

*"The undersigned hereby agree to organize for the purpose of gaining and maintaining the independence of California."*

THE BEAR FLAG PLATFORM, DRAFTED BY GENERAL BIDWELL. (FROM HIS MANUSCRIPT OF THE PRESENT ARTICLE.)



## FRÉMONT IN THE CONQUEST OF CALIFORNIA.<sup>1</sup>

BY JOHN BIDWELL (PIONEER OF '41).

**I**N the autumn of 1845 Frémont came on his second exploring expedition to California. This time he divided his party east of the Sierra Nevada and sent the greater portion to come in through a gap supposed to exist farther to the south, while he followed substantially what is now the emigrant road, or Truckee route, and came direct to Sutter's Fort with about eight or nine men. At that time I was in charge of Sutter's Fort and of Sutter's business, he being absent at the bay of San Francisco. Frémont camped on the American River about three miles above the fort. The first notice of his return to California was his sudden appearance, with Kit Carson, at the fort. He at once made known to me his wants, namely, sixteen mules, six pack-saddles, some flour and other provisions, and the use of a blacksmith's shop to shoe the mules, to enable him to go in haste to meet the others of his party. I told him precisely what could and could not be furnished—that we had no mules, but could let him have horses, and could make the pack-saddles; that he might have the use of a blacksmith's shop, but we were entirely out of coal. He became reticent, and, saying something in a low tone to Kit Carson, rose and left without saying good-day, and returned to his camp. As they mounted their horses to leave, Frémont was heard to say that I was unwilling to accommodate him, which greatly pained me; for, of course, we were always glad of the arrival of Americans, and especially of one in au-

thority. Besides, I knew that Captain Sutter would do anything in his power for Frémont. So I took with me Dr. Gildea, a recent arrival from St. Louis, across the plains, and hastened to Frémont's camp and told him what had been reported to me. He stated, in a very formal manner, that he was the officer of one government and Sutter the officer of another; that difficulties existed between those governments; and hence his inference that I, representing Sutter, was not willing to accommodate him. He reminded me that on his first arrival here, in 1844, Sutter had sent out and in half an hour had brought him all the mules he wanted. I protested my willingness to do anything in my power, but was obliged to plead inability to do more than stated, telling him that in 1844 Sutter was in far better circumstances; that on that occasion a man (Peter Lassen) had just arrived with a hundred mules, of which Sutter had bought what Frémont needed. But he had not been able to pay for them, because Frémont's drafts had to go East before Sutter could realize on them the money which had been promised to Lassen. In a few days Sutter returned, but could not furnish anything more than I had offered. Then Frémont concluded to go down to the bay and get supplies. He went with his little party of eight or nine men, including Kit Carson, but without success; so he sent the men back to Sutter's Fort to go, as best they could, to find the main party. Meanwhile he himself had made his way to Monterey to see the American consul, Thomas O. Larkin. After several weeks Frémont and his entire party became united in the San Joaquin Valley.<sup>2</sup> While at

<sup>1</sup> See the preceding papers by the present writer: "The First Emigrant Train to California" and "Life in California before the Gold Discovery," in THE CENTURY for November and December, 1890, respectively.—EDITOR.

<sup>2</sup> His men in the mountains had suffered considerably. Frémont had given positive orders for them to wait at a certain gap or low divide till he should meet them with supplies, but the place could not be found. The men got out of provisions and bought from the Indians. The kind they most relished was a sort of

brown meal, which was rich and spicy, and came so much into favor that they wanted no other. After a while the Indians became careless in the preparation of this wonderful meal, when it was discovered to be full of the broken wings and legs of grasshoppers! It was simply dried grasshoppers pounded into a meal. The men said it was rich and would stick to the mouth like gingerbread, and that they were becoming sleek and fat. But after the discovery they lost their appetites. How hard it is sometimes to overcome prejudice!

Monterey he had obtained permission from José Castro, the commandant-general, to winter in the San Joaquin Valley, away from the settlements, where the men would not be likely to annoy the people. He had in all in the exploring party about sixty well-armed men. He also had permission to extend his explorations in the spring as far south as the Colorado River.

