

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

A Quarterly Bulletin of Historic Monterey Issued by
The Monterey History and Art Association
Contents copyright 1980 by Monterey History and Art Association

Member: National Trust for Historic Preservation
California Historical Society — Conference of California Historical Societies

Vol. XXIII, No. 4

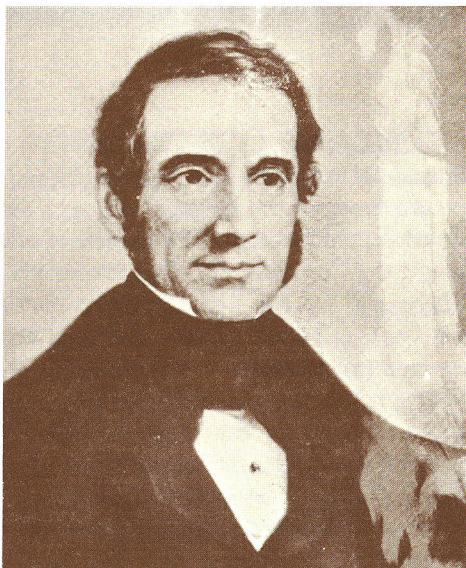
April, 1980

The Rev. Walter Colton's Town Hall

Perhaps because it so long has been "City Hall," the importance of Colton Hall as a reminder of the early days of California statehood are apt to be overlooked.

But to many, it is without equal as a relic of the first years of the United States occupation of the West.

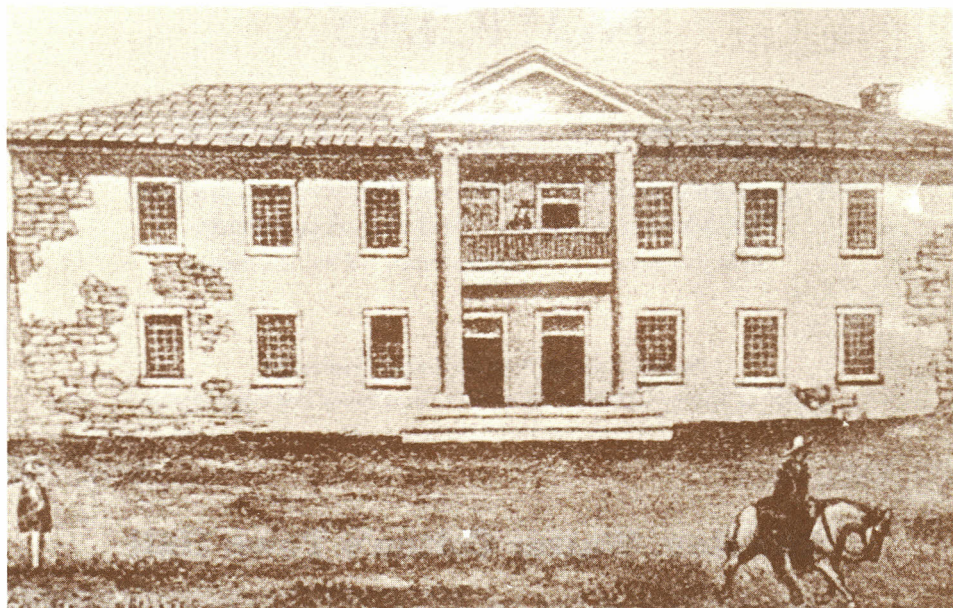
Colton Hall is named for the man who designed and caused to be built Monterey's town hall. Walter Colton was a native of Vermont, a Congregational minister, professor, writer and editor. He arrived in Monterey as chaplain aboard the USS Congress in command of Commodore Robert Stockton, who replaced Commodore John D. Sloat, not long after the latter raised the United States Flag over Monterey July 6, 1846.



It was Stockton's duty to establish some form of government in the newly conquered territory, and he appointed the Rev. Walter Colton, as alcalde, or mayor, of Monterey. Colton turned out to be an excellent choice for the job — a fine imaginative administrator, a judge who leavened justice with compassion and a "foreigner" who understood and appreciated the Californian and his paisano ways.

Colton was surprised, however, that California had no penitentiary, and he set about forthwith to build a jail, and not long after a town meeting hall so familiar in his New England.

