

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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SITE of FORT GUIJARROS
Registered Landmark #69

by

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for

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FORT GUIJARROS

Ruins now mark what was once a proud battery, ready to roar its welcome or its defiance to the world -- Fort Guijarros, defender of San Diego harbor. Only remnants, which the wind, rain, and man have left, are the reminders of the imperial and ambitious plan which Spain conceived for the defense of her distant frontiers. One link in a chain of fortifications forged to protect the Spanish possessions, Fort Guijarros was to secure the middle section of the California coast against foreign invaders. The presidio walls were sufficient for security against uprisings from the savage Indians, but disturbed currents of events in Europe had unexpected, or perhaps expected, results in colonial possessions. Spain's answer to the threats was the castillo system.

When George Vancouver, the English explorer, made his voyage through the Pacific area, he visited the coast of California several times. His report, on the conditions in the Spanish province, resulted in such unfavorable publicity in regard to the state of defense that the Spanish government took immediate cognizance of it.¹ Vancouver's report together

1. G. Vancouver, A voyage of discovery, II, 498-501.

with the troubled state of European politics gave such a fillip to Spanish endeavor that, by 1794, Fort San Joaquín on San Francisco Bay was completed. However, these plans were in harmony with surveys which had been made and approved previously, so that the later happenings could not be given all the credit for the construction.

In the same year that the northern horseshoe shaped castillo was completed, the viceroy indicated his satisfaction by declaring his desire to have a similar one built at San Diego. Early in 1795, Point Guijarros (or Point Cobblestone, now Ballast Point) was selected for the new site. This agreed with Vancouver's observations that:²

with little difficulty, the Spanish settlement at San Diego might be rendered a place of considerable strength by establishing a small force at the entrance of the port; where at this time there were neither works, guns, houses, or other habitations nearer than the Presidio, five miles from the port, and where they have only three small pieces of brass cannon.

Strategically, this position was excellent. Guns placed on the spit would command the entrance, because at Point Guijarros the channel was hardly a cable's length in width.

Preparations were begun at once for the new establishment. Transports from Monterey brought down timber,

2. Vancouver, A voyage of discovery, II, 498-501.

because there was none to be had around San Diego. Workmen also were sent from the northern settlement. Santa Barbara Mission furnished the wheels and axles for ten carts; bricks and tiles were made at the presidio close at hand. From the post the materials were carted to the beach, and then carried to Point Guijarros by flatboat.

Evidently, work lagged, as it usually did on the outskirts of the empire, for not much had been done by 1797. In that year, the engineer, Alberto de Córdoba, made an inspection of the California defenses, and found that only temporary works had been erected at San Diego.³ Upon his recommendation, a permanent work was projected which was not to have the circular shape as originally planned, and was to have a complement of ten guns. Even with work going slowly, by the time of the inspection \$9,020 had been spent.⁴ The money had gone towards the battery, magazine, barracks and flatboat. To provide water, a well which had been long unused, at the presidio, was reopened. This meant a long portage to the place where the water was to be used. There were nothing but Indian tracks, by land, to connect the battery with its base of supply, the presidio. In 1798, a road was

3. I. B. Richman, California under Spain and Mexico, 170.

4. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 651-652.

proposed which would go around the bend of the bay and join the two.

Records are scanty concerning the rest of the work on the castillo. One peculiar circumstance of the construction work was that citizens of the United States aided in the building. Four sailors had been left in Lower California, by an American ship - whether by accident or design is unknown. Hiking across country, they arrived in 1798 at the presidio, where they asked for food, shelter and transportation. The commandant agreed to take care of them until they could be sent to Mexico; but they had to work on the new fortifications to pay for their keep.⁵ Work, evidently, was completed, or nearly so, just after the turn of the century. In 1801 there appeared in the record a bill for repairs on the battery. The cost amounted to \$183.⁶

With faint rumors of European struggles coming to their ears, the local people put much faith in their new castillo, and it was not long before its baptism of fire occurred. However, this battle was not with a European force intent upon wresting the province from Spanish hands, but instead, a fight with an American smuggler.

