At the close of the eighteenth century, the nations of Europe were engaged in a headlong scramble for territorial possessions on a scale previously unknown in the arena of global politics. Alliances between nations shifted like quicksand in the international race for land, and among the most vulnerable of the participants in this international sweepstakes was Spain.

Spanish land claims in North America alone were enormous—ultimately ranging from the Gulf of Mexico to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Within this vast area, Spain's lines of occupation, supply, and defense stretched like a spiderweb across the little-explored wilderness. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Spain would have attempted to extend her sparsely-settled domain northward into Alta California and beyond without the threat of Russian exploration far to the north and the possibility that England, Spain's age-old enemy, might revive sea-raiding activities in the Pacific Basin.

Throughout the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s, Spain replied to these challenges with exploratory expeditions and colonial settlement. By 1783 four presidios and several missions had been established in Alta California to deter encroachment by the world's major powers. Only in the last decade of the eighteenth century, however, did the Spanish government decide that even more stringent protective measures were needed to hold this territory. Acting in response to increased international political pressure and more specifically in response to an incident in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Spanish government set out to improve coastal defenses by establishing naval batteries at California's four major ports and presidios: San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco.

Perhaps the most important of these Spanish fortifi-

(Above) "El Castillo de Monterey, the Old Spanish Fort Overlooking Colonial Monterey, c. 1833" by Olof Dahlstrand. El Castillo, whose setting is intact, is the last of four harbor defense installations in Alta California. © Colonial Monterey Foundation 1984
cation efforts resulted in a structure known today simply as “El Castillo.” Perched on a hillside overlooking Monterey, the provincial capital of Alta California, at the southern end of Monterey Bay, El Castillo lent credence to Spain’s vow to defend its territories against all invaders. Indeed, the little naval battery did defend the Port of Monterey on at least three occasions.

El Castillo’s official life began sometime in 1792 when initial plans for the fortification were conceived. Viceroy Revilla Gigido informed Governor Jose Arrillaga on February 16, 1793, that he had approved fortification plans for all four of Alta California’s presidios. Furthermore, he reported, he had ordered artillery and materials sent to Arrillaga in Monterey. This artillery was clearly an augmentation for the existing garrison in the capital for in November 1792, British sea captain George Vancouver noted the presence of seven mounted and four unmounted cannons at the entrance to Monterey’s royal presidio. Despite the fact that Vancouver was English and obviously making military observations of Spanish defenses in California, he was privy to the official plan for El Castillo, for he noted in his journal:

The four dismounted cannon, together with those placed at the entrance into the presidio, are intended for a fort to be built on a small eminence that commands the anchorage [of Monterey]. A large quantity of timber is at present in readiness for carrying that design into execution.

An astute observer, Vancouver also commented on El Castillo’s eventual strengths and weaknesses with remarkable foresight.

When completed, [El Castillo] might certainly be capable of annoying vessels in that part of the bay which affords the greatest security, but could not be of any importance after a landing was accomplished as the hills behind it might be easily gained, from when the assailing party would soon oblige the fort to surrender. . . .

The battery was probably constructed in early 1794. That same year George Vancouver once again tested Spanish hospitality in the provincial capital and noted that the cannons located in 1792 near the entrance to
the presidio were now at El Castillo. Vancouver saw nothing about the fortification, however, that might deter invaders:

Here is now erected a sorry kind of barbet battery, consisting chiefly of a few logs of wood irregularly placed; behind which those cannon, about eleven in number, are opposed to the anchorage, with very little protection in the front, and on their rear and flanks entirely [sic] exposed.4

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Gigido’s successor as viceroy, the Marquis de Branciforte, maintained Gigido’s policy of strengthening California’s defenses. On July 13, 1795, in answer to Branciforte’s request for a report on current conditions, a trio of experts including the well-known engineer Miguel Costanso recommended specific defensive improvements. Branciforte acted upon several of these suggestions; most crucial for California was the immediate dispatch of talented engineer Alberto de Cordoba to California with direct responsibility for organization of the province’s defenses.5

Cordoba spent some months in San Diego before presenting himself to the governor in Monterey and starting work on El Castillo de San Joaquin, the fortification near the mouth of San Francisco Bay. In September 1796 Cordoba forwarded to the viceroy a report on Monterey’s castillo which reiterated Vancouver’s earlier criticisms of the battery site. Cordoba also appended a drawing of the changes he considered necessary to improve the structure.6 Unfortunately, this sketch has not been found in either Mexican or Spanish
“The men of the presidial company bore themselves at the battery with an unspeakable serenity despite the balls that were falling around them.”

