

Joshua Norton

(Joshua Abraham Norton)

Feb 4, 1818 (London, England) - Jan 8, 1880 (San Francisco, CA)

SO, HOW DID JOSHUA Norton become the Emperor of America, when he was born in England and spent most of his childhood and early adult life in South Africa?

Here's how.

In 1849, Joshua Norton, thirty-nine, inherited \$40,000 from his father's estate in England.¹ Then, with his inheritance in hand and a sense of adventure in mind, he immigrated to America and settled in San Francisco.

At first, the fortune served him well as he turned his initial \$40,000 into \$250,000. But then, overestimating his business acumen and underestimating the vagaries of the stock market, he lost nearly everything.

In 1853 he signed a contract to deliver rice to San Francisco and immediately set about buying every kernel of rice he could from Peruvian markets for twelve cents per pound. Then, when an unexpected shipment of rice suddenly appeared in San Francisco harbor, the price fell to four cents per pound, and the bottom fell out of Norton's financial world.

He was broke.

Although he sued to have his contract declared invalid, the judge failed to see the matter Norton's way. Norton, unable to meet his rice delivery or financial obligations, disappeared from San Francisco, only to reappear six years later a changed man, but not as you might think.

He was no longer Joshua A. Norton, citizen investor.

He was "Norton I, Emperor of the United States," and a few years into the future, he would add to his title, "and Protector of Mexico."

You would think that the folks in San Francisco could see that Norton was exhibiting the hallmarks of a person teetering precariously on the edge of mental instability.

However, if you stop to think about it, from the days of Norton I to the present time, San Franciscans have never let pipe dreams, silliness, or a touch of insanity, become an issue when

it comes to politics and local governance. Thus, Norton I had indeed found a home.

So, how did the Emperor rule his empire?

He did it mostly through the issuance of proclamations, decrees, edicts, and many of each.

After a half-dozen years of self-imposed exile, he didn't like the way Washington politicians were running the country. Therefore, on September 17, 1859, he issued a proclamation (published in the *San Francisco Bulletin*) to let the folks in Washington know who was in charge. It read, edited:

At the peremptory request and desire of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I Joshua A. Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope and now . . . of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of the United States. And in virtue of the authority thereby in me vested, do hereby order and direct the representatives of the different States of the Union to assemble in Musical Hall on the 1st day of February next. There to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is now laboring.... ²

Later, incensed by the hanging of the militant abolitionist John Brown in Charles Town, Virginia, on December 2, 1859, the Emperor issued another proclamation. In this one, he fired Henry A. Wise, the Governor of Virginia, and replaced him with John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky.

A year later, on October 1, 1860, the Emperor decreed that Congress shall no longer meet in Washington, D.C.

San Francisco, as you may imagine, was rapidly falling in love with its Emperor. On September 17, 1861, the city's newest theater, Tucker Hall, opened with a performance of a comic-opera titled *Norton the First, or An Emperor for a Day*.

But not everyone was pleased with the way the Emperor was running things.

On January 21, 1867, a San Francisco policeman named Armand Barbier arrested the Emperor and charged him with

being a public nuisance. The arrest so outraged the community that something had to be done and quickly.

Police Chief Patrick Crowley issued a formal apology to His Majesty for the misunderstanding, noting that the Emperor “had shed no blood, robbed no one, and despoiled no country, which is more than can be said of his fellows in that line.”

Emperor Norton, to show he harbored no ill feelings toward the San Francisco Police Department, granted an Imperial Pardon to Officer Barbier. From that point forward, without exception, all of San Francisco's police officers would salute His Majesty whenever they came into contact with him.

During Norton's rule, it was impossible to miss his presence on the street, as his uniforms were indeed eye-catchers.

Several photographs of the Emperor are available on the internet, and the following may have been his favorite. He is wearing a high-crowned hat adorned with the iridescent tail feathers of a pheasant, and a military-style jacket embellished with large gold-braided epaulets on each shoulder.

His belt, drawn tightly about an ample waist, supports a sheath within which rests a military sword. His right hand is on the sword's hilt, and his other hand rests casually on a waist-high decorative column (see cover image).

Overall, the photo is flattering, although his thick droopy mustache and untrimmed beard could have benefitted from a trimming before the tripping of the camera's shutter.

On August 12, 1869, Norton I published the following abolishment order of the major political parties in the *San Francisco Herald*.

Here, in part, is his abolishment edict:

*Norton I, Dei Gratia, Emperor ... being desirous of allaying the dissensions of party strife now existing within the realm, do hereby dissolve and abolish the Democrat and Republican parties, and also do hereby decree disfranchisement and imprisonment, for not more than ten nor less than five years, to all persons leading to any violation of this Imperial decree.*³

Right now, you're undoubtedly wondering, where is the Emperor when we need him most?

Sadly, on January 8, 1880, the Emperor exhaled his final noble breath. His funeral cortège was viewed by an estimated 30,000 loyal subjects who lined the streets to pay homage. An excellent turnout considering San Francisco's 1880 population was about 190,000 souls.

The Emperor was laid to rest in San Francisco's Masonic Cemetery with funeral costs paid by the City of San Francisco.

In 1934, the Emperor's remains were moved to Colma, California, his grave marked by a large headstone inscribed:

NORTON I
EMPEROR OF THE UNITED STATES
AND PROTECTOR OF MEXICO⁴

Since the Nobel Prize didn't exist in 1869, many to this day, remain hopeful that the time will come when the Emperor will receive the prize posthumously.

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1. According to the Consumer Price Index inflation calculator, an inheritance of \$40,000 in 1849 would be worth approximately \$1,300,000 in 2019.
 2. "Biography of Emperor Joshua Norton," ThoughtCo.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-joshua-norton-emperor-of-the-united-states-4158141>
 3. "Joshua A. Norton," The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco.
<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/norton.html>
 4. Hsieh, Wayne. "Flickr" *Grave of Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico*.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whsieh78/9781560972>

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*The Supreme Court of the United States is hereby
commanded to try Andrew Johnson for usurpation of our
Imperial authority and prerogatives, and if found guilty,
behead him or send him here to black the Emperor's boots.*

Joshua A. Norton (1818–1880) Emperor of America