Background: An overview of the Latino presence in San Francisco and the formation of a Latino neighborhood in the Mission District

The area that would later become the City of San Francisco had historically been a part of the Mexican Republic from 1821-1848. Beginning in 1833, the newly-established Mexican government began to secularize Mission lands that had been founded a half-century earlier by the Spanish, and distributed over 500 land grants to prominent families throughout California in an effort to encourage agricultural development.

Juana Briones (1802-1889) and her husband, Apolinario Miranda, were among these families and together, they established a farm near the Presidio of San Francisco. Juana Briones also purchased property in the area now known as North Beach where she built a home, making her the first person to own land in Yerba Buena somewhere other than the Presidio or Mission Dolores. Upon divorcing her abusive husband in 1844, Juana Briones became the first woman in the city to own property and it is for this reason that she is considered the founding mother of San Francisco.

The Mexican land grant system heavily influenced settlement patterns in the area that is now San Francisco. The foundation for the city’s layout was further established in 1839 when then-Governor of California, Juan Bautista Alvarado, ordered Yerba Buena’s alcalde, or mayor, to lay out the city grid. Jean Jacques Vioget was hired to carry out a survey of the land, which included a Mexican plaza located at Portsmouth Square.

Following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which ended the Mexican-American War and resulted in the succession of a large swath of territory to the United States, including California, additional Mexican nationals migrated to San Francisco. Many of the Mexicans who had been living in Yerba Buena remained in San Francisco during and after this transition.

A second wave of migrants from Latin America made their way to San Francisco during the mid-19th century as large numbers of Chileans, Peruvians, Mexicans, and other Central and South Americans settled in the city leading up to and after the Gold Rush.

Some of the earliest Latino neighborhoods to form in San Francisco included the area surrounding Mission Dolores, where a town of Mexicans lived during the mid-19th century; “Little Chile” or Chilecito, which formed during the 1850s in an area near Telegraph Hill; the “Latin Quarter” of North Beach, which by the 1880s contained a large concentration of the city’s Mexican population; the “Mexican Colony,” which referred to the area surrounding Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (1906) in North Beach during the early 20th century; and the South of Market during the early-to-mid 20th century.

As a result of large-scale government transportation projects executed in San Francisco throughout the 20th century, including the Bay Bridge near Rincon Hill in the 1930s and construction of the Broadway Tunnel in North Beach in 1952, the two primary Latino neighborhoods of the early 20th century were physically fragmented, triggering displacement and the dissolution of social fabric in both neighborhoods. Some of the Latinos displaced from these neighborhoods, augmented by a wave of newly arrived Latin American immigrants, began settling in the Mission District as early as the 1930s.
Historic background for a resolution supporting the establishment of Calle 24 as a Latino Cultural District
Prepared by Calle 24 SF, San Francisco Heritage, and the San Francisco Latino Historical Society

A number of Latino businesses were also displaced from these original neighborhoods, relocating to the Fillmore, then to the North Mission, and finally along 24th Street in the Inner Mission. This trend has continued in recent years as well, with several Latino businesses relocating to 24th Street from the commercial corridor located near the intersection of Valencia and 16th Street in the Inner Mission.

Migration from Mexico, Central, and South America to San Francisco accelerated during the post-WWII period, with the Mission District being the primary destination for the new arrivals. With people coming from Central America, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico during the mid-20th century, San Francisco’s Latino population displayed an incredible amount of diversity. The Mission District’s identity as a Latino neighborhood crystallized during this time, when the area’s Irish residents resettled in newly built homes in the Sunset and Richmond districts. Latinos moved into the Mission District to be closer to their places of employment in the breweries, canneries, and textile factories found nearby.

Latinos had also settled in the northern sections of the Mission District, Noe Valley, and the Castro, but were eventually displaced from those areas in the 1970s due to gentrification. Later waves of Latino migrants came to the Mission District from the Southwestern United States, Central California, and Central American countries experiencing political strife in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, the neighborhood’s Latino population is concentrated in the southern part of the Mission District and represents a culturally diverse population with roots from all over the Americas.
Historic background for a resolution supporting the establishment of Calle 24 as a Latino Cultural District
Prepared by Calle 24 SF, San Francisco Heritage, and the San Francisco Latino Historical Society

Calle 24: El Corazon de la Misión / The Heart of the Mission

Spanning fourteen city blocks, the section of 24th Street bounded by Valencia Street to the west and Potrero Avenue to the east has served as the center of Latino activism, arts, commerce, and culture in San Francisco since the 1940s. The activities and events that took place along lower 24th Street, or Calle 24, from this time to the present have created waves of social change that continue to reverberate throughout the country and the world, establishing Calle 24 as the heart of the Mission District and the hub of Latino cultural expression in San Francisco. With several churches, botánicas, and cultural events like Día de los Muertos festival taking place annually along 24th Street, the corridor is also the spiritual home of the city’s Latino community.

