

THE EMPEROR OF THE UNITED STATES, NORTON I

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He abolished Congress. He ousted Virginia governor Henry Wise and appointed John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky to take his place. Ultimately, he even dissolved the republican form of government in the United States and substituted an absolute monarchy.

Yet, the federal government recognized in a most legitimate form his vast claims of authority, heads of state sent him telegrams, and numerous cities courted his approval. Such contemporary literary giants as Ambrose Bierce, Bret Harte, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Mark Twain wrote about him. Promoters used his name freely in their literature to encourage tourists to visit San Francisco. And businessmen catered to this avid interest by selling dolls, postcards, figurines, and other souvenirs of him at a handsome profit.

By the time he died, he was an institution. One major newspaper ran a banner headline that read “Le Roi Est Mort” (The King is Dead). On the tombstone that indicates his final resting place are chiseled—without quotation marks—the following words: Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, Joshua A. Norton, 1819–1880.

Joshua Abraham Norton, our nation’s first (and so far only) emperor, was born in 1819 in London, England. When he was only a child—some people say not more than two years old—his family moved to Algoa Bay, South Africa, where his father set up a general store. Joshua learned from his father the rudiments of business, apparently oblivious to his regal greatness.

Norton’s mother and siblings died in South Africa. Gravely ill, his father returned to England, where he, too, passed away. All alone in the world, in 1849 Norton decided to seek his fortune in the United States. With a \$30,000 inheritance, he sailed for San Francisco, where gold had just been discovered.

Shortly after arriving, Norton convinced Peter Robertson, a young shipping clerk from Baltimore, to join him in forming Joshua Norton & Company, General Merchants, to sell supplies to gold miners. Norton bought several prime lots, including one with a disabled ship offshore that he turned into his warehouse. In 1851, a fire destroyed many businesses in the area, including Norton’s own office, but his merchandise was undamaged as it was on the ship. The company was

successful, and Norton gained the respect and admiration of the financial and social elite of the city.

Norton soon multiplied his business ventures. He opened a cigar factory and erected a large building, renting office space to fellow businessmen. He built a rice mill to meet the growing demands of the increasing Chinese population of the city. By 1855, he had amassed a fortune estimated at more than a quarter of a million dollars. His friends and associates began referring to him as “the emperor.”

But his financial success was not to last. When a famine struck China, the Chinese government banned the export of rice, creating a shortage in California. The price of rice shot from four cents a pound to thirty-six cents a pound. A shipping agent whispered to Norton that a ship loaded with 200,000 pounds of scarce Peruvian rice had just arrived in port and that he could buy the whole load for twelve-and-a-half cents a pound, or \$25,000. Norton foresaw a corner on the market. At the going retail price, he could sell the shipload, the only rice available on the West Coast, for \$72,000. He made the purchase.

But the next day another shipload of Peruvian rice sailed in. The day after that, yet another arrived, and they continued to do so until the market was glutted with rice. The retail price fell to only three cents a pound. Norton tried to have his original contract nullified, but the sellers took him to court, where he spent the next three years fighting to save his fortune. The financial strain of the court fight prevented Norton from making critical payments on his buildings and other properties. His hard-nosed banker foreclosed on him. (That banker, who would later become more infamous for his hard-nosed treatment of civilians during a march he took through Georgia, was William Tecumseh Sherman.) Even Norton’s Masonic lodge suspended his membership for failure to pay his dues.

Compounding his problems, a depression hit. Commodities rotted unsold on the docks. Norton tried his hand in stocks, but they failed in only three months. He opened a real estate office, but no one wanted to buy. He even stooped to selling goods for other people on commission, but still no one would buy. He finally sold his remaining holdings—including his mill, the cigars, and even his mule—at a loss. Suddenly his friends among the elite no longer wanted him around. Norton, realizing his failure, declared bankruptcy. Then, as suddenly as he had appeared in San Francisco, he disappeared. For nine months Norton was nowhere to be found.

One day in late summer 1859, an unusual person turned up on the streets of San Francisco. Wearing a rumpled old military uniform, the character strode proudly

into the offices of the *San Francisco Bulletin*. He approached editor George Fitch, handed him a document, and “respectfully requested” that he run it in the paper.

