

San Francisco's Renaissance From Ruin

The 1909 Portola Festival

The April 18, 1906 earthquake and subsequent three days of fires devastated San Francisco, nearly wiping it off the face of Earth. Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, after three years of grinding day after day repair and construction from 1906 to 1909, San Francisco was a new city. It was time to throw a big party for the world, one that would show off the accomplishments of recovery but also demonstrate San Francisco's capability of holding a major civic event showing the city could handle the tourism and commercial challenge. In early 1909, it was announced that San Francisco would have a grand celebration called the **Portola Festival**. Much was riding on the success of this festival, which would also bolster the city's case for eventually hosting the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915.

Exhibit Purpose and Scope: This exhibit focuses on the story of the Portola Festival, held for 5 days during October 19-23, 1909 in San Francisco, CA. Festival history is documented through related postal cards, covers and ephemera. All postal items in this exhibit are postally used and not unused surviving examples from the era.

Festival Theme: Designed to celebrate Juan Gaspar de Portola's discovery of San Francisco Bay in October 1769 (the 140th anniversary), Portola was a symbol which evoked the past ideals of Old California, contributing to an overall Spanish theme for the festival.

Festival Colors: Red and yellow in honor of Portola's homeland of Catalonia, the colors appeared on banners, bunting, and flags that decorated the city (as well as stamps and postal cards).

Festival Events: Five days of joy and spectacle, featuring a festival queen and a portrayer of Portola himself, huge parades with marching military and fraternal units, bands, and floats, formal dress and masked balls and evening fireworks displays in Union Square. The resident population of the city was 565,000 at the time, it is estimated the festival attracted more than two million visitors.



Card produced by Edward H. Mitchell of San Francisco.

Festival post card depicting Juan Gaspar de Portola's arrival party to the San Francisco bay, yellow & red official colors on the banner, with a view of the Golden Gate and a CA grizzly bear.

Postmarked Berkeley, CA, Oct 16, 1909, three days before start of the festival.

1906 Earthquake Leaves San Francisco in Ruins

The earthquake struck at 5:12 a.m. on Wednesday, April 18, 1906 with an estimated 7.9 magnitude. Devastating fires soon broke out and lasted for several days. An estimated 3,000 people lost their lives, up to 300,000 people were made homeless and over 80% of San Francisco was destroyed with \$400 million in property damage (over \$11 billion in today's dollars).



"The Great Fire, April 18 to 21, 1906 San Francisco" Mailed several years later with San Francisco, CA Aug 22, 1912 postmark to San Jose.



San Francisco, CA Apr 22, 1906 postmark to Santa Barbara, CA. Endorsed "all letters from San Francisco without stamps" mail allowed to be sent free due to the disaster.

The Post Office survived the quake and allowed mail to be sent postage free to expedite news from the devastated city

The Festival's major purpose was to celebrate the rebirth of San Francisco after the devastating events of 1906



Looking down California St from Stockton St showing the damage after the earthquake (Photo: The SF Chronicle)

Festival Stamps Created

To help publicize the festival event and offset expenses the committee created poster stamps which were sold to merchants and city residents to place on mail. Both perforation 12 and imperforate versions (approx. 35x50 mm) were created.



Imperf Poster Stamp



Perf 12 Poster Stamp

San Francisco, CA Oct 26, 1909 CDS to Angels Camp, CA. CA poppies postal card, imperf stamp used for promotion.



San Francisco, CA Sep 2, 1909 CDS to nearby Petaluma, CA (receiving CDS shown on front). Floral postal card, imperf stamp promotion.



San Francisco, CA Sep 4, 1909 CDS to Prague (Bohemia). Scarce destination with imperf stamp promotion. Postage on opposite side.

Poster Art Created

The official pageant poster for the Portola Festival pictured a young, dark-haired señorita tossing red roses to the wind. A similar theme was used on the poster stamps.

Two official versions of these festival postal cards were created, one with red solid lettering and one with blue hollow lettering. The city Ferry Building can be seen in the background.

SAN FRANCISCO DATA	
Area, 40 square miles.	Population, 507,200
Area of San Francisco Bay, 450 square miles.	
FIRE, APRIL, 1906	
Property Destroyed - - -	\$500,000,000.
Buildings Destroyed, 28,188 (value) -	\$105,000,000.
New Buildings, 13,000 (value) - -	\$156,000,000.
Customs Receipts, 1908 - -	\$6,816,398.40
Bank Clearings, 1908 - -	\$1,774,706,840.00

Reverse side of card displays data of the loss from the earthquake and ensuing fire.



