

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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The warm interior of Casa Serrano beckons visitors to enter. Story inside.

INSIDE: Casa Serrano - A History

CASA SERRANO - A HISTORY

By Mary Korstad Engholm

Casa Serrano, a little adobe on Pacific Street, was purchased by the Monterey History and Art Association in 1959. With a front footage of 98 feet and a depth of 68 feet, it proved to be a valuable acquisition for the price of \$21,524. Although the structure was in a state of disrepair, the vision, organization, and energy of the members turned it into a delightful home for the association's collection of historic artifacts, paintings, and furniture. The casa also provided History and Art with a place for meetings and hospitality in the tradition of old Monterey.

It was built in the early 1840's with adobe walls that were a little over twenty inches thick, the length of the bricks. They supported the heavy beams, ceiling and shingled roof, all of redwood, a popular material at that time. Interior walls were painted white, in the Mexican manner, to reflect light from the small windows. Originally, the structure contained three rooms, the center one with a simple fireplace. An upper loft was reached by a typical outside staircase. The building was unusual in that the two side walls extended beyond the enclosed portion of the house to support the heavy roof covering the front entrance. This architectural feature created a porch unencumbered by wooden posts. As in most adobes built during the Mexican period (1822-1846), it was oriented to face east or west to take advantage of the morning and evening sunshine at both front and back entrances.

Several improvements were made to the minimal structure in 1845. Usually, floors were of hard packed earth mixed with ox blood and tallow so they could be swept clean. These had been covered by redwood planking, which raised the floor level and made the door lintels lower, causing people to stoop when they went under them. Shutters and iron or wooden bars had been used for protection at the windows, creating problems when the shutters were open. Dust, wind-born objects, and flying creatures came into the house, making it necessary for residents to hang oiled hides over the openings. Although light could filter through them, they lacked transparency. Clear glass was installed, a needed improvement and a sign of progress in those days. An outdoor kitchen was added also, since cooking was seldom done inside a home. The casa was owned by Thomas Larkin, the first and only American consul at Monterey. After the improvements were made, he sold it to Don Florencio Serrano, for whom the house was named. Records show that it was purchased from a "foreigner," as Larkin was considered, early in 1846 for \$1003.

Don Florencio was a young man of Spanish descent who had been studying medicine in Mexico City in the 1830's. His dreams of becoming a doctor were shattered by the death of his parents when he was only twenty years old, leaving him with the care of his younger sister, Francisca, a widow with a small son and daughter. Although an uncle

offered to care for all four, the young man was too proud and independent to accept help. Furthermore, stories of Northern California and a spirit of adventure lured the young man.

A colonization company was being formed at that time with the blessing of the Mexican government. Its purpose was to travel to California, develop the area and improve the population. Since its residents consisted of Indians, soldiers, some priests of the missions, and a few American merchants who had sailed around the Horn from the East Coast, this chosen group of 250 doctors, farmers, craftsmen, and other artisans could be a welcome addition. They had been enticed by the promise of rich lands, loans of money to help them through the first year, animals to stock their ranchos, and free transportation. The well-educated Don Serrano, his sister and her two children joined this band who set sail from the Mexican Coast in two ships in 1834. One of the vessels landed in Southern California, where some of the passengers chose to settle. Others, who had disembarked, made their way overland to Monterey.

Although the colonists arrived eager to establish themselves in their new home, they were met with the heartbreaking news that government leadership had changed, and the whole area was in a state of political turmoil. The missions had been secularized under Mexican rule, and the friars were afraid of losing their huge acreage. Consequently, there were no ranchos, no animals, and no money to give the colonists as promised. They were to receive absolutely nothing except their free transportation. Some of the party returned to Mexico in disgust, but Serrano and his family plus Jose Abrego (an adobe and street are named after him) decided to remain. Their original disappointment was compounded when news arrived that the brig *Natalia*, which was carrying all of their worldly treasures, had crashed on the rocks off the coast of Monterey, and everything was lost.

The members of the group were stranded in a strange land without their possessions and with no means of support. Florencio Serrano was one of the lucky ones, for he could read and write, a talent few possessed in Monterey at that time. He accepted a position as administrator of Mission San Antonio, moving to that far outpost. Francisca and her children remained in Monterey, however, boarding with the Kinlock family. Within the year her brother returned to Monterey to join her.

His education had served him well, for almost immediately he found employment as a teacher and clerk in various offices, including secretary of the town council. In spite of her brother's success, Francisca still missed her friends at home. She and her children left for Mexico and relatives who would care for them. In 1838, Florencio received a letter from her, mailed in Mazatlan, assuring him of her safe arrival.

