Scoop! Stop The Presses!

We hesitated before using this outworn phrase (modern journalists hate it!), but what better way to express our glee in being privileged to print for the first time an eye witness account of the Bear Flag Revolt and the taking of California during the war with Mexico?

We are equally proud to present Dr. Harlan Hague's analysis of the letter and this very exciting era of California history. His commentary reminds us again that things are not always what we think. For example, at the very moment Lewis is serenely telling his father that Fremont is governor and Kearny on his way to New Mexico, Fremont is challenging Kearny and blustering his way toward court martial and disgrace.

We are proud of this issue—enjoy!

On The Cover...

We thought the original Bear Flag would be an appropriate cover, but "simple" things are never easy, are they? The absolute truth is that the original flag apparently no longer exists and it is not certain what it looked like.

The Bear Flag revolt and its flag are dismissed by modern historians, but in the last century the "Osos" and their emblem were held in high esteem. In the 1870s and 1880s there was much testimony and controversy over who made the first Bear flag, what it was made of, and what it looked like.

According to people who were there, it was made by at least three different people. Material came from a ship, a native California lady, someone's red flannel shirt, Nancy Kelsey, a chemise, or "Dirty Matthew's" wife's petticoat. One report says the cloth was green!

The star was either red or black. The stripe was red or brown. The bear was standing (statant) and looked more like a hog (most reports), or the bear was reared-up (rampant).

The arguments about who did what with what are endless. One thing we know for sure—originally the green represented tules!

We give you here Todd's Sonoma flag, Ide's flag, and the official 1911 version.
Fly On The Wall:

The Testimony of John B. Lewis

By

Harlan Hague

Introduction

Americans had always seen promise in California. At the opening of the nineteenth century, Yankee whalers called at California ports to sell goods and take on supplies. Americans came to California in the 1820s, became citizens and settled in Mexican communities along the coast. They married Mexican women and prospered as merchants and ranchers. Boston companies dominated California's lucrative hide and tallow trade during the 1820s and 1830s. Ships of the Yankee companies also sold American manufactured goods as they plied the California coast.

American government leaders reflected the public's growing interest in California.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams expressed his opinion in 1819 that the entire North American continent would inevitably fall to the United States. Three years later, Joel R. Poinsett, President James Monroe's agent in Mexico, advocated a revised international boundary which would place Texas, New Mexico, California, and other territories in northern Mexico in the United States. President Andrew Jackson in 1835 offered to buy a large tract in California that would include San Francisco Bay.

If these overtures did not awaken Mexico to the dangers posed by American interest in California, the affair at Monterey in 1842 surely did. Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, commanding the American Pacific fleet, had orders to protect the interests of his country and countrymen. Believing rumors that war had broken out between the United States and Mexico, Jones sailed into Monterey Bay in September 1842. He sent landing forces ashore who occupied the town and ran up the Stars and Stripes. Within a few days, Jones was convinced by United States Consul Thomas O. Larkin and others that there was no war. Jones apologized to California authorities, pulled down the flag, and soon sailed away. In future, Californians would know why an American fleet hovered off their coast.

By the early 1840s, most Americans believed that the United States was manifestly destined to spread across the continent. James K. Polk placed himself at the head of the expansionist tide and in 1844 was elected President of the United States. During the campaign, he had promised the American people that his administration would give them Texas, Oregon, and California. The scene was set for confrontation, if not war.

In the mid-1840s, American immigration to California increased and changed. Americans now entered California overland, settling in the interior, far from the coastal settlements. They rejected Mexican authority and had no intention of becoming Mexican citizens. They waved the Stars and Stripes defiantly and called for a "Texas solution" for California. Americans had moved in great numbers to Texas in the 1820s, rebelled against Mexico in 1836, and saw Texas annexed to the United States in 1845. The American annexation of Texas and American designs on California were principal factors in the outbreak of war between the United States and Mexico in 1846.
On the eve of war, Captain John C. Fremont, United States Army, led his exploring expedition into California. California authorities feared that the band of about sixty heavily-armed mountain men posed a threat to the security of the province and ordered Fremont to leave. After a momentary standoff, Fremont departed California, only to return quickly to raise a call to disgruntled Americans to stand out against California authority. Some who had gathered at his call seized Sonoma and proclaimed a "Bear Flag Republic." The visionary republic soon evaporated. California was overtaken by invading American sea and land forces, and the "Bear Flag Affair" passed solidly into California folklore.

