

PAYMASTER: CALIFORNIA BATTALION

The year 1846 has been called the "year of decision" in the history of the American West. In California the change from Mexican to American rule made that phase exceptionally apt. After the expulsion of Governor Micheltoarena in 1845, the political situation became increasingly unstable. Sectionalism added fuel to the already inflammable situation as all civil officials of the Mexican government decided to remain at the sleepy pueblo of Los Angeles while the military leadership, customs house, and treasury remained in the north at Monterey. The rapid influx of American emigrants who were now practically independent from Mexico, made the situation even more precarious. Finally, the presence in California in 1846 of Captain John C. Fremont of the United States, supposedly on a scientific exploring expedition, but more obviously intent on furthering American's "manifest destiny," was the spark which would ignite the tinder of revolution.

In early 1846, Fremont after menacing Governor Jose Castro in the Salinas Valley and subsequently moving his troops into Oregon, returned to California and set up camp near present-day Marysville. There he called American settlers in the Sacramento Valley to join him. It is apparent that from these meetings arose the Bear Flag Revolt of June 14, 1846. On that date a group of American filibusters led by Ezekial Merritt, Robert Semple and William B. Ide seized General Mariano Vallejo and captured the town of Sonoma. Their announced purpose was to set up a republic with the Bear Flag as their emblem. Although Fremont did not physically support the Sonoma action, he subsequently assumed leadership of the revolutionary movement, continuing that leadership when the action in California became part of the total war between Mexico and the United States in July, 1846.

As an American interested in his nation's annexation of California, Pierson B. Reading joined the revolutionary forces on June 8, 1846. Although he was not a participant in the action at Sonoma, Reading began actual service in the California cause on June 16th, when he and Hensley were sent ostensibly on a hunting trip from New Helvetia, but actually to appraise the political and military situation south of the San Francisco Bay area. Reading returned to Fremont's camp on June 20th, reporting the likelihood of an attack by Castro. Prompted by this disclosure, Capt. Fremont moved his contingent of explorers, trappers, and American settlers south to Sonoma, then to the north bay area and finally back again to Sonoma. July 4 was celebrated at that historic city and on the following day Fremont appointed a committee of Reading, John Bidwell and William B. Ide to formulate a plan of action. Because the three conferees could not decide upon a specific plan of action, they agreed upon a statement simply to "render service for independence." The military contingent, now under Fremont's complete leadership, was termed the "California Battalion."

With the formal American entrance into war with Mexico, Commodore John Sloat occupied Monterey. Captain Fremont, upon Sloat's request,

moved his forces to that city on July 19. The forces under Fremont, including Pierson Reading and his friends, were vividly described by Monterey alcalde, Walter Colton, upon their arrival in that place. He wrote:

"They are 200 strong, all well mounted and have 300 extra horses in their train. They defiled, 2 abreast, through the principle street of the town. The ground seemed to tremble under their heavy tramp...Their rifles, revolving pistols and long knives glittered over the dusty, black skin which enveloped their sinewy limbs, while their untrimmed locks, flowing out from under their foraging caps, and their black beards...gave them a wild savage aspect."

Although Sloat was fearful of Fremont because of the latter's actions without authority, Commodore Robert Stockton, who replaced Sloat accepted Fremont's force. It was Stockton who commissioned P. B. Reading a First Lieutenant of Artillery on July 24.

On July 25th the California Battalion embarked for San Diego on the vessel "Cyane." Arriving at that port on August 1, they took possession of the town without resistance. After collecting horses for military use, the battalion marched north and in six days joined forces with Commodore Stockton's marines outside Los Angeles. On August 13, 1846, the pueblo of Los Angeles fell to these Americans. Four days later Stockton issued a proclamation certifying the United States' possession of California. To assure peaceful occupation, the California Battalion remained at the pueblo. While at Los Angeles, Reading, suffering from an infected leg, and "belious colic," which he affirmed causes him "the greatest agony," was appointed Paymaster of the California Battalion with the rank of Major.