5. W. E. Smythe, History of San Diego, 1542-1907, 87.

6. Bancroft, History of California, II, 102.

The Lelia Byrd, out of Salem, William Shaler master, and Richard Cleveland mate, arrived on the California coast in 1803. She was loaded with merchandise and came with the avowed intention of trading. On the voyage up the western coast of South America and Central America from the Horn, much valuable experience had been gathered. In Mexico, \$10,000 worth of goods were disposed of, while supplies and 1,600 sea otter skins were acquired at prices which alone insured the success of the voyage.⁷ Spanish dislike for foreigners almost caught up with her at San Blas, but, being warned in time, the ship was able to get away. At this port the officers also learned of furs which were to be had in San Diego, and at good prices.⁸

Sail was set immediately for that harbor, and the landfall was made on March 17. Wind prevented entrance into the harbor until evening, when the vessel sailed by Fort Guijarros without being challenged, and anchored about a mile from the battery. The next morning Commandant Manuel Rodriguez, with an escort of twelve soldiers, appeared on the shore opposite the ship and called for a boat to convey him on board. In answer to his query, the American officers

7. Frances, J. H. D. "The Lelia Byrd," in California History Nuggett, devoted to the story of the Golden West. II, new series, 94-95.

8. R. J. Cleveland, A narrative of voyages and commercial enterprises, 210.

stated that they had been forced to enter the harbor to obtain supplies. The Spanish commander agreed to supply the wants, but gave strict orders that the Americans could visit land only in the neighborhood of the vessel, forbidding them the town and its environs. He also intimated that, as soon as the supplies had been delivered, the ship was to leave and on no account was there to be any trading. Rodriguez then took his departure, leaving four soldiers and a sergeant on board the ship as a guard against infringement of his orders.

Even though the Americans had expected some such regulation, from their experiences in other Spanish ports and possessions, the cold facts so abruptly presented evidently had a blasting effect on their hopes. The guard especially irked them because it considerably curtailed their activity. An indication of their state of mind is evident in Cleveland's description of Rodriguez:⁹

We had been told that Don Manuel was an exceedingly vain and pompous man; and indeed, we found him so; for such a ridiculous display of a 'little brief authority', and pompous parade I never before witnessed. His dress and every movement evinced the most arrant coxcomb. Having saluted us on coming over the ship's side, he waited, before proceeding aft, until his escort were drawn up

9. Cleveland, Narrative, 211.

in two lines, with hats off in one hand,
and drawn swords in the other, and then
passed between them to the companionway.

Undoubtedly Rodriguez was vain - other records confirm the fact; but he was not deserving of such opprobrium as the Americans heaped upon him. The death blows struck at their smuggling activities seem to have colored their conception of events and persons.

Part of the ship's company took advantage of the opportunity to stretch their legs, and landed near Fort Guijarros. Their ramblings took them into the fort, and, according to their account, they found it deserted. A close, although hasty, examination of the battery revealed that it was armed with eight brass nine-pounders, which were plentifully supplied with ball and powder. Cleveland remarked upon their appearance as not "having been used for a long time."¹⁰ The seamen cut their visit short because of a fear that the Spaniards would not relish an inspection of the defenses.

That evening they struck up an acquaintance with Sergeant Arce, who commanded the ship's guard. He told them that Rodriguez had more than a thousand sea otter skins in his possession. This was contraband taken from another

10. Cleveland, Narrative, 212.

American ship a few weeks before, and the comandante's own private stock. The news whetted the desires of the traders so much that they made every effort during the next day or so to obtain the skins from Don Manuel. He, however, refused to have anything to do with the smugglers. Cleveland said that Rodriguez would gladly have sold the skins if the transaction could have been kept secret, but as it was he did not dare make the sale.

Chagrined, and knowing that their plans had failed, the Americans, as soon as their supplies had been put on board, March 21, made preparations for leaving. Rodriguez went on board to receive his pay for the supplies and to bid the ship farewell, and departed on the most friendly terms with the Americans. The latter, determined to salvage a little out of the debacle, listened to offers of several soldiers and other people who had furs of which they were willing to dispose. Delivery was to be after dark between eight and nine o'clock.

Two boats were sent ashore at that time to pick up the cargo. One returned with a few skins but the other did not; nor did it return all night, while the ship waited for dawn and for any contingency. At dawn, a boat was put off for a reconnoitering cruise. Cleveland, who was in charge, perceived a group of people on shore, among them his missing comrades. Returning to the ship for arms, the boat

again approached the shore, after the Spanish guard on the ship had been disarmed and put below hatches. Landing, the Americans ran up to the Spanish soldiers who were keeping vigil over their comrades, and overawing them with loaded pistols, released the American sailors who had been bound all night. After dipping the soldiers' weapons in the water of the bay, to render them useless, all the Americans hurried to their ship, where, in the meantime, preparations for sailing had been under way.

