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THE WAR THAT WASN'T

THOMAS ap CATESBY JONES'S SEIZURE OF MONTEREY

Gene A. Smith

During the 1840s, the United States acquired as much territory as in any other period in its history, yet discussion of that process generally centers not around the act of extension itself but around the concept of "destiny." The idea was widely accepted that Providence had destined the United States to continued growth and that expansion was a civilizing process based on moral progress rather than military might. However, the "natural right" of expansion unquestionably lay in the power to conquer. What ultimately made expansion not only possible but apparently inevitable was not some transcendent destiny but rather the absence of a powerful

The Cyane at sea. William H. Meyers illustrated his journal of the 1842 voyage which included the capture of Monterey with watercolors of ships, flags, and sights in the many ports along the route.

neighbor to check its progress.¹

American interest in the Pacific Coast had begun by the end of the eighteenth century when New England merchantmen discovered the Pacific route to China. Treaties and tariff regulations in the first decades of the nineteenth century encouraged the Yankee traders to think of the Pacific routes as theirs. As early as 1823, John Quincy Adams wrote to the American minister at London, Richard Rush, "It is not imaginable . . . that *any* European Nation should entertain the project of settling a *Colony* on the Northwest Coast of America. . . . That the United States should . . . is pointed out by the finger of Nature, and has been for years a subject of serious deliberation in Congress."² By the 1840s, the issue was more than a matter of rhetoric. The United States had a small naval fleet stationed in the

Pacific, and the slowly increasing ranks of American settlers in California were beginning to think in terms of when rather than whether California would be annexed to the United States.

Geography, or more precisely, distance presented one of the few disadvantages the Americans faced in pursuing their goals. In 1842, with tensions high between the United States and Mexico over California, it could take months for a naval commander to send and receive a dispatch instructing him how to act in a particular situation. But few issues could wait so long for resolution. England, France, and the United States were all eyeing California and calculating their chances of seizing the prize when it dropped from the tiring hand of Mexico. Under these circumstances, the United States attempted to station competent naval

officers at the remote posts on the Pacific. These men were expected to be able, on the basis of their own character and sense of duty, to make responsible decisions without consultation or authorization from Washington, although these decisions might affect the remainder of their careers. One man who had to make such a decision was Thomas ap Catesby Jones. His choice to seize Monterey in the fall of 1842 severely strained relations between the United States and Mexico and delayed for several years the U.S. acquisition of California by disrupting negotiations for its possible purchase.

Thomas ap Catesby Jones, a Virginian of Welsh descent, had gained a reputation as a man of unquestioned ability. In thirty-seven years of naval experience he had seen action along the Gulf Coast during the War of 1812, served in the Pacific during the 1820s, and commanded a ship in the 1836 Pacific Exploring Expedition under the direction of Charles Wilkes. Jones was a popular commander with his men, but his impulsive and dogmatic style combined with a personal vendetta against rum and dueling brought criticism from his officers. His strong sense of duty toward his country may explain his intense patriotism and the personal pride that was misconstrued by so many of his fellow officers.³

In late 1841 Jones gained the command he had so long awaited, the Pacific squadron consisting of the flagship *United States* (dating back to the 1790s), sloops-of-war *St. Louis*, *Cyane*, *Dale*, and *Yorktown*, the schooner *Shark*, and the storeship *Relief*.

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The Pacific Squadron.

