

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 17, 1954

### **Building the Custom House**

Dr. Aubrey Neasham, historian of the State Division of Beaches and Parks, made a study of the construction of the Old Custom House during the time that he was associated with Dr. Herbert E. Bolton at the Bancroft Library of the University of California. During that time he wrote a series of articles for *The Herald*, one of which we found in a scrap book made in 1938, and from which we will borrow a story for today's Diary.

The Bancroft Library has many documents and manuscripts which offer evidence as to the construction of the Custom House in Monterey. These documents and manuscripts, consisting of inventories, memoirs, estimates, contracts, letters, and daily ledger accounts seem to leave no doubt as to the real story, thinks Dr. Neasham. There have been so many conflicting stories told of the building of the north wing by Spain, the middle section by Mexico and the south wing by the United States, and a great many other versions including a number of dates, but most of them do not seem to be in agreement.

Dr. Neasham believes that the date of the building of the first part of the present Custom House is difficult to ascertain. Undoubtedly there were some structures on the site by the late 1820s. An inventory presented by C. Jose Maria Herrera to Jose Estrada on Oct. 20, 1837, list "a new building near the new boat landing and consisting of two rooms, a large one that is being used as a storage room and for the convenience of the corporal of the Custom House guard and the other for the guard troops. It is constructed with a peaked roof, of adobe and roofed with sheet metal and tile. The two rooms aforementioned have doors fitted with lock plates and keys."

There are mentioned also in this document, a flagpole set up near the building, a hut of upright poles and tules for the use of the sailors and a shed used for protecting boats from the sun.

The building is also mentioned several times by the early pioneers. James Meadows in his reminiscences of the "Graham Affair" tells that, in 1840, when certain foreigners were being expelled by the Mexican officials, they were placed in the old Custom House building prior to embarkation for Mexico.

Although there may have been some additional work on the structure prior to 1841, that year marked the beginning of new activity in building; and from 1841 to 1846 the Custom House took on its present shape, with the two-story north wing, a long one-story central portion, and two-story southern wing, according to Dr. Neasham's belief.

In August, 1841, Thomas Oliver Larkin came into the picture of the history of the Custom House. He contracted with the Mexican government to rebuild the building. From the document which he presented as an estimate, and which is today in the Bancroft Library, it is seen that the structure was to have been enlarged. This construction was to include what was, undoubtedly, a part of the central portion, a second story on the north end, and a portico on the side facing the sea.

A summary which Dr. Neasham found at the end of the estimate is interesting. There are included 5,000 adobe bricks, 8,000 tiles, two large doors, five windows, and iron gratings; 100 rafters, 3 by 6 inches, were to be used for the roof and 100 joists, 4 by 8 inches, for the floors; 6,000 feet of one inch flooring and 4,300 feet of two-inch flooring were to be put on the lower floor. Ten pillars for the portico were to be constructed.

The material for the room upstairs included two windows and shutter frames, a staircase, two lintel beams, 400 feet of flooring and two stringers or girders for the guard rail. The total cost estimated at 2,300 pesos, was to be paid to Larkin with one half in merchandise from the first three ships required to pay duty at the port.