

= Emperor Norton =

Joshua Abraham Norton ( c.1818 ? January 8 , 1880 ) , known as Emperor Norton , was a citizen of San Francisco , California , who in 1859 proclaimed himself " Norton I , Emperor of the United States " and subsequently " Protector of Mexico " .

Born in England , Norton spent most of his early life in South Africa . After the death of his mother in 1846 and his father in 1848 , he emigrated to San Francisco with an inheritance from his father 's estate , arriving in November 1849 aboard the Hamburg ship *Franzeska* with \$ 40 @, @ 000 ( inflation adjusted to \$ 1 @. @ 1 million in 2015 US Dollars ) . Norton initially made a living as a businessman , but he lost his fortune investing in Peruvian rice .

After losing a lawsuit in which he tried to void his rice contract , Norton became a less and less public figure . He reemerged in September 1859 , laying claim to the position of Emperor of the United States . Although he had no political power , and his influence extended only so far as he was humored by those around him , he was treated deferentially in San Francisco , and currency issued in his name was honored in the establishments he frequented .

Though some considered him insane or eccentric , citizens of San Francisco celebrated his regal presence and his proclamations , such as his order that the United States Congress be dissolved by force and his numerous decrees calling for a bridge crossing connecting San Francisco to Oakland , and a corresponding tunnel to be built under San Francisco Bay . Similar structures were built long after his death in the form of the San Francisco ? Oakland Bay Bridge and the Transbay Tube , and there have been campaigns to rename the bridge " The Emperor Norton Bridge " .

On January 8 , 1880 , Norton collapsed at the corner of California and Dupont ( now Grant ) streets and died before he could be given medical treatment . At his funeral two days later , nearly 30 @, @ 000 people packed the streets of San Francisco to pay homage . Norton has been immortalized as the basis of characters in the literature of writers Mark Twain , Robert Louis Stevenson , Christopher Moore , Maurice De Bevere , Selma Lagerlöf , and Neil Gaiman .

= = Early life = =

Genealogical and other research indicates that Norton 's parents were John Norton ( d . August 1848 ) and Sarah Norden , English Jews ? John , a farmer and merchant ; Sarah , a daughter of Abraham Norden and a sister of Benjamin Norden , a successful Jewish merchant ? who moved the family to South Africa in early 1820 as part of a government @-@ backed colonization scheme whose participants came to be known as the 1820 Settlers .

Most likely , Norton was born in the Kentish town of Deptford , today part of London .

Pinning down Norton 's exact date of birth has proved difficult . His obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle* , " following the best information obtainable , " cited the silver plate on his coffin which said he was " aged about 65 , " suggesting that 1814 could be the year of his birth . But Norton 's biographer , William Drury , points out that " about 65 " was based on nothing more than the guess that Norton 's landlady offered to the coroner at the inquest following his death . In a 1923 essay published by the California Historical Society , Robert Ernest Cowan claimed that Norton was born on February 4 , 1819 . However , the passenger lists for the *Belle Alliance* , the ship that carried Norton and his family from England to South Africa , indicate he was two years old when the ship set sail in February 1820 . The February 4 , 1865 , edition of the *Daily Alta California* newspaper included an item in which the *Alta* wished Emperor Norton a happy 47th birthday , indicating that his birth date was February 4 , 1818 ( not 1819 , as Cowan claimed ) ? a date that would line up with the *Belle Alliance* passenger listing from two years later . Moreover , it has been shown that Robert Ernest Cowan appears to have falsified the 1865 *Alta* item to advance his claim of an 1819 birth date and that persistent online claims for an 1819 birth date , which can be traced to the early years of the Internet , are of doubtful provenance .

Norton emigrated from South Africa to San Francisco in 1849 after receiving a bequest from his father 's estate . He enjoyed a good deal of success in the real estate market , and by the early 1850s had parlayed an initial nest egg of \$ 40 @, @ 000 into a fortune of \$ 250 @, @ 000 . Norton

thought he saw a business opportunity when China , facing a severe famine , placed a ban on the export of rice , causing the price of rice in San Francisco to skyrocket from four to thirty @-@ six cents per pound ( 9 to 79 cents / kg ) . When he heard the Glyde , which was returning from Peru , was carrying 200 @,@ 000 pounds ( 91 @,@ 000 kg ) of rice , he bought the entire shipment for \$ 25 @,@ 000 ( or twelve and a half cents per pound ) , hoping to corner the market .

Shortly after he signed the contract , several other shiploads of rice arrived from Peru , causing the price of rice to plummet to three cents a pound . Norton tried to void the contract , stating the dealer had misled him as to the quality of rice to expect . From 1853 to 1857 , Norton and the rice dealers were involved in a protracted litigation . Although Norton prevailed in the lower courts , the case reached the Supreme Court of California , which ruled against Norton . Later , the Lucas Turner and Company Bank foreclosed on his real estate holdings in North Beach to pay Norton 's debt . He filed for bankruptcy and by 1858 was living in reduced circumstances at a working class boarding house .

