

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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History of the Abrego Adobe

The Abrego home, located on the corner of Abrego and Webster streets, is one of the oldest landmarks in Monterey, and has a delightfully interesting history.

According to an article written by Mrs. Anna Geil Andresen for the Cypress-American newspaper published in Monterey, the home was built of adobe brick and wood by Don Jose Abrego, a Spanish merchant who came to Monterey from Mexico in 1834 with the colonists under Don Jose Maria Hjar on the vessel "La Natalie," which is said to have been the vessel on which Napoleon escaped from the Isle of Elba. In 1835 the vessel was sold to smugglers who carried on their dishonest business for a few months.

One night while the men were on shore, a heavy northeast gale parted the anchor chain and the ship drifted ashore and was wrecked. Portions of the timbers of this historic vessel were used by Jose Abrego in building his house. Other pieces of the timber from the vessel are to be seen in Monterey. On display in the Old Custom House is a portion of the old wood.

In the year of his arrival, Abrego opened a hat shop in what is now called the Abrego House. He was young, intelligent, with some capital and of good repute, according to Bancroft. He became a prominent citizen, holding office continuously from 1836, as comisario de policia, administrator of San Antonio Mission, customs official, member of the assembly and treasurer.

In 1844 he was grantee of Pt. Pinos rancho, and later claimant of San Francisquito Rancho. After the United States occupation he deemed it his duty as a Mexican to decline office for a time, but later held other important positions.

In 1836 Senor Abrego married Josefa Estrada, a half sister of Governor Alvarado, and moved at once into a part of the house he had built, and to which additions were afterward made.

Abrego acted as state treasurer of Alta California up to the time of the American occupation of Monterey, July 7, 1846. After this period he conducted his store, and also commenced the manufacture of soap from fats and using oak ashes. He continued making soap until ships from the eastern coast began making frequent trips following the discovery of gold. He then had to abandon

this industry as he could not compete with the perfumed soap brought on the market.

In this house was one of the first pianos brought to California in the early days. A paper on the inside of it, written by Don Jose had the following inscription: "In 1841 Captain Stephen Smith arrived with his vessel in Monterey, and I engaged him to bring me a piano on his next trip to the country. In March, 1842, he returned to this city in a brigantine; he had three pianos on board. I bought this one from him for \$500. He then sailed for San Francisco, where General Vallejo purchased another of the pianos and the third was sold at Los Angeles to K. de Celis."

For many years the Abrego piano was in the possession of Mrs. Frances Bolado Davis, a granddaughter of Abrego, at her ranch at Tres Pinos, near Hollister. A few years ago she presented it to the California Historical Society and it can be seen at the society's quarters on McAllister Street in San Francisco. The piano is a six octave one, made by Breitkopf and Hartel of Leipzig, and imported by Brauns and Faulkem of Baltimore.

The Abrego home was the scene of many social gatherings in the early days – and up until the time of Mrs. Abrego's death in the 1890's, the most prominent and distinguished visitors to Monterey were entertained in this historic house. Bayard Taylor, the California historian, who visited Monterey in 1849 and attended the Constitutional Convention in Colton Hall, was entertained there, and in his "El Dorado" he wrote:

"I attended an evening party at the home of Senor Jose Abrego which was as lively and agreeable as any occasion of the kind could be. There was a piano in the parlor on which a lady from Sydney, Australia, played with a great deal of taste. Two American gentlemen gave us a few choice flute duets, and the entertainment closed with a Spanish quadrille, in which the little son of Senor Abrego figured to the general admiration."

The most distinguishing features of this house are the 12-foot ceilings with paneling in all the front rooms, and the three pair of teakwood doors.

On the map of 1849 the house is shown. In 1851 it was assessed to Abrego for a value of \$200. In 1855 it was assessed for \$400. Senor Abrego was also the owner of several adobe buildings in Monterey, one of which stood on the northwest corner of Scott and Olivier streets, opposite the "House of Gold" according to a map issued in 1849. At that date there was no

assessment against the property, the first being in 1851 for the sum of \$800. In 1855 Abrego was assessed \$1,300 for the improvements. The building was torn down many years ago.

Senor Jose Abrego died in 1878, at the age of 65 years. His wife Josefa Estrada, survived him with six of their children. The two daughters married, one was the wife of Judge Webb of Salinas and the other married J. Bolado of San Francisco. A son married the daughter of Jacob P. Leese of Monterey.

Another piano which had once been used in the Abrego adobe has been returned to Monterey and is now on display in the Old Custom House. It was a gift from Edward Abrego, the grandson of Senor Jose Abrego. There are other historical items which had belonged in this distinguished family to be seen in the Custom House museum.