California was one of the last places that Spain colonized in the New World. In addition to establishing presidios and missions, the government of Spain also made land available to private individuals to found pueblos in the hope that new settlers would supply the presidios and missions with food and other products. Spain’s hold on the territory did not last long, with Mexican independence coming in 1810.

Mexico’s government also granted over 800 large tracts of land to Hispanic and White settlers. Most of these became known as Ranchos. Neither Spain nor Mexico recognized Indian ownership of these lands. Most of these grants were not accurately surveyed or mapped which made the claims difficult to prove when California passed into American hands in 1848. With thousands of new immigrants needing land and the owners unable to prove their claims in American courts, most of the grants were divided into smaller plots of land. The same lands that were included in the land grants of the Spanish and Mexican periods are now the cities, suburbs, and agricultural lands of modern California.

**Image below:** Diseño del Rancho San Miguelito. A diseño is a hand-drawn map used to mark the natural geography of a land grant. This colorful diseño from Monterey County shows trees, orchards, pathways, waterways, surrounding mountains, and other features.