But he left another legacy of perhaps even more value — his diary which was published as "My Three Years in California." Colton was a good reporter, and his diary makes fine reading. Following are excerpts from his book, including those pertaining to his jail and his hall, where the state's first Constitution was written in 1849:



1846

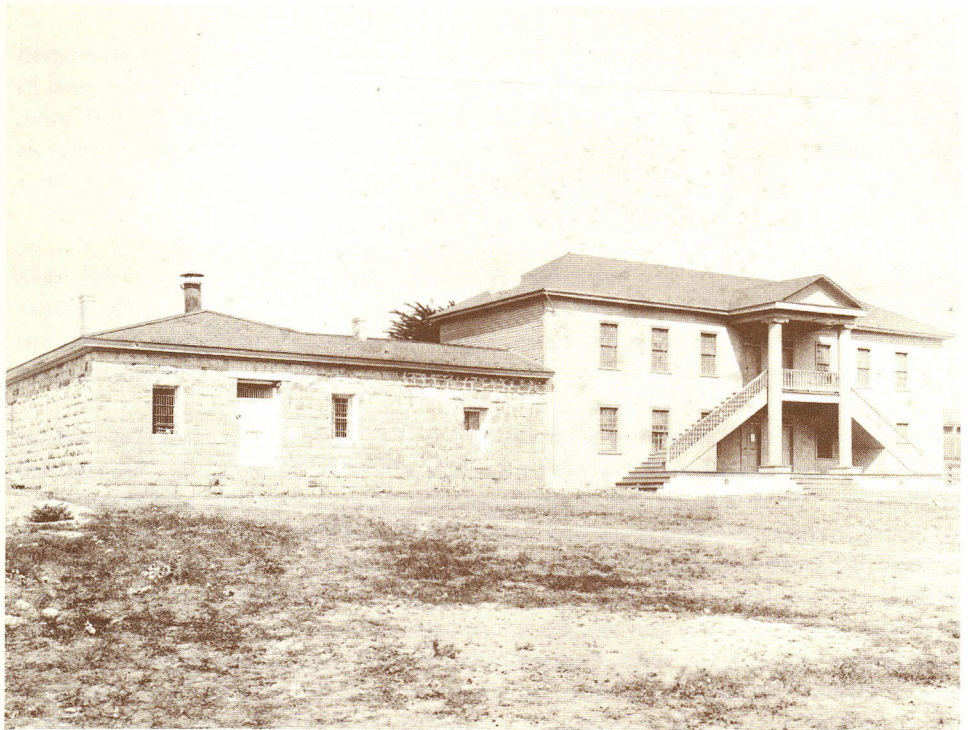
TUESDAY, JULY 28. Com. Stockton informed me to-day that I had been appointed Alcalde of Monterey and its jurisdiction. I had dreamed in the course of my life, as most people have, of the thousand things I might become, but it never entered my visions that I should succeed to the dignity of a Spanish alcalde. I much preferred my berth on board the Congress, and that the judicial functions in question should continue to be discharged by the two intelligent gentlemen, Purser R.M. Price and Dr. Edward Gilchrist, upon whom they had been devolved. But the services of these officers were deemed indispensable to the efficiency of the ships to which they were attached. This left me no alternative; my trunks were packed, my books boxed, and in an hour I was on shore, a guest in the house of our consul, T.O. Larkin, Esq., whose munificent hospitalities reach every officer of the squadron, and every functionary in the interest of the flag. This is the more appreciated from the fact that there is not a public table or hotel in all California. High and low, rich and poor, are thrown together on the private liberality of the citizens. Though a quasi war exists, all the amenities and courtesies of life are preserved; your person, life, and liberty, are as sacred at the hearth of the Californian as they would be at your own fireside. He will never betray you; the rights of hospitality, in his generous judgement, require him to peril his own life in defence of yours. He may fight you on the field, but in his family, you may dance with his daughters, and he will himself wake the waltzing string.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 29. The sloop-of-war *Levant*, under Commander Page, sailed to-day, with Com. Sloat on board, for the United States. We gave the commodore a parting salute. He has rendered the squadron under his command efficient, and preserved harmony among the officers. This expedience of his measures in California will be canvassed elsewhere. He acted on the light and intelligence within his reach. If war has been declared, the laurel awaits him.

