

wounded, including Gillespie, who was brained by a spent ball, but none killed. Flores had three men probably killed and between twenty and forty wounded.^{xix}

The following morning, January 10, 1847 found Commodore Stockton's eclectic force marching into the *Pueblo de Los Angeles*, accompanied by his marching band and observed by hundreds of Angelinos watching from the low hills and along the dusty streets. There was no resistance aside from a few drunks who were easily scattered by pistol shots aimed into the air. Captain Gillespie raised the same American flag over his headquarters that he was forced to strike four months earlier.

Commodore Stockton, in his official report to the War Department and later, at Major Frémont's court martial for mutiny, claimed most of the credit for the reconquest of California for himself. He did allow that he had been "aided by General Stephen W. Kearny with a detachment of sixty men on foot from the First Regiment of U.S. Dragoons and by Captain A. H. Gillespie with sixty mounted riflemen," but it was he, Stockton, who "was wholly and solely responsible for the success of the expedition." Stockton's aim was to remove all doubt about who had been the conqueror of California and who now was in charge.

NOTES:

i. Benton was a willing ally; it was he who, in 1845, had sponsored a bill in the Senate authorizing \$100,000 to finance a new annexation dialog with Texas.

ii. Dale L. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising: The Conquest of California, 1846*, (New York: Tom Dougherty Associates, 1999), 142. Sloat vacillated for weeks. In a meeting with Consul Larkin ashore on July 4, he confessed, "I shall be blamed for doing too little or too much—I prefer the latter." This quote is originally found in Bancroft, Hubert H., *History of California*, Vol. 5, (San Francisco: The History Co., 1886-1890), 228.

iii. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 144. Sloat's personal message to Pico.

iv. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 155.

v. *A Sketch of the Life of Com. Robert F. Stockton*, no author or ed. listed, (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856), 116, from Stockton's 23 July 1846 Proclamation placing California under martial law.

vi. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 155.

vii. *Sketch*, 119.

viii. *Sketch*, 119.

ix. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 157. Stockton's reply to General Castro's request for a truce.

x. *Sketch*, Appendix A. Stockton letter to Secretary of the Navy Mason, 21.

xi. *Sketch*, 21. Stockton to Mason.

xii. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 161.

xiii. *Sketch*, 115.

xiv. *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont, Volume 2 Supplement, Proceedings of the Court-Martial*, Mary Lee Spence & Donald Jackson, eds., (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 84. Stockton's August 22, 1846 report to Secretary of State George Bancroft. Copies of all original documents and transcript pertaining to the Frémont court-martial, originally published by the U.S. government April 7, 1848 at the request of President Polk, can be found in the National Archives.

xv. Bancroft, H. H., *History*, Vol. 5., 310. From the so-called Varela Proclamation, penned by Sérbulo Varela, a local dissident, and signed by about three hundred followers.

xvi. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 162. Quoting Stockton.

xvii. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 238.

xviii. Walker, *Bear Flag Rising*, 239. Quoting H. H. Bancroft in *History of California*.

xix. Neal Harlow, *California Conquered: The Annexation of a Mexican Province 1846-1850*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 215-216.

The Remarkable Commodore Robert F. Stockton

BY KERT VANDERMEULEN

Stockton had had a long and glorious career in the U.S. Navy before he arrived off California in 1846 to assume command of the Pacific Squadron from Commodore Sloat. The grandson of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the son of a well-regarded common-law attorney and senator from New Jersey, young Robert entered college at the ripe old age of thirteen in 1808. The impending war with Great Britain and the exploits of the fabled Admiral Lord Nelson compelled Robert to quit school, even though he was at the head of his class, and seek a midshipman's warrant, which he received in September 1811.

Stockton served with distinction during the War of 1812 under the famed Commodore Rodgers off the coast of Great Britain and later in the war at the defense of Baltimore. Stockton was commissioned as a lieutenant on December 9, 1814. For the next several years Stockton served in the Mediterranean. While he was posted aboard the *Erie*, he became embroiled in the controversy against lashing as punishment aboard ship. (Much later in his career, Stockton became the driving force behind the extinction of corporal punishment aboard all U.S. Navy ships.) Stockton was also known to have had more than one duel over his honor and the honor of his flag and service. Once in Gibraltar, Stockton offered to duel every British officer in port when he overheard disparaging remarks about American sailors in the wake of Britain's defeat in the recent war. "The personal combats in the Mediterranean, fortunately, were attended with no loss of life...They taught the British naval and military gentlemen a salutary lesson...Their deportment thenceforward was extremely circumspect and respectful towards all Americans. The American character for courage, sensibility, and honor, was established. Since this period, no difficulties of a personal nature have ever occurred of any serious importance between the American and British officers."¹ Stockton had made his mark.

