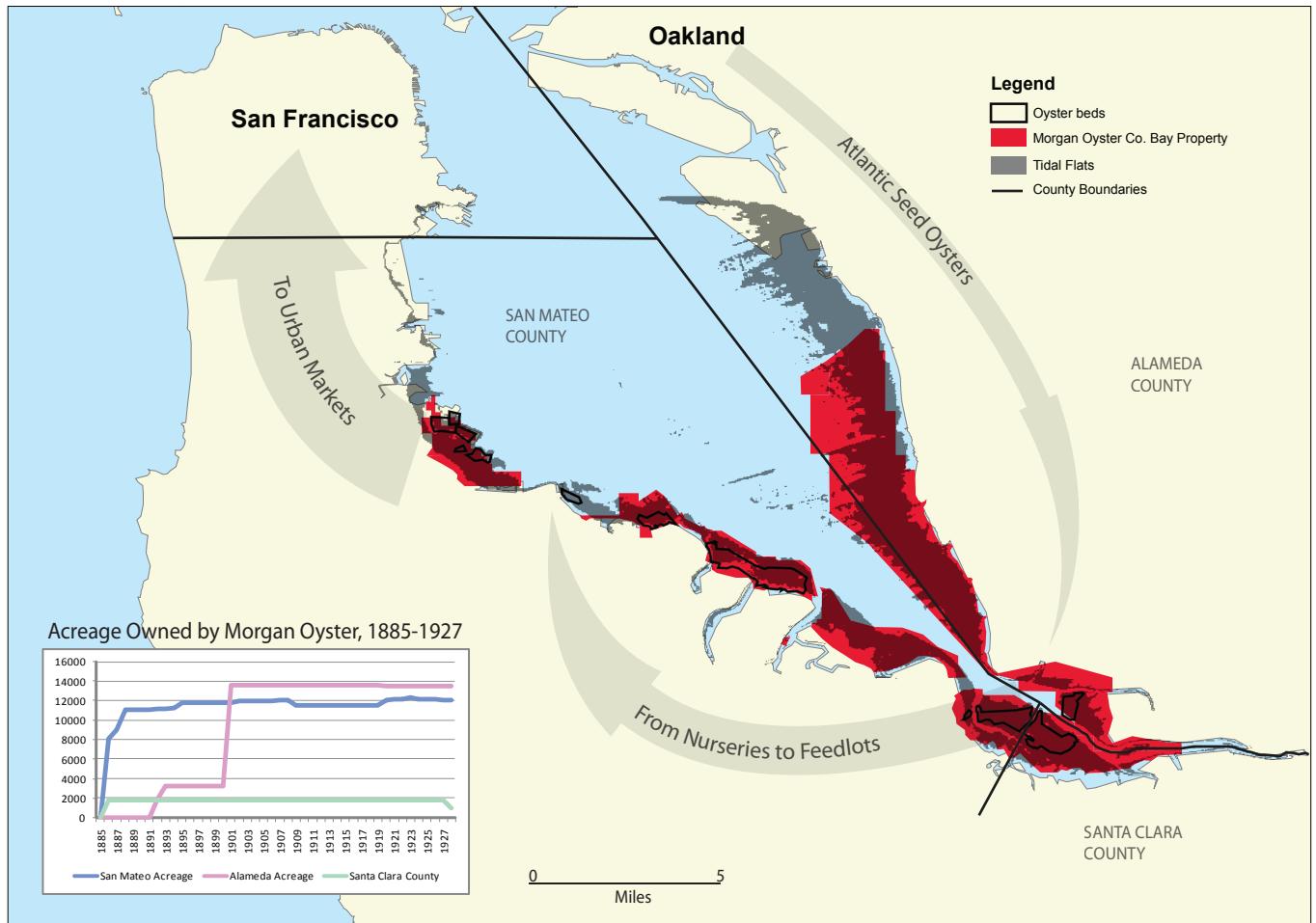


The Production of Space in San Francisco Bay

Morgan Oyster Holdings, 1909: Height of Bay Oyster Industry



The Rise of Morgan Oyster Company

In the nineteenth century, oysters were an everyday food for working people. As San Francisco grew in the late nineteenth century, so also did its appetite for the mollusks. Sediment from mining upstream on the Sacramento River destroyed native oyster beds during the Gold Rush. In the years immediately following completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, oyster producers imported seeds of the larger and tastier Atlantic oyster by rail and planted them in the Bay, where they grew quickly but could not reproduce due to environmental conditions. As a result, the Bay became a feedlot for transplanted eastern oysters, which were fattened on the fertile bay floor before being sold and consumed in San Francisco. The oyster industry in San Francisco quickly became a business in



Owning the Tidal Flats. Oyster producers erected fences to fend off bat rays, a natural predator, and built guard houses on the beds to thwart oyster pirates. (Photo 1896)

which fortunes were made by selling a high volume of oysters at low prices.

But by the first decade of the twentieth century, oyster production in San Francisco was a virtual monopoly, controlled by the Morgan Company. Given the size of the Bay, how was it possible that a few oyster beds on the western shore constituted a monopoly of production? Why didn't oyster growers use other parts of the Bay? By mapping possible oyster habitat and bay ownership, this project got closer to answering those questions, and opened a network of new historical questions.

Using historical bathymetry data this project mapped possible oyster habitat (defined as two feet above and below "mean low tide" using documented criteria of oyster producers as well as the location of actual beds). Maps of assessed property show that by 1909 Morgan controlled virtually all of the productive oyster space within San Francisco Bay.