As time passed, he held various government posts, eventually becoming second alcalde (assistant mayor) in 1844. Don Florencio arranged for the purchase of his little casa in 1845. It also was the year



Casa Serrano was saved by members of the Monterey History and Art Association, among others. It now serves as one of the group's meeting places.

he married the lively Rita, thirteen years his junior. She was the daughter of Joaquin de la Torre, the head of a prominent military family and whose wife was Maria de los Angeles Cota. After the wedding ceremony, conducted at the Royal Presidio Chapel, the couple moved into the three room adobe where they raised their children and lived together for more than thirty years.

After war had been declared between the United States and Mexico, Commodore Sloat landed in Monterey on July 7, 1846, and raised the Stars and Stripes over the Custom House. This gesture added approximately 600,000 square miles of land to America without a single shot being fired. Sloat's administrative duties began almost immediately, for during his second day in town, he received a letter from Thomas Larkin urging him to open a school and appoint a headmaster. Since education had been haphazard during the Mexican period, it was considered a wise move for the commodore to show

concern for the welfare of the town's children. It was one way the Americans could more readily gain the respect of the local residents.

The well educated Serrano was the obvious choice. Thus he became the headmaster of the first American school in California, although the children were taught in Spanish. His salary was \$1000 a year. Special furniture was ordered, keeping carpenters busy until the classes began. For some time a number of California children had been transported by ship to Hawaii by Captain Cooper of Monterey. They attended a school there where they could receive an American education. It was only natural for parents to want their children to learn while being closer to home, even though they were not taught in English. The location of this school is unknown, but in later years, the parlor of Casa Serrano served as a classroom.

When Walter Colton left the area, Don Florencio was elevated to alcalde in 1848. He had been well trained under his predecessor, for he had sat on the first jury when Colton had introduced the system of American justice and trials by jury. Because Serrano was admired and respected for his intelligence, fairness, and kindness, he became increasingly important in the growth of the town.

In 1849, Don Serrano purchased land adjoining the back of his adobe that extended to the property of Maria Antonia Vallejo. A narrow road, called Vallejo Street, was created to separate the parcels from each other. Later, it was widened and renamed Pierce Street.

Over the years, Don Florencio made needed improvements to his house, adding to the back in order to accommodate his growing family. He and Rita had six children, although only four lived to maturity. Life was not easy in those days.

The gentle don continued to teach and was very successful. Unfortunately, there was one teacher in the area who appeared to be jealous of his ability. It was common knowledge that parents chose to send their offspring to his school, instead of to others, because they admired his intelligence and kind manner, thoroughness and patience. They knew that, in addition to receiving an excellent education, his students would love and respect him, a key to good learning. Unfortunately, the envious teacher offered to help Don Florencio when he was having a problem with his eyes, recommending that he use special drops. They were of no value. Instead, they tragically blinded him. But the good man refused to believe that anyone would deliberately harm him, dismissing the catastrophic eye drops as an unintentional mistake.

After his blindness, Don Florencio taught in his school with the aid of his daughter Manuela. In later years she told of her father's phenomenal memory, and that he knew every word of each page of his students' lessons so well that he corrected them during recitations when they made an error.

As he grew older, the maestro and his wife were cared for by their sons Raphael and Pedro. Shortly before Don Florencio died at the age of

63 in 1877, Hubert Howe Bancroft sent a representative to Monterey to interview him. This well-known California historian knew the importance of recording valuable tales from the past that were retained in Serrano's remarkable memory. We have learned much from this humble, kind man, who overcame many obstacles while adding richness to the history of Monterey.

Rita survived him, remaining in the casa after his death. When she died, their son Raphael raised his children there. Eventually, the family scattered, and the building was abandoned.

In 1933, the adobe was leased to the Cademartori family for a restaurant. The back wall was extended into the garden to create more room for the diners. In time, they outgrew the facilities and moved to larger quarters. Two or three other restaurants opened in Casa Serrano, but they failed to prosper and moved away. The house was abandoned and plans were made to tear it down for a city parking lot.

Those who had watched the wrecking ball at work, demolishing other buildings rich in history, were incensed. Yet from the 1890's into the twentieth century, it had been considered progress to pull down the old and replace it with the new.

Many disagreed and were spurred into action. As a result, Carmel Martin, Claude Faw, and Clinton Slusher of the Monterey History and Art Association appeared before the city council in September of 1958 with a plan to save Casa Serrano from destruction. A decision was reached, and the association purchased Casa Serrano. We have come full circle. Because of the strong beliefs of a few people in a very special organization, a small adobe full of history now remains for us to enjoy.

Trained docents guide visitors through the building each Saturday and Sunday, with the exception of the Christmas holiday. No entrance fee is charged.

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