1968, the Friends of the Adobes were organized as a non-profit corporation and entered into a management agreement with the County Parks & Recreation Department. Restoration of the adobe took several years:

The restored building was dedicated in 1972, and the Museum and Gift Shop were dedicated in 1978. In 1971, the property was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1981 the State Office of Historic Preservation designated the site as California Historical Monument #936. The Friends of the Adobes have just renewed their 5-year lease agreement with San Luis Obispo County through 2025.

**Please visit the web site for the Friends of the Adobes:
www.historic-rios-caledonia.org
for more information.**



Rios Caledonia Adobe ca 1920s - prior to addition of Dorries' Gift Shop/Entrance



Bronze plaque for State Historical Monument Number 936

ADDENDUM - MISSION SAN MIGUEL ARCÁNGEL

and the First Mass Murder in California, 1849

The history of the Rios-Caledonia Adobe is closely tied to the nearby Mission San Miguel Arcángel, which lies within walking distance just north of the Rios Caledonia Adobe. It is well worth a visit.

The Mission was founded in 1797 as the 16th mission in the chain of Franciscan missions, and for a quarter century the Mission served to extend the power and reach of the Kingdom of Spain and the Roman Catholic Church in Alta California. After the Mexican Republic gained its independence in 1821, however, the leaders ordered the Mission to be “secularized” – sold to private owners.

In 1846, Mexican Governor Pio Pico sold the Mission and the Adobe to Petronilo Rios, the retired Mexican Army officer who had originally supervised the construction of the Adobe that now bears his name. Two partners joined Rios in this purchase: Manuel Garcia, a fellow Californio, and William Reed, an English immigrant who settled into the Mission grounds with his Californio wife, Maria Antonia and their son. Little is known of Manuel Garcia; he would soon abandon his part of the enterprise – and indeed, the Reed family as well were not long to inhabit the old, decaying Mission.



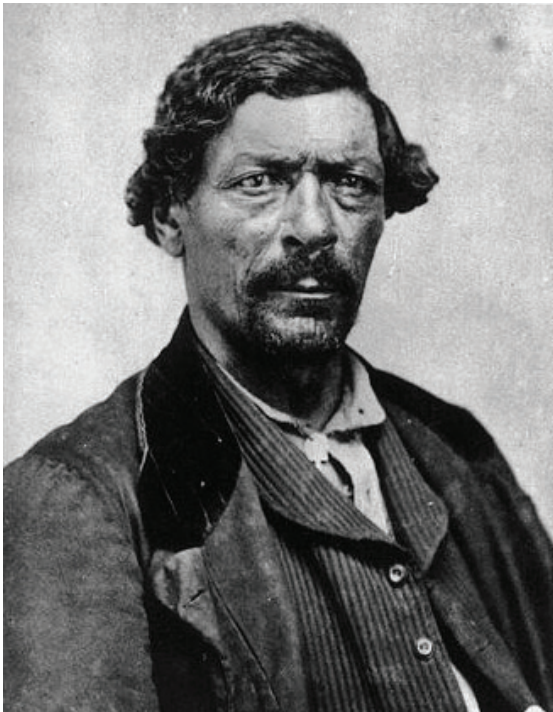
Mission San Miguel Arcángel
775 Mission Street, San Miguel



Aerial views courtesy of Google Earth

On December 5, 1848 the entire Reed household would be brutally murdered on the Mission grounds in the first mass murder in the history of California – even before the State was admitted to the United States. The victims included Reed, his wife Maria Antonia, their son (age 4), and their unborn child. In addition, there were seven other victims including Maria’s brother, Jose Ramon Vallejo; a mid-wife, Josefa Olivera; the 15-year old daughter and the grandson of Martin Olivera; a Negro cook; an Indian sheep-herder and his grandchild. Altogether, eleven men, women, and children were slain, counting the unborn child.

