

# The Civil War Military Post On Catalina Island

by *Donald Chaput*

THE CIVIL WAR POST on Santa Catalina Island caused much controversy in southern California. The post was established in order to control the island, which was intended to become a reservation for Indians from the northern part of the state. In order not to upset the Los Angeles area residents, though, the Indian reservation plan was not widely publicized locally.

Most of the off-shore islands had a tradition of being centers for smugglers and privateers, and there were many rumors that the Confederates intended to use the island to prey on Yankee shipping.<sup>1</sup> Southern California had many Confederate sympathizers, so the rumors reasonably caused concern.

In the spring of 1863, gold, silver, and other metals were discovered on Santa Catalina Island, and by the end of the year dozens of companies had been organized, and a hundred miners and prospectors were scattered throughout the island. The mining community became part of the rumor, because the alarmists reasoned that the miners were Rebels who were faking a metal rush in order to take over the island for the Confederacy. The Army's first official interest in the island appears to be a letter of instructions on November 21, 1863, to Major Henry Hancock, stationed with the Fourth California Infantry at Camp Drum, Los Angeles, from the camp commander, Lieutenant Colonel James F. Curtis. According to Curtis, the island "may soon be of commercial importance," and Hancock was to inspect the island, take measurements, and seek a good harbor. Hancock and two enlisted men of Company C went to the island on the sloop *Ned Beal* on November 22.<sup>2</sup>

Hancock's detailed report contained an assessment of the mineral riches: "The mines of the island will very soon yield immense quantities of silver, lead, and some gold." There were about 100 miners there, and the main farming activities were herds of 15,000

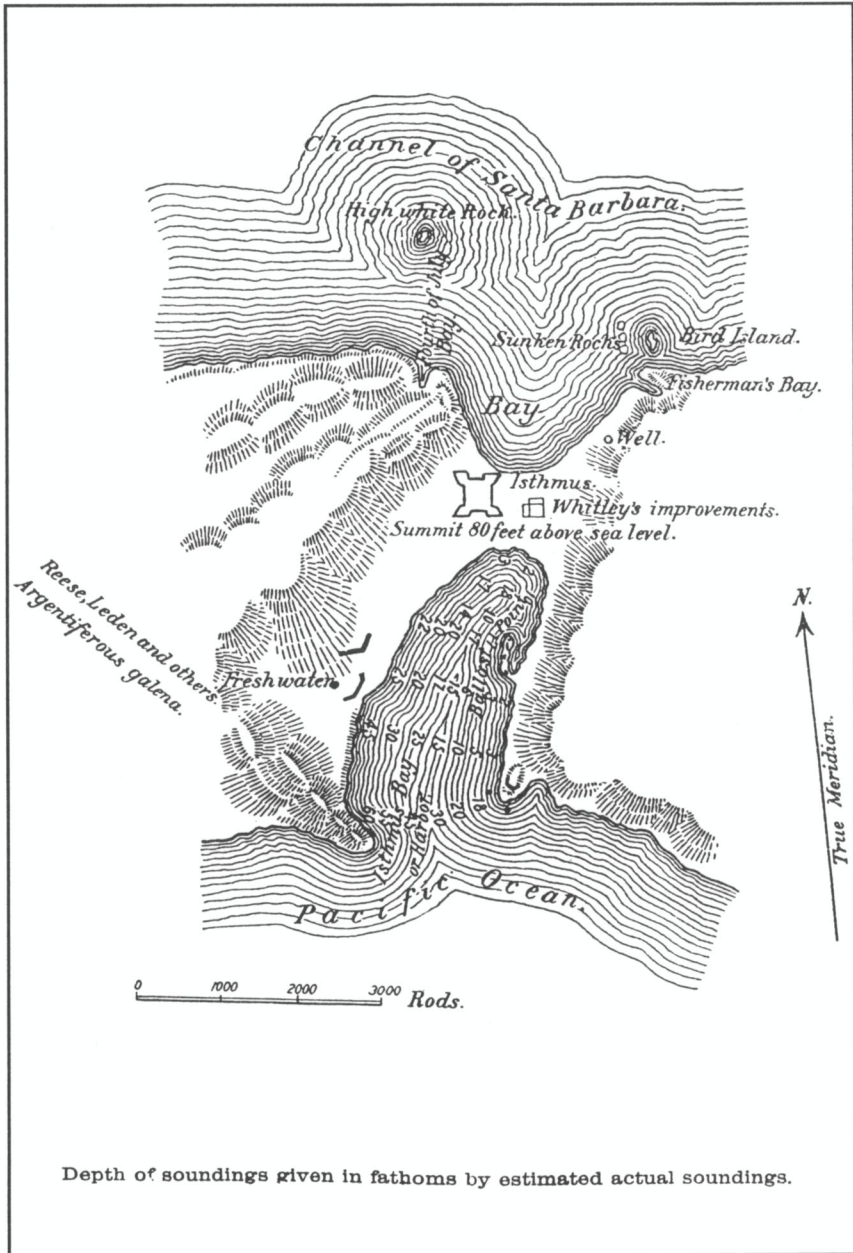
sheep and about 8,000 goats. Hancock was impressed with the Isthmus Harbor as a military site. It was deep and landlocked, and a few guns would render the harbor impregnable. "The island...is capable of becoming a vast military and naval depot and key point of a long reach of the Pacific Coast, and in the hands of an enemy possessed of a respectable navy might become of infinite annoyance and incalculable prejudice to the Government."<sup>3</sup>

