

# A Visit to Los Angeles in 1843

Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones' Narrative of his  
Visit to Governor Micheltoarena



(Reprinted from the SOUTHERN VINEYARD for May 22, May 29, June 5  
and June 12, 1858.)

## INTRODUCTION

The "capture" of Monterey by the American Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, on October 19, 1842, and its "restoration" to the local authorities two days later has been the subject of much comment by historians. Bancroft, whose account of the incident comprises Chapter XII in Vol. IV of his *History of California* speaks of the difficult position in which Commodore Jones found himself, as commander of the Pacific Squadron of the United States Navy, when rumors of an outbreak of war with Mexico reached him at Callao, Peru. France and England both had fleets superior to his in the Pacific, and Jones appears to have felt that he must occupy the ports of California before the British naval forces could do so, as was rumored to be their intention. A brave commander, and apparently a man of excellent record, Jones later wrote that he felt the situation to be so critical that he must accept the responsibility of performing what seemed to be his duty, even though dismissal from the navy were to be his reward were his premises mistaken.

A brief but highly entertaining account of Commodore Jones' career and personality, from the pen of U. T. Bradley (who wrote a doctoral dissertation on the Commodore while studying at Cornell University) was published in the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* for August, 1933 (Vol. 59, pp. 1154-6). Jones, who served in the navy for more than half a century (from 1805 until 1858), saw his first active service near New Orleans, where he assisted in chasing the pirate Jean Lafitte from his bayou stronghold. In the

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campaign of 1814 Jones was captured by the British, after having been wounded by a ball which he carried in his shoulder for the remainder of his life. He later served on the *Constellation* in the Mediterranean, and on the *Peacock* in the Pacific. In 1836 he was raised to the rank of Commodore and commanded the *Macedonian* during the Wilkes' South Seas expedition. Four years later he was placed in command of the Pacific squadron, his flagship being the *United States*. After the Monterey fiasco, the Commodore was recalled to Washington to still Mexican complaint, but Secretary of the Navy Mason privately commended him for his actions. In 1847 he was again given command of the Pacific squadron, but the old man had by this time become a bit of a martinet, and during the gold rush he made many enemies by his efforts to meet the unusual situation. Mr. Bradley concludes:

*"Thomas ap Catesby Jones was not a character of outstanding importance in our naval history. He was rather an outstanding example of the type of officer produced by the navy of his day. In his faults and in his virtues he was entirely positive, a strong character who stood out in a service full of strong characters. He was for years the subject of many stories, both true and fictitious. While he lived he called forth positive reactions in others. He could be hated; he could be loved or admired, but he could not be regarded with indifference."*

In the same issue of the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Lieut. K. S. Reed, U.S. Navy, relates that in 1848, when lying at the port of Monterey, Commodore Jones published an order on the duties of persons serving under military law, in which he commented upon his own actions of 1842 as follows:

*"A circumstance occurred on this station within a few years past, some of the actors in which are now present. The commander of the U.S. Squadron on this station, for reasons satisfactory to himself at least, directed a hostile descent upon a town and portion of a neighboring state in peace and amity with the United States. A large force was landed, the town and fort capitulated and the American flag took the place of the Mexican which the commodore had caused to be struck. For this act unauthorized by the*

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*government and of course unlawful, the commander who gave the order was called to account but no questions were ever asked of the inferiors who executed the order Why did ye this? or Why did ye not that?*

*“Neither in the case of burning public property referred to were the subordinate officers who applied the torch ever held accountable, or in any degree deemed culpable, the superior officer in each case alone was called to account for the unlawfulness of the order, given by him and was justified by the high motives, or public considerations which actuated him, predicated upon facts or circumstances which he was not at liberty to divulge, much less bound to communicate to anyone under him.”*

It was on October 18, 1842, that the American war vessels *United States* and *Cyane* appeared off Monterey, and on the 19th Captain James Armstrong went ashore and demanded the surrender of the town. The newly-appointed Governor of the Two Californias, General Manuel Micheltorena, had only recently landed at San Diego, and, as related in the following narrative, was slowly marching up the coast at the head of a nondescript force of *cholos*, mostly ex-convicts.

