



Commodore Robert F. Stockton, 1795-1866: Protean Man for a Protean Nation, Student Edition

R. John Brockmann

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Stockton first made his reputation as "Fighting Bob" in the defense of Baltimore in the War of 1812, and, on his first naval command, he founded Liberia for freed slaves. Yet he also owned slaves on his sugar plantation in Georgia, and later probably used "rented" slave labor his in Virginia gold mines. As a naval officer, he chased pirates with the West Indies Squadron and may have been responsible for the death of Jean Lafitte; yet he acted like a pirate himself in ruthlessly protecting his Joint Companies' monopoly of railroad and canal traffic across New Jersey. Stockton achieved nautical design prominence by bringing John Ericsson to America to create the first steam-powered, propeller-driven warship and the most powerful cannon in the world. (Ericsson later designed USS Monitor in the Civil War.) However, in demonstrating his cannon to high government officials, the cannon backfired killing nearly half of President Tyler's cabinet. From Congress and the President, Stockton brought the invitation of annexation to Texas, but then he tried to initiate a war between Texas and Mexico that he would clandestinely underwrite with profits from his transportation monopoly. He sailed to California arriving at the start of the Mexican-American war so that he was the commander-in-chief of all US forces, and joined with John C. Fremont and his filibusters to take California for the United States-yet he never had specific orders to take California. Upon his return, he became the first naval officer to become a U. S. Senator, and then he sought the nomination for president twice: once on the 1852 Democratic Party ticket almost nosing out Franklin Pierce and once on the American Party or Know-Nothing ticket. His nomination from the nativist American Party is particularly ironic because he has been instrumental twelve years earlier in suppressing nativist riots in Philadelphia. In 1861, on the eve of the Civil War, New Jersey sent him as a member of a delegation to the Peace Conference in Washington that attempted to avert the Civil War. However at the peace conference, Stockton threatened to beat up a member who opposed his policies. Stockton eventually retired from public life to the New Jersey seashore where he founded the community of Sea Girt, and sat idle during the Civil War. He died in 1867 just after witnessing the expulsion of his son who had attempted to succeed him in the U. S. Senate. Historians of the Early Republic and antebellum naval operations will discover hitherto unknown or unappreciated materials and texts in the protean odyssey of this unsung American hero.

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