

SIEGE AND CAPTURE OF LOS ANGELES, SEPTEMBER, 1846.

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There are few events in the acquisitions of California by the Americans, of which, considering its importance, so little is known as the expulsion of Captain Gillespie and his garrison from Los Angeles by the Mexican forces under Gen. José Maria Flores and Serbulo Varela, and the subsequent occupation of the city by Flores and his army September 30, 1846. The bear flag had been raised in Sonoma, Sloat had taken possession of Monterey, and Montgomery of Yerba Buena, or San Francisco. All Northern and Central California had passed under American rule, and not a battle had been fought nor a shot fired. Castro, the commanding general of the Californians, had fled southward and was endeavoring to arouse his countrymen in Southern California to resist the advance of the Americans. Commodore Stockton, who had succeeded Com. Sloat in command of the U. S. naval forces on the Pacific Coast, and Fremont, who might be considered in command of the land forces, determined to complete the conquest of Alta California. Fremont, with his exploring party recruited to a battalion of one hundred and twenty men, sailed for San Diego. Stockton, with three hundred and sixty marines and six pieces of light artillery, landed at San Pedro. The plan of operations was for Fremont to obtain horses at San Diego, and with his men mounted and acting as cavalry, join forces with Stockton and attack Castro, who was reported encamped on the mesa just outside of Los Angeles. Castro's forces were variously estimated at from five hundred to fifteen hundred men, with ten pieces of artillery. It was also rumored that Castro was fortifying his camp and would give battle to the invaders. Fremont, failing to find horses at San Diego, marched his battalion on foot to join Stockton. Stockton, who in the meantime had been drilling his marines at San Pedro in military movements on land, moved his troops against Castro. He and Fremont joined forces just south of the city and entered it without opposition. Castro's forces on the approach of Stockton had dispersed, the larger portion of them fleeing by way of the Arroyo Seco to the Rancho San Pasqual, where Pasadena is now located. The General, with several of his officers,

fled to Mexico by way of the San Gorgonia Pass. Governor Pio Pico retired to the Yorba Rancho on the upper Santa Ana, afterwards making his way to Mexico. Stockton, in his "Military and Naval Operations in California," reports finding at Castro's abandoned "Campo en La Mesa," "ten pieces of artillery, four of them spiked." Fremont, in his memoirs, says that Castro had ten pieces of artillery, part of which he buried. Don Antonio F. Coronel, who was in charge of Castro's artillery, says the Californians had eight guns—four iron and four bronze pieces. The bronze guns were buried in the sands of the Arroyo Seco, the iron pieces were probably spiked and abandoned. Castro's "Campo en La Mesa" was located on what is now Boyle Heights, near the present site of the Sisters' Orphan Asylum.

With the fall of Los Angeles the conquest of California was completed. All of the vast territory of Alta California, greater in extent than that of the thirteen colonies at the time of the American Revolution, had been subjected to the United States without bloodshed—without even the firing of a gun. And stranger still, the conquest had been made without official knowledge by Stockton and Fremont that war had been declared between the United States and Mexico. Los Angeles was captured on the 13th of August. A few days later Midshipman McRea arrived at San Pedro in a Mexican brig via Vera Cruz and Acapulco, disguised as a British officer, bringing official dispatches from the Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, that war had been declared between the two countries. War had been declared on the 11th of May, and it had taken three months to get the news to California. The first seizure and occupation of California was a filibustering scheme on a gigantic scale. Just what would have been the consequence, or how the question of the seizure would have been adjusted between the two nations had war not been declared, must be left to conjecture.

