

How just/unjust were Indian Removal and land acquisitions in Humboldt County?



Background:

By: Pamela Service, Archivist from <https://www.humboldthistory.org/a-brief-history>

In 1850, settlers and gold seekers found what they were seeking in what was to become Humboldt County, California. They named their first settlement and future county seat Eureka classical Greek for "I found it."

However, for many centuries before, the area had been the ideal home for others. The boundaries of future Humboldt County contained the home territory of several tribes, most prominently the Wiyot, Yurok, Hupa, Karuk and Tolowa. Though speaking languages from three different language families, these groups shared similar beliefs, social structures and material culture.

All were predominantly hunter-gathers, but the area's mild climate and abundant resources allowed the people to live in permanent villages and to nurture wild plants. Subsisting on acorns, game, coastal shellfish, and the rivers' abundant salmon and trout, they developed elaborate ceremonials and the art of fine basket making. They experienced little warfare because disputes within and between groups were generally settled by paying compensation. The people lived in close harmony with their environment and each other.

That harmony was shattered in 1848 when Shasta County rancher Pierson Reading discovered gold in the Trinity Mountains. Although Spanish explorers and Russian fur hunters had earlier touched Humboldt's coastline, it took a month-long westward expedition led by Josiah Gregg to establish a route between the Trinity gold fields and the coast. In April 1850, the *Laura Virginia* became the first American ship to enter the bay, the adventurers on board naming it Humboldt after the famous German scientist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt.

Soon fortune seekers flocked to the area by ship and over the mountains. Humboldt County did not prove a major source of gold although to the east Willow Creek and Orleans developed mining-based economies, and beach sand under Gold Bluffs was worked with limited success. However, the coastal towns of Eureka, Arcata (originally called Union) and Trinidad grew into prosperous and notoriously rowdy ports and supply centers for the mines. Pack trains moved gold seekers and supplies into the mountains, and one of California's first railroads was built in Arcata to transport goods from the wharfs to the town plaza.

The miners and early settlers, however, usurped or destroyed the resources on which the native populations depended. Conflict led to massacres, the establishment of government forts and forced resettlement. These practices, as well as introduction of diseases, destroyed some tribes entirely. Others, however, have retained their identity and many aspects of their culture.

Timber, Humboldt's "red gold", was soon found to be a resource as valuable as minerals. Massive redwood trees, some over 2000 years old and as tall as 300 feet, thrived in the narrow fog belt along California's northwest coast. Felling and milling activities began almost immediately as lumbermen, used to smaller eastern trees, developed new techniques and tools to deal with the huge redwoods. Timber companies multiplied, expanding operations inland, building rail links and scattering the area with small lumber-based towns and temporary camps.

The need to ship out timber plus the ready availability of wood stimulated a local ship building industry. Fishing for crab, oysters, ocean fish and even whales grew into major industries. Humboldt, Shelter Cove and Trinidad soon supported active fishing fleets. The rugged coastline sprouted lighthouses in an attempt to protect shipping, but the area remained the site of numerous spectacular wrecks.

The land itself and the area's moderate climate proved to be other valuable resources. Farmers from many parts of the world were drawn to the rich soils around Humboldt Bay and several river bottoms, while the hills provided good grazing. Sheep raised here produced exceptional fleece, and the dairy industry prospered. Fruit growing was also successful with the area becoming particularly known for apples.

Humboldt towns grew, and the more prosperous citizens built elegant homes using local wood. The difficulties of road travel over the mountains, and the dangers and discomfort of sea travel, kept the area fairly isolated. Residents developed an attitude of rugged independence. The "redwood curtain" began to part, however, in the early 20th century with the completion of rail connections, building the Redwood Highway and the rise of automobile use. Tourism quickly joined timber and fishing as a major industry. Movements to preserve the redwoods led to creation of local, state and national parks. Though this cut into timber profits, it bolstered tourism and preserved endangered species. The natural and architectural beauty of the area, plus relative accessibility to Hollywood, made Humboldt County the setting for many films from the silent era to the present.

