

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Portrait of the Past**

Our readers will remember the fascinating story we wrote a few months ago about the visit of Langdon Sully of New Jersey to Monterey to acquire more knowledge of the life and work here of his grandfather, Lt. Alfred Sully. The senior Sully came to Monterey in 1849 with Col. J. D. Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers. Soon after their arrival a group, with dramatic aspirations, organized a group of players who opened first in the Old Cuartel and later persuaded Jack Swim to turn his sailors rooming house into a theatre. This old adobe building is now known as California's First Theatre and is a State Historical Monument.

While here Lt. Sully met and fell in love with Senorita Manuelita Jimeno, the charming and beautiful daughter of Dona Augustias Jimeno and granddaughter of Don Jose de la Guerra of Santa Barbara. The young bride died at the age of 17 years on March 28, 1851, and her infant son followed her in death on the 15th of April. The headstone marking their grave, the epitaph, written in Spanish, was put there by her devoted husband, who returned to the east coast and eventually became General Sully,

Lt. Sully was the son of Thomas Sully, the famous portrait artist, who was born in England in 1783. He came to the United States as a young child and was a pupil of the famous Gilbert Stuart and eventually, established himself in Philadelphia as a portraitist.

In the November issue of *Antique Magazine* there is a splendid article by William E. Steadman, revealing a great deal of further information about this famous painter, Thomas Sully, whose son also inherited a bit of his father's talent for he left several water views of various scenes in Monterey, which have been prepared and reprinted from time to time.

Mr. Steadman writes: "With the establishment of the Military Academy at West Point in 1802, as the principal post and school for the United States Corps of Engineers, its officers and professors began to collect portraits of distinguished persons connected with the school. Today the collection at West Point is significant not only because of the people depicted, but for its artistic quality as well. It includes works of such artists

as Gilbert Stuart, John Wesley Jarvis, and J. P. Healy, as well as eleven portraits by Thomas Sully,"

Ten of these Sully portraits were done on order for the Military Academy and have remained there, the eleventh was given to West Point with documentary evidence of its identity.

The first painting Sully did for the academy was of its first superintendent, Jonathan Williams, which Steadman describes as: "majestic in concept as well as in size (54 inches by 94), which dominates the academy library where it has hung since the building's erection; here Sully has portrayed a man of great physical, as well as moral, strength . . ." Williams was the grandnephew of Benjamin Franklin and an officer well qualified to head the newly established academy - a likely man for President Jefferson to choose for the post.

Another one of the outstanding portraits at the academy is the full length of Thomas Jefferson, painted in 1822, four years before the President's death. It shows the statesman in complete command of his many years, according to Steadman. This is the largest Sully canvas, measuring 103 by 6 inches. The pillar and drapery in the background reflect the influence of the theater on the artist, so we imagine Lt. Sully inherited his love of the drama from his parent.

Edward Biddle and Mantle Fielding are the author of "The Life and Works of Thomas Sully," in which there is much information concerning the various West Point portraits.

In 1829 Sully painted four notable portraits for the academy, those of General Walter Keith Armistead, chief of engineers, during War of 1818; Col. Joseph Gardner Swift, the first graduate of the academy and inspector in 1818; General Alexander Macomb, who was in command of land operations at the Battle of Plattsburg; and Captain Thomas Jefferson Leslie, paymaster of the Corps of Engineers and treasurer of the Academy. He also painted the portrait of General Charles Gratiot, graduate of West Point and inspector from 1829 to 1838. In 1832 he did a portrait, full length of James Monroe showing the President in full dress - dark coat, knee breeches and white silk stockings, and providing one of the earliest depictions of the Phi Beta Kappa key, hanging from his vest.

A three-quarter-length portrait of Colonel John James Abert, chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers is the last Sully painting to be commissioned by West

Point. The last painting by Sully, presented by a descendant and only identified last year, is that of Major George Blaney, adjutant at West Point during 1820-1821 and 1822-1824.

Steadman ends his article on Sully with these words:

"Sully was a great painter . . . His portraits of these distinguished men provide a lesson in history and continual inspiration."