John Charles Fremont is one of the most enigmatic figures in history. At one extreme, he is considered a godlike American Hero, at the other, a charlatan. In his own day, he was at once reviled and lauded. With the passage of time, his fortunes have risen and fallen with the discovery of new materials and new insights by historians of each age.

Now a new source has come to light. John B. Lewis entered California in 1845 with the Swasey-Todd party, also called the Snyder-Blackburn party after the best-known members. This group of twelve or thirteen men, the second overland company to enter the province that year, crossed the Sierra on the Truckee route and arrived in Sacramento in September.

The Letter of John B. Lewis

In February 1847, Lewis wrote from Los Angeles to his father in Virginia. It was the first letter that he had addressed to his father since leaving Missouri in April 1845. In the letter, Lewis tells what he has been doing since his arrival in California. The letter, previously unpublished, is printed below, verbatim except that paragraphs and only occasional punctuation have been added for clarity. Numbers in brackets refer to correspondingly numbered comments made in the narrative following the printed letter.

The envelope that contained Lewis's 1847 letter to his father, printed here, is lost. The envelope below, which was found with the 1847 letter, originally contained the letter that Lewis sent to his father in 1845 from Missouri at the beginning of his journey to California.

Serendipity—Again

How We Got The Letter

The story begins with a very old family home in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, owned by John C. Musgrave. He found the letter in a box of old family papers and documents. He showed the letter to Vance Clark, a colleague from California who immediately felt the letter was important and that someone or somebody in California should publish it. Mr. Clark obtained a photo copy of the original and prepared a typescript.

After his retirement and return to California, Mr. Clark happened to be in Stockton visiting Robert Hake, an old camping buddy. He asked Bob if he knew of anyone who might be interested in the letter. Bob directed him a few short blocks to my then office, and the letter was ours!

Fortune continued to shine on this project because our Publications Committee includes Dr. Harlan Hague who agreed to do the commentary on this new treasure. An acknowledged authority on this period of California history, Dr. Hague had just completed and had published a biography of Thomas O. Larkin, co-authored with Dr. David J. Langum, and was already "up to speed," so to say.

The Society is indebted to Mr. Musgrave for giving his permission to publish this letter for the first time, to Mr. Clark for his diligence in pursuing the project, and to Mr. Hake for remembering us.

Bob Shellenberger
Editor, S.J. Historian

The best account of Fremont's role in California during the Mexican War era is in Neal Harlow, California Conquered: War and Peace on the Pacific, 1846-1850 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). See also the present author's account in Harlan Hague and David J. Langum, Thomas O. Larkin: A Life of Patriotism and Profit in Old California (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), chapters 7-8.
Upper California, Ciudad de Los Angeles Feb. 2 1847

My Dear Father

On leaving Mo. I wrote you I was going to Oregon, but afterwards changed my course for this country, which I reached in 5 months from my departure, without much difficulty the route being excellent. The greater part is entirely level & well watered. Crossing the California mountains, a distance of 150 miles is perhaps the roughest road that ever waggon crossed, but the idea of closing so long a journey so encouraged the men that they got through apparently without much difficulty. The first settlement we came to was by foreigners on the Sacramento River, where we were well recd., but on entering the Spanish [Mexican] settlements we found the Alcaldas [Alcaldes] Commandantes &c [etc.] all collected & soon summoned us to appear before them; & present our passports (no man having one, we were then told to come & live in town and our persons & property should be respected,) otherwise we should pack our kit & leave the country forthwith; [1] We obeyed by stopping where we pleased and nothing more was heard from them. [2] The first Foreigners who settled in the country recd. Large grants of land which, I also expected to receive. But jealousy induced them to discontinue it before I arrived. [3] I now hope to be able to make a location which will be recognized by the Government of the United States. [4] it may not perhaps be uninteresting to you to hear something of the taking of this country, if taking it is; in the latter part of last winter, Captain Fremont Being here on scientific purposes (5), Joseph Castro the Commandant of Calif. would not recognize him as anything else than an outlaw, & ordered him from the country. [6] He obliged. [7] A few weeks after[,] the Sloop of War Portsmouth arrived and hearing of the circumstance despatched for Captain F. and brought him
"The Pathfinder," John C. Fremont

Admired by Lewis in his letter, Fremont was indeed Governor of California on the epistle's date but within weeks was deposed by General Kearny. Because of his initial refusal to acknowledge Kearny's authority, he was forced to return overland a virtual prisoner and to stand trial for mutiny. Found guilty, he was "forgiven" (not pardoned!), by President Polk. During the trial, his infant son died—a victim of the tension of the trial, according to the mother. He resigned his commission and led a new expedition in search of a southern rail route through the Rockies. Ten of his party died of cold and starvation on this mid-winter adventure. Arriving back in California in 1848, he found the Gold Rush just beginning and his Mariposa Grant—purchased in error—loaded with gold! In 1850 he became California's first Senator. (By 1856 he was a candidate for U.S. President).

