

## “Raising the Flag over San Diego”

*July 29—8 to meridian. At 10:30 hauled up courses, standing in for harbor of San Diego. At 11:30 came in to 9 ½ fathoms; hoisted out boats . . . At 3:40 the launch and Alligator under command of Lieutenant Rowan, and the Marine Guard under Lieutenant Maddox, left the ship to take possession of the town of San Diego.*

--Log of the USS Cyane.

On Wednesday morning, July 29, 1846, a Navy sloop-of-war, the USS *Cyane*, sailed into San Diego harbor and dropped anchor at La Playa. Four hours later, sailors and Marines from the ship raised the first American flag over the small Mexican pueblo.



Commander Du Pont *Wikipedia Commons*

The Mexican-American War was barely three months old but U.S. forces were already making an aggressive claim for Alta California. In early July, the Navy had raised the flag in Monterey. Commodore Robert F. Stockton, commander of the Pacific Squadron, ordered Commander Samuel Francis DuPont of the *Cyane* to sail from Monterey and take possession of San Diego.

Carrying 160 soldiers of John C. Fremont’s California Battalion, the *Cyane* entered a quiet San Diego harbor and asked the town’s Mexican authorities to raise the American flag. When they refused, DuPont directed his executive officer, Lt. Stephen Rowan, to take the town.

“Landing with the Marine guard and a few sailors, I marched up to the town a few miles away,” Rowan later wrote, “and, having read the proclamation, hoisted the flag without opposition.” That evening Major Fremont began taking his soldiers ashore to secure San Diego.

Despite the initial reluctance over the change in flags, San Diegans greeted the American troops warmly. Commander DuPont was impressed by the town’s “orderly character and friendliness” to the American cause. “We have found it very pleasant,” DuPont wrote in a letter to his wife. “These people are all intelligent, and make it a much more agreeable place than Monterey.”

DuPont was particularly impressed with the town’s leading citizen, Don Juan Bandini. Long a fixture in California’s Mexican government, Bandini was betting early on that the Yankees would soon win all of California. Bandini opened his fine house to the Americans [preserved today in Old Town State Park] where he hosted “music and dancing every night.”

Commander DuPont thoroughly enjoyed his stay in San Diego. Donning a Panama hat and a blouse over his uniform coat, he toured the countryside on a hired horse. On one occasion he headed for the Mission San Diego de Alcalá, six miles beyond the town.

*The buildings were good, picturesquely situated, with a church. But now all is in a mournful state of decay. Miserable naked Indians were around the piazza. We*

*were received most hospitably by the old padre, a Franciscan, a perfect Friar Tuck, who was what sailors term "two sheets in the wind."*

Dupont's tour would last only a week before orders came to depart for San Pedro. While the *Cyane* sailed north, Major Fremont took his California Battalion overland to Los Angeles and quickly took control of the town.

The initial conquests were easy—keeping them proved to be another matter. The Californios recaptured Los Angeles in October then headed south to take back San Diego. Frightened citizens abandoned the pueblo and took refuge in the harbor on an anchored whaling ship, the *Stonington*. The refugees soon saw the Mexican flag reappear over the town plaza.

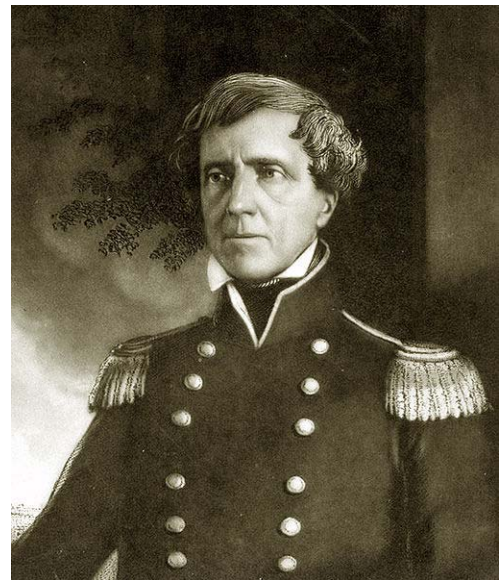
Rescuers arrived from San Pedro in mid-October and assembled to retake the town. An adventuresome young New Yorker, Albert B. Smith, went ashore from the *Stonington*, raced to Presidio Hill, and spiked several Mexican cannons.

The Californios then abandoned the town without a fight, but not before hauling down their own flag to save it from the Americans. Albert Smith continued his heroics by shimmying up the flag pole to re-attach the American flag. A few Californios reportedly shot at Smith, who waved his hat in defiance.

