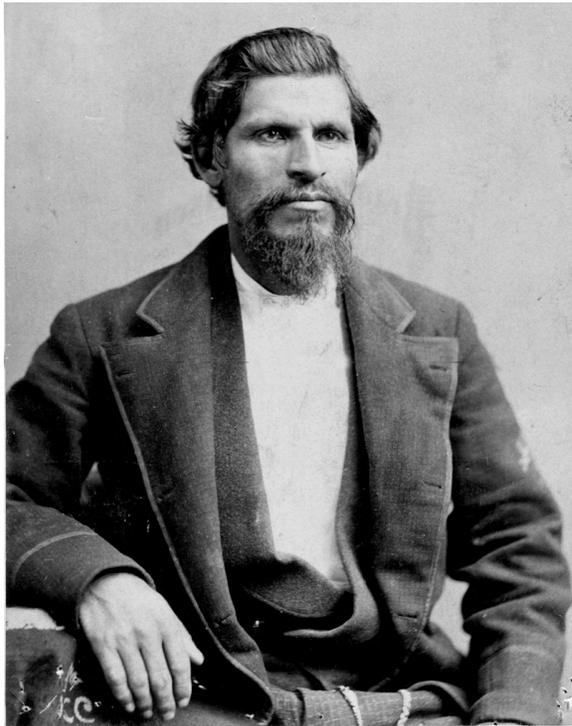


# California school named after bandido ignites controversy

**AP** Associated Press

By GOSIA WOZNIACKA, The Associated Press  
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FRESNO, Calif. -- Scaffolding climbs the walls of the new elementary school in Salinas, an agricultural city celebrated as John Steinbeck's birthplace but plagued by gang violence.

Although still under construction, the school is already embroiled in controversy because the school board decided to name it after Tiburcio Vasquez, one of the state's most notorious Old West banditos.

Critics say he was a 19th century outlaw who robbed and terrorized Californians before he was convicted and hanged for murder. They say naming a school after him glorifies crime.

In a city where two-thirds of residents are Latino, some Mexican-Americans say Vasquez was defending his land, culture and Spanish-speaking community from greedy white settlers who overran the state in pursuit of Manifest Destiny and gold.

Naming a school after Vasquez symbolizes opposition to discrimination and is an act of cultural pride, said Alisal Union School District Superintendent John Ramirez Jr.

"The real issue here is cultural citizenship," Ramirez said. "And part of citizenship is when people choose to name streets after their heroes."

The controversy has reignited the question of whose version of history should be honored and who is considered a hero in a multi-ethnic nation that often glorifies military figures.

"It's a question of who writes history," said Gary Alan Fine, a sociologist at Northwestern University who has written about the reputations of historical figures. "And the writers of history change over time."

Once populated by Dust Bowl migrants, the Alisal neighborhood – also called East Salinas – is now predominantly home to Mexican farmworker families who work in the Salinas Valley, an area known as "the Salad Bowl of the World."

Salinas' poorest neighborhood, Alisal also is the center of gang

violence in a city where officials have worked to steer youths away from gang culture. A former mayor even hired a firm to improve the city's image.

The Alisal school district itself has struggled with low test scores, student poverty and violence creeping onto school grounds. But Ramirez said the new school, to be completed by June, was planned as a step in the right direction – a magnet school where each student would receive a computer tablet to bridge the technology gap many poor students face.

In naming the school, a committee narrowed the choices to Trini Rodriguez, a former Alisal district principal who died of cancer, and to Vasquez. In December, the school board unanimously selected Vasquez, sparking an immediate outcry.

The city's new mayor, Joe Gunter, a former Salinas police detective, has criticized the decision, saying the district should not "be honoring people who are criminals." And the Monterey County Deputy Sheriff Association and the Salinas Police Officer Association publicly condemned it.

Some parents also disagreed with the choice, said Rosalina Ramos, who has two children attending other schools in the district.

"Naming a school after a criminal promotes violence. And our district already has a lot of problems with bullying and other issues," Ramos said.

In a written statement, the Monterey County Office of Education said the naming of a school is done at the discretion of the local

school board.

Without condemning or endorsing the name, county Superintendent of Schools Nancy Kotowski said, "The name of the new elementary school in the Alisal district should symbolize the fulfillment of the best hopes and dreams parents and the community have for their children."

Symbolism is exactly what school board members were after, Alisal district officials said.

"Vasquez was a folk hero, a revolutionary who was a product of the environment that existed at the time," Ramirez said. "He represents a ... time when the people of Mexican descent were treated in an offensive way."

Vasquez came of age in Monterey during the tumultuous conflicts between white Anglos and Californios – Mexicans who began streaming into the region a hundred years before the Gold Rush. When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, it gave the U.S. ownership of California. Statehood followed.

With the Gold Rush on, Mexican Californios quickly were outnumbered by the masses of white settlers, said John Boessenecker, author of "Bandido: The Life and Times of Tiburcio Vasquez." They were discriminated against, their land was taken away, and they had difficulty getting jobs. Some were lynched.

"The Californios were the economic, social and political power in the state until the Gold Rush," Boessenecker said. "Overnight,

they lost everything. They became second-class citizens in their own land."

Vasquez was an educated man from a reputable and affluent family. But he rustled horses, committed robberies and spent five years at San Quentin prison. Still, his biographer said, he was also considered a folk hero whose crimes amounted to fighting discrimination by white settlers.

Vasquez was captured after he and his gang robbed a store near Hollister, killing three people. He was convicted of murder and hanged in San Jose in 1875, according to news stories.

Those who support naming a school after him say it's difficult to tell whether Vasquez was treated justly, because anti-Mexican sentiment was extremely high at the time.

But even if Vasquez did kill someone, committing violent acts doesn't necessarily discredit a person from being a hero, said Fine of Northwestern University. U.S. national heroes include military generals, war veterans and slave owners. For example, Fine said, Thomas Jefferson – one of country's founders who became president – owned several hundred slaves.

The difference between a hero and villain, Fine said, is in the interpretation of historical context and in who has the power to decide. "The question is how communities today make the choices about whom to honor," he said.

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