

THE CONQUEST OF CALIFORNIA.

BY H. D. BARROWS.

Paper read before Historical Society, January 3, 1911.

The story of the taking possession of California by Commodore Sloat and the forces under his command, should always have an interest for Californians.

In 1892 I visited Monterey to obtain data for a History of Central California, and I there learned of many interesting incidents connected with the change of governments, from persons still living, who took part in, or witnessed the actual events as they transpired, and which I believed had theretofore never been published.

A few words would seem to be necessary here, to explain the situation of affairs in the Province just prior to the change.

Lieutenant Gillespie arrived at Monterey, April 17, 1846, on the United States vessel *Cyane*, bringing instructions from Washington to Consul Thos. O. Larkin and Captain John C. Fremont.

Matters were at the time rapidly approaching a crisis in California. Even as early as March 27, a meeting of leading citizens of Monterey, with the military junta, was held at Consul Larkin's house, to consider the situation, in which the several propositions were discussed, of independence, annexation to the United States, to England, or to France, by Castro, Vallejo, Prudon, Hartnell, and others.

From this it was evident that the partisans of all these schemes already believed that a political change of some kind was certain to come very soon. This belief, more or less clearly defined, extended throughout the territory; but it was probably more actively discussed at Monterey than at any other locality.

Commodore Sloat of the Pacific squadron, on his flag-ship *Savannah*, fifty-four guns, arrived at Monterey from Mazatlan, July 1, 1846. There were in port at the time of his arrival, the *Cyane*, Captain Mervine and the *Levant*, Captain Page, twenty-four guns each.

Several days passed before Sloat decided to take possession of the town, and to order Captain Montgomery of the U. S. vessel, the *Portsmouth*, then at San Francisco, (or Yerba Buena, as it then was more generally known) to raise the American flag at that port.

On July 7, however, having completed all his arrangements for the important step, he sent Captain Mervine ashore with a force of 250, who hoisted the Stars and Stripes over the custom-house, which were saluted with three cheers by the marines and spectators, and by twenty-one guns from each of the United States men-of-war in the harbor.

A proclamation in both Spanish and English, addressed "to the inhabitants of California," was posted in various public places; the necessary steps for the preservation of order were taken; and information of what had been done was sent to Montgomery, Fremont, Castro, Stearns and others.

At San Francisco Montgomery raised the American standard two days later without opposition, and on the same day Lieutenant Revere performed the same act at Sonoma.

Thus was the change of government in Central California effected quietly, as an event that was expected by all, and gladly welcomed by many.

* * * *

The foregoing is a brief skeleton account of the conquest, which will be supplemented by the stories of Dr. Ord, Thomas Bralee and others as recounted to the writer, mostly being based on matters which came within their own personal knowledge.

MR. BRALEE'S STORY.

Thomas Bralee, who was one of the actors in the flag-raising at Monterey, in 1846, and who was still a resident of that town in 1892, gave me some extremely interesting details concerning that event and concerning persons connected therewith.

Mr. Bralee served on the Savannah, a fifty-four gun, double-bank frigate, the flag-ship of Commodore Sloat. He said that while the Savannah, and the British man-of-war Collingwood, Admiral Sir George F. Seymour, were anchored at the Mexican port of Mazatlan, the American frigate sailed out of the harbor several times, and Admiral Seymour of the Collingwood would follow to learn in which direction the Savannah would head. But every time she would return to port, and back again would come the British admiral. Once, on the occasion of a court-martial having tried and found guilty a young sailor who had struck an officer, the penalty of which was death, the Savannah put to sea to carry out the sentence of hanging at the yard-arm, which was not permissible in a foreign port, under international law. The poor boy was pardoned by Commodore Sloat; but the incident served as a pretext to put to sea. The Admiral finally got tired of following the movements of the Commodore.

Meanwhile, on the arrival of news from Washington, Sloat set

sail in earnest for Monterey, where he arrived July 1, having entirely eluded the Briton, who supposed the sallying forth this time, as before, was only a feint.

On July 3, continued Mr. Bralee, some of the men from the Savannah were allowed to go ashore at Monterey. But on July 4, they were not given shore-leave, as they were liable to get too merry on our nation's birthday, and thereby make trouble. Neither on the 5th were they allowed to go ashore, and the men began to grumble. But on the 6th matters were made clear to them.

The Declaration of War with Mexico was read and active arrangements were made for them to go ashore the next morning. About 400 men, Mr. Bralee thought, (or one-half the force of the Savannah, and the sloops-of-war, the Cyane and the Levant) disembarked on the morning of July 7, and marched, under command of Captain Mervine, up to the custom-house to demand the surrender of the place, and detachments of the United States forces then took possession of the *cuartel*, and other points in the town.

Of course, the inhabitants recognized that they could not successfully defend the place against the guns of the United States men-of-war, and their well-armed, formidable crews, and therefore no attempt was made to do so.

It is customary for a conqueror, in taking possession of a country or port, to go through the formality of lowering the flag of the conquered before raising his own. But the Mexican flag had been removed, which caused some delay in proceedings, whilst messengers were sent aboard the frigate to bring a Mexican flag. This was raised to the top of the flagstaff. Whereupon it was duly lowered, and the United States flag was elevated in its place. Three cheers were given by the seamen and spectators, and a salute of twenty-one guns was fired by each of the men-of-war.

Dr. James L. Ord's recollections of persons and incidents connected with the conquest are interesting, although he, with his brother lieutenant, afterwards General Ord, arrived at Monterey six months after the flag-raising by Commodore Sloat. Dr. and Lieutenant Ord came to California as members of Company F, Third Artillery, on the United States ship Lexington.