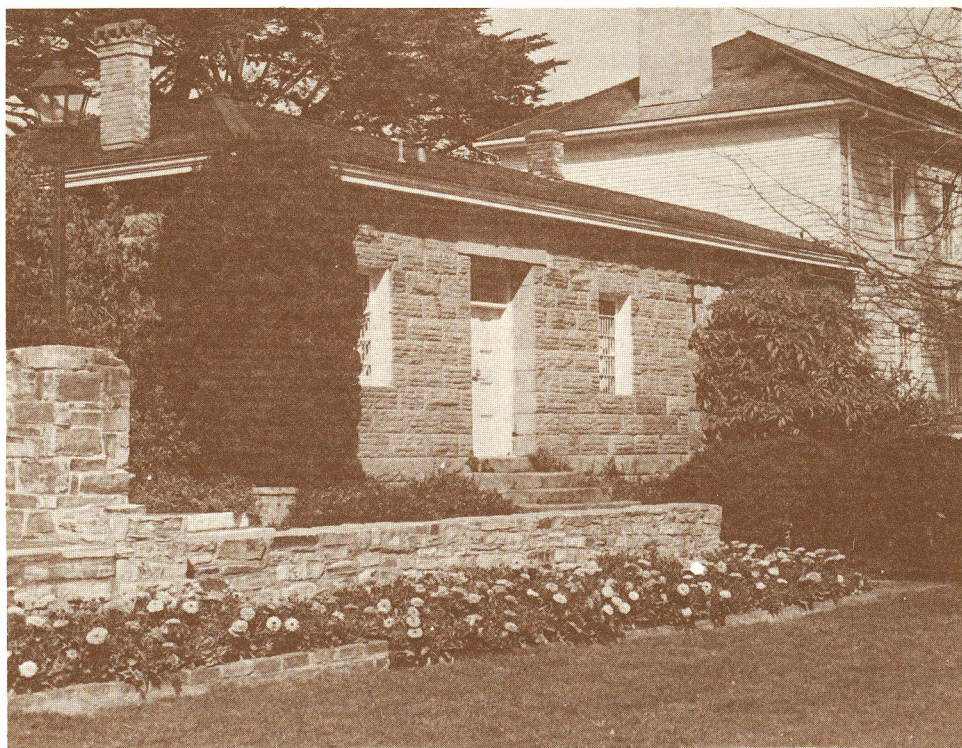
THURSDAY, JULY 30. To-day I entered on the duties of my office as alcalde of Monterey: my jurisdiction extends over an immense extent of territory, and over a most heterogeneous population. Almost every nation has, in some emigrant, a representative here — a representative of its peculiar habits, virtues, and vices. Here is the reckless Californian, the half-wild Indian, the roving trapper of the West, the lawless Mexican, the licentious Spaniard, the scolding Englishman, the absconding Frenchman, the luckless Irishman, the plodding German, the adventurous Russian, and the discontented Mormon. All have come here with the expectation of finding but little work and less law. Through this discordant mass I am to maintain order, punish crime, and redress injuries.

MONDAY, AUG. 10. The fecundity of the Californians is remarkable, and must be attributed in no small degree to the effects of the climate. It is no uncommon sight to find from fourteen to eighteen children at the same table, with their mother at their head. There is a lady of some note in Monterey, who is the mother of twenty-two living children. The youngest is at the breast, and must soon, it is said, relinquish his place to a new-comer, who will, in all probability, be allowed only the same brevity of bliss.

There is a lady in the department below who has twenty-eight children, all living, in fine health, and who may share the “envied kiss” with others yet to come. What a family — what a wife — what a mother! I have more respect for the shadow of that woman than for the living presence of the mincing being who raises a whole village if she has one child, and then puts it to death with sugar-plums. A woman with one child is like a hen with one chicken; there is an eternal scratch about nothing.



Colton Hall in 1907, before landscaping.



Colton's Jail - "Every bird builds its own nest."

SATURDAY, AUG. 22. Our little paper, the Californian, made its appearance again to-day. Many subscribers have sent in their names since our last, and all have paid in advance. It is not larger than a sheet of foolscap; but this foolscap parallel stops, I hope, with the shape. Be this as it may, its appearance is looked for with as much interest as was the arrival of the mail by the New Yorkers and Bostonians in those days when a moon waxed and waned over its transit.

WEDNESDAY, AUG. 26. The Californians breakfast at eight, dine at twelve, take tea at four, supper at eight, and then go to bed — unless there is a fandango. The supper is the most substantial meal of the three, and would visit anybody but a Californian with the nightmare. But their constant exercise in the open air and on horseback, gives them the digestion of the ostrich.

