

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 20, 1957

### **California's Migrant Capital**

On Dec. 30, 1851, a meeting of members elected to the California Legislature was held in San Francisco for the purpose of consulting as to the proper place for holding the next session.

Twelve senators and 30 assemblymen were present, and after a debate and the reception of the opinion of Atty. Gen. McDougall that Vallejo was by law the seat of government, it was decided to meet at that place. Accordingly on Jan. 5, 1852, the third session of the Legislature began at Vallejo.

Again when the Legislature met, the State House was entirely unfurnished, and the rostrums for the presiding officers had not been built. So uncertain had it been whether the Legislature would meet there that the inhabitants of that city were ill prepared to accommodate the increase in the population.

Rooms and beds were scarce and upwards of 100 persons were forced to seek quarters on board the steamer Empire, on which they had traveled from San Francisco. Chairs were so scarce in the town that the members were seated in their halls on temporary benches made of boards placed on stools and nail kegs, also rum kegs. The Legislature soon began to complain that their wardrobes were becoming soiled, and that there was not even a washer-woman in town to keep them in clean clothes.

To add to the discomfort, food of all kinds became scarce. Work, however, was prosecuted with energy in the State House but it was some time before it was anything like order. A strong disposition was manifested for a removal of the Legislature to some other city that could afford superior accommodations.

The fifth capital of California was Benicia. On Feb. 4, 1853, the Assembly voted and adopted a resolution to adjourn to meet at Benicia on the 11th. On May 18th another act was passed declaring Benicia the permanent seat of government in accordance with the provision of the Constitution.

Benicia was laid out in 1847 by Dr. Robert Semple, founder of the city and president of the first State Constitutional Convention in Monterey in 1849. The site was deeded to Semple and Thomas Oliver Larkin by

General Vallejo in the autumn of 1846, and the city was laid out the following year.

The Legislature first met in the new city hall, built of brick which had been completed in December of the previous year and offered to the state by the town. In April 1884, Sacramento, by one vote, finally won the fight for the state capital. For the next five years the old state capital building in Benicia was used as a county courthouse. Then it was used as a city hall, library, and Red Cross headquarters. It was marked by the state society of D.A.R. in 1924.

At an old-timers reunion on Sept. 12, 1936 a bronze tablet honoring Mariano G. Vallejo, Larkin and Dr. Semple was placed on a concrete shaft on the corner of the old capital grounds.

Sacramento became the fourth and sixth capital of California. After brief careers in various early California communities, the Legislature was finally established in Sacramento in 1852 and the members met there that year and in 1854. A new state building was under construction in 1854 when it was destroyed by fire and another attempt to have a state house met with disaster when it was completely destroyed in a flood in January of 1861. In February 1853 the Legislature moved to Benicia but Sacramento gained it back in 1855.

The present handsome capitol building was finally completed in 1874 at a cost of \$3,400,000 for construction and subsequent improvement.