Fremont's personal odyssey from 1847 to 1850 defies fiction. He was knocked from a position of authority, publicly disgraced, met personal sorrow, led a failed and tragic expedition, became suddenly wealthy, and found political power—all in less than 36 months.
On returning he offered the Americans who chose his [illegible] to take the country & form an Independent Government. He would take Castro a prisoner to the States. Some 40 or 50 Foreigners immediately consented. 22 of us immediately set out for the town of Sonoma made prisoners of 4 of the principal men of the country, 8 soldiers, a stand of arms, some ammunition, 5 pieces of artillery, 20 of garrisoned [at] the place. Men soon joined us from all quarters of the country. Spaniards [Mexicans] collecting in large Force in various places and 400 were ready to cross the Bay and Bleach the plains with our Bones about this time 3 of our men were made prisoners & a party of 20 went out in search of them and found the Bodies of 2 cut entirely to pieces. Then following on they came up with a party of 80 Spaniards, fought them, killed eleven[,] drove them from the field & took one of our men without receiving a scratch. The Spaniards then left the North side of the [illegible] & concluded not to come in rifle shot again. On the 7th of July the Squadron under command of Commodore Stockton anchored in the harbor of Monterey took possession of the town & hoisted the Stars and Stripes & appointed Fremont Major who raised all the volunteers he could and marched against this present place where Castro had fortified. He fled to Sonora[,] disbanded his army who went to their homes & met us as friends he all then retired from the field of [illegible] went to our homes and were consoling ourselves with the easy conquest we had made, when we heard of the Spanish rising in all parts of the country. Fremont collected the Foreigners again making 400 men[,] there having just arrived a large immigration from Oregon & the States we got no fight as before after marching 500 miles. Stockton having Landed 700 men & uniting them with 100 dragoons just arrive from the States under command of Genl. Carney [Kearny] and got here 3 days before us. They had what they call 2 Battles on 8 & 9 of Jan. & lost 4 or 5 men & the number of enemy Loss was not ascertained, as they fight on horseback and drag off their dead. previous to this however on Carney's [Kearny's] arrival, his advanced guard being ordered to charge together with a company of volunteers under command of Capt. Gillespie in the first onset Capt. Moore of the dragoons was killed & 2 Lieut. They scattered & the Spaniards seeing their advantage turned and killed 20 in all with their lances[,] wounded 16 others & again retreated.

Fremont has been appointed Governor by Stockton, and a [illegible] of a treaty of peace concluded. Carney was sent by the Government to a [word missing] But his claims not Being acknowledge He immediately withdrew and I expect will soon return to New Mexico where he left the principal part of his force. We are to have 4 or 500 Mormons amongst us as soldiers. Having got through with my experience in the wars I shall say nothing more of political matters.

To take this country Generally, I like it Better than I ever saw. No climate I think can be better. The winters are warm & the summers cool no sultry weather such as you have except in the Large Valleys far from the coast. Even there although hot there is always a Breeze[,] nights cool & pleasant & remarkably healthy. all kinds of Produce succeeds well & fruit also. For the last 3 months, Grass of every kind has been growing & the whole Face of the earth matted over. The Choicest beef can be had here at all seasons of the year, and the most stock I ever saw in any country. no man thinks his farm stocked with Breeding Cattle unless unless [sic] he has 1000 or 1500 head. Many have 15000 and upwards & 3 or 4,000 head of horses. Mineral of various kinds is said to be abundant with so many openings for making money I have no fears but in the course of 5 years I will be able to make enough to return to the U.S. with an Independent living
The fort would have looked much the same when Lewis arrived in 1845. Contemporary drawings vary in details, much as do eye witness accounts.

