

The “Stolen” Cabrillo Statue

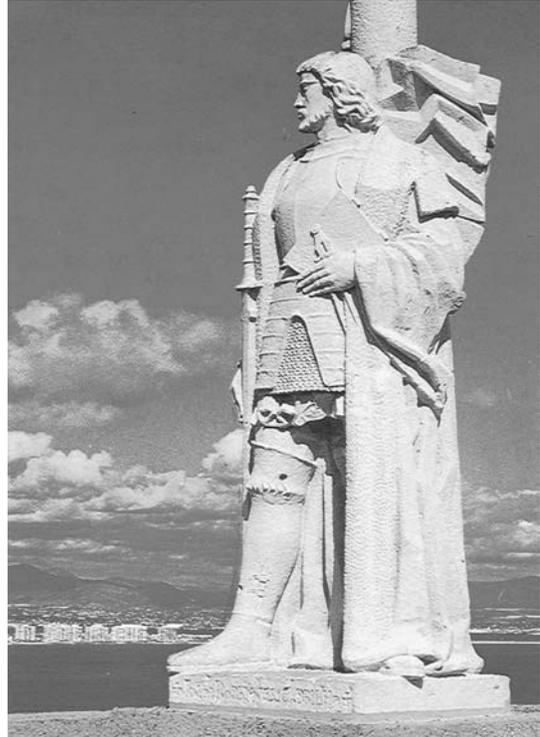
“I didn’t steal it,” declared Senator Fletcher with ruffled dignity. “But there were threats of lawsuit and an injunction, so with a gang of men, a derrick and a truck, I took quick action, and possession is nine points of the law.”

--Los Angeles Times, March 1, 1940

For nearly six decades a figure of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo has watched over San Diego Bay from the heights of Cabrillo National Monument on Point Loma. The fourteen foot sculpture is an icon to San Diegans who know Cabrillo as the sailor who entered our port in 1542, the first European to visit California.

A statue commemorating Cabrillo had long been sought by San Diegans, particularly by the Portuguese community who claim the explorer as one of their own. In the 1930s, the artist Alvaro de Bree was commissioned by Portugal to create the now familiar sandstone sculpture. A decade of controversy would follow.

As a gift to the State of California the Cabrillo statue was sent to San Francisco in 1939 for the Golden Gate International Exposition. But it arrived too late for display and languished instead, in a Federal Customs warehouse. A six-foot replica served as a stand-in at the fair.



After the Exposition’s conclusion, Governor Culbert Olson formally accepted Portugal’s gift. Released from the customs house, the statue was sent for safe-keeping to a private residence in the bay area. The ultimate destination, decided Governor Olson, would be the city of Oakland in Alameda County, home to over 60,000 people of Portuguese descent.

The governor’s decision outraged San Diegans who believed the most appropriate site for the statue would be the port where Juan Cabrillo originally landed. The community was also anxious to make the figure the centerpiece of a planned Cabrillo celebration, marking the 400th anniversary of the explorer’s visit to California. Joseph Dryer, president of the “Heaven on Earth Club,” enlisted the aid of State Senator Ed Fletcher to bring the Cabrillo statue to San Diego.

The statue “was a prize worth fighting for,” thought Fletcher. The senator took the offensive, securing a legal opinion from his Sacramento colleagues that held that the Legislature—not the governor--would determine the permanent home of the statue.

Next, with the aid of Lawrence Oliver, founder of San Diego’s Portuguese-American Club, Fletcher located the statue at the home of a former Portuguese national near San Francisco.

Fletcher and his wife, accompanied by State Senator George Biggar and his wife, paid a visit to the house where the crated, seven-ton statue lay on the floor of the garage:

It was so heavy it had broken the concrete in the garage floor. We discussed the matter with the lady, found she was sympathetic, and convinced her the statue should go to San Diego. Her husband having died recently, she wanted it out of the garage, but insisted upon some authority from the state before having it moved to San Diego permanently.

Fletcher introduced a bill in the State Senate that designated San Diego as the permanent home of the Cabrillo statue. The senators passed the resolution unanimously but it died in an Assembly committee, killed by an assemblyman from Oakland. Fletcher's only thought was to get possession of the statue.

