

A Biographical Note on Isidro de Antondo y Antillón: Admiral of the Californias

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Originally published in the December 1965 issue of the California Historical Society Quarterly

This article was digitized by the History Office, Installation Support Unit, Camp San Luis Obispo

28 April 2016

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By W. MICHAEL MATHES

THE ESTABLISHMENT of a permanent settlement in the Californias presented one of the most difficult obstacles to the advancement of the frontier of New Spain. In 1535, Fernando Cortés failed to maintain a colony at Santa Cruz (La Paz) and was forced to withdraw, as was Sebastián Vizcaíno six decades later in 1596. For a time, interest was shifted to the Pacific Coast subsequent to Vizcaíno's exploration of the area in 1602-1603 and his discovery of Monterey Bay; however, by 1606 plans for the settlement of Monterey were also eliminated, and the peninsula of Baja California, more readily supplied from the mainland, again became the focal point for colonization plans.¹

The inhospitable climate and geography of the peninsula remained as a deterrent to settlement; and in the early seventeenth century, it was hoped that the potential wealth to be gained from pearl fishing in the Gulf of California would not only attract colonists, but also offset the high costs of such enterprises. Thus, licenses granting a monopoly upon the exploitation of pearls in the gulf, in exchange for payment of the *quinto*² and the establishment of a permanent settlement on the peninsula at their own expense, were granted to various individuals and partnerships during the first three quarters of the seventeenth century. Under the terms of these licenses, voyages to the Gulf of California were made by Nicolás de

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Cardona and Juan de Iturbe in 1615; by Francisco de Ortega in 1632-1636; by Pedro Porter y Casanate in 1643; and 1647-1648; by Bernardo Bernal de Piñadero in 1664 and 1666; and by Francisco de Lucenilla in 1668. All of these voyages failed to effect colonization, since the recovery of pearls was slight and not sufficient to attract colonists or compensate for the high costs involved in such enterprises.³

Following the failure of the Lucenilla expedition in 1668, voyages to California were suspended, and hearings were held to determine a new course of action for settlement of the region.⁴ As a result of these hearings, it was determined that, since secular private enterprise had failed, the colonization of California would be possible only through a joint venture, secular and ecclesiastical, with the secular aspects of the expedition financed from the Royal Treasury. The Society of Jesus was charged with the ecclesiastical responsibility of the enterprise by interpreting the terms of the will of Alonso Fernández de la Torre of April 4, 1671, providing funds to the Society for the establishment of two missions in Sonora, to include California.⁵

Due to problems of defense throughout the northern frontier of New Spain, several years passed before concrete plans for the California expedition could be formulated. The appointment of a competent leader for the expedition presented particularly delicate problems since there were many applicants, including Bernardo Bernal de Piñadero who claimed priority due to past experience in the navigation of the gulf. Piñadero's record was one of failure and reflected a lack of leadership; therefore, in November, 1678, Viceroy Archbishop Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera selected Isidro de Atondo y Antillón as leader of the new expedition.⁶

Much has been written relative to the life and exploits of Atondo's ecclesiastical counterpart on the California enterprise, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, S.J.; but, due to the greatness of this pioneer Jesuit, Atondo has been neglected.⁷ The California expedition was to be Kino's first missionary post, assigned to him upon his arrival in New Spain in September, 1681.⁸ Atondo's selection, however, reflected a different criterion for assignment because he was a seasoned soldier with considerable background as a leader of men.

Isidro de Atondo y Antillón was born in Valtierra, a small town in Navarra near the city of Tudela, and was baptized there on

December 3, 1639. His parents, Luis de Atondo and Agustina de Aybar, were well known and highly respected members of the *hidalgúia* of the region, and their house displayed the Atondo coat of arms, composed of the Chains of Navarra and two half-moons on a shield, with a griffon in its center.⁹

On September 29, 1651, Luis de Atondo was elected *alcalde* of Valtierra, and thus his son was raised in an atmosphere of responsibility and honor.¹⁰ As in the case of many young men of the period, Isidro de Atondo was drawn to military service as a means of livelihood as well as carrying on the family tradition of honor. At the age of eighteen, after leaving Valtierra in a company of infantry under José García, Atondo entered the Army of Galicia as a soldier on August 1, 1658, advancing to the rank of ensign by February 2, 1662, when he received a discharge from the Viceroy of Galicia, the Marqués de Viana.¹¹

During his years of service in the Army of Galicia, Atondo excelled as a soldier in the battles of San Luis Gonzaga, Noguera, Castillo de la Pela, Monzón, and Salvatierra in the aftermath of the Catalán Revolt and during the minor uprisings in Aragón and Navarra. He also served with valor in Portugal in the campaigns of 1661 to halt the Portuguese War for Independence.¹²

