

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

PORT STOCKTON

Registered Landmark #54

By

George Tays

for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1957

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

FORT STOCKTON

Old Stockton, which was situated on the top of the hill about one-half mile east of Old Town, San Diego, and about 150 feet above and south of the ancient Presidio Hill, received its name from Commodore Robert F. Stockton, United States Navy, because he had it built while his forces occupied San Diego, in November, 1846.

Since the Spaniards landed in San Diego, in May, 1769, they had used the top of the hill at the northeastern end of the harbor for a fort. There they built the Presidio of San Diego, which served until it was abandoned in 1836. Thereafter, the adobe and tiles from the walls of the fort and buildings were dug up and carried to Old Town, where they were used in the construction of houses. By 1838, only a few sections of walls of the old fort remained, and now only traces of the foundations may be seen.

In 1839, a civil war raged in California, between the forces of Juan B. Alvarado of Northern California and Carlos A. Carrillo of Southern California. Alvarado had headed a revolution in November, 1839, and after

1. H. C. Hopkins, History of San Diego, 1, 159.

deposing Governor Nicolas Gutierrez, had himself become governor, Carrillo was appointed governor by the Mexican government in 1837, and received the news early in 1838. He at once tried to remove Alvarado from office and the latter refused. A civil war followed which lasted for more than year. Late in 1838, Carrillo was driven south by Alvarado's forces under Jose Castro and took refuge in San Diego. About Christmas time, 1838, reports reached San Diego that Castro was moving with an army to attack the town. Carrillo then had his men throw up earthworks a little to the south of the old presidio on the hill-top. Trenches were dug, and two cannon were dragged up to the new fort from Fort Guajarro at the entrance to the harbor. These commanded the approaches to the town, so all was in readiness to withstand an attack by General Castro. The Alvarado forces did not appear at that time, however. As the years went by, the earthworks disintegrated and were washed away, the trenches filled in, and by 1846 little evidence of the fort remained.

On July 7, 1846, came the capture of Monterey by the United States naval forces commanded by Commodore

S. W. E. Smythe, History of San Diego; 122-129. For full details of the revolution and civil war, see; C. Tays, Revolutionary California, M.S., University of California, Ph. D. thesis, 1933; H. R. Emerson, History of California, III, 444-378.

John D. Sloat. Towards the end of July, Commodore R. P. Stockton took command of those forces and sent the warship Cyclops, carrying Fremont's men, to capture San Diego. The Cyclops, commanded by Captain Samuel P. Rupert, entered San Diego harbor on the afternoon of July 29, 1846, and he immediately sent a landing party of marines ashore under Lieutenants Rowan and Maddox to occupy the town. Because there were no Californian forces there, the capture was effected without resistance.

Fremont used San Diego as the base for his march on Los Angeles in August, and left a few men to hold San Diego. In September, Captain Ezekiel Merritt, with a dozen men, was sent from Los Angeles to reinforce San Diego. A few days later the Californians drove the American troops from Los Angeles and then sent Francisco Rico and Serbulo Varela with fifty men to capture San Diego. Merritt and his men were driven aboard the old whaler Stonington. They then set out to sea, where they cruised for three weeks. The Californians then occupied the town.

Late in October, Merritt's force, having been reinforced with men sent by Captain Harvino from San Pedro, returned to San Diego and captured the town once more. By that time a detachment of one hundred men under Captains Cota and Carrillo had been added to the Californian troops. They had built new earthworks on Presidio Hill in the same

spot where those of 1838 had been located. A cannon had also been put in place at the fort, overlooking the town.

The Californians did not attack the United States troops, however, but held them in a stage of siege and sniped them from the fort. After some days of this, early in November, an armorer, named Stevens, saw a group of Californian cavalry on the bluff near the fort. He ran into the blacksmith shop, and, taking a hot iron, touched off a loaded howitzer which stood in the plaza. His aim had been quick, but true, and the ball scattered the horsemen, disabling one and tearing his horse to pieces.

A day or so later, Santiago E. Arguello, one of the Californians who had joined the United States forces, led a brilliant charge up the hill. He and his company, dragging a cannon with them, stormed the fort. They drove the Californians from the trenches, captured their cannon and turned the guns against them. The enemy made a new stand behind the old presidio walls, but a determined attack soon dislodged them and they retreated up the valley towards the mission.

Captain Arguello, wounded in one leg in that battle was obliged to drop out of the fighting. Captain Pedronera, however, took command and led the company in

pursuit. About a mile up the valley, there was a skirmish with a Californian party under Leandro Cerna. A little farther on, one of the Americans was killed. When Pedrerena's company reached the mission, the Californians made another stand and a sharp battle raged. Some of the Californians were captured. Soon afterward, the enemy scattered; some of them deserted, and the rest retired toward the north.

A day or so later, Commodore Stockton arrived with several vessels of his fleet and established his headquarters at Juan Bandini's house on the plaza. One of his first concerns was to place San Diego in a state of defense. He therefore ordered the captured earthwork on the hill improved and enlarged. Up to that time, the fortifications had been known as Fort Dupont, but the sailors working on them renamed them Fort Stockton.

When finished, the fort consisted of a ditch or moat, behind which were earthworks with openings. At these embrasures were casks filled with earth, placed at intervals of two feet. Twelve ¹⁵ guns were mounted in the spaces between the casks in a manner to command the roads from Los Angeles and Mission Valley. One hundred men under Lieutenant Minor were assigned to garrison the fort. When the work was finished it constituted quite a formidable defense for the town.

