

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Leasing a Theater

Major John O'Neill, who played in "Putnam, or the Lion Son of '76," the first play to be produced at California's First Theatre in the spring of 1848, was the lessee, with James A. Gray, of the Old Washington Hotel 1854.

Major O'Neill came to Monterey in 1847 with Colonel Jonathan Drake Stevenson and part of his command, the famous New York Volunteers. Two companies had been assigned to Monterey. When the Mexican War was over, and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been ratified, the regiment was mustered out.

Among the New Yorkers were several clever fellows who, to relieve the tedium of barracks life, put on plays first in the Cuartel and later out of doors. When it looked as if the pay checks would soon cease, it occurred to them to ask Jack Swan to make his rooming house into a theater. Major O'Neill and Mrs. O'Neill both took part in that first play and several succeeding productions.

The granddaughter of Major and Mrs. O'Neill, Mrs. Nellie Fleisher, is still a resident of Monterey and lives in the charming yellow colonial house on Monroe street, overlooking the old town. Recently she placed on loan in the Old Custom House the original lease to the Washington Hotel signed by Alberto Trescony, the owner, and J.M. O'Neill and James A. Gray.

The document is completely executed in longhand, beautifully written with shaded letters and without a solitary mistake. The date of the recording was December 13th, A.D. 1884, and signed by James H. Gleason, county recorder, Monterey County.

The wording of the lease of the Washington Hotel follows:

"This indenture made and entered into in the City of Monterey, State of California, this thirteenth Day of December, A.D. 1854 by and between Alberto Trescony, party of the first part, and John M. O'Neill and James A. Gray, parties of the second part. All parties residents of Monterey aforesaid: That the party of the first part, for and in consideration of the full and perfect fulfillment of the conditions hereinafter mentioned as incumbent upon the parties of the second part, hath and doth by these presents let lease and demise unto the parties of the second part, for the full period of three years from

and after the date of these presents, that certain lot of land lying and being situate in the City of Monterey, together with all and singular the buildings thereon now known as the "Washington Hotel" and the appurtenances thereunto in any wise appertaining, as also the household furniture now in use in said Hotel. Always saving and excepting so much of the buildings and the lot aforesaid as are present, occupied by S. Cahn and Brother.

"And the said parties of the second part agree and bind themselves to pay unto the party of the first part the full sum of one hundred and seventy five dollars per month (payable always monthly in advance,) as rent for the premises and furniture above cited. And they further agree and bind themselves to produce and deliver to said party of the first part or his assigns, at the expiration of the aforesaid term of three years, the furniture above referred to, or other of like quality, in as good order, the necessary wear and tear only excepted, and also the said premises and buildings in as good condition as they now are wear and tear excepted."

In addition to the original lease loaned by Mrs. Fleisher, the Custom House also has in its museum an old match box which came from the hotel, as a gift from Mrs. Millie Birks; and in a case on the upper floor at the north end, is the hotel register of guests dated 1863, the gift of Miss Hattie Morey, who found it among the possessions of her late parents, Mr. and Mrs. Reuban Morey. In the Stevenson House there is a small rocking chair which once was part of the furnishings of the Washington Hotel, it is also a gift to historic Monterey from Mrs. Millie Birks.