More reinforcements arrived in early November when Commodore Stockton entered the port aboard his ship *Congress*. His men rebuilt a crude Mexican stronghold on the heights of Presidio Hill. "Fort Stockton" consisted of several cannons surrounded by a moat backed by dirt-filled whale oil barrels from the *Stonington*.

Meanwhile, marching from the east, the "Army of the West" under General Stephen Watts Kearny was nearing San Diego. On December 6, Kearny's 100 dragoons stumbled into the Californio cavalymen of Andrés Pico. The "Battle of San Pasqual" was a disastrous rout with Kearny losing twenty-two dead. Three couriers, including the famed frontiersmen Kit Carson, crawled through the Californio lines to get help from San Diego.

Kearny's little army would stagger into San Diego on December 12. After recovering for two weeks the soldiers headed north to Los Angeles. Shortly before their departure, the *Cyane* returned to San Diego. Much of the sloop's crew was assigned to the force marching north, leaving too few sailors to leave port. DuPont's men busied themselves by refitting the *Stonington*--"a worthless old tub"—for future service.



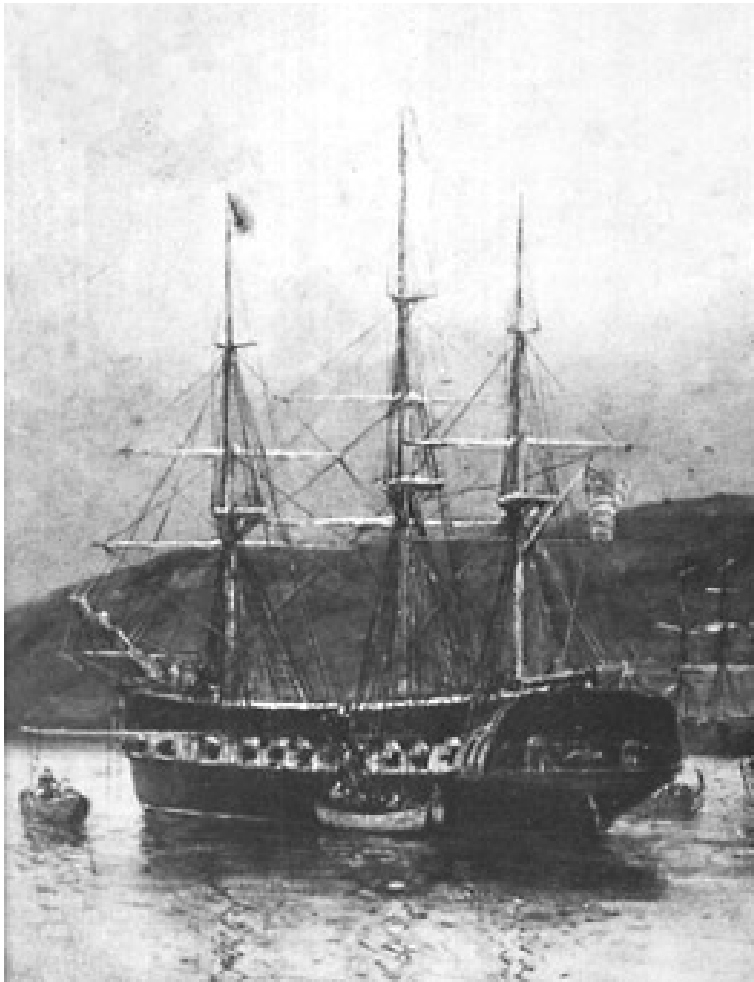
General Kearny *Wikipedia Commons*

The war in California ended with two skirmishes fought near San Gabriel on January 8-9, 1847. A peace treaty was signed four days later by John C. Fremont and Andrés Pico.

The *Cyane* remained in San Diego for the remainder of the month. It was a festive time. The town had transitioned smoothly to American authority and the populace was happy. DuPont would celebrate by hosting San Diegans aboard his ship:

*I have invited all the Bandinis, and all of society, for they are all intermarried, to spend Saturday night aboard the Cyane. I believe the circle of San Diego consists of eight ladies, old and young. They were so kind to us last summer when we first took possession here, and since our arrival, that I have long wanted to pay them some civility.*

The *Cyane*'s departure on January 31 closed a remarkable six-month period in San Diego history. The town's vital role as a naval port had been crucial to the success of the American victory over Mexico in California. In 1852, President Millard Fillmore would approve the acquisition of land along Point Loma as a federal reserve for harbor defenses—formally establishing a relationship that began with the flag raising of July 1846.



“USS Cyane Taking Possession of San Diego Old Town July 1846.” Detail of painting by Carlton T. Chapman.  
*Wikipedia Commons*

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