

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Tom Maguire**

"I am writing a book in which mention is made of Tom Maguire, a prominent theater owner in San Francisco from the 1850's on," was the opening paragraph in a letter to The Herald from William Parker of West Long Branch, New Jersey.

This bit of information led us on to investigate this character who had once made history in San Francisco. The letter continued with this information: "His last years were unsuccessful and according to theater documentation in New York, he died in Monterey, 'where he had been employed on a daily newspaper.'" This latter information made the research much more fascinating and important.

"The date of his death is given as March 3, 1910. Maguire was buried at Monterey and, at a later date, James Murray, a Montana millionaire, had a monument placed over Maguire's grave." And so the story became more and more interesting.

We spent hours at the Monterey Library reviewing the old files of the newspaper published in Monterey in 1910 but found no mention of Maguire or of a funeral or of James Murray placing a monument on anyone's grave. So we turned to the California Historical Society files and there found an article running in the Quarterly published by the society, from the December 1941 issue through the September 1942.

In the book "The Spectacular San Franciscans" by Julia Cooley Altrocchi, we discovered this reference to this once important theatrical personage: "Thomas Maguire, who was to loom large in San Francisco's theatrical history, and to earn the sobriquet of the 'Napoleon of the Drama,' opened Maguire's Theater and rebuilt the old Jenny Lind (destroyed for the second time in one of the city's many holocausts), presenting there Julius Brutus Booth in Richelieu and other plays.

"Meanwhile as evidence of increasing urbanities, Thomas Maguire was building his splendid Opera House on Washington street, complete with silk-curtained boxes (1854)."

Then again in a later chapter there is this reference to Maguire: "San Francisco opened the silver decade by giving, on New Year's Day, a presentation to Thomas Maguire, who had been the city's beloved impresario

for 20 years, of a \$1,000 service of plate with silver medallions representing Adah Menken, Edwin Forrest, Charles Kean, and other favorites of both Maguire and of San Francisco."

Clay M. Greene, prominent in theatrical circles in San Francisco, whom many will still remember as the brother of the late Harry Greene of Monterey, and as being interested for many years in the drama at Santa Clara University; wrote this description of Maguire: "Like Napoleon, he created his own career, like Napoleon, he sought to conquer everything in the sphere he had selected for his activities, and for a time succeeded, then like Napoleon again, he failed and died in exile."

In Louis Foster Rodecape's articles in the Quarterly of the California Historical Society, he writes this of Maguire: "... Handsome, unlettered, quick-tempered, far visioned Irishman. Thirty years he swaggered, a sometimes benevolent, sometimes pitiful tyrant in the affairs of the theater in the new West."

In 1849 when news of the gold discovery reached Maguire in New York, the young man ordered a theater shipped to San Francisco in sections from the former city. We have read that he arrived there in September of that same year with "Little Em," his wife, and his father, James Maguire. During the first period of his residence he was a saloon keeper in the famous old Parker House. He opened the Jenny Lind Theater on June 13, 1851 and on June 22, the sixth great fire to visit the city took place and Maguire was a victim, but four days later he was rebuilding. The opera house that bore his name was first opened in July of 1863.

Louis J. Stellman of Carmel, of "Sam Brannon," a book describing other early happenings in San Francisco, became interested in our research into the life of Thomas Maguire, and he sent this bit of information to add to the collection: "Hittell, the historian, gives Maguire several brief notices, the first of which concerns his sale of a decrepit and fire-weakened structure known as the Jenny Lind theater, to the city by means of a political maneuver in 1852. He received \$200,000 for it after a vote to this effect was passed by the city council and board of supervisors. The price was considered so outrageous that public meetings and some rioting resulted and the mayor vetoed the deal which was, however, passed over his head.

“The Vigilance Committee of San Francisco blacklisted Maguire and ordered him to leave town as a ‘bad citizen’ and disturber of the peace. But he managed to delay his departure until the order of deportation was finally revoked.”

Maguire went on building and buying theaters, according to “They Were San Franciscans,” bringing the first grand opera to San Francisco and maintaining it, often at great loss to himself until, finally, his fortunes waned and he returned to New York, where for years he lived on funds cadged from his friends and finally died, completely impoverished. He died there January 20, 1896, after 12 years away from San Francisco.

Mrs. de Ford states in her book that he was so illiterate he could not write his own name, which tends to destroy the legend that Maguire was on his way to Monterey to enter newspaper work when he died. We found no reference in any of the stories of a marker on his grave.