John Augustus Sutter (1803-1880)
Sutter, a Swiss of German birth, arrived in California in 1839, quickly became a citizen of Mexico and received his land grant from Gov. Alvarado. The grant served the governor in two ways: it put a limit on the influence of his uncle, Mariano Vallejo, and it finally put some government authority into the interior. While Sutter was always generous and helpful to overland immigrants, he remained loyal to the government. This often put him at odds with the other “foreigners” during the turbulent years Lewis describes in his letter.
nothing would be more gratifying to my feelings, than return sooner but I will be content if I can hear from you. [22]
We labor under more disadvantages for articles of every description as the whole trade in[?] the country has been in the hands of a few Boston merchants who sell at 5 & 800 pr ct above state [U.S.] prices. [23] I will now conclude By sending my love to you & all the family if you will direct letters to the Navy Agent[,] New York Post Paid they will be forwarded direct to Yerba Buena (Up) California.

With respect and Esteem
Your Obt. Son

s/John B Lewis

NB direct Via Panama

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall!
Thus many have said who ponder the meaning of the past. Oh, if only I could have been there! I would then know what was said and what happened. I would be privileged. I would understand.

Yet there were witnesses to events, and they left their accounts: letters, diaries, memos, journals, reminiscences. Alas, all suspect. They contradict each other, and they often inflate the writer's importance while erasing that of an adversary. Such accounts often reveal bias and ignorance, and they habitually show more hindsight than insight.

Personal documents, including eyewitness accounts, are not history. They are the stuff of history, the data from which historians extract meaning and condense into history. Personal documents must be analyzed, sifted, weighed against other data, and judged. If you had been a fly on the wall, your version of what happened would simply be more grist for the historian's mill. The best account of an historical event is not written by a participant. It is written decades, even generations, later by a historian who has had access to a great body of data, including those suspect personal documents.

John B. Lewis's letter is an historical document, and it must be measured against comparable evidence. Bracketed numbers in the narrative below refer to the numbered segments in Lewis's letter above.

Historic Analysis
John B. Lewis arrived in California in troubled times. This frontier province of Mexico was torn by internal strife and external threat. For years, Californians had alternately felt either ignored or oppressed by Mexico City. They periodically rejected Mexico's governors and rebelled against her authority. Some in California called for absolute independence. Others urged a cautious independence under the protection of a friendly nation, such as France, Britain or the United States.

When Lewis entered California, the province was in political turmoil. Only recently, a popular rising led by California natives Pio Pico and José Castro had ousted Governor Micheltorena, who had been appointed by the central government. The central government gathered an army at Acapulco for dispatch to California.

Facing this threat from without, California leaders quarreled among themselves. Newly-appointed Governor Pico established his seat of government in Los Angeles, while General Castro, commandant of California forces, located in Monterey. Each was jealous of the other and claimed to best represent the interests of California. At the same time, each recognized the threat posed by an expansionist United States. It is natural that they would consider the arrival of American immigrants, belligerent and demanding, as the initial phase of invasion.
It was into this political maelstrom that the Swasey-Todd party plunged in 1845. They first reached Sutter's Fort. Though John Sutter was a Mexican official, the overlanders were treated hospitably. Sutter, an immigrant himself, was a generous host to the Americans, hoping to benefit in some fashion, either by hiring the new arrivals or seeing them settled nearby as potential customers and suppliers.

Native authorities were more cautious. [1] By this time, relations between the United States and Mexico had become so tense that Mexico City had issued a blanket prohibition against even legal entrance of Americans into Mexican territory. California officials routinely ignored the regulations, but they still wished to ensure that newcomers would obey the laws of California.

American overlanders arriving in the mid-1840s were asked for their passports, a customary procedure in every country. Since the Americans had none, they were illegal immigrants. Nevertheless, they were permitted to stay. Authorities instructed them to settle near Sonoma or Sutter's Fort and apply within three months for permission to settle, and to leave California if the permits were then not granted. Most Americans raised no open objection to this benign policy, planning to settle in the mentioned areas anyway, while assuming that they could ignore its provisions at will. Lewis's comment, that they "obeyed by stopping where we pleased," was a common response and certainly represented the usual attitude toward Mexican authority. [2]

Lewis's next statement reveals a commonly-held misunderstanding of Mexican land policy. [3] Lewis writes that earlier immigrants to California had received large grants of land, so he had hoped to receive a grant. Perhaps he was not aware that only Mexican citizens were eligible to receive grants. Those immigrants who were so favored had become naturalized as Mexican citizens, something that Lewis and his companions certainly would never have considered. Even Thomas O. Larkin, friend and financier of California government officials, and a resident since 1832, was not eligible for a grant since he refused to naturalize.

