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DEPARTMENT OF SAN BLAS,
1775-1777**

BY

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DIFFICULTIES OF MAINTAINING THE DEPARTMENT OF SAN BLAS, 1775-1777

CHARLES E. CHAPMAN

In a recent article the writer endeavored to show how important the supply ships from San Blas were in maintaining the early Spanish settlements of Alta California, and how ably the viceroy of New Spain performed the difficult task of getting supplies and ships to the northern establishments in time to prevent abandonment of the province.¹ The difficulties of Viceroy Bucarely and the precarious existence of the new colonies will be even better understood when it appears that maintenance of the Department of San Blas was in itself no small problem. The period covered by this article has been selected because it was long enough after the founding of the department to avoid the effect of abnormal conditions, and also because it was before permanence of the Alta California settlements had become assured by development from within. First, however, a review of the department's history to 1775 will be attempted.²

The founding of the Department of San Blas grew out of the need for a port as a base of supplies in conducting wars against the Seris of Sonora, but it would seem to have been associated from the outset in the mind of *Visitador* Gálvez with conquests in the Californias as well. As early as December, 1767, we learn that Gálvez was ardently at work on plans for formation of the department, having charged one Rivero with the duty of establishing a port there.³ The official objects of the department are stated in Viceroy Croix's instruction of January 11, 1768, for settlement

¹Chapman, "The Alta California Supply Ships, 1773-76," in *THE QUARTERLY*, XIX, 184-94. "Alta California" is used, as also in the present article, for what is now California of the United States to distinguish the more clearly from Baja California of Mexico, or from "California" or "Californias," which formerly included both. Names of individuals appearing in this account have been identified for the most part, where they were important enough to require it, in the above article.

²I have relied wholly on materials of the Archivo General de Indias (A. G. I.) of Seville, Spain. Copies of some of the documents used are now in the Academy of Pacific Coast History, Berkeley.

³Rada to Arriaga, Dec. 27, 1767. A. G. I., *Estado Aud. Mex.* 1, Doc. 99.

of San Blas. After the measures necessary for pacification of Sonora and other frontier provinces should be taken, he said, it had been deemed indispensable to found a port for the advantage of boats employed on such expeditions and available for commerce with Sonora, and for the preservation and advancement of the Californias.⁴ Gálvez proceeded to San Blas in May, 1768, and established the department. Whatever place the Sonora wars may have had in the original plans, the Department of San Blas was to serve primarily as a base of supplies for maintaining the two Californias. The selection of San Blas for this purpose was open to objection, for the port was not a good one, and the site was unhealthful and not suited to either agriculture or stock-raising.

Some idea of the nature and operations of the department may be gained by consulting the *reglamento*, or instrument of government, for the Californias and San Blas of the year 1773. The intimate relation of San Blas to Alta and Baja California is to be noted, for they were regarded as essentially an unit. The principal document in the file which was eventually to become the *reglamento* (for no single document was drawn up embodying the results of deliberations to this end) was a recommendation of May 19, 1773, by Juan José de Echeveste, at that time purchasing agent for the Californias in Mexico City, giving detailed suggestions as to what the *reglamento* should be. The document begins with an estimate of the number of men and cost per year of each of the Californias and San Blas. San Blas was considered under three heads: the department proper; the arsenal or shipyard; and the fleet. The following men were needed: in the department proper, a commissary, an accountant (*contador*), a paymaster and storekeeper, three scribes, an amanuensis, a chaplain, and a sacristan; at the shipyard, a master-workman (*maestro mayor*), a cooper, a rope maker (*corchador*), and a boatswain; in the fleet: for the frigate, a captain and pilot, a second pilot, a boatswain, a boatswain's mate, a steward, a carpenter, a calker, two cabin boys, six steersmen, twenty-seven ship's boys (*gurutetes*), and thirty sailors; for each of two packet boats, a captain and pilot, a second pilot, a boatswain, a boatswain's mate, a steward, a carpenter, a calker, two cabin boys, six steersmen, ten

⁴A. G. I., 104-6-15.

ship's boys, and sixteen sailors. The annual cost of the department proper was calculated at 8,691 *pesos*, 4 *tomines* (or *reales*); 6 *granos*, including rations for 127 men in the Californias;⁵ of the shipyard, at 12,355 *pesos*, 2 *tomines*, 6 *granos*, mostly for repairs to ships; and of the fleet, at 34,037 *pesos*, 5 *tomines*. Thus the total cost for San Blas would be over 55,000 *pesos* a year, with only three boats in service. As an offset, the salt mines of San Blas produced about 25,000 *pesos* a year. Besides the three ships provided for, which were to serve as supply ships, there were two other packet boats, one sloop, and a schooner in the department for which no funds were assigned. Echeveste recommended that very careful, detailed accounts should be kept at San Blas of goods shipped to the Californias.⁶ A *junta de guerra y real hacienda* of July 8, 1773, sustained the recommendations of Echeveste that have been quoted here, but recommended sale of the extra four ships. Special notice was also taken of complaints received from Campo, an official at San Blas, that there were not enough funds on hand even to pay wages to the men,⁷ and the necessity was recognized for early despatch of money to San Blas to cover expenses for the rest of the year 1773.⁸ Bucarely's decree of July 23 amounted to an agreement with the *junta* until the king should decide upon a new *reglamento*. Bancroft Library

