

This tour was published in March 2021, when the Covid-19 pandemic was active. Please wear a mask/face covering and maintain a social distance of 6 ft from people not in your household. Visit www.emergencyslo.org for the latest in public health advice.

HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

MISSION PLAZA IN 1858 AND THE COMMITTEE OF VIGILANCE



A Self-Guided Walking Tour Through a Historic Neighborhood

INTRODUCTION

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE VIGILANTES—AND THEIR VICTIMS

Mission Plaza has been described as “the jewel of downtown San Luis Obispo.” Most residents and visitors link this site to the origin story Spanish padres. They held a Mass nearby in 1772, and began construction of the mission complex at this site in 1794, the fifth in the chain of 21 California Missions.

The Plaza has been used for joyful community events, and as the entrance to Mission church services. Obscured is a darker history: In May and June of 1858, in front of the Mission, a self-appointed Committee of Vigilance used the Mission as a jail and impromptu courthouse, and systematically hunted down and hanged seven “Californios” (people native to California prior to the 1850 Statehood). Because they had been Mexican citizens prior to the War with Mexico, these men were deemed US citizens when the war ended in 1848; they were still American citizens ten years later when their necks were stretched.

The “official story” is that the Vigilantes had rid the County of murderous

bandits, the so-called “Powers-Linares Gang.” The truth is more complicated.

This Self-Guided Tour tells the story of one woman and four men at the center of the 1858 Vigilance activity in Mission Plaza: Ramona Carrillo de Pacheco ys Wilson, her son Romualdo Pacheco, Jr. and Walter Murray (the Vigilantes), and Jack Powers and Pio Linares (their victims).

The violence that permeates the story of the Committee of Vigilance casts a shadow over Mission Plaza. There’s a lighter story of Ramona Carrillo de Pacheco y Wilson however: Her faith and devotion to her son, to her extended family, and to her community clearly helped to pacify San Luis Obispo and to all of California during the earliest hours of its transition to American rule, even after 175 years.

Step into the story and begin the tour at “Site 1,” now the home of our SLO County History Center, formerly the Carnegie Free Library (1905) at the south end of Mission Plaza. In 1858, this was the “town home” site of Ramona Carrillo de Pacheco y Wilson and her husband Captain John Wilson.



*Mission Plaza Guide to the Sites
Courtesy of the City of San Luis Obispo*

SITE 1
MONTEREY STREET
1905-LIBRARY/1858-WILSON HOUSE

This building was constructed as the County's first library building in 1905 with a \$10,000 grant from Andrew Carnegie. Today it's the headquarters of the History Center of San Luis Obispo County and houses our Museum, Research Room, Gift Shop, and staff offices.



In 1858, this property was site of the "town home" of the family of Captain John Wilson, a Scottish immigrant whose parlayed his wealth acquired in the Pacific shipping trade into acquiring land in Mexican California to become one of the largest and richest landowners in the county.



The Wilson home at this site was likely the first wood-framed residence in San Luis Obispo. The house burned to the ground in 1898.

John Wilson was able to purchase Mexican property because of his marriage to his Californio wife, Ramona. She was the daughter in a prominent Santa Barbara family. When she met Wilson she was a widow with two young sons. In 1845, Captain Wilson was able to purchase the Mission property from Mexican Governor Pio Pico. Wilson paid \$510.

Ramona Carillo de Pacheco y Wilson took advantage of her home's proximity to the Mission, the church portion still a church, according to an account by local historian and artist Joan Sullivan: "Mrs. Wilson, an extremely religious person, attended Church three of four times a day and used the walk of flagstones connecting their home with the mission, wearing 'deep hollows in the stone by her feet, passing into the chapel for prayer.'"

From her home at this site, Ramona Wilson considered it her Christian duty to protect the children of the pueblo in this time of violence. According to local historian Dan Krieger, Mrs. Wilson "invited each and every child to her home to protect the children in this time of violence." Dan wrote of the experience of young Anita Murray, one of the daughters of Walter Murray, the close neighbor of Ramona Wilson and the founder of the Committee of Vigilance (see **Site 4**): "When the time came to hang the bandidos, Doña Ramona urged the children to come out onto the balcony. She told them to cover their eyes and pray for the souls of the unfortunate men who were fated to slowly strangle in the wind. The makeshift gallows was scarcely more than spitting distance from the children. Each child dutifully covered his or her eyes, leaving ample space between each finger permitting a full view of the gory proceedings."



