

**NOTICIAS**  
**del**  
**PUERTO de MONTEREY**  
**A Quarterly Bulletin of Historic Monterey Issued by**  
**The Monterey History and Art Association**  
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**Member: National Trust for Historic Preservation**  
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**Vol. XLVIII No. 2**

**September 1996**

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Frances (Fanny) Cummins Porter  
Courtesy of Bernice Porter

**Inside: John T. and Frances Cummins Porter**  
**A Story of a Pioneer Family in California**

# **John T. and Frances Cummins Porter** **A Story of a Pioneer Family in California**

by Ruta Casabianca, Director, Monterey History and Art Association

John T. and Frances (Fanny) Cummins Porter, a pair of tall, imposing pioneers, accustomed to the dangers of the frontier, were prepared for any adventure when they went out on a Sunday drive in the Monterey countryside during the Civil War years. So when they were accosted by Southern sympathizers, it was natural for John T. to draw his gun. But it must have been a bit disconcerting when Fanny called out, "Please excuse us gentlemen, but we are on our way to Church. Drive on, John." (As related by John T.'s Grandson, Ed Porter Pfingst to his niece, Diane Porter Cooley.)

"Gold fever" seduced the Porter brothers and their cousins to come to California and make their fortunes. The oldest of seven children, John T. Porter was born in Duxbury, Massachusetts, August 26, 1830. His father, a doctor, was Daniel Webster's personal physician as well as business partner.

Armed with a letter of reference by Daniel Webster, John T. signed on as an able-bodied seaman on the bark *Herculaneum* and sailed around the Horn to San Francisco, where he arrived in 1850 at the age of twenty. Whereas the bulk of the crew immediately rushed off to the mines, John T. stayed long enough to help unload the ship. He then went to the gold fields in the Yuba River area where he had little success. By 1852 he joined his two cousins, Benjamin and George Porter, in the Soquel area. There they opened the first cow-hide tannery in the area and possibly in Northern California. Until then cattle hides had to be shipped back east for processing, returning to California as finished products.

John T. Porter, a powerful young man standing 6 feet 2 inches tall, was elected sheriff of Santa Cruz County in 1857 and, to use his own expression, "rounded up" some of the worst characters in the State whom the Vigilance Committee had forced to leave San Francisco.<sup>1</sup>

## **Marriage to Frances Cummins**

"I was a young girl, just fresh from the convent school at Kingston, Ontario [Canada]. If I had been a Roman Catholic, I should have become a nun, for I was much impressed with the idea that I had a mission in life, that I must find a way to do my part for the world," is how Frances (Fanny) Cummins Porter described herself when she first arrived in California, joining her brother in Watsonville in 1857. Her first assignment as a teacher in Watsonville, "was worth the \$75 a month to teach it. For it was not easy. There were Indians and Mexicans, Spanish and Japanese and Chinese, all sorts of nationalities, and very few white children."

"Then I married the sheriff, [in 1859] Mr. Porter, and for three years while he held that office after that, I was constantly anxious for his safety for those were troubled times, and it was a dangerous post to fill."<sup>2</sup> After John T. came home with a bullet hole in the crown of his felt hat, Fanny insisted he make a job change. By then, Fanny was the young mother of an infant son and was not interested in the prospect of being a young, destitute widow.





John T. Porter  
Courtesy of Santa Cruz Historical Trust

### **John T. Porter Appointed Customs Collector in Monterey**

The politics of the time were responsible for the nature of this job change. John T. was one of the founders of the Republican Party in California, the party opposed to the extension of slavery. The election of Abraham Lincoln, first Republican president, signaled the secession of the South and the beginning of the Civil War. England was known to be funding the South and also controlled much of the Pacific seaways. Gold was being smuggled out of California ports to British ships off the coast. Each customs officer was responsible for his port and the section of coast around it. Therefore, it was necessary to have trustworthy people controlling the ports.

President Lincoln appointed John T. Porter to be Collector of the Port of Monterey in 1861. He was the natural choice for this important job: he was active with the Republican Party, he knew the Central Coast, was an experienced sheriff, and his trustworthiness was attested to by the statesman, Daniel Webster.

The position lasted for five years, until the war ended and the Custom House of Monterey was closed. Once the Civil War was over the reason for smuggling gold ended, and the Monterey job was eliminated. After 1865, the customs operations were overseen from San Francisco.

During the war, while living at the Custom House in Monterey, Fanny gave birth to her second child, Florence Porter, on Christmas Day, 1863. Fanny became close friends with Maria Ignasi Bonifacio, who gave her a gift of a china set, supposedly the one used to serve General Sherman. According to Fanny's great-granddaughter Joan Pfingst Lawson, the ladies of Monterey would meet in the afternoon, not for tea but for smoking. They had special aprons with pockets for cigarettes and matches, and smoked little Spanish-style cigarillos.

## **John T. Becomes Leading Entrepreneur and Landowner**

While at the Custom House, John T. followed the other California dream - to become a landowner and *ranchero* - and purchased a large acreage near Jolon and the practically deserted Mission of San Antonio de Padua, where he moved his family. The land gamble was made with the assumption that his salary as Collector of Customs would support the Porter family until the remote ranch became profitable. But the end of the Civil War ended the security of government employment and the drought of 1866-67 killed off his cattle. Porter was forced to return the property to the seller.