Accordingly early in the spring (1846) Frémont started south with his party. When Castro gave him permission to explore towards the Colorado River he no doubt supposed he would go south or southeast from where he was camped in the San Joaquin Valley, and on through the Tejon Pass and the Mojave Desert; but, instead, Frémont with his sixty armed men started to go west and southwest through the most thickly settled parts of California, namely, the Santa Clara, Pajaro, and Salinas valleys. As he was approaching the last valley Castro sent an official order by an officer warning Frémont that he must leave, as his action was illegal. The order was delivered March 5. Frémont took possession of an eminence called Gavilan Peak, and continued to fortify himself for several days, perhaps a week or more, Castro meantime remaining in sight and evidently increasing his force day by day. Frémont, enraged against Castro, finally abandoned his position in the night of March 9, and, gaining the San Joaquin Valley, made his way rapidly northward up the Sacramento Valley and into Oregon, leaving Sutter's about March 24.

A little over four weeks after Frémont left I happened to be fishing four or five miles down the river, having then left Sutter's service with the view of trying to put up two or three hundred barrels of salmon, thinking the venture would be profitable. An officer of the United States, Lieutenant A. H. Gillespie, of the marines, bearing messages to the explorer, came up the river in a small boat and at once inquired about Frémont. I told him he had gone to Oregon. Said he: "I want to overhaul him. How far is it to the fort?" And receiving my reply, he pushed rapidly on. He overtook Frémont near the Oregon line. Frémont, still indignant against Castro, who had compelled him to abandon his explorations south, returned at once to California. It so happened that Castro had sent Lieutenant Arce to the north side of the bay of San Francisco to collect scattered Government horses. Arce had secured about one hundred and fifty and was taking them to the south side of the bay, *via* Sutter's Fort and the San Joaquin Valley. This was the only way to transfer cattle or horses from one side of the bay to the other, except at the Straits of Carquinez by the slow

processes of swimming one at a time, or of taking one or two, tied by all four feet, in a small boat or launch. Arce, with the horses and seven or eight soldiers, arrived at Sutter's Fort, staid overnight as the guest of Sutter, and went on his way to the Cosumne River (about sixteen or eighteen miles) and camped for the night.

Frémont's hasty departure for Oregon and Gillespie's pursuit of him had been the occasion of many surmises. Frémont's sudden return excited increased curiosity. People flocked to his camp: some were settlers, some hunters; some were good men, and some about as rough specimens of humanity as it would be possible to find anywhere. Frémont, hearing that the horses were passing, sent a party of these promiscuous people and captured them. This of course was done before he had orders or any positive news that war had been declared. When Gillespie left the United States, as the bearer of a despatch to Larkin and Frémont and of letters to the latter, war had not been declared. The letters included one from Senator Benton, who had the confidence and knew the purposes of the Administration. As Gillespie had to make his way through Mexico, he committed the despatch and his orders to memory, destroyed them, and rewrote them on the vessel which took him, *via* the Sandwich Islands, to the coast of California. There had been no later arrival, and therefore no later despatches to Frémont were possible. Though Frémont was reticent, whatever he did was supposed to be done with the sanction of the United States. Thus, without giving the least notice even to Sutter, the great friend of Americans, or to Americans in general, scattered and exposed as they were all over California, he precipitated the war.

Sutter was always outspoken in his wish that some day California should belong to the United States; but when he heard that the horses had been taken from Arce (who made no resistance, but with his men and with insulting messages was permitted to go on his way to Castro at Santa Clara), he expressed surprise that Captain Frémont had committed such an act without his knowledge. What Sutter had said was reported to Frémont, perhaps with some exaggeration.