Woman alleged to be Ramona Carillo de Pacheco y Wilson and third son John.

For your own view of the site where these “gory proceedings” took place, cross Monterey Street to Site 2.

SITE 2 INTERSECTION OF MONTEREY AND BROAD STREET—SITE OF THE VIGILANTE’S GALLOWES

This intersection is the place where most of the hangings of the accused victims of the Committee of Vigilance occurred in May and June of 1858.



The area for the execution that Ramona Wilson would have seen from her balcony. (Present-Day Carnegie Library/History Center.)

And this is the place to begin the intersecting stories of four men who played “starring roles” in these events: Walter Murray, Romualdo Pacheco Jr., Jack Powers and Pio Linares. These four men squared off in 1858 from opposite corners of society: Two were *Californios*, and two were Anglos. Two of these men were “Establishment” leaders in the Committee that used this site to lynch the alleged members of the “Powers Linares Gang,” and the other two were the leaders of the gang.*

Neither Powers nor Linares met their maker at this site, but most of the men who were executed here were reputed to be in their gang. Six alleged bandidos were summarily executed

at this site without any due process. Five had been fingered as members of the Powers-Linares “gang.” Who were these unfortunate men? What were the charges against them? And why did Vigilantes organize, ignore the Constitutional rights afforded to criminal defendants, and hang them here?

Two of the men’s stories are told here. The spate of vigilante violence all stemmed from a gruesome triple murder: On May 12, 1858, Bartolome Baratie and Jose Borel, two Basque immigrants who had recently settled as ranchers in the North County, were brutally murdered by a gang of assailants allegedly from the Powers-Linares gang. Baratie’s wife Andrea, was abducted by one gang member. Others murdered a third man, witness Jack Gilkey, whose murder was based solely on the operating principle of the gang that “dead men tell no tales.”

One member of the gang failed to fulfill that commandment: Luciano Tapia, aka “El Mesteno” (mestizo, or mixed indigenous and European). He secretly spared the lives of two household servants, Ysidro Silvas and Luis Morillo. Though Tapia had also been ordered to kill Baratie’s wife, instead he conveyed her north to San Juan Bautista, taking a full eight days, where she later escaped (or was released, in Tapia’s account).

The two servants fled to the nearby ranch of Captain David Mallagh. The following day, May 13, Mallagh escorted Silvas to San Luis Obispo where his testimony was taken before a judge. Mallagh and Silvas then searched the saloons and pool halls in the pueblo, and before long, Silvas identified one of the murderers, Santos Peralta.



*Walter Murray
Journalist, Attorney*



*Romualdo Pacheco
Only Hispanic Governor of California*

The Sheriff arrested Peralta and threw him into the jail that local authorities had created in the old Mission convento (**Site 3**) – but Peralta did not survive the night: An angry mob of townsmen broke in and seized the prisoner, hanging him from the roof of the jail. No testimony was taken; no confession was obtained. According to historian Pete Kelley, there was no evidence against him apart from Silvas' placing him at the scene of the crime. He had no attorney, and the mob didn't even wait to construct a gallows for the alleged murderer.

Neither Jack Powers nor Pio Linares were at the scene of the crimes in North County. Rumors about their involvement were sufficient to incite the crowd to find them, and to look for several *Californios* presumed to have been part of the murderous assault.

The second victim of the public outrage following the murders was clearly NOT a member of the gang, "Joaquin" Valenzuela who was a victim of mistaken identity. Some sources indicate that this "Joaquin" was actually Jesus Valenzuela, younger brother of the real Joaquin, but to the State of California, Jesus had been identified as "Joaquin" Ochomorenio – a childhood nickname – and both brothers had been named as two of the "Five Joaquins," led by the infamous bandit

Joaquin Murietta. The real Joaquin Valenzuela had been killed in an 1853 shootout, along with Murietta (whose pickled head was displayed throughout California, for many years, and for a price to thousands of curious onlookers). By 1858, however the younger brother Jesus, had long since left the gang. He was employed as a ranch hand on Rancho San Emidio in Cuyama.