Upon his discharge from the Army, Atondo entered the naval service as a captain of Spanish Infantry. He continued in the Portuguese War in 1663 as a part of the fleet under Pedro Nuño Colón, Duque de Veragua, blockading the Atlantic Seaboard. As the commander of the ships *Isabel* and *San Salvador*, he was responsible for the capture of several Dutch ships attempting to supply Portugal. By the termination of his naval service on December 20, 1669, Atondo had reached the rank of camp commander and adjutant lieutenant general.¹³

With the respite from European wars enjoyed by Spain in the latter part of the seventeenth century, Atondo's interest in adventure shifted to the New World, and in 1669 he joined the fleet of the Duque de Veragua bound for New Spain.¹⁴ Continuing in the service of the Crown while in New Spain, Atondo in 1676 was appointed Governor and Lieutenant Captain General of Sinaloa.¹⁵ Receiving news of the plans for a new expedition to California, Atondo petitioned the King on November 8, 1678, to be granted the command

of the expedition, the rights to colonize, fortify, and fish for pearls in the area, as well as reappointment as the Governor of Sinaloa. This petition was granted by the Viceroy and confirmed by Royal Order of December 29, 1679, which gave Atondo the title of Admiral of the Californias.¹⁶

In March, 1679, Atondo began preparations for the expedition by opening a small shipyard on the Río Sinaloa near Guasave. Because of the duties of the governorship and problems of Indian uprisings, Atondo made slow progress in the outfitting of the ships; it was not until March, 1682, that he was joined by the Jesuit Fathers Kino and Matías Goñi.¹⁷ Work continued throughout the year and the advent of 1683 found the expedition fully outfitted.

On January 17, 1683, Atondo and Goñi, aboard *La Concepción* (the flagship commanded by Blas de Guzmán), and Kino, aboard the *San José* (commanded by José de Pereda y Arze), set sail from Sinaloa for California. Taking on supplies along the coast, the expedition crossed the gulf and arrived at La Paz on April 1.¹⁸ A camp was established and formal possession of the area was taken on April 5.¹⁹ Because of the poor climate and soil, supplies had to be obtained in Sinaloa, and two crossings were made during the summer, while exploration to the north of La Paz was carried out in search of a more suitable site for settlement. On October 5 such a site was discovered at the Arroyo San Bruno; and on October 28 with the new camp well established, Pereda sailed to Sinaloa for supplies.²⁰

A permanent colony permitted further exploration for expansion as well as mapping of the area. On December 1 a second camp was established at San Isidro (San Juan Bautista Londó), and on the following day Ensign Nicolás de Contreras led a detachment inland to the Arroyo de Comondú. Later that month and in January, 1684, Kino carried out exploration inland and southward along the coast from San Bruno.²¹

The spring and summer of 1684 was spent in cultivating and planting as well as the construction of a fort and mission buildings at San Bruno. Despite these efforts, supply from Sinaloa was necessary, and five trips across the gulf were made between August and December, 1684.²² Atondo, aware that San Bruno could not survive unless further arable land was found, thus prepared an expedition inland to search for such terrain and possible areas for settlement on the more temperate Pacific Coast.

On December 14 Atondo and Kino set out from San Bruno with a party of men to cross the peninsula and, after two weeks of hard travel through rocky terrain, reached the Pacific coast on December 30. While the first crossing of Baja California by Europeans had been accomplished, the primary objectives of the expedition in discovering arable land and locating Bahía Magdalena had failed. Returning to San Bruno on January 13, a second expedition was prepared to cross the Sierra de la Giganta to the south.²³

This second expedition, led by Atondo and Goñi, left on February 16 and proceeded southward to San Dionisio. After several attempts to cross the mountains, Atondo found it impossible due to the large rockslides and deep canyons and returned to San Bruno on March 6.²⁴

The failure to discover new land and the problems of supply from Sinaloa resulted in the abandonment of San Bruno in May, 1685. Kino continued exploration of the coast; and Atondo, under the terms of his commission, searched for pearl beds at Isla del Carmen and La Paz. The coming of October storms forced the return of both parties to Matanchén on the Nayarit Coast; and, while Kino journeyed to Mexico to seek Viceregal aid for San Bruno, Atondo sailed to the Pacific Coast of Baja California and escorted the Manila Galleon to Acapulco.²⁵

Upon Atondo's return, he joined Kino in December, 1685, at hearings held to determine the future of San Bruno. Both requested further aid for the settlement of California and estimated the annual cost at 30,000 pesos. Despite this testimony and the expenditures already incurred, a Royal Order was issued on December 22 suspending the colonization of California due to the problems of Indian revolt in Durango and New Mexico.²⁶