Additional duties were placed upon the department in connection with Spanish voyages of exploration to the northwest to see whether the Russians had formed establishments upon American soil. This called for more ships and men and officers. In a letter of July 27, 1773, Bucarely asked Arriaga to send some naval officers from Spain for use in the projected explorations.⁹ Arriaga's reply of August 24 informed him that six were being sent.¹⁰ One voyage was made, however, before their arrival, that

⁵Except for four muleteers and the missionaries this number accounted for the entire Spanish establishments of the Californias.

⁶In *Testimonio del Reglamento Provisional*, 1773, A. G. I., 104-6-16, Cuad. 2.

⁷Campo's letters, dated January 27 and February 14, 1773, are in *Testimonio de las representaciones del Comisionado de S. Blas*, A. G. I., 104-6-16, Cuad. 5.

⁸In *Ibid.*

⁹A. G. I., *Estado, Aud. Mex.* 1, Doc. 1.

¹⁰Cited in Bucarely to Arriaga, Nov. 26, 1773. A. G. I., *Estado, Aud. Mex.* 1, Doc. 4.

of Pérez in the frigate *Santiago* in 1774. The burden placed upon San Blas was a heavy one. Bucarely expressed an opinion in his July 27 letter that voyages of exploration would cost less if conducted from Manila. Gálvez suggested to Arriaga, December 18, 1773, that the Manila galleon should be ordered to stop at Monterey on its voyage to Acapulco and leave goods for Alta California, a cheaper method, he believed, than by reliance upon San Blas.¹¹ So great were the financial burdens of San Blas that one body, the *Tribunal de Cuentas* (Tribunal of Accounts) of Mexico recommended that the department be done away with. This extreme view called forth several protests, among others from Gálvez, who characterized the suggestion as nonsensical, saying that the department was indispensable.¹² One of the problems in the use of San Blas was the great cost and labor involved in getting goods across New Spain to that port, owing to the width of the viceroyalty at that point and the difficulty of the route. It was virtually impossible to get artillery across New Spain to San Blas, necessitating recourse to Manila. This caused Bucarely to send one Agustín Crame to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to see if a route might be found for transportation of artillery. Crame's expedition was a complete success. Writing of it to Arriaga, March 27, 1774, Bucarely remarked that the Tehuantepec route might be used for transportation not only of artillery but also of goods for Alta California and the ships employed in exploring voyages. It would cost less to send goods that way than it did by way of San Blas, and would take less time than it would if recourse were had to Manila.¹³ Despite manifold objections to it, however, San Blas was to remain for many years the seat of the marine department for the northern shores of the Pacific coast of New Spain. We may now proceed a little more in detail to consider its difficulties in the years 1775-1777.

The Pérez voyage of 1774 to the far northwest was followed by voyages of Heceta and Bodega in 1775, while supply ships continued as before to visit Alta and Baja California. It had been intended to follow up the 1775 voyages to the northwest with others, but even before the return of Heceta and Bodega it was

¹¹A. G. I., 104-3-4.

¹²Gálvez to Arriaga, March 8, 1774, A. G. I., 104-6-16.

¹³A. G. I., *Estado, Aud. Mex.* 1, Doc. 9.

clear that there were going to be difficulties. The Department of San Blas had exhausted its funds and had been obliged to borrow 7,976 *pesos* because of the expense involved in fitting out the 1775 voyages. Bucarely more than made up the deficiency by remitting 20,000 *pesos* chargeable to explorations.¹⁴ A more serious difficulty arose when the port of San Blas began to fill in. Bucarely referred to this in a letter to Arriaga of June 26, 1775. The department might have to be moved to another port, he said.¹⁵ On August 27, he wrote two letters to Arriaga on this subject. In one, he said that he had directed Miguel de Corral, a lieutenant colonel of engineers, to make soundings of San Blas and other ports in the vicinity.¹⁶ In the other, he said that he was suspending decision about removal of the department from San Blas, until he should hear whether any Russian establishments had been found upon the northwest coasts, in which case he implied that a better port than San Blas would be necessary. If no more should be required than to send supplies to Alta California, San Blas would answer the purpose.¹⁷ The scant depth of the port of San Blas continued to give trouble, however. On July 27, 1776, we find Bucarely writing to Gálvez, who had become *ministro general de Indias* upon the death of Arriaga, of measures that had been taken in view of the filling in of San Blas. The nearby ports of Chacala and Matanchel had been explored, and there was something to be said in favor of moving the department to one or the other. Barring urgent necessity, however, no such course should be taken, for if discoveries in the northwest were to be continued, either San Francisco, Alta California, or Trinidad, Guatemala, would be a better site for a marine department.¹⁸ Gálvez's reply of January 9, 1777, gave orders to continue the department at San Blas until its port should become wholly useless, and then to move it temporarily to Acapulco. Ultimately, it might be established in some good port of Alta California.¹⁹ None of these plans for a change of site matured.

