

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Gold Under the Stairs

The story of the early day happenings in the Allen House, which, until its demolition in 1922, was the "oldest frame house in Monterey, reads like a modern thriller. This old dwelling stood at the corner of Munras and Webster streets for 75 years.

Ruby Hickman, young daughter of John Hickman, the principal of the Monterey Public School, wrote a story of the Allen House for the school publication in 1896 after interviewing Mrs. Allen. In it she tells of the robbery of the Custom House and how the money was hidden beneath the stairs of the Allen House.

It was early in 1849 that William Bushton, a carpenter by trade, arrived in Monterey with his wife and daughter. In the hold of the ship Elizabeth Starbuck Bushton had shipped boards and other timbers, cut, and matched perfectly, for the erection of a comfortable residence destined for his family. Since nails were scarce, every joining in the entire structure was mortised.

It was not long after the house was completed that Bushton died, and his widow married Thomas E. Allen. Upon the death of Allen, Mrs. Allen rented the south wing of the building to a group of Australians as a residence.

Ruby Hickman writes:

"After the tenants had lived there awhile the Custom House was robbed of \$30,800. Suspicion fell on this family because of the strange sounds in the house, whispering, a muffled sound of walking, and, at night, a great deal of pounding; and late one-night people were heard going in and out.

"Mrs. Allen heard so much that she was quite convinced as to who had stolen the money. So, she sent a young girl to tell the Custom House officer that if he would bring a package of needle work to her so that people would not know his real errand, she would, tell him, where the money was. She also asked for two good and worthy men to be sent to stay in the house with her so that she would not be killed if the thieves should think it was she who had told on them.

"When the officer came, she told him all she had heard and seen. He got some soldiers, they surrounded the

house, and upon searching they found the money. There was \$800 in silver under the table, and \$30,000 under a flight of stairs. The money had been put into boxes and one placed under each stair. This room is next to the street and is now used for a dining room."

We have read in other reports of the robbery and the recovery of the money, that the crime was laid to a man named King, then collector of the port. King was liberated for lack of evidence and soon after left the country.

When the officers arrived, no objection was made to the search, but it was noticed that one of the women sat firmly on the third step of the narrow staircase leading to the second floor, and that she would scarcely move in order to allow the officers to pass. One of the officers called for an axe. He then chopped a portion of the staircase down, resulting in finding the gold, divided into smaller sums and placed in boxes under the stairs, a box under each stair. The floor was also torn up and \$800 in silver was unearthed in the floor under the table. Long prison terms were given the culprits.

Mrs. Allen told the school reporter that the previous year she had thought of having the old house weather-boarded. She told a man that she would pay him \$75 if he would do the work. He agreed to, but upon driving the first nail found that that it would not enter the wood; he tried several, but instead of going into the wood they flew back and hit him in the face. He then told Mrs. Allen that he guessed he would not do the work, for the boards were like iron. "Well," she said, "If that is the case, I guess the house will not fall this year."