In 1821 Stockton was given command of the schooner *Alligator*, aboard which he banished the lash as an instrument of punishment; the dreaded "Cat" was pitched overboard as soon as the ship was under way. One of the *Alligator's* primary missions was to support Dr. Eli Ayres, agent of the American Colonization Society, in his effort to establish a colony on the west coast of Africa to be run and populated by American blacks. To this end "Captain Bob," disguised as a civilian, found himself one day facing down King Peter and an angry village of tribesman, stirred up by a disingenuous slave trader and convinced that Stockton was trying to deceive them in negotiations for a large parcel of tribal land.

Deliberately drawing a pistol from his breast and cocking it, he gave it to Dr. Ayres, saying, while he pointed to the mulatto, 'Shoot that villain if he opens his lips again!' Then, with the same deliberation, drawing another pistol and leveling it at the head of King Peter, and directing him to sit silent until he heard what was to be said, he proceeded to say, in the most solemn manner, appealing with uplifted hand to God in heaven to witness the truth of what he said, that in all the previous conferences with King Peter and the other chiefs he had told them nothing but the truth; that they came there as



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their benefactors, and not as their enemies, to do them good and not evil; that their mission was not to defraud or cheat them, but to confer on them and their country inestimable blessings; that King Peter might now murder them, but that, if he did so, God on high, who was now looking down on them, would punish their guilt with almighty vengeance; that the price demanded for their cession of territory had been conceded without abatement; that they had entered into a treaty already...that if they did not agree to execute the treaty that they intended to kill him and his party, he had determined that King Peter himself should be the first victim, and that unless he agreed to execute the treaty on the following day, his fate was fixed.²

Thus, thanks to the considerable *chutzpah* and solid brass ball bearing of Captain Stockton of the U.S. Navy schooner *Alligator*, the state of Liberia was founded.

Stockton's penchant for shore excursions with armed parties did not begin in California in 1846; in 1823 while on patrol in the West Indies after returning from his second cruise off the African coast, Stockton often pursued pirates and slavers ashore on Cuba's south coast. "In this way he gave a serious check to their nefarious depredations and inspired them with a salutary terror of American retribution."³

In 1826, Stockton, having been in service continually for nearly sixteen years, sought and was granted extended shore leave, although he was not furloughed. Besides dabbling in politics, married life, racehorses and business ventures, Stockton found time

to study naval architecture and artillery design. Thus, it was in 1838, while once again on sea duty in the Mediterranean as Executive officer aboard the *Ohio* (seventy-four), flagship of Commodore Isaac Hull, that Stockton embarked upon the most significant episode of his pre-Mexican War career. He conceived the idea for a hybrid steam-powered sailing ship that would house its entire propulsion system below the waterline, thus protecting it from enemy gunfire. A novel concept for the day, it was met with skepticism by the "sailing admirals" of the contemporary navy hierarchy. Sound familiar? Nevertheless, undeterred, Stockton received funds to build a scaled-down version of the ship, which he named the *Princeton*, after his hometown. She was armed with two 225-pound iron guns, made of a new formulation of metal that was not cast iron, but wrought iron, forged according to the best methods known to metallurgists at the time.

So it was that on February 28th, 1844, in triumphant display of the fruition of his visionary naval design concepts, Stockton found himself on the Potomac River, captain of the *Princeton*, hosting a party of Washington bureaucrats and their retinues, entertaining all aboard with periodic firing of the new, large guns. After the gunfire demonstrations the party had repaired below for dinner and brandy. A request from the Secretary of the Navy for one more salvo of the guns brought Stockton, who had already ordered the guns secured, topside to supervise personally a last round of gunfire for the evening. Tragically, the thick metal failed, the breech of the gun exploded, and five men were killed: the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Navy, a navy captain, a senator from Maryland, and President Tyler's father-in-law. The subsequent Naval Court of Inquiry fully exonerated Stockton and his officers.

In conclusion, the court is also decidedly of the opinion that not only was every precaution taken which skill, regulated by prudence and animated by the loftiest motives, could devise to guard against accident, but that Captain Stockton, Lieutenant Hunt, and Mr. King, the gunner, who had attended to and directed all the experiments and trials of these guns, exhibited only a due confidence in what they had witnessed, in placing themselves on every occasion, and particularly on that of the explosion, almost in contact with the gun, and in a position apparently not only more dangerous than any other, but that which might rationally have been deemed the only perilous situation on board the vessel.⁴

After recovering from his own injuries, thankful to leave the terrible tragedy behind him, Stockton was assigned to deliver the long-awaited annexation resolutions to the government of Texas, one of the last official acts of the Tyler administration. Rightly sensing that the annexation of Texas and the fixing of its borders meant war with Mexico, the intrepid navy captain petitioned the incoming president, James K. Polk, for an assignment in the brewing conflict.

NOTES:

¹ A Sketch of the Life of Com. Robert F. Stockton, no author or ed. listed, (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856), 36. Though it contains reprints of many official documents, Sketch is essentially a paean to Stockton written, presumably, to support his efforts on behalf of the American Party in the election of 1856.

² Sketch, 46. The story is taken from the journal of Mr. Ayers, the only known record of Stockton's participation in the founding of Liberia.

³ Sketch, 53.

⁴ Sketch, 97-98. From the official Naval Court of Inquiry.