The efficient Spanish bureaucracy did, however, preserve financial records which detail changes almost certainly initiated by Cordoba. From these documents the date of certain structural modifications noted during the 1967 archeological investigation of El Castillo can be pinpointed. That survey uncovered approximately seventy-five per cent of El Castillo’s underlying structures and documented many architectural changes that apparently occurred during its lifespan.

The open, v-shaped structure exposed in 1967, which was interpreted to be the earliest portion of El Castillo, indicates that the irregularly-shaped log battery seen by Vancouver in 1792 was subsequently modified by Cordoba. This v-shape is formed by two sixty-foot-long wings built to overlook the main anchorage in the port below. These wings, which still exist in situ, form a massive platform built of well-made adobe bricks clearly laid by an expert mason. A crenelated protective wall designed to mount ten to twelve cannon of various caliber originally overlaid the outside edge of these platforms. In addition to the gun platforms, Spanish documents describe the construction of a rough cobblestone esplanade which excavations revealed stretched entirely across the open end of the “v” shape, a powder magazine near the apex of the platforms, and a 1½-story adobe barrack to house the artillerymen. This more formal defensive configuration was built “quite economically” for approximately $450. Late in 1796 an additional $381 was authorized for unspecified repairs.

The appearance and condition of El Castillo throughout its early years directly reflected Spain’s changing international situation and after 1821, Mexico’s lack of...
concern for the defensive posture of its northernmost capital. It is not surprising, therefore, that the battery was generally in a condition of semi-ruin and fair game for denigrating descriptions of its appearance and capability by occasional visitors. Typical is an 1804 account by American seaman William Shaler, who was clearly more accustomed to the massive Spanish fortifications of St. Augustine and Manila Bay: "There is a miserable battery on a hill that commands the anchorage, but it is altogether inadequate to what it is intended for." It is all the more amazing, then, that El Castillo figured prominently in one revolution and two invasions, and was mute witness to the final coup de grace of American occupation.

Although a frontier province far removed from the center of international tensions, California was not totally immune to occasional breezes, if not winds, of change, particularly the revolutionary movement of Spain's colonies in Central and South America. In 1817 General Jose de San Martin's fight for Chilean independence triggered an "invasion" of Monterey by the Argentine insurgent Hippolyte Bouchard.

As early as 1816, the inhabitants of Alta California feared that South American revolutionaries would view their lands as ripe for "liberation" and Governor Pablo Vicente de Sola therefore took immediate steps to renew and improve California's neglected defenses. Munitions were particularly needed, and in October 1816 a ship from San Bias laden with "warstores" landed in Monterey. These stores included eight 8-pound cannon, 800 cannon balls, 100 English muskets with bayonets, twenty cases of powder, 1000 flints, 20,000 one-ounce musket balls, and 20,000 cartridges. But war is often a waiting game, and Bouchard's voyage to California was delayed until 1818. Jose de la

(Above) The landscape and buildings of Old Monterey c. 1835. Map by Olof Dahlstrand

The dark lines and disturbed soil visible between the parking lot and the street below in the aerial photograph are trenches made during the 1967 archaeological investigation. William Pritchard Collection
"When completed, El Castillo might certainly be capable of annoying vessels in that part of the bay which affords the greatest security, but could not be of any importance after a landing was accomplished, as the hills behind it might be easily gained, from when the assailing party would soon oblige the fort to surrender."

