

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

FORT ROSECRANS

Registered Landmark #62

by

George Tays

for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1937

Written under auspices of Works Progress Administration  
District #8, Project #165-03-7307, Symbol #165027

## FORT ROSECRANS

Fort Rosecrans, the military reservation situated on the bold headland of Point Loma at the western end of San Diego harbor, was established as a coast defense fortification for the protection of the city and port of San Diego against attack by a foreign power. Although this fort, in itself, is not very old, dating only from the latter half of the Nineteenth century, part of the eastern portion of the reservation was the location of the old Spanish fort known as Fort Guijarros. It is to this fact that the historical importance of Fort Rosecrans is due.

When the Spaniards occupied San Diego in May, 1769, they did not fortify the harbor immediately. They built a presidio on a hill on the mainland side of the bay at the northeast end of the harbor, but no military protection was provided for the entrance to the bay. For years the Spanish authorities left the harbor undefended. On November 27, 1793, Captain George Vancouver, of the British navy, sailed into San Diego Bay aboard his ship, the Discovery. He stayed there twelve days, during which time he observed and made a note of the

weakness of the Spanish military establishment. The Spaniards found it out and were alarmed. That same year, at the urgent request of the governor of California, the viceroy in Mexico ordered the presidio of San Diego repaired. It was planned to build a fort at Point Guíjarros (now Ballast Point), which Vancouver had described as the strategic defensive point. The plans for a battery of ten guns were drawn in 1795, to be placed at that spot, but the work proceeded so slowly that it was not completed for some five years or more.<sup>1</sup>

The timber for the fort was cut at Monterey. Santa Barbara furnished ten carts for hauling the wood, and tiles and bricks were taken from the presidio to the beach and across the bay to the point on a flatboat. Only a few men worked on the fort at any one time, but by 1797 a total of 9,020 pesos had been spent in its construction. The exact date of its completion is not available; it was at the end of 1800.<sup>2</sup>

Fort Guíjarros defended the entrance to San Diego harbor for some thirty years before it became useless. It was finally abandoned about 1835. Only once during those years was the old fort of service. This event took place

---

1. W. E. Smythe, History of San Diego, 85.

2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 651-653.

on March 21, 1803, as the battle between the American trading ship Lelia Byrd and Fort Guijarros. The ship, under the command of Captain Richard J. Cleveland, arrived in San Diego on March 17, 1803, and tried to enter into contraband trade. Don Manuel Rodriguez, commandant of San Diego, discovered the activities and tried to detain the vessel. Captain Cleveland set sail and engaged the land battery at Fort Guijarros in a battle for about three-quarters of an hour while the Lelia Byrd was going through the mouth of the harbor. During the engagement the ship was badly damaged but managed to escape. The fort, though poorly manned, gave a good account of itself.<sup>3</sup>

After Fort Guijarros was abandoned, it soon went to ruin and by 1838 only the brass cannons remained; silent souvenirs of an age that had passed. In 1838, two of the guns were removed to Old Town, San Diego, by the Californians and mounted at the Plaza. When the American forces captured San Diego in 1846, Commodore Stockton had the old brass guns which lay in the crumbled ruins of Fort

---

3. Bancroft, op. cit., II, 10-15. Full details of this famous battle may be found in the monograph on Fort Guijarros, in California Historical Landmarks Series, State Division of Parks.

Guijarros removed and cast into the ocean off the entrance to the harbor.

When Fort Guijarros was established, the Spanish government did not set aside that site as a special military reservation, such as it had done in the case of the four presidios. When the fort was abandoned, the town of San Diego laid claim to the land of the Point Loma peninsula as lying within the boundaries of its municipal communal grant of four leagues square. So it was considered as the years passed by.

When San Diego was incorporated into a pueblo, in 1835, it became entitled to a grant of land four leagues square. It applied for its public lands, but the legal formalities were not completed until 1845. The final act was the survey of the land and the making of the map by Captain Henry D. Fitch. The map was approved by sub-prefect of San Diego, Santiago Arguello, and by Governor Pío Pico and countersigned by the secretary of the State government. Thus the lands included in the survey which took in the peninsula of Point Loma became the common property of the citizens of the pueblo of San Diego.<sup>4</sup>

After the war with Mexico, California came into

---

4. Smythe, op. cit., 386-388.

the possession of the United States; but, by a special provision of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, title to all private and municipal lands passed on unchanged to the owners. By the same treaty, however, the United States government acquired title to all military reservations established under Spain or Mexico.