Commodore Jones issued a lengthy “proclamation,” and received the formal surrender of the District of Monterey from Juan B. Alvarado, then in command at that point, but two days later he obtained access to papers and dispatches of later date than those which he had seen at Callao, and he soon perceived that his suspicions of the existence of a state of war had been erroneous. Accordingly, he hastily sent for Alvarado, who had retired to his Alisal ranch, and with all ceremony struck his flag and retired with his men to the vessels, firing a salute in honor of the Mexican flag. A messenger was dispatched to apprise Micheltorena of the altered situation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Numerous documents relating to this affair are to be found in the “Message from the President of the U.S., in reply to the resolution of the House of Representatives, of Feb. 2d, calling for information in relation to the taking possession of Monterey by Com. Thomas ap C. Jones, Feb. 22, 1843” (27th Cong., 3d Session., House Ex. Doc. 166).

The portrait of Governor Micheltorena which is here reproduced was presented to the State of California many years ago, and now hangs in the California Room of the State Library, at Sacramento. A lithographic portrait of

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That worthy had met the news of the investiture of his capital with retreat from a point near the Camulos Rancho, where the first messenger found him encamped with his Falstaffian forces, to San Fernando, whence he issued a number of "proclamations," couched in the characteristically bombastic language of the Spanish-American *politico*.

He would not leave without protecting the valiant inhabitants of Los Angeles, cried he, though he verily wished himself "a thunderbolt to fly and annihilate the invaders." Even with his small force he "should not hesitate to attack" were he not 100 leagues distant from Monterey. But "Triumph is certain," and "are there Mexican bosoms which do not feel themselves boil with valor at seeing this effort to rob us of our territory?" He congratulated himself and all Mexicans that this invasion afforded "an opportunity to demonstrate the national valor" in a war "so holy, so just, and so national." In particular, as related in the following account, he required all *rancheros* to drive their cattle and horses inland, so as to starve the enemy.

He had barely arrived at San Fernando at the head of his retreating *cholos* when the second messenger arrived, telling of Commodore Jones' restoration of the captured territory. Then indeed did his blood boil and his vocabulary expand.

"I was marching," he wrote the Commodore, "in consequence of the assault committed by you on Monterey, to fight you, and at all hazards to drive you from Mexican territory without using any other idiom than those of lead and cannon," when the second messenger arrived. Moreover, since "the multitude of persons now surrounding me will not be content with such satisfaction as you can give me in a single official dispatch," Commodore Jones must come in person to Los Angeles to render public satisfaction to the General.

Jones did not at once acquiesce, and meanwhile Micheltorena sent

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Micheltorena, as of a slightly later date, is included in Albert C. Ramsey's translation of Ramon Alcaraz' "The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War between Mexico and the United States" (N.Y., 1850, opp. p. 114). We have as yet been unable to secure a suitable portrait of Commodore Jones. Two purported likenesses of this officer were published in the "United States Naval Institute Proceedings" for August, 1933, but they are not, in our opinion of sufficient quality to be reproduced here. The editors would be grateful for any information respecting a portrait of the Commodore suitable for publication in this *Quarterly*.

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to Mexico the terms of the "treaty" which he intended to require the Commodore to sign. This is the *convention* mentioned in the following narrative. Indemnification for outrage to the flag and settlement of claims of individuals for damages were to be demanded. The terms of surrender signed by Alvarado were to be declared officially void. A salute to the Mexican flag was to be fired by the American vessels in San Pedro harbor. In addition, the Commodore was to deliver 1500 infantry uniforms to replace those ruined by the General's forces in their hasty march through the rain to San Fernando, while \$15,000 was to be paid to reimburse Micheltorena for extraordinary expenses incurred in preparing for the defense of the territory. Finally, a complete set of musical instruments was to be delivered to replace those lost by the General's band on the retreat from Camulos. These were the demands of which Jones speaks with such feeling in his account.

For, as is related below, the Commodore did visit Los Angeles, where he exchanged courtesies with the General. Although most of this interesting narrative is couched in the third person, and although Bancroft states that this account is by some unknown hand (*History California*, Vol. IV, p. 321, note 43), it is believed that most of it is from the pen of Commodore Jones himself. In several places the first person is used in speaking of actions of the Commodore, and J. J. Warner referred to the document, when he published it in his *Southern Vineyard* in 1858, as the "Unpublished Narrative of Commodore Thomas ap C. Jones, U.S. Navy." It is here reprinted in full from the issues of that newspaper for May 22, May 29, June 5, and June 12 of that year, and appreciation is due for the courtesy of the Huntington Library in authorizing this reprint from that institution's unique file of Warner's journal.

Not only is Commodore Jones' narrative a valuable historical document, rounding out the tale of this *opera bouffe* on these then distant shores of the Pacific, but it is of considerable importance because of the picture it gives of Los Angeles and its surroundings in 1843.

The tale of the wild ride in the General's carriage from San Pedro to the "Pueblo," the ceremonious reception accorded the Commo-

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dore at the little town, the grand ball in honor of the American officers, and the affair of the proposed treaty, all lend interest and color to this account, which the Historical Society of Southern California is now privileged to rescue from the obscurity in which it has lain for so many years.

CARL I. WHEAT.

### COMMODORE JONES' NARRATIVE

On the 17th day of January, 1843, we reached the anchorage or roadstead of San Pedro, the port of Los Angeles, then the Head Quarters of General Micheltorena, Governor General of the two Californias.

About 7 P. M., our attention was attracted by the hoisting of a light on shore, and the discharge of small arms at short intervals. As the U. S. Ship Cyane was the only vessel in the roads, a boat was sent to ascertain the object of the signal, which returned in due season, bringing an Aide-de-Camp from Head Quarters, bearing the following letter from the Governor General, viz:

HEAD QUARTERS, AT THE ANGELES,  
January 17, 1843.

To the Honorable, Commodore,  
THOS. AP C. JONES,

SIR: The deficiencies and small population of the port of San Pedro, deprive me of the agreeable pleasure of receiving you and your distinguished officers as they ought to be, and as I should desire.

If you should desire to come to this place with those of your officers whom you may wish to bring with you, you will have a friendly reception, and if not as splendid as it should be, at least, more worthy of the Honorable Chief, the representative here of a friendly nation, and of him, who has the distinguished honor of offering it.

If you are pleased to honor my head quarters with your presence, I will send my carriage which has six seats, that you may come with more convenience, accompanied also by a small escort which is at your disposal.

In the event that your duties and ill health should not permit you

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to accede to this proposition, I beg of you to have the kindness to reply to this immediately, for which there is an aide-de-camp in waiting on the beach, so that I may go to-morrow, with my staff, aides and a few citizens who ask the favor of being present at the interview.

By either of these means, I will have the honored distinction of renewing to you verbally the sincere assurance, with which I avail myself of the honor of being, Your very obedient Servant, who  
B. S. M. (i. e. "kisses your hands.")

(Signed) MANUEL MICHELTORENA.

The Commodore made the following reply:

Commodore Jones has the honor to acknowledge the receipt of His Excellency, General Micheltorena's very kind note of this date, by the hands of Lieutenant Somoza of the Mexican Army.

Commodore Jones being desirous of meeting General Micheltorena, and being agreeably disappointed in the landing, means of approach, and time necessary to reach the Pueblo, accepts with pleasure the offer of General Micheltorena's carriage, &c., &c.

Commodore Jones and six or eight of his officers, will be ready to land at any hour after nine o'clock, to-morrow morning.

U. S. Sloop, Cyane, Bay of San Pedro,

9 P.M., Jan. 17, 1842.

At 9 P. M., the Aide with the commodore's note was landed, and three hours more, he was in the presence of his Chief at the Pueblo. At 10 A.M. on the 18th, the commodore, accompanied by Commander C. K. Stribling, of the Cyane, her Surgeon, Dr. Clymer, Purser, Gibson, H. K. Reintrie, Commodore's Secretary, Midshipmen Toler, Latimer and Armstrong, left the ship for the purpose of a visit to Head Quarters.

