

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey as the Capital

"The capital of this queer country is a mere collection of buildings scattered as loosely as if they were so many bullocks at pasture." wrote one of the officers who had accompanied Commodore John Drake Sloat to Monterey in 1846 to raise the United States flag over the Custom House and claim California. His description continues: "The most expert surveyor could not possibly classify them even into very crooked streets.

"The dwellings, some of which attain to the dignity of a second story, are all built of adobe, being sheltered on every side from the sun by overhanging eaves, while toward the rainy quarter of the southeast they enjoy the additional protection of boughs of trees resting like so many ladders on the roof.

"The center is occupied by a large hall to which everything else is subordinated. The hall is designed and used for dancing. It has a wood floor and springs nightly to the step of those who are often greeted in the whirl of their amusements by the rising sun.

"Externally, the habitations have a cheerless aspect in consequence of the paucity of windows. As to public Buildings, this capital of a province may with a stretch of charity be said to possess four. First is the church, part of which is going to decay, while another part is not yet finished; its only peculiarity is that it is built, or rather half-built, of stone. Next comes the castillo, consisting of a small house, surrounded by a low wall, all of adobe. Third is the guard house, a paltry mud hut without windows. Fourth and last stands the custom house, which is, or promises to be, for it is not yet completed, a small range of decent offices."

By Sept. of 1849 Colton Hall had been completed by the Rev. Walter Colton, who also came to Monterey with Commodore Sloat. He had been appointed the first alcalde here and almost at once started collecting fines, for all offenses which were considered unlawful, with which he built Colton Hall, a structure which was named in his honor. It was in this building that the first Constitutional Convention was held that year.

Before the convention ended the members voted to hold the first meeting of the legislature in San Jose. By doing so Monterey lost its title of capital and San Jose gained it. The day appointed for convening was

Saturday, Dec. 15, 1849. That winter was an unusually wet one, with a rainfall upward of 36 inches for the season. There were about 3,000 people in the town. During the Monterey convention a committee of San Jose citizens had promised a suitable building by Dec. 15. This was indeed a rash promise, when it is considered that San Jose at that time had no building adequate for the purpose. Colton Hall been chosen for the convention because it was the largest and most impressive building in the state at that time. In San Jose there was a building erected in 1849, but the rental price asked was \$4,000 per month. That was so exorbitant that it was deemed best to purchase it outright. This was done by a group of public-spirited citizens, paying \$34,000, with interest at the rate of 8 per cent a month.

The building and furnishing have been described thusly: "The Senate room is ill-lighted, badly ventilated with a low ceiling; and rough railing a little inside the door, beyond which none but members and officials may pass. Every member has a rush-bottomed chair and a small desk with stationery. At the farther end the speaker is perched in a species of pulpit. The floor is covered with a number of little carpets of various sizes, patterns and shapes, looking as if every member had contributed a piece to make up the robe which had quite a mosaic appearance. An appearance of antiquity is produced by the threadbare state of the floor covering. The upper floor is occupied by the Assembly. Here plain common chairs, flat deal tables, and a strip of matting are the extent of the accommodations, thus bringing out the greater loftiness and exhibits in the difference in grade between the two bodies in the style of furniture."

Because the poor accommodation in San Jose the legislators voted to move the capitol on to Vallejo in 1852.