The necessity for a military reservation on Point Loma was recognized by the United States Army officers soon after the conquest. General S. W. Kearny, in 1847, ordered a military reconnaissance of the peninsula at the entrance to San Diego harbor. On March 1, 1849, Captain Henry W. Halleck submitted that report to the secretary of war. He stated that the west side of the entrance to the Bay of San Diego was the most favorable position for work of military defense. That also had been the location of old Fort Guijarros, built by the Spaniards, whose remains were still to be seen. The report added that the land in the vicinity was regarded as public property.<sup>5</sup>

Acting on the strength of that report, Secretary of War C. M. Conrad had the president set aside the southern end of the peninsula of Point Lomas as a military

---

5. Smythe, op. cit., 699-700.

reservation on February 24, 1852. He wrote to the president as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Sir, I have the honor to recommend that the following tracts of land in California and Oregon, which have been selected for military purposes by the joint commission for the examination of the Pacific Coast be accordingly reserved from sale or grant, viz:

In California, San Diego Harbor - to include that portion of the peninsula lying on the west side of the entrance to the harbor, which shall be included between the southernmost point of the Peninsula (Punta de Loma) and a line drawn across said peninsula from the harbor to the ocean at the distance of one and a half miles above Punta de Grenanos.....  
Very respectfully, your obedient servant. (Signed) C. W. Conrad, Secretary of War. To the President of the United States.

Two days later, February 26, 1852, the president signed the executive order creating the military reservation. Trouble with the City of San Diego started at once, as that land was included in the Fitch survey by which the town had acquired title to it from the Mexican government.<sup>7</sup>

---

6. H. C. Hopkins, History of San Diego, 236.

7. Hopkins, History of San Diego, 236-237.

San Diego claimed the land, as did the government. The dispute went before the United States Land Commission and also before the courts. There was much disagreement, even between government officials, about the rights involved. As late as 1867, the chief of the the government board of engineers for the Pacific Coast requested a grant of land from the City of San Diego, to be used as a military reservation at Point Loma. The application was discussed for several years by the city council, but nothing was done. Finally, the secretary of the interior ruled that the land belonged to the national government by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, so the United States took possession. The occupation of the military reservation began on February 28, 1870. The reservation included all the outer end of the Point Loma peninsula to a line running east and west through the center of La Playa. It contains a strip of land about two miles wide at the widest point and about three miles long.<sup>8</sup>

Works on the reservation began at Ballast Point in May, 1873, and have continued ever since. On June 21, 1897, construction began on the present fortifications on Point Loma. This fort was named Fort Rosecrans, in

---

8. Smythe, op. cit., 700.



honor of Major General William S. Rosecrans, one of the generals in the Civil War, who visited San Diego in 1867 and during later years.<sup>9</sup>

During the late 1870's the San Diego Chamber of Commerce took up the matter of adequate fortifications, and pressed the matter in Washington. October 4, 1883, General Scofield sent notice from Washington that the War Department had decided to establish a two-company post at San Diego.<sup>10</sup>

The first garrison for the fort consisted of twenty men of Battery D, Third United States Artillery, Commanded by Lieutenant G. T. Patterson, and was stationed there February 20, 1898. By 1907, the garrison had been increased to eight officers and 194 men, commanded by Major Charles G. Woodward, United States Army. The first child born at Fort Rosecrans was the daughter of Lieutenant and Mrs. Deangly of the 28th company Coast Artillery. She was born February 11, 1906.

During the World War, Fort Rosecrans became quite a large post with a training school for Coast Artillery officers and men. Today a summer course in coast artillery is given there for young men who enlist in the

---

9. San Diego Chamber of Commerce, pamphlet, San Diego's Historical Landmarks, 8-9.

10. Smythe, op. cit., 626-627.

Citizens' Military Training Corps.