On reaching the shore we were informed that the General had dispatched extra cooks with supplies to prepare dinner at the port for our party, lest the *Cavalcade* should not arrive in time to conduct us to the village before night. This generous precaution of the General's was well timed, for it was near two P.M. when the van courier arrived with the welcome intelligence of the near approach of the means of conveyance to the village, thirty miles inland; a

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few minutes brought the entire *retinue* to a halt before the doors of the only house at the Port. This is a large quadrangular building with transverse wings, the latter are used as store-houses, whilst the centre is comfortably furnished as a house of accommodation for strangers, drawn thither by commerce. A comfortable hotel in California is a rare thing. This house is owned by Mr. Stearns, an American gentleman, of whom we shall hereafter have occasion to speak.

It consisted of the General's barouche, drawn by three horses abreast, in which was seated his chief-aide-de-camp, Major Medina, in a full staff costume, displaying on his left breast three badges of honor, won on as many battle fields; sundry saddle horses, some of them richly and gaudily caparisoned, a retinue of out-riders and a military escort of five and twenty lancers, under a portly and happy looking Captain from the "Santa Barbara Guards," of which the escort was a detachment.

Alighting from the carriage, the aide-de-camp immediately presented himself to the Commodore, saying, that in obedience to the commands of his chief, General Micheltorena, he had the honor to report himself to Commodore Jones, and to await his commands.

By this time dinner was announced, and it was necessary to breathe the cavalry a little, (for there is neither food or water at the port for quadrupeds during the dry season,) we, the bipeds, had ample time to do justice to the sumptuous repast so thoughtfully provided by the general; nor was champagne the least abundant of the viands set before us. Before 4 o'clock, we found ourselves on the road toward the "City of Angels," the Commodore, Captain Stribling, the aide-de-camp, Dr. Clymer, and the Commodore's Secretary, comfortably seated in the barouche; the rest of the party including the Commodore's servant was mounted on horseback. As already said, the carriage (a new-oak-ark-barouche) was drawn by three horses abreast, but attached to it in a manner peculiar to Spanish descendants in the Americas. Harness is entirely dispensed with, save the poles and straps, which are lashed to the logger-head of the saddle of the centre horse, and a single trace or tug-rope leading from the pommels of the saddles of the outside horses to the fore axle-tree of



