

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 6, 1956

Defense of Monterey

Among the records of the Monterey History and Art Assn. kept by the late Col. Roger S. Fitch, former commandant of the Presidio of Monterey and who, for 15 years, was president of the association, we have found these official notes on the history of the Old Fortifications, Presidio of Monterey. The record from the War Department, as requested by the colonel, was written June 8, 1928.

“With reference to your letter, dated May 21, concerning a description of the original fortifications at the Presidio of Monterey, only a scant description of the early fortifications of Monterey are available, as far as can be ascertained after a careful research.”

Col. R.B. Mason, 1st Dragoons, in a letter to adjutant general of the Army, dated Monterey, June 23, 1847 (Executive Documents, 1st Session, 31st Congress), wrote.

“The garrison of the place being of mixed character, I have exercised the command myself and caused the construction, under the immediate supervision of Lt. Halleck of the engineers, of a redoubt in the form of a bastion on the hill overlooking the town and anchorage. There are twenty 24-pounders mounted, and four 8-inch mortars on the platform. All the shot and shells brought by the Lexington are piled within the redoubt. In the rear of the redoubt I have caused to be constructed, mostly by contract labor, a stone house 75 feet by 25 with an excellent shingle roof, containing ample room to store all the valuable ordinance stores sent out in the Lexington.”

Among the executive documents (1st Session, 31st Congress) there is this reference to the Presidio of Monterey, as written by H.S. Halleck, brevet captain and secretary of state. Monterey, California March 1, 1849:

“The old battery—San Carlos—at that place (Monterey) was built soon after the establishment of the mission of the same name (1770), and, though much dilapidated, was maintained up to about the time the Americans took possession of the country. An auxiliary in back of San Carlos was begun by the Mexicans previous to July 7, 1846, and afterward enlarged by the Americans and occupied by them without intermission to the present time.”

These fortifications as described by Colonel Mason and Halleck were within the compound near the Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos, the present Roman Catholic Church of Monterey.

A copy of “Colonial History of the City of San Francisco,” written in 1866 by John W. Dwinelle, contains this reference to the presidios of the West: “All the presidios were established on the same plan: closing a favorable place they surrounded it by a ditch 12 feet wide and six deep. The earth of the ditch served for the outwork. The enclosure for the presidio was formed by a quadrilateral, about 600 feet square. The rampart, built of adobe brick, was 12 by 15 feet high, and three feet in thickness; small bastions flanked the angles; the presidio had but two gates. Its armament generally consisted of eight bronze cannon, eight 12 and 16 pounders. Although incapable of resisting an attack of ships of war, these fortifications were sufficient to repel the incursions of the Indians.

“Not far from the presidios, according to the topography of the land, was an open battery (batterie decouverte), pompously styled ‘the castle’ (castillo). Within the enclosure of the presidio were the church, the quarters of the officers and soldiers, the houses of the colonists, store-houses, work-shops, stables, wells, and cistern. Outside were grouped some houses, and at a little distance was the “King’s Farm’ (El Rancho Del Rey), which furnished pastures to the horses and beast of burden of the garrison. Four coast batteries and four presidios defended upper California. Those of San Diego were found in 1769; Monterey, in 1770; San Francisco 1776, and Santa Barbara in 1780.”