This report suggests that at the time even Hancock was not aware of the plans to use the island for an Indian reservation. The commander of the Department of the Pacific was Brigadier General George Wright, who on December 21 first alluded to the use of the island as a reservation for the Klamath, Redwood, and Trinity Indians. One historian suggested that Wright had Santa Catalina in mind earlier and had ordered the island survey although not disclosing the reservation plan. Wright certainly had no fear of Confederate privateers, and he knew of the mining boom but decided that it must be stopped if Indians were to be sent to the island.<sup>4</sup>

Plans, orders, and other commitments occupied December of 1863. Wright's headquarters in San Francisco decided that one company of troops would be sufficient for the island, and Captain B.R. West's C Company of the Fourth California Volunteers was chosen by Lieutenant Colonel Curtis of Camp Drum. West was given permission to buy beef for the troops from the island ranchers and to erect temporary quarters at the Isthmus.<sup>5</sup> In a series of communications between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the "settler-miner" problem developed its first complications. For example, on December 24, Captain West was told to "notify all persons on Catalina Island to leave the same before the 1st of February next." He was also directed to allow no new settlers to land.<sup>6</sup> However, was a miner a settler? And, if all persons were to leave the island, what would happen to the few residents who took care of the large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep?

The island was occupied on January 2 by Captain West, one subaltern, one assistant surgeon, and eighty enlisted men.<sup>7</sup> A few days later Lieutenant Colonel Curtis left Camp Drum and inspected the island. He approved the selection of the Isthmus for the garrison site. The Isthmus was 600 yards long and 300 yards wide. Three shanties were there but were ordered removed. To the

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U.S. Army sketch of the Catalina Isthmus, 1864, showing location of military post.

south of the Isthmus was Catalina Harbor, to the north was Union Bay. Catalina Harbor impressed Curtis, and he mentioned that mariners referred to it as the safest harbor on the California coast, other than San Diego. The Isthmus was ideal for artillery to cover both harbors, and Curtis at once sent over a twelve-pounder field gun.<sup>8</sup>

Curtis also saw that it would be impossible to meet the February 1st deadline for removing all inhabitants. Because of the lambing season, and because grass was scarce on the mainland, Curtis felt that the herds could not be moved. He did express a feeling that the miners could be removed, as they had done little except prospecting so far.<sup>9</sup>

The inspection trip by Curtis was on January 7, and on that same day General Wright was writing to Washington, extolling Catalina Island as an excellent site, "better adapted for an Indian reservation than I at first supposed." He had just heard from Captain West and was impressed with words about the herds, fertile valleys, water supply, and climate.<sup>10</sup>

During January Captain West made some improvements, such as adapting the corrals for storage and stables, removing fencing, and cutting a road. The Department of the Pacific also arranged to have the schooner *Jesup* overhauled and stationed at Catalina, to act as communication link with the mainland, but also to serve as an armed vessel. The vessel was supplied with a pivot gun and carriage. West had problems with the water supply. Either the water had to be shipped in from other parts of the island, or a pipeline had to be installed, which could run anywhere from six to eight miles.<sup>11</sup>

