

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 6, 1950

Colton Hall

To Walter Colton belongs the honor of erecting the first building of importance in California, which was intended for a town hall and schoolhouse.

When Commodore Sloat sailed into Monterey Bay and took possession of the capital in 1846, the chaplain on the "Congress," one of the vessels of the fleet, was Walter D. Colton. Colton was the first and only American alcalde of Monterey, the appointment being made on July 28, 1846. He was formally elected by the people to the same office on September 15 of that year and held the office for a period of nearly three years.

As there was no adequate school building in Monterey, and no money in the treasury to provide one, he conceived the unique plan of financing the building of one through levying excessive fines on gamblers, drunkards, and road house proprietors, also to minimize the cost of construction by utilizing convict labor for that purpose.

Colton started the construction of the building, which he called "Town Hall" in 1847, and it was completed by March, 1849, according to his diary, "Three Years in California."

In an entry, dated March 8, 1849, Colton says: "The town hall, on which I have been at work for more than a year, is at last finished. It is built of white sandstone quarried from a neighboring hill, and which easily takes the shape you desire. The lower apartments are for schools; the hall over them 70 feet by 30 – is for public assemblies. The front is ornamented by a portico, which you enter from the hall. It is not an edifice which would attract any attention among public buildings in the United States, but in California it is without rival. It has been erected out of the slender proceeds of town lots and labor of convicts, taxes on liquor shops and fines on gamblers."

In this building from September 1 to October 15, 1849, assembled the convention which drafted the constitution under which California was admitted to statehood on September 9, 1850. The 48 delegates met on the upper floor which ran the length of the building. Robert Semple was chosen chairman and William G. March, secretary. Monterey was represented by H.W.

Halleck, Thomas Oliver Larkin, C.T. Botts, P. Ord and L. Dent.

At that time, so the story goes, the entrance to the second floor was from a stairway in the rear, which has been recently restored.

Later on two more elaborate stairways were placed in the front of the building to lead to the second floor, and this floor was divided into two large rooms and still later into a number of still smaller rooms. Another small room with a small fireplace is at the rear of the building on the second floor and at the present writing this room is being repaired and restored. The partitions were all torn from the large assembly room in the upper floor, one fireplace has been restored at the south end and the one at the north end repaired and the entire room, with its beautiful proportions, has been restored and now in 1950 looks very much as it must have looked for the Constitutional Convention in 1849. The entire program was carried out by the City of Monterey, which owns the building, under the expect direction of the members of the Museum Board, and completed for the Centennial celebration in September of 1949

The above facts were taken from the 1881 "History of Monterey County, California," Bayard Taylor's "Eldorado" and "Three Years in California" by Walter Colton.