

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Custom House

An outstanding historic site, the Monterey Custom House Reservation, to which the State Division of Beaches and Parks obtained title from the Federal government in 1930, is the spot at which in 1846 Commodore John Drake Sloat landed, raised the American flag, and took possession of California for the United States.

In September 1938 the California Conservationist printed an article concerning this outstanding California landmark. Part of that article we will quote in today's column, for the reason that we feel that the Custom House Reservation is just as important today to the State and to Monterey as it was when it was bought from the Federal government by the State and a group of interested citizens. It was on July 7, 1929, that simple ceremonies were held and the building was officially opened to the public.

The building was erected about 1827, added to under the Mexican and American regimes, the old adobe structure symbolizes the three main periods in California history, during each of which Monterey was the State capital.

Well preserved and from time to time restored through the efforts of the local community, the Landmarks League, the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, the Monterey History and Art Association and the California State Parks Commission, this building with its exhibit of early California relics, has long been a shrine for students of history and patriotic citizens.

More than 80,000 persons visited it last year, and including July 4th more than 34,000 was the count and the number is steadily increasing. Purchase price paid by the State to the Federal government was \$20,000, one-half of which was contributed by public-spirited citizens of the Monterey region, and the remaining half provided from State Park bond funds. The tract contains approximately 1 ½ acres. Under authorization of an act of Congress it was sold to the State at one-half of its appraised valuation. It is one of five properties in Monterey owned and administered by the Division of Parks. The other four, also historical monuments, are the First Theatre, House of Gold, Stevenson house and the Junipero Serra Landing Place.

The Custom House of Monterey, more than a century old, and the beach, ancient in time, are linked with the El Estero and the early Presidio Church. These units are intimately related to a chain of historic sites and buildings which, taken as a whole, constitute a foundation for long range preservation planning that challenges vision and imagination.

Emerson Knight wrote in his Master Plan for Monterey: "Our aim is to reestablish the topographical integrity of the rugged shoreline close to the Custom House, so that its Plaza which lies north of the structure can be revived and a clear view once more assured from the Custom House over the Bay and landing place of Viscaino and Junipero Serra.

"The aspect of the beach as known to pioneer settlers from Spain and Mexico should be approximated and the natural charm of El Estero held inviolate. To insure convincing architectural settings, ample space is desirable around all historic structures.

"This planning project, focalized on the concept of preserving rare, historic values which they hold in trust, is not only of city-wide, county and state-wide significance, but also is of national and international importance.

"Citizens craving material gain and its increase will be more sure to achieve their end by first taking pains to maintain the essence of historic Monterey in all its purity.

"We do not conceive of preserving the inheritance of Old Monterey as a dead museum piece. We do expect it to become a living force in the midst of an alert, modern city. The old is but the firm foundation of tradition and history on which the present rests and the future will build. Any changes, features or growth that can infringe on this principle of a living past will prove unwholesome and must detract from our purpose of uniting that past with the vivid present, and potentially glowing future."