= = Declares himself emperor = =

By 1859 , Norton had become completely disgruntled with what he considered the inadequacies of the legal and political structures of the United States . On September 17 , 1859 , he took matters into his own hands and distributed letters to the various newspapers in the city , proclaiming himself " Emperor of these United States " :

At the peremptory request and desire of a large majority of the citizens of these United States , I , Joshua Norton , formerly of Algoa Bay , Cape of Good Hope , and now for the last 9 years and 10 months past of S. F. , Cal . , declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these U. S. ; and in virtue of the authority thereby in me vested , do hereby order and direct the representatives of the different States of the Union to assemble in Musical Hall , of this city , on the 1st day of Feb. next , then and there to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is laboring , and thereby cause confidence to exist , both at home and abroad , in our stability and integrity .

The announcement was first reprinted for humorous effect by the editor of the San Francisco Bulletin . Norton would later add " Protector of Mexico " to this title . Thus commenced his unprecedented and whimsical 21 @-@ year " reign " over America .

In his self @-@ appointed role of emperor , Norton issued numerous decrees on matters of the state . After assuming absolute control over the country , he saw no further need for a legislature , and on October 12 , 1859 , he issued a decree formally abolishing the United States Congress . In it , Norton observed :

... fraud and corruption prevent a fair and proper expression of the public voice ; that open violation of the laws are constantly occurring , caused by mobs , parties , factions and undue influence of political sects ; that the citizen has not that protection of person and property which he is entitled .

Norton ordered all interested parties to assemble at Platt 's Music Hall in San Francisco in February 1860 to " remedy the evil complained of " .

In an imperial decree the following month , Norton summoned the Army to depose the elected officials of the U.S. Congress :

WHEREAS , a body of men calling themselves the National Congress are now in session in Washington City , in violation of our Imperial edict of the 12th of October last , declaring the said Congress abolished ;

WHEREAS , it is necessary for the repose of our Empire that the said decree should be strictly complied with ;

NOW , THEREFORE , we do hereby Order and Direct Major @-@ General Scott , the Command @-@ in @-@ Chief of our Armies , immediately upon receipt of this , our Decree , to proceed with a suitable force and clear the Halls of Congress .

Norton 's orders were ignored by the Army , and Congress likewise continued without any formal acknowledgement of the decree . Further decrees in 1860 dissolved the republic and forbade the assembly of any members of the former Congress . Norton 's battle against the elected leaders of

America persisted throughout his reign , though it appears he eventually , if grudgingly , allowed Congress to exist without his permission . Hoping to resolve the many disputes that had resulted in the Civil War , in 1862 Norton issued a mandate ordering both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches to publicly ordain him as " Emperor " .

His attempts to overthrow the elected government having been ignored , Norton turned his attention to other matters , both political and social . On August 12 , 1869 , " being desirous of allaying the dissensions of party strife now existing within our realm " , he abolished the Democratic and Republican parties . The failure to treat Norton 's adopted home city with appropriate respect is the subject of a particularly stern edict that often is cited as having been written by Norton in 1872 ? although evidence for the authorship , date or source of this decree remains elusive :

Whoever after due and proper warning shall be heard to utter the abominable word " Frisco , " which has no linguistic or other warrant , shall be deemed guilty of a High Misdemeanor , and shall pay into the Imperial Treasury as penalty the sum of twenty @-@ five dollars .

Norton was occasionally a visionary , and some of his Imperial Decrees exhibited profound foresight . He issued instructions to form a League of Nations , and he explicitly forbade any form of conflict between religions or their sects . Norton saw fit to decree the construction of a suspension bridge or tunnel connecting Oakland and San Francisco , his later decrees becoming increasingly irritated at the lack of prompt obedience by the authorities :

WHEREAS , we issued our decree ordering the citizens of San Francisco and Oakland to appropriate funds for the survey of a suspension bridge from Oakland Point via Goat Island ; also for a tunnel ; and to ascertain which is the best project ; and whereas the said citizens have hitherto neglected to notice our said decree ; and whereas we are determined our authority shall be fully respected ; now , therefore , we do hereby command the arrest by the army of both the Boards of City Fathers if they persist in neglecting our decrees .

Given under our royal hand and seal at San Francisco , this 17th day of September , 1872 .

The intent of this decree , unlike many others , actually came to fruition ; construction of the San Francisco ? Oakland Bay Bridge began on July 9 , 1933 and was completed on November 12 , 1936 . The construction of Bay Area Rapid Transit 's Transbay Tube was completed in 1969 , with Transbay rail service commencing in 1974 .