As soon as the horses arrived at Frémont's camp, the same party—about twenty-five in number—were sent to Sonoma. By this party General Vallejo, the most prominent Californian north of the bay, his brother Salvador, his brother-in-law Jacob P. Leese, and Victor Prudon were surprised at night, taken prisoners, and conveyed to Frémont's camp, over eighty miles distant by the traveled route on the Sacramento River. The prisoners were

sent to Sutter's Fort, Frémont arriving at the same time. Then Sutter and Frémont met, face to face, for the first time since Frémont, a month before, had passed on his way towards Oregon. I do not know what words passed between them; I was near, but did not hear. This, however, I know, that Sutter had become elated, as all Americans were, with the idea that what Frémont was doing meant California for the United States. But in a few minutes Sutter came to me greatly agitated, with tears in his eyes, and said that Frémont had told him he was a Mexican, and that if he did not like what he (Frémont) was doing he would set him across the San Joaquin River and he could go and join the Mexicans. But, this flurry over, Sutter was soon himself again, and resumed his normal attitude of friendship towards Frémont, because he thought him to be acting in accordance with instructions from Washington. For want of a suitable prison, the prisoners were placed in Sutter's parlor,—a large room in the southwest corner of the second story of the two-story adobe house,<sup>1</sup>—which had but one door, and this was now guarded by a sentinel. Frémont gave me special directions about the safety of the prisoners, and I understood him to put them under my special charge. Some of Frémont's men remained at the fort.

Among the men who remained to hold Sonoma was William B. Ide, who assumed to be in command. In some way (perhaps through an unsatisfactory interview with Frémont which he had before the move on Sonoma) Ide got the notion that Frémont's hand in these events was uncertain, and that Americans ought to strike for an independent republic. To this end nearly every day he wrote something in the form of a proclamation and posted it on the old Mexican flagstaff. Another man left at Sonoma was William L. Todd,<sup>2</sup> who painted, on a piece of brown cotton, a yard and a half or so in length, with old red or brown paint that he happened to find, what he intended to be a representation of a grizzly bear. This was raised to the top of the staff, some seventy feet from the ground. Native Californians looking up at it were heard to say "*Coche*," the common name among them for pig or shoat.

The party at Sonoma now received some accessions from Americans and other foreigners living on the north side of the bay. Rumors began to reach them of an uprising on the part of the native Californians, which indeed began

under Joaquin de la Torre. Henry L. Ford and other Americans to the number of thirty met De la Torre — whose force was said to number from forty to eighty — near the Petaluma Ranch, and four or five of the Californians were said to have been killed or wounded. The repulse of the Californians seems to have been complete, though reports continued alarming, and a man sent from Sonoma to Russian River for powder was killed. A messenger was sent in haste to Sacramento for Frémont, who hurried to Sonoma with nearly all his exploring party and scoured the country far and near, but found no enemy.

I tried to make the prisoners at Sacramento as comfortable as possible, assisting to see that their meals were regularly and properly brought, and sometimes I would sit by while they were eating. One day E. M. Kern, artist to Frémont's exploring expedition, called me out and said it was Frémont's orders that no one was to go in or speak to the prisoners. I told him they were in my charge, and that he had nothing to say about them. He asserted that they were in his charge, and finally convinced me that he had been made an equal, if not the principal, custodian. I then told him that, as both of us were not needed, I would go over and join Frémont at Sonoma. Just at this time Lieutenant Washington A. Bartlett of the United States Navy arrived from the bay, inquiring for Frémont. The taking of the horses from Arce, the capture of the prisoners, and the occupation of Sonoma, had been heard of, and he was sent to learn what it meant. So he went over to Sonoma with me.

On our arrival Frémont was still absent trying to find the enemy, but that evening he returned. The Bear Flag was still flying, and had been for a week or more. The American flag was nowhere displayed. There was much doubt about the situation. Frémont gave us to understand that we must organize. Lieutenant Gillespie seemed to be his confidential adviser and spokesman, and said that a meeting would be held the next day at which Frémont would make an address. He also said that it would be necessary to have some plan of organization ready to report to the meeting; and that P. B. Reading, W. B. Ide, and myself were requested to act as a committee to report such a plan. We could learn nothing from Frémont or Gillespie to the effect that the United States had anything to do with Frémont's present movements.

<sup>1</sup> This adobe house is still standing, within the limits of the city of Sacramento, and is the only relic left of Sutter's Fort. [See sketch on page 169, *THE CENTURY* for December, 1890.] It was built in 1841 — the first then, the last now.

