

## HISTORY OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE FLAG

THE California State Flag has evolved from the historic Bear Flag first flown at Sonoma, California, by a small band of American settlers in revolt against Mexican authority.

Relations between the United States and Mexico had been strained for quite some time, and a declaration of hostilities between the two countries was momentarily expected. The presence of British ships in Mexican waters had been viewed with considerable alarm in Washington, and some of the leaders there felt certain that California would fall either to England or to the United States as a prize of war. Firm in their resolve to acquire the territory for the United States, they urged the advantage of having competent men there to take matters in hand when and if war should come.

Early in 1845, John Charles Fremont, a young officer in the United States Engineers was given the title of Lieutenant Colonel, and appointed to lead an expedition to the Pacific Coast. Because his expedition was, presumably, for the purpose of "discovering the most direct routes from the East to the Pacific Coast," Fremont's little band of about 62 men contained no Army officers or personnel, but was made up mostly of backwoodsmen and mountaineers.

In October of that same year, Thomas O. Larkin was appointed United States Consul in California. As a confidential agent for the United States, he was also to make frequent reports to Washington upon the activities of both the French and the British Governments there. He was, further, to impress upon the Californians the freedom and benefits to be derived under jurisdiction of the American Government.

Scattered at different points along the west coast of Mexico and California were United States Naval forces, consisting of some three frigates and four sloops-of-war under command of Commodore John D. Sloat.

Each of these men was instructed in the action to be taken by him if war should be declared, but each was also ordered to pursue a policy of peace, and to avoid any acts of aggression. The peaceful acquisition of California was most desired, but the United States was ready for any trouble that might ensue.

Fremont arrived in California in January of 1846, and proceeded immediately to Monterey. There, accompanied by Larkin, he called upon the Mexican Commandante General Jose Castro, and explained his presence in the country. Evidently Castro neither expressly approved nor disapproved his stay, so Fremont set up camp in the Gabilan Mountains about 30 miles from Monterey.

The population of California at that time was estimated to be about 10,000 inhabitants, exclusive of Indians. The foreign population, mostly from the United States, was placed at around 2,000. Immigration of the Americans had been rapidly increasing for a number of years, and Mexican officials were becoming increasingly conscious of the menace to their possession. Proclamations had been issued against the Americans, but no definite effort to evict them had been made.

Pio Pico, Mexican Governor of California at the time, maintained his headquarters in Los Angeles, while Jose Castro, Commandante General of the military, was established at Monterey. These two Mexican officials, representing the political and the military factions, had at first been friendly, but had by now begun to quarrel, and the bitterness of their differences had spread among their followers.

The sudden presence of an armed force of Americans in their midst was viewed with increasing alarm by the Californians, and Castro finally ordered Fremont to leave the country. This he at first refused to do, setting up a rude fort on the top of Gabilan Peak in defiance of Castro. However, before actual combat, he broke camp and moved north to the Klamath where he was delayed by heavy snow and hostile Indians. There he was overtaken by Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie carrying certain important messages from Washington. Fremont then returned south to the Buttes where he again set up camp.

In the meantime, Fremont's defiance had provoked more angry feeling among some of the native Californians, and further proclamations against him and against the American settlers were issued by the Mexican authorities. Whispered rumors of actions to be taken were repeated, exaggerated, and finally accepted as threats by the Americans.

On June 1, 1846, Castro instructed Lieutenant Francisco de Arce to remove a large band of Mexican horses from Sonoma to the Santa Clara Valley. Proceeding upon his mission, de Arce and his party were sighted as they swam their horses across the Sacramento River near New Helvetia. Rumor that the horses were to be used for mounting a battalion and marching against the Americans were spread up the valley. A consultation was held near Fremont's camp, and it was decided that the American settlers should capture the horses, thereby frustrating Castro's plans for the time at least.

At dawn on June 10th, de Arce was overtaken and captured by a party of 12 men headed by Ezekiel Merritt. After seizure of the horses, de Arce and his men were permitted to proceed without further molestation.

Realizing that news of the action taken by them would spread in every direction, the Americans then decided to proceed immediately to Sonoma, capture the principal military men of Northern California, and seize the town before the Mexicans could arm themselves in reprisal. Proceeding across the Napa Valley, the settlers had increased their numbers to 32 or 33 men by the time they reached Sonoma.

On the morning of June 14, 1846, they captured General M. G. Vallejo, Mexican Commandante for Northern California, his brother Salvador, and a Colonel Victor Prudon. They then took possession of the pueblo of Sonoma.

The captive Mexican officers were immediately taken to General Fremont's camp near the Buttes, and by him removed to Fort Sutter where they remained until their release several weeks later. Ezekiel Merritt accompanied the men who escorted the prisoners north, and William B. Ide remained at Sonoma in command of the insurgents.

Having thus started a revolution, the men felt that one of their first needs was a flag to represent their cause—and so the Bear Flag came into being.

William L. Todd, who is most generally credited with the actual making of the original Bear Flag, stated in a letter to the *Los Angeles Express* in 1878 that when the Americans had decided what kind of flag should be adopted, he served as artist while Granville P. Swift, Peter Storm, and Henry L. Ford collected the materials. He further stated that a piece of "new unbleached cotton domestic" with four-inch stripes of red flannel attached to its lower side was used. That a star was placed in the upper left hand corner of the flag, and a Grizzly bear passant—common to the country at that time—was placed in the center. Beneath the bear were the words "California Republic."

June 14, 1846, appears to be most generally accepted as the date upon which the Bear Flag was raised over Sonoma, although various historians have set it from one to three days later.

A state of war had existed between the United States and Mexico since May of 1846, but the news did not reach California until many weeks later.

On July 7, 1846, Commodore Sloat hauled down the Mexican colors, and raised the American flag over the Port of Monterey. A courier was immediately dispatched to San Francisco, and on July 9th, Commander Montgomery took possession of that city for the United States.

On the same day, the Bear Flag at Sonoma was lowered, and the Stars and Stripes unfurled in its stead. Thus ended the Bear Flag Revolution—less than four weeks after its beginning.

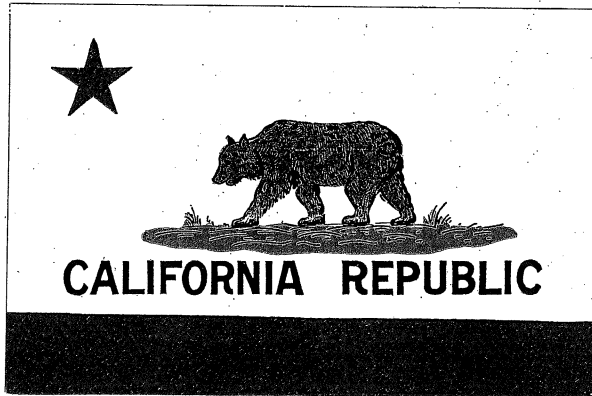
The original Bear Flag was preserved for many years in the offices of the Society of California Pioneers at San Francisco, but was destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906.

In 1911, the California Legislature adopted the Bear Flag as the State Flag for California, and provided that it conform to the following specifications:

Its length is one and one-half times its width. The upper five-sixths of the width is a white field, in the upper left-hand corner of which appears a single red star, across the bottom the words "California Republic," and in the center a California Grizzly bear upon a grass plat in the position of walking towards the left of said field. The bear is dark brown in color, and in length equal to one-third of the length of the flag. The lower one-sixth of the width of the flag is a single red stripe.

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# CALIFORNIA BLUE BOOK



CALIFORNIA STATE FLAG

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