= = Norton 's Imperial acts = =

Norton spent his days inspecting San Francisco 's streets in an elaborate blue uniform with gold @-@ plated epaulettes , given to him by officers of the United States Army post at the Presidio of San Francisco . He also wore a beaver hat decorated with a peacock feather and a rosette . He frequently enhanced this regal posture with a cane or umbrella . During his inspections , Norton would examine the condition of the sidewalks and cable cars , the state of repair of public property , and the appearance of police officers . Norton would also frequently give lengthy philosophical expositions on a variety of topics to anyone within earshot .

During the 1860s and 1870s , there were occasional anti @-@ Chinese demonstrations in the poorer districts of San Francisco . Riots , sometimes resulting in fatalities , took place . During one incident , Norton allegedly positioned himself between the rioters and their Chinese targets ; with a bowed head , he started reciting the Lord 's Prayer repeatedly until the rioters dispersed without incident .

Norton was loved and revered by the citizens of San Francisco . Although penniless , he regularly ate at the finest restaurants in San Francisco ; restaurateurs took it upon themselves to add brass plaques in their entrances declaring " [ by ] Appointment to his Imperial Majesty , Emperor Norton I of the United States . " Norton 's self @-@ penned Imperial seals of approval were prized and a substantial boost to trade . No play or musical performance in San Francisco would dare to open without reserving balcony seats for Norton .

A rumor started by the devoted Norton caricaturist Ed Jump claims he had two dogs , Bummer and Lazarus , which were also San Francisco celebrities . Though he did not own the dogs , Norton ate at free lunch counters where he shared his meals with the dogs .

In 1867 , a policeman named Armand Barbier arrested Norton to commit him to involuntary treatment for a mental disorder . The Emperor 's arrest outraged the citizens and sparked scathing editorials in the newspapers . Police Chief Patrick Crowley ordered Norton released and issued a formal apology on behalf of the police force . Crowley wrote " that he had shed no blood ; robbed no one ; and despoiled no country ; which is more than can be said of his fellows in that line . " Norton magnanimously granted an Imperial Pardon to the errant policeman . All police officers of San Francisco thereafter saluted Norton as he passed in the street .

Norton did receive some tokens of recognition for his position . The 1870 U.S. census lists Joshua Norton as 50 years old and residing at 624 Commercial Street ; his occupation was listed as Emporer [ sic ] . It also noted he was insane . Norton also issued his own money to pay for his debts , and it became an accepted local currency in San Francisco . These notes came in denominations between fifty cents and ten dollars ; the few surviving notes are collector 's items . The city of San Francisco also honored Norton . When his uniform began to look shabby , the San Francisco Board of Supervisors bought him a suitably regal replacement . Norton sent a gracious thank you note and issued a " patent of nobility in perpetuity " for each supervisor .

= = Later years and death = =

During the later years of Norton 's reign , he was the subject of considerable speculation . One popular story suggested he was the son of Emperor Napoleon III , and that his claim of coming from South Africa was a ruse to prevent persecution . Another popular story suggested Norton was planning to marry Queen Victoria . While this claim is unsupported , Norton did write to the Queen on several occasions , and he is reported to have met Emperor Pedro II of Brazil . Rumors also circulated that Norton was supremely wealthy ? only affecting poverty because he was miserly .

A number of decrees that were probably fraudulent were submitted and duly printed in local newspapers , and it is believed that in at least a few cases , newspaper editors themselves drafted fictitious edicts to suit their own agendas . The San Francisco Museum and Historical Society maintains a list of the decrees believed to be genuine .

On the evening of January 8 , 1880 , Norton collapsed on the corner of California Street and Dupont Street ( now Grant Avenue ) in front of Old St. Mary 's Church while on his way to a lecture at the California Academy of Sciences . His collapse was immediately noticed and " the police officer on the beat hastened for a carriage to convey him to the City Receiving Hospital . " Norton died before a carriage could arrive . The following day the San Francisco Chronicle published his obituary on its front page under the headline " Le Roi est Mort " ( " The King is Dead " ) . In a tone tinged with sadness , the article respectfully reported that , " [ o ] n the reeking pavement , in the darkness of a moon @-@ less night under the dripping rain ... , Norton I , by the grace of God , Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico , departed this life " . The Morning Call , another leading San Francisco newspaper , published a front @-@ page article using an almost identical sentence as a headline : " Norton the First , by the grace of God Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico , departed this life . "

It quickly became evident that , contrary to the rumors , Norton had died in complete poverty . Five or six dollars in small change had been found on his person , and a search of his room at the boarding house on Commercial Street turned up a single gold sovereign , then worth around \$ 2 @.@ 50 ; his collection of walking sticks ; his rather battered saber ; a variety of headgear ( including a stovepipe , a derby , a red @-@ laced Army cap , and another cap suited to a martial band @-@ master ) ; an 1828 French franc ; and a handful of the Imperial bonds he sold to tourists at a fictitious 7 % interest . There were fake telegrams purporting to be from Emperor Alexander II of Russia , congratulating Norton on his forthcoming marriage to Queen Victoria , and from the President of France , predicting that such a union would be disastrous to world peace . Also found were his letters to Queen Victoria and 98 shares of stock in a defunct gold mine .