With California in his possession and the official information that war existed between the United States and Mexico, Stockton set about organizing a government for the conquered province. Fremont was to be appointed military governor. Detachments of his battalion were to be detailed to garrison different towns, while Stockton, with what recruits he could gather in California and his marines, was to make a naval expedition against the west coast of Mexico, land his forces at Mazatlan or Acapulco, and march overland to "shake hands with Gen. Taylor at the gates of Mexico." Commodore Stockton, regarding the conquest of California as complete, appointed Captain Gillespie military commandant of the southern department, with headquarters at Los Angeles and a garrison of fifty men. He

left Los Angeles for the north September 2d. Fremont, with thirty-five men of his battalion, took up his line of march for Monterey a few days later. Gillespie's instructions were to maintain military rule in accordance with the Commodore's proclamation. The city was to be placed under martial law, but he was authorized to grant exemptions from the more burdensome restrictions to quiet and well disposed citizens, at his discretion, and a conciliatory policy in accordance with instructions of the Secretary of the Navy was to be adopted, and the people were to be encouraged to "neutrality, self government and friendship."

All historians who have written upon this subject lay the blame for the subsequent uprising of the Californians and their rebellion against the rule of the military commandant, Gillespie—to his petty tyrannies—"to his attempt, by a coercive system, to effect a moral and social change in the habits, diversions and pastimes of the people, and to reduce them to his standard of prosperity. "Gillespie, no doubt, was lacking in tact, and his schooling in the navy under the tyrannical regime of the quarter-deck of fifty years ago, still further unfitted him for governing a people unused to government.

Los Angeles was noted as the hot-bed of sedition and revolution. It had a turbulent and restless element among its inhabitants that was never happier than when fomenting strife and conspiring to overthrow those in power. Of this class, Colton, writing in 1846, says: "They drift about like Arabs. If the tide of fortune turns against them they disband and scatter to the four winds. They never become martyrs to any cause. They are too numerous to be brought to punishment by any of their governors, and thus escape justice." There was a conservative class in the territory, made up principally of the large landed proprietors, both native and foreign born, but these exerted small influence in controlling the turbulent. While Los Angeles had a monopoly of this turbulent and revolutionary element, other settlements in the territory furnished their full quota of that class of political knight errants whose chief pastime was revolution and whose capital consisted of a gayly caparisoned steed, a riata, a lance, a dagger and possibly a pair of horse pistols. In the ten years immediately preceding the conquest, California had had ten different governors and almost as many revolutions. Only the year before, at the bloodless battle of Cahuenga, Micheltorena, the lawfully appointed governor, had been compelled to abdicate by the insurrectionists under Pico and Castro, and had been deported to Mexico.

That Stockton should have left Gillespie so small a garrison to keep the city and surrounding country in subjection, shows that he was either ignorant of the character of the people with whom he had

to deal, or that he placed too great reliance in the completeness of their subjection. With Castro's men in the city, or dispersed among the neighboring ranchos, many of them still retaining their arms, and all of them ready to rally at a moment's notice to the call of their leaders; with no reinforcements nearer than five hundred miles to come to the aid of Gillespie in case of an uprising, it was foolhardiness in Stockton to entrust the holding of the most important place in California to a mere handful of men, half disciplined and poorly equipped, without fortifications for defense or supplies to hold out in case of siege.

Scarcely had Stockton and Fremont with their men left the city before trouble began. The turbulent element of the city fomented strife and seized every occasion to annoy and harass the military commandant and his men. While his "petty tyrannies," so called, which were probably nothing more than the enforcement of martial law, were the immediate provocation, the real trouble was more deep seated. The Californians, without provocation on their part and without really knowing the cause why, found their country invaded, their property taken from them and their government in the hands of an alien race, foreign to them in customs and religion. They would have been a tame and spiritless people indeed had they neglected the opportunity that Stockton's blundering gave them to regain their liberties. They did not waste much time. Within two weeks after Stockton had sailed from San Pedro hostilities began, and the city was in a state of siege. Gillespie thus describes the first attack (Bancroft's History, Vol. V): "On the 22nd [of September], at three o'clock in the morning, a party of sixty-five Californians and Sonoreños made an attack upon my small command quartered in the government house. We were not wholly surprised, and with twenty-one rifles we beat them back, without loss to ourselves, killing and wounding three of their number. When daylight came Lieutenant Hensley, with a few men, took several prisoners and drove the Californians from the town. This party was merely the nucleus of a revolution commenced and known to Col. Fremont before he left Los Angeles. In twenty-four hours six hundred well mounted horsemen, and armed with escopetas, lances and one fine brass piece of light artillery, surrounded Los Angeles and summoned me to surrender. There were three old honey-combed iron guns (spiked) in the corral of my quarters, which we at once cleared and mounted upon the axles of carts."