Calle 24 as a hub of Latino arts and culture in San Francisco

Interspersed throughout a web of neighborhood businesses and services on 24th Street, are the major Latino cultural and community institutions that anchor Calle 24. These organizations emerged as a result of discrimination and a lack of opportunity for Latino artists to exhibit their work at mainstream art galleries, museums, and spaces. Galería de la Raza, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, Precita Eyes Mural Arts & Visitors Center, Acción Latina, and the Brava Theater, all of which are located on or adjacent to 24th Street, represent the arts and cultural organizations that continue to carry on Latino cultural traditions, cultivate new generations of Latino artists, and foster the creation of new art works and cultural events that have promulgated the Mission District to an international audience.

Established in 1970, Galería de la Raza was the first Latino arts organization to appear on 24th Street and its presence influenced the corridor in significant ways. The gallery nurtured cultural icons, Culture Clash and Mujeres Muralistas, and also helped to inspire the creation of the Mexican Museum. For decades the Galería has provided a space for Latino artists to create innovative new works, transforming the Latino arts field and putting the Mission District, and 24th Street in particular, on the map.

Additional Latino-based arts organizations were created along the 24th Street corridor in the years that followed and have contributed substantially to Latino culture and history in San Francisco. The Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts’ Grafica Department has contributed to the city’s legacy of printmaking, which documents many of the social struggles faced by the Latino community during the 1970s and 1980s; Precita Eyes Mural Arts & Visitors Center established a model of community mural-making that has been replicated by communities across the country; Acción Latina’s El Tecolote newspaper upholds a nearly two-century-long tradition of bilingual Spanish/English journalism in San Francisco; and the Brava Theater has produced groundbreaking and provocative work by women playwrights, including well-known Chicana lesbian playwright, Cherrie Moraga, and hosts a variety of Latino cultural events.

Calle 24 boasts some of the city’s most beloved murals, many of which have contributed significantly to art history on the local, national, and international scale. In following with the Mexican tradition of large-scale public mural painting, Chicano, Central American, and other local artists have painted nearly 400 murals throughout the Mission District beginning in the 1960s and continuing through
the present day. These murals serve as a testament to the Latino experience in San Francisco and reflect important people, events, and ideas of the time in which they were created.

Extending an entire city block, **Balmy Alley contains the largest concentration of murals in San Francisco.** Balmy Alley emerged out of the need to provide a safer passage for children from the Bernal Dwellings apartments to “24th Street Place,” an arts and education program located at the intersection of the alley and 24th Street, and run by Mia Gonzalez, Martha Estrella and Ana Montano, Esq. In 1972, members of the Chicana artist collective, Mujeres Muralistas, were invited to paint the first mural in Balmy Alley.

Mujeres Muralistas emerged from an exhibition at the Galería de la Raza in the early 1970s. The collective became known for producing groundbreaking murals depicting the experiences of women – a subject rarely represented in murals of this era – and inspiring other female artists to produce large-scale outdoor works, a trend that would forever transform muralism in San Francisco. Early members of the collective included Graciela Carrillo, Mia Gonzalez, Irene Perez, and Patricia Rodriguez.

In 1984, a group led by muralists Ray Patlán and Patricia Rodriguez calling itself PLACA coordinated a large-scale mural project in Balmy Alley. It included a total of 27 murals painted by over three-dozen Chicano and Central American muralists. The collection centered on then-ongoing conflicts in Central America, expressing anger over human rights violations, promoting peace, and honoring the indigenous cultures of those countries. Mural painting in Balmy Alley became a tradition and today the alley extends for an entire city block, containing the largest concentration of murals in San Francisco.

**Other murals painted along the 24th Street corridor** include Michael Rios’ “BART” mural (1975), Daniel Galvez’s “Carnaval” mural (1983), Precita Eyes’ “Bountiful Harvest” (1978) and “Americana Tropical” (2007), Mujeres Muralistas’ “Fantasy World for Children” (1975), Isaias Mata’s “500 Years of Resistance” (1992), Juana Alicia’s “La Llorona’s Sacred Waters” (2004), and the Galería de la Raza’s Digital Mural Project, among others.

