

“The Battle of San Diego Bay”

San Diego is a very fine, secure harbour . . . within there is safe anchorage for ships of any burthen. There is a sorry battery of eight pounders at the entrance: at present, it does not merit the least consideration as a fortification.

—William Shaler, captain of the American trading ship *Lelia Byrd*.

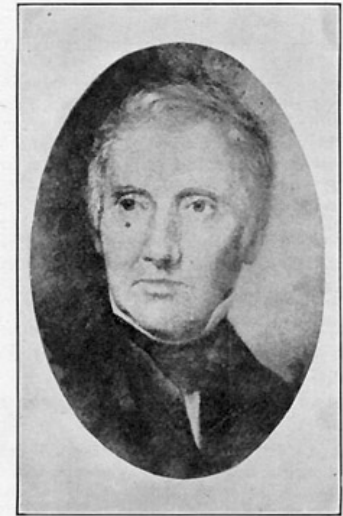
In the first years of the 1800s, San Diego’s fine harbor offered a welcome respite for the “Boston men”—New England traders who cruised the coast of Spanish-controlled California pursuing the lucrative sea otter fur trade. Guarded only by the small Fort Guijarros at Ballast Point on Point Loma, the harbor was a prized locale for fresh food and water.

Provisions were not the only reason for anchoring in San Diego. The opportunity for smuggling otter pelts was a powerful incentive. All along California’s coast, the Boston men were collecting furs—by any means possible—while the Spanish authorities tried to monopolize the selling and keep the profits at home.

The first American trading ship to challenge Spanish authority was the *Alexander*, which entered San Diego in February 1803. Captain John Brown received permission to buy provisions for his scurvy-ridden crew. But while Brown’s “sick” sailors recuperated on shore, the Captain eagerly bought contraband furs from Indians and soldiers. When the Spanish commandant got wind of the smuggling he boarded the *Alexander*, confiscated 491 otter pelts, and ordered Brown to leave San Diego immediately.

Two weeks later, on March 17, Captain William Shaler’s brig *Lelia Byrd* anchored in San Diego bay. This time the commandant, Don Manuel Rodríguez, was ready. Captain Shaler’s mate, and co-owner of the brig, Richard Cleveland, recalled the comic opera that followed:

The commandant made his appearance on the shore with an escort of twelve dragoons, and, hailing the brig, requested that a boat might be sent for him. This being done he crowded his whole retinue into the boat, and on reaching the brig waited until they had climbed over the side and arranged themselves in two rows, with swords drawn and hats in hand, when he followed, and passed between them to the cabin.



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In Shaler’s cabin Rodríguez granted the captain’s request for permission to come ashore and buy provisions. The commandant then departed, leaving several guards on board to watch the crew and prevent smuggling. But the sergeant of the guard quietly informed Shaler of the *Alexander* episode and the 491 confiscated pelts, which now, presumably, resided in the commandant’s warehouse.

By nightfall, Shaler sent a boat crew ashore to try to acquire the otter pelts. The sailors bought a small load of black market pelts from some private parties and then arranged to send another boat for a larger quantity. The transaction turned out to be a Rodríguez sting operation. When the second boat touched shore, the commandant arrested the crew, bound them and left them

under guard on the beach. The next morning Shaler and armed sailors rowed ashore, rescued their men and returned to the *Lelia Byrd* with five Spanish soldiers as hostages.

Now it was a race to escape San Diego harbor under the guns of Fort Guijarros. From the brig the crew could see “all bustle and animation” on shore, “both horse and foot were flocking to the fort.” As the ship neared Ballast Point, Shaler forced the Spanish guards to stand in their uniforms, exposed in the bow where they could be seen by the fort’s gunners. The Spanish fired anyway with the frantic guards “imploring them to desist” and falling “with their faces to the deck, at every renewed discharge of the cannon.”

For nearly an hour the *Lelia Byrd* took cannon fire from the fort. A few shots struck the hull, others damaged rigging and sails. A faint land breeze slowly pushed the brig close to the fort. Cleveland reported, “We now opened our fire, and, at the first broadside, [we] saw numbers, probably of those who came to see the fun, scampering away up the hill at the back of the fort.” A second Yankee broadside silenced the fort completely.

Finally clear of Fort Guijarros, Shaler put the trembling guards ashore at Point Loma and headed out to sea. So ended the colorful episode known as the “Battle of San Diego Bay,” the first and last naval engagement fought in San Diego.



Painting by Jerry MacMullen.
Courtesy San Diego Maritime Museum

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