Serbulo Varela, a young man of some ability but of a turbulent and reckless character, had been the leader at first, but, as the uprising assumed the character of a revolution, Castro's old officers came

to the front. Capt. José Maria Florés was chosen as Commandante-General, José Antonio Corrillo was made Mayor-General and Andrés Pico Commandante de Escuadron. The main camp of the insurgents was at a place called Paredon Blanco (White Bluff), located on the mesa east of the river, near the present residence of Mrs. Hollenbeck.

On the 24th of September, from the camp on the White Bluff, was issued the famous Pronunciamiento de Varela y otros Californios contra Los Americanos (The Proclamation of Varela and other Californians against the Americans). It was signed by Serbulo Varela, Leonardo Cota and over three hundred others. Although this proclamation is generally credited to Florés, there is no evidence to show that he had anything to do with framing it. He promulgated it over his signature October 1st. It was intended to fire the Californian heart and arouse his latent patriotism. It has been the custom of American writers of California history to sneer at this production as florid and bombastic. In fiery invective and fierce denunciation it is the equal, if not the superior, of Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give death!" Its recital of wrongs are brief but to the point: "And shall we be capable of permitting ourselves to be subjugated and to accept in silence the heavy chains of slavery? Shall we lose the soil inherited from our fathers which cost them so much blood? Shall we leave our families victims of the most barbarous servitude? Shall we wait to see our wives outraged, our innocent children beaten by the American whips, our property sacked, our temples profaned, to drag out a life full of shame and disgrace? No! a thousand times no! Compatriots, death rather than that! Who of you does not feel his heart beat and his blood boil on contemplating our situation? Who will be the Mexican that will not be indignant and rise in arms to destroy our oppressors? We believe there will be not one so vile and cowardly!" The Americans had been summoned to surrender and the city was surrounded and besieged by the Californians. Gillespie's supplies were cut off and his situation was growing desperate. He had mounted his cannon on Fort Hill, but whether he still retained possession of the government house (located on the site now occupied by the St. Charles Hotel) is uncertain. There was but little firing between the combatants, an occasional sortie and a volley of rifle balls by the Americans when the Californians approached too near. The Californians were well mounted but poorly armed, their weapons being principally short-range muskets, pistols, lances, and riatas, while the Americans were armed with long-range rifles, of which the Californians had a whole-

some dread. The fear of these arms and his cannon doubtless saved Gillespie and his men from capture.

On the 24th Gillespie dispatched a messenger to Monterey and San Francisco to apprise Stockton of his perilous situation. His dispatch bearer—John Brown, better known by his California nick-name, Juan Flaco or Lean John—made one of the most wonderful rides recorded in history. To paraphrase Whittier's "Skipper Ireson's Ride"—

"Of all the rides since the birth of time,
Told in story or sung in rhyme,
The fleetest ride that ever was sped"

was Juan Flaco's ride from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Brown's own story is in substance as follows :