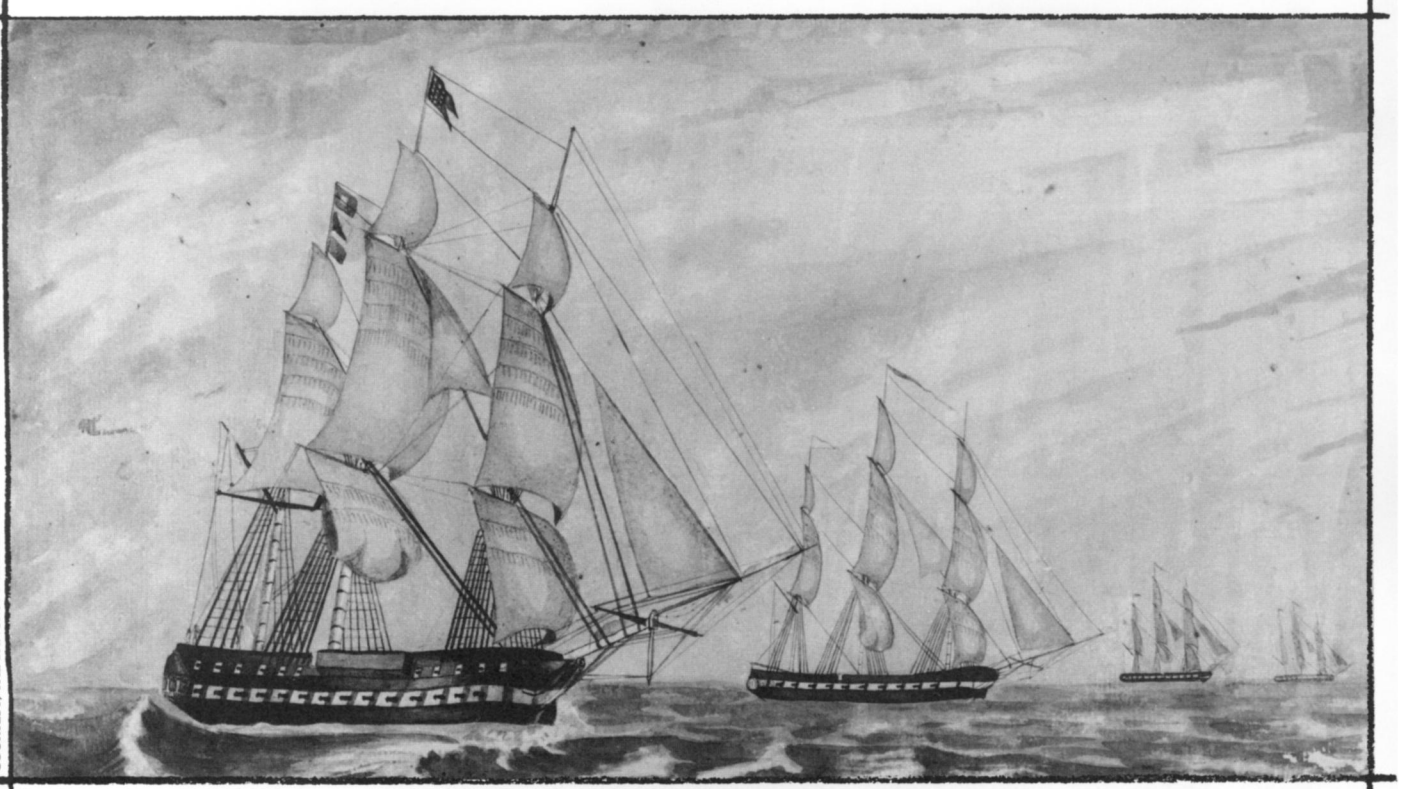
In all, the ships carried 116 guns.⁴ The boundaries of the Pacific station were defined as "all the west coast of America, and westward from the meridian of Cape Horn to the 180th degree of longitude; and southward between those meridians to the South Pole,"⁵ an area, Jones believed, far too large to patrol adequately with such a small force. Jones drew up plans which would enlarge his squadron and require a minimum of seven ships, exclusive of the flagship and her tender. His aim was to station these ships off the coasts of Chile, Panama, Mexico, California, the Northwest coast, and two among the Hawaiian Islands.⁶ The plan was never approved, however, and even after the loss of one of his sloops (*St. Louis*), Jones's plea went unheard.⁷

Because he had such a small force, his orders were simple: to protect American commerce, to improve the discipline of his men, and to gain useful information.⁸ These orders reflect the uncertainty surrounding the Pacific area in 1841. The Oregon question was still unsettled, U.S. relations with Mexico were tense, and rumor had it that Great Britain was about to acquire California from Mexico, perhaps in settlement of

Mexico's 1.5-million-pound debt to the British. This possibility lent urgency to the U.S. view that California belonged by some natural right to the Union and created an atmosphere favorable to preemptive action. Uppermost in Jones's mind as he took up his new command was the idea that he should not risk allowing the British to take control of California.⁹

When Jones arrived in the Pacific in May, 1842, and took his station at Callao he learned that a French squadron had departed from Valparaiso, Chile, two months before for an unknown destination. Jones believed, as did the British, that it was headed for California on a venture of colonization. Any European colonization would, according to Jones, ". . . be disastrous to our whale fisheries and commercial interest in these seas . . ." and make it impossible for the United States to protect these enterprises. But in Jones's opinion, California was secondary in importance to the primary U.S. concern in the Pacific—the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands.¹⁰ A flurry of activity in early September heightened the tension and became the precipitating cause for Jones's landing in Monterey.

On September 5 a mail steamer arrived at Callao from Panama, and the *HMS Dublin*, flagship of British Rear Admiral Richard Thomas, weighed anchor with sealed orders. The steamer also brought information which led Jones and other observers to believe that Mexico and the United States were at war.¹¹ Troubled by the news and by the hasty departure of the British ships, Jones hurried the eight miles to Lima



to confer with the American chargé d'affaires J.C. Pickett over the role his squadron would play in the upcoming events. While he was meeting with Pickett, dispatches from John Parrott, U.S. consul at Mazatlan, arrived to add to Jones's conviction that war had begun.¹² Enclosed with the dispatches were two newspapers. A copy of the Mexican *El Cosmopolito* dated June 4, 1842, contained correspondence between the Mexican government and Waddy Thompson, U.S. minister to Mexico, on the subject of Texas. The tone of the letters and Parrott's suggestion that they would cause the recall of the American minister confirmed Jones's belief that war was inevitable. Another paper, published at Boston, carried an article from the New Orleans *Advertiser* which stated that ". . . according to authentic information, . . . Mexico has ceded

the Californias to Great Britain for seven millions of dollars!"¹³ After careful deliberation, Jones and Pickett concluded that the reports could be accepted at face value, and Jones returned to Callao to ready his ships for sea.¹⁴ If hostilities with Mexico had indeed broken out, Jones and Pickett considered that the United States would be justified in forestalling British possession of California by occupying what was now enemy territory.