Soon after the famous California Gold Rush, prospectors investigated all past rumors of gold along the Pacific coast, and it was recalled that the Los Angeles region produced considerable gold in the early 1840s, before the famous Gold Rush in northern California. Also, it was recalled that George Yount, as early as the 1830s, had discovered sizeable deposits on Catalina Island. Yount returned to the island several times, the last try in 1854, but he never relocated his find.<sup>12</sup>

In the spring of 1863, Martin H. Kimberley and Daniel E. Way staked out claims in the Isthmus vicinity, and soon dozens of other

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View of the Isthmus, probably late 1880s, with the former military post in the center of the Isthmus.

prospectors from Los Angeles and San Francisco were trekking over the island.<sup>13</sup> Many companies were incorporated, carrying such exotic names as Diamond, Rose Matilda, North Star, Acadia Gold and Silver, True American, and so forth. Most of the claims were in Cherry Valley and on Mineral Hill. By late April 1863, the population formed the San Pedro Mining District, embracing all the islands of Los Angeles County and the Coast Range of mountains. The district mining law allowed 300 feet to a claim, with an extra 300 feet as “discovery claim.” The entire mining excitement was based on reasonable exploration and expectations, as some gold, silver, copper, and other metals were found, supposedly in paying quantities.<sup>14</sup>

The mining promise was so great that Sparrow, Mars & Company of San Francisco, a stock, commission, and brokerage firm, opened an office in Los Angeles in June of 1863.<sup>15</sup>

So the Army was faced with tough prospectors, not Rebel sympathizers. Yet, the Army did not dare announce plans for an Indian reservation on the island. General Wright began to equivocate, saying that mining companies incorporated at the time the island was occupied by troops would be allowed to remain there until otherwise ordered by the War Department. Los Angeles began to growl, accusing General Wright of vacillating. Either all should be removed, if the government really did need the island, or none should be removed. The question was stated clearly by the Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News* of January 29, 1864: Why should incorporated companies have better rights than others?<sup>16</sup>

The miners did not really develop the island, although some work was done. Within a year after the April 1863 discoveries, claims to nearly 100,000 feet were recorded. The lodes ran in all directions. And, in true prospector fashion, if the island was not big enough to locate all of one claim, the prospectors ran a few hundred feet into the ocean. A city site was located at Wilson Harbor and lots were staked. Queen City became a mining "metropolis." Yet, this was a time of hardship in southern California. There was a disastrous famine, and thousands of cattle and sheep died. Furthermore, the nation was in the midst of a Civil War, and investment money was not easy to find. Also, there was more money to be made in fat government contracts, so many investors refused to engage in speculation when such a sure thing was available.<sup>17</sup>

The Army and the miners co-existed, mostly because the Army was too embarrassed to publicize the reservation plans. General Wright continually prodded the Department of the Interior to use Catalina as a reservation, but Interior had doubts about the location. They were not convinced that the island had adequate food, water, and transportation facilities. But, because Interior took its time in making a decision, Wright was unable to rationalize removing the miners and settlers from the island. The public was perplexed, because some orders from San Francisco and Washington were clear and urged removal, but these orders were softened or changed by General Wright and Colonel Curtis.<sup>18</sup>

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More “paper” mining took place, as new companies were formed: the Marquis Lafayette, the Black Jack, Old San Pedro, and Little Harbor companies were incorporated in early March.<sup>19</sup> In either irony or hope of reward, the General Wright Mining Company was incorporated on March 4.<sup>20</sup> But more than paper work was done. On March 22 the steamer *Senator* arrived from San Francisco with a large cargo of mining equipment and provisions, and also in late March shipments of fifty and sixty tons of ore arrived in San Francisco from Catalina. The ore, mostly gold, silver, and galena, was earmarked for Swansea, Wales, a leading international smelting center. “A new field seems thus to have been opened, differing from all others in the cheapness and facility with which the ores can be placed in marketable condition.”<sup>21</sup>