Lewis was apparently not overly depressed by the Mexican policy, for now, he says, he will "make a location which will be recognized by the Government of the United States." [4] Lewis was convinced that California would soon fall to the United States, and he would then be under a benevolent American land policy which routinely guaranteed grants of land to hardy frontiersmen.

Once settled on the land, Lewis was caught up in the fortunes of John C. Fremont. [5] For the second time, the United States Army Captain led an expedition into California. Leaving most of his party of about sixty mountain men in the central valley, Fremont and eight others went to Monterey. The "Pathfinder" conferred with Consul Larkin, then with General José Castro, the military commandant of California, and Manuel Castro, the prefect of Monterey. The Castros asked Fremont why he had brought American troops into California without authorization. Fremont replied that his expeditionary members were hired men, not army troops. The purpose of his mission, he said, was both scientific and commercial. Specifically, he was surveying the best route from the United States to the Pacific. He had come to Monterey to buy supplies, after which he would leave the province for Oregon. The Comandante and Prefect acquiesced, with the understanding that Fremont in the meantime would leave the principal part of his expedition in the central valley, well away from settlements.

Fremont soon violated his hosts' hospitality. Though he had promised to march directly to Oregon after finishing his business in Monterey, he gathered his expedition and moved to the coast where they stopped a few days near Santa Cruz. The expedition then turned inland and camped east of Salinas. At this latter camp, Fremont had an altercation with a Californian and then denied the authority of the San Jose alcalde who investigated the incident. Comandante and Prefect, learning of the unauthorized itinerary, ordered Fremont to leave California. [6]

Lewis notes that Fremont "obliged." [7] Fremont's response was not so serene. Indeed he was furious. He felt personally insulted and complained of General Castro's rudeness and "breach of good faith." Fremont fortified a position in the nearby Gavilan Mountains, raised the American flag, and challenged the Castros to try to dislodge him. He would defend his country's honor.

Larkin was aghast. He urged patience on the Mexican authorities, who quickly gathered an army to rout the Americans. Larkin then counseled Fremont on the seriousness of the situation which could only end badly. Fremont thought better of his actions, and withdrew, but he felt humiliated and he would not forget. Fremont led his force through the central valley to Klamath Lake in Oregon where he camped.
Lewis's recollection of Fremont's return to California is a confused blending of facts and supposition. He notes that the U.S. Warship Portsmouth arrived in California waters and "dispatched for Captain Fremont and brought him back." [8] Marine Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie, a secret agent of President Polk, arrived in Monterey on the United States Sloop of War Cyane, not the Portsmouth. Gillespie pursued and caught up with Fremont at Klamath Lake. The two officers conferred, and the expedition turned back to California. What Gillespie told Fremont is still a matter for scholarly debate, but it is almost certain that Polk did not instruct him to return to California. Fremont in any event decided that he should be in California at this moment.

Lewis makes an intriguing comment at this point. He notes that Fremont, on returning to California, "offered the Americans who chose his assistance to take the country, and form an independent Government." [9] The historical record is ambivalent on the degree to which Fremont initiated or guided the Bear Flag affair. It may never be known for sure whether he was the effective leader at the outset of the movement or simply the lighting rod that attracted malcontents. Lewis's comment supports the former view, suggesting that the captain advocated the insurgency and offered himself as leader. There is no evidence to second Lewis's following comment that Fremont planned to take General Castro to the United States as his prisoner.

One thing is sure. Still smarting from the humiliating retreat from his Gavilan Mountains redoubt, Fremont was determined that he would not withdraw again in the face of Mexican force. Leader or figurehead, Captain Fremont, United States Army, now oversaw the unfolding insurgency.

As Lewis records, a party of the disgruntled settlers who had gathered at Fremont's call seized Sonoma. The initial size of the party is usually cited as twenty-one, rather than Lewis's twenty-two. Picking up settlers along the way, the number increased to over thirty by the time they arrived in Sonoma. The rebels took prisoner some of Sonoma's leading citizens, including General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who was the leading advocate among California leaders for a peaceful association with the United States. [10]

Now, says Lewis, the Americans braced for the onslaught of 400 "Spaniards" who were determined to "bleach the plains with our bones." [11] Rumors indeed flew about the country that Castro had called on loyal Californians to punish the Americans and force them from the province. In fact, Castro had made no proclamation against the settlers, he had taken no action to drive them away, and he had gathered no force to send against them. If he were plotting and collecting a force, it was to defend himself from his political adversary, Governor Pico, not the Americans. Only later, after the affair at Sonoma, would the General gather forces to oppose the American insurgents.