In addition to controlling oyster habitat, the Morgan Company's control of tidelands allowed it to implement a highly efficient system of production that exploited natural advantages of particular spaces within the bay. Oysters were unloaded from trains in Oakland, sailed south and planted near the Dumbarton crossing, culled as young adults and replanted in fattening beds south of San Francisco, then harvested and brought to market in the city. It was control of property and space that allowed Morgan to institute this vast and dynamic system of production and gave his company an advantage over competitors.

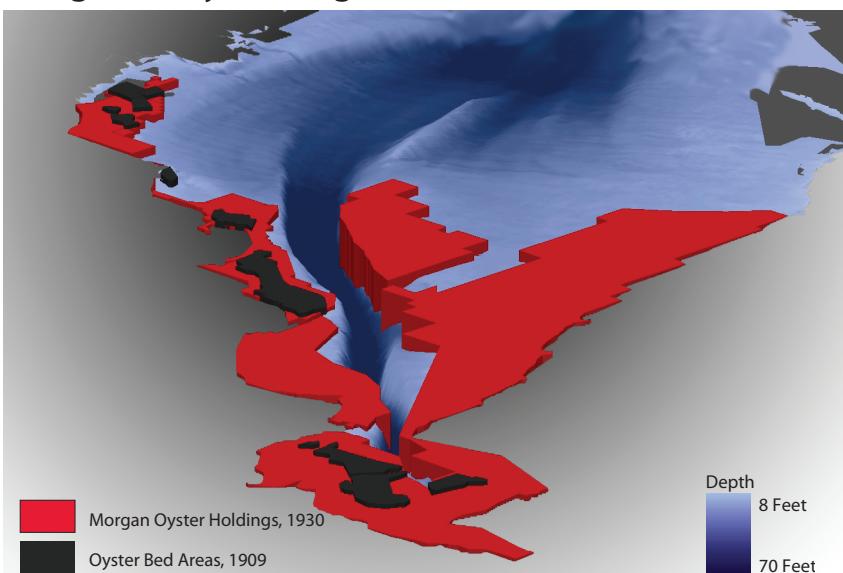
Consolidating Oyster Space

The maps to the right show five decades of change in bay ownership in San Mateo County (south of San Francisco), based on official county maps from those years. In 1868, the state of California parceled out the San Francisco Bay tidelands for sale by county, with a variety of owners bidding on and gaining ownership in San Mateo County. Tidelands in San Mateo County, the most desirable and contested in the South Bay, underwent significant ownership changes early on, but between 1886 and 1888 Morgan Oyster Company consolidated most of the eastern San Mateo tidelands under a single owner. Morgan's early purchases show an interest in accumulating productive oyster habitats extensive enough to support a dynamic system of production that provided unique advantages. Those who attempted to compete in the oyster industry never lasted long. Controlling the tidal flats of San Mateo County also enabled Morgan Oyster to sell tracts only on favorable terms, and the company rarely parted with lands even into the late 1920s, fifteen years after the oyster industry had dramatically declined.

Beyond Oyster Space?

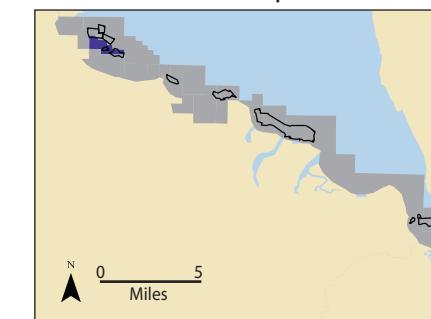
As the Morgan Company continued to accrue wealth from oyster production, deed records indicate the company expanded its ownership farther into the Bay. Overlaying complete property holdings (both taxed and untaxed) with bathymetry data creates a map that provides new evidence of Morgan's intentions. In addition to the property plotted on this map, Morgan controlled 5,000 acres of the Bay through lease. Much, if not most of the leased land was non-oyster habitat. Outside the channel, which could not be owned, Morgan controlled virtually all usable bay lands. Morgan increasingly dominated San Francisco Bay as the company acquired and maintained oyster habitat, as well as "strategic" or speculative parcels of the Bay. It is plausible that Morgan extended his ownership in the interest of protecting his particular industry by excluding other users. By 1930, however, this could no longer be the case; the oyster industry had collapsed nearly two decades earlier. Morgan had moved beyond oysters.

Morgan's Bay Holdings, 1930



San Mateo County Bay Ownership 1877-1927

Tidal Flat Ownership 1877



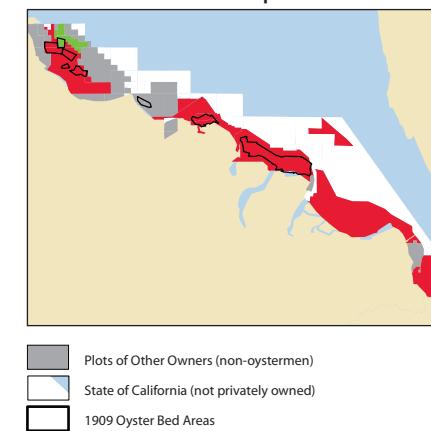
Tidal Flat Ownership 1894



Tidal Flat Ownership 1909



Tidal Flat Ownership 1927



Conclusion

Mapping bathymetry against property allowed us to understand the relationship of ownership and oyster habitat over time. The maps presented here are not illustrations of historical speculations or conclusions drawn from documents. Rather, they serve as evidence in their own right and have led to a new set of conclusions about oyster production and bay ownership and speculation. Morgan Company held a monopoly because it controlled oyster habitat. But as time passed, Morgan also speculated in property, buying pieces of the Bay that held little productive value, but which might have had strategic value as the Bay became a site for railroads, pipelines, and uses that made bay ownership profitable in other ways. Morgan came to see the Bay less as a productive space and increasingly as an opportunity to speculate, where ownership of a key piece of real estate could offer large returns.