The family returned to Santa Cruz, where John T. was able to recoup family fortunes through hard work, real estate ventures, and partnership in the Loma Prieta Lumber Company. In 1874 the Porters purchased the San Cayetano Rancho in Watsonville from the Vallejo family. The Rancho consisted of 820 acres and a six-room house that was to have been the home of General Mariano Vallejo's brother, Ygnacio, who was killed in a riding accident. They moved the house back from the road and, over the years, expanded it to over 23 rooms. When Diane Porter Cooley traveled back to her great, great grandmother's home town in Ontario, Canada, she recognized the style of architecture as remarkably similar to that of the Porter family home in Watsonville.

In 1874 John T. co-founded the Bank of Watsonville. In 1888 he helped start the Pajaro Valley Bank and the Pajaro Valley Savings and Loan Society, of which he remained President until his death in 1900. He also owned the Granite Rock Quarry, was a partner with Spreckels in his sugar mill, and served as an appraiser for Miller and Lux, just to name some of his business ventures..

## **The Porters Support Watsonville's Chinatown**

Watsonville's first Chinatown grew up on the corner of Maple and Union, in 1865, on property and buildings owned by John T. Porter. The community grew as the region's agriculture diversified, and by mid-1880 the corner was no longer large enough to accommodate the Chinatown. After delicate negotiations, the community moved across the Pajaro River to just 50 yards from the Porter family home. The town became known as "Brooklyn," possibly because its relationship to Watsonville was similar to that between Brooklyn and Manhattan - the rough, ethnic neighborhood across from the heart of the city.<sup>3</sup>

As the region's largest sugar beet grower in the 1870s and part-owner of the sugar beet factory at Soquel, John T. came to depend heavily on beet contractors, primarily Chinese. John T. owned extensive farm acreage from Watsonville to



Castroville, and he was one of the first farmers in the valley to make use of Chinese farm laborers.

John T. had a history of aiding the Chinese, from testifying on their behalf during habeas corpus proceedings in San Francisco, to attending Chinese weddings and funerals. John T. often defended the Chinese during their frequent brushes with immigration officials. His willingness to publicly befriend the Chinese took political courage as Porter became increasingly involved in statewide Republican party politics. (When Porter's son, Warren R. Porter, ran for Lieutenant-governor, he was elected despite being branded a "Chinaman-lover.")

Porter family tradition has it that Mrs. Porter was allowed to keep the Brooklyn rents for her personal spending money, which would help explain the devotion she showed to her task of personally collecting the rent from tenants the first of every month. Each transaction is carefully documented in her ledger book with the resident's name, the date, and the amount paid each month. These monthly excursions into Brooklyn are also recorded in her personal diary. Lydon notes in his book, Chinese Gold, that Mrs. Porter's monthly rent-collection trips through Brooklyn in a black carriage are still a vivid part of the memories of Chinese who lived there. She provided housing rent-free for those who could not work any more, built the school, and hired a teacher. The responsibility for providing most of the municipal services in Brooklyn fell to John T., including the creation of a fire department and security guards.

### **Fanny Porter - A Regal Presence**

While John T. traveled up and down the coast on various business trips, Fanny held court at home. Tall, imposing, and dressed in black silk, her snowy white hair piled on her head, she created a regal presence. She brought the first Episcopal minister to Watsonville and helped found the first Episcopal church in Watsonville. She organized the church ladies in her huge sewing room where they made quilts and other projects for the church and to help the less fortunate in the community. Her diary contains accounts of luncheon parties for the notables of the era, including Senator Stanford and Governor Gillett.

John T. and Fanny Porter had two children: Warren and Florence. Warren was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1906 and served from 1907-1911 under Governor James Gillett. Warren had three sons and a daughter, including Thomas B. who married Bernice in 1927.

Florence married twice: to a Mr. Effy, which marriage was "dissolved;" and then to Fernando Pfingst in 1893. Florence and Fernando lived in Munich, Germany, where their son Edward was born in 1894. The marriage ended in separation and eventual widowhood and Florence returned to California. She established her residence in the Fairmont in San Francisco while her son, Edward was brought to Watsonville for Fanny to raise.

## Support of Monterey History and Art Association

Monterey History and Art Association is indebted to the Porter family for the many gifts they have made to the Association. Most recently, Mrs. Thomas B. (Bernice) Porter gave \$20,000 for a new roof and other needed improvements to the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library.

The family contributed furniture used by John T. and Fanny Porter in the Custom House, as well as the bedroom set they used in Watsonville; linens with violets, a favorite flower of Fanny and Florence, both of whom wore violet eau de cologne; a box of hats which Florence's granddaughter, Joan Lawson of Carmel, used to play "dress up;" bed pillows with "Florence" embroidered on them; and a toilet set which is the same pattern as in the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House and which was a gift from Mr. Lincoln to Mr. Porter while he was Customs Officer. Also among the treasures is a charming book of California Wild Flowers painted by Florence Porter Pfingst in 1883.

These items can be viewed in the Library of the Maritime Museum of Monterey and the Porter Bedroom in Casa Serrano in Monterey.

### FOOTNOTES

1. John T. Porter's Obituary by Free and Accepted Masons, Watsonville, 3/5/1900.
2. "Mrs. J.T. Porter, 90 Today, Taught Our First School," Register/Pajaronian, 3/7/28.
- 3/ Lydon, Sandy, Chinese Gold. The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region, Capitola Book Company, 1985, p. 192.

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