

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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LANDING PLACE of CAPTAIN MONTGOMERY

Registered Landmark #81

by

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for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1936

Written under auspices of Works Progress Administration,  
District #8, Project #65-3-3218, Symbol #1873

## LANDING PLACE OF CAPTAIN MONTGOMERY

Five weeks had passed since the good sloop-of-war Portsmouth dropped anchor several hundred yards off the shore at Yerba Buena Cove in San Francisco Bay. All that time its commander, Captain John B. Montgomery, had been expecting something to happen in California or the war with Mexico to start in the East so that he might have an excuse for taking possession of the Bay of San Francisco and the town of Yerba Buena in particular. Thus far, only the "Bear Flag" filibuster had taken place to break the surface calm of American-Californian relations, but with that incident Captain Montgomery could not properly concern himself beyond observing a strict neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

Up to the end of March, 1846, the U.S.S. Portsmouth had been riding at anchor in the Mexican port of Mazatlan with the rest of the American naval squadron under Commodore John D. Sloat. Then there had come an urgent request from American Consul Thomas O. Larkin at Monterey, California, to Commodore Sloat, that the latter send one of his warships to Monterey, to protect American lives and property there.

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1. H.H. Bancroft, History of California, V, 101-190, gives a full discussion of Bear-flag affair

This had come as a result of Captain John C. Fremont's rash actions by which he became involved in difficulties with the forces of General Jose Castro, the military commander-in-chief of California, on March 5, 1846.<sup>2</sup>

On April 1, 1846, the Portsmouth, Captain John B. Montgomery, was despatched to Monterey, where it arrived on April 22. After staying there for some six weeks, the Portsmouth set sail for San Francisco on June 1. She entered through the Golden Gate on June 3 and dropped anchor at Yerba Buena Cove.<sup>3</sup> During the days that followed, the time was whiled away by the officers and men of the Portsmouth in hunting and pleasure trips about the bay region to the various towns and missions, as well as attending dances at Yerba Buena to which the women for thirty miles around were invited.<sup>4</sup>

On June 15, 1846, a messenger came to the Portsmouth from Sonoma with the news that the town had been taken by the American insurgents from the Sacramento Valley under William B. Ide, and that Vallejo and other prominent men of the village had been taken as prisoners to Sutter's Fort. On reviewing this news, Captain Montgomery at once sent one of his

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2. Bancroft, History of California, V, 200-201.

3. J. W. Revere, A Four of duty in California, 20-51.

4. Ibid., 53-54.

officers, Lieutenant John S. Missroon, to Sonoma to observe what was taking place and by his presence and advice to prevent any attacks upon the native population and their property at the hands of the overly-enthusiastic American revolutionists. Further than that, Montgomery refused to participate in the events on either side, and observed a position of strict neutrality although he sympathized with Frémont.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Captain Montgomery used the time between June 3 and July 8, 1846, in getting acquainted and on friendly terms with the citizens of Yerba Buena, as well as in getting his ship in readiness for anything that might take place. At that time the Captain felt much anxiety concerning the relations of the United States and England over the Oregon Territory boundary line. He was afraid that war might break out between the two countries at any time.<sup>6</sup>

During those short weeks Montgomery had come to be highly regarded by the people of Yerba Buena. He was a great favorite with all classes, Americans and foreigners, and also with the Californians. He was about fifty years of age, with a pleasant, intelligent face; a man of considerable ability, officer-like in appearance, and always polite, kind and conciliatory in his demeanor toward the people, winning their

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5. T.H. Hittell, History of California, 11,438-442.

