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CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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LANDING PLACE of SEBASTIAN VIZCAÍNO
and FRAY JUNÍPERO SERRA

Registered Landmark #128

by

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for

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The Landing Place of
Sebastián Vizcaíno and Fray Junípero Serra

The course of empire had taken its way ever westward under the relentless zeal of the Spanish conquistadores. The Caribbean Islands, the Atlantic seaboard, Mexico and the Pacific Coast had resounded to the tread of their feet and felt the keen edges of their swords in the short space of fifty years. Thus, by 1542, the west coast of Mexico and half the way up the Pacific Coast of Lower California had been well explored. It was in that year that Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza decided to send the Portuguese navigator, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, at the head of an expedition to explore the coast of California, which was then a great mystery. Consequently, Cabrillo set out with two small vessels, the San Salvador, his flagship, and La Victoria, commanded by Bartolomé Ferrelo. They were particularly instructed to be on the watch for the long-sought-after Strait of Anian.¹

The expedition left the port of Navedad on the west coast of Mexico, on June 27, 1542, and moved slowly past Cape San Lucas, against contrary winds, for weeks.

1. Z. S. Eldredge, History of California, II, 51-52.

Finally, on September 27, the ships entered the port of San Diego, which they called San Miguel in honor of the patron saint of that day. There they stayed for five days. They then sailed north once more, discovering the Santa Barbara Islands and Channel. Progress was slow; and by the time they rounded Point Concepción, which they named El Cabo de la Galera, it was November and the winter storms had set in. Slowly they worked their way northward, encountering several storms on the way. The bold, rocky coastline offered no place to land and take possession. On the way north they passed a pine clad point of land which they called Cabo de Pinos, and a bay named Bahia de Pinos, which Bancroft believed to have been Monterey Bay.²

Soon after, a storm drove them south again to the Santa Barbara Islands, where Cabrillo died. He was buried there on January 3, 1543. Ferrelo then took command of the ships and set out once more on January 19. Again storms drove them up the coast, so that they missed Monterey Bay and supposedly reached Cape Mendocino. From there they returned to Mexico and thus ended the first voyage by white men into California waters.

For the next fifty years, the explorations of

2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 75-77.

Captain Francis Drake in 1579, of Francisco de Gali in 1584 and Sebastián Rodríguez de Cermeñon in 1595, added little to the knowledge of the California coast. Then the Count of Monterey, Viceroy of New Spain, decided to send a well equipped expedition to make a more thorough exploration.

The new expedition consisted of three vessels, the flagship San Diego, the Tres Reyes, and the Santo Tomas, well furnished and manned by 200 men under the command of the Spanish navigator, Sebastián Vizcaino. The fleet set out from Acapulco, on the west coast of Mexico, Sunday, May 5, 1602. It proceeded slowly up the coast, across the Gulf of California and along the Pacific Coast of Lower California to San Diego, where it anchored on November 10. After a rest of ten days, the ships sailed north on Wednesday, November 20, eight days later visiting the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. From there they proceeded northward until the expedition arrived at the port of Monterey on December 16, 1602, late in the afternoon.³

Vizcaino named the bay Monterey, in honor of the viceroy, and early the next morning prepared to land to take possession. They landed on the beach, east of the location of the present custom-house. A tent and an arbor were erected,

3. A. J. Denis, Spanish Alta California, 23-30.

under a great live oak tree whose branches reached nearly to the water. The ceremonies were held there. The oak tree stood on the bank, near the mouth of a small stream of good water. That is the creek, which runs down the hill from the southwest and passes below and east of the present Monterey High School. It emptied into the slough east of the present railway station.

Led by Fathers Andres and Antonio, two of the three Carmelite friars who accompanied the fleet, the general and the rest of the men assembled under the tent. The Friars said the Mass of the Holy Ghost, "so that the general and those of his council might have the wisdom to order and provide what was most agreeable to the service of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and of the King."

When the mass was concluded, Vizcaino assembled a council of his officers. The council was to decide whether to send one of the ships back to New Spain with messages to the viceroy telling of the discoveries to that date. It was to consider, also, which ship might be sent and what was to be done with the numerous sick persons. The question of the sick was a very serious one. Each day some had died. There were scarcely any left who could say they were perfectly well, and few who could manage the sails of the ships. The pilot of the Santo Tomas, his assistant, and the master were unable to stand. Father Tomás de Aquino, the ship's chaplain,

had been sick for many days. Before they arrived in Monterey, they had buried sixteen men at sea.

