

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Montgomery Block

To those of our readers who enjoy the early history of California, we heartily recommend "Ark of Empire" by Idwall Jones. It is the story of the building and the life of the Montgomery Block in San Francisco, and tells of the meeting there of the men who helped to make up the rich pageant of California since the days of the gold rush. "Ark of Empire" was published by Doubleday and Co., in 1951, so it might well be counted among the many, both good and not so good, books brought out during California's centennial years.

The review of the lives of the great men who visited and lived in the Block, so intimately connected with the early days in Monterey, might also serve as a history of California's first capital.

The builder of the Montgomery Block was Henry Wager Halleck, who rose to be a general under Abraham Lincoln, in command of the Federal Armies in the War of the Rebellion. Halleck arrived in Monterey soon after the American Flag was raised over the Old Custom House, by John Drake Sloat. He became the first secretary of state, with headquarters first in the little adobe building next to the home of Thomas Oliver Larkin – the first and only American consul to Monterey – which he shared with General William Tecumseh Sherman. Later Sherman arranged to move the records and headquarters to El Cuartel, where he installed an outside stairway to the upper floor offices.

Completed in 1853, by Halleck, the Montgomery Block became the fashionable gathering place for the great and the small. In its first years the famous land-title cases, arising from the American occupation of Spanish California, were transacted there. Fine wines were aged in the Block's cavernous dungeons, and gold dust from the Mother Lode was cast into ingots.

Throughout the book, such names as Robert Louis Stevenson, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, George Sterling, Charles Warren Stoddard, Sherman, Mark Twain and others are frequently mentioned. Among present day personages mentioned by the author is Dr. Milton Shutes of Carmel, "learned in the Lincoln period of California," to whom he extends his appreciation for help and encouragement received.

The Montgomery Block, about which stories still appear in newspapers through the West, is to be torn down possibly within the year, to provide space for a garage and a parking lot. It is situated at the corner of Washington St., a little below where Montgomery lifts to the high slopes of Telegraph Hill, in San Francisco.

It was a wonder of masonry in its day, so the author declares. The edifice fronts along a whole block, it is four stories high, well pierced with windows, those on the top floor being shorter than the rest. In 1853 it was the tallest building in the West. The entrance, simple and Georgian, has been preserved intact, but much of the other ornamentation was either removed or fell during the earthquake and fire of 1906. The building stood the disaster as no other building of that period was able to do.

Captain Halleck, later a general, knew perfectly well what he was doing, so Jones tell us, when he floated a bolted log raft across the bay and sunk it in 1852, to provide the foundation for the "Ark of Empire" – the Montgomery Block.

A century ago General Sherman and his friend, young Selim Woodworth, the son of Samuel Woodworth – author of the poem, "The Old Oaken Bucket," neglected business to go fishing on the very spot which Halleck chose for his Ark.

Idwall Jones, the author of this fascinating book – which we postponed too long to read, was born in the north of Wales. In 1934, he and his family moved to California, and have since resided in Laguna Beach – but he chose San Francisco as the locale for his latest book.