

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 6, 1952

Whistler's Art In California

A short query in a recent issue of Notes from the California Historical Society has attracted our attention for several reasons. First, because it concerned the association of James Abbott McNeill Whistler, the famous artist, with the United States Coast Survey in California, and secondly because we are fortunate enough to have in our possession copies of two of Whistler's engravings made during his brief term of service.

The California Historical Society's Notes read: "Everyone may not know that when James Abbott McNeill Whistler was a lad he served a term not as an office boy, but as a draftsman and engraver with the United States Coast Survey in the early fifties, long before his artistic reputation was established. He did, however, establish a small reputation of sorts in official circles, which caused the abrupt termination of his brief government employment when it was discovered that he had inserted upon a map of Anacapa Island two graceful flights of seagulls. This undoubtedly improved the artistic value of the map, but it provided an embellishment which failed to appeal to the regulation and stern government eye."

Mrs. Stevens McNeil, whose home is at "Old Seawanhaka House," Oyster Bay, Long Island, will be grateful, so the Notes report, to anyone who may be able to supply her with the details of this episode, or with any others relating to Whistler's Coast Survey adventures.

The first engraving in our possession shows the artistic work of Whistler and the two flights of seagulls. The engraving is of the Anacapa Island, which is due east of Santa Cruz Island in the Santa Barbara channel. The date is 1854.

The other sketch was printed by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in November, 1854, and entitled "Sketches by Whistler." In an explanatory paragraph is the following data: "James McNeill Whistler at the beginning of his brief employment in the coast and Geodetic Survey prepared this sample to demonstrate his aptitude for copper-plate engravings. These sketches represent the initial results on copper of

Whistler's fancy and invention and are the first genuine Whistler etchings."

Whistler was born in 1834 and died in 1903. He attended West Point but left after three years and served for a year as draughtsman for the Coast Survey. He studied in Paris and in London. Recognition was slow. His paintings have a quiet and charming dignity but his etchings, often regarded as his finest productions, were recorded recognition before his paintings. They number over four hundred. His signature of a butterfly was developed from his initials.

"The Artist's Mother," his best known work, a charming and serene arrangement in black and gray, is now in the Luxembourg in Paris.