The council finally decided that the Santo Tomás should go with its commander, Pilot Juan Pasinál and his assistant, the master of the ship, Baltazar de Armas, Father Tomás de Aquino and all those very ill, aboard it. All the food aboard the Santo Tomás, except what was deemed necessary for the return voyage, was transferred to the flagship San Diego. It was given enough sailors to navigate it to the port of Acapulco. The other men who were in any way capable of working were given to the San Diego and the Tres Reyes.

When all that had been decided and carried out, copies of all diaries and charts of the coast up to Monterey were made and sent to the viceroy. He and the king were thus provided with knowledge of all that had been accomplished to that date, even if the two ships with the remainder of the expedition were wrecked and lost while exploring up to Cape Mendocino. Just before the returning vessel was ready to sail, Vizcaino ordered everyone in the fleet to confess and take communion; then extreme unction was administered to those who seemed to be at the point of death, since Father Tomás was too sick to do it on the journey. The Santo Tomás then set sail for New Spain on December 29, 1602,, after leaving the San Diego and Tres Reyes ready to

depart in search of Cape Mendocino.⁴

While the expedition was waiting for the sailing of the Santo Tomas a number of parties were sent inland to explore. Of the country about Monterey, the diary gives a good account. The port was considered good and well protected from all winds except from the north and northwest. Great forests of large, smooth, straight pine trees were found, suitable for masts and yards of ships. There was plenty of oak of all varieties, and flowers of all kinds, as well as willows, alders, poplars and other trees similar to those in Spain. Streams were plentiful; and large lakes abounded in ducks, geese, magpies, cranes and other edible waterfowl. The soil was most fertile. The meadows were covered with fine grass for cattle, and were suitable for fields for growing crops. The woods were full of wild animals of all kinds - large ones such as bear, elk and large deer, and the smaller jackrabbits, cottontails, wildcats and squirrels. There were also many species of birds, such as doves, thrushes, sparrows, linnets, cardinals, quail, partridges, buzzards, and others found in Castile. Sea-birds of all kinds were present in great numbers, especially gulls, curly-jacks, pelicans and cormorants. The sea abounded in

4. H. R. Wagner, "Spanish voyages to the northwest coast in the sixteenth century," California Historical Society Quarterly, VII:4, December 1928, 357-359.

many good fish, as well as mussels, oysters, clams, mother-of-pearl shells, lobsters, crabs, large seals, otters and whales. There was also a very large bird of the shape and appearance of a turkey, which was the largest type of bird seen on that voyage.

About the port there were numerous settlements of affable Indians, who were very kind and willing to give what they had. They traded skins of bear, lions, and deer for trinkets given them by the Spaniards. Their weapons were the bow and arrow. They went naked, and lived by primitive customs, but according to Vizcaíno had a form of government. They were also so friendly that they said they would be pleased to see the Spaniards begin a settlement in their country.

After the Santo Tomás sailed, Vizcaíno led a party over the hills to the south. He discovered a copious river which he named Rio Carmelo, in honor of the Carmelite friars who were members of the expedition. From it Vizcaíno's men got good water as it came down from the mountains. They also named the port at the mouth of the river.⁵

During the few days in which they prepared for their departure, there came a very severe cold spell to Monterey. On

5. Wagner, "Spanish voyages to the northwest coast in the sixteenth century," California Historical Society Quarterly, VII:4, December 1928, 359-363.

Wednesday, New Year's day, 1603, the men worked under great difficulties in taking on wood and water because of the extreme cold. The day dawned with all the surrounding mountains covered with snow. The water-hole from which they were taking water was frozen over more than a palm in thickness, and the bottles which had been left full overnight were all frozen solid. The situation was so desperate that everybody had to work, including Vizcaino, and by Friday, January 3, they were ready to sail. At nightfall all but one anchor was raised; and at midnight a land breeze arose and they set sail for the north.⁶

Vizcaino, after leaving Monterey, sailed past Cape Mendocino. He then turned back and raced down the coast for Mexico, because practically all his men were sick and dying from the scurvy. He did not enter the port of Monterey again, but his account of it lived in Spanish annals for many a year. A change of viceroy in Mexico, politics, and dissatisfaction of the new official with the results of Vizcaino's explorations prevented the latter from making any further voyages to the northwest coast. Thereafter the king refused to spend any more money on such undertakings and Monterey remained unoccupied.

6. Denis, Spanish Alta California, 29-31.

A full one hundred and fifty years had passed before further notice of Monterey was taken or an attempt was made to colonize California. Finally the year 1769 rolled around, then Spain awoke to the realization of the value of her northern province. Circumstances had changed; foreign powers were beginning to encroach upon Spanish possessions in the north. King Charles III, a wise, ambitious and energetic monarch, now ruled Spain; José de Gálvez, an honest, loyal, courageous nobleman, was visitor general to New Spain and a member of the Council of the Indies; Don Antonio de Bucareli, a broad-minded, competent official, soon came to take the post of viceroy of New Spain. Those three great men were able to see eye to eye on the problems affecting the Spanish frontiers in North America. It was decided to send an expedition to occupy Upper California.

