

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 28, 1958

Henry A. Tefft

The museum in Colton Hall, has recently been presented with a copy of an old letter written by Henry A. Tefft, a member of the first Constitutional Convention, to Don Guellermo Dana, concerning the proceedings of the 1849 convention held in the historic hall in Monterey. The photocopy of the letter was presented by Keith Ponsford of Berkeley for his mother-in-law, Mrs. Cristina Alviso Chapman (whose father was Valentin Alviso).

The letter was written Sept. 7th, 1849 from Monterey, Tefft wrote Dana:

"Enclosed I send you according to my promise made in the letter sent by Henry a copy of the laws relating to the duties of the different officers elected in the district of San Luis Obispo. They are difficult to be obtained, and this should be carefully preserved for future reference.

"We have at length organized in the Convention. After some difficulty—Robert Semple from the District of Sonoma, is president of the Convention. California being the tallest country in the world 'tis perfectly proper that we should have, as we have got, the tallest president that ever served in that capacity.

"One general committee to report a form of a State Constitution has been appoint by the House of Delegate. I am on that committee and consequently have very little leisure time. This morning we reported to the House a preamble and Bill of Rights for the Constitution of the State of California. The vote for the State or Territorial Government was—8 for Territorial—Stearns, Foster, Carrillo, from Los Angeles; Hill from San Diego; Pico from San Jose; Rodrigues, Santa Barbara; Tefft, San Luis Obispo, voting for a Territorial Government.

"I have spent a few evenings very pleasantly at the home of Manuel Jimeno whose wife is, I think a cousin of Mrs. Dana—and whose daughter is consequently a cousin of your daughter Josepha. I have also passed two pleasant evenings at the house of Mr. Hartnell whose family I also believe is related to yours. I have been very kindly treated since my arrival here—have been invited to dine at Mr. McKinely's, Mr. Larkin's and Cap. Westcott's houses—have not accepted any invitations

yet, but hope to do so soon. Mr. Halleck has been very kind indeed. I am still sleeping at Mr. Halleck's house—he is an excellent man—and much esteemed here. He will, I hope be the first governor of California under the new constitution. There is not as yet any party or political feeling existing in the House. There is now fair probability that the delegates will work with unanimity and complete their work in two or three weeks.

There is now a meeting before the House to adjourn till Monday morning. But the committee will meet immediately on the adjournment of the House and between the two I am kept constantly busy, I know of nothing new here of any interest to you and will therefore close this by requesting you to remember me kindly to your family. Tell them I am anxious to get home and see them as I should be to see my own mother and sister. And believe me your sincere friend and well-wisher, Henry A, Tefft."

Tragedy ended the brilliant career of Henry A, Tefft, and this delegate from San Luis Obispo to the Constitutional Convention at Monterey. Three years later, in 1852, his death occurred as he was preparing to take his wife on a trip east. He boarded the coastal steamer Ohio at Santa Barbara, planning to land at San Luis Obispo to pick up his family and to proceed on the little ship to San Francisco to catch the Panama steamer there.

At San Luis the surf was running high. Despite this, Tefft and five other men started in a small boat for the shore. When they were within 100 yards of the beach, the boat capsized, and Tefft and three of his companions were drowned. He was 29 years of age at the time.

Tefft was a native of New York State. He migrated to Wisconsin and started for California soon after news of the gold discovery became known. In the spring of 1849, he traveled overland by way of Santa Fe and the Gila River route to San Diego. Coming north along the coast, he was so struck by the attractiveness of the San Lis Obispo area that he stopped there and immediately entered upon his law practice.

His election to the convection quickly followed. He was an excellent speaker and debater so he became active in the sessions and originally opposed the plan to organize a state, rather than a territorial government, in accordance with the wishes of his constituents.

Tefft was a member of the first legislature, and later was chosen judge of the Second Judicial District. In 1850

he married Josefa Dana, eldest daughter of Capt.
William G. Dana, owner of the great Nipomo Rancho.