On May 14, just two days after the triple murder, and one day after the lynching of Santos Peralta, Sheriff Francisco Castro organized a posse to search for the men who had committed the murders. After several days, they arrived at Rancho San Emidio in the Cuyama Valley, and there they found Jesus Valenzuela, aka "Joaquin Ochomorenio." They brought him back to the jail in the convento of the Mission (**Site 3**). There they interrogated him, and held him overnight on unrelated murders and other unspecified crimes.

The day after his arrest and incarceration, May 20, the newly-formed "Committee of Vigilance," led by one Walter Murray (**Site 4**) held a public "trial," built a gallows at this site, and hanged Jesus Valenzuela (aka "Joaquin") in broad daylight and in full public view - including that of the children cowering in Ramona Wilson's home (**Site 1**) only a few feet away.



*Pio Linares
"Gang Leader"*

*Neither "gang"
leader" was
hanged, but
both suffered
horrible deaths*

**For more
biographical
information
see the
accompanying
"Guide to the
Main
Characters."*



*Depiction of Jack Powers, "ladies'
man," from the cover of Pete Kelley's
book "The Quick and the Dead,"
as there is no known
photograph of him.*

SITE 3

PARISH HALL MISSION SAN LUIS OBISPO—SITE OF 1858 JAIL & COURTHOUSE



Convento wing of Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa.

Colonnade area used as a jail by the sheriff.

Painting by Edwin Deakin, 1899.

Courtesy of the Santa Barbara Mission Archives and Library.

In 1858, at the time of the Vigilantes, the convento wing of the Mission was still being used by the Sheriff as a jail and courthouse. It is here that the seven *Californios* were incarcerated before their execution.

In 1857, this wing had also served as the jail and the courtroom for the trial of Nieves Robles, charged with the murder of two Basque men, cattle drovers this time, on Peachtree Road northwest of Paso Robles. In late December, Robles was arrested on suspicion of the crime, but on that occasion, he was given a trial AND an attorney. It would be another century before accused criminals would be entitled to a Public Defender – so who would defend this miscreant, known to have committed similar crimes in Northern California but never convicted? None other than Walter Murray, the young lawyer who had just passed the bar and was seeking to build his reputation among the other white “Americans” who were flocking to town. And who paid Murray’s bill? Not Robles himself, but his friend and drinking companion Jack Powers.

With Murray’s representation, and with no evidence nor any reliable witnesses to place him at the scene of the crime, Robles was acquitted and allowed to walk free on March 5, 1858.

The trial of Nieves Robles, Murray later claimed, was tainted by the presence of *Californios* with Spanish/Mexican ancestry on the jury. In a letter to his sister, he wrote that “public opinion among this bastard people cannot be trusted... Law could not help us. Law was powerless anyhow before a jury of these people.”

Robles could not have known that when he was acquitted and walked out of the courtroom on March 5, he had only a few months to live: On June 28, he would be the last of the seven *Californios* to die on the gallows – this time facing organized Vigilantes, however, without the benefit of a trial or a skilled attorney like Walter Murray. In fact, Murray had “switched sides” and by that time, he was a leader of the Vigilantes.



Deakin altered his vision of the mission, as the extension to the mission building is clearly seen in a photograph dated between 1880-1889, years prior to Deakin painting it.

The next two victims of the Vigilantes were, respectively, Luciano Tapia and Juan Antonio Garcia. To understand how the Committee of Vigilance was created, and why it ultimately was disbanded, cross the walkway to Site 4, the remains of the Murray Adobe.

SITE 4

WALTER MURRAY ADOBE AND THE COMMITTEE OF VIGILANCE



The Murray adobe was clad in boards as shown in this 1971 photograph. The boards were meant to modernize and protect the baked mud bricks, but the moisture trapped inside resulted in its deterioration. The image below shows the restored, and only wing left of the building.

In 1859, a deed was recorded transferring title of this property to Walter Murray, the leader of the Committee of Vigilance. Murray provided details of Committee activities in the earliest history of San Luis Obispo County by author Myron Angel (1883).

