



**Barry Lawrence Ruderman
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This Plan of the Harbour, Town and Forts of Porto Bello (Taken by Edward Vernon Esqr. Vice Admiral of the Blue on the 22d of November 1739. With Six Men of War only,) Drawn by Lieutent. Philip Durrell: Is most Humbly Inscribed to the Rt. Honble. Sir Charles Wager First Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty . . . 1740

Stock#: 65196
Map Maker: Toms

Date: 1740
Place: London
Color: Hand Colored
Condition: VG+
Size: 23 x 16.5 inches

Price: \$2,400.00



Description:

One of the First Maps of the Battle of Portobelo— First Plate Example

Rare and highly influential plan of Portobelo, Panama based upon the sketch of Phillip Durrell, then a Lieutenant in the British Navy, and brought to London by Captain James Rentone. The plan shows the layout of the Battle of Portobelo, a major early clash in the War of Jenkins Ear and one of the most important British victories in the conflict.

Based on a nearly identical map published in March 1740, just as news of the battle reached Britain, this is one of the first maps showing the fight. Close inspection to the [sister map](#) reveals that, although very close, this is actually an entirely separate and newly-engraved plate, most likely made after the first plate wore out. The Battle of Portobelo was one of the most celebrated naval victories of the eighteenth century; it proved so popular that demand quickly outpaced the capacity of the first copper plate.

The plan provides a detailed treatment of the most highly-prized Spanish harbor on the Central American coastline. It shows the location of the town of Portobelo and its fortifications, the Iron Castle, Castle de Gloria, and Fort St. Jeronimo, which together guarded both sides of the harbor. The plan also shows soundings, the locations of the rivers which fed the harbor, and detailed, if somewhat stylized, topographical details.



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Oriented with southeast at the top, the plan shows Vernon's five-ship attack force entering the harbor with a sixth ship remaining outside for protection. The key at the bottom identifies each of the ships, along with some commanding officers and other points of interest.

Portobelo, Panama

Durrell's plan is one of the most detailed and influential plans of this highly important trading center. Ironically, today Portobelo is a small town with just the ruins of the fort to remind visitors of a time when it was a busy, and hotly contested, port. The site that would become Portobelo was visited by several early conquistadores, including Christopher Columbus, but it was not settled until the end of the sixteenth century.

In 1586, the engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli began to fortify the natural harbor, in order to make it a protected outpost of the Spanish empire. He suggested the abandonment of the nearby settlement of Nombre del Dios in favor of the more easily-defensible Portobelo. This process was accelerated when Francis Drake attacked Nombre de Dios in 1596, causing the settlers to flee. This was actually Drake's second sacking of Nombre de Dios, the first had been in 1573. A fire, also in 1596, convinced the merchants and their families to develop Portobelo instead.

The city of San Felipe de Portobelo was officially founded in 1597. Although defensible, Portobelo proved a tempting target for privateers, pirates, and navies in opposition to Spain. In 1602, Captain William Parker, a pirate, attacked, followed by Henry Morgan in 1671, who caused significant damage. Portobelo was again harassed, and again by English sailors of dubious reputation, in 1679, when a group including Bartholomew Sharp and the pirate-authors William Dampier and Lionel Wafer came to the harbor. The focus on Portobelo was justified, as the town was the staging place for Spanish silver to be brought from Panama to Havana. Finally, and most famously, Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon bombarded the town in 1739—the subject of this plan.

Vernon, the War of Jenkins Ear, and the Battle of Portobelo

The Battle of Portobelo was a consequential moment in a war that would eventually involve most of Europe and many of the European empires' colonies around the world. For decades, tension had been mounting between Spanish and British ships in the Caribbean. The British wanted access to Spanish ports, yet the Spanish operated a closed policy with regard to its colonial trade. On the edges of empire,



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however, illegal trade was the norm and one was only in trouble if one was caught. To counter the practice, Spain created the dreaded *guardacostas*, or coast guards, who were empowered to seize vessels found to be participating in illicit commerce. Additionally, the Spanish and the British disagreed over the precise boundaries of their North American holdings, particularly in Florida and the southeast.

On April 9, 1731, Captain Robert Jenkins, a British captain, watched as his ship was boarded by *guardacostas* desiring to inspect his cargo. The Spanish soldiers roughed up the crew, made a mess of the ship, and, as Jenkins claimed, cut off his ear. The captain sailed back to England, where his ear became but one example of Spanish incursions on British liberties, or so the impassioned press would have readers believe. The public cried out for revenge, and the government, faced with a powerful opposition and angry merchants, chose to go to war in October 1739.

The war was no great triumph for Britain, except for one shining moment—the attack on Portobelo by Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon (1684-1757). Vernon was the son of a Westminster bureaucrat and went to sea at age 16. A favorite of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell, Vernon improved from fifth to third lieutenant on the admiral's flagship, the most important ship in the British fleet. He gained his first command in 1706, and he commanded ships mainly in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the Baltic. He joined Parliament as the representative for Penryn, Cornwall in 1722, starting a fiery political career.

Vernon was voted out in 1734 and for several peacetime years he also had no ship to command. In December 1738, he sought out the Admiralty in light of the impending conflict. First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Charles Wager, to whom this plan is dedicated, gave Vernon command of the West Indies fleet, as no other senior officer wanted the post. It came with a promotion to vice-admiral of the blue.