San Francisco, CA Oct 19, 1909 CDS to Denver, CO. Solid red font version of postal card. Used first day of festival.

Local use within Point Arena, CA Oct 22, 1909 CDS. Hollow blue font version of postal card.

Reverse of postal cards labeled "Official Post Card No. 9008 The Official Poster Design"

Cards printed by Britton & Rey Lithographers (San Francisco).

Prior to the festival various versions of promotional postal cards were created in order to advertise the event in advance of the start on October 19, 1909. Many of these cards conveyed a "Meet Me at Portola" theme and implied that many important businesspeople would attend the event.

Leading Up to the Festival



"San Francisco Requests Your Participation" design, views of Market Street and the Pacific (with Cliff House restaurant) behind the arches as two festival-dressed females toss flowers. Sep 11, 1909 CDS, one month prior to festival, from San Francisco to Portland, OR.



"Are You Coming" design, red and yellow official colors on a Portola flag, with message that all the important people will be at the festival so do not miss out! Oct 6, 1909 CDS, two weeks prior to festival, from San Francisco to Grants Pass, OR.



San Francisco, Oct 4, 1909 CDS mailed across the bay to Alameda, CA. "Meet Me At..." design".

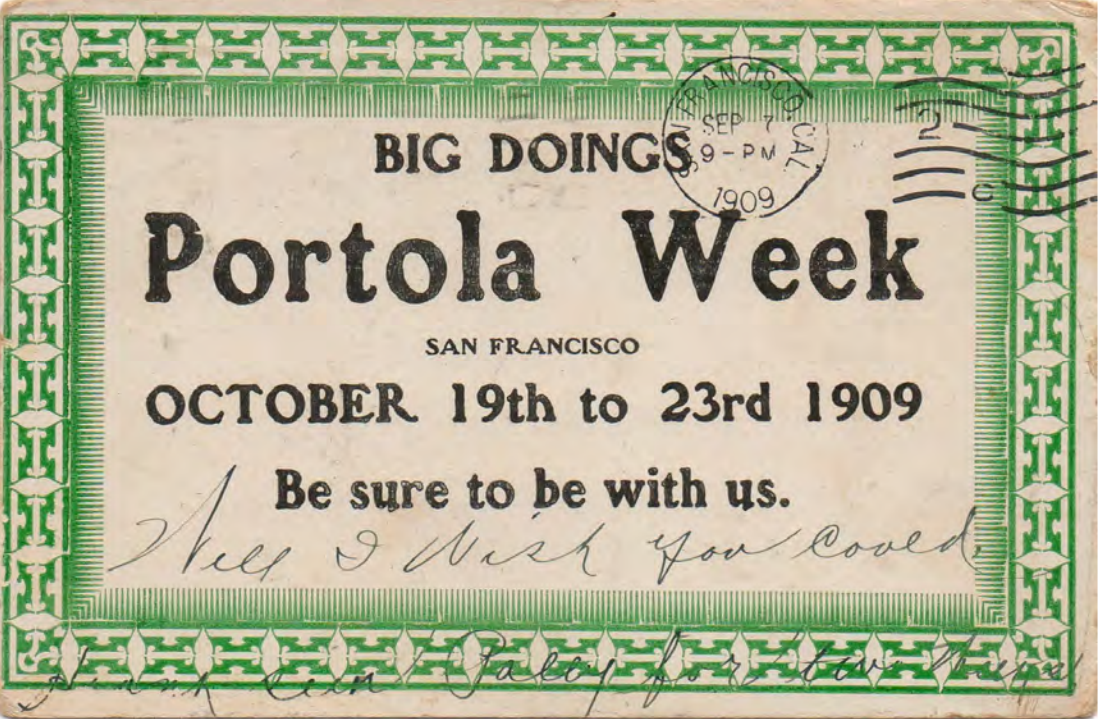


Local use within San Francisco, Oct 15, 1909 CDS. "Meet Me At..." design" with poinsettias.



San Francisco, CA Oct 23, 1909 CDS to Sacramento, CA. Poinsettia & Poppy "Pack Your Trunk for..." design, used last day of festival.

