

A Warmonger in the Buttes?

by
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In the 1840s Alta California was a “department” of Mexico. The Mexican government was in disarray and had not been really organized after the country’s independence from Spain in 1820. Alta California was pretty much on its own with little to no support from the Mexican government. Many countries had a covetous eye on this Pacific Coast land. This article is a short report on how California became a U.S. state.

It was, perhaps, a million and a half years ago that a seam in the earth’s crust opened and from the mantle volcanic detritus spewed onto the Sacramento Valley floor. With a 60-mile circumference, a unique geological formation arose. This unusual projection in the middle of the Sacramento Valley has been named Spirit Mountains, Los Picachos, Tres Picos, Three Buttes, Prairie Buttes, Marysville Buttes, Sacramento Buttes, Butte Mountains and, finally, by fiat, to be forever the “Sutter Buttes.”

This extraordinary locale is revered by the local citizens and they have dubbed it “the smallest mountain range in the world.”

Into this special place, on May 30, 1846, rode a cadre of 60 Americans. They were scientists, soldiers, and Delaware Indian scouts, and were led by Captain John C. Frémont of the Army Topographical Corps, who was on his third major expedition into the West and California.

They camped at the 800 foot elevation at longitude 121° 38' 04", latitude 39° 12' 03". They later moved to a lower elevation at longitude 121° 33' 36", latitude 39° 14' 41". These coordinates were calculated by Captain Frémont.

While camped in the Buttes, Frémont said the Indian scouts thought they had found the “happy hunting grounds” as they had, on one morning, brought back to camp 80 animals. These were elk, antelope, deer, bears and small game. Frémont reported that “the buttes were pleasantly cool in the morning for a few hours but the heat became very great. The camp was in one of the warmest situations in the Sacramento Valley.”

Even a short synopsis of Fremont’s biography would be lengthy. A few of his exploits are recounted here. He was author of the *Fremont Report*, based on his first two expeditions into the West and California. Thousands of copies of this *Report* were printed by Congress and became the tour guide for western migrants. Much of his third expedition (of five) is covered in this article. He received the surrender of the California Mexicans from Andres Pico at the Cahuenga Pass in Southern California. He became the first military governor of California (self-appointed), became a millionaire from gold mines in Mariposa, was one of the first two Senators from California, was the first Republican candidate for president in 1856, was a Major General in the Civil War, issued a proclamation of

emancipation before President Lincoln's, attempted to build a railroad across the southern United States, was territorial governor of Arizona, went broke, lived on the returns from his wife's writings, received a pension from being a Major General for one month, and in 1890, lying gravely ill in Washington, told his son that he was "going home... to California," and died.

Before Frémont camped in the Buttes he'd had a run-in with the Mexican government. While exploring central California his men were reported to be acting inappropriately. He received orders to leave California. Frémont was angered at this termination of his exploration and built a makeshift fortification atop Hawke's Peak in the Gavilan mountains near Monterey. As the men were piling logs together for a fort they placed a U.S. flag on a sapling tree. After three days the tree fell down. Fremont took this as an omen and after five days left the mountain. He might have been motivated by the 200 soldiers collected at the base of the mountain who were gathering artillery to blast him off the peak.

He slowly marched up the San Joaquin Valley, seemingly taunting the Mexican army that did not pursue.

After traveling through the Sacramento Valley he camped near the Oregon border close to Klamath Lake. At this location he was intercepted by Marine Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie. Gillespie had letters for Frémont from President Polk, the Secretary of the Navy, his father-in-law Thomas Hart Benton (a U.S. Senator for 30 years) and Frémont's wife Jessie.

He was so engrossed in reading these letters he did not post guards around the camp. In the middle of the

night the sound of a tomahawk bashing in the head of a soldier, Basil Lajeunesse, alerted the camp to a Tlamath (Fremont's spelling) Indian attack. Three soldiers were killed and several of the Indians, including their chief, were also killed. After the attack Frémont reversed his departure route and headed back down the Sacramento Valley. As they were on the trail an Indian was about to kill Kit Carson. Frémont spurred his horse and knocked over the Indian, who was immediately dispatched. The horse was named "Sacramento" and was a gift from John Sutter.

This reversal of direction and change of attitude from a mission of exploration to one with a military purpose has confounded historians ever since. Did one of his messages contain a secret code that told Frémont that war with Mexico was inevitably imminent? In his *Memoirs* he definitely states that this was the case.

What Frémont had already known was that on March 9, 1846, General Jose Castro of the Mexican Army had positive orders to drive Fremont out of California. There was also a "Banda" or proclamation to force American settlers to leave California (they didn't have green cards).

He knew that war with Mexico was inevitable as President Polk wanted California. Many politicians and believers in "Manifest Destiny" wanted California. Manifest destiny was the belief that Americans had a divine right to migrate westward. It became a patriotic duty to do so.

The most imminent threat to war with Mexico was the annexation of Texas in 1846. Texas had been a republic wrested from Mexico ten years earlier. The annexation was a supreme

insult to Mexico and the war was begun over boundary disputes between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. Fremont did not know *when* war would start but he knew that it would.

From many settlers that came to the camp in the Buttes Frémont heard stories that they were going to be forced to leave. Frémont decided to aid the settlers. He orchestrated a plan to again irritate the Mexicans. His man Ezekiel Merritt stole 200 Mexican Army horses and brought them to Fremont's camp. He conceived the plan to seize Sonoma and capture General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and three other Mexican officers. They were brought to his camp and then imprisoned at Sutter's Fort.

