



Download audio -- choose a format: [RealAudio](#) | [MP3](#)

DATE=8-26-01

TITLE=PEOPLE IN AMERICA #1836 - Emperor Norton

BYLINE=Paul Thompson

VOICE ONE:

I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Robert Cohen with the VOA Special English program, PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today we tell about the man who declared himself the emperor of the United States.

((THEME))

VOICE ONE:

The small city of Colma, California, is just a few kilometers south of San Francisco. Many people visit the city each year to see the burial place of one very unusual man in Colma's Woodlawn Cemetery. These visitors come to see a memorial stone placed on his grave.

The writing on the stone says in large letters, "NORTON THE FIRST, - EMPEROR OF THE UNITED STATES AND PROTECTOR OF MEXICO." Under this, in smaller size letters, is, "Joshua A. Norton Born in Eighteen-Nineteen. Died January Eighth, Eighteen-Eighty.

VOICE TWO:

Anyone who has studied American history knows that the United States is a democracy. The president and other political leaders of the United States are elected to office by the citizens. There is no royal family, no king, and no emperor.

Yet, Joshua Abraham Norton declared himself to be Emperor of the United States on September Seventeenth, Eighteen Fifty-Nine.

He sent an announcement to the newspapers of San Francisco saying he was Emperor Norton the First of the United States and the Protector of Mexico. The newspapers did not publish it.

VOICE ONE:

Many people in San Francisco knew Joshua Norton. He was born in England in Eighteen-Nineteen. He moved to San Francisco from South Africa. He arrived with a lot of money. He later lost all his money in a very bad financial deal. His many friends knew that this greatly affected him.

Joshua Norton no longer was the same man. Most of his friends believed the shock of losing all his money had taken away his ability to reason and to live in the real world. Poor Joshua Norton was not dangerous or violent, but he no longer knew what was real and what was only imaginary.

((MUSIC BRIDGE))

VOICE TWO:

Soon after he declared himself to be the Emperor of the United States, Joshua Norton began wearing blue military clothing. A soldier at the army base in San Francisco gave him the gold colored buttons and gold cloth. It made his uniform seem as if it belonged to a general...or perhaps a king...or even an Emperor.

Emperor Norton the First soon became the best known man in San Francisco. He always wore his uniform and a tall hat. When people saw him they would show the respect given a king...or emperor. Emperor Norton usually did not have any money. But he did not need any. If Emperor Norton went to an eating place, he was served a meal...free. If he needed something little from a store, that was also freely given. Sometimes he paid with his own kind of money. It was paper money with his picture on it.

Many stores began placing a small sign in the store window. The sign said, "By Appointment to his Majesty, Emperor Norton the First." The sign meant the store or eating-place had been approved by the Emperor of the United States. Stores that had the signs noted that their business increased.

VOICE ONE:

Emperor Norton began sending royal orders...called decrees...to the newspapers of San Francisco. The newspapers began publishing them. Many people thought they were funny. Some people bought the newspapers just to read about the latest decree from the Emperor of the United States.

Many of the decrees, however, made people think. For example, Emperor Norton said that Governor Wise of Virginia was to be removed from office by royal decree. Emperor Norton said this was necessary because Governor Wise had ordered the death by hanging of John Brown. John Brown was a rebel who had tried to start a war to free slaves.

Emperor Norton said John Brown had tried to capture the state of Virginia with only seventeen men. That was evidence, Emperor Norton said, that John Brown was mentally sick and should have been put in a hospital for treatment.

Emperor Norton said John Brown never should have been executed. Many people in

San Francisco agreed with Emperor Norton. The execution of John Brown was one of the many issues that led to the American Civil War.

VOICE TWO:

Another Emperor Norton decree had to do with the name of the city. Some people often use a short name for city of San Francisco. They call it "Frisco." Emperor Norton did not like this short name. He decreed that anyone found guilty of using the word "Frisco" must pay a penalty of twenty-five dollars. Even today many citizens of San Francisco warn visitors never to call the great city "Frisco. "

Perhaps Emperor Norton's most famous decree ordered the city government to build a bridge from the city of Oakland to a small island in San Francisco Bay. It said the bridge should extend from the little island to San Francisco.

City leaders did nothing about building the bridge. So Emperor Norton ordered them removed from office. Nothing happened, of course, to the city leaders or about the bridge.

Many years later, after Emperor Norton's death, a bridge was built extending from San Francisco to the city of Oakland. It was placed almost in the exact spot that Emperor Norton had decreed. It is called the Bay Bridge. Thousands of cars pass over it every day.

((MUSIC BRIDGE))

VOICE ONE:

San Francisco has always been home to many Chinese people. It still is today. One story about Emperor Norton involves the Chinese. In his time many people did not like Chinese people. One group of people organized an anti-Chinese committee. They believed too many Chinese lived in San Francisco. They decided to cause violence in the Chinese area of the city.

Many people knew about the committee's plans, but no one did anything to stop the planned violence. One night, members of the committee left a meeting and walked toward the area of the city where most of the Chinese lived. As they got close to the area, one man stood in the street blocking their way.

He said nothing. He did not move. His head was low on his chest and he seemed to be praying. The mob of troublemakers stopped. They looked at the old blue uniform with its gold colored buttons. They said nothing. They did nothing. Slowly, the mob turned and walked away. Emperor Norton had prevented the planned violence.

VOICE TWO:

Emperor Norton had two dogs. They were named Bummer and Lazarus. They were with him all the time. If a San Francisco theater was presenting a new play or musical, Emperor Norton, Bummer and Lazarus had three seats at it. If the San Francisco Science Academy was meeting, the three might attend to listen to a discussion of the latest developments in science.

One night, a new member of the San Francisco police department arrested Emperor Norton. The young policeman thought anyone who claimed to be the Emperor of the United State might be a danger to the public. Very soon a judge and the chief of police arrived at the police station. The judge said, "The Emperor has hurt no one that I know of." He quickly ordered the Emperor freed and apologized for the mistake. From that time on, the San Francisco policemen showed respect to Joshua Norton by giving a military salute.

VOICE ONE:

On January Eighth, Eighteen-Eighty, Emperor Norton was walking along California Street inspecting his city as usual. People in the area saw him fall down. Several rushed to his aid. Moments later it was clear that Joshua Norton was dead.

The next day, the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper printed four words in French across the front of the paper. They were "LE ROI EST MORT." They mean, "The King is dead."

The newspaper reported the death of the city's most famous citizen. The report said that Joshua Norton had no real money...not even enough to pay for his burial. Almost immediately, wealthy members of a San Francisco business group collected enough to pay for the funeral.

Businesses closed in San Francisco the day of the funeral. Newspapers reported that more ten thousand people attended the burial ceremony for Emperor Norton. One newspaper said that the world would be a much better place if all kings and emperors were as kind and as honest as Joshua Norton.

VOICE TWO:

Today, some stores and eating places in San Francisco still have signs which say, "By Appointment to His Majesty, Emperor Norton the First." And each year a group of citizens meets at Joshua Norton's burial place to honor the first and only Emperor of the United States.

((THEME))

VOICE ONE:

This Special English program was written and produced by Paul Thompson. Our audio engineer was Wagner Roberts. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Robert Cohen. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.

» » **Publishers: Please contact us if you would like to use our scripts**

E-mail: special@voa.gov	VOA Special English
Web: http://www.voa.gov/special	Washington, D.C. 20237
Fax: 202-619-2543	USA