<sup>2</sup> More than thirty years afterwards I chanced to

meet Todd on the train coming up the Sacramento Valley. He had not greatly changed, but appeared considerably broken in health. He informed me that Mrs. Lincoln was his own aunt, and that he had been brought up in the family of Abraham Lincoln.



(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN ABOUT 1863, IN POSSESSION OF C. B. HALL.)

*K. Carson  
Late 1 Cavalry U.S. A.  
Brig General*

PORTRAIT AND AUTOGRAPH OF KIT CARSON.

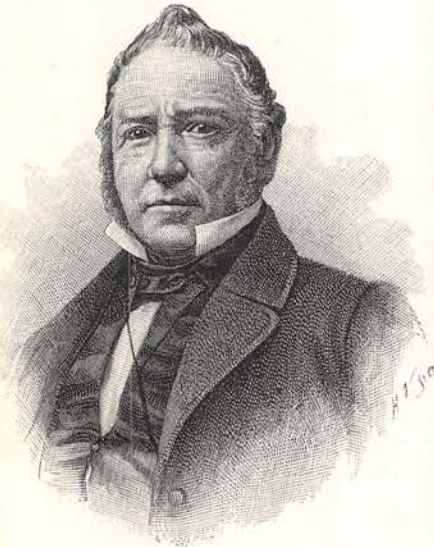
In past years rumors of threats against Americans in California had been rather frequent, several times causing them and other foreigners to hasten in the night from all places within one or two hundred miles to Sutter's Fort, sometimes remaining a week or two, drilling and preparing to resist attack. The first scare of this kind occurred in 1841, when Sutter became somewhat alarmed; the last, in 1845. But in every case such rumors had proved to be groundless, so that Americans had ceased to have apprehensions, especially in the presence of such an accessible refuge as Sutter's Fort. And now, in 1846, after so many accessions by immigration, we felt entirely secure, even without the presence of a United States officer and his exploring force of sixty men, until we found ourselves suddenly plunged into a war. But hostilities hav-

ing been begun, bringing danger where none before existed, it now became imperative to organize. It was in every one's mouth (and I think must have come from Frémont) that the war was begun in defense of American settlers! This was simply a pretense to justify the premature beginning of the war, which henceforth was to be carried on in the name of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Under these circumstances on the Fourth of July our committee met. We soon found that we could not agree. I wished to paste together his long proclamations on the flagstaff, and make them our report. Reading wrote something much shorter, which I thought still too long. I proposed for our report simply this: "The undersigned hereby agree to organize for the purpose of gaining and maintaining the independence of California." Unable to agree upon a report, we decided to submit what we had written to Lieutenant Gillespie, without our names, and ask him to choose. He chose mine. The meeting took place, but Frémont's remarks gave us no light upon any phase of the situation. He neither averred nor denied that he was acting under orders from the United States Government. Some men had been guilty of misconduct in an Indian village, and he reprimanded them—said he wanted nothing to do with the movement unless the men would conduct themselves properly. Gillespie made some remarks, presented the report, and all present signed it.

The organization took place forthwith, by the formation of three companies. The captains elected were Henry L. Ford, Granville P. Swift, and Samuel J. Hensley. Thus organized, we marched into the Sacramento Valley. The men who had not been at Sonoma signed the report at the camp above Sutter's Fort, except a few who soon after signed it at the Mokelumne River on our march to Monterey. This was, so far as I know, the last seen or heard of that document, for Commodore Sloat had raised the American flag at Monterey before our arrival, and soon it waved in all places in California where American influence prevailed.