The perpetrators of the crime were, for the most part, a group of deserters from the US military in the just concluded War with Mexico. A few had already proven their ability to commit robbery and murder in the gold fields. The unfortunate William Reed had made the mistake of offering these men hospitality at the Mission, and compounded his error by showing off a portion of the gold he had obtained by selling sheep to the miners in the gold fields. The murders were committed with an axe, a sword, and a shotgun.



James Beckwourth

The bodies were discovered on December 5, 1889 by James Beckwourth, a famous explorer and a former enslaved mountain man. He knew the Reeds from his work delivering mail along the El Camino Real. Beckwourth helped to get the word out, and ultimately got word to Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman at the Monterey headquarters of the Tenth Military District.

A posse was quickly organized by Francis Branch and John Michael Price, local rancheros who were just returned from driving livestock to the gold country. The killers were able to escape south as far as Santa Barbara before a Santa Barbara posse caught up with them, ambushing them on the spot as they were rising from their campsite on the beach

at Summerland. One member of the posse was killed in the ensuing gun battle, along with two of the desperadoes. The three surviving members of the outlaw gang were tried by a military tribunal in Santa Barbara under the leadership of Colonel Edward O.C. Ord.

Having been duly convicted, the three men were executed by firing squad in Santa Barbara on December 28, 1848, and subsequently buried in the cemetery of Mission Santa Barbara.



Maj. Gen. Edward O.C. Ord

With his servants, Petronilo Rios took on the responsibility of burying the butchered remains of his business partner William Reed and the other victims. The gravesite that he chose is within the Mission compound, just outside and a little to the southwest of the rear door of the sacristy and near the old first church wall.

Upon learning the fate of five men responsible for the murder, Rios asked that all recovered money (a substantial quantity of silver plus a little gold and currency) be given to the widow of Ramon Rodriguez, the member of the Santa Barbara posse who was killed by the murderers in the ambush at Summerland.

RIOS CALEDONIA ADOBE - MISSION SAN MIGUEL ARCÁNGEL

Sources and Resources for the Walking Tour

SOURCES: *Here are some recommended sources for further reading:*

Web site for “Historic Rios Caledonia Adobe” by Friends of the Adobes,

<https://www.historic-rios-caledonia.org/history>, accessed September 8, 2021.

Wallace Ohles, The Lands of Mission San Miguel, Friends of the Adobes, Inc., San Miguel, California, 1997, 2nd Printing 2001.*

Richard B. Rice, William A. Bullough, and Richard J. Orsi, The Elusive Eden: A New History of California, McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2002.

Ramon A. Gutierrez and Richard J. Orsi, editors, Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush, University of California Press, 1998.

Annie L. Morrison and John H. Haydon, Pioneers of San Luis Obispo County and Environs, Friends of the Adobes, San Miguel, California, 2002. Printed in Association with Word Dancer Press, Sanger, California. *

Jim Gregory, San Luis Obispo County Outlaws: Desperados, Vigilantes and Bootleggers, The History Press, 2017. Available at History Center of San Luis Obispo Book Store.**

Myron Angel, History of San Luis Obispo County, California, originally published 1883, reprinted by Valley Publishers, 1979.*

RESOURCES: *The History Center also recommends these community organizations who work with us to improve our understanding of our shared history and our evolving diversity, and recognizing the need for improved social equity and inclusion of historically neglected minorities and indigenous cultures:*

Salinan Tribe of Monterey and San Luis Obispo Counties - <https://salinatribe.com/>

Diversity Coalition of San Luis Obispo - <https://www.diversityslo.org/>

NAACP, San Luis Obispo Chapter – <http://naacpslocty.org>

Latino Outreach Council - <https://latinooutreachcouncil.org/>

Yak titʷu titʷu tilhini yak tityu (ytt) Northern Chumash - <http://www.yttnorthernchumash.org/>

R.A.C.E. Matters San Luis Obispo - <https://www.racemattersslo.org/welcome>

California Law Enforcement Historical Society Museum - <http://calpolicehistory.com/>

*Available for purchase at Rios Caledonia Adobe, Friends of the Adobes Gift Shop.

** Available for purchase at History Center of San Luis Obispo Book Store.