The only meat consumed here to any extent is beef. It is beef for breakfast, beef for dinner, and beef for supper. A pig is quite a rarity; and as for chickens, they are reserved for the sick. The woods are full of partridges and hare; the streams and lagoons are covered with ducks and wild geese; and the harbor abounds with the most delicious fish. But no Californian will angle or hunt, while he has a horse or saddle left. And as for the Indians, but very few of them have any hunting gear beyond the bow and arrow; with these they can kill the deer and elk, but a partridge and hare are too shy and too quick. They spear a large salmon which frequents Carmel river, three miles distant, and bring it in to market. This fish is often three feet long, extremely fat, and of a flavor that takes from Lent half the merit of its abstinence. Spearing them is high sport for the Indian, and is another feature in California life.

THURSDAY, AUG. 27. Nothing puzzles me so much as the absence of a penitentiary system. There are no work-houses here; no buildings adapted to the purpose; no tools, and no trades. The custom has been to fine Spaniards, and whip Indians. The discrimination is unjust, and the punishments ill suited to the ends proposed. I have substituted labor; and have now eight Indians, three Californians, and one Englishman at work making adobes. They have all been sentenced for stealing horses or bullocks. I have given them their task: each is to make fifty adobes a day, and for all over this they are paid. They make seventy-five, and for the additional twenty-five each gets as many cents. This is paid to them every Saturday night, and they are allowed to get with it any thing but rum. They are comfortably lodged and fed by the government. I have appointed one of their number captain. They work in the field; require no other guard; not one of them has attempted to run away.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 8. We have had for the last five days hardly an hour of sunshine, owing to the dense fogs which prevail here at this season. These murky vapors fill the whole atmosphere; you seem to walk in them alone, like one threading a mighty forest. A transcendentalist might easily conceive himself a ghost, wandering among the cypresses of a dead world. But, being no ghost or transcendentalist, I had a fire kindled, and found refuge from the fog in its cheerful light and warmth.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 15. The citizens of Monterey elected me to-day alcalde, or chief magistrate of this jurisdiction — a situation which I have been filling for two months past, under a military commission. It has now been restored to its civil character and functions. Their election is undoubtedly the highest compliment which they can confer; but this token of confidence brings with it a great deal of labor and responsibility. It devolves upon me duties similar to those of mayor of one of our cities, without any of those judicial aids which he enjoys. It involves every breach of the peace, every case of crime, every business obligation, and every disputed land-title within a space of three hundred miles. From every other alcalde's court in this jurisdiction there is an appeal to this, and none from this to any higher tribunal. Such an absolute disposal of questions affecting property and personal liberty, never ought to be confided to one man. There is not a judge on any bench in England or the United States, whose power is so absolute as that of the alcalde of Monterey.

MONDAY, OCT. 12. A wide conflagration is sweeping over the hills which encircle the bay of Monterey. The forests, and the grass with which they are feathered, are as dry as tinder, and the flame rolls on with its line of fire clearly and fearfully defined. This has become still more grand and awful since the night set in. The clouds seem to float in an atmosphere of fire; and the billows, as they roll to the rock-bound shore, are crested with flame. The birds are flying from their crackling covert, and the wolves go howling over the hills. It is a type of that final conflagration in which the great frame of nature will at last sink.

1847

MONDAY, APRIL 12. The old prison being too confined and frail for the safe custody of convicts, I have given orders for the erection of a new one. The work is to be

done by the prisoners themselves; they render the building necessary, and it is but right they should put it up. Every bird builds its own nest. The old one will hold an un inventive Indian, but a veteran from Sidney or Sing Sing would work his way out like a badger from his hole, which the school urchin had obstructed. I had an experiment with one a few nights since, and he went through the roof with ball and chain. How he ever reached the rafters, unless the man in the moon magnetized him, I cannot conjecture. But out he got, and it cost me a California chase to catch him.

THURSDAY, APRIL 16. Six of the crew of the Columbus ran from one of her boats this morning. They cleared the town in a few minutes, and plunged into a forest which shadows a mountain gorge. The officer of the boat came with a request from Capt. Wyman that I would have them caught and brought back. My constables were both absent, and I ordered three Californians who were well mounted to go in pursuit. The native people are always inclined to aid a sailor in his attempt to escape; they seem to think he is of course running from oppression or wrong, when in nine cases out of ten he is running upon some sudden impulse, and continues the race because he has begun it.

In this instance an order was given and it was obeyed; the sailors were promptly apprehended and brought back. But had I offered a reward of fifty dollars each for them, and left the Californians to pursue or not as they preferred, not one of them would have been apprehended. I have never known a Californian to molest a runaway sailor or soldier to secure the reward offered. He will obey my order to arrest him, and he would do the same if ordered to.