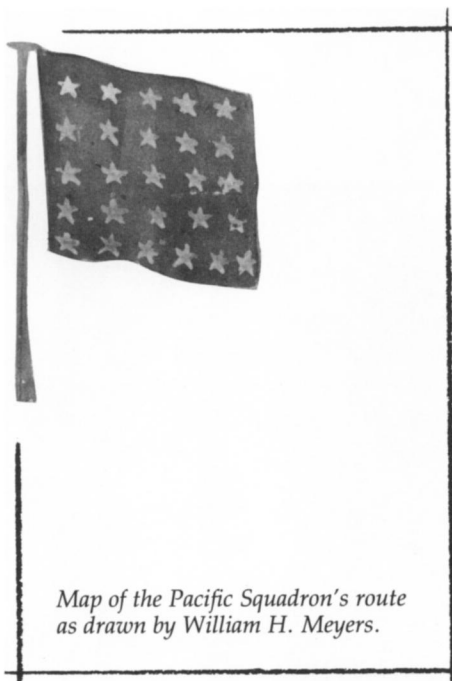
Jones intended to keep his plans secret, but his unusual activities and the secretive departure of the British squadron aroused the curiosity of his fellow Americans. In addition, the *Cyane's* load of trade goods—14 dozen spades, 32 axes, 1 hoe, 1 pickax, 1 dozen hatchets, and 1045 pounds of bar iron—unusual for a naval vessel, raised questions about the upcoming mission.¹⁵ A lack of

wind delayed the fleet's departure until the afternoon of September 7 and gave the British a two-day head start.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Jones planned to crowd sail and reach California before the British, land a force, build batteries on shore, and prevent their landing. The Americans pressed forward with all possible speed, ignorant of the true British destination, the Mosquito Islands off the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua.¹⁷

Jones got under way while the *Yorktown* was out on a cruise to the south, so he left a letter for Lieutenant Commander John S. Nicholas explaining the intentions of his mission. One day out the ships backed main topsails long enough for the commanders to board the flagship.¹⁸ Captain James Armstrong of the *United States*, Commander Cornelius K. Stribling of the *Cyane*, and Commander Thomas A. Dornin of the

Dale were presented with the evidence that had brought the ships to sea. Jones then posed two questions: "Is the rumor of war between the United States and Mexico . . . and the cessation of the Californias . . . to Great Britain, sufficiently probable to justify the withdrawal . . . of our naval force from the coast of Peru and Chile, to send . . . to California?" To this question they answered, "Yes, without doubt. . . ." The second question Jones posed was "Under what circumstances, if any, would it be proper for us to anticipate Great Britain in her contemplated military occupation of California?" The officers concluded that "in case the United States and Mexico are at war, it would be our bounden duty to possess ourselves of every point and port in California that we could take and defend . . . , and if the views of the late President Monroe . . . are still received as the avowed and fixed policy of our country . . . , we should consider the military occupation of the Californias by any European Power, . . . as a measure so decidedly hostile to the true interest of the United States as not only to warrant but to make it our duty to forestall the design of . . ." the British.¹⁹ About a week after these decisions had been made, the *Dale* left the squadron and headed for Panama with dispatches for Washington, while the *United States* and *Cyane* proceeded to the coast of California to act as circumstances prescribed.²⁰

On the cruise to California the *Cyane* and the *United States* parted company and did not rejoin until they reached the vicinity of Monterey on October 16. Jones noted that on his journey to California not a "single strange sail" was seen

