

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **A Faint Prospect of Profit**

In these days when there has been so much publicity given to the destruction of the old post office building on Alvarado street in Old Monterey, it will be interesting to relate here a bit of the history of the first mail which came to Monterey.

The building, which will be marked only by the site within a few days, was the first United States post office in town. It formerly marked the north boundary of the Old Plaza, lining up with the older Casa de Castro. The old stone wall, which will soon disappear we suppose, was the connecting link between the two buildings.

Even before the gold discovery in California there was interest in shipping and in travel to the State. Ships sailed from New York to the Isthmus, connecting haphazardly on the Pacific side with ships that plied the South American coast as far south as Callao. On the Isthmus trains of pack mules were used to transport the mail and freight. As time passed, a keen rivalry sprang up between the United States and England for the growing Pacific trade. It was not until 1846, however, the war with Mexico having given this country a territorial stake on the Pacific, that positive steps were taken to link the two sides of the continent more closely.

As a first step, a treaty was negotiated, late in 1846, between the United States and the Republic of New Granada – of which Panama was then a part, by which this country was granted free transit across the Isthmus and in return guaranteed New Granada's sovereignty.

The next year, 1847, the longstanding controversy over the boundaries of Oregon territory having been amicably settled between this country and England, the plan of establishing regular mail service to California and Oregon was taken up in earnest. The matter was before Congress for many months.

Eventually a bill was passed and signed by President Polk authorizing an annual subsidy of \$290,000 for a line of steamers with semi-monthly sailings, between New York and Chagres. Later a similar bill provided a subsidy almost as large for monthly service on the Pacific between Panama and the California coast, with its northern terminus at Astoria.

The Pacific line fell to William H. Aspinwall, a man of ample means and wide mercantile experience; the other went to a group headed by George Law, a capitalist who had previously been identified with large railroad projects. Of the two ventures the Atlantic had to all appearances a far better chance for success, for its steamers could draw trade from Central America and the west coast of South America as from California and Oregon.

The Pacific Mail Steamship Company (as Aspinwall's company was known) on the other hand seemed a dubious gamble, there being, in 1847, little commerce between the country's east and west coasts and no real prospect of more for many years.

In "Sea Routes to the Gold Fields" by Oscar Lewis, it is recorded that a writer in 1847 said "The Pacific Company was looked upon by the generality of business men as a certain sequestration of a large amount of property for an indefinite time, with a faint prospect of profit; and the wonder seemed to be that so sound a man as Mr. Aspinwall should have engaged in it."

These pioneer mail contracts required that five steamers, each of 1,500 tons, be placed on the Atlantic run, while operations on the Pacific called for three steamers, two to be of not less than 1,000 tons and the third of 600. Both companies began building the vessels at once; the first was finished in time to permit through traffic between New York and San Francisco to begin before the end of 1848.

In preparation for inaugurating regular service, the first of the Pacific mail steamers, the California, left New York in early October 1848. She was bound on the round-the-Horn voyage to her home port, Panama, there to start monthly round trips to California.

Meantime the Atlantic company made ready the Falcon and dispatched her to Chagres on December 1, timing her departure so that she would arrive at the Isthmus at about the same time the California reached Panama, thus permitting passengers to cross over and re-embark with little delay.

The California reached Monterey on February 24, 1849.

(More Tomorrow)