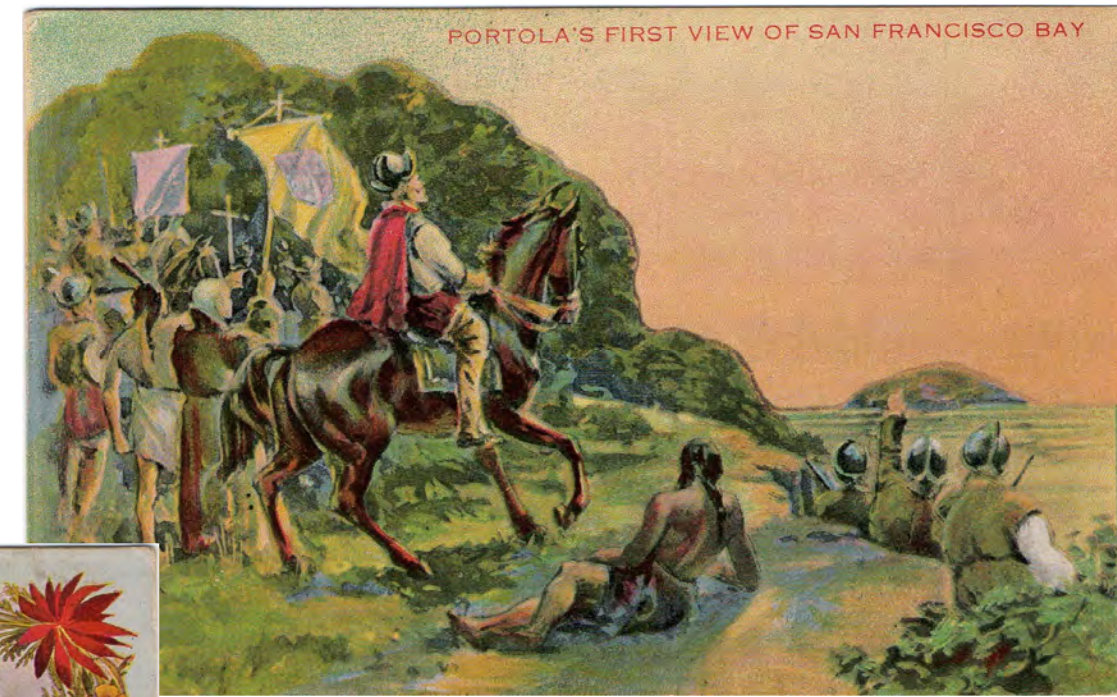
"Big Doings" design, Sep 7, 1909 CDS, six weeks prior to festival, from San Francisco to Dayton, TN.



Non-Official Festival Cards



British, Dutch, German, Italian, Japanese and American warships participated in the event resulting in a dramatic naval presence in the San Francisco Bay and raising the level of the festival to international status. Daily ship tours were available to the general public. This postal card shows a backdrop of several warships. The red and yellow color theme is portrayed in the "P" of Portola. Postmarked Oct 28, 1909, San Francisco to Chicago.



San Francisco, CA Oct 18, 1909 CDS, local city use. Portola's first view of the San Francisco Bay is depicted.



San Francisco, CA Oct 8, 1909 CDS to San Diego. Cornucopia design.



San Francisco, CA Oct 20, 1909 CDS to Los Angeles. Portola Coat of Arms theme.

San Francisco, CA Sep 27, 1909 CDS to nearby Martinez, CA. This is a rarer postal card design.



San Francisco, CA Nov 29, 1909 CDS to Chicago, with a birds-eye view of the Bay Area long before bridges were built.

Juan Gaspar de Portola and the Festival Queen

Festival organizers set out to find a beautiful young woman to be the queen of ceremonies. They also searched for a man to play the part of Juan Gaspar de Portola.

The contest to select the queen included a prize of \$100 for a photograph of the most beautiful young woman in the state. After examining thousands of photos from all over California, in April 1909 the committee chose Miss Virgilia Bogue of San Francisco, age 23.

With the queen selected the committee chose who they thought best embodied the caballero spirit to play Portola. 70-year-old Nicholas Covarrubias of Santa Maria, California was selected. Covarrubias was born to a Spanish immigrant in Santa Barbara in 1839, a time when California was still a part of Mexico.



Real Photo Post Cards (RPPC) were created after the festival based on photos which captured Portola and Festival Queen Virgilia during various events.



San Francisco, CA Dec 2, 1909 CDS to Riverside, CA. Portola and Queen Virgilia pose while seated on horses.

