

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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FORT HUMBOLDT

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## FORT HUMBOLDT

On the American frontier, in Northern California as elsewhere in the United States, the steps in the process of occupation were almost invariably the same. Exploration of new territory was frequently coincident with its first exploitation. The trapper, the prospector, and the trader led the way, to be followed by the squatters and permanent settlers, who improved the land, built the towns, made trails into roads, in short, transformed the wilderness into partially civilized communities built on the older American and European patterns. This experience, with all its vitality, hardship and suffering, crudeness and ruthlessness, and seeming inevitability, was the glorious epic of the American westward advance.

Like most human things, however, it had its drab and tragic side. What the white man saw as courageous, justifiable, even obligatory conquest of the wilderness, the tapping of new and unused sources of wealth, and the widening of opportunity for the common man, the red man, original occupant of the land, recognized with dismay as dispossession by violence, curtailment of personal and group freedom, and destruction of the means of subsistence. Inherent in the frontier process, therefore, was the clash between the

two races, in which, inevitably, the weaker, the less numerous, and the ill-organized was driven against the wall.

In California the American occupation of the Humboldt Bay region most nearly approximated frontier experience in other parts of the United States. Here was an area, hemmed in on three sides by rugged mountains and with easy access only from the sea side. It was inhabited by native tribes who had had practically no previous contact with white men, and it abounded in natural resources, one of which, gold, was to induce an early and vigorous advance into it.

On the Upper Trinity River, within this region, gold was discovered by an American party led by Major P. B. Reading in July, 1848. Despite the rough mountain country which had to be crossed to reach the scene of the new strike, more and more emigrants coming to California overland by the northern trails were drawn thither. The result was that by the fall of 1849 it had a surprisingly large population, a fact which caused much concern, since the approach of the winter season made it probable that a shortage of provisions would result.<sup>1</sup>

To forestall this, repeated attempts were made by land and sea during the winter of 1849-1850 to discover a suitable bay along the coast, if possible the lost Trinidad

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1. O. C. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 37.

Bay of the old Spanish maps, which might serve as a supply depot to these northern mines. In November, 1849, Dr. Josiah Gregg led a party westward from the Upper Trinity itself, and after great hardships reached Trinidad Bay on December 7, and what is now Humboldt Bay two weeks later. Meanwhile, vessel after vessel was being sent out from San Francisco to conduct the search by sea, the Cameo entering Trinidad Bay on March 16, 1850, and the Laura Virginia Humboldt Bay on April 14, following.<sup>2</sup>

Hardly were Trinidad and Humboldt bays discovered than towns were founded on their shores to serve as gateways to the entire back country and to the mines of the interior. On Trinidad Bay the town by that name was founded in April, 1850, to be followed soon by Union, Bucksport, and Eureka on Humboldt Bay, farther south. Trails were opened to the mines, pack trains came and went, and ship after ship landed its quota of passengers on their way to the Klamath, Salmon and Upper Trinity. As a result, the new towns grew rapidly, agricultural communities were settled, lumber mills arose along the coast; the mining area was extended and its population greatly increased.

The cumulative effect of these sudden changes upon the Indians of the region can be imagined. The redskins

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2. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 37-43.

were not hostile when the white man first appeared; rather, they were friendly, showed a lively interest in trading with the newcomers, and were amazed at the efficacy of the white man's weapons. Not until the Indians saw the intruders preempt village sites and hunting grounds did they become actively resentful. The red men's anger expressed itself at first in individual acts of violence—a white man robbed here, another killed there. Lawless whites, moreover, at the same time were often guilty of wanton acts of barbarity. Each in turn retaliated, the Indian according to his code, "a life for a life," regardless of whether the avenging blow struck the innocent or the guilty, and the white man with an unjustifiable fury and savagery which often destroyed whole rancherias of men, women, and children.<sup>3</sup>

By 1851, the resulting situation was acute; but open war was averted, largely through the effort of the Indian agent, Colonel Redick McKee. In the fall of that year, with a company of soldiers, he conducted an expedition among the Northern California Indians, visiting the tribes on the Eel River, on Humboldt Bay, and on the Klamath, distributing presents and drawing up treaties in which reservation lands were promised to them.<sup>4</sup> In the main, his

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3. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 137-141. See also Bledsoe, Indian wars of the Northwest.

4. Ibid., 138-141.

work had a pacifying influence, but any permanent good result which it might have had was nullified when the selfish opposition of the settlers to the sequestration of virgin lands within Indian reservations prevented the ratification of the treaties in congress.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there was a strong sentiment in California that the Indians should be entirely removed from the State. This encouraged the more lawless whites, who favored their entire extermination, to foment trouble and to commit depredatory acts which could lead only to greater hostility between the two races. Early in 1852, a statement was presented to Governor Bigler by several senators from Northern California, in which it was claimed that in the preceding few months 130 white men had been killed by the Indians and property valued at 240,000 dollars destroyed.<sup>6</sup> As Indian agent, McKee in turn pointed out to the governor that his wards had fared no better. Clearly, Indian relations were at a critical juncture. Measures were needed, to safeguard the rights and lives of settlers and Indians and to preserve order between them.