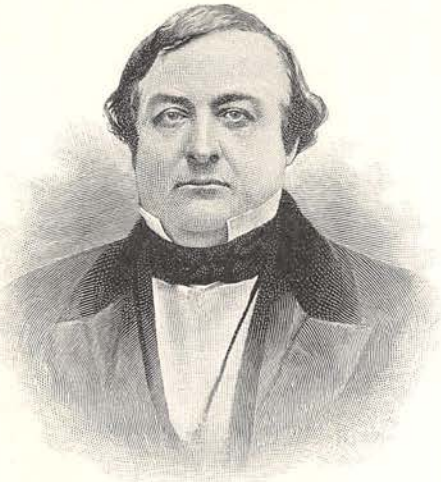
As yet Frémont had received advices from Washington no later than those brought by Gillespie. His object in going to Monterey must have been to confer with Commodore Sloat and get positive information about the war with Mexico, which proved to be a reality, as we learned even before our arrival there. There was now no longer uncertainty; all were glad. It was a glorious sight to see the Stars and Stripes as we marched into Monterey. Here we found Commodore Sloat. The same evening, or the next, Commodore Stockton, a chivalrous and dashing officer, arrived around Cape Horn to supersede him. Plans were immediately laid to conquer California. A California Battalion was to be organized, and Frémont was to be lieutenant-colonel in command. Stockton asked Frémont to nominate his own officers. P. B. Reading was chosen paymaster, Ezekiel Merritt quartermaster, and



JACOB P. LEESE.

<sup>1</sup> So much has been said and written about the "Bear Flag" that some may conclude it was something of importance. It was not so regarded at the time: it was never adopted at any meeting or by any agreement; it was, I think, never even noticed, perhaps never seen, by Frémont when it was flying. The naked old Mexican flagstaff at Sonoma suggested that

something should be put on it. Todd had painted it, and others had helped to put it up, for mere pastime. It had no importance to begin with, none whatever when the Stars and Stripes went up, and never would have been thought of again had not an officer of the navy seen it in Sonoma and written a letter about it.



GOVERNOR JUAN B. ALVARADO. (1836-42.)



GOVERNOR MANUEL MICHELTORENA. (1842-45.)

TWO MEXICAN GOVERNORS OF CALIFORNIA.<sup>1</sup>

I think, King commissary. The captains and lieutenants chosen at Sonoma were also commissioned. Though I did not aspire to office, I received a commission as second lieutenant.

Merritt, the quartermaster, could neither read nor write. He was an old mountaineer and trapper, lived with an Indian squaw, and went clad in buckskin fringed after the style of the Rocky Mountain Indians. He chewed tobacco to a disgusting excess, and stammered badly. He had a reputation for bravery because of his continual boasting of his prowess in killing Indians. The handle of the tomahawk he carried had nearly a hundred notches to record the number of his Indian scalps. He drank deeply whenever he could get liquor. Stockton said to him: "Major Merritt" (for he was now major), "make out a requisition for some money, say two thousand dollars. You will need about that amount at the start. Bring your requisition on board, and I will approve, and direct the purser to honor it." Major Reading wrote the requisition and Merritt got the money, two thousand Mexican silver dollars. That afternoon I met him in Monterey, nearly as drunk as he could be. He said, "Bidwell, I am rich; I have lots of money"; and putting both hands into the deep pockets of his buckskin breeches he brought out two handfuls of Mexican dollars, saying, "Here, take this, and if you can find anything to buy, buy it, and when you want more money come to me, for I have got lots of it."

Merritt was never removed from his office or rank, but simply fell into disuse, and was detailed, like subordinate officers or men, to perform other duties, generally at the head of

small scouting parties. Merritt's friends—for he must have had friends to recommend him for quartermaster—in some way managed to fix up the accounts relating to the early administration of his office. In fact, I tried to help them myself, but I believe that all of us together were never able to find, within a thousand dollars, what Merritt had done with the money. How he ever came to be recommended for quartermaster was to every one a mystery. Perhaps some of the current theories that subsequently prevailed might have had in them just a shade of truth, namely, that somebody entertained the idea that quartermaster meant the ability and duty to quarter the beef!

