

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 22, 1956

### Colton Hall

"This is the birthday of Washington. The Independence and Lexington are brilliantly dressed; the flags of all nations stream over them in a gorgeous arch. A salute of 28 guns from the Independence has expressed the homage of each state to the occasion." These were the expressions of the Rev. Walter Colton on Monday, Feb. 22, 1847, as noted in his "Three Years in California," printed in New York in 1860.

Colton continues with his views on Washington.

"Even here, and among the native population, Washington is known, and his virtues are revered. People speak of him as being exempted from the weaknesses of our nature - as one commissioned of Heaven for a great and glorious purpose, and endowed with the amazing powers requisite for its accomplishment, It is the character of Washington that will never die. His achievements will long survive on the page of history, but his character is embalmed in the human heart. It is not a man's deeds that of themselves render him immortal. There must be some high consecrating motive. He who reared the most gigantic of pyramids has perished. He sought an eternal remembrance in his monument, end not in any virtues which it was to perpetuate. The monument remains, but where is the builder? 'Gone, glimmering through the twilight of the past'."

Plans for the building of Colton Hall were discussed by Colton in his diary on March 4, 1847: "And in the meantime I shall set the prisoners quarrying stone for a school house, and have already laid the foundations. The building is to be 60 feet by 30 - two stories, suitably proportioned, with a handsome portico. The labor of the convicts, the taxes on rum, and the banks of the gamblers, must put it up. Some think my project impractical; we shall see."

Next Colton writes of his plans for a new jail: "The old prison being too confined and frail for the safe custody of convicts. I have given orders for the erection of a new one. The work is to be done by the prisoners themselves: they render the building necessary, and it is but right that they should put it up. Every bird builds its own nest. The old one will hold an uninventive Indian,

but a veteran from Sydney or Sing Sing would work his way out like a badger from his hole."

Colton Hall was at last completed and Walter Colton left a notation in his diary of the fact on Thursday, March 8: "The town hall, on which I have been at work for more than a year, is at last finished. It is built of white stone, quarried from a neighboring hill, and which easily takes the shape you desire. The lower apartments are for schools; the hall over them - seventy feet by thirty - is for public assemblies. The front is ornamented with a portico, which you enter from the hall. It is not an edifice that would attract any attention among public buildings in the United States; but in California it is without rival. It has been erected out of the slender proceeds of town lots, the labor of convicts. taxes on liquor shops, and fines on gamblers.

"The scheme was regarded with incredulity by many; but the building is finished, and the citizens have assembled in it, and christened it after my name, which will now go down to posterity with the odor of gamblers, convicts, and tipplers. I leave it as a humble evidence of what may be accomplished by rigidly adhering to one purpose, and shrinking from no personal efforts necessary to its achievements. A prison has also been built, and mainly through the labor of the convicts. Many a joke the rogues have cracked while constructing their own cage; but they have worked so diligently I shall feel constrained to pardon out the less incorrigible. It is difficult here to discriminate between offenses which flow from moral hardihood, and those which result, in a measure, from untoward circumstances. There is a wide difference in the turpitude of the two: and the alcalde under the Mexican law, has a large scope in which to exercise his sense of moral justice. Better to err a furlong from mercy than a fathom with cruelty. Unmerited punishment never yet reformed its subject; to suppose it, is a libel at the human soul."