The story of the conquest as learned by him from persons who took part in it, is as follows:

While the Savannah was lying at Mazatlan Surgeon Wood being in poor health, went East, and somewhere in Mexico he learned that General Taylor had crossed the Nueces river, and he sent back a courier with the news, to the American Consul, and through him to Commodore Sloat, who thereupon set sail for Monterey, where

he arrived July 1, and some two weeks ahead of Admiral Seymour of the British man-of-war, the *Collingwood*. The latter vessel arrived on the 16th of July, one day after the arrival of the American war vessel, the *Congress*, and anchored right between the *Congress* and *Savannah*. Sloat, supposing that Seymour had later news from the seat of war, and not knowing that the Oregon boundary question had been settled, ordered his guns double-shotted, with directions to aim at the water line of the *Collingwood*.

But whatever sinister appearance Seymour's act of anchoring between the two American men-of-war may have had, no further movement indicating possible hostilities on the part of the English Admiral was made; and the subsequent intercourse between the officers of the two fleets was friendly, till, not long after, Seymour sailed away.

Later (in December, 1847) Seymour met at Valparaiso the *Lexington*, which was on its way to California with Company F of the Third Artillery. The British Admiral in a friendly interview in Captain Tompkins' cabin on board of the *Lexington*, Captain Bailey, Lieutenants Sherman, Ord and Halleck being present said, "The Yankees were two weeks ahead of us in the taking of California."

Dr. Ord recounted to me this curious incident in the life of his brother, Lieut. Ord, in connection with the precipitation of the Mexican War, and the far-reaching issues which grew out of it, including the taking of California, etc.

At a meeting of President Polk and his cabinet, it was decided to send Lieutenant Ord as a bearer of dispatches to General Taylor, ordering him to cross the Nueces river and occupy the disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande.

At a later meeting of the cabinet the previous determination was reconsidered and a courier was sent to countermand the previous order, but he was delayed by heavy rains and bad roads and failed to overtake Ord till it was too late, and till after the battle of Palo Alto had been fought.

Dr. Ord said his company landed at Monterey in January, 1847, and was stationed on the hill back of the town where the earth-work still existed (1892). As they occupied tents and the weather was quite cold, they moved down in February to the old custom house. Lieut. Sherman and Dr. Ord occupied the north end of the building, and the south end was used as a hospital.

Dr. Ord said that the officers of his company were received by the people of Monterey, not as enemies, but as friends. The newspaper, *The California*, was published while Dr. Ord was in Monterey.

Here is an incident related by the doctor. The officers of Company F gave a party, or *baile*, with supper and champagne, etc.,

at Mr. Hartnell's house on the hill, on the 6th of July, 1847; and, although the Californians were very friendly, they got the idea erroneously that the ball was purposely given on the anniversary of the taking of the town, and they would not come. Nevertheless the officers had a good time; Sherman, Halleck, Ord, etc., were there, as also were Mr. Hartnell's family and a few others.

Mrs. David Jacks, who came to Monterey as a child, with her parents in 1841, at the time of my visit in '92, had vivid recollection of the events connected with the American flag-raising in '46, she then being about nine years of age. She said she thought at the time that the officers and sailors of the American men-of-war, with their neat, handsome uniforms, presented a fine appearance, as they marched from the beach to the "Cuartel," in front of the Hartnell house, where she then happened to be. She remembered that the sisters, Mrs. Jimeno and Mrs. Hartnell, were much excited, and as they embraced each other and cried, she, Mrs. Jacks (or Marie Romie, for she was only a little girl then), asked a daughter of Mrs. Hartnell why her mother and aunt cried and "took on" so, and the reply was: "The Americans have come to take our country from us!"

Nevertheless even these sisters in time became reconciled to the change, and one of them, Doña Angustias de la Guerra de Jimeno, widow of Secretary Jimeno, under Governor Micheltorena, sister of Mrs. Hartnell and of Judge Pablo de la Guerra, later became the wife of Dr. Ord.

The foregoing details and many more, from original sources, directly or indirectly, illuminating the story of the Conquest, may be found in the "*History of Central California*," in our Public Library, wherein also may be found Dr. Ord's account of the three Ord brothers, and of their father, who was a morganatic son of King George IV of England, by the beautiful Mrs. Fitzherbert. Dr. Ord's story, as he recounted it to me, and as recorded by his consent in the above history, was corroborated in every essential detail by documents lodged in the vaults of a London bank three-quarters of a century ago and opened and published by order of King Edward VII a few years ago.

This imperfect sketch of an important epoch in the history of California would be incomplete if I did not mention the fact that the Americans did not take possession of Los Angeles for more than a month after the taking of Monterey. During all this interval Governor Pio Pico performed the functions of his office at Los Angeles, which at that time was the legal capital of the Territory, and the official residence of the Governor.

Governor Pico told me that he left Los Angeles on the 12th day of August, 1846.

On the 13th, the American forces entered the city, and thereupon the sovereignty of Mexico over California finally came to an end.

* * * * *

Without entering into any discussion of the merits of the *beginning* of the war with Mexico or the causes which led to it I desire in conclusion to call attention to an important incident connected with its *ending*.

Instead of holding fast to *the spoils of war*; as most Nations civilized or barbarous, usually do, and which a provision of doubtful morality of International Law sanctions, the United States voluntarily returned to the Mexican people the control of their capital, and instead of arbitrarily insisting on holding as "a spoil of war" Alta California, our Government entered into friendly negotiations for the purchase of the Territory, and actually paid \$15,000,000 for the same, which has always seemed to me *a white act in a sordid and selfish world*—an act, in the history of California as an *American* or a *United States possession*, which its inhabitants justly have a right to be proud of.