Armed with a letter of authorization from the State Park Commission and a copy of the *State Journal* showing the approval of the Senate, Fletcher returned to the house. The widow viewed the "documentary proof" and consented to the statue's removal.

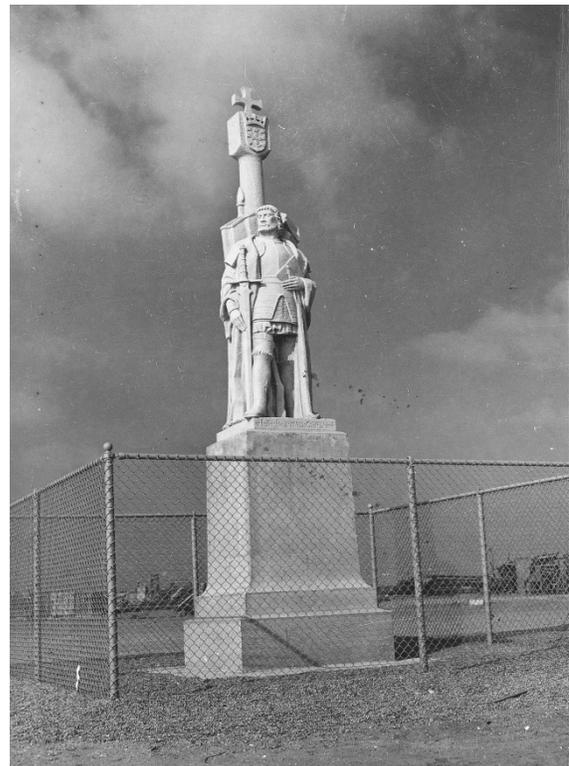
Earlier in the day Fletcher had arranged for movers to be ready at a moment's notice. Now he called in the movers and a crew of four arrived with a "tremendous" truck. The men hefted the statue onto rollers and pushed it out to the sidewalk. Then the telephone rang.

She called me into the house and asked me to talk over the phone to the Vice Consul of Portugal who protested its removal and threatened court proceedings. I also got another telephone call from an attorney in Oakland who threatened an injunction. The lady was in tears, but it was too late. I promised her she would never regret it and left with the statue.

Fletcher's crew hauled the statue to the Santa Fe railroad depot and put it on an evening train for San Diego. The statue was soon safely locked up in a San Diego warehouse under the care of City Manager Fred Rhodes.

The uproar was immediate. Oakland's Portuguese community demanded an investigation. Alameda assemblyman George P. Miller filed a protest with Governor Olson, and the governor himself publicly accused Senator Fletcher of "kidnapping" Cabrillo. The furor slowly died as bills introduced in the legislature to retrieve the statue were defeated in committee.

San Diego dedicated the statue on the grounds of the Naval Training Center near Harbor Drive in December 1940. Here the sculpture remained for the next several years, behind a fence and out of public view. Plans for the statue's starring role in the



The statue at the Naval Training Center.

Cabrillo quad-centennial ended when the festival was canceled due to the World War II. Instead, a simple ceremony honoring Cabrillo was held on September 28, 1942. Dr. Reginald Poland, Director of the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, praised the statue as “a fine work of art” and “a fortunate balance of the natural and abstract.”

The statue was finally moved to Cabrillo National Monument in 1949 where it was erected on a five-foot pedestal north of the lighthouse. An elaborate rededication ceremony on September 28 honored the “discoverer” of San Diego. The statue would later be moved closer to the visitor center at spot overlooking the harbor.

Time would not be kind to the sandstone sculpture. Weathering badly in the ocean air and suffering from “visitor abuse,” it was brought indoors for restoration in the 1980s, never to return. An exact replica sculpted out of denser limestone was dedicated in 1988.

Today, the figure of Cabrillo still stirs controversy. The assumed Portuguese nativity of Juan Cabrillo is doubted; many historians now believe the navigator was Spanish. Scholars also question the statue’s appearance, finding the presentation unauthentic. But without question, the storied statue continues to be a star attraction for one of the most visited National Monuments in the country.

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013).