

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 6, 1954

Tomorrow's Anniversary

Tomorrow Monterey will again celebrate the raising of the American Flag over the Custom House, in a re-enactment of the important event which took place here on July 7, 1846.

The Monterey History and Art Assn. is the sponsor of the event, assisted by the Peninsula Navy League and the Navy Postgraduate School. It is hoped that the citizens of the Monterey Peninsula will be present in full force to honor the Stars and Stripes and the men who raised it over California 108 years ago.

The Rev. Walter Colton in his diary, written from 1846 until 1849, has left us with a very good account of the historic event. He reports the raising of the flag and explains that this event was wholly unexpected by the Californians, and "struck the public heart with the deepest surprise." Other causes of alarm and apprehension faded into shadows, he wrote, in the presence of this decisive measure; they were the admonitory vibrations, but "here was the earthquake itself."

History tells us that a public meeting was held in Monterey, at which the most intelligent people were largely represented. The question of asking England's protection through the naval forces under command of Adm. Seymour, which were on the California coast at the time, were discussed. But Don Rafael, who was probably Don Rafael Estrada, the local alcalde of the day, persuaded the citizens against such action. His words were: "Our object is to preserve our country; but she is gone – California is lost to us: and this proposal to invoke the protection of England is only to seek another owner." And so the meeting broke up, leaving each member to act upon his own impulses.

California's military forces were at this time in the command of Gen. Jose Castro, a prominent citizen of Monterey and one of the leading politicians of his day. He was for a brief period governor of California. Most of his soldiers felt that it was the same thing to them whether "their weapons were rifles or a guitar – whether they were going to a skirmish or a fandango," according to observations of Walter Colton.

Commodore John Drake Sloat, in his flag-ship, the Savannah arrived at Monterey on the 1st or 2nd of July,

to find the Cyane, Capt. Mervine in command, and the Levant, Capt. Page.

Bancroft relates in his history of California that he has been unable to determine which of the two dates is correct, but Sloat wrote in his report that he arrived on the 2nd.

Capt. William Mervine raised the flag and took command on shore in Monterey. Fort Mervine on the brow of the hill at the old Monterey Presidio, is named in his honor. John B. Montgomery, in command of the Portsmouth, which remained in San Francisco, was also honored in California with a street in San Francisco named for him.

It is related in Bancroft and other historical documents that at 7 o'clock in the morning of July 7 (Tuesday) Sloat sent Mervine ashore with two or three officers, bearing a formal demand for the surrender of the post of Monterey, with all troops, arms, and other public property. On receipt of a reply at half-past nine o'clock, Sloat issued to the crews of all ships a general order forbidding in the usual terms all plunder and other excesses on shore.

The order from the commodore began with these words: "We are about to land on the territory of Mexico, with whom the United States is at war. To strike her flag, and to hoist our own in the place of it, it is our duty. It is not only our duty to take California, but to preserve it afterward as a part of the United States at all hazards. To accomplish this it is of the first importance to cultivate the good opinion of the inhabitants, whom we must reconcile."

At the stated hour 250 Marines were landed under Capt. Mervine, with Cmdr. Page as second. The force marched directly to the Custom House, where Sloat's proclamation was read, the flag of the United States was raised – three cheers were given by troops and spectators, and at the same time a salute of 21 guns was fired from each of the three men-of-war. The proclamation in English and Spanish was posted in several public places. Thus Monterey, became permanently an American town and the Rev. Walter Colton was appointed its first alcalde.