Meanwhile, the agitation on the part of the settlers and their representatives for protection had directed itself to Brigadier-general Hitchcock, commander of the Pacific Coast division of the United States Army. The request was made

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5. President, Annual message, December 6, 1852, (Serial 673), 10, 32.

6. Senate journal, 3rd session (1852), 703-704.

that a new United States military post be set up somewhere "between Humboldt Bay and the Klamath River, or at the junction, of the Klamath and Trinity rivers." Such a post, it was considered, would be a "most favorable one for holding in check not only the Indians, but those abandoned whites who are so ready to create disturbances on the slightest provocation."<sup>7</sup> Colonel McKee suggested that a small post be established at each of the proposed Indian reservations and a central fort on the shores of Humboldt Bay. This plan received the approval of General Hitchcock, who promised to establish the new post as soon as arrangements could be made.<sup>8</sup>

While Indian troubles were thus impending in Northern California, furious open warfare had broken out between the white men and the red in Oregon. Another regiment of regular troops, the veteran Fourth United States Infantry, was therefore ordered to the Pacific Coast by way of the Isthmus of Panama. In August, 1852, it arrived in San Francisco, and, after a short rest at Benicia, it was reëmbarked for the Columbia River. There the important northern post, Columbia Barracks, the present day Fort Vancouver,

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7. Alta California, February 21, 1852.

8. Senate Journal, 3rd session, (1852), 711.

was situated. Two companies, "B" and "F," however, were ordered to proceed to Humboldt Bay under the command of Brevet-lieutenant-colonel R. C. Buchanan, where they arrived late in January, 1853.<sup>9</sup>

Colonel Buchanan's orders gave him full authority to select the site for the new fort, and to begin its construction. His choice finally fell upon a bluff overlooking the small settlement of Bucksport, at that time one of the most important rival communities on the east shore of the bay. The site was located about a quarter mile from the shore, and was conveniently close to timber.

After the location was decided upon, the actual construction of the fort - commissary, barracks, officer's quarters, and other buildings - could be begun. Since houses in the nearby town were few, the officers, soldiers, and their families lived in tents while the fort was building. The labor, of course, was done by the soldiers. The original plans for construction specified walls of hewn logs, covered with weatherboard and plastered on the inside. This was found to be too expensive of time, energy, and materials, and, moreover, not necessary in the mild California climate. After one building had been finished according to the original

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9. History of Humboldt County California with illustrations---,  
163.



plan, the rest were constructed simply of weatherboard with plaster inside. The finished establishment comprised about a dozen buildings which enclosed a large quadrangular parade ground on three sides, leaving the west side open to the sea.

Giberson, who saw Fort Humboldt in the 1880's, says that "its situation was admirably chosen, both from a strategic point of view and for an unrivalled outlook in almost every direction. One may 'box the compass' anywhere on the parade ground, and he will be surprised and delighted at the view which unfolds before him."<sup>10</sup>

During the first few years, life at Fort Humboldt was not very exciting or interesting. The nearby civilian population was small, and the garrison very limited in numbers, totaling, in June, 1853, only eighty-two enlisted men and six officers.<sup>11</sup> Communications with San Francisco were only by water, and mails were very irregular. With the letters came an occasional newspaper, and the staple provisions for the fort. The commissary was supplemented by elk and deer meat, which a local civilian contracted to

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10. N.S. Giberson, "Captain Grant's old post Fort Humboldt," in Overland monthly, VIII, 134-137. Bucksport now lies within the city limits of Eureka.

11. Thirty-third congress, 1st session, Senate executive documents, No.1, Part II.

supply to the fort. Officers, and men as well, spent their leisure time in hunting, fishing, and in drinking bumpers to one another's health.

It was during those first years that Ulysses S. Grant was stationed at Fort Humboldt for a short time. Grant's graduation from West Point had been followed by distinguished service, during the Mexican war, in the Fourth United States Infantry, and when that regiment was transferred to the Pacific Coast in 1852 he reluctantly accompanied it, being stationed first of all on the Columbia River. For Grant, the decision to come west with his regiment was a hard one. It meant separation from a young wife and family which made his stay in Oregon and Fort Humboldt an unhappy one.<sup>12</sup>

In August, 1853, Grant was promoted to the full rank of captain and ordered to Fort Humboldt to fill the vacancy occasioned by the death of Captain Bliss. To reach his new post, Captain Grant had to go by a roundabout route, by sea to San Francisco and then northward on a coastal vessel; as a result he was unable to report to Colonel Buchanan before October. When he did, it did not take long for both

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12. Garland, Ulysses S. Grant his life and character, 124-126; King, The true U.S. Grant, 116-131.