Guerra, commandant of the presidio at Santa Barbara, was the first Californian to learn of Bouchard’s intentions when Captain Henry Gyzelaar of the brig Clarion arrived from Hawaii ahead of Bouchard on October 6, 1818. De la Guerra immediately ordered a number of steps taken for defense of the province. Included were some hasty repairs to El Castillo, although none was substantial enough to alter the basic configuration of 1796, and most seem to have been confined to the interior.

More than twenty years had elapsed since the pine-plank gun platforms had been laid, undoubtedly with poorly seasoned wood. Between the weight of the guns and exposure to the elements these floors had deteriorated badly over the years. This seems to have been true of the gun trucks and carriages as well. Without repair, it seems unlikely that the guns of El Castillo could have been fired without causing mayhem among the Spanish gunners.

To complete the preparations, ammunition was located, serviceability of the guns tested, and attempts made by the few who knew how to train those detailed to the battery who did not. Luckily for Alferces Manuel Gomez and Jose Estrada, commandants of the battery garrison, Bouchard did not arrive for another six weeks. The battery garrison—indeed the entire settlement—undoubtedly profited greatly by the delay."

On November 20, 1818, Bouchard’s invasion force arrived in two ships: the Argentina, carrying thirty-eight guns and two howitzers, and the Santa Rosa, armed with twenty-six guns. Governor Sola’s report of the battle to the viceroy noted the surprisingly valiant role played by those who manned the guns of El Castillo:

*At dawn, November 21, the Santa Rosa opened fire on the shore battery. The eight Spanish guns, six and eight pounders, were not all serviceable, but returned fire, and with so much skill and good luck were they aimed by the veterans and amateurs under Gomez, that after a two-hour battle during which they kept up a constant and effective fire, they did*
much damage to the frigate [Santa Rosa]. They were aided by the men of the presidial company who bore themselves at the battery with an unspeakable serenity despite the balls that were falling around them. The insurgents lost five men, many more were wounded and transferred to the Argentina before a cease-fire was requested and [they] lowered their flag.11

Toward evening the Argentina wisely anchored outside the range of El Castillo's guns. Despite the fact that Bouchard’s heavily armed force had somehow suffered the greater loss, he sent an officer under flag of truce to demand surrender of the province. Governor Sola refused.

It is not clear why Bouchard and Peter Corney, English captain of the Santa Rosa, subjected their force to this barrage of fire from El Castillo. Corney had visited Monterey during the summer of 1815, and whether or not he was actually spying, he was certainly familiar with both the configuration and capability of the Castillo and undoubtedly aware it could easily be captured from behind. Thus, the first day’s battle between the castillo and the Santa Rosa may have been either a simple display of machismo or a careful probing of Spanish defenses. In any case, the next morning Bouchard sent four hundred men ashore in two groups to capture El Castillo and the city of Monterey.

One group proceeded directly to the presidio, the other climbed the hillside and stormed El Castillo from the rear, spiking guns, burning the artillermen’s barracks, and wreaking havoc on the little naval battery that had acquitted itself so valiantly in the ship-to-shore battle the day before.12 Bouchard captured Monterey and remained in the capital for several days before setting fire to the presidio and slipping away into the night to terrorize Santa Barbara.

In the ensuing years, El Castillo once again sank into semi-ruin, and by 1827, according to visitors, it was entirely useless for defense:

*Arrived at Monterey [anchored] opposite a little hill on which are seen the remains of a fort...*13 The presidio [of Monterey] is in better condition than that at San Francisco; still as a place of defense it is quite useless. The [naval] fort is not much better, and its strength may be judged of from its having been taken by a small party of seamen who landed from a

(Above) William H. Meyers, gunner on the U.S.S. Cyane, made a watercolor sketch of the taking of El Castillo de Monterey by U.S. marines in 1842. Meyers may not have actually entered El Castillo, however, for several details of this drawing do not match the archaeological evidence.

