

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 7, 1950

The French Consulate

France was an important factor in the history of California prior to its acquisition by the United States and she was as anxious to get a foothold here as either Great Britain or the United States. After the capture of Monterey in 1842 by Commodore Jones, France took immediate steps to place a consul in California.

The exact date of the first French consul is not known but as early as November 3, 1842, Francis Guisot, minister of foreign affairs, wrote to one Bosserons, whom he addressed as Consul at Monterey. Later, however, on October 28, 1843, the fiery Louis Gasquet was appointed and on his arrival some time later he established his headquarters in the adobe building then located at Fremont and Abrego streets. The adobe was later moved to its present location on El Estero and is now used as a Girl Scout house.

A complete story of the French Consulate in California from 1843-1856 ran serially in the Quarterly of the California Historical Society. The author was Abraham P. Nasatir, who was accorded the privilege of translating the documents in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. These archives were taken from "a box dedicated to the consulate at Monterey" and consist of letters written from the French consulate which the citizens of Monterey and the History and Art Association saved when they moved it to El Estero.

From the number of letters that were sent out of this now historic adobe, it evidently was one of Monterey's busiest places during the "roaring forties."

That the building was also the scene of much entertaining is seen from one of the letters written by Gasquet while enroute to Monterey. He was asking for funds for the consulate and says:

"He will only be able to install himself there after having made costly repairs and changes. He will be obliged to furnish it and as the agent who will represent France and will be called upon to receive the authorities and influential men of the country, as well as the officers of the Royal Marine who will come into these quarters, he cannot content himself with the more than simple furniture of the Californians. He will have to bring complete furnishings from Paris. I say from Paris, for if

he wished to buy them here, the same furniture would cost him four or five times as much. And moreover, must we not take into consideration the position of this agent? Relegated to the end of the earth in a paltry town which offers no recourse against boredom, deprived of the joys of family, what would remain to him if he did not have pleasant quarters where he might find in his comfort a compensation for his isolation? He will be obliged to hire at least two house servants and even then will be badly served and robbed in the bargain. The Indians are not adaptable to different tasks. They believe in the division of labor; that is why I say it will require at least two servants."

That the servants lived up to his expectations is shown in another letter, from which we quote: "It is impossible to get honest servants here," and he was forced to commandeer a 14-year-old mess boy from a French boat that was in port. He did not like the Indians anyway as they had "murdered three men at the outskirts of Monterey a short time before and forced all honest people to go heavily armed and in large groups."

With the French consulate in Monterey, France became a real menace, as her people were the only foreigners liked by the natives, and Consul Gasquet was continually writing of the fertile country and fine opportunity for a French colony. He asked for a gunboat to be held in Monterey Bay for its "moral effect," and for his government to establish a protectorate in California. He complains of the number of American immigrants and the foothold they were making. France was having internal troubles at home, however, and would not listen to her ambitious consul in Monterey.

His picture of the Mexican rule is illuminating. He says: "Everyone here wants to command and none obey." He writes of the swaggering drunken Micheltoreno's "cholos" robbing and killing and it was through his efforts that Mexico made amends for the assaulting and robbing of sailors from the French whaler "Angelina," an incident that caused international complications.

Tomorrow's column will recite more of the history of the French consulate in Monterey.