The **Mission Economic Cultural Association (MECA)**, which was founded by Roberto Hernandez and operated along 24th Street during the 1980s and 1990s, was another highly influential organization that had profound impacts on the corridor. MECA produced many of the Mission District’s well-known Latino festivals and parades that continue to take place along Calle 24 and other parts of the Mission District, including **Carnaval, Cinco de Mayo, and the 24th Street Festival de las Americas.** Other important events that take place along 24th Street include the **Cesar Chavez Parade and Festival, Día de los Muertos Procession and Festival of Altars, and Encuentro del Canto Popular.** While MECA shut its doors in 1999, the building it formerly occupied remains standing at 2899 24th Street. Other organizations located along 24th Street or in different parts of the Mission District continue to produce these important festivals.

Calle 24 also embodies the evolution of Latin music in San Francisco. The legacy of Latin jazz that was born in the Fillmore spilled over into the Mission, preempting the formation of a vibrant Latin rock scene in the Mission District. **San Francisco’s Latin rock boom** emerged during the 1960s in the midst of the Chicano Movement and produced numerous local Latin rock legends including **Santana,**
Malo, Sapo, and Azteca, many of which performed during the festivals and parades held on 24th Street during this era. The city’s diverse Latino population comprised of Latinos with Caribbean, Central American, South American, and Chicano or Mexican roots resulted in a unique sound that combined musical styles and instruments from all over the Americas. As a result, San Francisco latin rockeros fused Latin beats with blues, funk, jazz, psychedelic, and rock in a new way.

Small and family-owned businesses have also played a role in promoting and preserving Latino culture along 24th Street. Ranging from restaurants and panaderías, to jewelry shops and botánicas, these businesses sustain Latino culinary, spiritual, and cultural traditions, offering products to meet the needs of the city’s Latino residents. Longtime Mexican and Salvadoran panaderías such as La Victoria (1951), Dominguez (1967), La Reyna (1977), Pan Lido (1981), and La Mexicana (1989) have served up sweet breads to generations of Mission residents and visitors. Similarly, restaurants like The Roosevelt (1922, formerly Roosevelt Tamale Parlor), Casa Sanchez (1924), and La Palma Market (1953) help sustain Latino food traditions. Some of these businesses relocated to 24th Street from older Latino neighborhoods in San Francisco, such as North Beach, Rincon Hill, the Fillmore, and the North Mission, and finally along 24th Street in the Inner Mission. This trend has continued in recent years as well, with several Latino businesses relocating to 24th Street from the Valencia and 16th Street corridor in the Inner Mission. While the popular record store Discolandia (1962) closed in 2010, its memory lives on through the “Discolandia” sign that has been retained as a visual landmark by the current business owner, harkening back to earlier eras and continuing to reflect Latino character of the neighborhood.

Calle 24 as a center of organizing for social justice

Additionally, Calle 24 is home to sites of important social demonstrations spearheaded by the local Latino community. Such events took place along 24th Street during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and of the 1960s and 1970s, the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran Solidarity Movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Mission youth organized numerous political demonstrations along 24th Street as early as the 1960s, coming together around issues such as police brutality, discrimination, and gentrification. Calle 24 also upholds a long legacy of queer Latino leadership, with many of the community’s notable leaders identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT). Sites of Latino organizing throughout the second half of the 20th century include the Betel Apartments (and the Safeway store formerly in its place), the 24th Street BART stations, St. Peter’s Church, Modern Times Book Store, and cultural organizations such as Galería de la Raza, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, and Brava Theater for Women in the Arts.

Mission Housing Development Corporation (MHDC) developed the Betel Apartments in 1978 in response to community demands for more affordable housing for Mission District residents. The site is also an important marker of Chicano labor history. The United Farmworkers Movement (UFW) organized protests at the Safeway formerly occupying the site as part of the 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott. Led locally by activists Eva Royale and Bob Hernandez, the protests were intended to support Central Valley farmworkers demanding improved working conditions and fair wages. Eva Royale went on to found the annual Cesar Chavez Parade and Festival that takes place each April along 24th Street in the Mission.
The two plazas located at the 24th Street BART station have long served as a popular arena for public demonstrations, ranging from those organized by the Mission Coalition of Organizations to those associated with the Central American Solidarity movements in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, the plazas would come to be known as “Plaza Sandino,” after Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto Cesar Sandino, and “Plaza Martí,” after Salvadoran leftist leader Farabundo Martí. A prominent feature of the northeast BART plaza is the 1975 mural painted by Michael Rios, which depicts the controversial impact of the 16th and 24th Street BART stations that were constructed in the 1970s. The mural takes a critical look at how the station was built on the backs of hard working residents who protested the extra sales tax that financed the rapid transit system.