"With a package of cigarettes, the paper of each bearing the inscription 'Believe the bearer' and stamped with Gillespie's seal, he started at 8 p. m. September 24, hotly pursued by fifteen Mexicans. His horse, incited by a bullet through his body, cleared a ravine thirteen feet wide, and fell after running two miles. Then he started on foot, carrying his spurs for twenty-seven miles to Las Virgines. Here he was joined by Tom Lewis, and they reached Santa Barbara at 11 p. m. of the 25th. At the same hour of the 26th, having been furnished horses successively by Lieut. Talbot, Thomas Robbins and Lewis Burton on showing the magic cigarettes, they camped between San Miguel and San Luis Obispo, where Lewis gave out, but Brown started again next morning, and late at night reached Monterey. Not finding Stockton at Monterey, he started at sunrise for San Francisco on a race horse belonging to Job Dye. Larkin aided him at San Jose, where he was detained four hours, and he reached Yerba Buena at 8 p. m. of the 28th—630 miles in four days!"* Colton, who was Alcalde at Monterey, notes Brown's arrival at that place on the evening of the 29th. Colton says in his "Three Years" that he (Brown) rode the whole distance of 460 miles in fifty-two hours, during which time he had not slept. "His intelligence was for Commodore Stockton, and in the nature of the case was not committed to paper, except a few words rolled in a cigar fastened in his hair. But the Commodore had sailed for San Francisco, and it was necessary he should go 140 miles further. He was quite exhausted and was allowed to sleep three hours. Before day he was up and away on his journey." According to Colton and Stockton he arrived at San Francisco on the 30th. Counting the time lost by the death of his horse, he probably made the ride in five days. Colton makes the distance 600 miles. Following the sinuosities of the coast and

*Foot note Vol, V, Baneroff's History of California.

zigzagging to avoid hostile parties of Californians, doubtless he did ride that distance.

Longfellow has immortalized the "Ride of Paul Revere," Robert Browning tells in stirring verse of the riders who brought the good news from Ghent to Aix, and Buchanan Read thrills us with the heroic measures of "Sheridan's Ride." No poet has sung of Juan Flaco's wonderful ride, fleetier, longer and more perilous than any of these. Flaco rode 600 miles through the enemy's country to bring aid to a besieged garrison, while Revere and Jorris and Sheridan were in the country of friends, or protected by an army from enemies.

Gillespie's situation was growing more and more desperate each day. The fight at the Chino Rancho had resulted in the capture of Wilson's riflemen, who were on their march to aid Gillespie. In the charge upon the adobe where Wilson and his men had taken refuge Carlos Ballestaros had been killed and several Californians wounded. This, and Gillespie's obstinate resistance, had embittered the Californians against him and his men. The Chino prisoners had been saved from massacre after their surrender by the firmness and bravery of Varela. If Gillespie continued to hold the town his obstinacy might bring down the vengeance of the Californians, not only upon him and his men, but upon many of the American residents of the south who had favored their countrymen.

Finally Florés issued his ultimatum to the Americans—surrender within twenty-four hours or take the consequences of an onslaught by the Californians, which might result in the massacre of the entire garrison. In the meantime he kept his cavalry deployed on the hills, completely investing the American forces. Before the expiration of the time allowed, upon the persuasion and advice of Wilson, who had been permitted by Florés to intercede with Gillespie, articles of capitulation were drawn up and signed by Gillespie and the leaders of the Californians. On the 30th of September the Americans marched out of the city with all the honors of war, drums beating, colors flying and two pieces of artillery mounted on carts drawn by oxen. They arrived at San Pedro without molestation, and four or five days later embarked on the merchant ship *Vandalia*, which, however, did not at once leave the port. Gillespie in his march was accompanied by a few of the American residents and probably a dozen of the Chino prisoners, who had been exchanged for the same number of Californians whom he had held under arrest, most likely as hostages.

Gillespie took two cannon with him when he evacuated the city, and left two spiked and broken on Fort Hill. There seems to have been a proviso in the articles of capitulation requiring him to deliver over the guns to Florés on reaching the embarcadero. If there was

such a stipulation Gillespie violated it. He spiked the guns, broke off the trunnions and rolled them into the bay. These four guns were probably the same that Stockton reported having found in Castro's abandoned camp. Marshall, of gold discovery fame, claims to have unspiked the guns with a hammer and cold chisel, and upon improvised carriages they were mounted on Fort Hill.

The revolt inaugurated by Varela at Los Angeles spread throughout the territory. The American garrisons were driven out of San Diego and Santa Barbara. Monterey and San José were placed under martial law, and a number of sanguinary engagements followed before Stockton, Kearney and Fremont regained what Gillespie (through Stockton's blundering) lost in the surrender of Los Angeles.