Vernon arrived in Jamaica in October 1739. He had no set plan of attack, only a desire to best the Spanish in the region. Havana was too risky a target, so Vernon settled instead on Portobelo, which he called “the only mart for all the Wealth of Peru to come to Europe” (Vernon to Newcastle, 31 Oct 1739, TNA: PRO, SP 42/85, f. 31). He sailed for Panama on November 5 and attacked on November 20.

Vernon had previously bragged that he could take the fortified town with only six ships, which is precisely the size of the squadron he commanded, as shown on this plan. Due to the prevailing winds, Vernon concentrated his attack on the fort labeled “Iron Castle” here. Tenders, labeled as key item “I”, ferried marines ashore to attack the fort and stop the Spanish soldiers, who were fleeing. Vernon then began to focus on the other side of the harbor, nearer the settlement. The Spanish asked for terms of surrender



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early on November 21.

The British occupied the town for three weeks, destroying the fortifications and opening it to British traders. They gained a Spanish snow, most likely the one which delivered Captain Rentone, as explained in key item "L" and two *guardacostas* vessels, key item "K." They lost only three men, with seven injured.

Aftermath: the fates of the protagonists and mapmakers

The engagement took only one day and, when he attacked, Vernon still did not know that Britain had already declared war on Spain. News of his victory reached London in March 1740 and it elated a public who expected a quick victory in the latest war. This plan was first published March 27, 1740 and it was most likely the first depiction available of the battle.

The capture of Portobelo was received as a popular triumph throughout the British empire. The name Portobelo was often used as a commemorative honor, such as with the Portobelo Road in London, the Portobelo district of Edinburgh, and Porto Bello in Virginia.

Admiral Vernon became a hero. His name was also used in an act of commemoration and veneration, most famously with Mount Vernon, the estate of George Washington. His image, and that of the battle, was emblazoned on medals, ceramics, prints, and fabrics. As the war dragged on and became part of the larger conflict surrounding the Austrian succession, Vernon's victory remained one of the only bright spots available to a weary British public.

Vernon returned to England after a disastrous campaign in the Caribbean in 1741 with his popularity untarnished. He had been elected a Member of Parliament for three constituencies; he chose to represent Ipswich and held this position until his death. Now without a command, even though the war continued, Vernon became an outspoken critic of the Royal Navy. He did return to command later, but his criticisms eventually saw him struck from the flag list. He continued to be active in politics and died in 1757.

Admiral Vernon would later commission paintings of the battle. One of the paintings, "The bombardment of Portobello," attributed to Samuel Scott, shows a layout of the harbor. It is assumed that this geography was based on diagrams of the harbor drawn by Captain James Rentone and Captain Phillip Durrell of the *Burford*, the ship is identified as "E" in the present plan.

Rentone is identified in the title as the person who delivered the manuscript sketch, by Durrell, to London.



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Durrell (1707-1766) would reach the rank of vice-admiral, with noteworthy commands in the Battle of Minorca (1756) and the Siege of Quebec (1758). Rentone, however, was not so lucky. A letter from his wife to the Duke of Newcastle in 1748 (BL Add MS 32717, f. 564) reveals that James Rentone, captain of the *Strafford*—incidentally, one of the ships involved in the attack on Portobelo, key item “G”—had died at the Battle of Saint-Louis-du-Sud, in Saint Domingue. It was one of the final battles of the war.

Aftermath: the popularity of a plate

This plan also has an intriguing afterlife. It was originally engraved by W. H. Toms and published by Harding & Toms in London in 1740 for only one shilling. It was intended as an affordable memento for those wishing to celebrate and learn more about the battle. The memento proved so popular that it seems the first plate wore through, necessitating the engraving of this second plate. The differences are explained below

First Plate

- Harding & Toms:
- Slightly larger
- P separated, in three lines
- Scale title bigger, scale bar farther down
- March THE 27th 1740
- Third line of key smaller than previous two
- Trees slightly different
- Fewer trees around governor’s plantation, titled Gov/rs Plantation
- Rose in compass rose finer
- Small details in ships different, see especially O, which is inferior
- St. Jeronimo Castle label slightly lower
- “This Plan” farther from top of title box
- “I do assure...” line is left aligned
- Key item F, The Hampton Court
- Key item P, use of the instead of ye

Second Plate



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- Slightly smaller
- P integrated, NB in top right of key, third line only slightly smaller
- Scale moved up to accommodate extra text below
- March 27th 1740
- Trees slightly different
- More trees around governor's plantation, titled Govern/rs Plantation
- Rose in compass rose squished
- Small details in ships different, see especially O, which is finer
- St. Jeronimo Castle label slightly higher
- "This Plan" closer to top of title box
- "I do assure..." line is justified
- Key item F, Commodore Brown's Ship ye Hampton Court
- Key item P, use of ye instead of the

Finally, a reduced version in Latin and German was published by the Dutch company Homann Heirs in 1740.

Rarity

This second plate printing of the Harding & Toms map is rarer than the original. Even so, the first plate printing is also rare, most recently offered by Sotheby's on December 2, 1999 (Lot 187) and by Old World Auctions in 2014.

Detailed Condition: