

The Occupation of Santa Catalina Island During the Civil War

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By THEODORE KORNWEIBEL, JR.

ON JANUARY 1, 1864, a detachment of federal troops sailed from Wilmington Harbor to take possession of Santa Catalina Island, located twenty-six miles off the coast of Southern California. The purpose was to secure the island for use as an Indian reservation. The Army, however, never had announced why the island was occupied, so local opinion, buttressed by past rumors, concluded that the action was taken to forestall a Confederate attempt to seize the island and establish a privateer base.

Unfortunately for today's historian, the real reason for the occupation, while known to some Californians, was never reported in the Southern California newspapers. Early local historians and natives writing memoirs repeated the rumors of a Confederate plot, using as evidence the newspaper inaccuracies. Here is a case in point of the frequent inadequacy of local history which is no more than an uncritical repetition of earlier works brought up to date. This problem becomes serious when the historian, writing of national issues, is forced to rely upon local history to support his generalizations. In the case of Santa Catalina Island the Confederate plot explanation may very well have served to distort and exaggerate the amount of Confederate sympathy in Southern California. Yet, in the minds of some Californians, such a plot *was* possible, and this explains how the incorrect explanation gained credence. To understand this the divided political sympathies of the state at this time must be briefly discussed.

Although California remained loyal during the Civil War, senti-

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Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.
Santa Catalina Island shortly after the Civil War.

ment within the state was seriously split. Four alternatives faced Californians: they could remain with the Union, declare loyalty to the Confederacy, declare independence from the United States, or remain neutral.¹ Southern California was frequently thought to be dominated by Secessionist sentiment, and the small Army post at Drum Barracks in Wilmington was kept busy investigating alarmed reports of subversive activity, most of which proved groundless. Among these were rumors that the miners on Santa Catalina Island were Southern sympathizers, and when the Army occupied the island without explanation, the fears of a Confederate privateer base were confirmed in the minds of part of the populace. This article will first disprove the Confederate conspiracy idea, and then show why the island was never used for its intended purpose.

On November 21, 1863, Lieutenant Colonel James F. Curtis, commander of the District of Southern California, directed one of his officers, Major Henry Hancock, to go to Santa Catalina Island and conduct a reconnaissance.² He reported that the island possessed excellent harbors which could be easily fortified. Furthermore, it was capable of becoming a "vast military and naval depot and key point in

a long reach of the Pacific Coast.”³ The best harbor was said to be Isthmus Harbor, on the ocean (SW) side of the island at the isthmus.⁴ This report was forwarded to Curtis’ superior in San Francisco, Brigadier General George Wright, the commander of the Department of the Pacific.⁵

Early in December Wright ordered a company of infantry to take possession of the island and remove all persons from it except government employees or others whom Colonel Curtis should exempt.⁶ A day later, however, Curtis was told to delay the occupation until he received further instructions;⁷ on that same day he and Major Hancock boarded the ship *Senator* and sailed to San Francisco, presumably to confer with Wright.⁸

After Curtis returned to Wilmington, Wright instructed Captain Benjamin R. West, one of Curtis’ company commanders, to take possession of Santa Catalina Island, have previous settlers leave by February 1, and keep all new settlers off the island.⁹ The troops embarked on the schooner *San Diego* on January 1, and took post on the isthmus the next day.¹⁰ West’s formal report of the occupation as well as a detailed description of the island were sent to Wright on January 12,¹¹ who later forwarded them to Washington.

In none of the correspondence between West, Curtis, and Wright before January 1 was any indication given as to the reason for the occupation or was a public statement ever made by the Army. Contemporary observers had to find an explanation on their own, and the possibility of Secessionist activity quite naturally came to mind.

Angeleños were first appraised of the coming occupation by a notice placed in the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News* on December 28, signed by West, which gave no reason for the occupation but merely directed all persons who were on the island to leave it by the deadline. It also stated that this was an order from the Department of the Pacific.¹²

In its next issue, the *Tri-Weekly News* editorialized on the seizure of the island. It stated that the island unquestionably belonged to the government, so no justification had to be given for the occupation even though “enemies of the government” might cry foul. The reason for the occupation was thought to be two-fold. In the first place, the island would be a convenient place to detain “traitors to their country.” The second reason was to “flustrate [*sic*] some evil design

or other. Rebel emissaries are running at large everywhere among us; . . .”¹³ Here, then, supposed Confederate designs on Santa Catalina Island were introduced into the matter.

The *Tri-Weekly News* elaborated on this point when it reported the sailing of troops for the island. In announcing that West and Company C of the Fourth California Volunteer Infantry, now commanded by Lieutenant Patrick Munday, had occupied the island, it was reported that “the rebel ‘deposits’ [mines] will no doubt be placed in charge of Lieut. Munday.” Furthermore, “this movement will no doubt shock the ‘copper brained’ politicians—here the growl comes in.”¹⁴ This repeats the suspicion that the miners of Santa Catalina Island were Confederates who were using mining only as a pretext until the time should come for subversive activity.

At the end of the month the paper reported that “the Government needed the Island for a military depot and harbor defense for the protection of commerce [against privateers?], &c.”¹⁵ Later, the *Tri-Weekly News*, perhaps thinking about the possibility of Confederate action on the other Channel Islands, lamented that they had not all been seized at the beginning of the rebellion, thereby eliminating a great annoyance to both California and the federal government.¹⁶

The extent of the influence of the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News* on the populace of Southern California is difficult to ascertain. It boasted in 1862 that it had the largest circulation of any Southern California newspaper, but this may have been due to the fact that the other daily newspaper, the Los Angeles *Star*, was banned from the mails at that time for its criticism of the federal government.¹⁷ It is probable, however, that the *Tri-Weekly News* succeeded in persuading the segment of the population that favored the North that Santa Catalina Island was seized to forestall a Confederate takeover, especially since the *Star* remained totally silent on the occupation.

The effectiveness of this newspaper in the perpetuation of the Confederate conspiracy story can be seen in the literature about Santa Catalina Island written by local historians. An early reference to the affair is an article by J. M. Guinn, published in 1890 in *The Overland Monthly*. The author, a resident and historian of Southern California, spoke of the occupation as a consequence of the mining activities on the island. He stated that the island was taken

to prevent it from becoming a rendezvous for privateers. The relations between the honest miners and the country's defenders were somewhat strained. Each regarded the other with suspicion. There were rumors that this mining rush was a blind to conceal a plot to seize the island and make it a rendezvous for Confederate privateers—an *entrepôt* from which these vessels could fit out to prey upon the commerce of the Coast. . . . Many of the miners were Southern sympathizers, but whether such a plot was ever seriously contemplated is doubtful. The government determined to forestall the possibility of it, however, by taking military possession of the island and evicting the miners.¹⁸

Thus the old explanation was given new life in an historical journal.

This article alone could not have gained total acceptance for the old theory. That remained for Harris Newmark, a successful Los Angeles wholesaler and merchant. In his memoirs, entitled *Sixty Years in Southern California: 1853-1913*, published in 1916, Newmark repeated the same reason for the occupation, but with more certainty:

just as the [mining] boom seemed likely to mature, the National Government stepped in and gave a quietus to the whole affair. With or without foundation, reports had reached the Federal authorities that the movement was but a cloak to establish there well-fortified Confederate headquarters for the fitting out and repair of privateers intended to prey upon the coastwise traders; . . .¹⁹

The significance of Newmark is not simply in his repetition of the old story, but that his book has had wide circulation and is considered an important source on Southern California history.

One more example will be sufficient to show the wide acceptance of the privateering theory. William A. Spalding, a longtime resident of Los Angeles, also repeated the same explanation in his memoirs, published in 1931:

An effort was made early in the year [1863] to start a mining boom on Catalina Island. . . . Reports reached the federal authorities that the movement was a cloak to establish a fortified Confederate base for the fitting out of privateers to prey upon west coast commerce.²⁰

The similiarity in language between Newmark and Spalding seems to be more than coincidental, and their debt to the *Tri-Weekly News* is evident.

In the narratives of the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News*, Guinn, Newmark, and Spalding, one principal reason is given for the occupation of Santa Catalina Island. It has been shown that it was the *Tri-Weekly News* that suggested this reason, while the military offered no explanation at all. Yet, at this time there was practically no danger of privateering on the California coast.²¹ Neither conditions on the West Coast nor the evidence in official military records support the old theory of a Confederate takeover, but instead point to a far different conclusion. The actual reason for taking Santa Catalina Island was that the Department of the Pacific wanted to use it as an Indian reservation. The Army records to be discussed provide ample proof of this conclusion.

It will be remembered that in November Colonel Curtis ordered a reconnaissance of the island to be made by Major Hancock. His instructions were:

In view of the probability that the neighboring island, Catalina, may soon be of commercial importance, you will proceed there tomorrow and obtain such information as can speedily be had of its resources and advantages as a military point. The harbor upon its westerly side will claim your best attention. Ascertain its extent, scan well its surrounding points, and learn by whom, if at all, the lands adjoining the harbor are occupied. . . .²²

The reason Curtis wanted information about the island at this date is unclear, as no record has been found of whether he did this on the order of General Wright or on his own initiative.

On November 26 Curtis received the report on the advantages of the island. It stated that if an enemy with a respectable naval force were in possession of the island much damage might be done to the federal government. In view of that fact, the report concluded that

it would seem of vital moment that in the way of coast defense a small force with a few guns should be permanently stationed there at once to prevent the possibility of its falling into the power of a maritime enemy. . . .²³

Here Hancock might have been thinking of the past rumors of Confederates on the island; on the other hand, his recommendation may have been the product of a farsighted military mind recognizing the natural military advantages of the island.

When Curtis sailed to San Francisco on December 9, he was accompanied by Major Hancock. They undoubtedly discussed the matter of Santa Catalina Island with General Wright. It was probably at this time that Wright informed Curtis of his plans for the island.

A communication to the Adjutant General of the Army written on December 21, 1863, is the first evidence extant of Wright's interest in the island. He related the difficulties in the District of the Humboldt (north of San Francisco) created by the Klamath, Redwood, and Trinity Indians who would not remain on their reservations. Wright concluded that the only solution was to remove the Indians from that area, and as a new reservation location he suggested Santa Catalina Island. In listing the assets of the island, he mentioned the benefits of ample wood and water, good land for gardening, a good harbor, many goats, much pasturage and abundant fish. "With all of these advantages, I consider it the most eligible location for an Indian reservation that can be found on this coast." He further stated that if the island had been used two years previously, he could have removed all of the Indians from the District of the Humboldt at a great savings to the government of men and money. Noting that he had already ordered a post to be established there, Wright requested that the government allow him to colonize Indians on Santa Catalina Island.²⁴

In the light of this evidence it is almost certain that Wright had an Indian reservation in mind when he first ordered Curtis to take possession of the island. It is also probable that it was Wright who ordered Curtis to have the reconnaissance of the island made. Furthermore, Wright could not have had such a detailed knowledge of the island unless he had seen the reconnaissance report or had talked with Hancock, the author of that report. It is also clear from Wright's message to his superiors that he was not acting to forestall any Confederate takeover of the island. In none of his correspondence is there any indication that he feared such action.

It is unfortunate for today's historian that the Army never made any public announcement as to the real reason for the occupation. It is easy, however, to imagine good reasons for withholding the true purpose. There would have been consternation in Southern California had it been known that the Army wanted to colonize the island,

located a mere twenty-six miles from the mainland, with hostile Indians recently on the warpath.

Curiously enough, General Wright's intentions were known to the public in San Francisco, but apparently this information never reached the Southern California newspapers. The San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, either having interviewed Wright or having learned from sources close to him, stated in an editorial on January 6 that the island was to be used as a reservation.²⁵ Reporting of this fact, less than a week after the occupation, should have been sufficient to establish the army's motives.

Despite the accurate reporting of the *Alta California*, only one historian, to this writer's knowledge, has properly understood the motive of the army since the Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News* first suggested reasons for the occupation. Aurora Hunt, in *The Army of the Pacific*, properly reports that Wright wanted to colonize the Humboldt Indians on Santa Catalina Island.²⁶ Miss Hunt's conclusions deserve more acceptance than Newmark's repetition of historic rumor, but unfortunately, Newmark is still quoted today.

General Wright was convinced that the best course of action was to colonize the Indians on Santa Catalina Island, but he was never given the opportunity to put his ideas to a practical test. A lack of enthusiasm on the part of the War Department and adverse decisions by the Department of the Interior combined to defeat the plan. If the War Department had vigorously backed Wright's suggestion and indicated a strong conviction as to the feasibility of an island reservation, the Department of the Interior might have been more amenable to the proposal.

It will be recalled that in December Wright first suggested to the War Department that the island be used.²⁷ On January 18 he subtly hinted that some action should be taken without delay, asking the Assistant Adjutant General that "when you receive my letter of the 21st of December I shall be glad to know the views of the Department by telegraph."²⁸ A few days later Wright reiterated that the Indians had to be totally removed from the area because the reservation system then in effect had proved to be a failure.²⁹ On February 8 he again prodded Washington for an answer.³⁰ Finally, on February

20, almost two months after he first proposed that a reservation be created, Wright was informed that the War Department had requested the Department of the Interior, of which the Bureau of Indian Affairs was a part, to make Santa Catalina Island a reservation.³¹ This was to be the only positive action taken by the War Department. From then on the military made little effort to influence or hurry the decision of the Department of the Interior.

About a week later Wright impatiently wrote Washington three times in one day. He requested that the decision of the Interior Department be forwarded to him as soon as possible by telegraph.³² He also asked if he could send captured Indians to the island at once,³³ without a decision by the Department of the Interior. No answer to this request has been found.

If General Wright was irritated because no action was taken on his proposal, the wartime bureaucracy was probably to blame. Not until February 11 did the War Department send his letter to the Secretary of the Interior. The War Department made no recommendation—the letter was simply forwarded.³⁴ It was then sent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for its views.³⁵

Perhaps even the War Department grew impatient, for on March 8 it requested the Bureau of Indian Affairs to act promptly; the request was promptly filed.³⁶ Action, however, was being taken. Two days later the Secretary of the Interior asked the Commissioner General of the General Land Office to furnish him with information about the island, particularly of its suitability for agriculture.³⁷ By the next day, March 11, the decision had been made, and the Secretary of the Interior wrote to Edwin A. Stanton, Secretary of War, giving him the news:

If the Island mentioned in the Commissioner's letter and in that of Genl. Wright, is the same, I am not favorably impressed with the idea that it possesses the advantages requisite for an Indian Reservation. Upon referring to the U. S. Coast Survey report of 1856 I found a description of the island, and enclose a copy of it for your information, not doubting that you will agree with me, that it is valueless for the purpose referred to.

I am in favor of concentrating the Indians upon reservations where they can be properly maintained, . . .³⁸

Thus was General Wright's plan defeated before it was given a trial. Presumably he got the news of the decision within a few days, although the document has not been found. This was not, however, the end of attempts to secure the island for a reservation, as protests against the decision were lodged by the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for California, Austin Wiley, while Wright was left to care for the Indian prisoners as best he could.

On June 1 Wiley wrote to the Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs protesting that putting the Indians on reservations north of San Francisco was no better than turning them loose. He stated that he had asked General Wright to keep the Indians until he (Wiley) could arrange for them to be transported south of San Francisco.³⁹ Four days later Wiley again attempted to get the reservation by asking that a "temporary home" be established for the Indians on the island. The reason was that they should be removed from their homeland at once, but that it would take several months to locate a new reservation north of San Francisco. Wiley felt that this should be done for humanitarian reasons to show those who had suffered at the hands of the Indians that something was being done to relieve them.⁴⁰ Apparently Wright was aware of and condoned those efforts by Wiley.⁴¹

Late in June Wiley renewed his entreaties by telling the Commissioner of Indian Affairs that General Wright fully concurred in the plan for a new reservation and that in anticipation he was holding and feeding the Indian prisoners until they should be removed. Hostilities in the Humboldt area were nearly ended, and the Indians indicated a willingness to surrender.⁴² All that was needed was a home for them.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, William P. Dole, finally scotched these attempts to alter the decision. In a letter to Wiley he stated that

I cannot consent that you should relieve the military authorities of the care and subsistence of the Indians now held by them as prisoners. It has ever been customary for the War Department to provide for the necessities. When the Indians shall have been subdued by military force, or induced to submit to peaceable negotiation, I apprehend that but little difficulty will be encountered in securing their concentration upon the Round Valley reserve, or upon such other reservation as I hope to learn will then have been established. . . .⁴³

He concluded that there was no money available for establishing a new reservation and that, even if there was, it would not be needed and would be disastrous to the Indians.

Wiley acceded to this decision, but still got the last word in. He stated that he would locate the Indians at two existing reservations in the Humboldt District, although he said that such action was foolish. His judgment of the decision not to establish a reservation on the island was far from optimistic:

General Wright and his successor, General McDowell, fully concur with me in the opinion that the policy of making the attempt to move hostile Indians, unless they can be taken south of San Francisco, is suicidal. . . .⁴⁴

Once it was certain that Santa Catalina Island would not be used as an Indian reservation it was swiftly evacuated. On September 14, 1864, the last of the "army of occupation" left the island.⁴⁵ Apparently there was then no fear of a Confederate takeover, for the Unionist *Tri-Weekly News* was silent on the withdrawal. Probably by this time much of the hysteria over Confederate plots had disappeared as the Confederacy was continually pushed to the defensive. A few of the miners who had been evicted by the occupation returned, but for the most part Santa Catalina Island slumbered for two decades, undisturbed by the mainland. The bloodless occupation, by removing most of the population from the island, had served only to prolong its isolation. Yet the story of Confederate plotting did not slumber. Revived by Guinn, given currency by Newmark and Spalding, it still survives to distort the history of Southern California during the Civil War.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, "California and the Civil War," *The California Historical Society Quarterly*, XL (December, 1961), 291.
2. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Ser. 1; Washington, 1897), L, Pt. 2, 686.
3. *Ibid.*, 687.
4. *Ibid.*, 686. The harbor was later renamed Catalina Harbor, and the harbor on the channel side of the isthmus was named Union Bay. See *Ibid.*, 720.
5. "Letters Received August 1863 to January 1865" (Department of the Pacific), Record Group 98, Records of United States Army Commands, National Archives, 14.

6. *Official Records*, L, Pt. 2, 692.
7. "Department of the Pacific Letter Book March 1863-July 1864," Record Group 98, National Archives, 420.
8. "Camp Drum, Cal. Orders Oct. 1862-Dec. 30, 1863," Record Group 98, National Archives, unpagged.
9. *Official Records*, L, Pt. 2, 714.
10. "Post Return of Troops Stationed at Santa Catalina Island Cal," Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives, return for first ten days of January, 1864.
11. *Official Records*, L, Pt. 1, 244-246.
12. Los Angeles *Tri-Weekly News*, 28 December, 1863, 2. No notice was placed in the other Los Angeles newspaper of that time, the Los Angeles *Star*, as this paper was a Copperhead journal and was in disfavor with both the civil and the military authorities. The *Tri-Weekly News*, on the other hand, was generally a Union newspaper.
13. *Ibid.*, 30 December, 1863, 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 6 January, 1864, 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 29 January, 1864, 2.
16. *Ibid.*, 26 February, 1864, 2.
17. William B. Rice, *The Los Angeles Star: 1851-1864* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947), 218.
18. J. M. Guinn, "An Early Mining Boom on Santa Catalina," *The Overland Monthly*, XVI, 2nd Series (November, 1890), 478.
19. Harris Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California: 1853-1913* (3rd ed. rev., Boston and New York, 1930), 318.
20. William A. Spalding, *History and Reminiscences: Los Angeles City and County: California* (Los Angeles, 1931), 163.
21. For a discussion of abortive Confederate privateering attempts see Brainerd Dyer, "Confederate Naval and Privateering Activities in the Pacific," *The Pacific Historical Review*, III, 433-443.
22. *Official Records*, L, Pt. 2, 686.
23. *Ibid.*, 687.
24. *Ibid.*, 706.
25. San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, 6 January, 1864, 2.
26. Aurora Hunt, *The Army of the Pacific* (Glendale, 1951), 248-250.
27. *Official Records*, L, Pt. 2, 706.
28. *Ibid.*, 728.
29. *Ibid.*, 733.
30. *Ibid.*, 743.
31. *Ibid.*, 760.
32. *Ibid.*, 772; 773.
33. "Department of the Pacific Letter Book March 1863-July 1864," 516.
34. "Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824:81: California

Superintendency 1863-1864," Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, February 11, 1864.

35. "Indian Division: Register of Letters Received. Indians. No. 4. Dept. of the Interior. Jan. 2, 1862-Dec. 27, 1865," Record Group 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives, 26.

36. *Ibid.*, 29.

37. "Indian Division: Record of Letters Sent. Indian Affairs. No. 4 1862-1864. Jan. 3 to June 30," Record Group 48, National Archives, 432.

38. *Ibid.*, 434.

39. *U. S. Department of the Interior Annual Report 1863/64* (Washington, 1864), 271.

40. *Ibid.*, 272.

41. "Department of the Pacific Letter Book March 1863-July 1864," 616.

42. *Department of Interior Annual Report*, 274.

43. *Ibid.*, 276.

44. *Ibid.*, 277.

45. "California. Morning Reports Cos. A. B. C. 4th Infantry," Record Group 94, National Archives, September 14, 1864.