Lewis's comment on the two Americans who were killed refers to Thomas Cowie and B. or George Fowler. [12] Lewis's statement supports certain contemporary reports of the inflammatory incident that their bodies were horribly mutilated. Other accounts are more ambiguous. Hubert H. Bancroft, the leading nineteenth-century historian of California, states that such an act was out of character of the Californians and concludes that if there had in fact been mutilation, it likely was done by a cruel individual or in the frenzy of an escape attempt.

In the skirmish that followed, the Mexicans lost one or two men, according to the accepted version, not eleven, as Lewis states. Lewis does not mention a subsequent action when a Bear Flag contingent, led by Fremont himself, killed three non-combatant Mexicans in cold blood, at least partly in retaliation for the deaths of Cowie and Fowler.

Lewis's account of the United States conquest of California is a bit confused. [13] The American fleet under command of Commodore John D. Sloat, not Stockton, dropped anchor in Monterey on July 1, not July 7. Commodore Robert F. Stockton arrived on July 15, assuming command from Sloat. It was Sloat
who first solicited Fremont's cooperation. The commodore wanted to ask Fremont to form a peacekeeping force for the interior. At Sloat's request, Larkin wrote to Fremont, twice, but Fremont replied to neither.

Almost two weeks after the date of the first letter, Fremont rode into Monterey at the head of his rustic band of trappers and settlers. Again at Sloat's command, Larkin notified Fremont that the commodore did not need his men after all. The commodore had decided to forego the interior police force. Sloat interviewed Fremont and asked him by what authority he had engaged in hostilities against the Mexican people. The Pathfinder replied that he had acted on his own responsibility. The commodore was not satisfied. Fremont was miffed, both at being dismissed and at Sloat's using Larkin as an intermediary.

Fremont's fortunes changed with the arrival of Commodore Stockton, Sloat's replacement. While Sloat had described the American role in California as liberator, Stockton came to California as conqueror. He appointed Fremont major, commanding the "California Battalion of United States troops," made up largely of Fremont's irregulars. His orders were to go to the south on the Cyane to intercept General Castro who was marching his force to Los Angeles.

General Castro indeed fled from Los Angeles at the approach of Fremont's force, as Lewis notes. [14] That is not what Commodore Stockton had in mind. Fremont had sailed to San Diego and then marched leisurely up the coast. The plan was to rendezvous at Los Angeles with Stockton's force which had sailed from Monterey five days after Fremont's. The commodore later complained that General Castro had escaped to Sonora because Fremont had not arrived in Los Angeles on time.

With the conquest of Los Angeles complete by mid-August 1846, California was at peace. Most of the settlers in Fremont's force returned to their homes, secure in their assurance of protection by an American overlord. Lewis's comment that they "consoled themselves" at their easy conquest was typical of the settler attitude. [15] They had a collective chip-on-the-shoulder and welcomed any opportunity for a brush with the Mexicans who they saw as their oppressors.

Commodore Stockton had not intended that the volunteer force be disbanded. Soon after the seizure of Los Angeles, Stockton ordered Fremont to increased the battalion to three hundred men. The commodore soon raised the number to one thousand. Not satisfied with the lackluster conquest of California, Stockton planned to sail to Mexico's west coast with a large force and open a second front in that war.
He would fight his way inland and meet General Taylor at the gates of the Mexican capital. Neither Fremont nor his men were interested.

In any event, California still had laurels for the commodore to win. Reacting to Stockton's harsh occupation policy, Los Angelenos rebelled. {16} Fremont was called back to service. He collected a large force, including Lewis, and marched southward. Fremont arrived in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles, in time to arrange the capitulation of the Mexican leaders in the Treaty of Cahuenga, January 13, 1847. Fremont, who without authority had initiated hostilities against Mexican California, now ended hostilities, again without authority.

