

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 19, 1954

When Building Costs Were Low

There is sufficient evidence to prove that Larkin carried through his contract with the Mexican government in 1842 and 1843, to rebuild the old Custom House in Monterey. There is in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, the estimate which Larkin made for his own record. In it he wrote: "Cost of Custom House, 1841 and 1842."

Other writers and businessmen of the time have mentioned the building. Esteven de la Torre tells in his reminiscences that Larkin was given the contract, and that he (Torres) worked on the building at the time of its construction in 1841 and 1842. H.W. Fitch in September 1841, in a letter to Larkin wrote, "I understand that you are building the Custom House by contract."

Finally a manuscript key to "Picture No. 1 of Monterey" made by Larkin in 1842 has this wording: "No. 8, Custom House, 120 yards long (feet). Corridor or Piazza 10 feet wide. Built in 1842 under direction of Thos. O. Larkin for Government. "Picture No. 1 of Monterey," of which there are many copies existing, shows the two-storied north end and a longer central portion.

Dr. Neasham writes that from 1842 to 1846, according to existing records, there was continual working on the Custom House, indicating that Larkin did more work than that done by him in 1841 and 1842. That accounts, probably, for the four distinct sections showing in old photographs. Between 1843 and 1846 another section in the central part had been added, as well as the south end.

Among the carpenters whose names are mentioned as having worked on the building are William Anderson, Humphrey Hathaway, Robert Thomas, George Kinlock, William Martin, Thomas Doak, Job Dye, and Henry Pitts. Esteven de la Torre did the plastering, and a few Indians and Kanakas helped. An item in Larkin's account book dated December 23, 1844, shows a contract of \$1,800 for building the south end of the Custom House; and another item of March 1846, included the building of a smaller room. From that time onward Dr. Neasham found no evidence of important work on the building.

From the foregoing account it seems probable, then, that by the late 1820's the lower part of the north wing

had been constructed; the upper story of the north wing and part of the central section had been built between 1841 and 1842; and from 1843 to 1846 the rest of the building, including another section of the central portion and the south wing had been finished. The Custom House is then primarily a structure of the Mexican period, if documents and manuscripts unearthed by Dr. Neasham, are to be accepted by historians.

Dr. Neasham further believes that the United States did not do any major work on the building. True, there were minor repairs made from time to time. In 1870, according to the Monterey Republican of February 3, 1870, \$250 was spent for roofing and repair work. But until the modern restoration done by the people of California and the citizens of Monterey, with possible exceptions by private parties between 1870 and 1900, the building stands much as it did when built by Mexico, between 1841 and 1846.

Mrs. F.L. Knudsen has presented to the Monterey History and Art Association to be preserved in the archives of that organization, the "History of the Celebrations of the Semi-Centennial Anniversaries of the Raising of the American Flag and Occupation of California", published in 1896 under the direction of Edwin A. Sherman, president of the Associated Veterans of the Mexican War. The celebration was held in Monterey July 7, 1896 in observance of the 50th anniversary of the raising of the American flag over the Custom House by Com. John Drake Sloat, U.S.N. The copy is autographed by Maj. Edwin A. Sherman, then retired and a resident of Oakland. He had been commissioned major by Gov. Leland Stanford in 1862, during the Civil War.