

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Preserve Our Heritage

Today there seems to be a revival of interest in the old adobe buildings in Monterey when a few of them are again on the market for sale and others are in great danger of being completely destroyed to make way for "progress". What is progress for Monterey? Is it to be a community just like any other town in California or are we going to preserve the heritage which was left in our keeping by those who preceded us to these shores of Monterey Bay where the natural beauty was God-given, and the adobe buildings left to us by the Spaniards and the Mexicans who came here to colonize and later to claim the great West for the United States of America?

The Peninsula is too small to be ruined by over-anxious financiers or by lack of good planning or architectural control. We have just so much land and when that is ruined, we cannot bring back what has been lost. Let's be careful, on the alert and planning well for the future that we may keep the beauty we have in such abundance, the trees, the hills and as many of the historic buildings as we possibly can. Let's do more tree planting and beautify Alvarado and adjacent streets with more store front gardens and better and more artistic window displays, so a leisurely walk downtown will be a pleasure and an inspiration. It can be done. Let's do it!

A group of enthusiastic women have banded, together to preserve the Abrego adobe at the corner of Abrego and Webster streets from possible destruction. This charming little one-story adobe was for many years the home and studio of the late Mary Black Morrison, one of the Peninsula's best-known artists. Since her death, the house, and the beautiful walled-in garden, which surrounded it on three sides, have changed hands many times. But the little adobe has remained unharmed and in its corner. Now it's turn has come, and the Monterey Foundation will soon become the new owners, with the group of far-sighted women as the co-sponsors of the project.

It will be of interest here to recite a bit of the history of the old building, one of the oldest landmarks in Monterey. The house was built of adobe brick and wood by Don Jose Abrego, a Spanish merchant who came to Monterey from Mexico in 1834. He arrived with the colonists under Don Jose Maria Hizar on the

vessel "La Natalie," which is said to have been the vessel on which Napoleon escaped from the Isle of Elba. In 1835 the vessel was sold to smugglers who carried on their dishonest business for a few months.

One night while the men were on shore, a heavy northeast gale parted the anchor chain, and the ship drifted ashore and was wrecked. Portions of the timbers of this vessel were used by Don Jose Abrego in building his house.

In the year of his arrival, Abrego opened a hat shop in what is now known as the Abrego house. Bancroft says of him: "He was young, intelligent, with some capital and a good repute. He became a prominent citizen, holding office continuously from 1836, as comisario de policia, administrator of San Antonio Mission, customs official, member of the assembly and treasure.

In 1844 he was grantee of Pt. Pinos rancho, and later claimant of San Fransicquito Rancho. After the United States occupation, he deemed it his duty as a Mexican to decline office for a time, but later held other important positions.

In 1836 Senor Abrego married Josefa Estrada, a half-sister of Gov. Alvarado, and moved at once into a part of the house he had built, and to which additions were afterward made.

Abrego acted as state treasurer of Alta California up to the time of the American occupation of Monterey, July 7, 1846. After this period, he conducted his store and also commenced the manufacture of soap from fats and using oak ashes. He continued making soap until ships from the Eastern coast began making frequent trips following the discovery of gold. He then had to abandon this industry as he could not compete with the perfumed soap brought on the market.

We will continue the history of this early citizen of Monterey and his adobe home for Friday's Diary.