Bancroft Library
El Castillo de Monterey is the last remaining harbor defense installation built by the Spanish government in Alta California. It sits on a small knoll within the U.S. Army Presidio at Monterey, overlooking present-day Fisherman’s Wharf and the busy, boat-filled harbor. The old fort is not visible on the surface at this time, but archeological investigation by the Central California Archeological Foundation in 1967 revealed that about 75 percent of the original Spanish and Mexican structure is intact under a shallow overburden of soil.

This startling discovery led Paul Schumacher, National Park Service archeologist, to describe El Castillo as “the most comprehensive Spanish military base remains west of Saint Augustine, Florida.” As a result of these findings, the Colonial Monterey Foundation and other local organizations as well as the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation have tried to protect the site and restore the old fort. Unfortunately, these efforts have been unsuccessful to date, and El Castillo is now once again directly threatened by new development proposals.

The City of Monterey is considering a street-widening project that could undermine the site or leave it perched precariously on the edge of a man-made cliff. Moreover, the city is also studying the possibility of cutting a new road directly through the site. Meanwhile, even though the U.S. Army has officially determined that the site should be used for historical preservation purposes, the Reagan administration (specifically the Federal Property Review Board) is considering the possibility of declaring the site surplus and selling it.

Preservation of El Castillo can be brought about through the cooperation of the state and federal governments. Present and future generations deserve the opportunity to see for themselves what “the front line of defense” looked like in this part of the world just one hundred and fifty years ago. Editor

Buenos Ayrean pirate in 1918 [sic] destroyed the greater part of the guns, pillaged and burnt the town.14 In 1836 El Castillo was partially rescued from the ignominy into which it was rapidly sinking by the beginning of a more active phase in Alta California revolutionary politics. In the years following Mexican independence, Californians had endured a variety of laws and rules made, they believed, with little or no consideration for the province’s needs. Many Californios came to hold strong feelings against central rule by Mexico. Although most Californios did not favor absolute independence, they did believe they should be consulted about decisions affecting their activities. In 1836, with the appointment of Nicholas Gutierrez, yet another governor from Mexico, leaders of a home-rule faction staged a popular uprising.

On November 3, 1836, “revolutionary” forces under Jose Castro entered Monterey, captured El Castillo, and trained its guns upon the presidio commanded by Gutierrez. From that vantage point, the revolutionaries demanded that Gutierrez surrender the town. When an answer was delayed, Castro ordered a shot from the battery fired to remind Gutierrez that his bargaining position was somewhat precarious. By sheer luck, the cannon ball went through the roof of the governor’s residence, sending his supporters in all directions and eventually resulting in his surrender.

The apparent dash and heroism of this event is somewhat qualified by the following: (1) the revolutionaries captured El Castillo because it was not defended, although it could have been—and devastatingly so at close quarters; (2) the cannon ball that hit the presidio was the only one in the castillo that fit any of its guns; and (3) gunners Balbino Romero and Cosime Pena fired the cannon after taking fifteen minutes to read up on artillery practice. Following the shot that brought down a government, the instigators of this sensible little revolution took possession of the presidio, exiled Governor Gutierrez, appointed Juan Bautista Alvarado governor, and properly celebrated the entire fiasco with a series of fiestas.15

The sad physical condition of El Castillo may have gained some official attention following this incident, but not enough to impress visitors. Perhaps the best description of El Castillo during this period is from the pen of British sea captain Edward Belcher in 1837:

The apparent dash and heroism of this event is somewhat qualified by the following: (1) the revolutionaries captured El Castillo because it was not defended, although it could have been—and devastatingly so at close quarters; (2) the cannon ball that hit the presidio was the only one in the castillo that fit any of its guns; and (3) gunners Balbino Romero and Cosime Pena fired the cannon after taking fifteen minutes to read up on artillery practice. Following the shot that brought down a government, the instigators of this sensible little revolution took possession of the presidio, exiled Governor Gutierrez, appointed Juan Bautista Alvarado governor, and properly celebrated the entire fiasco with a series of fiestas.15

