

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 8, 1955

A Colton Letter

Because the Navy and the Monterey Museum Board are planning to honor the memory of Chaplain Walter Colton, Monterey's first American alcalde, the publisher of California's first newspaper, the Californian, the builder of Colton Hall and the author of a number of books relating to the history of his city and the state, we are of the opinion that the following letter concerning his observations of conditions in San Francisco will be of interest to our readers.

The letter was addressed to the Hon. William Ballard Preston, secretary of the Navy: Philadelphia, Aug. 3, 1849

Dear Sir:

A few facts in reference to public affairs in San Francisco may be unacceptable to you at this time. The opposition of citizens to the present alcalde flows from a profound conviction of his unfitness for office. During his administration of the police the greatest confusion and disorder have prevailed. He has not the support of any portion of the community competent to sustain him. The citizens have resolved on a new administration of their affairs and, whether right or wrong, will be very apt to persevere in it. They are safe in the experiment for their condition can hardly be worse. The interference of Gen'l. Riley is unfortunate; he can but partially succeed at best, and this partial success will only increase the confusion. The ground he should take is that every town may make its own municipal government and regulations. If they are satisfied with the old alcalde system it is well, but if they prefer a more thorough organization they should have it. The alcalde system is a one-manpower. This may suit Californians, but it never has and never will suit Americans, and any attempt to force it upon them will meet with resistance. Let the town, therefore, of San Francisco govern itself and let every other town in California do the same.

The government in Washington desires, I doubt not, to avoid a collision between the South and the North on the slave question in reference to California. This may perhaps be done if the people of that country will at once organize a civil government and apply next winter to be admitted as a state. They will have a population to

justify such an application. But this result can be realized only by prompt and decisive measures.

The towns in the north of California are ready to act, but those in the south are indifferent. They require the presence and personal influence of some one in whom they have confidence, such a man as Thos. O. Larkin of Monterey. A letter addressed to him by any member of the cabinet would result in the simultaneous movement of the citizens in the South of California in the contemplated organization. Mr. Larkin is not a great statesman, but he is a man of indomitable force of character. What he attempts he rarely fails to accomplish. He desires no office and would accept none. This renders his influence the broader and deeper. Should the people of California organize a government—be called upon to make a choice of a governor, they will elect Col. Fremont. Such at least was the general impression at the time I left Monterey.

It is much to be regretted that Congress did not at its last session establish a branch mint in California. It would have secured to the basis of our currency millions that have gone and are going to the mints of other countries. England has been more benefited by the mines of California than the United States. All laws to exclude foreigners from the mines must for the present be powerless, or only end in bloodshed. In lieu of this there must be a branch mint, let it be obligatory on all to deposit their gold for coinage, and let it be a forfeiture to attempt to take gold out of the country without being coined. Such a law will be considered a reasonable requirement for the privilege of taking the gold out of the public lands, for all the lands in which gold is found belong to the United States. They are covered by no private grants with the exception of a solitary ranch.

I have made these remarks unsolicited, but in no obtrusive spirit. It takes a heartfelt interest in California, and that is my apology.

With great respect, I am Dear Sir, very faithfully yours,

Walter Colton, U.S.N.