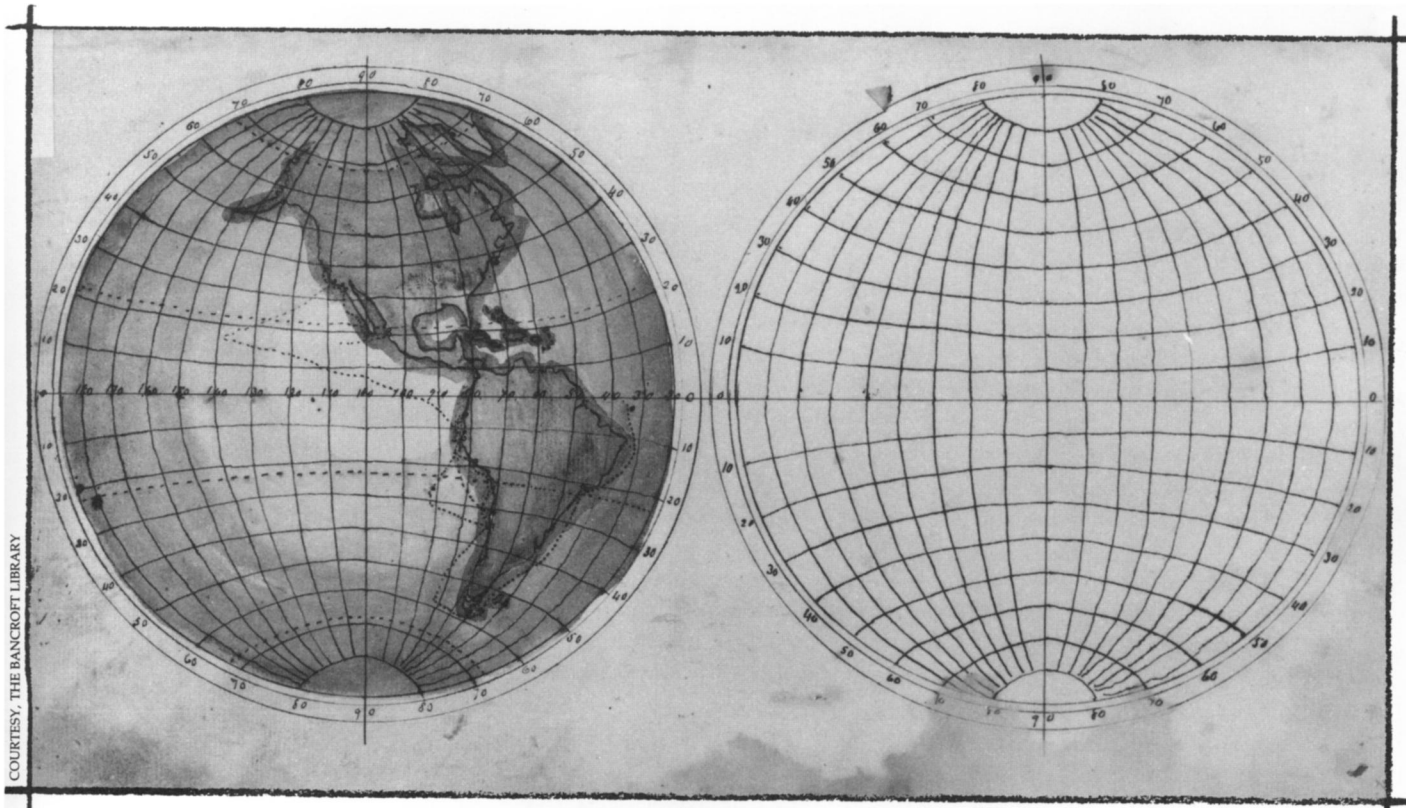


north of the equator,²¹ yet it apparently did not occur to him that this fact should cause him to question the rumor that war had begun. Passage was unusually slow due to obstinate head winds which forced the ships to sail west after crossing the equator almost to the Sandwich Islands before they could put about and sail to the northeast.²² The prolonged journey worked to the advantage of Jones and his crew, since it allowed time for gunnery training and small arms practice, which, according to one report, continued both day and night. Alonzo C. Jackson of the *United States* wrote in a letter to a relative that on every calm day the crew transported a barrel two miles out to be used for target practice. During the practice, he noted, a whole broadside, consisting of twenty-six guns, would be fired simultaneously. He added that this was "a thing that is very seldom done."²³ Another account claimed that a company of one hundred men chosen to drill daily with muskets sharpened their cutlasses to a razor-fine edge and improved their marksmanship by firing at a bag suspended from the foremast.²⁴ This display of firepower and drill made a vivid impression on all present and would

provide the backbone for any decision to be enforced by Jones and his squadron.

On October 18, a few hours out of Monterey, Jones issued a grandiose order informing his command, "We are now approaching the shore of California, the territory of Mexico, the enemy of our country, whose flag it is our duty to strike, and hoist in its place our own." California, Jones told his men, "is not only our duty to take. . . , but we must keep it afterwards, at all hazards." He continued, "this may or may not be an easy task; we are prepared for the worst, . . . in a few hours we shall be in possession of Monterey." Jones then noted "the soldiers of Mexico we know how to take care of" but that innocent civilians must be reconciled to change and, if possible, brought to the aid of the United States. In pursuit of this goal, Jones maintained that the United States must be the "protectors of all, and not the oppressor of any," and he established regulations which prohibited maltreatment of the inhabitants and above all forbade plundering of any kind.²⁵ With these orders, selections were made for landing parties to go ashore and take possession of Monterey.²⁶

On the morning of the nineteenth, a day with light pleasant winds from the northwest,²⁷ the *United States* and the *Cyane*, flying the British flag, rounded Point Pinos (the southern tip of the bay) and sighted the Mexican barque *Joven Guipuzcoana*.²⁸ A chase ensued, and the *United States* fired a shot across the bow of the Mexican vessel, convincing the frightened commander to talk. Cap-



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tain Joseph F. Snook, the English commander of the *Joven Guipuzcoana*,²⁹ claimed that he was involved only in the coastal trade and knew nothing of the diplomatic situation. Jones disregarded Snook's plea to be released and ordered the *Cyane* to take his prize to Monterey.³⁰

Now flying the Stars and Stripes, the *United States* proceeded alone and at 2:45 in the afternoon dropped anchor outside the castle of Monterey, "a dilapidated work mounting eleven guns." Jones waited several hours for a visit by some American or neutral from whom he might obtain some "disinterested information," but no one came. At last a boat flying the Mexican colors approached Jones's flagship. However, nothing could be gained from its officers on the situation, "except that they had never heard of any difficulties between Mexico and the