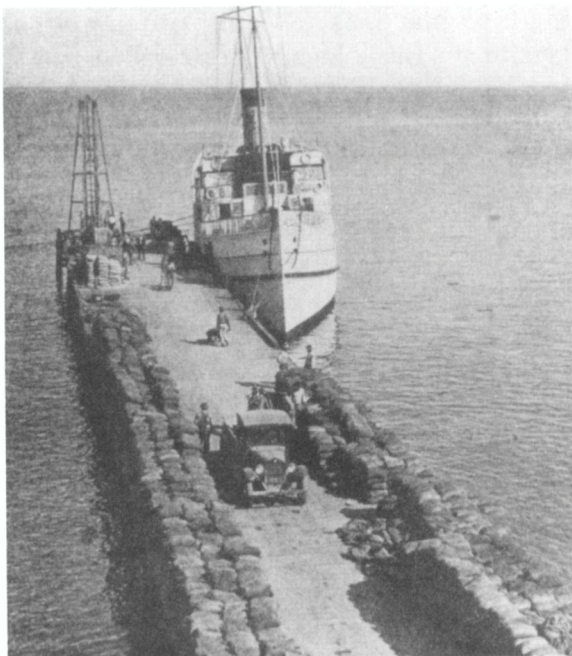
All reports agreed that the Catalina Island boom was in its infancy. Dozens of additional companies were incorporated, including the Occidental, the Hopper, Stars and Stripes, and Wellington. By mid-April an interesting soldier-miner understanding was reached with the Gem of the Ocean Mining Company. The Gem of the Ocean, located in nearby Fourth of July Bay, was incorporated in San Francisco on February 22. Of the five trustees, two were members of Captain West’s C Company: Sergeant Samuel W. Smith and Private Joshua C. Shields, both from Shasta. Apparently quite a few soldiers worked in the Gem, as a newspaper stated, “during the intervals of their military duties.”<sup>22</sup>

Through May and June many new lodes were discovered, followed by typical frontier mining phrases: “strong indications of silver,” “reports are most favorable,” and so forth.<sup>23</sup> Respectability was reached in mid-July when Professor Benjamin Silliman, prominent Eastern mining expert, examined the Catalina mines, “with which he was favorably impressed.”<sup>24</sup>

During July and August more companies were formed, and the “established” firms were shipping considerable ore to San Francisco. Prominent among the shippers was the “army”-owned Gem of the Ocean firm. Various reports mentioned hundreds of tons, four hundred sacks, and so forth. The Gem had mostly silver and galena ore. Apparently Captain West’s army of occupation had more than a little spare time to devote to their commercial interests.<sup>25</sup>

General Wright kept insisting that the island was suitable for a





Considerable mining took place on the island in the 1920s. Both of these views appeared in the *Scientific American* of August, 1926, in an article entitled "Treasure Island in the Pacific." The ship was loaded with "Bags of Treasure" from the Black Jack Mine, a silver operation that was first worked during the Civil War.





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reservation. By late February of 1864 he had sixteen companies of troops in the Humboldt District “prosecuting vigorously the war against the hostile Indians.” He felt that the campaign would end soon and that upon hearing affirmatively from Washington he would send the Indians to Catalina.<sup>26</sup>

During this period of mining excitement, General Wright was not solving his Indian problem. The State of California was pressuring the federal government to end the Indian “problem”; the legislature as early as April 1863 passed a resolution urging the federal government to remove the Indians to distant places and keep them there under heavy guard.<sup>27</sup> This fit in well with General Wright’s plan to remove hostiles from northern California and place them on remote Catalina Island. For awhile it seemed that Washington would accept the Catalina plan. Charles Mix from the office of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs wrote to Sacramento in April 1864 suggesting that a proper location for an Indian reservation must be distant from white settlements.<sup>28</sup>

By mid-summer the fate of the Indians—and also of the garrison—was determined. From Washington, Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole wrote to California Superintendent of Indian Affairs Austin Wiley on July 9, 1864, maintaining that the Indians should remain in northern California, in Round Valley. Dole pointed out that the site had adequate land, was fairly isolated, had much game and fish, plus it was near the Indians’ traditional homeland. Dole dismissed the Catalina plan as too expensive, “unwise on our part, and exceedingly disastrous to the Indians.”<sup>29</sup>

Dole had no control over Wright, but the Army did. Wright was replaced as commander of the Department of the Pacific by Major General Irvin McDowell, who brought the Indian campaign in the Humboldt District to a conclusion. McDowell wrote on August 17, 1864: “It was the intention of my predecessor to remove the Indians in this section to Catalina Island, and he had for this purpose taken possession of the island.” However, McDowell claimed that the Indian Bureau required the Indians “to be kept in the section in which they now live.”<sup>30</sup> McDowell did not have Wright’s Catalina fixation, so the garrison there had no future. The last of the troops left the island on September 14, 1864.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the correspondence and orders, plus the logical

series of troop movements, improvements, and withdrawal, all point to the occupation of Catalina Island as a military post to prepare for and control a forthcoming Indian reservation. Once the reservation plan was scrapped, the troops were withdrawn.