On any other day the notice from the oddly dressed man would never have seen print. But the news in the forthcoming issue of the *Bulletin* seemed unusually negative to Fitch, and he was somewhat discouraged. The information that the man had handed him appeared to be just what was needed to overcome the otherwise negative tone of the paper. He decided to print the message just as he had received it. The next day’s paper carried the following proclamation:

At the peremptory request of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and now for the past nine years and ten months of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these U.S.

Norton I,
Emperor of the United States

For the next 21 years, Norton I graced the streets, public gatherings, and even governmental meetings of San Francisco with his presence. Citizens who passed him on the street bowed to him and addressed him as “Your Majesty.” (If someone forgetfully called him Mr. Norton, he gently reminded the person of his imperial position and demanded to be addressed more respectfully.) Policemen on the beat saluted him smartly. He gladly accepted free lunches in almost every eating establishment in the city. Theater managers reserved a special seat for him at every opening performance. A large upholstered chair was always reserved for him in the state legislature. He reviewed the local militia.

The new emperor attended church faithfully, too. To avoid offending any religious group and to promote religious harmony within the community, he took turns attending services at various Protestant and Catholic churches on Sundays and at a Jewish synagogue every Saturday.

As emperor, Norton I also issued a number of imperial proclamations, with the newspapers dutifully printed. Newspaper sales boomed every time a proclamation was published. One such proclamation reads as follows:

Whereas, a body of men calling themselves the National Congress are now in session in Washington City, in violation of our Imperial edict of the 12th of October last, declaring the said Congress abolished;

Whereas, it is necessary for the repose of our Empire that the said decree should be strictly complied with;

Now, therefore, we do hereby Order and Direct Major-General Scott, the Commander-in Chief of our Armies, immediately upon receipt of this, our Decree, to proceed with a suitable force and clear the Halls of Congress.

Norton I,
Emperor of the United States

Other proclamations fired Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, ordered the arrest of Andrew Johnson, corrected newspaper errors, and demanded that merchants supply him with suitable attire and appropriate living quarters. Several times he exhibited an apparent ability to see future potential by issuing proclamations ordering, for example, the erection of a bridge linking Oakland and San Francisco. Still more edicts promoted the development of aircraft and a new and safer type of railroad switch. To preserve both community integrity and linguistic purity, one of his proclamations forbade the use of the term *Frisco* for the city.

Whenever the imperial proclamations were slow in coming, newspaper editors created their own proclamations in Norton's name but without his knowledge or approval. Many such frauds were not-to-subtle efforts to promote local businesses. Businessmen also put signs in their store windows announcing, for example, that they were in business "By appointment of Norton I" or were "Suppliers for His Royal Majesty."

At first Norton was supported in a subsistence lifestyle by "taxes" he collected from bankers and merchants. Whenever he needed funds, he entered a business establishment with imperial regality and respectfully reminded the proprietor that he was in arrears on his taxes, whereupon the businessman generally inquired the amount due. Norton stated an exorbitant amount in the millions of dollars, and the delinquent taxpayer proceeded to dicker, usually getting the tax down to two or three dollars. He then dutifully relinquished the stated amount and vowed not to be so negligent in the future. Norton would thank him and walk out proudly.

As the years passed, however, economic conditions required that Norton supply the treasury by printing bonds with face values of 50 cents and two, five, and ten dollars, then selling them to tourists. The bonds were redeemable in 1880 and promised seven percent interest. The emperor personally signed each bond at the time of purchase and, using a coin and ink that he carried in his pocket, impressed

it with the imperial seal. For all practical purposes, the bonds were worthless—or so people thought. One of his 50-cent certificates reportedly sold at a charity auction in 1870 for \$150.

Norton's clothing changed little over the years. He generally wore a blue naval uniform with gold buttons and a red stripe down each pant leg. Although he initially wore a Civil War-era kepi, he later switched to a tall beaver hat with an ostentatious plume. He also later added gaudy epaulets to his shoulders. He carried a varied assortment of canes, most of them gifts from various cities, organizations, and other loyal subjects. He didn't have an overcoat, but he did carry a Chinese waxed-paper umbrella with a bamboo handle for protection from the rain.