On September 4, Reading received orders to proceed to Monterey on the U. S. ship Congress to obtain 350 horses for the Americans. Toward the end of October, Reading went on to San Francisco obtaining both men and horses. There, Major Reading received a lengthy letter from an old Mississippi friend, George McKinstry, who had recently reached New Helvetia and was working for John Sutter. McKinstry re-counted to Reading Sutter's desire to sell his property to the government; indicated he waited with great impatience to see his friend and "talk over all old affairs." At about the same time Sutter also wrote to Reading indicating his price for his possessions to be \$80,000 and defending his right to that sum by asserting: "It cost me a great deal, and (I) have sacrificed myself for the welfare of the public and particularly to foreigners which emigrated in the country; I need not to tell you when I have done; you know all." He added that he promised: "By the first opportunity you will receive what I am owing you, the whole balance at once." In the meanwhile, the tactless occupation of Los Angeles by Lt. Archibald Gillespie had prompted retaliation by the irate Angelenos. Rising against the American force on September 22, these native Californians forced the

surrender of Lt. Gillespie. Their success continued until they were finally subdued by a force under Stockton and General Stephen Kearney in January, 1847.

During this time Reading had joined Fremont, now a Lt. Colonel, in gathering men and horses in northern California. After acquiring a force of over 400 men, Fremont began his long and arduous march southward. After reaching the San Fernando mission on January 10, 1847, Fremont received the Mexican peace envoy, Andres Pico, at his camp at Cahunega. On January 13, the generous peace treaty granted by Fremont, known as the Cahuenga Capitulation, was written by five men. One of the authors was Pierson B. Reading.

Out of the choice of Andres Pico to surrender to Fremont came the savage struggle between Fremont, Stockton and Kearney over who was actually commander-in-chief in California. Although Kearney ultimately won the supremacy, Fremont served as acting governor for about fifty days. As a Paymaster without funds, Reading encountered great difficulty in paying bills and discharging men. On January 23 Fremont issued the following order to Reading:

"In the absence of funds in your department, you are authorized to issue due bills in making settlements with such troops as shall be discharged from the service."

At this time Reading was also authorized to "effect settlements with all the officers connected with the Battalion," and likewise was appointed "special agent and attorney to proceed with blank bonds signed by myself" for the negotiation of loans for the United States."

During Fremont's quarrels with Col. Mason, appointed commander of the southern district on March 28, and with General Kearney, Reading served as the "Pathmarker's" assistant and confidant. When Fremont was ordered to Washington in June by Kearney for court martial, Fremont gave Reading the power-of-attorney to act for him regarding his "La Mariposa" claim. In addition, Fremont continued to write to Reading, informing him in great detail of what was happening to him, to "...give you and through you, our other friends, information of the true state of things here." Fremont also assured Major Reading of his continued endeavors for his former compatriots, reported a visit with Reading's brother and asked him to arrange the purchase of a ranch between Monterey and San Francisco for him. In addition, Col. Fremont wrote Major Reading in June, 1850, asking him to assist in procuring friends in California for a nephew of President Van Buren, stating: "Mr. Van Buren has written to him (the nephew), to say that I have written to you on the subject."

Major Reading's duties as paymaster were diverse. A list of tasks to remember are included in the entry for September 19, 1846 in Reading's journal. They include:

"Deliver the map to Commodore Stockton
Ascertain what quantity of clothing will be furnished the troops
have bridle bit repaired by Mr. Brigman
Obtain muchillas and swiss cloth from Mr. Maddon
on going aboard the Congress, do not forget "Buttes"

Although the task had been difficulty, Reading had served with distinction as paymaster of the California Battalion. His wife later indicated that the War Department had commended Major Reading for his accounts, stating that they were "the best sent in during the Mexican War." Finances had been slow in coming; in fact at the conclusion of hostilities Reading estimated claims to be \$700,000 with disbursements \$166,000. It was not until after a trip to Washington D. C. in 1850 that affairs were finally settled and the Battalion was at least inadequately compensated. Nevertheless, the conflict was over, California was now part of the United States and Reading could finally return to settle his grant in Shasta County.