San Francisco, CA Oct 26, 1909 CDS to Portland, OR. Portola and Queen Virgilia seated in a Victorian room setting. Portola is holding the "Key to the City" in his right hand, after it was presented to him by Mayor Edward R. Taylor.

San Francisco, CA Aug 12, 1913 CDS to Trenton, CA. Portola and Queen Virgilia parading down Market Street during the height of the festivities. This was mailed nearly 4 years after the event.



San Francisco, CA Dec 7, 1909 CDS to Collinsville, IL. Portola stands alongside his horse. According to the souvenir program Portola was described "cavalier in bearing, a magnificent horseman and a daring rider".

Official Festival Cards

The Portola Festival Committee had eight official post cards created for the festival. One style was the vertical format official poster art (shown above) while the others depicted various scenes around San Francisco with a photo of Festival Queen Virgilia Bogue in a circular frame, surrounded by two clown type characters, implying a carnival-like atmosphere for the festival. The designs were produced by Britton and Rey Lithographers, with serial numbers 9008-9015.



Oakland, CA Oct 22, 1909 CDS to Provo, UT. Queen Virgilia facing to right in a scene of Market Street at night during the festival. Note the character in red resembles Virgilia.

Gaspar de Portola¹ was the first Governor of Upper and Lower California, from 1767 to 1771, under Spanish regime. In 1769 he visited California and made his residence here until 1771—the expiration of his term.

On July 14, 1769, he left San Diego with a small force in search of Monterey, but failed to find it. While continuing the search he explored the peninsula on which San Francisco is now built, and looked upon the Bay of San Francisco within the Golden Gate, being, according to best authorities, the first white man who ever gazed upon these waters.

Father Junipero Serra was President of the Missions of California during this time, establishing the Mission Dolores October 9th, 1776. Portola² as Commander-in-chief of land expeditions, visited the Missions at San Diego, Monterey and San Buenaventura

Reverse side of some cards displays data regarding Portola's time in California. This is the second of two types of messages, the first shown earlier, related to the losses from the earthquake and ensuing fire.



San Francisco, CA Oct 23, 1909 CDS to Hartford, CT. Queen Virgilia facing to left in a vertical format card showing a view of Chinatown.



Eureka, CA Nov 21, 1909 CDS, local town use. Queen Virgilia facing to right in a night scene with the famous Cliff House. Note the similarity of the foreground characters to other postal cards.



San Francisco, CA Oct 23, 1909 CDS to Minneapolis, MN. Queen Virgilia facing to right in a scene on the bay with the Golden Gate and Fort Point in the background.

Festival Events & Sights

Military personnel of different nations march on Market Street during the festival parades. Photographic postcard mailed March 3, 1910 from San Francisco, CA to Portland, OR.

Naval officers and enlisted men along with various decorated floats were part of the daily parades during the festival.

Close-up and afar view of signage on Yerba Buena Island in the bay. The letters are 45 feet in height and the overall length is 1300 feet.

San Francisco, CA Oct 15, 1909 CDS to Creston, CA to the left and San Francisco, CA Oct 16, 1909 CDS to Fruitvale Station, CA below.



Colonial Float depicting Virtue, Liberty, Patriotism. Mailed Nov 17, 1909 from Oakland, CA to Sierra City, CA.



140 veterans of the Spanish American War carried the USA flag in the parade. Sent Nov 1, 1909 just after the festival ended, from Oakland to San Francisco, CA. **At the time, this was the largest USA flag ever made.**



Colorized postal card of the large US flag, with advertising for Crocker Safe Deposit vaults created after the festival, mailed August 11, 1911 from San Francisco to San Mateo, CA.

RPPC of October 21, 1909 parade day, Market Street view of the float and dress of the Native Daughters of CA,. Mailed November 20, 1909 from San Mateo, CA to Hollister, CA.