The officers learned from the re-captured sailors that Rodriguez, with a troop of horse, had surprised the party on landing. This led to the conclusion that the Spanish commander was a treacherous villain and had deliberately caused soldiers to make the agreement in order to decoy the Americans, so that he would have the opportunity of "plundering" the ship. The men were so indignant at the treatment meted out to their shipmates that they were "ready to fight even had the odds been greater against us."¹¹

Loosing the sails and heaving up the anchor took only a short while, but the sailors were worried because the wind had almost died away. They feared that it would be an

11. Cleveland, Narrative, 214. The American smugglers along the coast were always complaining about the unfair treatment they received at official hands.

hour later before they would be past the battery on the point. People had been bustling about on shore, and, as soon as the sail spread, a blank had been fired at Fort Guijarros and the Spanish flag raised. When the Americans continued their activity on board, a gun loaded with a solid shot was fired, the ball striking ahead of the ship. The vessel had been gradually approaching the fort all the time. Now the five members of the guard who had been imprisoned below were brought on deck and secured in exposed places, in hope that their comrades would slacken the firing. But the Spanish gunners in the fort did not heed their comrades' frantic cries. Cleveland said that the ship was under fire for three-quarters of an hour before it reached a point abreast of the fort. No damage was done except to the rigging until that point, when several shots pierced the hull, one between "wind and water." Not until then did the Lelia Byrd reply. Her first broadside caused many soldiers to evacuate the fort; after the second, not a single Spanish gun was fired. By that time, the fort was totally deserted except for a solitary soldier who sprang up on the rampart and waved his hat, signaling the ship to cease firing. The guards were immediately landed, and, so glad were they at this spirit of beneficence shown by their conquerors, they shouted, "Vivan, vivan los Americans."¹²

12. The entire account is related in Cleveland, Narrative, 210-216.

Don Manuel Rodriguez, the Spanish commandant, in his official report, gave a different version of the battle. He agreed with Cleveland's account of firing the blank cartridge, raising the flag, and then the solid shot. According to Rodriguez, one more shot was fired, which struck the hull but did no damage. Firing was stopped when Sergeant Arce shouted that the guard on the ship was to be put ashore. When the ship's guns bore on the battery, she began firing; the fort followed suit, ceasing fire, however, as soon as the vessel did. These two accounts are entirely out of harmony and there is no way to coordinate them.¹³

Such was the famous battle of San Diego, the first fight on the west coast between the Spanish and the people of the new United States. No one was killed, but the fight was the main topic of conversation in San Diego for many years. There was an amusing sequel to it. Corporal Velasquez, who was in charge of the fort, had been surprised by Rodriguez' sudden appearance just after the Americans had been arrested on the shore. The corporal had been found with several hundred dollars worth of American trade goods in his possession, as well as several packets of furs.¹⁴

13. N. Rodriguez, Lo acaecido con tripulantes de la fragata Lelia Bird con motivo de compra de nutrias.

14. W. Davidson, Where California began, 75.

Velasquez declared that the goods were gifts, but the fact that he had served the guns so vigorously did not save him from standing trial or keep the "gift" goods from being confiscated and sold at auction. One thousand furs, which the Americans had attempted to buy, finally rotted in the warehouse and three years later were dumped into the ocean.¹⁵

History concerning the fort recorded little of interest for two decades. Brief items, here and there in official reports, were the only indications that the fort was still in existence. Notices such as the following give the tenor of the many: In 1804, \$688 was appropriated to build a flatboat for the small garrison stationed at the battery; 1805 saw six six-pounders sent to the fort. However, they did not help the firing power very much, as five of them were useless. Corporal Mariano Fernandez was ordered to take over the command of the battery in 1806.¹⁶

Foreign smugglers did respect the guns defending the harbor, though, after the Lelia Byrd had spread the news of her fight. For some years, none came into the port, but went to some roadstead which was unprotected. This made San Diego very dull, indeed, because the contraband trade furnished the only excitement during that era.

15. Smythe, History of San Diego, 91-92.

16. Bancroft, History of California, II, 102-103.

Weather is seldom kind to the handiwork of man, nor did it spare Fort Guijarros. A commission of officers, in 1826, reported that the battery was in such need of repairs that a sum of \$10,000 was necessary for the work. No record is extant which indicates that such an amount was forthcoming, but in 1828 the governor requested the missions to send supplies and ten men to work on the castillo.¹⁷ The year previous, the flatboat was wrecked and the timber used for building a small wharf.

Nothing has been said of the change in control from Spain to the republic of Mexico, because it had little or no bearing on the battery itself. The only direct effect was that appropriations were not forthcoming for repairs and the like.