**Fremont, who without authority had initiated hostilities against Mexican California, now ended hostilities, again without authority.**

The two battles mentioned by Lewis were the Battle of San Gabriel on January 8 and the Battle of Los Angeles, or La Mesa, on January 9. These were more skirmishes than battles, and casualties were light on both sides. The Americans lost three killed and twelve wounded. Probably three Californians were killed and a dozen wounded.

Lewis's reference to "Carney," General Stephen Watts Kearny, and the Battle of San Pasqual, is reasonably accurate. [17] Kearny led an advance unit of his Army of the West from New Mexico, arriving in southern California in early December 1846. The American dragoons were battered by a body of mounted Californians near the Indian village of San Pasqual on December 6. The Americans lost three officers, including Captain Benjamin D. Moore, mentioned by Lewis, and about eighteen men, twenty-one in all. All but two were killed by the Californians' willow lances. The Captain [sic] Gillespie that Lewis mentions was the same Archibald H. Gillespie who had pursued Fremont to Oregon. He led a party of thirty-seven volunteers from the coast to Kearny'said.

Lewis's comment on the question of command following the end of hostilities is based on wishful thinking. [18] He would wish the best for Fremont and those who favored him. Stockton, claiming supreme command of California, appointed Fremont governor. Kearny, armed with a letter instructing him to form a government for an American California, claimed precedence. The captain refused to acknowledge the authority of the general. Kearny was eventually confirmed as who first solicited Fremont's cooperation. The commodore wanted to ask Fremont to form a peacekeeping force for the interior. At Sloat's request, Larkin wrote to Fremont, twice, but Fremont replied to neither.

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any opportunity for a brush with the Mexicans who they saw as their oppressors.

Commodore Stockton had not intended that the volunteer force be disbanded. Soon after the seizure of Los Angeles, Stockton ordered Fremont to increased the battalion to three hundred men. The commodore soon raised the number to one thousand. Not satisfied with the lackluster conquest of California, Stockton planned to sail to Mexico's west coast with a large force and open a second front in that war. He would fight his way inland and meet General Taylor at the gates of the Mexican capital. Neither Fremont nor his men were interested.

In any event, California still had laurels for the commodore to win. Reacting to Stockton's harsh occupation policy, Los Angelenos rebelled. (16) Fremont was called back to service. He collected a large force, including Lewis, and marched southward. Fremont arrived in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles, in time to arrange the capitulation of the Mexican leaders in the Treaty of Cahuenga, January 13, 1847. Fremont, who without authority had initiated hostilities against Mexican California, now ended hostilities, again without authority.

The two battles mentioned by Lewis were the Battle of San Gabriel on January 8 and the Battle of Los Angeles, or La Mesa, on January 9. These were more skirmishes than battles, and casualties were light on both sides. The Americans lost three killed and twelve wounded. Probably three Californians were killed and a dozen wounded.

Lewis's reference to "Carney," General Stephen Watts Kearny, and the Battle of San Pasqual, is reasonably accurate. (17) Kearny led an advance unit of his Army of the West from New Mexico, arriving in southern California in early December 1846. The American dragoons were battered by a body of mounted Californians near the Indian village of San Pasqual on December 6. The Americans lost three officers, including Captain Benjamin D. Moore, mentioned by Lewis, and about eighteen men, twenty-one in all. All but two were killed by the Californians' willow lances. The Captain [sic] Gillespie that Lewis mentions was the same Archibald H. Gillespie who had pursued Fremont to Oregon. He led a party of thirty-seven volunteers from the coast to Kearny's aid.

Lewis's comment on the question of command following the end of hostilities is based on wishful thinking. (18) He would wish the best for Fremont and those who favored him. Stockton, claiming supreme command of California, appointed Fremont governor. Kearny, armed with a letter instructing him to form a government for an American California, claimed precedence. The captain refused to acknowledge the authority of the general. Kearny was eventually confirmed as California governor. He would later bring court martial charges against Fremont and take him to the United States for trial.

The Mormons mentioned by Lewis were members of the Mormon Battalion, mustered into General Kearny's Army of the West in mid-summer 1846 at Council Bluffs, Iowa. (19) The Mormon community was on the brink of a migration that would find them firmly settled in the Salt Lake Valley by 1848. Brigham Young persuaded the young men to enlist because their pay would help finance the migration, and the army weapons, which they would retain at the end of their enlistment, would be useful in their frontier settlements. The Battalion marched through New Mexico and the Southwest, to reach California more than a month behind Kearny's advance column. The Mormons arrived in San Diego on January 29, only three days before Lewis wrote to his father.