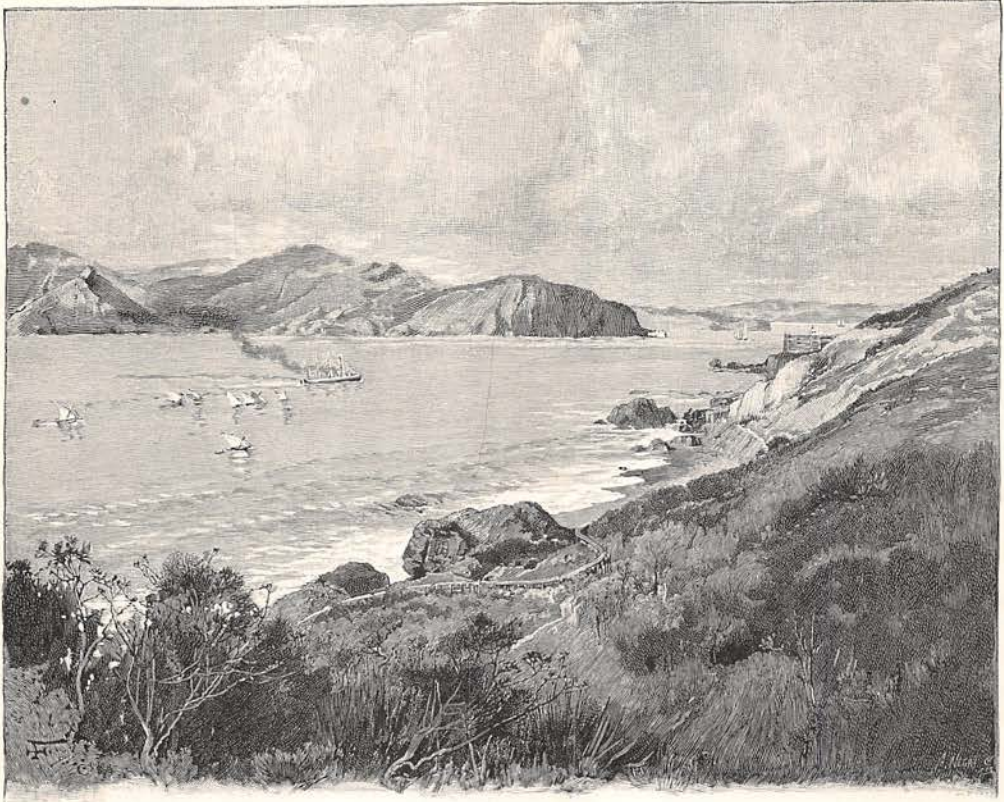
The first conquest of California, in 1846, by the Americans, with the exception of the skirmish at Petaluma and another towards Monterey, was achieved without a battle. We simply marched all over California from Sonoma to San Diego and raised the American flag without opposition or protest. We tried to find an enemy, but could not. So Kit Carson and Ned Beale were sent East, bearing despatches from Commodore Stockton announcing the entire conquest of California by the United States. Frémont was made governor by Stockton at Los Angeles, but could not enter upon the full discharge of the duties of his office till he had visited the upper part of California and returned. He sent me to take charge of the Mission of San Luis Rey, with a commission as magistrate over the larger portion of the country between Los Angeles and San Diego. Stockton and all his forces retired on board of their vessels. Frémont went north, leaving part of his men at Los Angeles under Gillespie, part at Santa Barbara under Lieutenant Talbot, and some at other points. Pio Pico and

<sup>1</sup> For a portrait of Pio Pico, the successor of Micheltoarena and the last Mexican governor, see THE CENTURY for January, p. 379.

José Castro, respectively the last Mexican governor and commander-in-chief, remained concealed a while and then withdrew into Mexico.

Suddenly, in about a month, Frémont being in the north and his troops scattered, the whole country south of Monterey was in a state of revolt.<sup>1</sup> Then for the first time there was something like war. As there were rumors of Mexican troops coming from Sonora, Merritt was sent by Gillespie to reconnoiter towards the Colorado River. Gillespie was surrounded

and reorganized the forces, composed of sailors, marines, men of Frémont's battalion under Gillespie and Merritt, volunteers at San Diego, including some native Californians and that portion of the regular troops under General S. W. Kearney that had escaped from the field of San Pascual<sup>2</sup>—in all between 700 and 800 men. Of these forces I was commissioned and served as quartermaster. This work of preparation took several months. Finally, on the 29th of December, 1846, the army set out to retake



