

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Attention, Sailors!

The last of the four broadsides or posters sent as a keepsake series by the Book Club of California to its members under the title "Attention, Pioneers!", is "S.F. Town Ordinance, 1847, Designed to Discourage Sailors from Deserting Their Ships." It is a facsimile reproduction of the California circular, with explanatory comment by Carroll D. Hall. The original is in the collection of Sutter's Fort State Historical Monument at Sacramento. Mr. Hall is an official in the California State Division of Beaches and Parks.

Jumping ship accounted for the presence of more than one pioneer of California. This was bad for masters and ship-owners. Also for law and order. These reasons had much to do with the issuing of the ordinance which the Book Club felt was interesting enough to historians and collectors to be reproduced for a keepsake. Its passage is dated some months before the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill – a fact that emphasizes that runaway sailors were not peculiar to the gold rush.

The ordinance, signed by George Hyde, Alcalde, opens thus:

"Be it ordained by the Town Council, of the Town of San Francisco – That if any person or persons within the limits of this Town, shall entice or advise any SAILOR or other person employed on board any ship within this Harbor or Bay, to leave the vessel on which he or they may be employed, upon proof thereof, shall be Fined not exceeding FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS – NOR LESS THAN TWENTY, and be imprisoned not exceeding three months.

BE IT FURTHER ORDAINED – That if any person or persons who shall Feed, Harbor or Employ any runaway Sailor within the limits of the Town, without permission of the Alcalde, such person or persons will receive the same punishment.

The third resolution stated that the convicted sailor or employee of any vessel would be ordered to hard labor on the Public Work, not exceeding six months. The ordinance went into effect on the 16th of September, 1847.

It is of interest, as an incidental sidelight, to know that the original printed sheet from which the reproduction was made was found among the treasured papers of

James Frazier Reed, a prominent member of the ill-fated Donner Party.

The "Annals of San Francisco" tells the story that on July 28, 1847, George Hyde, alcalde, "selected six gentlemen to assist him in disposing of the great and daily accumulation of municipal business." These were the "ayuntamiento (town council), and were to remain in office until the governor should think fit formally to cause an election to take place among the citizens to fill their places."

Governor Mason in due time, according to the text, directed Hyde to call a town meeting for the election of six persons. These, with the alcalde, would be the town authorities until the end of 1848. In this directive, the governor observed that: "There may soon be expected a large number of whalers in your bay, and a large increase of your population by the arrival of immigrants. It is therefore highly necessary that you should at an early day have an efficient town police, proper town laws, town officers, &c., for enforcement of the laws, for the preservation of order, and for the proper protection of persons and property."

The election was held September 13, 1847, and the new council at once "entered with spirit upon the duties of their office" and "passed a multitude of laws" ... One of these is the circular about which we are concerned today.

The printing may have been done upon Sam Brannan's press which had printed San Francisco's first newspaper, The California Star. Edited by Dr. E.P. Jones, the Star first appeared in January 1847. Dr. Jones was a member of the council which adopted the ordinance relating to sailors. But there was also another press in town. Walter Colton and Robert Semple had started The Californian in Monterey August 15, 1846, on the Zamorano press, and Semple transferred the publication to San Francisco the following May.