Thus it was that the land and water expedition under the leadership of Captain Don Gaspar de Portolá and Father Junípero Serra of the Franciscan Order assembled at the Port of San Diego on July, 1769. Two weeks later, on July 14, Captain Portolá, with a party of sixty-four persons including Captain Rivera y Moncada, Lieutenant Pedro Fages, Sergeant José Ortega, Engineer Miguel Constansó and two friars, Father Juan Crespi and Francisco Gomez, set out to rediscover and occupy the famous port of Monterey, that

Vizcaino had eulogized so highly one hundred and sixty-six⁷ years before.

With Father Crespi writing the diary of day-to-day progress, the expedition followed the coast line to the northwest in slow, difficult marches. On September 30, the company arrived at the mouth of the Salinas River on Monterey Bay, the Spaniards believing that they were on the Carmelo River. From the beach they could see the two headlands of the bay, Point Pinos to the southwest and Point Año Nuevo to the northwest, which they recognized without difficulty from Vizcaino's description. Nevertheless they were mystified because if they were on the Carmelo River, Point Pinos should bear to the northwest instead of the southwest. Here they stopped, deciding to explore.

Captain Rivera, with eight men, was sent south along the shore to look for the Port of Monterey. The party found the oak tree, the creek, the slough, the little lakes, as well as the Carmelo Bay, river and point, but they returned to camp reporting they could not find the port. This was due to the fact that they expected a large land-locked harbor such as Vizcaino had praised so highly. The great open Bay of Monterey did not appear as a good port to the land party. Calling a council of his officers, Portola and

7. Bancroft, History of California, I, 140-142.

the rest decided to continue northward in search of the port. It was this failure to recognize Monterey that led them, on November 2, to discover the incomparable Bay of San Francisco.

Upon the discovery of San Francisco Bay, the weary travelers became convinced that they had gone too far north and had missed Monterey Bay. A council of officers was called on November 11, and it was decided to return to Point Pinos for further explorations. After sixteen days of marches by which they retraced their steps, without incident of note, they arrived at the Carmelo River. There they stayed from November 28 to December 10, exploring but finding nothing new. By that time their provisions were running low. Another council of officers and friars was called which finally decided that it was best to return to San Diego at once, instead of waiting any longer for the vessel which was supposed to come up the coast.⁸

On December 9, before the party left Carmelo Bay, they set up a large cross on a knoll near the beach. It bore a carved inscription. "Dig at the foot and thou wilt find a writing." The buried document was a brief narrative of the expedition, with a request that the commander of any

8. Bancroft, History of California, I, 160-163.

vessel arriving soon, sail down the coast and try to communicate with the land party. The next day they crossed over the peninsula to the Monterey Bay, and there, on the beach of the very harbor they could not find, they set up another cross, with an inscription announcing their departure.⁹ On December 11, they set out on their return to San Diego, which they accomplished on January 24, 1770, arriving half starved after a long and arduous journey.

At San Diego, Portolá's party found Father Serra and the other members of the expedition in great want. For several months thereafter there was talk of returning to Lower California and abandoning the colonizing scheme. March 19, 1770, had been set as the date upon which they would leave California, but the timely arrival of the San Antonio with new and abundant provisions prevented the departure of the expedition to Baja California.

New orders from Galvez and the viceroy came on the San Antonio to Portolá. Those orders changed his mind about abandoning the enterprise. The next day he began to make preparations to set out for Monterey once more, with a sea as well as land expedition, to establish a mission and a settlement there. By the middle of April, all was in

9. R. G. Cleland, California pathfinders, 140-144.

readiness. On April 16, 1770, the San Antonio sailed for Monterey with the necessary provisions for the establishment to be set up there. Aboard it were Captain Juan Pérez and his crew: Miguel del Pino, as second officer; Father Junípero Serra; Miguel Constansó, the engineer; Pedro Prat, and a number of servants. The following day, April 17, Captain Portolá set out with his land expedition, which included Lieutenant Pedro Fages, twelve Catalan volunteers, seven soldiers, Father Crespi, two muleteers, and five natives.