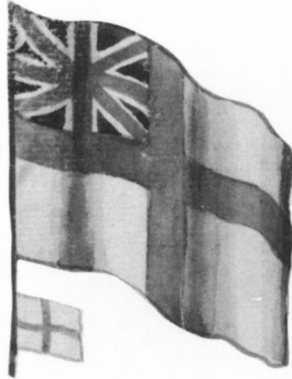
United States, and knew nothing of war; . . ." Not satisfied with this news, Jones summoned the mate of the merchant ship *Fame*, who relayed the story that the *Fame* had been delayed for a week in the Sandwich Islands on account of war rumors. But since its arrival in Monterey nothing new had occurred except a report that the British were to take possession of Upper California and guarantee Mexico's possession of Lower California. This report confirmed what Jones had heard in Callao. Since no American had come aboard, Jones believed "the time for action had now arrived. . . ." Reasoning that "Mexico is the aggressor, and as such is responsible for all evils and consequences . . . in which she placed herself . . .," he began the act which would gain him a place in the annals of expansionist history.³¹

At four in the afternoon, Jones sent Captain Armstrong of the *United States* ashore under a flag of truce to demand the surrender of Monterey. Papers for this purpose were apparently prepared in advance, because there were copies in both English and Spanish. Additionally the date, place, and signature were left blank so they could be used in different towns if necessary.³² This may have reflected Jones's wish to save time and gain control of the town before the British arrived. Although the terms of capitulation were straightforward and simple, Jones gave Juan Bautista Alvarado, acting governor of Monterey, eighteen hours to make his decision. Alvarado was initially willing to surrender the port without question, but in a letter sent to Jones later that afternoon, he equivocated, "it would not be becoming that I should

make a capitulation in the name of the Mexican nation, when my authority does not . . . reach beyond the limits of Monterey. . . ."³³

With this statement, Alvarado turned the problem over to Don Mariano Silva, military commandant of Monterey. Silva quickly concluded that the city's defenses of twenty-nine regular soldiers, eleven pieces of artillery, and a castle in serious disrepair were no match for the Americans and that the only sensible thing to do was to surrender.³⁴ Two Mexican ministers then boarded the *United States* to "treat for the surrender of Monterey"; they agreed to sign the articles and change flags at 9:30 on the morning of the twentieth.³⁵ Accompanying the Mexican commission as interpreter was Thomas Oliver Larkin, an Anglo-American merchant from Monterey. Larkin asked which side had declared war and was told that the declaration was conditional and on the part of Mexico. Surprised, he informed Jones that there were papers of "late dates" on shore that made no mention of strife between the two countries. Rather than doubting his own assumptions, however, Jones suspected that Larkin was attempting some kind of subterfuge—the idea grew stronger when Larkin failed to produce the papers—and concluded that the need for action was even more urgent than he had thought.

The Mexican commissioners, appearing impatient to surrender, boarded the *United States* at 7:30 instead of 9:30 to sign the articles by which the United States forces would land and take possession of Monterey. The landing party, composed of 150 seamen (stormers) and marines proceeded ashore under the



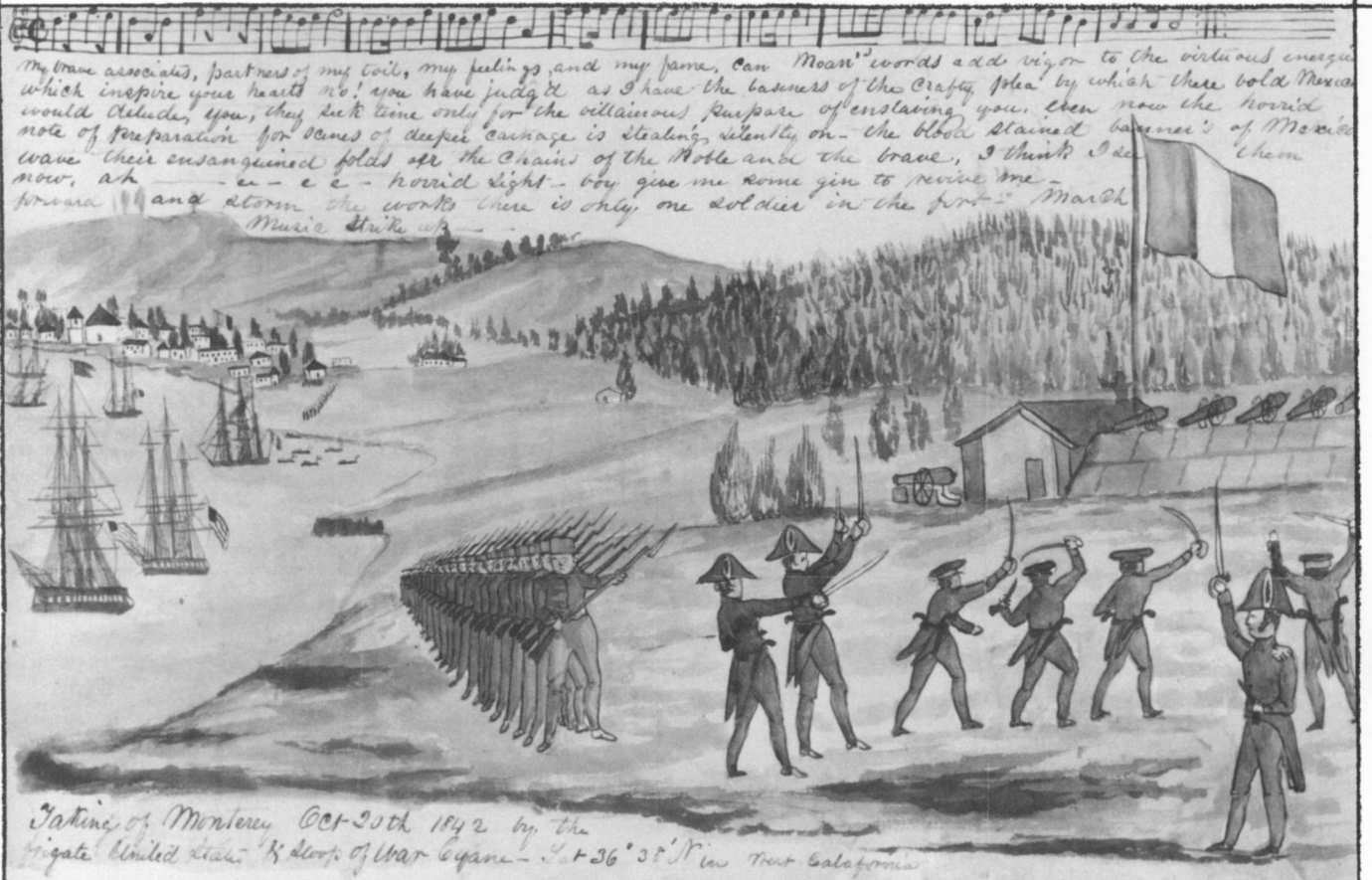
Meyers was present at the capture of Monterey but treated it as a minor incident on the long voyage.