Historian Kornweibel belittles those local historians who considered the post a Yankee response to a Confederate threat. It does seem that General Wright gave no credence to Rebel activity and that he was only interested in the island as an Indian reservation. Yet, a Confederate threat, perhaps even an ill-managed conspiracy, did exist in southern California, especially in the Los Angeles vicinity. When Major Hancock first inspected the island in November of 1863 he knew nothing of the reservation plans; he studied the island as a potential fortress against the “enemy,” that is, the Confederacy.

Even as late as August 1864, Colonel Curtis at Drum Barracks reported to the Department of the Pacific that the secession groups around Los Angeles were arming “with hostile purposes.” The problem was especially acute in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. Curtis asked for some brass guns, as “one 12-pounder gun at Catalina Island is the only piece of artillery nearer than Fort Yuma.”<sup>32</sup>

Even more than a month after the troops were withdrawn, the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News* was ignorant of the Indian reservation plan. The paper felt that the Army had done its job by dealing a decisive blow against all invaders, “foreign or domestic.” The paper reasoned that “treason-plotters” of California had occupied the island disguised as miners; they then planned to capture outgoing Panama steamers and inward-bound merchantmen. The *News* concluded that because the Army had left the island, the Rebel conspiracy must have been smashed. Yet, although the spirit of secession was strong in southern California, this in no way figured in General Wright’s decision to occupy Catalina Island.<sup>33</sup>

One of the complicating factors in the Catalina affair was ownership of the island. Some of the prospectors assumed that it was public or “free” land. However, the federal government never owned the island. The Mexican Governor of California, Pío Pico, granted the island to Thomas M. Robbins on July 4, 1846, a few days before United States rule became official. A few years later the

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This view of the former military post was taken in the early 1970s, when it housed the Isthmus Yacht Club.

island passed to Jose Maria Covarrubias.<sup>34</sup> In the 1860s, during the mining boom and Army takeover, the validity of the grant to Robbins was challenged, as were dozens of other Spanish and Mexican grants.<sup>35</sup>

Ownership was not of great concern in 1864; miners and the Army merely moved on to the island. The courts finally ruled in favor of Covarrubias in mid-1864, and the land was patented in 1867. The *News* for months refused to believe that the grant had been confirmed. The paper erroneously believed that because the

War Department decided to take possession of the island that they had looked carefully into the ownership matter.<sup>36</sup>

Because of the Army's short stay on the island, the post was not well developed. The key building was the barracks, a 40-foot square, one and one-half story building with Greek Revival lines. The building, with many additions, still stands and serves as the quarters for the Isthmus Yacht Club. Several small buildings were taken over by the Army, and a few outbuildings were erected, but no trace of them remains. Captain West was frustrated by the lack of good spring water, and he drilled in at least five nearby locations, with only moderate success. One windmill well is a few yards from the old Barracks yet. Although the wood and piping seem to be only about fifty years old, the well was most likely one drilled by Company C.<sup>37</sup>

Although the post was a modest establishment, many people in Los Angeles felt that the half-million or so dollars expended on it was another case of Phineas Banning, local entrepreneur, making huge profits from the government. For example, the *News* felt that too much money was spent on lumber and buildings, not enough on erecting a strong battery.<sup>38</sup> The answer, of course, was one that the people of Los Angeles did not know. A battery would have received priority if Catalina was to be a fortress to fend off Confederate privateers. But in General Wright's scheme for an Indian reservation, buildings were more important than batteries.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A good summary of smuggling is in Mrs. M. Burton Williamson, "History of Santa Catalina Island," *Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California*, VI (1903-1905): 14-31.