1848

THURSDAY, FEB. 10. By the laws and usages of the country, the judicial functions of the Alcalde of Monterey extend to all cases, civil and criminal, arising with the middle department of California. He is also the guardian of the public peace, and is charged with the maintenance of law and order, whenever and wherever threatened, or violated; he must arrest, and imprison, or sentence to the public works, the lawless and refractory, and he must enforce, through his executive powers, the decisions and sentences which he has pronounced in his judicial capacity. His prerogatives and official duties extend over all the multiplied interests and concerns of his department, and reach to every grievance and crime, from the jar that trembles around the domestic hearth, to the guilt which throws its gloom on the gallows and the grave.

THURSDAY, FEB. 17. There is no need of an Orphan Asylum in California. The amiable and benevolent spirit of the people hovers like a shield over the helpless. The question is not, who shall be burdened with the care of an orphan, but who shall have the privilege of rearing it. Nor do numbers or circumstances seem to shake this spirit; it is triumphant over both. A plain, industrious man, of rather limited means, applied to me to-day for the care of six orphan children. I asked him how many he had of his own; he said fourteen as yet. "Well, my friend," I observed, "are not fourteen enough for one table, and especially with the prospect of more?" "Ah," said the Californian, "the hen that has twenty chickens scratches no harder than the hen that has one." So I told him I would inquire into the present condition of the children, and then decide on his application. His claim lay in the fact that his wife was the godmother of the orphans.



Colton Hall today - a precious relic of the past.

THURSDAY, MARCH 8. The town-hall, on which I have been at work for more than a year, is at last finished. It is built of a white stone, quarried from a neighboring hill, and which easily takes the shape you desire. The lower apartments are for schools; the hall over them — seventy feet by thirty — is for public assemblies. The front is ornamented with a portico, which you enter from the hall. It is not an edifice that would attract any attention among public buildings in the United States; but in California it is without a rival. It has been erected out of the slender proceeds of townlots, the labor of the convicts, taxes on liquor shops, and fines of gamblers. The scheme was regarded with incredulity by many but the building is finished, and the citizens have assembled in it, and christened it after my name, which will now go down to posterity with the odor of gamblers, convicts, and tipplers. I leave it as an humble evidence of what may be accomplished by rigidly adhering to one purpose, and shrinking from no personal efforts necessary to its achievement. A prison has also been built, and mainly through the labor of the convicts. Many a joke the rogues have cracked while constructing their own cage; but they have worked so diligently I shall feel constrained to pardon out the less incorrigible. It is difficult here to discriminate between offences which flow from moral hardihood, and those which result, in a measure, from untoward circumstances. There is a wide difference in the turpitude of the two; and an alcalde under the Mexican law, has a large scope in which to exercise his sense of moral justice. Better to err a furlong with mercy than a fathom with cruelty. Unmerited punishment never yet reformed its subject; to suppose it, is a libel on the human soul.

THE EDITORS
MONTEREY HISTORY
AND ART ASSOCIATION

Post Office Box 805
Monterey, California 93940

Return Requested

Non-Profit Organization
Bulk Rate
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 88
Monterey, California

Officers and Directors 1979-80

OFFICERS: 1979-80

President: Harold C. Hallett

Vice-President: Mrs. Charles (Martha) Bentley

Treasurer: Frank K. Fulton

Secretary: Mrs. Tina T. Del Piero

DIRECTORS: William H. Ballard, Mrs. Charles Bentley, John Burns, Capt. Norman D. Chetlin, James G. Costello, Eldon J. Covell, Mrs. Tina Del Piero, Douglas C. Despard Jr., Mrs. Christopher Dreyer, The Rev. Dwight Edwards, Mrs. Amelie Elkinton, Mrs. Alfred G. Fry, Frank K. Fulton, Col. Guy G. Gilchrist Jr., Harold C. Hallett, Col. James E. Henderson, C. Warner Keeley Jr., Col. Perry B. Lamson, Mrs. James D. Land, Miss Susan Littlefield, Francis Palms, Mrs. Stewart T. Peck, Mrs. Henry Ragsdale, Richard H. Rotter, H. Lewis Scott, Kent Seavey, Mrs. C. Tod Singleton Jr., R. Adm. Earl E. Stone, Burney Threadgill Jr., Mrs. Duncan Todd.