immediate leadership of Lieutenant G. W. Robinson with Cornelius K. Stribling of the *Cyane* in overall command of the operation.³⁶ The marines were assigned to receive the arms and take the barracks of the Mexican troops while the stormers were to take the castle that overlooked the harbor. Fearing a Mexican trick, the members of the landing party were heavily armed, each carrying a musket, a cutlass, and a brace of pistols, but they accomplished their mission without incident and without firing a single shot. The situation could have been very different. The stormers had been landed at the foot of a narrow ravine, twelve feet wide and four hundred yards long, which led to the fort. They marched six abreast to the top. There they discovered nine additional cannon which commanded the entire ravine and were camouflaged, loaded, and ready for action with burning matches nearby. The Mexicans honored their surrender, however, and there was no attempt to fire the guns. It was all over then except the shouting, the cheers and the music that accompanied the raising of Old Glory in place of the Mexican flag, and a twenty-six-gun salute.³⁷ It was a con-

quest, as Jones concluded, that had been "conducted in a most orderly manner."³⁸

The afternoon and night of the twentieth passed without incident as all but one division of marines returned to the ships. On the morning of October 21, Commodore Jones went ashore to inspect the town and fort that were now under the Stars and Stripes. There the pomp and ceremony halted. Jones's private secretary H. LaReintrie had found the papers Larkin had referred to on the previous day. Dated as late as August 22, they mentioned nothing of hostilities between the United States and Mexico or the cession of California to Great Britain. Jones at this point realized his mistake and called an immediate conference with Captain Armstrong and Commander Stribling.³⁹ They agreed that the only thing to do was to restore Mexican authority and try to mend relations. At 4:00 that afternoon the American flag was lowered and, with as much pomp as had accompanied its raising the day before, the Mexican flag was rehoisted.⁴⁰ The troops were reembarked, property that had been seized was returned, and normal relations were resumed.

Meanwhile, in San Diego, Captain William D. Phelps of the American merchant ship *Alert* had captured the local fort, using the threat of his two four-pounders to cow any would-be opposition. Phelps's actions were attributed to the inspiration of Jones's action, a rumor that soldiers were coming to seize his ship, and the arrival of a group of Americans seeking his protection from the Mexicans. He held the fort



for three days until he heard that Monterey had been evacuated and that the rumor of war was false.⁴¹

The reaction of Monterey's inhabitants to Jones's assault varied, mainly because they were a diverse group which included Anglo-Americans, Mexicans, foreigners, and native Californians. At first many of them were frightened, but with Jones's proclamation that there would be neither looting nor violence and that native rights would be respected, fear gave way to admiration for the Yankee invaders.⁴² As Larkin recounted in 1844, "the fear and apprehension of the lower class of People here was at its height, drawing their recollections [sic] from the horrible atrocities committed [sic] by the Spaniards [sic] . . ." and "they expected to see the same enacted here."⁴³ Many of the public officials at Monterey found them-

selves suddenly summoned away on urgent business when they heard the news of the invasion, although they returned as hastily upon hearing the Americans ". . . did not shoot at sight, then scalp their victims with a great knife, as many . . . believed was the habit of the fighting Yanquis."⁴⁴ As a result of the orderly landing, Larkin reported, ". . . the people are not afraid of the next squadron, perhaps many are anxiously waiting its arrival . . ."⁴⁵ More importantly, since there was no incident of questionable conduct during the occupation, a view of the marines became prevalent, that they were "a fine body of Young men" whose departure would leave a void along the coast of California.⁴⁶

Several incidents raised the prestige of the bluejackets in the eyes of the Californians. When one marine made a purchase and then borrowed

