

THE WAY WE WERE

Cabrillo statue's journey to San Diego marked by legal twists

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By Richard Crawford

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For nearly six decades, a figure of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo has watched over San Diego Bay from the heights of the Cabrillo National Monument on Point Loma.

The 14-foot sculpture is an icon to county residents who know Cabrillo as the sailor who entered San Diego's port in 1542, the first European to visit California.

A statue commemorating Cabrillo had long been sought by San Diegans, particularly by the Portuguese community, who claim the explorer as one of their own. In the 1930s, artist Alvaro de Bree was commissioned by Portugal to create the now-familiar sandstone sculpture.

A decade of controversy would follow.

The Cabrillo statue, a gift to the state of California, was sent to San Francisco in 1939 for the Golden Gate International Exposition. It arrived too late for display, and it languished in a U.S. Customs warehouse. A 6-foot replica served as a stand-in at the fair.

After the exposition ended, Gov. Culbert Olson formally accepted Portugal's gift. Released from the Customs warehouse, the statue was sent to a private residence in the Bay Area for safekeeping. The ultimate destination, Olson decided, would be the city of Oakland in Alameda County, home to more than 60,000 people of Portuguese descent.

Olson's decision outraged San Diegans, who believed the most appropriate site for the statue would be the port where Cabrillo originally landed.

Joseph Dryer, president of the Heaven on Earth Club, enlisted the aid of state Sen. Ed Fletcher to bring the Cabrillo statue to San Diego.

The statue "was a prize worth fighting for," Fletcher said. The senator took the offensive, securing a legal opinion from his Sacramento colleagues that held that the Legislature – not the governor – would determine the permanent home of the statue.

Next, with the aid of Lawrence Oliver, founder of San Diego's Portuguese-American Club, Fletcher located the statue at the home of a former Portuguese national near San Francisco. Fletcher and his wife, accompanied by state Sen. George Biggar and his wife, paid a visit to the house, where the crated, 7-ton statue lay on the floor of the garage.

Recalled Fletcher: "We discussed the matter with the lady, found she was sympathetic, and convinced her the statue should go to San Diego. Her husband having died recently, she wanted it out of the garage, but insisted upon some authority from the state before having it moved to San Diego permanently."

Fletcher introduced a bill in the state Senate that designated San Diego as the permanent home of the Cabrillo statue. The resolution passed unanimously, but it died in an Assembly committee, killed by an assemblyman from Oakland.

Fletcher decided to take possession of the statue.

Backed with a letter of authorization from the state Park Commission and a copy of the State Journal showing the approval of the Senate bill, Fletcher returned to the house. The widow viewed the "documentary proof" and consented to the statue's removal.

Fletcher called in a crew who arrived with a "tremendous" truck. The men hauled the statue onto rollers and pushed it out to the sidewalk.

Then the telephone rang.

“She called me into the house and asked me to talk over the phone to the vice consul of Portugal, who protested its removal and threatened court proceedings. I also got another telephone call from an attorney in Oakland who threatened an injunction. The lady was in tears, but it was too late. I promised her she would never regret it and left with the statue.”

Fletcher's crew put the statue on an evening train for San Diego.

The uproar was immediate.

Oakland's Portuguese community demanded an investigation. Alameda Assemblyman George P. Miller filed a protest with Olson, and the governor publicly accused Fletcher of “kidnapping” Cabrillo. The furor slowly died as legislative bills aimed at retrieving the statue were defeated in committee.

San Diego dedicated the statue on the grounds of the old Naval Training Center near Harbor Drive in December 1940. The sculpture remained there for several years, out of public view.

The statue was moved to Cabrillo National Monument in 1949, placed on a 5-foot pedestal north of the lighthouse. An elaborate rededication ceremony Sept. 28 honored the “discoverer” of San Diego.

The statue later would be moved closer to the visitor center overlooking the harbor.

Weathering badly in the ocean air and suffering from “visitor abuse,” the statue was brought indoors for restoration in the 1980s, never to return. A replica sculpted out of denser limestone was dedicated in 1988.

Richard Crawford is a San Diego historian.