Today, despite over a century and a half of change, Humboldt County remains true to its roots. It is an area where people and their natural environment are strongly interdependent. It is a place where many longing for an ideal home can still cry "Eureka!"

Questions:

1. Describe the local tribes of Humboldt County.
2. What happened to the area in 1845?
3. How were the tribes impacted by contact with white settlers?

Vocabulary: (research)

Land ownership

Massacre

Reappropriation

Industry

Land acquisition-

Document A:



Questions:

1. What is a massacre?
2. How many massacres do you count on this map?
3. What is a reason for or against massacring people to obtain their land?

Document B:

Governor Peter H. Burnett-

“That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected; while, we cannot anticipate this result with but painful regret, the inevitable destiny of this race is beyond the power and wisdom of man to avert.”

(From: https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_01-Burnett2.html)

Governor John Bigler-

“They seem to cherish an instinctive hatred toward the white race, and this is a principle of their nature which neither time nor vicissitude can impair. This principle of hatred is hereditary, and it is transmitted from the live to the Son by example and by injunction..... That Whites and Indians cannot live in close proximity in peace ...that an ultimate evacuation of the Northern Counties by the Whites or the Indians will be unavoidable.”

(From: <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/j67316090>)

Questions:

1. How does Governor Peter H. Burnett view the relationship between white and Native Americans?
2. How does this person describe Native Americans?
3. How does Governor John Bigler view the relationship between white and Native Americans?
4. How does this person describe Native Americans?
5. What are the reasons these men provided for/against removing Native Americans from their land?

Document C:

“Indian Island is the center of the Wiyot People's world. It is home to the ancient village of Tuluwat, and a traditional site of the World Renewal Ceremony. Once a year, the Wiyot people would get together for the World Renewal Ceremony. During this ceremony, all people were welcomed, no one was turned away. The leader of the Humboldt Bay Wiyot People was a man named Captain Jim. He was the man who would organize and lead the ceremony to start the new year.

The ceremony would continue for at least seven to ten days. It was held at the village 29 site of Tuluwat on the northern part of the island. Traditionally, the men would leave the island and return the next day with the day's supplies. The elders, women and children were left to rest on the island along with a few men.

Early on the cool winter morning of February 26, 1860, a group of settlers armed with hatchets, clubs and knives (they left their guns behind so that their presence on the Island would not be known to the nearby neighbors in Eureka) paddled to what is now known as Indian Island. There, sleeping Wiyot men, women and children, exhausted from a week of ceremonial dance were caught unaware and brutally slain.

This was not the only massacre that took place that night. Two other village sites were raided. One was on the Eel River and another on the South Spit. Eighty to one hundred people or more were slain that night. A baby, Jerry James (Captain Jim's son), was the only infant that survived from the massacre on the Island.

The Wiyot people were decimated. For their protection, the Wiyot people were corralled at Fort Humboldt. This was another case of the Army protecting the Indigenous People of California from the violent and barbaric settlers. Later, some were herded to other Indian centers within California. However, they would keep returning to their homeland.”
(From: <https://semspub.epa.gov/work/HQ/100001200.pdf>)

Questions:

1. What was the World Renewal Ceremony?
2. What happened on February 26, 1860?
3. What's a reason(s) for why the massacre happened? Could it have been prevented, and if so, why?

Document D:

Watch the video The Return of Indian Island 11/06/2019

<https://www.pbs.org/video/retro-local-return-indian-island/>

Questions:

1. What happened on December 4th, 2018?
2. Why did the City of Eureka return the land to Wiyot Tribe?
3. Why was this a momentous moment in history?
4. What are the reasons for/again returning the land to the tribe?

Put it all together:

Write a two-paragraph response to:

How just/unjust was Indian Removal and the land acquisition in Humboldt County? Include direct information from the documents. Use vocabulary words: land, massacre, reappropriate, just/unjust, and industry.