6. W.H. Davis, Seventy-five years in California, 268.

esteem and affection. He was much liked by his officers, who spoke of him as one of the best commanders in the service, and during the six or more months that he was stationed at Yerba Buena he never had the slightest trouble with anyone.<sup>7</sup>

Yerba Buena, at that time, was a village of a few houses and about one hundred inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> There was no Mexican garrison stationed there and the place was entirely undefended by any fortifications, military works or naval force of any kind. There was a custom-house with two revenue officers. The alcalde was Don José Jesús de Noé, and the sub-prefect was Don Francisco Guerrero. Don Francisco Sánchez was commander of the abandoned presidio, and Robert Ridley was the port-captain. On July 2, Fremont had sent Robert Semple with ten men from San Rafael to Yerba Buena and at noon of that day this party had taken Port-captain Ridley prisoner and conducted him to Sutter's Fort, where he was held, with Vallejo and the other Californians. At about that same time, Collector of Customs Pinto had departed for Santa Clara to join General Castro, after first disposing of the custom-house flag, which in 1870 he presented to the Society of California Pioneers,

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7. Ibid., 272-273.

8. Revere, A tour of duty in California, 52.

and the archives of the office which he later donated to H. H. Bancroft. Then on July 7, Sub-prefect Guerrero and Commandant Sánchez left town, so that at the time the American forces occupied it there were no forces or defences, no officials or flag of any kind at the surrender of the town.<sup>9</sup>

Early in June, Commodore Sloat, still at Mazatlan with part of his squadron, received news that war between Mexico and the United States had begun in Texas. Sloat sailed for Monterey on June 8, 1846, to take possession of that port and California. After some twenty-five days on the voyage he and his fleet dropped anchor in Monterey Bay on July 2, 1846. Then, after four days of indecision, he decided to land his forces on July 7, and to take possession of the port and the territory for the United States.

On the evening of July 6, Commodore Sloat sent a message to Captain Montgomery ordering him to land troops at San Francisco and take possession of the town and to raise the flag at Sonoma and Sutter's Fort. Along with these orders was sent a copy of the commodore's proclamation to the Californians, which was to be read at the

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9. Bancroft, History of California, V, 177-178; 238-239.

time the flag was raised. A copy of each of these documents was sent in the Portsmouth's launch, which took five days to make the voyage, leaving Monterey on the evening of July 6 and arriving on July 11. Another one was sent by a messenger, John Dye, who made the trip overland along the coast, arriving in San Francisco at 1. P.M., July 8. A third set was sent by another messenger, Henry Pitts, who traveled overland by way of San Jose and reached Yerba Buena at 7 P.M. on July 8, 1846.<sup>10</sup>

The night of the 8th was passed aboard the Portsmouth in making preparations for the landing the next morning and in preparing the ship for action. At that time Captain Montgomery wrote a short note to Vice-consul William A. Leidesdorff telling the latter of his plans as follows: <sup>11</sup>

Sir: At half past seven o'clock tomorrow morning I propose landing a considerable body of men under arms and to march them from the boat to the flagstaff in Yerba Buena at eight o'clock.

I shall hoist the flag of the United States under a salute of twenty-one

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10. Bancroft, History of California, V, 238.  
 11. C.C. Phillips, Captain Montgomery to W.A. Leidesdorff, Yerba Buena, July 8, 1846, Portsmouth Plaza, the cradle of San Francisco, 12.

guns from the Portsmouth, after which the proclamation of the commander-in-chief, Commodore Sloat, will be read in both languages for the information of all classes.

I will thank you, therefore, to have it translated and ready for that purpose at the appointed hour, and be pleased to present my compliments to the Alcalde and say if agreeable to him, I shall be gratified to see him present on the occasion that I may under the authority of the proclamation confirm him in his official position, until the pleasure of the commander-in-chief shall be known.

Early the next morning everything was in readiness and at half-past seven o'clock the landing party left the Portsmouth and headed for the shore. They were acting under the following order from Commodore Sloat: <sup>12</sup>

Sir: Your launch left yesterday. I enclose your two documents, by which you will see what I have done.

I hoisted the American flag here today at nine, A.M.

You will immediately take possession of Yerba Buena, and hoist the American flag within range of your guns; post up the proclamation in both languages; notify Captain Frémont and others; (sic); put the fort and guns in order.

