

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 23, 1951

The Commodore Who Dreamed Up a War

The memory of Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones is honored at the Old Custom House Museum where his pictures is appropriately hung and several rare documents relating to the "capture" of the Port of Monterey from the Mexican government, have been on exhibit from time to time.

Commodore Jones was the first American to capture Monterey, under the erroneous impression that the United States and Mexico were at war. The date of the "capture" was October 19, 1842, when Jones was commander of the United States Pacific Squadron. He hoisted the American Flag over the castillo and the Californians signed articles of capitulation without a struggle. Two days later, upon discovering that he had been misinformed about the war and the suspected cession of California to England, Com. Jones took down the American flag, restored the town to the Californians, fired a salute to the Mexican Flag, and set a message of apology to Gen. Manuel Micheltoena at Santa Barbara who was then on his way north from Mexico to assume the governorship.

The gift of the rare documents and the portrait of Commander Jones was made to the Monterey History and Art Association for the museum by T. Catesby Jones, grand-nephew of the now famous United States commodore and includes all this communications between this government and Mexico following the seizure of Monterey in 1846.

Jones, a prominent New York, attorney, decided to make the gift after a visit to the Museum in the summer of 1939. The papers, which give a detailed story of the earliest capture of the town and port of Monterey, includes an article of the convention between Commodore Jones, head of the American Pacific station and governor general of the two Californians, Brigadier General and Adjutant General of the Mexican Army.

The article reads: "Mr. Thomas ap Catesby Jones will deliver fifteen hundred complete infantry dresses to replace those of nearly one-half of the Mexican forces which have been ruined in the violent march and continued rains and also a complete set of military musical instruments, in place of those ruined on this occasion."

Commodore Jones' premature seizure of Monterey is important because it resulted in the first raising of the American flag over California, and because it was the result of a little war dreamed up personally by the commodore.

His fleet was stationed at San Diego at the time, and one day he decided that Mexico and the United States were at war. He sailed at once for Monterey to capture the important town, and arrived here in October with his fleet. Decks were cleared and sanded for action as the ships rounded the point and anchored near the Custom House. The Americans were going to take the most important town in California for the government in Washington. But the Mexicans did not understand and they rushed into small boats, rowed out the American fleet and welcomed those on board with open arms.

It was sad and disillusioned group that rowed back to shore with the news that the visitors demanded the surrender of the town. They had not heard that war had been declared and that could be the only reason for such an attack.

So the Mexican capitulated to the superior force and prepared to evacuate. But the next morning a courier from Mexico City arrived with definite word that there was no war and that relations were extremely friendly between the two countries.

Commodore T. ap Catesby Jones did the only thing he could do. He lowered the American flag, which he had raised when the town surrendered to him, raised the Mexican flag, saluted it and stayed on as a guest of the town to await developments.

(More Monday)