

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Presidio of Monterey

How did the United States come by the Presidio at Monterey, and what is its story?

We must think of the Presidio as in two parts - "El Castillo" (fort) on the hill, and the old occupational area in closed within a stockade, where the soldiers, officers, colonists and officials lived roughly, speaking, within the area bounded by Pearl street on the north, Fremont on the south, Munras on the west, to El Estero at the east. On the southeast corner stood the Royal Presidio chapel of San Carlos de Borromeo still there and still functioning.

The first foreigners to stand on the site of "El Castillo" were Sebastian Vizcaino and his men, including three Augustinian friars, on cold December morning of 1602. Mass was celebrated and the country claimed for the King of Spain. The spot is marked, though the famous tree under which the ceremony was performed, has disappeared, and the picturesque ravine filled in in the name of "progress."

Capt. Gaspar de Portola came for the purpose of establishing a mission and a presidio at Monterey. A second trip to locate the Bay of Monterey was accomplished, with the aid of Father Junipero Serra, on June 3, 1770. In 1822 news reached Monterey that Mexico had thrown off the yoke of Spain and the colors of the new government were flown at the Custom House. The Mexican officers began building redoubts thinking that defense must be provided.

It was at the same fortification that the Marines, under Commodore John Drake Stoen, raised the Stars and Stripes, on July 7, 1846 the first American flag to be flown to the breeze telling the world that the United States claimed possession of the territory, war having been declared in May between Mexico and the American republic.

It was a friendly sort of capture.

Bluejackets and Marines, headed by their band, landed and raised the flag. Within a few days the officers were guests of some at the romantic señoritas of the town, everybody was happy, except the older generation who bore no love for the "Gringos."

The Navy held the town until the arrival of the frigate Lexington, bearing the first U. S. troops. Aboard were Gen. William T. Sherman and Ord, Halleck and Loeser. Sherman wrote: "We landed in fine shape, in spite of our six months at sea," and marched "up the hill, in full uniform; carrying our knapsacks and arms." They relieved Lt. Baldwin of the Navy detachment and were soon in quarters. Most of the soldiers were quartered in the Mexican barracks at the west side of the presidio - El Cuartel, Sherman taking up his quarters in the Custom House as quartermaster.

The matter of who was governor after the occupation was settled when Gen. Kearney arrived aboard the Cyane. He was heralded by the Army as their chief. The "rough and ready" commander took up his quarters in the Larkin House, the first governor's headquarters in the capital under the American regime. Col. Mason succeeded him as governor, for whom Sherman acted as adjutant general. They moved their headquarters to the Cuartel, where they fitted up rooms in the middle of the building, the soldiers quarter flanking them. For the information of newcomers to Monterey we might say that the Cuartel site is on Munras street and at the rear of the Stevenson House.

The block houses built by the Navy under Baldwin on Presidio Hill stood for many years, many Monterey men and women probably remember playing in them as children and others remember the pile of adobe brick on the site in later years. Now all that is left is a few photographs.

Then came the Spanish War. When it came to an end, and the troops were returning in great numbers from the Philippines, the government was hard pressed for space to accommodate them. Then some bright mind remembered, so the story goes, old Monterey, long ago abandoned. Contractors were soon at work removing what remained of the historic barracks, and the post was rebuilt anew.

The Presidio thus in its 186th year, one of the oldest in the United States, and the most important during the formative years of the west. San Diego Presidio, though one year older, was never more than an outpost for the protection of the Mission San Diego.

As the other presidios, San Francisco and Santa Barbara, Monterey became Monterey, the town.