In 1915, William Kettner, San Diego's representative in congress, introduced a bill to appropriate the sum of 1,000,000 dollars for building new fortifications at Fort Rosecrans. At first the bill met with very serious opposition from the members of congress, especially from the board of army engineers. One of the members testified that Los Angeles had a much better harbor, therefore the money should be spent there. After a prolonged struggle the bill was finally passed and approved.<sup>11</sup>

One of the army units stationed at Fort Rosecrans was the Sixty-fifth Artillery, in which many young men of San Diego enlisted during the war. This regiment went to France in 1918 and served with distinction, receiving a great reception from the city of San Diego when it returned home in February, 1919.<sup>12</sup>

Since the 1915 appropriation for fortifications was made by congress, a number of others have been made and the military reservation on Point Loma has been greatly improved. At present the fortifications at Fort Rosecrans consist of a row of strong reinforced concrete emplacements for huge disappearing guns of twelve and fourteen inch

---

11. C. A. McGrew, City of San Diego, 196.

12. Ibid., 215.

caliber. There are a number for smaller guns also, one group on the harbor side of the peninsula. These command the entrance to the bay just south of Ballast Point. Another group faces towards the Pacific Ocean on the west side of the peninsula and commands the approach from the north, south and west.

On the east side of the peninsula and above the forts, lie the barracks and officers' quarters facing towards San Diego. These consist of rows of frame and concrete structures, arranged along streets surrounded by trees, shrubbery and lawns.

The soldiers' barracks are large buildings, each one occupied by either an entire company or parts of one. The officers' quarters are modern ones and two family homes of the latest type, each with its own garden plot. Since about 1906, the officers and their wives have taken a prominent part in the social life of San Diego.<sup>13</sup>

Included within the boundaries of the military reservation of Fort Rosecrans lies the Cabrillo National Monument. This is the smallest national monument in the United States. An act of congress of June 8, 1906, Section 2, gave the president authority to set aside a plot of

---

13. State Division of Parks, "Historical landmarks series archive," Landmark No.62, Fort Rosecrans, 1-3.

ground on Point Loma upon which to erect a monument to Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. The great Portuguese navigator discovered San Diego Bay on September 28, 1542, for Spain. Seven years after the congressional act of June 8, 1906, something was done about a Cabrillo monument on Point Loma. President Wilson, by a proclamation of October 14, 1913, set aside a small parcel of land containing an area of 21,910 square feet as an historic landmark to commemorate the landing of Cabrillo on the Southern California shore. This little plot of less than an acre is separate from Fort Rosecrans, although in the military reservation, and is under the jurisdiction and management of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. A shaft has been erected on that ground.

## AUTHORITIES

### Printed Material

#### I. Bibliographical Aids:

1. Cowan, Robert Ernest, and Cowan, Robert Gran-  
niss. A bibliography of the history of  
California, 1510-1930. San Francisco,  
1933.

#### II. Documents:

2. United States Government Documents. United  
States Military Reservations, National  
Cemeteries and Military Parks. War Dept.  
No. 496. Washington, 1916.

#### III. Periodical Literature:

3. Grizzly Bear, a monthly magazine for all Cali-  
fornia. Los Angeles, 1907-.
4. Herald. San Diego, 1851-1933.
5. North American Press Association. Handbook of  
Southern California. San Francisco, 1914.
6. Overland monthly. San Francisco, 1868-1875;  
1883-.
7. Sunset; the Pacific monthly. San Francisco,  
1898-.
8. Union. San Diego, 1868-.

#### IV. General Works:

9. Bancroft, Hubert Howe. History of California.  
7v. San Francisco, 1884-1890.

10. Bartlett, John Russell. Personal narrative of explorations and incidents in Texas, New Mexico and California, . . . during the years, 1850-1853. 2v. New York, 1856.
11. Davidson, Winifred. Where California began. San Diego, 1929.
12. Drury, Aubrey. California: an intimate guide. New York, 1935.
13. Hopkins, Harry C. History of San Diego, its pueblo lands and water. San Diego, 1929.
14. McGrew, Clarence Alan. City of San Diego and San Diego County. 2v. Chicago and New York, 1922.
15. Rensch, Hero Eugene, and Rensch, Ethel Grace. Historic spots in California, southern counties. Stanford University and London, 1932.
16. San Diego Chamber of Commerce. San Diego's historical landmarks. (Pamphlet.) San Diego, 1935.
17. San Diego Chamber of Commerce. Historical San Diego, here California began. (Pamphlet.) San Diego, 1936.
18. Smith, Walter Gifford. The story of San Diego. San Diego, 1892.
19. Smythe, William Ellsworth. History of San Diego, 1542-1907. San Diego, 1907.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

20. California State Park Commission Archives. Fort Rosecrans. San Diego, 1932.