It is not known definitively that this adobe, (clad in boards above) existed in 1858, or whether Murray had it built later. When constructed, Murray advertised it as his law offices. The adobe was also the original office of the *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, founded by Walter Murray in 1869, still published as the County's "newspaper of record."

May 20, 1858 was a dramatic day in the story of Murray and the Vigilantes. This was eight days after the triple murder and a week after the angry mob lynched Santos Peralta in the jail at **Site 3**. Sheriff Francisco Castro and a 15-man posse had been scouring the countryside for the banditos, but they had returned with no prisoners except for the luckless "Joaquin" whose story is recounted in Site 1.

It began very early—3 a.m., according to Walter Murray. Sheriff Castro, Murray and his posse, tried to arrest Pio Linares, the alleged leader of the gang. Linares was at home with his wife in the adobe that still stands on Andrews Street.



When confronted, Linares escaped amidst a hail of bullets to the Los Osos Valley, not far from the adobe where he had been raised on his late father's land grant. Linares and a few of his gang members eluded the Vigilantes for three weeks.

Later that morning, when Murray learned that the posse had failed to take Linares, he met with the posse and organized them into a "Committee of Vigilance," a popular form of frontier justice that had already been employed in San Francisco and Los Angeles to suppress the alleged criminal behavior of various "non-American" criminals (i.e., Chinese, Chileans, *Californios*, etc.).

The Committee dispatched a posse to San Francisco to locate and arrest gang leader Jack Powers. But he had been

warned and escaped the dragnet. Powers sent word that he would return voluntarily to San Luis Obispo to face his accusers. The Vigilantes awaited his expected arrival on the steamship Senator at Avila Bay on June 4, but Powers absconded to Mexico on another boat.

Meanwhile, on June 3, Luciano Tapia (**Site 2**) returned to the county “escorting” Andrea Baratie, the surviving widow of the Baratie/Borel murder. After a short search, a posse promptly arrested Tapia and hauled him before Murray’s Committee of Vigilance for interrogation.

Tapia was the only member of the gang who gave a complete description of the murders, pointing the finger at others and denying that he had kidnapped Mrs. Baratie. He certainly expected mercy for having convinced Froilan Servin to spare the lives of the two servants and Andrea Baratie. No mercy was shown: The Committee extracted a lengthy statement from their prisoner, ten men signed his death sentence, and Tapia was hanged the very same day, June 3 at **Site 2**.

On June 8, the Vigilantes made another “arrest” – this one of Jose Antonia Garcia. The arresting officer was “Sheriff” D.D. Blackburn, who captured Garcia in Santa Barbara and transported him to SLO where he gave testimony that tied him to an earlier murder of two cattle drovers. Garcia denied taking part in the actual murders—but his protestation of innocence did not help. The Vigilantes allowed him to write a letter to his mother, and then he too was led to the gallows at **Site 2**.

On June 11, the Vigilantes learned that Pio Linares had been spotted hiding out in the dense woodland in the Los Osos Valley. A posse of Vigilantes found him and two comrades, hidden in the brush. A two-day shootout ensued, resulted in the death of one Vigilante (John Matlock), the wounding of two others (including Walter Murray), and a fatal shot to the head of Pio Linares.

The other two alleged bandidos, Miguel Blanco and Desiderio Grijalva, were apprehended alive. The Committee brought them to the jail, forced a confession from them, and held a public trial at the Mission courtroom the next day. The hanging was delayed until Monday, June 14, as Sunday was the day of John Matlock’s funeral, attended by most in the town.

Having killed Linares and put two of the gang on the gallows, the Committee of Vigilance now gained significant new membership. At its peak, the Committee’s roster included

almost 100 names—and a third were Hispanic.

The Committee dispatched one of its most prominent members, Californios Romualdo Pacheco, to Los Angeles in pursuit of “El Huero,” Rafael Herrada. El Huero had been hiding out with Pio Linares, Miguel Blanco, and Desiderio Grijalva, but he managed to avoid capture during the extended shootout in the Los Osos Valley.

Pacheco was already a State Senator at the age of 26, and destined for much bigger things*. He and his posse were hot on the trail of El Huero for weeks, but never caught him. They DID, however, catch up with Nieves Robles in Santa Barbara. Pacheco transported Robles back to San Luis Obispo and handed him over to Sheriff Castro. As with the others however, the Vigilantes forced Castro to give up Robles to them.