Initial funeral arrangements were for a pauper 's coffin of simple redwood . However , members of the Pacific Club , a San Francisco businessman 's association , established a funeral fund that provided for a handsome rosewood casket and arranged a suitably dignified farewell . Norton 's

funeral on Sunday , January 10 , was solemn , mournful , and large . Paying their respects were members of " ... all classes from capitalists to the pauper , the clergyman to the pickpocket , well @-@ dressed ladies and those whose garb and bearing hinted of the social outcast . " Some accounts say as many as 10 @,@ 000 people lined the streets , and that the funeral cortège was two miles ( 3 km ) long . San Francisco 's total population at the time was 230 @,@ 000 . Norton was buried in the Masonic Cemetery , at the expense of the City of San Francisco .

In 1934 , Emperor Norton 's remains were transferred , as were all graves in the city , to a grave site of moderate splendor at Woodlawn Cemetery , in Colma . The grave is marked by a large stone inscribed " Norton I , Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico " .

= = Legacy = =

Although details of his life story may have been forgotten , Emperor Norton was immortalized in literature . Mark Twain , who resided in San Francisco during part of Emperor Norton 's public life , modeled the character of the King in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on Joshua Norton .

Robert Louis Stevenson made Norton a character in his 1892 novel , The Wrecker . Stevenson 's stepdaughter , Isobel Osbourne , mentioned Norton in her autobiography , This Life I 've Loved . She said that Norton " was a gentle and kindly man , and fortunately found himself in the friendliest and most sentimental city in the world , the idea being ' let him be emperor if he wants to . ' " San Francisco played the game with him . "

Since 1974 , there has been an annual memorial service at his grave in Colma , just outside San Francisco .

In January 1980 , ceremonies were conducted in San Francisco to honor the 100th anniversary of the death of " the one and only Emperor of the United States . "

The Emperor 's Bridge Campaign , a San Francisco @-@ based nonprofit launched in September 2013 , works to honor the life and advance the legacy of Emperor Norton .

He is considered a patron saint of Discordianism .

= = = Efforts to rename the San Francisco @-@ Oakland Bay Bridge = = =

In 1939 , the group E Clampus Vitus commissioned and dedicated a plaque commemorating Emperor Norton 's call for the construction of a suspension bridge between San Francisco and Oakland , via Yerba Buena Island ( formerly Goat Island ) . The group 's intention was that the plaque be placed on the newly opened San Francisco @-@ Oakland Bay Bridge itself . This was not approved by the bridge authorities , however ; and , sometime shortly after World War II , the plaque was installed at the Cliff House . In the 1990s , the plaque was moved to the Transbay Terminal . When the Terminal was closed and demolished in 2010 , as part of the project to construct a new Transbay Transit Center , the plaque was placed in storage , where it remains .

There have been two recent campaigns to name all , or parts , of the Bay Bridge for Emperor Norton .

In November 2004 , after a campaign by San Francisco Chronicle cartoonist Phil Frank , then @-@ San Francisco District 3 Supervisor Aaron Peskin introduced a resolution to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors calling for the entire bridge to be named for Emperor Norton . On December 14 , 2004 , the Board approved a modified version of this resolution , calling for only " new additions " ? i.e. , the new eastern span ? to be named " The Emperor Norton Bridge " . Neither the City of Oakland nor Alameda County passed any similar resolution , so the effort went no further .

In June 2013 , eight members of the California Assembly , joined by two members of the California Senate , introduced a concurrent resolution to name the western span of the bridge for former California state Speaker and San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown . In response , there have been public efforts seeking to revive the earlier Emperor Norton effort . One effort , an online petition , was started in August 2013 and calls for the entire bridge to be named for Emperor Norton . This petition has received coverage from local media .

The Emperor 's Bridge Campaign is carrying forward the bridge @-@ naming effort . The Campaign

is using the example of numerous California state @-@ owned bridges that have multiple names to call for an " Emperor Norton " name simply to be added as a second name for the Bay Bridge , rather than for the bridge to be renamed altogether . The organization is exploring the possibility of offering state ballot proposition to this effect in 2018 , the 200th anniversary of Emperor Norton 's birth .