St. Peter’s Church is another site significant to the city’s Latino history and an anchor of the 24th Street corridor. The church and its adjoining school served a predominately Irish and Italian congregation until the mid-20th century, when the Mission transitioned into a predominately Latino neighborhood. During this period, the church was associated with antipoverty programs such as Arriba Juntos, the United Farm Workers Movement, the Mission Coalition Organization, and community efforts to stop urban redevelopment.

By the mid-1980s, the congregation at St. Peter’s Church was comprised largely of Nicaraguans and Salvadorans who had fled conflict in their home countries. Salvadoran refugees founded the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) of Northern California in 1986 and operated it out of St. Peter’s before relocating to its current location at 3101 Mission Street. In 1989, San Francisco adopted a Sanctuary Ordinance, which prohibited City employees from helping Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with immigration investigations or arrests unless such help was required by federal or state law or a warrant. This, in addition to previously established familial and social networks, led to San Francisco becoming major center of Central American immigration during that era.

An important feature of St. Peter’s Church is its 1992 mural painted by Salvadoran muralist, Isaías Mata, entitled “500 Years of Resistance.” St. Peter’s Church commissioned the mural on its clergy building (1905) to mark the anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the Americas. The mural honors indigenous people who have had to fight for freedom, especially those who have settled in San Francisco.

The Mission District, and 24th Street in particular, has sustained a tradition of youth organizing within the Latino community. Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the present day, youth have organized against police brutality, established anti-gang violence programs like the Real Alternatives Program (RAP) and Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth (HOMEY), advocated for affordable housing such as the Betel Apartments, fought for open space such as La Raza Park, and played instrumental roles in the creation of many of the arts and cultural organizations located along the 24th Street corridor including the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts. Most recently, youth have been critical to the anti-gentrification efforts, with 24th Street being the principal place of related protests, marches, and rallies.

Finally, Calle 24 is emblematic of the city’s long legacy of queer Latino leadership. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) Latinos and Latinas have been at the forefront of much of the organizing that has taken place along the corridor. Many queer Latinos found themselves isolated from
the mainstream Gay Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as they experienced discrimination within the larger queer community. Straddling the boundaries between both the larger gay and Latino communities, many queer Latinos were able to forge their own space within the realm of community activism.

Many **queer Latino artists and cultural workers**, for example, became leaders in their field. Chicana lesbian feminist artist, Ester Hernandez, is perhaps most famous for her 1982 poster entitled, “Sun Mad,” which questioned the effects of pesticides on agricultural workers; prior to founding the Mexican Museum, gay Chicano artist and curator, Peter Rodriguez, founded the ground-breaking Mexican Museum in 1975; Argentina native Juan Pifarre was a Mission District activist and publisher of the Spanish-language newspaper, Horizontes; openly gay Chicano activist, Juan Pablo Gutierrez, has organized the Día de los Muertos parade for over three decades, founded the San Francisco Latino AIDS Education Prevention Project, and co-founded the Community United in Response to AIDS-SIDA.

Queer Latino artists found space to express themselves and develop their artistic talents at 24th Street cultural institutions including Galería de la Raza, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, BRAVA for Women in the Arts (formerly the York Theater), and Carnaval. Moreover, queer Latinos served as organizers for many of these Latino cultural events and organizations.

Other sites on 24th Street that are important to the Latino queer community in San Francisco include **Modern Times Bookstore**, with its collection of queer bilingual (Spanish/English) literature, and St. Peter’s Church, where the self-governing faith community of LGBT Catholics known as **Dignity San Francisco** held its first mass. Modern Times Bookstore was first located on Valencia Street before relocating to 24th street where it serves as an important community anchor.

Numerous lesbian, gay, and bisexual political leaders within the Latino community have made their mark on the city’s civic history as well. San Francisco Supervisor David Campos, whose jurisdiction includes the Mission District, is an out gay Latino of Guatemalan heritage; former City Supervisor and president of the San Francisco Planning Commission, Christina Oлага, identifies as bisexual and Chicana; and Erick Arguello, president and co-founder along with John Mendoza, of the Calle 24 SF (formerly the Lower 24th Street Merchants and Neighbors Association), is an openly gay Latino of Nicaraguan heritage who works for the Latino gay advocacy organization known as AGUILAS. **AGUILAS** is an acronym for Asamblea Gay Unida Impactando Latinos A Superarse, or Assembly of United Gays Impacting Latinos towards Self-Empowerment, the largest gay Latino organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. Established in 1991, AGUILAS provides the Latino gay community with health services and coordinates AIDS awareness programs. Other queer Latino community advocates with ties to the Mission District and 24th Street include Olga Talamante, Mark Sanchez, Miguel Bustos, and Alfredo Pedoza, to name a few.