¹⁴Bucarely to Arriaga, May 27, 1775. A. G. I., 104-6-16.

¹⁵A. G. I., 104-6-16.

¹⁶A. G. I., 104-6-17.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸A. G. I., 104-5-24. Trinidad was suggested, it would seem, because more accessible by land from the Atlantic coast than was San Blas.

¹⁹A. G. I., 104-5-24.

One of the greatest difficulties that the department had to encounter arose from lack of boats enough with which to carry on its duties, despite the fact that there were five boats in the department in 1776. Several factors arose in that year to complicate this problem. Orders had been received for fresh voyages of discovery to the northwest to be made in the year 1777; Alta California had developed to such a point that more supplies were needed than formerly; and finally, Bucarely's *fiscal*, Areche, had been named *visitador* to Peru, and must needs have a ship for the journey to Peru. As the writer has already indicated in a former article much that was done to solve this question,²⁰ little need be added here. Bucarely recommended that two new frigates be built in Peru.²¹ Gálvez informed Bucarely, December 24, 1776, that he approved of the suggestion,²² and on the same day gave orders to the viceroy of Peru to construct promptly two good frigates for use in explorations.²³ The chance arrival of a merchant ship at Acapulco permitted of Areche's going to Peru in that. Bucarely wrote to Gálvez, December 27, 1776, that he was also sending Bodega, a naval officer of San Blas, to Peru to see if he might purchase a frigate there.²⁴ Gálvez approved,²⁵ and gave orders to the viceroy of Peru that only one frigate needed to be built for Bucarely, if Bodega should succeed in purchasing a frigate.²⁶ This matter need not be pursued. The voyages of exploration were officially postponed to December, 1778. One boat was procured in Peru, and another built at San Blas, and they left San Blas for the northwest coast in February, 1779.

It may be wondered why the ships were not built at San Blas in the first place. One reason why they were not was the inability of the department to procure ordinary manufactured articles of which it stood in need, such as iron, tools, artillery, canvas, and tackle. In a letter of August 27, 1775, Bucarely asked of Arriaga that a supply of iron and tools be shipped from Spain to Vera Cruz

²⁰Article cited in note 1, at pp. 191-94.

²¹Bucarely to Gálvez, Sept. 26, 1776. A. G. I., 104-6-17.

²²A. G. I., 104-6-17.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴A. G. I., 104-6-18.

²⁵Gálvez to Bucarely, March 19, 1777. A. G. I., 104-6-18.

²⁶Gálvez to the viceroy of Peru, March 19, 1777. A. G. I., 104-6-18.

for use at San Blas. He had already asked for a supply of the other effects from Havana, he said.²⁷ In a letter of September 26 he asked for 2,500 binding plates (*planchuelas*) for use in making water-barrels for the San Blas ships.²⁸ Grimaldi, acting for Ariaga, who was sick, gave orders that the iron and other effects from Spain be assembled at Cádiz for shipment to Vera Cruz,²⁹ and that the materials sought from Havana be shipped from there as soon as possible.³⁰ On the same day, December 22, 1775, he wrote to Bucarely reciting what he had done.³¹ There was a comparatively prompt response to the orders as regards effects sought in Spain. On April 9, 1776, Ruiz informed Gálvez that they had been sent to Vera Cruz.³² Articles sought in Havana, however, were not forthcoming. On October 21, 1776, Bonet, the naval commander at Havana, wrote to Castejón, of the ministry of marine in Spain, that it was in the interests of the service that the effects desired for San Blas be procured in Peru rather than at Havana.³³ Castejón addressed Gálvez about the matter on December 31,³⁴ and the latter wrote to Bucarely³⁵ and to the viceroy of Peru³⁶ on January 4, 1777, to see if they might arrange as Bonet had suggested. Bucarely replied, April 26, 1777, that he had written to the viceroy of Peru, remarking also that it would be less expensive if the goods could be procured in that viceroyalty.³⁷ Nearly two years had passed since he first asked for them, and they seemed to be no nearer arrival than ever.