Festival Ephemera and Aftermath

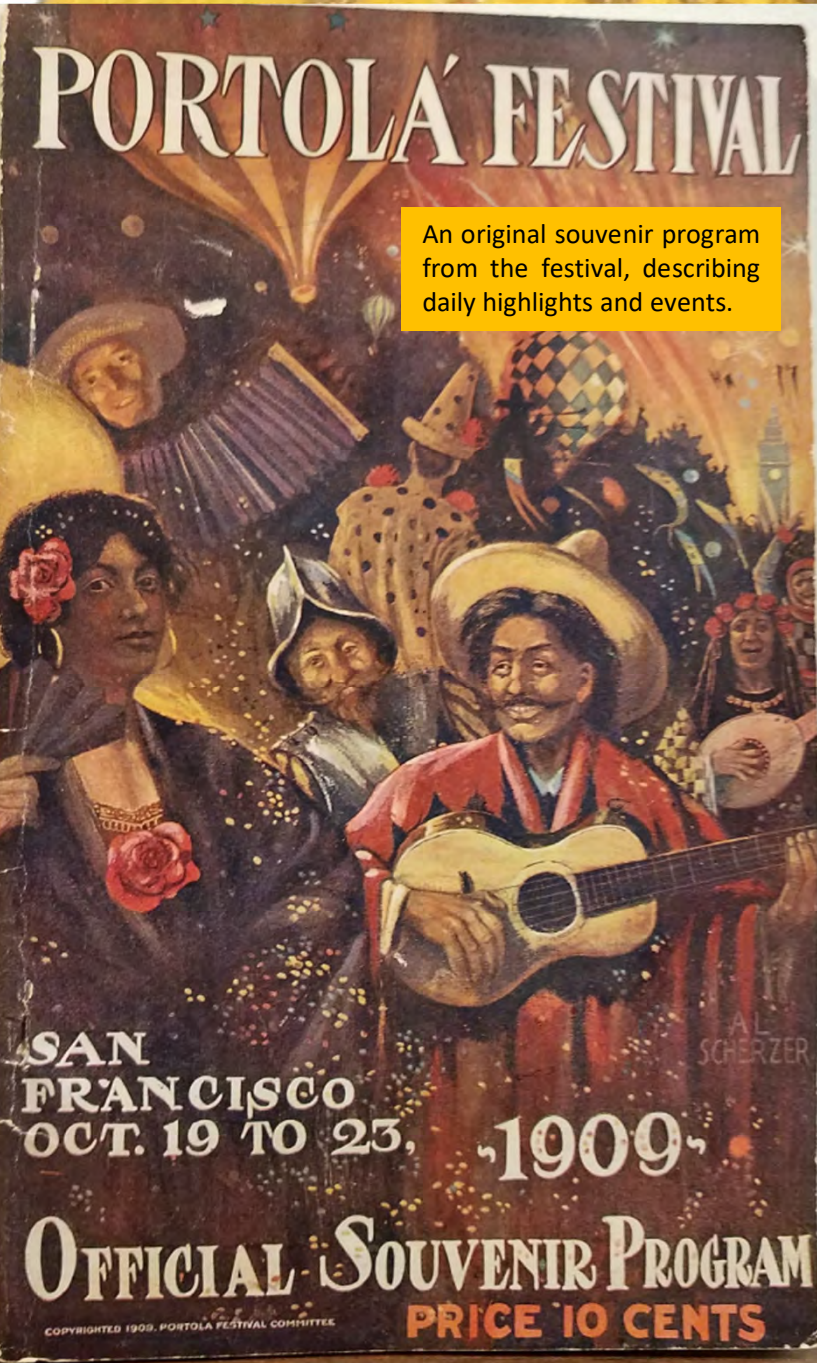
A very rare surviving 1909 pennant



Various buttons and tokens were created to commemorate the event.



In 1913 a second Portola Festival was held. The committee used the same colorful envelope design of 1909 for correspondence. This cover was mailed May 10, 1913 for local delivery in San Francisco, 5 months prior to the event. Material from the 1913 festival is much scarcer than 1909.



An original souvenir program from the festival, describing daily highlights and events.



A 1909 ribbon sticker applied to postal card showing statue in Golden Gate Park.



As early as 1910 San Francisco began lobbying to hold the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition (PPIE) in 1915 as depicted on this postal card to "Get Your Congressmen to Vote" leveraging the success of the 1909 festival. Mailed Oct 14, 1910 from San Francisco, CA to Portland, OR.



A homemade leather "postal card", San Francisco, CA local use with Oct 4, 1909 postmark.



The success of the 1909 Portola Festival resulted in a winning bid to hold the PPIE in 1915. This official Portola Festival postal card showing a view of Union Square was mailed from San Francisco, CA to South Bellingham, WA on Oct 9, 1913, 4 years after the festival. The postmark advertises the upcoming PPIE, still two years away.