Lewis would not likely have seen any of the Mormons when he wrote. He was in Los Angeles, and they in San Diego. News of their arrival was cause for concern, and alarm for some. Fear and loathing of Mormons was widespread in the United States. Commodore Stockton assured President Polk that he had his eyes on them. Most of the the Mormon volunteers were content to complete their enlistment and hasten to their promised land at Salt Lake.

Lewis then turns from military and political affairs to comment on his own hopes and fortunes. He likes California, he says. "I like it better than I ever saw." (20) The sentiment would be repeated by countless immigrants who saw their wildest dreams fulfilled in the golden state. Lewis describes a paradise of moderate climate and rich soil. The rumor he repeats of mineral abundance would be proven in little more than a year. (20)

Yet, a paradise without kin was no place for Lewis. Like so many who would be drawn to California during the gold rush, Lewis planned to get rich off California's bounty, then return with his treasure, sufficient to make him independent, to home and family in the United States. Five years would be long enough, he guesses, though
he will return sooner if he can. {22}

In the meantime, Lewis laments, he will be forced to pay outrageous prices for everything he needs. He complains that goods in California were sold at enormous markups over the prices in the eastern U.S., 500-800% markups, he says. [23] Yankee merchants indeed were greedy. Like Lewis, they expected to milk the California cow until it was exhausted and then throw it aside, their fortunes made.

Expectations and plans changed. Many of those who initially saw California only as a source of movable treasure decided that, since they could not carry the smiling land home with them, they would stay. The record is thin, but it seems that Lewis was still in California as late as 1850 and perhaps settled here.

The letter of John B. Lewis to his father is an interesting, useful first-hand comment on a critical period of California history. Lewis's understanding of events was based on narrow experience, ignorance of California society and politics, and the acceptance of rumor as fact. Yet, his impressions were not unlike that of hundreds of other newcomers. Americans saw California as a land of opportunity, the last segment of the continent that was destined to fall to industrious frontiersmen. The presumed idle Mexican inhabitants were obstacles in that fulfillment. Later an American population in California would realize what had been lost and would try to recapture the aura, hardly the essence, of the lifestyle of Hispanic California.

The Authors

Harlan H. Hague, PhD

Author and historian Harlan Hague is a recognized authority on early California history. His most recent book, Thomas O. Larkin: A Life of Patriotism and Profit in Old California, co-authored with David J. Langum, earned the prestigious Caroline Bancroft Prize. His Road to California: The Search for a Southern Overland Route, 1540-1848, (he does like long titles), published in 1985, is a standard reference on the often ignored early southern migration and trade routes to California.

His articles on all manner of Old California, American West, and exploration themes have been published in most of the scholarly journals and popular history magazines. And because he likes to travel as well as write, his travel articles have been published in newspapers throughout the country.

Harlan retired from teaching at San Joaquin Delta College to devote full-time to writing. Currently he is contracted with the University of Oklahoma Press to prepare a biography of General Stephen Watts Kearny. He has at least three other books in progress or completed and is turning his attention to screenplays, two of which are currently under consideration.

Harlan's early career was in business. In fact he holds an MBA in addition to his PhD in history. But while he found the world of commerce "...was economically satisfying, (it) provided little food for the soul." Their loss, our gain.

Dr. Hague's memberships include the Western History Association, American Society for Environmental History, California Historical Society (Trustee), American Farmland Trust, and others. He is a member of the San Joaquin County Historical Society and serves on our Publications Committee.

Harlan and his wife have three daughters and reside in Stockton when they are not traveling.

John B. Lewis

John B. Lewis was a native of Point Pleasant, Virginia (now West Virginia). His Scots-Irish forebears were pioneers of this area. He was descended from Colonel Andrew Lewis who fought and won the Battle of Pt. Pleasant against the British-backed Confederacy of Indian Nations led by Chief Cornstalk of the Shawnee on October 10, 1774. The twelve-hour battle resulted in the loss of 46 officers and men. It preceded Concord by six months and is considered the first battle of the Revolution by Virginians and West Virginians (as well as an Act of Congress in 1908).

Although several of Lewis's letters survive, his later history is not known to the family at this time. He apparently returned to Pt. Pleasant at least once to visit his aging parents. It is thought he taught school on occasion and that he was also in the cattle business, bringing herds north to California from Mexico.

We hope to learn more of this interesting California pioneer.
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