

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Jails in Old Monterey

We have chosen to write today a bit of the history of Monterey's jails previous to the building of the new Cuartel last year. There was a first jail, built in 1806, which was sort of a military prison, then El Cuartel built in 1832-'34 at the junction of California (Munras) and Pearl streets, by Gov. Jose Figueroa, sixth Mexican governor of California, followed by the now museum jail next to Colton hall, built in 1854.

The old Spanish jail was built in 1806, when Monterey was the governmental residence and chief military post of the province of Alta California. It was a sort of military prison, but afterward degenerated into a common jail and as such was used for several years. Some of the most noted prisoners of California's early troublesome times were incarcerated between its substantial walls.

The historical building stood at the back of the old Abrego store, almost surrounded by buildings of various kinds, and could only be seen from the alley way by which it was entered. On this account it was rarely seen by tourists who were looking up the interesting places in the old capital, according to the WPA historical survey. Until the committee In charge of arrangements for the semi-centennial anniversary of the American occupation of California in July, 1896, discovered the old place and put a signboard upon it telling its name and age, many of the Monterey residents did not know it was a relic of the Spanish rule.

The structure was a genuine adobe, its walls being made of the huge sunbaked blocks of clay, after the primitive style, without the chalk rock that later experience taught Montereyans to use for the six or eight feet of their adobe homes, and commodious, strongly built and comparatively comfortable prison.

Heavy red Mexican tile was used for the roof while great hand-hewn pine beams and joists fastened with rawhide thongs were used inside; substantial enough to have stood another 100 years.

October 1, 1898, the picturesque old Spanish jail was torn down and the adobe used to fill a gulch on California street (Munras). With its demolition passed another of the few remaining reminders of

Monterey's position as the leading town of Alta California.

The above story appeared as a news item in the Monterey newspaper of October 1, 1898.

The old stone and adobe jail, which stood at the junction of California and Pearl streets, was used as an army and civilian jail until 1850, when the city notified the officials at Ord Barracks (now Monterey Presidio) that the city would require sole use of the same.

To show the condition of the jail as far back as 1840 the following is a partial quote from a communication sent to President Tyler by a number of citizens of Monterey:

"To his excellency, John Tyler, president of the United States:

"On the morning of the seventh of April, one thousand eight hundred and forty, we your petitioners, citizens of the United States of North America, and many more of our countrymen, together with several H.B.M subjects, engaged in business in Monterey and its vicinity, were, without any just cause or provocation most illegally seized, taken from our lawful occupations, and incarcerated in a loathsome prison in Monterey . . . The room in which we were confined, being about twenty feet square, without being floored, became very damp and offensive, thereby endangering our health, at times, one had to stand while another slept . . ."

In 1842 a committee, appointed to visit the prisons of California, report in part as follows: "That the Monterey calabozas were without any floor, but the bare earth and so wet a stick would sink some distance into it. The walls were black, and so dark that an object could not be seen more than a yard off. There was neither light nor ventilation, except through two small skylights.

When the building was wrecked, its site for many years later was occupied by Jules Simoneau's restaurant and Tom Watson's butcher shop. This latter building was torn down in the latter part of the 1920s and is now occupied by a service station and the extension of Tyler street to Munras.