The adobe or mud-brick battery remained [from a previous visit] and has been newly-bedaubed during the late ebullition of independence. The fortification, of which plans must not be taken, consisted of a mud wall with three sides, open in the rear, with breast-works about three feet in height; with rotten platforms for seven guns, the discharge of which would annihilate their remains of carriages.16
Another 1837 account suggests that any attention given El Castillo had been merely cosmetic:

*This battery was originally designed to cover the roadstead and to prevent landings. Today its delapidated condition renders it useless. It hardly serves to render the customary salutes. The guns of different calibers with which it is armed are in an unbelievable state of deterioration and the mountings, like the platform, are entirely rotten.*

Unlike El Castillo’s role in the Bouchard affair of 1818, the battery’s role in the American invasion of Monterey under Thomas ap Catesby Jones in 1842 is difficult to assess. Jones, the commander of America’s Pacific fleet, was under orders to “conquer” and occupy California the moment that hostilities broke out between the United States and Mexico to avoid preemption of the territory by England. Due to a lack of communication, Jones believed the two countries were at war when he sailed for Monterey in early October. The USS United States and Cyane entered Monterey Bay on October 19, and although the situation between the two countries remained murky, Jones decided it was better to be safe than sorry and therefore sent an officer ashore to demand surrender of the post to the United States.

Governor Alvarado, given until 9:00 A.M. on October 20 to consider the demand, requested a report on existing defenses from Mariano Silva, commandant of the presidio. Silva tartly replied that the defenses “were of no consequence, as everybody knows.” Indeed, the capital’s entire defense apparently consisted of twenty-nine soldiers, twenty-five militia, eleven cannon—all nearly useless and lacking ammunition—and 150 muskets.

Clearly, defense of the colony was impossible, and terms of surrender were quickly arranged. At 11:00 A.M., Jones sent a troop of men to occupy the town and raise the American flag over the abandoned castillo.

At least two Americans witnessed the event, however, and they later indicated that things were more lively at the castillo than Jones reported. Richard Maxell, a physician with the fleet, accompanied the group of marines detailed to the castillo:

> We were landed from boats at the foot of a ravine about twelve feet wide, leading up directly to the fort about four hundred yards distant and marched up six abreast. On reaching the summit of the hill, about twenty yards from the fort, we found nine lone 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.

(Above) This image of El Castillo c. 1885, which is the only known photograph of the fortification, reveals its extensive harbor view.

William Pritchard Collection
and escopette balls, all primed, and the matches burning within a few inches of the powder and the linstocks lighted and at hand, burning within a few inches. . . . 19

This description contrasts so sharply with Silva's report to Alvarado that it might be dismissed as the exaggeration of an excited filibusterer. But there is corroborating evidence from the irreverent gunner of the Cyane, William H. Meyers, who wrote:

The fort mounted 13 guns and one not good for much, making 14. Plenty of powder, iron and copper shot, round, grape and canister. . . . 20

Evidence from the archeological excavations of 1967 indicate that El Castillo was considerably enlarged some time after Bouchard's depredations, although it is unclear exactly when these improvements were made. Nevertheless, very substantial stone foundations were discovered in 1967 that suggest, when viewed with the excellent watercolor sketch by eyewitness Meyers in mind, that the battery's two gun platforms had been extended more than thirty feet in each direction—undoubtedly to mount more firepower toward the bay anchorage. Two other additions were clearly indicated: several small stone magazines or storerooms had been built along the platforms at strategic locations and, perhaps most notable of all, an adobe wall had been constructed to close off the notoriously vulnerable rear approach.

It would seem, therefore, that although the fort was reviled by most observers, in peak condition and adequately manned, El Castillo de Monterey possessed a destructive potential of note among Spain's frontier fortifications.

It is thus possible that Monterey's defenses were considerably stronger than Silva reported, and it may well be that Alvarado simply did not choose to oppose the charade of American invasion and occupation.

