



## A Brief History of the Bear Flag Revolt

By (Steve Beck, Sutter's Fort State Historic Park)

The Bear Flag Revolt was a quasi-military action that occurred in Northern California between June 12 and June 18, 1846. It began the night of June 12 when Americans living in and around Sutter's Fort and other Americans in the Napa area met and decided to start an armed insurrection against the California-Mexican government. The action was precipitated by a proclamation issued by Mexican General Jose Castro that ordered everyone who was not a Mexican citizen to immediately leave California. Many Americans recently arrived from the States and thousands more were expected in the fall of 1846. Castro refused to grant anymore citizenship papers and that angered the Americans. On June 13th, Americans around the Fort, led by Ezekial Merritt, captured a large number of Mexican military horses under the supervision of Lieutenant Francisco Arce. The horses were going to be used by Jose Castro and the Mexican cavalry to drive American settlers from California. Many of the settlers had just arrived and were in no condition to leave. On June 14, the Americans used the horses to attack the military headquarters of General Vallejo at Sonoma. There were 12 or fewer soldiers guarding Vallejo's ranch. The Mexican government did not supply Vallejo with funds for an army, so the army was actually Vallejo's personal guard.

The Americans attacked during the predawn hours and literally had to awaken Vallejo and his soldiers to tell them they were under attack and under arrest. Vallejo treated the Americans with typical California hospitality--which means he opened his wine and brandy cellars to them. After a couple of days of sharing freely in Vallejo's brandy (aguardiente, or water with a bite), the Americans declared California an independent republic. The Bear Flag was designed by William Todd (nephew of Mary Todd Lincoln); although, many of those at Sonoma thought it more closely resembled a "boar." Todd created the flag using spare canvas and red flannel intended to be new underwear for William "Uncle Billy" Elliot and a new petticoat for his wife Elizabeth. William Ide was elected commander of the new republic, and he wrote a "Proclamation of Independence" that was never officially adopted. The original document is in the Sutter's Fort Archives. It was never adopted because the *Bear Flaggers* were purported by some to be too drunk to listen to a full reading of the document. Instead a much shorter creed was adopted. The shorter version, written by John Bidwell, roughly read: "The undersigned hereby agree to organize for the purpose of gaining and maintaining the independence of California." The brevity was more suitable to the attention span of the American rebels. It also became the "oath of allegiance" for the *California Battalion* formed by brevet Captain John Fremont of the United States Army Topographical Corps.

The Americans were emboldened to take action against the Mexicans because of the presence of John Fremont and more than 60 well-armed American volunteer soldiers. The *Bear Flaggers* felt that if something went wrong, they would have the support of Captain Fremont and his troops. Of course, Fremont had no legal authority to lend assistance since, to his knowledge; Mexico and the US were not at war. Fremont observed the Bear Flag action and did provide scouting parties to protect the Bear Flaggers from a Mexican counter attack. One of those parties, led by Kit Carson, murdered some Mexican civilians (Berryessa and his nephews the 20 year old deHaro twins), so they would not be able to report the rebellion to the Mexican authorities.

Official word of war between Mexico and the US arrived July 7, 1846 when Commodore Sloat sailed into Monterey Bay and raised the American flag over the government house. Lieutenant Joseph Warren Revere personally carried an American Flag to Sonoma where it was raised on July 9, and he sent one to Sutter's Fort where it was raised on July 11. The flag sent to Sutter's Fort had only 27 stars and a piece of muslin was sent up from Monterey to add the 28<sup>th</sup> star for Texas which had become a State on December 28, 1845.

