

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Dickinson Ferry

"A spinach patch is all that marks today one of the best known spots in California a century ago," writes Dwight Barnes in the Stockton Bee.

That spot was Dickinson Ferry, later to become Roberts Ferry, one of the most important stopping places on the old Fort Miller Road, over which all the traffic to the southern mines moved. This road also was the main line from Stockton and Knights Ferry to Millerton and Visalia. It was also the Butterfield Stage road to Albuquerque, N.M.; Kansas City and St. Louis, Mo.

Aside from all the history in the paragraph above, the name Dickinson means a great deal in the early history of Monterey. It was Gallant Duncan Dickinson who built the first brick house in California, on Decatur street, Monterey, between June of 1847 and the same month in 1848. In April, 1849, he located in Stockton where he operated a hotel and became alcalde there in the same year. He was a member of the first State Constitutional Convention held in Colton Hall in Monterey in '49.

In the bottom lands of the Tuolumne River once stood a hotel with accommodations for more than 200 guests. The ferry and hotel were established about seven miles east of Waterford by Dickinson, who had come overland from Missouri in 1846. He later sold the hotel to John W. Roberts, also an historic character of that era. The huge hotel burned to the ground the night of Feb. 22, 1865, with only one bed saved from the flames.

Dickinson was a man of many pioneer enterprises. Aside from building the first brick house, he mined for gold in Tuolumne County's Dickinson's gulch which was named for him. He founded the Dickinson Ferry.

Monterey Alcalde's accounts show that on March 31, 1848, a brick kiln lot, 90 feet long, was sold to Gallant Duncan Dickinson for \$29. Assisted by his son-in-law, A.G. Lawrie, a brick mason who molded and fired brick as well as laid them, he immediately began preparation of brick to build a mansion. Only one wing of this dream house was ever completed, for the two builders hastened away to the gold fields, leaving the "First Brick House" in California unfinished. It is now one of the old buildings marked with a Monterey History and Art Assn. marker on the Historic Route.

Dickinson was born in Virginia in 1806. He went to Tennessee in 1822 where he married Isabella McCreary in 1828 and four years later moved to Missouri where they lived for 14 years, being among the earliest pioneers of that state as well as of California. In May, 1846, with his wife and six children, he began the long trek to the then almost unknown West. The party arrived at Sutter's Fort in November, after pushing through the same perilous storm that had caught the noted Reed and Donner party.

Dickinson and his family passed their first California winter in Santa Clara. While there he and his two older sons were forced to take part in the war until the treaty with Mexico was concluded.

Soon after the adjournment of the Constitutional Convention in Monterey in Sept. 1848, Dickinson was elected prefect of the San Joaquin district and served as such until the State government was organized on Dec. 20, 1849, at San Jose, when the Mexican laws ceased to be in effect. His death occurred on Oct. 20, 1870. His widow died in San Jose in 1877.

Dickinson's daughters are said to have been the first American women to be married in Stockton. Margaret became Mrs. A.G. Lawrie and another daughter married N.B. Stoneroad. According to Bancroft's history a son, Dickey (or David) was a member of the first Monterey jury in 1848.

The First Brick House in California is located on Decatur street in Monterey and owned by Mrs. Juan Garcia.