With the abandonment of California, Atondo continued in the Royal Service in Nueva Vizcaya and later, in 1688, moved to Oaxaca where he served his uncle, the Bishop of Oaxaca, Isidro Sariñana.²⁷ Due to his long years of service to the Crown, Atondo on December 23, 1688, petitioned Carlos II for admission to the Military Order of Santiago. Throughout 1689 testimony was taken relative to Atondo and his family, their services, and their Christian standing. This testimony being favorable, Atondo was admitted to the Order in late 1689 at the age of fifty.²⁸

Subsequent to his entry into the Order of Santiago, no data on

Atondo's life or activities had come to light. It is quite possible that after thirty years of service he retired from military life to enjoy the stipend from the Order. The likelihood of this is further supported by Atondo's position as aide to his uncle in Oaxaca, the first nonmilitary post of his career. Although he never returned to California, Isidro de Atondo y Antillón was a major contributor to its development having opened the area which, twelve years after the abandonment of San Bruno, was finally to be permanently settled by Father Juan María Salvatierra, S.J.

NOTES

1. For further information on early voyages to California see: W. Michael Mathes, *Vizcaíno and Spanish Expansion in the Pacific Ocean* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1968); Alvaro del Portillo y Díez de Sollano, *Descubrimientos y Exploraciones en las Costas de California* (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1947); Henry Raup Wagner, *Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1929); and works cited therein.
2. A tax of one-fifth or less *ad valorem* placed upon natural resources.
3. For further information on seventeenth century pearl fishing see: W. Michael Mathes, ed., *Documentos para la historia de la explotación comercial de California: 1611-1679* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1969), and works cited therein.
4. Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Audiencia de México, legajo 51. Testimonio y autos hechos sobre Bernardo Bernal de Piñadero: 1677-1678. See also, Mathes, *Explotación comercial*, documento 135.
5. A. G. I., Audiencia de Guadalajara, legajo 68. Autos hechos sobre la Conquista de California: 1682-1683. See also, W. Michael Mathes, ed. *Documentos para la historia de la transformación colonizadora de California: 1679-1686* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1969), documento 15.
6. A.G.I., Patronato, legajo 31, número 4, and Audiencia de México, legajo 51. Carta del Virrey de la Nueva España al Rey: 12 de Febrero 1679. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 2.
7. For further information on Kino see: Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Rim of*

Christendom (New York: Macmillan, 1936); and various works of Ernest J. Burrus, S.J.

8. A.G.I., Guadalajara 68. Autos hechos sobre la Conquista de California: 1682-1683. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 15.

9. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Ordenes Militares-Santiago, legajo 723. Probanza de Isidro de Atondo y Antillón. The hidalguía was a class of lesser nobility deriving its status from service to the Crown and legitimacy of lineage.

10. A.H.N., Ordenes Militares — Santiago 723. Probanza de Isidro de Atondo y Antillón.

11. A.G.I., Indiferente, legajo 123. Relación de Servicios del Capitán Isidro de Atondo y Antillón: 30 de Julio 1671; and, A.H.N., Ordenes Militares — Santiago 723. Probanza de Isidro de Atondo y Antillón.

12. A.G.I., Indiferente 123. Relación de Servicios del Capitán Isidro de Atondo y Antillón: 30 de Julio 1671.

13. *Ibid.*

14. A.H.N., Ordenes Militares — Santiago 723. Probanza de Isidro de Atondo y Antillón.

15. A.G.I., Patronato 31/4, and México 51. Carta del Virrey de la Nueva España al Rey: 12 de Febrero 1679. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 2.

16. A.G.I., Patronato 31/4; México 1072/26; México 51; and, Archivo General de la Nación, México, Ramo Reales Cédulas, tomo 17, expediente 8. Real Cédula en favor de Isidro de Atondo y Antillón: 29 de Diciembre 1679. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 4.

17. A.G.I., Guadalajara 68. Autos hechos sobre la Conquista de California: 1682-1683. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 15.

18. *Ibid.*

19. A.G.I., Guadalajara 58. Auto sobre la Toma de Posesión de California: 5 de Abril 1683. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 13.

20. A.G.I. México 56. Autos sobre la Conquista de California: 1683-1684. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 25.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. A.G.I., Patronato 31/8; and, Museo Naval, Madrid. Colección Martín Fernández de Navarrete, XIX. See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 33; and, W. Michael Mathes, trans., *First Across the Peninsula* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1969).

24. *Ibid.*

25. A.G.I., México 26. Autos sobre la Conquista de California: 1685-1686.
See also, Mathes, *Transformación colonizadora*, documento 38.

26. *Ibid.*

27. A.H.N. Ordenes Militares — Santiago 723. Probanza de Isidro de Atondo
y Antillón.

28. *Ibid.*