Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, Spain claimed sovereignty over California. Two hundred years later, however, and excluding sixteen Jesuit missionaries and a few supporting settlers, the Spanish presence in this vast territory of northwestern New Spain was practically non-existent. This changed in the 1760s, when two competing visions of California emerged. One portrayed it as the “Ophir of the Americas,” a mythical port in the Bible, famed for its riches. The other vision claimed California was hell on earth. José de Gálvez, an energetic and ambitious king's envoy, went to see it by himself. Historical records housed at the Huntington and Bancroft Libraries in California show that Gálvez’s colonization efforts unleashed a heated political debate. This lecture examines the significance of this controversy against the wider context of enlightened reform in the Spanish empire.

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