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12. Commodore Sloat to Captain Montgomery, Monterey, July 7, 1846, California Historical Society Quarterly, VIII, No. 1 March 1920, 71.



I wish very much to see and hear from Captain Frémont, that we may understand each other and cooperate together.

The landing place of Montgomery's troops had until recently been named as being at the foot of Clay Street, up which they marched to Kearny Street and into the plaza.<sup>13</sup> This story has often been repeated by almost every writer on the subject, but none of the accounts came from an eye-witness of the event. It was supposed that the sailors landed there because they marched up Clay Street from the water's edge. However, the physical difficulties of landing there have not been taken into account. In the first place, the water at the foot of Clay Street was very shallow and any well-laden boat would have been unable to approach closer than perhaps a hundred feet from the water's edge. This meant that the soldiers would have had to wade out to dry land. A large sand-bar running parallel to the beach at Clay Street, several hundred feet out from shore, made this an even more difficult landing place. This bar was exposed at low tide, and even at high tide was scarcely under water, so that the boats of the landing party would

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13. Z. S. Eldredge, The beginnings of San Francisco, II, 540.

have been stranded a considerable distance from the shore. The troops, to reach land, would have been forced to walk knee deep in water and mud.

Such a state of affairs was unnecessary, however, because only a few hundred yards north of that spot was Clark's Point, where the water was very deep up to the edge, and men could step from the boats on to dry land. It is only fair to suppose that any prudent commander would have landed his troops there instead of in the mud, especially since the distance from the ship to either landing place was about equal. Such being the case, it would seem that Captain Montgomery did land his forces at Clark's Point rather than at the foot of Clay Street. That is the spot named as the landing place by one of the petty officers of the party who wrote an account of it a few days later, under the name of "Filings," which document has recently come to light.

According to Sailor Filings, the morning of July 9 dawned bright and beautiful. The crew was up and about long before sunrise, but, contrary to the usual custom, there was no deck scrubbing that morning for there were more important affairs afoot than the mere cleaning of decks and polishing of brass. Breakfast

was served at six o'clock and orders were issued for all to dress in clean white jackets, blue trousers, black hats and black shoes so as to be prepared for muster. Breakfast was soon over, because everybody was too much excited over the coming important events to have an appetite. Long before the drum called them to muster, the men were at their respective stations around the guns.

Exactly at eight o'clock, the drum beat to quarters, and Captain Montgomery made the assembled crew a short speech in which he stated that, in obedience to orders from Commodore Sloat, the American flag was to be hoisted at the public square in Yerba Buena on that day, and they would take possession of the town in the name of the United States of America. The first lieutenant then called the roll of those who were to become soldiers and form a part of the landing detail. The marines, commanded by Lieutenant Henry B. Watson, were in full dress, and every officer of the ship except two who remained on board to fire a national salute was in the landing party.

As soon as the drum beat retreat the boats were lowered and brought alongside, and the marines and carbineers were loaded into them. They were landed at what is now Clark's Point, and when all had stepped ashore they

formed into sections. Then to the inspiring tune of "Yankee Doodle" from the ship's band of one drum and fife," "with an occasional note added by a stray dog, or a disconsolate jackass which they passed on the line of march"; they marched along the rocky shore to Hinckley's bridge which crossed the Jackson Street slough, south over the bridge and down Montgomery Street to Clay Street, then up Clay to Kearny Street and the Plaza. There they formed a hollow square about the flagpole. The soldiers were then allowed to rest on their arms, while the aides to Captain Montgomery scattered themselves throughout the town to gather together some thirty or forty persons of all nationalities, colors, and languages. These people then stood in the square formed by the soldiers and sailors. The Captain walked to the flagstaff and gave a nod to his second in command. Then the first lieutenant nodded to one of the quartermasters, who advanced, the Stars and Stripes in his hands, and bent the flag on the halyards.<sup>14</sup>

Filings said that it was an eventful moment, at which something was about to be done that could not be undone easily. He gazed at that crowd of manly faces and he thought that he could see in them a settled determination.

