

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Dr. Maxwell's Account

In the last issue of the Peninsula Diary, we gave our readers the opening story of the visit to Monterey of the 44-gun frigate United States in command of Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, and of the episode of pulling down the Mexican flag and hoisting the Stars and Stripes over the Old Custom House in 1842, only to find that the United States was not at war with Mexico. A few days later the Mexican flag was restored, the commodore apologized, and backed out of the situation with as much grace as possible.

Today we will relate some of the statements of Dr. Richard T. M. Maxwell as told by him in his "Visit to Monterey in 1842," recently published for the first time by Glen Dawson in Los Angeles and edited by John Haskell Kemble. The diary of the doctor begins with the statement: "We sailed from Norfolk on the 5th of January 1842."

It appears that the object of the cruise was to protect commerce and cause our flag to be respected, the diary relates. The journey took them to Madeira to lay in a store of wine. At Valparaiso they met the St. Louis, which had just returned from the Coast of California where she had been to investigate the case of Alvarado, "who had been put in power here by a handful of Americans and one or two Englishmen, who drove Gov. Chico away, took possession of the fort at Monterey, and put Alvarado in power, which appointment he later rescinded.

"When we sailed from Callao, the English admiral supposed we had gone out to exercise the squadron in sailing outside . . . Oct 18th, discovered land." Dr. Maxwell wrote, "Oct 19th, stood in for Monterey. At noon saw Point Pinos, seven miles distance, east by north, discovered a sail, a Mexican bark, coming out of the harbor . . . At 2:15, in seven fathoms of water, close under the guns of the fort (we anchored). At 3:15 p.m., hoisted a white flag at the fort, and dispatched Capt. James Armstrong ashore, accompanied by Mr. La Reintree, the commodore's secretary, as interpreter, to demand the surrender of the place. At 11:30 p.m., commissioners of the government, one of whom was Mr. Abrego, now of Monterey, came on board and surrendered the place."

"At 12 our forces took possession of the Fort of Monterey. We had about 500 men from the different ships ashore." Dr. Maxwell states in his report, but Commodore Jones's report to the secretary of the Navy, dated Monterey, 24 Oct. 1842 states that the landing party consisted of 150 men in all.

Later, Dr. Maxwell relates that four men were sent to take possession of the Mexican government schooner. The California, a cutter commanded by Capt. John B Cooper, then in the harbor. Cooper became a resident of Monterey and married the sister of Capt. Vallejo. They hauled down the Mexican flag and hoisted the Stars and Stripes.

Continuing with Dr. Maxwell's recollection of this historic event, he wrote "On the morning of Oct. 21st Mr. La Reintree overhauled the more recent papers received from Mexico found in the government house, occupied, by Gov. Juan B. Alvarado, and discovered that the whole affair was a matter of bombast, that there was no war at all, that the Mexicans had given up the idea altogether. So, it was up to Commodore Jones to restore matters to their former condition in the best manner he could.

"We found in the harbor plenty of fine fish, rock fish in 30 fathoms of water, deer very abundant, also wild geese and ducks in the lakes and rivers, and innumerable quail and hares in the neighbors," was the description of the resources in Monterey as told by Dr. Maxwell. "The men were sent out with a seine to catch the Spanish mackerel, of which they brought large quantities aboard, and the whole ship's company was made sick, poisoned by them."

An interesting description of the landing in Monterey, as told by Dr. Maxwell, is worth quoting here "We were landed from the boats at the foot of a ravine, about 12 feet wide, leading up directly, to the fort, about 400 yards distance, and marched up six abreast. On reaching the summit of the hill, about 20 yards from the fort, we found nine long brass guns, concealed by green branches of trees, put in order of threes, above each other, commanding the whole ravine, these guns loaded with copper grapeshot and escopette balls, all primed, and the matches burning within a few inches of the powder, and the linstocks lighted at hand, burning within a few inches . . . Every gun had a name Jesus, San Pedro, San Pablo, and other saints."