

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Governor Alvarado's Chair

The Monterey History and Art association has acquired a priceless historical antique to add to the collection now on exhibit in the Old Custom House. It is a fine old Belter chair which had once been a prized possession of Gov. Juan Bautista Alvarado, when he made Monterey his home. For the last number of years it has been the property of the governor's grandson, Juan B. Alvarado of San Francisco who wishing it preserved in Monterey has consented to part with the chair to the History and Art Association.

It is appropriate that this beautiful piece of furniture be placed in the Custom House where Alvarado was collector of customs, appointed in 1845. About 1840 the style of furniture changed to Victorian rococo, and that held first place in popularity until the 1860's. Such was the type of furniture that Alvarado chose for his home.

In the day of the Belter furniture it was called "French" style for it was a conscious imitation or adaptation of Louis XV style of the 1700s, the style known as rococo from the French words rock and shell. (Alice Winchester, editor of Antiques Magazine.) This was the fashion that in the mid-1800s produced the familiar sofas, chairs and tables in mahogany, rosewood and black walnut, with exaggeratedly scrolled contours, curved legs and boldly carved decoration in naturalistic motifs such as roses, grapes, leaves and birds.

This was the style in which the famous John Belter of New York worked most. He produced quantities of rococo sofas, chairs and tables which were shipped to all parts of the country. His pieces of laminated wood made it possible to bend and shape it and also to carve it in extraordinary designs. Such is the beauty of the chair now on exhibit at the Old Custom House.

Juan Bautista Alvarado has, by some, been pronounced the ablest man that old California produced. Dr. Rockwell Hunt writes in his "California Stately Hall of Fame," that "Alvarado conspicuous for his industry in an age of easy-going indolence, deeply interested in education when California was practically without schools, will always be remembered for his generous and liberal disposition his sincerity of purpose, and his high sense of justice."

Alvarado was born in Monterey on St. Valentine's Day, 1809, the son of Gen. Don Francisco Alvarado, and grandson of Gen. Limon, renowned conqueror of Lower California. He was tutored by Pablo de Sola, the cultured governor of Alta California at the time of the transition from Spanish to Mexican rule—and opportunity which developed his love of books and rare intellect.

Alvarado's mother was Josefa Vallejo, sister of Gen. Mariano G. Vallejo, one of the most distinguished and influential men of Mexican California.

When Alvarado became governor of California the total population numbered 150, including such well-known persons as W.E.P. Hartnell, Thomas Oliver Larkin, Alfred Robinson, James Alexander Forbes, Abel Stearns, Jacob Leese, and later John Bidwell, John A. Sutter and W.D.M. Howard. About 1845 Alvarado was chosen by a great majority as representative to the Mexican Congress from California; but the ensuing war, with its blockade of ports, prevented him from appearing at this new post.

John Alvarado was governor of California for six years. After the American occupation he retired to his country home at San Pablo, where he quietly resided for many years. He died July 13, 1882.

(To be continued)