The land party followed their previous trail so that they were able to march much faster and avoid many of the former hardships. After an uneventful journey, they camped on the shore of Monterey Bay on May 24, near the spot where they had set up the second cross the winter before. The cross was still standing but it was surrounded and adorned by a curious collection of arrows, sticks, feathers, fish, meat, clams, and shells, evidently placed there by the savages as offerings to appease the strangers' God. Later, as the Indians learned Spanish, they related strange tales about the cross. They told how it seemed to grow and almost reach the heavens, and that rays of light illuminated it like a halo. In all these accounts the friars

saw deep religious significance.¹⁰ Portolá, Crespi and Fages went to visit the cross as soon as they had camped. As they were walking back, they looked out over the placid waters of the bay, and all in one accord said, "This is the port of Monterey which we seek, just as Vizcaíno and Cabrera Bueno described it. And so it was, only one wonders how they had failed to recognize it on their previous trip."¹¹

After camping on the beach for several days, they began to lack fresh water. The camp was moved over the hills to Carmelo Bay. While they were there, on May 31, the San Antonio hove in sight off Point Pinos. Fires were lighted to guide the ship, and soon it anchored in Monterey Bay after having been delayed for many days. It had been taken up to the mouth of San Francisco Bay by contrary winds.

On June 1, Governor Portolá, Father Crespi and Lieutenant Fages crossed back to Monterey to welcome Father President Serra and the other new arrivals. The camp was once more transferred to the port. After a brief search, they found and identified the little ravine with its pools of fresh water, the trees, and even the wide-spreading oak

10. Eldredge, History of California, I, 265-267.

11. Bancroft, History of California, I, 169.

whose branches almost touched the water at high tide and under which Father Ascensión had said mass in 1602. Everything was as Vizcaino had described it except that the crowds of friendly natives were lacking.

Father Serra then landed, perhaps very near the spot, if not on it, where Vizcaino had stepped so many years before. At once preparations were made for the ceremonies of taking possession. June 3, 1770, was Sunday of Pentecost, the first day of the Feast of the Holy Spirit. Don Gaspar de Portola assembled his officers, soldiers, and the rest of the land expedition. Don Juan Pérez, captain of the packet San Antonio, also known as El Principe, gathered the sea expedition - his second captain, Don Manuel del Pino, the crew, Fray Junípero Serra, Father Fray Juan Crespi and Don Miguel Constansó. When all were together on the beach of the harbor of Monterey, the following took place: An arbor was built on the spot near the oak where the holy sacrifice of the mass had been celebrated by the reverend Carmelite fathers who were with Don Sebastián Vizcaino in 1602. An altar was built, water was blessed, the bells were hung, and the ceremony began by loud and oft-repeated peals of the bells.

Then Father President Serra donned his alb and stole, while the rest of the company knelt, chanted the Venite creator spiritus,

and implored the assistance of the Holy Spirit. After that the cross was planted and blessed, Father Serra sprinkling the beach and fields with holy water, to frighten away the infernal enemies. An image of the Holy Virgin presented by Archbishop Lorenzana of Mexico was set up on the altar, then the chanted mass began led by Father Serra, after which he preached the gospel from the altar. The place of musical instruments was taken or supplied by the thunder of cannon and the crack of musketry, as repeated salvos were fired from the guns of the packet, and the firearms of the soldiers. Following that, a salvo to the virgin and the te deum laudamus, were sung.

The church ceremonies ended, Don Gaspar de Portola proceeded to take formal possession in the name of King Charles III. The royal standards of Spain were hoisted and saluted, and the usual forms of pulling grass and throwing stones were ceremoniously performed and recorded in the prescribed act. Thus it was that the long dreamed of occupation of Monterey was finally accomplished.¹²

Then followed the task of establishing the mission and presidio of San Carlos Borromeo de Monterey. This was done immediately. A few humble huts were erected at once, on a site surveyed by Constansó. That was a gunshot distance from the beach of the inlet which communicated with the bay at high tide, and three times as far from the shore of the port. Thus was founded the capital of California which grew into the present city of Monterey.

12. Cleland, California pathfinders, 147-151.

The Vizcaino Oak stood on its bank for many years, well into the 19th century. It was a well known landmark until 1837. When the winter rains of that year washed away the earth from its roots, it fell and perished.¹³ Thereafter the site was forgotten until late in 1904, when a number of societies and individuals joined the San Francisco Examiner in conducting a campaign for funds with which to buy the spot. After several months a sufficient amount was collected, and with the money the California Historical Landmarks League bought the land and presented it to the State of California as an historical monument. Since then it has been administered under the State Division of Parks, Department of Natural Resources. Although Vizcaino, the oak and Father Serra have long been gone, the landing spot and the significant events which took place there will live for future generations in the memories and hearts of a grateful people.

13. Bancroft, History of California, I, 170.

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