4. Smythe, op. cit., 205-206; Smith, op. cit., 80-81

When Stockton departed for Los Angeles on the first day of the year 1847, he left a small force at Fort Stockton to guard the town. A few weeks later, after Los Angeles had been captured, the Mormon Battalion reached San Diego from the East. Stockton then recalled his garrison from San Diego and the Mormons took over Fort Stockton for the first half of 1847. In the summer of that year, the Mormon Battalion was moved about the country and some of the men were mustered out of the service. To take their place at San Diego came Company 1 of the New York First Volunteer Regiment under Colonel J. D. Stevenson. This company occupied Fort Stockton until September 25, 1848, when it was mustered out, and Fort Stockton as such was abandoned. Thereafter, San Diego was garrisoned by a detachment of regular troops, but they lived in barracks down near the beach and not up on the hill.

After Fort Stockton was abandoned, it began to go to ruin very rapidly. Wind and rain wore down the earthworks and filled in the trenches. The mountings for the cannon broke down and rotted away. Some of the guns were taken away, and as the years went by less visible evidence remained of the old fort.

5. R. A. Vandergrift, "San Diego City" in Grizzly Bear XXVI, No. 6. April, 1920, 3.

By 1923, only a depression and some small mounds of earth marked the place of Fort Stockton. One of the old Spanish guns, "El Jupiter," which had served at Fort Guajarros in the battle between the American ship Lelia Byrd and the fort, was there. It was one of the cannon removed from the harbor fort and placed on the hill in 1838. Stockton's men had used it in fortifying the place. From there it had been moved several times to different places in the town. Year after year passed and nothing was done with the old fort. On April 7, 1923, San Diego Parlor No. 108, Native Sons of the Golden West, took action. They went to the site of Fort Stockton and erected a flagstaff on which now fly the American Flag and also the State flag of California (Bear Flag). In the cement base of the pole they placed a bronze tablet with an inscription which reads:

In the year 1846, Commodore Robert F. Stockton, U.S.N. commanding the Pacific fleet and acting Governor of California fortified this site and occupied it with a force of sailors, marines and volunteer soldiers. To preserve the memory of those days and men, the Native Sons of the Golden West on April 7, 1923 erected a flagstaff and set this tablet.

Some time before this ceremony, Mr. George Marston, a wealthy

6. San Diego Chamber of Commerce, San Diego's historical landmarks, pamphlet, 9.

merchant of San Diego, acquired the site of old Fort Stockton. He had been planning to beautify the spot. It was through his courtesy that the Native Sons and Native Daughters were privileged to mark the long-neglected site.

The ceremonies in dedication of the flagstaff and tablet were attended by a goodly company. The presiding officer was Edgar F. Hastings of San Diego Parlor, Native Sons. Following a prayer by Chaplain Dyer, addresses were delivered by Captain Craven of the United States Army, Mr. Louise C. Heilbron of San Diego Parlor No. 203, Native Daughters of the Golden West, and Captain Sweet of the United States Navy. After outlining the history of activities of the Native Sons in marking historic spots, Captain Sweet read an historic proclamation addressed by Commodore Stockton to the people of San Diego. This original manuscript is in the possession of Mrs. Mary Jane Wood, a member of San Diego Parlor No. 203, Native Daughters of the Golden West. It was dated November 24, 1846, and is in Spanish.

After the document was read, Judge Fletcher A. Outler, Grand Third Vice-President of the Native Sons of the Golden West, delivered the oration for the day. With silver-tongued eloquence he painted a word picture of California, with which he held his auditors spellbound. In conclusion of the ceremonies, Charles L. McInerney, Grand Director of the Native Sons of the Golden West, in a brief address presented the flags, and as the marine band broke into the strains of "The Star Spangled Banner," the emblems were flung to the breeze. Since then something has been done to improve the appearance of the historic site. It is visited daily by tourists and is close to the splendid Serra Museum established by Mr. George Marston on Presidio Hill.

7. Anonymous, "San Diego has a big day," in Grizzly Bear, XXXIII No. 7, May 1923, 22.

AUTHORITIES

Printed Material

I. Bibliographical Aids:

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

II. Periodical Literature:

2. Hunricker, Lena. "The Plymouth of the Pacific Coast," in Overland monthly, 2d series. LXXII. San Francisco, 1918.
3. Herald. San Diego, 1851-1933.
4. Union. San Diego, 1863-.
5. Grizzly Bear, Los Angeles, 1907-.

III. General Works:

6. Bancroft, Hubert Howe. History of California. 7v. San Francisco, 1884-1890.
7. Davidson, Winifred. Where California Began. San Diego, 1929.
8. California Blue Book. Fort Stockton. Sacramento, 1935.
9. Derby, George Horatio. Phoenixiana, or Sketches and burlesques. By John Phoenix (pseud.).....New York, 1856.
10. Drury, Aubrey. California: an intimate guide. New York, 1935.

13. McGrew, Clarence Alan. City of San Diego and San Diego County 2v. Chicago and New York, 1922.
14. Nolen, John. San Diego, a comprehensive plan for its improvement. Boston, 1908.
15. Rensch, Hero Eugene, and Rensch, Ethel Grace. Historic spots in California, southern counties. Stanford University, and London, 1932.
16. Smith, Walter Gifford. The story of San Diego. San Diego, 1892.
17. Smythe, William Ellsworth. History of San Diego, 1542-1907. San Diego, 1907.
18. San Diego Chamber of Commerce. San Diego's historical landmarks. (Pamphlet.) San Diego, 1935.
19. San Diego Chamber of Commerce. Historical San Diego, here California began. (Pamphlet.) San Diego, 1936.

MANUSCRIPTS

20. California State Park Commission Archive. Fort Stockton. Registered landmark No. 54. San Diego, 1932.
21. Tays, George. Revolutionary California, a political history of California, 1820-1848. Mss. Ph. D. thesis, University of California. Berkeley, 1932. Revised edition, 1934.