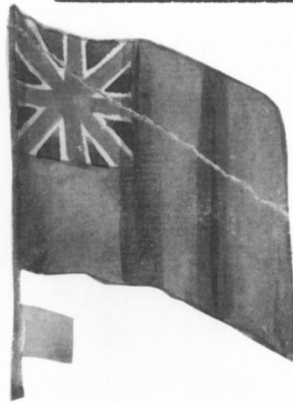
a pitcher to obtain water, he actually returned the pitcher and paid for what he acquired—in contrast, according to Larkin, to Mexican troops who rarely paid for anything.⁴⁷ While the ships remained in Monterey the men mingled with the inhabitants ashore. Larkin claimed they were either "hunting wild Deer or dancing with the tame Dear, both being plenty in and about Monterey." The flagship had an excellent band which provided the impetus for a number of balls, and some sailors who had never danced before learned to on this occasion.⁴⁸ Larkin called attention to the fine discipline of the men and to the speed and precision of the American ships during an emergency. This impressed the male population, he said, while it took only the young men in uniform to entice the females.⁴⁹ He also pointed out to the locals that there

had never been better order.⁵⁰

One story neither Larkin nor Jones recounted, however. Jones's son Meriwether Paterson Jones, a midshipman aboard the *Cyane*, was sent ashore for the lowering of the American flag and the rehoisting of the Mexican flag. Dramatically exclaiming that he could not strike the American flag, he proceeded to get so drunk that he rolled down a cliff. Although he was not injured, he did avoid hauling down the American flag.⁵¹

Jones and Larkin tried to conceal their embarrassment over the premature seizure of Monterey by concluding the incident with many banquets and dances.⁵² Larkin's primary fear, that the landing would stir up hostile feelings toward the United States among the natives and foreigners of California, proved to be unfounded, and he was relieved to find that it had just the opposite effect.⁵³

The Californians, as distinguished from the Mexicans, ". . . showed a very imperfect sense of how much they had been injured by this insult offered to Mexico." Subsequent relations with Americans on the coast were no less cordial than before, and the incident passed without further consequence.⁵⁴ Larkin still feared that if the U.S. Navy did not leave a ship, General Jose Manuel Micheltoarena would "let loose, his army of Cut throats and robbers, (in retaliation for the insult this territory has received) to plunder the property. . . ."⁵⁵ To prevent this, he petitioned Commodore Jones to station a ship off the coast to protect the innocent. Though no incident occurred to justify this precaution, Larkin felt much more at ease with his plea for help.



Mexican pamphlet narrating the "invasion of California at the port of Monterey by Thomas 'ape' Jones."

Anglo-Americans in California were delighted with the landing, seeing it as the harbinger of a more stable government that would protect the citizens instead of oppressing them. Some even suggested that the landing had "taught them [Mexicans] the propriety of respecting the rights of foreigners."⁵⁶ The Mexicans, however, were outraged by this violation of their national honor, and their attitude could be summed up by one general remark, "Why, we are going to cut the throats of *all* you Yankees."⁵⁷ Yet except for lasting anger toward Governor Micheltoarena, who retreated with his army to Los Angeles instead of advancing upon the enemy, they did not appear to harbor a grudge for long.

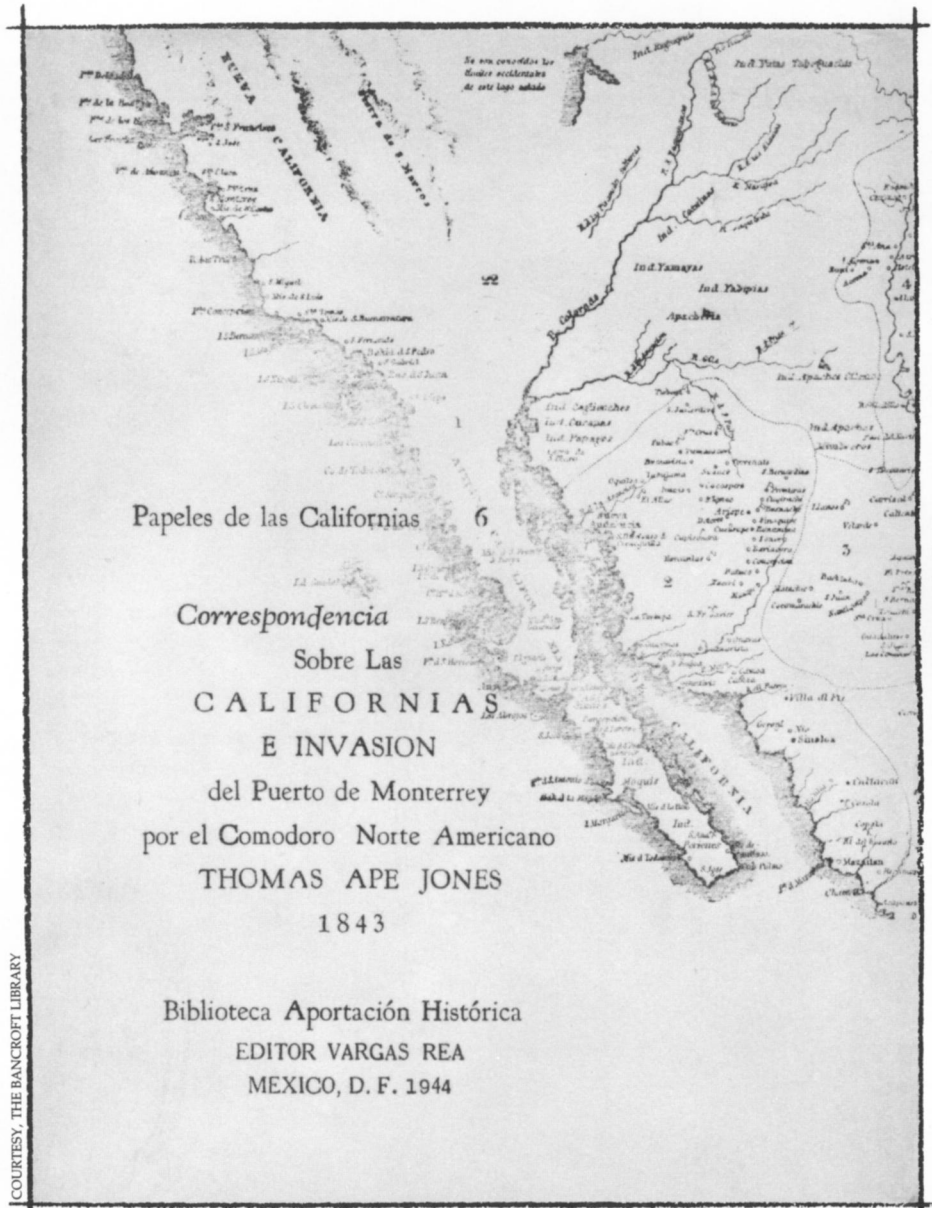
On the national level, the affair had serious repercussions. The government in Mexico, with the help of the Mexican press "made much of the barbarity of Thomas 'ape' Catesby Jones,"⁵⁸ creating an atmosphere in which the Tyler Administration was forced to suspend negotiations for the purchase of California.⁵⁹ Some Mexicans suggested that the incident could be

