

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Waterfront Pearl

The Monterey waterfront, particularly that area south of the Presidio, has been of the utmost importance to Monterey since its founding in 1770," wrote Dr. Aubrey Neasham of the Bancroft Library in 1937, when with Emerson Knight, they prepared a master plan for the City of Monterey. The project was sponsored by the city and the plan was prepared on behalf of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C., and the Division of Beaches and Parks.

"However, one portion, the Custom House reservation, has stood out as a center of activity," Dr. Neasham continues. "It, above all other areas, should be preserved, because of its historical associations. More than any other monument along the waterfront, it represents the first century of the white man in Monterey."

A recapitulation of some of the activities centering on the Custom House reservation is applicable at this point. Near here, and possibly on the reservation itself, Viscaino landed in 1602, as did Serra in 1770. It was the first logical place for a small boat landing; and since early in the Spanish administration it was used as a landing place for the vessels which visited Monterey. The founding of the permanent Custom House in 1814, at that place, marked the beginning of an ever-widening activity. Whalers, traders and government vessels in increasing numbers, especially after the first decade of the 19th century, all knew that familiar site. Such an entrance into Monterey from the sea could not help but be of importance to Monterey itself.

Other activities centered around the Custom House. It was used as a gathering place for social and governmental functions aside from its use as a Custom House; Larkin built there his pine-cribbed rock wharf in 1845-1846; Sloat landed there on July 7, 1846, to take possession of California for the United States; from 1846 to 1849, the Custom House was used as a quarters and warehouse for the naval and military forces of the United States, as well as a port of entry; the whaling industry located northward near there in 1855; customs were collected there until about 1868, although San Francisco had become the main port of entry by 1848; a new wharf was built near Larkin's wharf by the North

American Transportation Co., in 1869; and until 1874 all marine shipping activities centered there.

"It is evident, historically speaking, that there is one area which stands out from all others along the waterfront in Monterey, both in importance and length of time in use. That area is the Custom House reservation. Its preservation, because of its historical associations and remains, is of utmost importance," according to the master plan for Monterey. Dr. Neasham believes and so he wrote for that plan: "The Custom House, the center of post activity here should command an outlook onto the bay, free from the hindrances and blind stops caused by modern structures. In the natural crescent of the bay, it will become known, not only for its historical qualities, but for its setting as well. Development, which will take care of the demands of a modern city, may take place along the waterfront to the southward, but the Custom House area will be preserved in its simplicity. The jewel in the setting, it is one of the main attractions of Monterey."

On March 15, 1937, Joseph R. Knowland, chairman of the California State Park Commission, wrote the Secretary of the Treasury:

"The old Monterey Custom House in the City of Monterey, since 1901 has been under lease from the federal government to the State of California and has been administered as an historical monument. Because of the importance in California's early history of this site, where in 1846 Commodore Sloat raised the American flag and took possession of California for the United States, the Order of Native Sons of the Golden West in 1900 obtained a lease to the property from the federal government at the time of the golden jubilee celebration of the admission of California into the Union, and the following year, a bill was passed by the California State Legislature appointing a board of trustees to administer this historical monument, and the lease was assigned to the State of California with the consent of the United States of America.

"In 1903 the California State Legislature appropriated \$4,200, and in 1917, \$5,500 for the restoration of the Monterey Custom House. (Much more has been expended since that date.)

"In 1927 the California Legislature created the state park system, including various historical monuments. The Custom House thus passed under the administration of the State Park Commission... A

competent historian has been retained as custodian, and an historical museum has been maintained for the education and inspiration of the general public. A statement from our records is attached showing the total expenditure by the state at Monterey Custom House Historical Monument of \$23,700 (1937).

“Under date of February 12, 1937, the State Park Commission was notified that the federal government is contemplating the sale of the Old Custom House building and site. The letter further states the provision of law which the property can be sold to the state and offers us the first opportunity as lease to acquire it.”

The State Parks Commission voted unanimously to request that the sale of this historic structure be deferred until such time as the State of California is in a position to acquire it.

“It is unthinkable,” continued Mr. Knowland, “that this spot, so rich in early California’s traditions, should pass into the custody of private individuals or any agency other than the state.”