

OUR SONOMA COUNTY
AS EXPLORED THROUGH POETRY
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THEME I: HISTORY

Background

When we think of history, let's cast our net wide. The history books include a few stories fished out of the vast ocean of human experience. Sometimes stories are remembered differently by different people. Do you find stories in the history books that match your heritage and personal identity? Are they stories you can relate to?

Maybe there really are *two sides to every story*, as the American idiom says. Or—maybe—*there are more than two sides to every story*. Maybe some of the stories remain untold, or have been forgotten, and are waiting to be discovered and shared.

When California became the 31st state on September 9, 1850, Sonoma County was incorporated. Our county seat of government was located in the City of Sonoma from 1850 to 1854. Since 1854, it has been located in Santa Rosa. But prior to 1850, at various times, Russia, Spain, and Mexico established communities in what is now Sonoma County. And let's not forget that native people have lived here the longest, including the Pomo, Coast Miwok and Wappo people, whose villages date back to times before our current era (BCE).

History: is it only what happened in the past? Or are we still making history? Are we repeating the mistakes of our past? Are we learning from our past? The Spanish American philosopher George Santayana is quoted as saying "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Can we also flip this idea and say "Those who remember the successes of the past are more likely to repeat them?"

There's no one answer to these many questions. Let's write together and explore Sonoma County history from many different angles. Then let's come together in classrooms, in poetry workshops, in writing groups, in readings and open mics, to share what we've discovered.

Classroom / Library / Online Writing Exercises

Overarching goals and questions:

- Seeing ourselves in the past: to help us relate to the past, can we imagine ourselves living in the past? How would our lives be different from the ones we lead today?
- Placing the past in context: are we repeating our mistakes of the past? Are we repeating the successes of the past?
- Understanding those who have come before us: how do the people represented in the stories of the past resemble us? How are they different from us?

(1) Choose an event in Sonoma County history that you have read about, or heard about, and explore the following questions in a poem:

- Can you relate to the story? Explain why or why not.
- Could the same type event happen today? Explain why or why not.
- Do you have questions that the historical account doesn't answer? Write about those questions. Write about what you think is missing from the story.

(2) Choose a person in Sonoma County history that you have already read about, or heard about, and explore the following questions in a poem:

- Compare your life's journey to their life's journey.
- Do you have questions that historical accounts don't answer? Write about those questions. Write about what you think is missing from the story.

(3) Browse the following online resources in search of stories that interest you. Write about what interests you:

- Sonoma County Library / Local History Special Collections: <https://sonomalibrary.org/learn/localhistory>
- County of Sonoma Historical Records Commission: <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/administrative-support-and-fiscal-services/clerk-recorder-assessor-registrar-of-voters/historical-records-commission>
- Online Archive of California: <https://oac.cdlib.org/institutions/Sonoma+County+Library>

Field Trip / Group or Independent / Writing Exercises

Possible locations for group or individual/independent field trips include: Museum of Sonoma County (Santa Rosa); History and Genealogy Library (Santa Rosa); California Indian Museum and Cultural Center (Santa Rosa); Pacific Coast Air Museum (Charles Schulz Airport); Santa Rosa Junior College Multicultural Museum; West County Museum (Sebastopol); Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society; Petaluma Historical Museum and Library; Fort Ross State Historic Park; Jack London State Historic Park; Luther Burbank Home and Gardens; Mission San Francisco de Solano; Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park; Sonoma State Historic Park. (Note: this is not a complete list. If you know of other locations, add them to this list.)

You don't always need to go to a museum or library to find history. History can be found in your own back yard. There's probably a historical marker somewhere close to your neighborhood.

Here's a list of historical markers located in Sonoma County:

<https://www.hmdb.org/results.asp?Search=County&County=Sonoma%20County&State=California>

(1) Honoring the questions as well as the answers. At the museum or historical site that you visit, what grabs your interest? The story of a historical person? The story of a conflict between two people or two groups of people? A story linking you to your heritage? A story you haven't heard

before? A story that is different from the one you've always been told? When you feel a question jump out at you, follow it, try to understand it, reel it in, and write about it.

(2) Making meaning out of historical artifacts (bringing them back to life). In the museum or historical site you visit, select an artifact to write about. Select an artifact that intrigues you or to which you can relate in some way.

(3) Making meaning out of historical markers. Choose a historical marker in your town. Write the words down or take a photo of the plaque or marker. Ask what's missing. Write about what's missing. Do some research and write about what you find out. Consider making a video of yourself reading your poem in front of the historical marker (see multi-media exercises below).

Multi-Media Exercises

(1) Re-envisioning the Sonoma County seal of government. Create your own, revised, seal of government. The seal created in 1850 has three words (agriculture, industry, and recreation) and several symbols (the Bear Flag, grapes and other fruit, a redwood tree, and buildings). Do these words and images, to you, reflect what Sonoma County means to you? What three words would you choose? What images would you choose?

(2) Create your own seal of personhood. Draw your own seal that represents your personhood. Select words and images drawn from your life in Sonoma County.

(3) Film a video poem at a historical location or historical marker. Write a poem that responds to the historical site or the historical marker and take a video of yourself reading out loud "on location."

Sharing Your Work

Consider sharing your poems with friends, classmates, writing groups, etc. If you like to publish your poetry, consider submitting your poems to literary journals. Consider submitting to Our California, a project of California Poet Laureate Lee Herrick and the California Arts Council. If you like to perform your poems, consider reading at open mics or poetry slams. If you like group efforts, join up with fellow writers and design a zine. If you share your work on social media, use the hashtag #oursonomacounty. If physical and/or online space become available, you may have the opportunity to share your work on those platforms. Subscribe to the Sebastopol Center for the Arts newsletter and to the Sonoma County Literary Update newsletter. Writing workshops may be offered through the Sonoma County Library, so check out their website. See links below.

Our California (a project of CA Poet Laureate Lee Herrick and the CA Arts Council):

<https://capoetlaureate.org/ourcalifornia>

Sebastopol Center for the Arts: <https://www.sebarts.org/>

Sonoma County Literary Update: <https://socolitupdate.com/>

Sonoma County Library: <https://sonomalibrary.org/>