<sup>2</sup>Curtis to Hancock, November 21, and Hancock to Curtis, November 26, in *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. L, Part II, pp. 686-89.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Theodore Kornweibel, "Occupation of Santa Catalina Island During the Civil War," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XLVI (December 1967): 345-47.

<sup>5</sup>Curtis to Colonel Drum (San Francisco), January 1, 1864, and William Forry (San Francisco) to Captain West, December 31, 1863, in *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part II, p. 714.

<sup>6</sup>Colonel Drum to West, December 24, 1863, and Drum to Curtis, December 8, 1863, *ibid.*, pp. 692, 708.

<sup>7</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News*, January 6, 1864. Company C was formed in Shasta County in 1861. Richard H. Orton, *Records of California Men in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1867* (Sacramento: J.D. Young, 1890), pp. 617-24.

<sup>8</sup>Curtis to Drum, January 12, 1864, *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part I, 244-46.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Wright to Adjutant-General, Washington, January 7, *ibid.*, 718-19.

<sup>11</sup>West to Curtis, January 11, 1864; Curtis to West, January 17; Curtis to West, January 19; Drum to Babbitt (San Francisco), January 23, *ibid.*, pp. 720-21, 728, 730, 731.

<sup>12</sup>J.M. Guinn, "An Early Mining Boom on Santa Catalina," *Overland Monthly*, 2d Series, XVI (November 1890): 476-79.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*; W. Burling Tucker, "Mineral Resources of Santa Catalina Island," *Mining in California*, XXIII (January 1927): 32-39.

<sup>14</sup>Los Angeles *Star*, April 25, 1863; Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, January 6, 15, 1864.

<sup>15</sup>Los Angeles *Star*, June 6, 1863.

<sup>16</sup>See also issue of January 27.

<sup>17</sup>A good summary is in Guinn, *Overland Monthly*, 2d Series, XV (1890): 476-79.

<sup>18</sup>Earlier, all people were to be removed from the island. An example of the indecision was the letter from Drum to Curtis, February 27, 1864: "Persons will be permitted to land and work on Catalina until the Indian Department want it." *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part II, p. 772.

<sup>19</sup>Los Angeles *Star*, March 5, 1864.

<sup>20</sup>Articles of incorporation, State Archives, Sacramento.

<sup>21</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, March 23, March 28, 1864.

<sup>22</sup>Articles of incorporation, on file with Los Angeles County Clerk; Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, April 15, 1864.

<sup>23</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, May 4, May 31; Los Angeles *Star*, June 18, 1864.

<sup>24</sup>Los Angeles *Star*, July 2, July 16, 1864.

<sup>25</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, July 28, August 16, 1864.

<sup>26</sup>Wright to Adjutant-General, Washington, February 29, 1864, *War of Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part II, pp. 772-73.

<sup>27</sup>Resolution of April 20, 1863, in U.S., 38 Congress, 1st sess., House Misc. Docs., Vol. III (1864), serial 1200, Misc. Doc. #29.

<sup>28</sup>Mix to Wiley, April 26, 1864, in U.S., 38 Congress, 2d sess., House Exec. Doc. #1, Vol. V, Annual Report, Secretary of the Interior (1864), pp. 267-79.

<sup>29</sup>Dole to Wiley, July 9, 1864, *ibid.*, pp. 275-76.

## *Southern California Quarterly*

<sup>30</sup>McDowell to Adjutant-General, Washington, August 17, 1864, *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part II, pp 947-49.

<sup>31</sup>Kornweibel, *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XLVI (1967): 355. None of the Los Angeles newspapers commented on the troop withdrawal until weeks later.

<sup>32</sup>Curtis to Drum, August 16, 1864, *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, L, Part II, 945-46.

<sup>33</sup>October 29, 1864.

<sup>34</sup>Charles C. Baker, "Mexican Land Grants in California," *Annual Publication Historical Society of Southern California*, IX (1912-14): 240; Robert G. Cowan, *Ranchos of California* (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1956), p. 91.

<sup>35</sup>For detailed articles on the grant controversy see Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, January 13, June 18, 30, 1864; Los Angeles *Star*, June 18, 1864.

<sup>36</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, July 30, 1864.

<sup>37</sup>The well was still visible in 1985.

<sup>38</sup>Los Angeles *Tri-weekly News*, January 24, 1865.