invoked to legitimize the cancellation of all U.S. claims against Mexico, but cooler heads prevailed. A faction led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Maria Bocanegra considered the act "sufficient to put an end to the bonds uniting the two republics" and an outrage to Mexican honor. Waddy Thompson, U.S. minister to Mexico, asserted in response that it was no dishonor to surrender to a superior force and argued that since no public or private property had been damaged relations could be normalized. Any claims that did arise would be paid in full by the American government, he pledged. In Washington, Secretary of State Daniel Webster and Mexican Minister to the United States General Juan N. Almonte also engaged in an exchange of sharp notes. After much discussion, all diplomatic parties involved agreed that Jones was to be recalled and publicly reprimanded for his actions.⁶⁰

Although Secretary of the Navy Abel P. Upshur agreed to recall Jones, he made it clear to Webster and President Tyler that he would not jeopardize morale in the Navy by humiliating "an able and well-intentioned commander."⁶¹ With Upshur's defense of Jones and Webster's apology in the name of the president to the Mexican minister in Washington, the incident was closed.⁶² Jones was not reprimanded even though the House Committee on Foreign Affairs conducted an investigation which concluded that the taking of Monterey "was entirely of his [Jones's] own authority, and not in consequence of any orders or instructions given to him by the Government of the United States."⁶³ Upshur in fact considered himself

partially responsible for the affair and attempted to guard against similar incidents by giving careful instructions for future commanders to avoid giving offense to other governments.⁶⁴ Jones was replaced as commander of the Pacific squadron by Commodore Alexander Dallas and “punished” by being given command of the ship-of-the-line *Ohio*. Jones would have a Pacific command again during the Mexican War, however.

Was Jones’s landing in October 1842 a product of Manifest Destiny or did it have a strictly military connotation? Only Jones himself could answer this question, but it seems evident that he believed he was acting in the best interests of his country, which in his mind presumed a U.S. right to California important enough to justify conquest if purchase was not possible. By basing their decision to act on the Monroe Doctrine, Jones and his officers appeared to indicate that they thought in terms of national policy rather than limited military tactics. Although it temporarily damaged U.S. relations with Mexico, the seizure of Monterey cooled French and British interest in California and brought it one step closer to union with the United States. Even though British interest in the area was subsiding, some Americans still believed that if “John Bull” gained a foothold he would secure a monopoly on the Pacific and undermine American commerce to the point that the Stars and Stripes would not fly on the coast.⁶⁵ In fact, infiltration of Yankees in the early 1840s strengthened the position of the American merchants who had become established in the preceding two decades and gave the United States an edge it



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would not relinquish.⁶⁶ Jones’s action also indicated that the United States would have little problem taking California when and if hostilities did commence, thus adding force to the expansionist movement under the concept of Manifest Destiny.

Finally, Jones’s landing gave the Anglo-American public an idea of where and what California was, as Larkin wrote to James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *New York Herald*,

“I imagine you have never had a correspondent from the ‘Far West.’ . . . In fact you have not found out as yet where the Far famed ‘Far West’ is. You now know and so does Com[modore] Thomas ap C. Jones, and the officers of his squadron, . . .”⁶⁷ From this time forward, Anglo-Americans in general would also know where the “Far West” was. ■

See notes beginning on page 155.