

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Jacob Primer Leese

During a leisurely walk down Grant Avenue in San Francisco recently (for what is a day in the City without a glimpse of Chinatown?) we chanced to see a bronze plaque on the pillar of a corner building. Historians, or would-be historians, such as we are, always read plaques no matter where they are. From the text on the marker we copied this information: "On this site Jacob Primer Leese erected the first building in San Francisco in 1836. Here the American flag was first unfurled in this city on July 4, 1836. Here was born the first white child in San Francisco – Rosalia Vallejo Leese, April 15, 1838."

This historic marker had been placed there by the Tamalpais Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1931.

It still always amazes us that so much history began in Monterey. This same Jacob Primer Leese was one of Monterey's earliest settlers and was once the owner of now famous Larkin House here. After the Gold Rush, when San Francisco became the busiest port on the Pacific coast, Thomas Oliver Larkin entered into an agreement with Jacob P. Leese to trade properties, Leese taking over the Larkin House and other of his Monterey properties, and Larkin the holdings of Leese in San Francisco. After several years of residence in the Larkin House, the first and only American Consulate, Leese sold the property to Robert Johnson, former mayor of Monterey.

Jacob Leese was born in St. Clairsville, Ohio, Aug. 19, 1809. He was engaged in the Santa Fe trade in 1830, coming to California first in 1833 and returning in 1834, settling first in Los Angeles.

Leese entered a partnership with Nathan Spear and William Sturgis Hinckley, both Americans, according to Bancroft's history of California, and set up a mercantile business at Yerba Buena on San Francisco Bay. He immediately began a house on a lot officially granted to him and celebrated with an Independence Day fiesta in 1836, the occasion marking the first raising of the American flag within the future city of San Francisco. Among the guests were General Vallejo and his sister, Rosalia, to whom Leese was married the following April.

A year later, April 15, 1838, a daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Leese, who received her mother's name. It

was that child who was mentioned on the plaque on Grant avenue in San Francisco. That child later died and her name was given to a younger daughter. A son, Jacob, married an Estrada, a niece of Gov. Alvarado. A daughter married a son of Jose Abrego, for whom Abrego street was named.

We find a note in Bancroft history relating that once Jacob Leese had a California claim of \$6,189, besides a claim for the construction of a wharf at Monterey. In 1850 he was vice-president of the California Pioneers.

On February 2, 1892, the San Francisco papers had this to print:

"Having realized a comfortable fortune, Mr. Leese retired with his family to Monterey where he lived in a quiet, unostentatious manner, occasionally visiting this city and was always welcomed by his pioneer friends, as the pioneer of pioneers.

"In 1891 Mr. Leese returned to San Francisco after a prolonged absence in the east, and on Aug. 4 of that year he was struck down and run over by a wagon while crossing Fourth street from Pioneer Hall. His head and arms were badly cut. He was conveyed to St. Luke's Hospital and remained a patient there until the time of his death, Feb. 1, 1892, kindly cared for by his brother pioneers."