THROUGH THE GOLDEN GATE LOOKING TOWARDS THE BAY OF SAN FRANCISCO.

at Los Angeles, and made to capitulate. I fled from San Luis Rey to San Diego. Merritt and his party, hearing of the outbreak, also escaped to San Diego. Meanwhile Frémont enlisted a considerable force (about four hundred), principally from the large Hastings immigration at Sacramento, and marched south. Commodore Stockton had landed and marched to retake Los Angeles, and failed. All the men-of-war, and all the scattered forces, except Frémont's new force, were then concentrated at San Diego, where Commodore Stockton collected

Los Angeles. It fought the battles of San Gabriel and the Mesa, which ended the insurrection. The enemy fled, met Frémont at San Fernando, and surrendered to him the next day. The terms of surrender were so lenient that the native Californians from that time forth became the fast friends of Frémont.

Unfortunate differences regarding rank had arisen between Stockton and Kearney. Frémont was afterwards arrested in California by Kearney for refusing to obey his orders, and was taken to Washington and court-martialed. Stockton,

<sup>1</sup> Royce, in his history of California, says that the immediate cause of this revolt was the intolerant and exasperating administration of affairs by Gillespie at Los Angeles.—EDITOR.

<sup>2</sup> Time does not permit me to do more than allude to the arrival at San Diego of General Kearney with one hundred soldiers, and with Kit Carson and Beale, from New Mexico; or to his repulse at San Pascual.

however, was largely to blame. He would not submit to General Kearney, his superior in command on land, and that led Frémont to refuse to obey Kearney, his superior officer. Frémont's disobedience was no doubt owing to the advice of Stockton, who had appointed him governor of California.<sup>1</sup>

The war being over, nearly all the volunteers were discharged from the service in February

and March, 1847, at Los Angeles and San Diego. Most of us made our way up the coast by land to our homes. I had eleven horses, which I swam, one at a time, across the Straits of Carquinez at Benicia, which J. M. Hudspeth, the surveyor, was at the time laying out for Dr. Robert Semple, and which was then called "Francisca," after Mrs. Vallejo, whose maiden name was Francisca Benicia Carrillo.

*John Bidwell.*



THE RUSH TO CALIFORNIA: A CARICATURE OF THE TIME FROM "PUNCH" BY RICHARD DOYLE.

## THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN CALIFORNIA.



THE MOST APPROVED CALIFORNIA OUTFIT.  
(FROM "PUNCH.")

IN the summer of 1847 the American residents of California, numbering perhaps two thousand, and mostly established near San Francisco Bay, looked forward with hope and confidence to the future. Their government held secure possession of the whole territory, and had announced its purpose to hold it permanently. The Spanish Californians, dissatisfied with the manner in which Mexico had ruled them, and convinced that she could not protect them, had abandoned the idea of further resistance. Notwithstanding the unsettled condition of political affairs, the market prices of cows, horses, and land, which at that time were the chief articles of sale in the country, had advanced, and this enhancement of values was generally

regarded as a certain proof of the increased prosperity that would bless the country under the Stars and Stripes when peace, which seemed near at hand, should be finally made.

It so happened that at this time one of the leading representatives of American interests in California was John A. Sutter, a Swiss by his parentage; a German by the place of his birth in Baden; an American by residence and naturalization in Missouri; and a Mexican by subsequent residence and naturalization in California. In 1839 he had settled at the junction of the Sacramento and American rivers, near the site of the present city of Sacramento.

When he selected this site it was generally considered very undesirable, but it had advantages which soon became apparent. It was the head of navigation on the Sacramento River for sailing vessels, and steam had not yet made its appearance in the waters of the Pacific. It had a central position in the great interior valley. Its distance of sixty miles from the nearest village, and its situation on one of the main

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Charles H. Shinn informs us that General Vallejo in one of his letters tells of having received on the same day communications from Commodore Stock-

ton, General Kearney, and Colonel Frémont, each one signing himself "Commander-in-chief of California."  
— EDITOR.