There’s no record of a statement by Robles, nor any written charges by the Committee of Vigilance; it was simply understood that he had associated with Linares, and was named by one or more witnesses. He was hanged on June 28—the last of the seven Californios to be lynched in this spate of retribution set in motion by the triple murder in North County.

One more member of the Powers Linares Gang would be captured in September: Froilan Servin, who had participated in the murders of Borel and Baratie. He’d been persuaded by the late Luciano Tapia to spare the lives of the two servants. Servin actually got a trial, and in November he was convicted and sentenced to seventeen years of hard labor at San Quentin. His defense attorney in that trial? Walter Murray. (Servin died soon after in the harsh conditions at San Quentin).

The Committee of Vigilance disbanded after the hanging of Nieves Robles, the seventh *Californios* presumed to be associated with the Powers-Linares Gang, or with Joaquin Murietta. In the 160+ years since these events, our criminal justice system has tried to assure due process for criminal defendants in compliance with the Constitution. This system can always be improved, especially to assure that people of color are treated equitably. Nonetheless, we have moved beyond the dark days of 1858.

The Tour of 1858 Mission Plaza now moves to the front of the Mission at **Site 5**. We return to the story of Ramona and her role in bringing peace, mercy, and justice to California in 1846, as the state was shifting from the tenuous jurisdiction of the *Californios* to its destiny in union with the United States of America.

SITE 5
MISSION SAN LUIS OBISPO
DE TOLOSA



This site places the visitor in the heart of Mission Plaza, facing the front of the building that has meant so much to the cultural, religious, and civic identity of San Luis Obispo. This Mission was founded in 1772 by Father Junipero Serra, with a cross first erected near the south end of present-day Dana Street, a few blocks away. The building that stands today dates from 1794—with later additions. At the time, it was the largest of the five missions; it remains today the oldest large public building still standing in California.

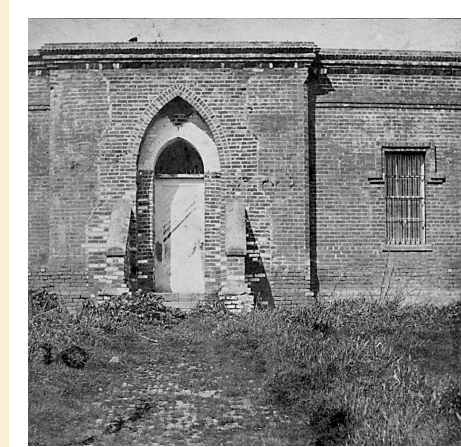
All of the missions in California owe their existence to the Franciscan order of friars, dedicated to the precepts of Saint Francis, the patron saint of peace. Saint Francis surely would have objected to the vigilante violence that disturbed “his” mission in 1858—but his Franciscan brethren had no power to do so: The San Luis Obispo Mission was not owned by the church.

By 1859, the Vigilantes had disbanded. This Mission was still owned by Captain John Wilson, and served as the site of one more murder trial and hanging. This time an “official” trial was held before an elected judge and Sheriff. This criminal proceeding was, in fact, the first and the last time that this grisly form of execution would be conducted legally in San Luis Obispo.

The prisoner was Luis Cariziza, a *Californio* convicted of murdering Francisco Alviso, another *Californio*. Sheriff Francisco Castro was paid \$20 on top of his monthly \$25 salary to apply the sentence to Cariziza. The hanging may have

occurred within the Mission quadrangle, although some sources place it at **Site 2**, the same location as the gallows used by the Vigilantes.

In 1861, Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa would be returned to the Catholic Church. Over the succeeding years, the County would build a separate jail and courthouse to house its prisoners and provide for a proper criminal trial in conformance with the Constitution.



*Jail at
Santa Rosa and Palm.*

A Flashback:
Story of Ramona Carrillo de Pacheco y Wilson

Ramona Carrillo de Pacheco y Wilson* was introduced at **Site 1**. It was here at **Site 5**, in the priest’s room at this Mission, that Ramona Wilson played a central role in pacifying Alta California as it went through its last throes of the War with Mexico.