Added to these other lacks at San Blas that have been mentioned, there was also a lack of the men required for operation of the department. A letter from two officers of San Blas, Diego Choquet de la Isla and Juan de la Bodega y Cuadra, to Antonio Reggio of Isla de León, Spain, dated February 13, 1775, recited some of the needs of San Blas in this respect, telling also of the

²⁷A. G. I., 104-6-17. He enclosed a detailed list of the effects needed.

²⁸A. G. I., 104-6-17.

²⁹Grimaldi to Felipe Ruiz, Dec. 22, 1775. A. G. I., 104-6-17.

³⁰Grimaldi to Macuriges, Dec. 22, 1775. A. G. I., 104-6-17.

³¹A. G. I., 104-6-17.

³²*Ibid.*

³³A. G. I., 104-6-18.

³⁴*Ibid.* ³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

unhealthfulness of the site and disorderliness of ships' crews.³⁸ The letter was forwarded to Arriaga,³⁹ who wrote to Bucarely on November 3, 1775, requiring him to provide San Blas with a surgeon and a chaplain, both of which were lacking at the time, and to send soldiers enough to compel crews to observe a proper respect for authority.⁴⁰ In a letter of February 25, 1776, Bucarely spoke of a need for carpenters, pilots, and a calker at San Blas.⁴¹ Gálvez seems to have taken up the matter with Castejón, for the latter wrote to him on June 14 that two pilots, two carpenters, and one calker would be supplied for use at San Blas.⁴² Francisco Manxón of the Casa de Contratación wrote to Gálvez from Cádiz on July 5 that he was awaiting orders to send the calker and carpenters, but that the two pilots had not yet put in an appearance.⁴³ Gálvez replied, July 12, that these men and the pilots should be sent at government expense on the first boat from Cádiz,⁴⁴ and on the same day he wrote to Bucarely of the orders that he had given.⁴⁵

It had been contemplated that boats for the department should be built in the shipyard of San Blas itself. If there were to be boats, however, there had to be men who knew how to build them. Bucarely wrote to Gálvez on November 26, 1776, stating that a shipbuilder, boatswain, and other shipyard employees were needed at San Blas. He was seeking a builder in Havana, but wanted one from Spain if he could not get one in Cuba.⁴⁶ On December 27, he wrote that Goya of San Blas had asked for eighty sailors, two boatswains, twelve shipyard employees, four phlebotomists, two light-tenders (*faroleros*), and two armorers. Bucarely had ordered fifty sailors, a boatswain, and twelve shipyard employees sent there, and had told Goya to try in future to recruit men from the neighborhood.⁴⁷ By February 24 he was able to inform

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Reggio to Arriaga, Sept. 26, 1775. A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁴⁰A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁴¹A. G. I., 104-6-17.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

Gálvez that he had procured twelve shipyard employees in Vera Cruz.⁴⁸ Bonet was unable to find a ship-builder in Havana,⁴⁹ but Gálvez wrote to Bucarely on February 15 that a ship-builder would be supplied.⁵⁰ He took the matter up with Castejón, who replied on April 20 that José Chenard had been designated to go,⁵¹ and Gálvez sent a letter next day to Bucarely to that effect.⁵² Bucarely wrote at length, May 27, 1777, reiterating the need for a ship-builder,⁵³ for it was not until July that he learned of the destination of Chenard.⁵⁴ Chenard did not go to Mexico, however. On October 22 Castejón informed Gálvez that Chenard was unable to go, and asked if there was still need for a ship-builder at San Blas.⁵⁵ Gálvez replied on October 27 that the king desired that such a man be sent,⁵⁶ whereupon Castejón notified Gálvez on November 22 that Francisco Segurola had been appointed to go.⁵⁷ Gálvez sent word to Bucarely to that effect the following day,⁵⁸ giving orders at the same time to one Francisco Rábago of Coruña to send Segurola by the next boat.⁵⁹ This arrangement did not please Segurola, who wrote to Gálvez on the 30th that his precipitate departure would compel him to abandon his family.⁶⁰ Segurola's wishes seem not to have been considered, however, for we find a petition of Antonio de la Cuesta, dated December 13, 1777, asking that Segurola's son Ramón be allowed to take the next boat to Havana, so as to join his father there,⁶¹ a request which was granted through Gálvez's letter of the 23d to Rábago.⁶²

The above review is enough to give an idea of the difficulties

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Bonet to Gálvez, Jan. 31, 1777. A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁵⁰A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Bucarely to Gálvez, July 27, 1777. A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁵⁵A. G. I., 104-6-18.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Ibid.*

experienced by the Department of San Blas. Bucarely did all that he could to repair the deficiencies, but delays were unavoidable, for the things wanted were not always at hand or readily assembled. Yet with this lame equipment he had been able to sustain and develop the Californias and to carry on the exploring voyages to the northwest coasts.



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