El Castillo de Monterey never saw further action. In the summer of 1844 Governor Manuel Micheltorena had all serviceable cannon, powder, and munitions moved inland to Mission San Juan Bautista for the long-expected war between the United States and Mexico. Those armaments may well have been abandoned there, for several cannon were later recovered by American troops at that site. 21

In 1846 during the final American takeover of long-coveted California, El Castillo stood empty. Having played a brave but futile role in previous invasions, it was now one more casualty of American expansionism under the banner of Manifest Destiny. El Castillo's final humiliation came soon afterward when the U.S. Army

(Above) In this view of the excavated northeast wing of El Castillo, the gun platform and the beginning of the cobblestone esplanade are clearly visible. An expert mason laid the well-made adobe bricks.

William Pritchard Collection
bypassed the Spanish site to construct star-shaped Fort Mervine, the American naval fortification, at a location higher on the hillside.

Constructed of the simplest adobe brick and already in a state of general ruin, little was left of El Castillo by 1880 and few remembered its early role in guarding the interests of Imperial Spain.

Notes


2. Of the four permanent naval artillery fortifications built in Alta California, only the names of two are known. These are El Castillo de San Joaquin (San Francisco), built in 1794, and Fort Guijarros (San Diego), constructed about the same time. The castillo at Monterey was built c. 1794. No information about the Santa Barbara battery has come to light, although it has been assumed that the battery was built by Alberto de Cordoba and was thus contemporary with the other three. Santa Barbara historian Richard Whitehead argues convincingly that it was not built until around 1830.

At least two semi-permanent brush batteries were also built along California’s shoreline. One at Bodega Bay was constructed by Bodega y Quadra during his stay in October 1775. The other seems to have been constructed on the order of Governor Sola around 1817 in Monterey, probably in preparation for Bouchard’s arrival.


4. Ibid., 82-3.


6. Provincial State Papers, MX, XIV, 83; see also “Informe sobre fuertes,” Monterey, September (n.d.) 1796, BL, California Archives, 8.

7. Provincial State Papers, MX, XXI, p. 267-8; *Ibid.*, MX, XVII, II; see also State Papers, Sacramento, MX, VI, p. 91; viii, pp. 76-77; ix, p. 34.

For a detailed report on the archeological excavations at El Castillo de Monterey, see William E. Pritchard, “Preliminary Archeological Investstions at El Castillo, Presidio de Monterey, Monterey, California” (Sacramento: Central California Archeological Foundation, 1968).


9. Provincial State Papers, MX, XX, 133.


11. Ibid., p. 228; Pablo Vicente de Sola, “Noticia de lo acaecido en est Puerto de monterey con does fragatas pertencientes a los Rebeldes de Buenos Ayres,” December 12, 1818, Provincial State Papers, XX, p. 70.

12. Peter Corney, captain of the Santa Rosa, described El Castillo’s role in the capture differently: “We halted at the foot of the hill where it [El Castillo] stood, beat a charge and marched up. . . . The Spaniards mounted their horses and fled. . . . We then turned the guns on the town, where they [the Spanish] made a stand, and after firing a few rounds, the Commodore [Bouchard] sent me with a party to assault the place while he kept possession of the fort.” Peter Corney, *Early Voyages in the North Pacific 1813–1818* (Fairfield, CA: Ye Galleon Press, 1965), p. 218.

Bancroft in Volume II., note 19, p. 229, discusses the possible role of the temporary brush shoreline battery. According to several witnesses, including Mariano Vallejo and Juan Alvarado, the battery which caused so much damage to the Santa Rosa was not the castillo but a “new” one of three guns commanded by Jose de Jesus Vallejo, and Vallejo’s 18-pounders fired both grape and round-shot effectively. After the Santa Rosa lowered her flag, Sola feared treachery and wished to continue firing. However, castillo commandant Gomez ordered Vallejo to cease. Vallejo refused, and Gomez ordered the guns of the castillo turned on the battery, although the men refused to fire upon their comrades. Gomez then instructed Sergeant Ignacio Vallejo to attempt to influence his son to follow orders, which witnesses stated, apparently worked. The battery fell silent.


15. Bancroft, III: 549.