On a stormy day in mid-December, 1846, Ramona Wilson went to work to PREVENT an execution—twelve years before the Committee of Vigilance was organized to suppress a perceived spate of violent crime by carrying out the hangings **Site 2**.

In the Fall of 1846, Lt. Col. John C. Fremont had been ordered to organize a well-armed force of 400+ American soldiers to march from Monterey, the occupied capital of Alta California, to Los Angeles to suppress a surprisingly successful revolt by the *Californios* against American forces in that city. On November 14, a force of *Californios* briefly skirmished with Fremont’s men in the Battle of Natividad. The *Californios* inflicted only a handful of casualties on the



Lt. Col. John C. Fremont

Americans, who were able to fend off the *Californios* and deliver their horses. Fremont's 400 men and 2000 mounts then headed south, expecting to encounter resistance in San Luis Obispo.



Henry Dally

Fremont's "California Battalion" swept down Cuesta Grade at nightfall into the sleeping town and occupied the Mission without firing a shot. At Fremont's command, they forced a local Anglo, Henry Dally (later San Luis Obispo's first sheriff), to reveal that *Californio* commander Don Jose Pico had taken refuge at the adobe in the Los Osos Valley—the same adobe that Victor Linares had constructed on his Mexican land grant decades earlier, and sold to John Wilson.

With Henry Dally as a hostage, Fremont dispatched a guard to apprehend Pico that night despite a drenching rain that obscured all paths through the flooded Los Osos Valley. After a tortuous slog through the mud, the soldiers surprised Pico, hauled him back to face a furious Colonel Fremont, who ordered Pico to be executed by firing squad the following day.

Pico's offense? He had joined the *Californios* who had attacked Fremont's California Battalion at the Battle of Natividad, breaking an earlier promise to abandon resistance to American occupation.

That evening, Ramona Wilson gathered a procession of women and children that included her own six children, several other local wives and Pico's wife and family. Don Jose de Jesus Pico, aka "Totoi," was her cousin, and he and his wife Francisca Antonia Villavicencia de Pico were leading citizens among the *Californios*. Their mission: To obtain mercy for cousin "Totoi," even as Fremont's American soldiers were polishing their rifles in the shelter of the Mission, preparing to carry out his death sentence as ordered.

This procession somehow worked magic. On that fateful December night, Dona Pacheco y Wilson, Dona Villavicencia de Pico, and their children succeeded in turning the flinty heart of Colonel Fremont. At the last moment he commuted Pico's sentence of death. The result: Fremont gained a lifelong friend and ally in Don Jose. Within a few weeks, Don Jose helped negotiate the peaceful surrender of Alta California to Fremont by his cousin Andres Pico at Campo Cahuenga in present-day Universal City, the site of an earlier battle that killed Ramona Wilson's first husband.

* See the "Guide to the Main Characters" published separately.

HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

SOURCES AND RESOURCES FOR THIS WALKING TOUR

MISSION PLAZA IN 1858 AND THE COMMITTEE OF VIGILANCE

SOURCES: Here are some recommended sources for further reading:

Pete Kelley. *The Quick and the Dead: Resistance, Banditry, and Vigilantism Revisited on the Central Coast*. Self-published: 2020.*

Jim Gregory. *San Luis Obispo County Outlaws: Desperados, Vigilantes and Bootleggers*. The History Press: 2017.*

Gary Hoving. *San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department*. Arcadia Publishing: 2011.*

Loren Nicholson. *Romualdo Pacheco's California – The Mexican American Who Won, California Heritage Publishing Associates*. 1990.**

Joan Sullivan. *Los Osos Valley: The Valley of the Bears*. Articles selected from *THE BAY NEWS* column, "La Canada de Los Osos 1989-1993." September 1995, 8th printing, September 2016.**

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

Joseph Hall-Patton. "Pacifying Paradise: Violence and Vigilantism in San Luis Obispo." Masters thesis, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2016.**

Vigilance Committee Papers, History Center Collections, various dates and contributors.**

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:*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Available for purchase at the History Center of San Luis Obispo bookstore.

** Available for reference in the Research Room of History Center of San Luis Obispo.