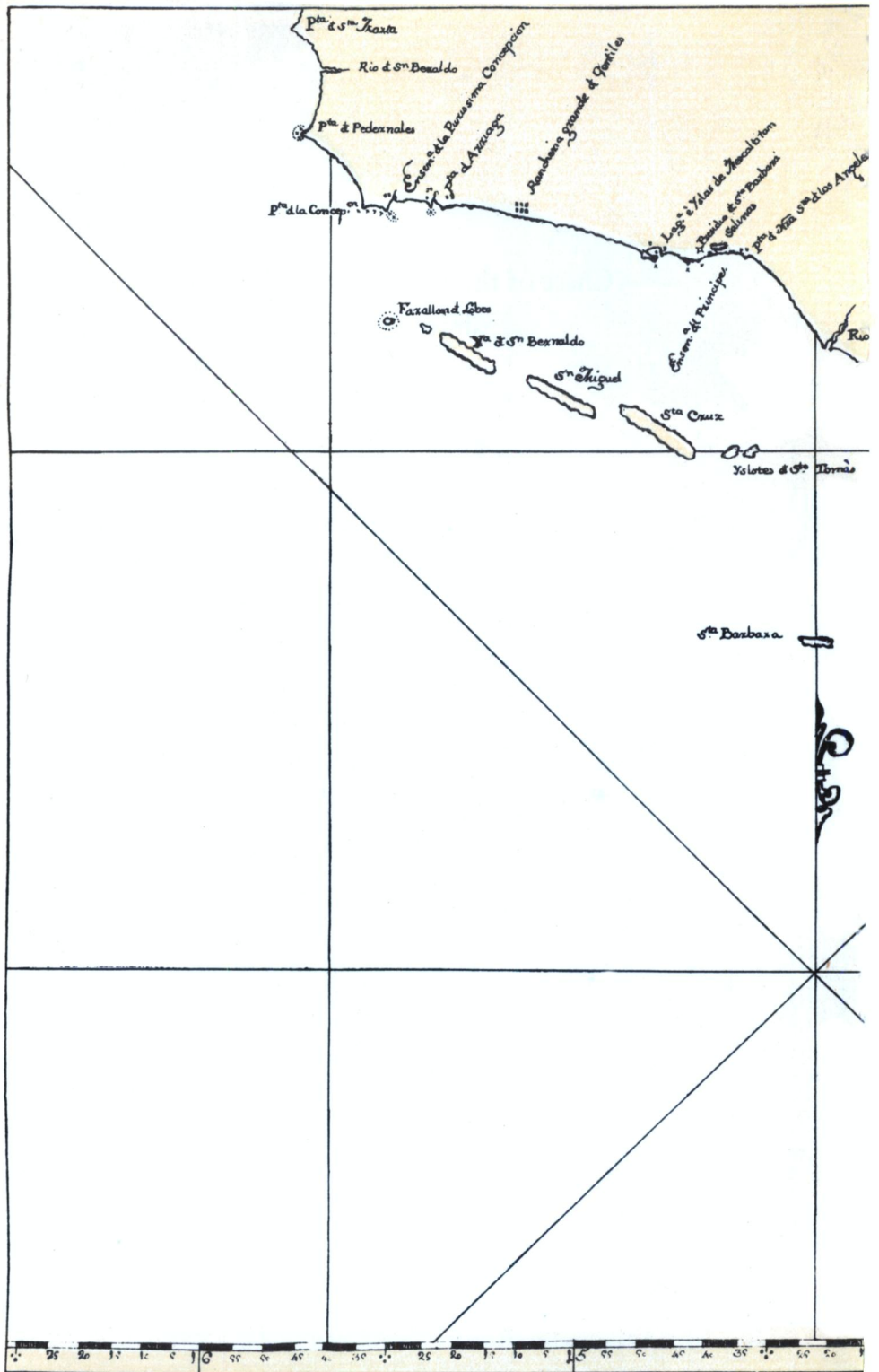
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the carriage. The horses are not *coupled*, nor in any manner attached to each other, consequently each one is governed by its own rider. In this manner the horses are urged on at the top of their power on level ground and on rising hill; when descending a hill the two outside horses suddenly fall to the rear of the carriages veering out enough of the tug-rope to clear the hind wheeler, when all the power of these two horses is exerted in *holding back* to keep the carriage from running over the one at the pole end, which it is clear, from what has been said, cannot hold back or do more, than keep out of the way of the pursuing vehicle. On this occasion our postillions were taken from the military escort, so that the novelty of the equipage was not a little heightened by the gay dress, the painted lance with its tri-colored flag flitting in the wind, and the carbine dangling on the thigh of the rider or striking in the flank of the steed as he dashed over the plain. The rate of travelling on level ground was ten or twelve miles per hour, so that a change of horses was frequently necessary, but it was effected without a moments loss of time. The order given—a lancer from the rear would dash up to the horse he was to relieve—receive the tug-rope from the previous occupants, who wheel out of the track and fall in the rear, when all would be right again without the speed of the carriage being the least interrupted. Now fairly on the road our party consisted of about forty all told, and a more grotesque troop has seldom been seen anywhere, and never in the United States. Imagine the society of Odd Fellows mounted on odd looking horses, oddly caparisoned and no less oddly appointed, and you may form a faint idea of our triumphant entry in the "City of the Angels." The route lay over what appeared to be, and what is called a plain of ten leagues extent, and although there are no hills and mountains to render this cognomen improper, still the traveller will find his course often interrupted by deep ravines, cut by the mountain torrents, winding their way to mingle with the briny main. They are scarcely perceptible until you are on their very brink; their bank, except where cut or worn down by travel, in width they vary from 50 to 150 yards. (Although we were now in the middle of the rainy season, (January) little or no rain had yet fallen, consequently