men to realize that their association would be uncongenial. Buchanan, the strict disciplinarian, punctual in everything, and fastidious in dress, was a striking contrast to the careless and likeable Grant. During the succeeding winter of enforced idleness the latter, missing the companionship of his wife and family increasingly, became despondent. He decided to leave army life, writing his resignation on April 11, 1854, and asking that it become effective on July 31 following.<sup>13</sup>

For the men whom Grant left behind at Fort Humboldt life became more exciting with the opening of the Indian wars in the Humboldt Bay region in 1855. The continual spread of white settlement more and more encroached upon the original possessors of the land, and made the clash inevitable. Intermittently the Indian wars of the Humboldt Bay region lasted a full decade. The Indians fought hopelessly against the "hated intruders, who were killing their game, scaring away their salmon, corrupting their women, turning their hunting grounds into farms and stock ranges, and by encouraging the dissensions of rival tribes, were rapidly rendering united resistance to a common enemy impossible."<sup>14</sup>

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13. Garland, Ulysses S. Grant his life and character, 125.

14. Giberson, op. cit., 134-135.

The details in connection with each of the Indian wars from 1855 to 1865 are too numerous and involved to include here. The first war of the series occurred on the Klamath and is called the Red Gap War (1855). This was followed in 1858-1859 by the Mad River Indian War, which also affected the Indians of the coast and caused great apprehension in the settlements. In 1861, there was trouble in the Hoopa Valley, the following year on the Mad River; in 1863-1865 the closing struggles with the Hoopas, and the Redwood and coast Indian troubles.<sup>15</sup>

The part which Fort Humboldt played in all these disturbances was peculiar. Never was the post the scene of an actual battle nor was it ever remotely threatened, but it was important. It was the base for troops in the field. It supplied the many small camps and forts, which were established from time to time in threatened areas in the interior, not only with food and munitions but also with men. This meant that the number of troops in the garrison fluctuated greatly. At one time in 1862 there were more than 400 soldiers at Fort Humboldt. In addition, the fort was headquarters for the Humboldt military district which was formed when so many troops were needed to cope with the situ-

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15. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 142-196.

ation. To give an idea of living conditions in the fort, the character of the struggle, and the entire situation which centered around Fort Humboldt during that critical time, nothing is so good as the report of Colonel F. J. Lippett, who assumed command in 1862:<sup>16</sup>

We landed here...in a drenching rain. I found the fort filled with the two companies from Fort Seward... having been driven here by the want of provisions.... As the ground about here was everywhere in a state of partial inundation, it was impossible to put my own two companies into tents, so I directed Quartermaster Swasey to hire buildings enough at Bucksport (about a quarter of a mile hence) to furnish shelter for the troops and for his stores.... The horses of the cavalry company are at present entirely unfit for service, being exhausted by continued short forage at Fort Seward, and the great fatigue of reaching here.... I may have to send the company into the field dismounted. From all accounts the state of the roads (or rather trails) and of the creeks is such that it will take thirty days at least of dry weather to make active operations possible. I have some seven applications already for new posts.... The state of things in this district may be summed up in a few words: There are several, perhaps many, thousands of Indians scattered through the forests and mountain gulches.... These Indians, or some among them, are constantly committing depredations on the whites ... sometimes for vengeance, (sic) sometimes for the sake of getting their arms or clothing. There are white men that associate with them...furnishing them with arms and ammunition .... These Indians are not divided into any considerable tribes with responsible chiefs,

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16. F.J. Lippett, "Report" in War of the rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies, part.1, series 1, L, 303-304.

but are made up of numberless rancherias or villages....On the other hand, there are many whites that are constantly killing Indians, after making up parties for that purpose, and as they generally find them in their rancherias, they kill as many of the women and children perhaps, as bucks....In deciding what is to be done, the question of which are the aggressors (sic) in this chronic warfare - the Indians or whites - is entirely immaterial. It is plain they never can live together in peace.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, a very significant change occurred in the personnel of the troops at Fort Humboldt and in the northern area. The regulars, needed in the East, were relieved by volunteers or militia. Although they were in the service of the United States, they were not regulars. It was under their management that the last events in the Indian wars occurred, and they did their part well. When the Indian wars were brought to a close in 1864 and 1865, the history of Fort Humboldt might be said to close, although a detachment of eighty-one regular troops arrived in April, 1865. The real need for the post, however, was gone; it was not long before it was abandoned, and in 1870 the property was placed on sale.<sup>17</sup>

Time took its toll of the buildings. One of them, the commissary, served as a residence at a later date and was somewhat made over. After its final abandonment, it

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17. Humboldt Times, June 25, 1870.

fell into dilapidation. At a still later date the site of the old fort was given to the city of Eureka for a park. Fort Humboldt Post 212, American Legion, took upon itself the task of rehabilitating the commissary, which was the one building left standing. It has a modern appearance, but the original shape and the framework were retained. That the passing world might not miss the historic site, Redwood Forest Chapter, D.A.R., marked it with a bronze tablet in 1925.<sup>18</sup> It is now registered with the State Park Commission as an historical landmark.

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18. H.R.P. Forbes, Fort Humboldt.

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