Bret Harte once wrote that Norton "lived in luxury," but such was not really the case, even in one's wildest imagination. He just acted as though he lived in luxury's lap. In fact, one biographer revealed his condition to be quite dismal:

His Majesty was painfully thin, wasted by malnutrition, his uniform deplorably threadbare. His ostrich plume, having waved in the wind too long and become worn to a frazzle, had given way to a hackle of peacock feathers mixed with rooster quills, and he no longer wore his baggy blue army trousers with the faded red stripes down the seams, as the *Bulletin* pointed out: "His Majesty's never-mention-'ems having lost their seat, the royal limbs are cased in a pair of civilian pants.'

Norton's living quarters matched his clothes. He resided in a 50-cents-a-day, six-by-nine-foot room (called "fleapit lodgings" by one author) at 624 Commercial Street. Furniture consisted of a dilapidated metal-frame bed, a well-used couch, a straight-backed chair, and a small table. He hung his royal apparel on ten-penny nails in the walls. The only adornments were several magazine lithographs of his royal protégées: Queen Victoria of Great Britain, Empress Carlotta of Mexico, Queen Emma of the Sandwich Islands, and Empress Eugenie of France.

Near the end of his life, Norton decided that he needed his own queen. He proposed in writing to 17-year-old Minnie Wakeman, the daughter of a prominent San Francisco family. The astonished (and somewhat embarrassed) young lady replied graciously but declined his proposal on the grounds that she was already betrothed to someone. Because the emperor was then overseeing the proceedings of the California legislature in Sacramento, he did not immediately receive her answer. On his way back from Sacramento, however, he dropped by her house—

much to her mother's mortification—where he learned the dismal news that his quest for a queen must continue. The next day, Miss Wakeman received the following message from her royal suitor:

My dear Miss Minnie Wakeman,
The Ladies of S.F. have declared Miss B. Marig Empress Norton I.
Hoping to have your consent.
I am your affectionate friend,
Norton I, Emperor

No one knows who the lucky girl was, or if Norton's first choice consented. But there is no record to indicate that he ever married.

On the night of January 8, 1880, the emperor left his royal room in a driving rainstorm and trudged slowly uphill toward the intersection of California Street and Dupont. He was going to a debate of the Hastings Society at the Academy of Natural Sciences. He paused a few steps from its door, staggered momentarily, and then collapsed to the sidewalk.

A shopkeeper walking behind him rushed to his aid, but Norton was unconscious. He died before medical help could be summoned. A crowd of his loyal subjects watched silently as their emperor escaped the necessity of redeeming his numerous bonds, all of which were payable that very month.

Not long after, ten thousand people in a drenching rain filed past his silver-ornamented rosewood casket to pay their respects. "The funeral cortege that followed his body," the *Daily Intelligencer* reported, "was two miles long." In spite of his ouster from the Masons for failure to pay his dues, they buried Norton in the Masonic Cemetery. During his funeral, San Francisco experienced a total eclipse of the sun.

Norton, one biographer wrote, "was hardly a beggar, certainly not in the ordinary sense. He had never solicited coins on street corners, humbly, cap in hand, but levied his 'ta' like imperial Caesar exacting tribute. If he was a beggar, he was surely the only one ever accorded the distinction of an obituary in the *New York Times*."

In 1934, the city demolished the Masonic Cemetery in the name of progress, but the emperor's bones were saved. He was reinterred with full civic and military

honors in Woodlawn Memorial Park in San Mateo County. And he got a tombstone befitting his royal majesty.

Least someone object that Norton I was merely a mentally unbalanced crackpot with illusions of imperial grandeur, consider the fact that the U.S. government officially recognized him as an emperor. On August 1, 1870, federal census taker J. Ellis Hill polled the residents of the flophouse at 624 Commercial Street. In the column for occupation under Norton's entry, Hill wrote, "Emperor."

Despite Norton's death, the royal presence of Emperor Norton I continued to be felt. Mark Twain inserted him as the king in *Huckleberry Finn*. Robert Louis Stevenson portrayed him in his novel *The Wrecker*. Even today, one can see his name and evidence of his influence throughout San Francisco. Maybe he's not as widely known to outsiders as the cable cars, but he's nonetheless an institution in the city and a curiosity for every tourist.