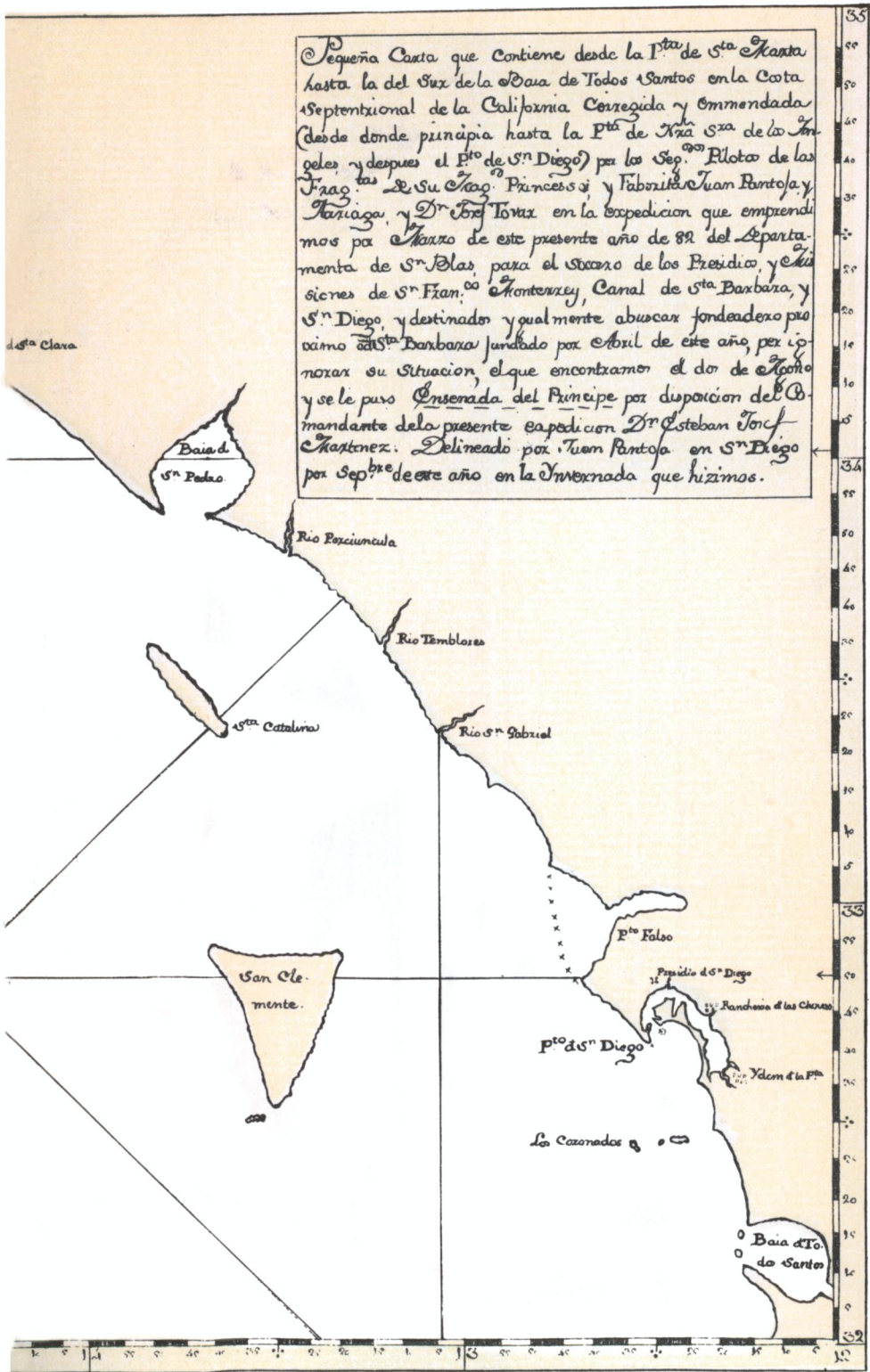
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everything was arid and parched as far as the eye could extend; nor was there a single tree or shrub of any kind to be seen on this extensive table land, except here and there, a specimen of some of the dwarf varieties of the cactus, a plant found everywhere in California and Mexico in great variety, and often in great beauty.) These ravines, often forty feet deep, from their present appearances having long since ceased to serve as conduits for surplus waters from the mountains, afford conclusive evidence of the vast diminution of snow and rain in this portion of the North American Continent, and go to strengthen the opinion expressed by the celebrated traveller Humboldt, that portions of North America for want of water are destined to become a desert waste, unfit for man's habitation; but be that as it may, it is certain that the cause which produced these deep and wide channels, all running circuitous courses from the mountain's base to the sea coast, no longer exists, for to our repeated inquiries upon this point, we were invariably told that not even during the wettest season within the recollection of the present inhabitants, have anything like rivulets or brooks passed through them. But notwithstanding the almost total absence of living vegetation on this plain, we had ample proof of the amazing fertility of its soil in the growth of the Black Mustard, then in a dry state. This plant, which when cultivated in the best gardens in Virginia, seldom attains three feet, on the plains of San Pedro reaches to eight or nine! Verily, not only do the birds of the air take shelter under the branches, but the cattle of a thousand hills get fat on it, and the inhabitants of the country make use of the dry stalks as substitutes for palings to enclose their yards, and many of the houses of the town of the Angels are thatched with it. Two leagues from the Port is the first and only Rancho or habitation for man, between the Port of San Pedro and the village of Angels. This is situated at the head of an arm of the sea, where several of the ravines before described, disembody themselves and where sweet waters from living springs commingle with the salt of the sea. Here then are two indispensables for the health and maintenance of cattle, (the staple of California) found at one and the same spot. It is to this oasis, that vast herds of horned cattle, and of horses, resort for water and salt, and on this