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14. Phillips, Portsmouth Plaza, the cradle of San Francisco, 54-56.

to do or die in defence of that act, if death for their country's flag should become necessary. Captain Montgomery had Commodore Sloat's proclamation ready. It was read by the first lieutenant to the assembled crowd. When he finished, he gave the signal, and in a moment, amid a roar from the ship's cannon, the hurrahs of the ship's crew, the "vivas" of the Californians, "the cheers of the Dutchmen, the barking of dogs, the braying of jackasses," and a general confusion of sounds from every living thing within hearing, the flag was hoisted. It floated proudly. When the ceremony was over and the captain had proclaimed himself governor of the northern portion of Upper California, he appointed Lieutenant Watson of the marines as military commander of the town of Yerba Buena. He was given a garrison consisting of twenty-four marines. They were installed in the adobe custom-house, which from then on was known as the barracks. Thus Lieutenant Watson was transformed from a lieutenant of marines into the potentate of a village.<sup>15</sup>

The sailors, whose propensities for drink were well known, were not allowed to stroll about the town, but were marched at once down to the landing place at Clark's

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15. Phillips, Portsmouth Plaza, the cradle of San Francisco, 57-58.

Point. Regardless of their wistful looks cast toward the several saloons, they were embarked. Before noon they were once more aboard ship.

As soon as the Jacks had been marched away, a guard was placed at the foot of the flagstaff and the assembled crowd of Mexicans, having become convinced that they had suddenly been transformed by some strange process into citizens of the United States, voted unanimously to go to where liquor could be had and there drink a health and long life to the flag. Consequently, the Indians rushed pell-mell to one of the pulperies. Consul Leidesdorff and the aristocracy went to Bob Ridley's barroom, and the second class and the Dutch went to Tinker's place. Those houses being on three of the four corners of the square, a person standing in the door of the barracks could see what was taking place in each of them. All was quiet for the first hour, but soon the fire-water began to have its effect. Then there came a confusion of sounds that would have put the Tower of Babel to shame. There were drunken "vivas" from an Indian who came out of Saloon Number 1; he would take a look at the flag and over he would go full length upon the grass. Then from the aristocratic corner would come a series of "hip, hip, hip," and a cheering three times three; then out of Tinker's would come a strange

jumble of words in which hurrah, viva, hip, pab, and Gott ver dam were only too plainly distinguishable. That racket lasted for some hours, in fact until sun-down, when the commandant, Lieutenant Watson, sent a guard to warn the revelers that as the town was under martial law they must cease their orgies and retire to their respective homes.<sup>16</sup>

From this vivid description, it seems quite evident that the writer, Filings, must have been present at the landing and the ceremonies at the plaza. Therefore, there is little or no reason to doubt that the landing place was at Clark's Point instead of Clay Street. No doubt the people in San Francisco received the impression that the troops were landed at the foot of Clay Street because they saw them marching up that street from the waterfront; but that is not strange since Montgomery Street was then the waterfront and the soldiers had come along that street to Clay.

According to Filings' remarks that several aides were sent around town to round up the people, it would seem that the citizens of Yerba Buena must either have been still in bed or at breakfast, and that they were

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16. Phillips, Portsmouth Plaza, the cradle of San Francisco  
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unaware the troops had landed. Possibly that explains why there has been so much uncertainty as to the exact place where the American forces landed. It seems strange that when one of the supremely important events in the history of San Francisco took place there were no eye-witnesses among the citizens to see it. Either the people of San Francisco had no curiosity or they were too engrossed in their daily tasks to notice an invading force being landed at their very front door. To commemorate this event, however, the street along the waterfront was named Montgomery and Portsmouth Plaza was named after his ship, the Portsmouth.



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