**Latino community organizes to support and improve Calle 24 and surrounding neighborhood**

Latino community leaders, residents, and parents have come together in a number of instances to establish **social service nonprofits** in order to support neighborhood youth. **Mission Educational Projects, Inc. (MEPI)**, for example, was established in the early 1970s when a group of young Inner Mission parents sat around a kitchen table to devise a way to help their children succeed
Historic background for a resolution supporting the establishment of Calle 24 as a Latino Cultural District
Prepared by Calle 24 SF, San Francisco Heritage, and the San Francisco Latino Historical Society

academically. These parents worked with Mission Coalition of Organizations (MCO), which was comprised of community leaders such as Herman Gallegos, Ben Martinez, and Abel Gonzalez, to secure public funds for their proposed program. As first conceived, MEPI was a partnership between the San Francisco Unified School District and the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Urban Development. By 1976, however, parents and program administrators felt that children would be better served if MEPI moved into the neighborhood where the students lived. Since then, MEPI has provided educational and support services to youth and their families within walking distance of their homes.

The 1990s witnessed another strong period of activity along 24th Street, when community leaders began to devise ways to celebrate the Latino identity of the neighborhood, curb gentrification, and encourage 24th Street-based businesses and nonprofits to purchase the property in which they operated. Former Mission District Supervisor, Jim Gonzalez, introduced a façade improvement program and a "Flags of the Americas Program," in which Mission artists created flags that were later attached to light poles along lower 24th Street as a way of recognizing the Latino heritage of the neighborhood. During this same time, a group of Latino designers and planners developed an urban design plan for the 24th Street corridor, also intended to honor the Latino identity of the neighborhood without spurring gentrification.

Upon the expiration of Supervisor Gonzalez’s tenure, Supervisor Susan Leal and the 24th Street Revitalization Committee held a “Mission District Economic Summit” to discuss the prospect of creating a cultural district along 24th Street, similar to what was being developed for the Town of Gilroy, California. Supervisor Jose Medina chaired the 24th Street Revitalization Committee for a period of time as well. Without tools for implementation, however, the idea eventually went dormant.

Supervisor Leal also provided leadership in developing a process to assist nonprofit organizations, such as BRAVA! For Women in the Arts and Mission Neighborhood Centers, purchase properties along 24th Street. Mission Girls, located at 24th and Harrison, represents one of these properties as the organization operates under the umbrella of Mission Neighborhood Centers. In 1992, the site was slated to become a Taco Bell until the community organized and, with the assistance of local officials including Supervisor Leal, secured funding to purchase the site. Mission Girls provides services targeted to Latina girls and young women, including homework assistance, leadership programs, and anti-violence education.

Mission District community leaders came together again in the late 1990s to seek resources for neighborhood services and preservation through the federal Enterprise Zone program. The first meeting to discuss this concept was held at MEPI on 24th Street, in which over 40 community leaders convened to develop a plan to curb violence, establish home ownership and affordable housing programs, spur business development, and support Latino arts and culture. With a direct tie to the federal government via Mission District-native and White House staffer, Miguel Bustos, the idea had potential. Without support from local elected officials, however, the initiative failed to move forward.

A few years later in 1999, a group of residents, merchants, service providers, and arts organizations founded the Lower 24th Street Merchants and Neighbors Association, now known as Calle 24 SF, with the purpose of making lower 24th Street a safer, cleaner, and healthier environment. With its
Hands in many neighborhood projects, Calle 24 SF advocates for neighborhood services, local businesses, arts and culture programs, and improved public spaces. Most recently, it has advocated for the designation of Calle 24 as a cultural district. The organization was the first to coin the term, “Calle 24,” and promotes the heritage of the corridor through its website and by speaking out against ongoing gentrification and displacement of long-time residents and merchants.

**Goal of designating Calle 24 as a cultural district is revived**

Community leaders have long sought to establish a program to preserve the culture and community of the lower 24th Street corridor, beginning in the mid-1990s under the leadership of then-Supervisor Jim Gonzalez in response to gentrification of the neighborhood, continuing under Supervisor Susan Leal’s tenure through the 24th Street Revitalization Committee, and also through efforts to establish an Enterprise Zone for the Mission District. Interest in establishing a cultural district and economic development program for the 24th Street Corridor has resurfaced in recent years, however, and Calle 24 SF is currently working with the San Francisco Latino Historical Society, San Francisco Heritage, the Mayor’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development, and Supervisor David Campos to create such a district.