Chart of the Southern California Coast  
drawn by Pantoja  
1782



Pantoja's 1782 Chart of the



of Southern California Coast

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account, pounds have been provided in which to collect the herds at stated periods, whether for branding and marking, or for slaughter to obtain the hides and tallow, the flesh being of little value, there being little demand for it as food for man. The whole of our journey was enlivened by innumerable flocks and varieties of birds which covered the plain in every direction as far as the eye could extend; the large Spanish curlew with several varieties of plover and the sweet little skylark, which abounds on the shores of our Potomac! my own native land! were among the birds of the field, whilst the wild goose and white brant (the latter covering acres and acres of ground) were so tame that they might have been shot from the carriage window, had we been provided with the fowling piece. Our journey was uninterrupted by accident though not without incident. A short distance beyond the Rancho or settlement before mentioned, our attention was attracted to a native horseman crossing the plain at full speed and directing his course to a number of unfettered horses browsing on the dry mustard. As the horseman approached *the pack*, brandishing his lasso over his head, and with a certain peculiar sound, to which the horses of the country are never deaf, they suddenly formed into compact order, or solid square, and at the word moved off at a rapid gait, taking a direction so as to intersect the main road at a point we were then approaching. We were informed that this pack of horses were unclaimed property, subject to the use of any travellers needing the service, and that the drove would attend us for the purpose of furnishing relays, as those of our cavalcade should tire under the severe duty of the double trip of thirty miles each way, without food and without water more than once. This new acquisition to our retinue formed what I suppose I must call the reserve corps, and fell in the rear; not however until a sufficient number had relieved such of those on duty as had become too much wearied to continue the quick and rapid speed at which we were travelling. The last half of our journey was performed after night fall, consequently some caution in picking our way, to guard against accident was rendered the more necessary from our charioteers not being the most experienced of their calling. Sometime before we reached the village, Midshipman Armstrong

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who on this occasion acted as one of the Commodore's Aides, was missed from among the out-riders. A halt was called and diligent search was made for him, when it was ascertained that his steed had given out and that he had dropped to the rear. A Corporal's guard of lancers was immediately dispatched to attend on Mr. A. and the *grand* cavalcade moved on towards the abode of Angels, whose lights were now visible. In an hour more we entered the suburb of the town, where a halt was called until the heralds could advance to announce our near approach. After a few minutes delay we were again in rapid motion, so that in ten minutes we reined up before a spacious mansion in the heart of the far-famed "Pueblo de los Angeles." The mansion before which we stopped, proved to be that of Mr. Abel Stearns, a native of Philadelphia, but not a naturalized citizen of Mexico. About fifteen years ago, Mr. Stearns entered Mexico, and for some years resided in its Capital. He has subsequently visited all the principal mining and commercial districts of Mexico proper and the two Californias, and finally pitched upon the "Pueblo de los Angeles," as the place of his permanent abode and where he has since married into one of the best and most influential families in California, and is now enjoying the reward of his industry and frugality in the comfort of an ample fortune, and the society of a lady who for beauty, amiability and accomplishments would not lose by comparison with our own fair countrywomen.

*(To be continued)*



Governor Micheltorena