

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 29, 1957

The First 'Skyscraper'

William Heath Davis, author of "Sixty Years in California," spoke and wrote Spanish fluently, as well as Hawaiian and English. His letters in all three languages may be seen today in the California State Library in Sacramento.

Because of his capabilities Davis was elected to the ayuntamiento (town council) and reelected for a second term. In 1849 he built the first brick building in San Francisco of more than one story. This sky-scraper of '49 towered four stories high! That same year he became an officer in the first military company formed in San Francisco, the California Guard.

It was a great day in 1849 when Davis lowered the Hawaiian flag on board the "Euphemia," the banner which had flown in California ports for 11 years, and hoisted an American ensign given him by Com. Thomas Ap Catesby Jones of the USS Ohio.,

In 1850 Davis leased his brick building to the United States government for use as a Custom House, the same year, sold his old ship to the City of San Francisco for a much-needed prison brig.

Davis helped found the Society of Pioneers and when outlaws undertook to take over the city, he carried a gun and did patrol duty in charge of a seven-man squad in Sam Brannan's volunteer force. He was also a member of the Vigilantes in 1851 and 1856.

Although Davis invested in and helped to found San Diego, his true interests continued in Northern California. He remained a wealthy man although the fire of 1851 wiped out \$700,000 worth of his property, including the Custom House. He planned to re-write his "Sixty Years in California," as "Seventy-five Years in California" and had the manuscript ready for the printer in 1906 when, in April, the earthquake and fire leveled San Francisco. Davis tried to rescue his book manuscript from the Montgomery' block, where his office was located, but was prevented from entering the building by a U.S. Marine guard. The building did not burn but it was looted, and the Davis' papers disappeared.

Davis still had his notes at home but at 84 years of age he was too old to start the work all over again. His papers were eventually given to the Huntington Library at San Marino and, in 1929, John Howell of San

Francisco published his "Seventy-five Years in California" edited by Douglas S. Watson, honoring William Heath Davis and his long life devoted to service and good citizenship in three countries, the Kingdom of Hawaii, the Republic of Mexico and the United States.

Speaking of early history in San Francisco, as we have been doing in these articles on Davis, the Hawaiian, we will assure you that a visit to the Pioneer Museum of the Society of California Pioneers at 456 McAllister, is well worth the time it takes to view the many exhibits it contains.

Paul Ryan has renovated the entire structure since the California Historical Society moved to its own quarters, some time ago. Helen Giffen has installed the exhibits with an experienced, knowing gift for transforming relics into realities.

The large ground floor room contains many wall cases, each richly stocked but not cluttered with objects that illuminate local history from the days of the earliest explorers to the fire and earthquake of April 1906. The immigrant trails, the Gold Rush, the six-shooter and its uses, early San Francisco architecture and the fire department that kept it going are among the numerous matters dwelt with in the cases, and these installations will be permanent we were told.

There are other cases for temporary display. When we visited the museum there were cases with displays appropriate to the moment; these were filled with programs and other mementos of opera as it was in the high, wide, and handsome days immediately succeeding the Gold Rush era.

Of special interest in the picture gallery on the second floor is a wonderful exhibit of portraits, landscapes and works of art commemorating historic events, There is picture of Mrs. John Sutter ascribed to William Jewett; a very good double portrait of Abraham and Sigmond Stem by the great Charles Christian Nahl, painted when the men were five and three years of age: and Thomas Hill's study of William Ralston driving his spirited horses.

Visit the museum some day and enjoy the visual education the exhibits give to you.