In 1828, the battery returned to the limelight for the second and last time. Once again, contraband goods and smugglers were the moving factors. Captain John Bradshaw of the Franklin had been one of the most notorious of the smugglers along the California coast, after Mexico had put into effect the very stringent laws against contraband trade. Much of this trading was done with the cognizance of the Mexican officials, but Bradshaw had become so insolent in the

17. Bancroft, History of California, II, 547.

daring of his activities that Governor Echeandia could not but become aware of them. In addition, particularly strong orders had come from Mexico to deal with the bold sea captain. Bradshaw entered the port. Echeandia did what he considered best, arranging for Bradshaw to land part of his cargo in surety for duty. Bradshaw promised, but when he was aboard he laughed at the demands of the governor and refused to return to shore. During the night of July 11, the Franklin's anchorage was moved close to the entrance to the harbor.

The next day, Governor Echeandia endeavored to put a guard aboard the ship, but was handicapped by the lack of a boat to convey them. He had bought a boat a few days previously from another American vessel in port, but the commander, who was in sympathy with Bradshaw, refused to sell any oars. He took some of the caulking out of the boat when it was delivered, and beached it very high, so that the sun dried out the rest of the caulking. While the governor was trying to borrow a boat, the Franklin suddenly let her sails fall and began to glide toward the mouth of the bay. Some twenty minutes passed before the ship was able to make her passage by Fort Guijarros. The Spanish gunners were busy during the interval and fired about forty balls at the escaping ship. It was thought at the time that the ship went by unscathed, but it was afterwards learned from a ship's

captain, who saw the Franklin in the Hawaiian Islands, that she had been hulled twice and forced to change some yards and rigging, due to hits. The ship had fired only two shots when she passed the fort.¹⁸

Again the fort sank into oblivion, with little mention of it, even in contemporary documents. Alfred Robinson, the author of one of the better accounts of early life in California, mentioned anchoring the Brookline under the guns of the low fortification. That was in 1829, when he was supercargo's clerk. By 1835, there was not even a guard stationed there for caretakers' duty.

An investigation, which was made in 1839, disclosed the fact that there were nine cannon in the emplacements, although only two were serviceable. In regard to ammunition, there were fifty canisters of grape shot and three hundred

18. There are two handy sources of information about this fight. One was written by the captain who sold the boat to the governor. A. Bernard Duhaut-Cilly, "Account of California in the years 1827-1828," in California Historical Society, Quarterly, VIII, 4;332-334. The other was the account of James O. Pattie, the American trapper, who was imprisoned in San Diego during this time. Pattie acted as translator and interpreter between the Spanish governor and Bradshaw. However, Pattie's book is very inaccurate as to details and dates; for instance he writes that he warned the Americans, on September 11, that he had heard of a plot to arrest them - and Bradshaw had sailed July 11. J. O. Pattie, The personal narrative of James O. Pattie of Kentucky during an expedition. 179, 185, 189-201.

balls. It was proposed and intended to put a guard on the property, but the project never materialized. In January, 1840, Juan Machado bought the remnants of the fort for forty dollars.¹⁹

There was an interesting bit of activity in the fort as a sort of aftermath of Commodore Jones' fiasco in 1842. The ship Alert, Captain W. D. Phelps, was loading hides in San Diego harbor when word arrived that war had been declared between the United States and Mexico and that Jones had captured Monterey. To protect the cargo yet on shore against the arrival of Mexican troops said to be approaching, the ship was anchored so that it commanded the only road to Fort Guijarros. A party was sent to the fort, where guns were spiked and any copper shot which would fit the ship's cannon carried off; other ammunition was dumped into the sea. Phelps declared that "there were five beautiful long brass eighteens and three iron twenty-fours in the battery."²⁰ Phelps was exaggerating a little, inasmuch as, three years previously, only two of the guns were in condition to be fired. No care was given the materiel during that time and deterioration was always a force with which to reckon.

19. Bancroft, History of California, III, 610.

20. W. D. Phelps, Fore and aft; or, leaves from the life of an old sailor, 262.

When the American forces occupied San Diego in 1846, the guns were thrown into the bay to prevent the Mexicans from utilizing them. Two guns which belonged to the castillo were later used as show pieces - one standing in the plaza of Old Town, while the San Diego Chamber of Commerce exhibited the other. One of the two, it is not known which one, had been raised from the floor of the bay.²¹

Fort Guijarros had one more indignity thrust upon it, although that was of a peaceful nature. Adobe bricks which had been built into the foundation and walls, were used to form the basement of the so-called "Spanish" lighthouse, constructed by the United States government in 1855.

There remain now (1936) but a few mounds, near the turn of the road which leads from Ballast Point to the modern battery at Fort Rosecrans, to mark Fort Guijarros, the once-proud Spanish battery.

21. Davidson, Where California began, 75.

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