The settlers and ragtag adventurers were called Bear Flaggers after their flag, designed and painted by William Todd – a cousin of Mary Todd Lincoln. Critics said that the bear on the flag looked more like a pig but the idea was there.

The Bear Flaggers formed the Republic of California with a constitution written mostly by William B. Ide, commander. The republic lasted 21 days and the flag was replaced by the Stars and Stripes.

Frémont took charge of the movement, the California Battalion was formed and after what John Bidwell later labeled an “unjust” war the Mexicans surrendered to Fremont at Cahuenga Pass in Southern California on January 13, 1847.

Did Frémont have authority to start the Mexican American war in California? Was he a warmonger, a loose cannon, an arrogant egotist, self-serving renegade acting to gain glory and fame from irresponsible actions?

A philosophical historian, Josiah Royce, thought so. Royce was born in Grass Valley in 1855. He had an unhappy childhood and schooldays there. In his book *California, a Study of American Character*, he delved into everything possible of the written information concerning these actions by Frémont. He found that Lt. Gillespie also delivered a letter from Secretary of State James Buchanan to Thomas Larkin, who was the only Consul the U.S. ever had to the California Republic. The “Larkin dispatch” suggested that Larkin could persuade the Californios to renounce their allegiance to Mexico and proclaim California a U.S. territory, without violence. Larkin was also a successful merchant and had many Californio friends. He was paid \$6 a day as an informer (spy) for the U.S. government. It seems unlikely that after the insult given Mexico by the Texans, the Mexican government could be persuaded by a merchant to hand over California.

Royce interviewed Frémont in his later years and when Frémont denied knowledge of the Larkin letter Royce called him a liar.

Royce's character assassination of Frémont was very harmful to Fremont's reputation. When Frémont published his *Memoirs*, they didn't sell well.

After the book was published Royce had a nervous breakdown. He took a cruise to the South Seas and his “head-weariness” disappeared. After his recovery he said he was “like a bent bow, all ready to thwang.” And so he did, slinging barbs at Fremont and also at another philosopher, Francis Abbot, whom Royce belittled in print. He

ruined Abbot's reputation and severely damaged Frémont's.¹

So – was Frémont a warmonger, starting a war for personal glory, an egocentric power-mad nut seeking recognition with irresponsible actions?

Or was he a patriot, knowing full well that even President Polk wanted California and that war was so inexorably imminent that his actions would be sanctioned?²

¹ Royce attacked Abbot so viciously that Abbot wrote a response (*Mr. Royce's Libel*, 1891) and asked Royce's employer, Harvard University, to intervene. Other philosophers supported Abbot in *The Nation*. (*Wikipedia*, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Ellingwood_Abbot, 2-21-12).

² Fremont started his campaign early June 1846. The U.S. Government had already declared war on Mexico May 10, 1846; however, Fremont did not know that.

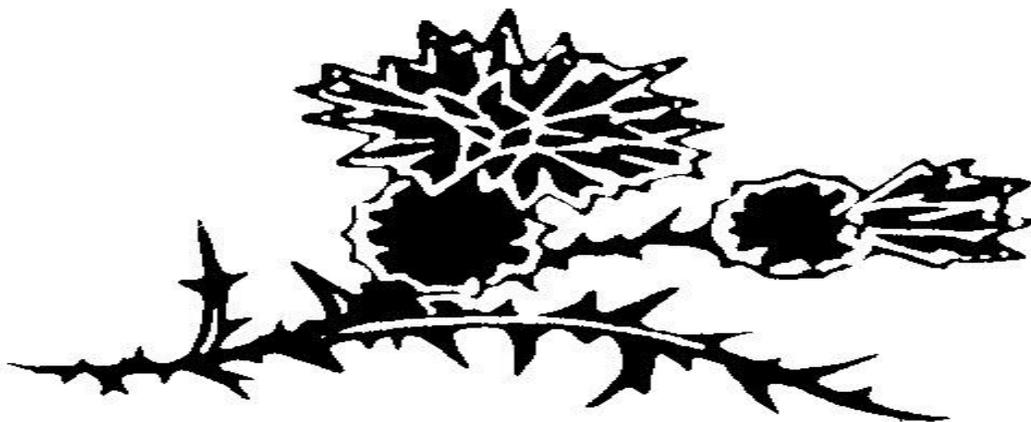
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Biographical information about Josiah Royce is from the Forward to his book, written by Ronald A. Wells.





Plaque commemorating Fremont's stay in the Sutter Buttes, Pass Road, Sutter

In commemoration of General John C. Fremont, US Army, and his expedition encamped in the Sutter Buttes in this vicinity May 30, 1846 to June 8, 1846, while on a march from Klamath Lake to Sonoma when he represented the United States Government during the Bear Flag Uprising which resulted in acquisition of California from Mexico.

Originally erected by the Bi-County Federation of Women's Clubs of Yuba and Sutter Counties, 1923.

Restored through the efforts of Save the Sutter Buttes Association, Inc. in conjunction with the Yuba City Women's Club, Live Oak Women's Club, Bogue Country Club, Quota Club, Kiwanis Early Risers, Rotary Club of Marysville, Tierra Buena Women's Club, Sutter Federated Women's Club and interested individuals, 1979.