

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old Buildings for Adoption

It is with considerable pride mingled with many regrets, that one interested in early California history and in particular in early Monterey, looks at two pictures in the June issue of Antiques Magazine. Those two pictures were taken from photographs of the Old Custom House and the Larkin House, the same as reproduced in the brochure recently published by the Monterey Foundation.

The article accompanying the pictures is entitled "Preservation Notes" The two buildings pictured are, we hope, safe from destruction, but what about others of historic nature in the Old Town?

The Custom House and the Larkin House are associated in the article with illustrations of the Revell House, Burlington, New Jersey; Independence Hall, Philadelphia; Church at West Barnstable, Mass.; Eleazer Arnold House, Lincoln, Rhode Island; Buttolph-Williams House, Wethersfield, Conn., Happy Retreat, one of the Washington Homes in Jefferson County, West Virginia (1780); North Family Property in New York State; Old Salum, North Carolina, and a confectionary store in Virginia City, Nevada.

A paragraph accompanying the photographs of the Monterey buildings reads: "We present here a preview of a new brochure being prepared on historic Monterey, birthplace of the California way of life."

The old Custom House is the only remaining building in California constructed by the Mexican government. The lower north section, the oldest part, was built in 1827 and the upper story added in 1841, the same year the one-story central section was built. The south wing was completed early in 1846, just before the American occupation. It was used as a Custom House until 1867.

On January 1, 1951, the historic buildings on Independence Square in Philadelphia were formally brought under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, to become part of Independence National Historic Park.

Included in the Independence National Park will be such famous buildings as Church Carpenters' Hall, the old City Hall, Philosophical Hall and the Philadelphia Library, the Old Custom House, First Bank in the United States, and the Merchants' Exchange.

In Jefferson County, West Virginia, there are no less than seven houses that were built by members of the Washington family, according to the article in Antiques. Young George Washington had surveyed this section which was then part of Virginia, and found it so pleasant that two of his brothers settled there. All of the houses except Belleair and Harewood have been restored by R.J. Funkhouser. The grounds at all five are open to the public without charge, and the interiors are open at Claymont Court and Happy Retreat.

The article on Virginia City and its restoration program is interesting. From 40,000 residents to 800 – that is the story of Virginia City, Nevada, twenty-three miles from Reno, once the mining capital of the west.

Here in its prosperous days the wealthy of the nation built their mansions, and Piper's Opera House featured such celebrities as Edwin Booth, Patti, and Lilly Langtry.

Many of the old buildings in Virginia City are crumbling, but the opera house still stands, as does the County Court house, the Masonic Temple, St. Mary's in the Mountains, and many others and the residents of this old mining town feel that it is worth while to preserve what is left.

Mrs. Helen Marye Thomas, granddaughter of one of the boomday financiers, decided that something should be done to preserve the old town. The Virginia City Foundation Trust was therefore established to preserve the town as "a living memorial." An "adoption" program permits individuals and organizations to "adopt" certain buildings and sponsor their restoration. According to a zoning ordinance that has now been put into effect, all new building in central Virginia City must conform with the 1870 period, in order to protect the 1870 appearance of the community.

The magazine Antique reports that last year they called these projects "restorations". Now they have changed their terminology, adopting that favored by the National Council of Historic Sites and Buildings; and call them "preservations." The aim is well phrased by the National Park Service: "Better to preserve than repair, better to repair than restore, and better to restore than to reconstruct."