

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Our Early Spanish Fort**

The State of California represented by the Division of Beaches and Parks is working out a plan to have Van Buren street extend across the base of the Presidio. Between the new street and existing Presidio curve, it proposes a state park which would include a restoration of El Castillo, an early Spanish fort. State authorities are negotiating with the Army to acquire the needed land for the park and the new street.

The lower section of the Presidio is known as Fort Mervine, in honor of energetic Capt. William Mervine who arrived in Monterey in 1846 with Commodore John Drake Sloat. After raising the American flag at the Custom House, Capt. Mervine and his men, in camp on Presidio Hill, mounted guns from the frigate Savannah, and began to build log house barracks and officers' quarters. Soon his men were drilling on the upper levels of El Castillo - the first American armed force to occupy California; and the Army post in years afterward was rated as one of the most important stations in the country.

The Presidio of Monterey, now the location of the important Army Language School, occupies a 360-acre military reservation. With the Presidio of San Francisco, founded in 1776, it is one of the two army posts to retain original Spanish names; and the Presidio of Monterey is the older of the two.

Soon after Commodore John Drake Sloat, on July 7, 1846, captured Monterey, construction was begun on a battery of barracks about 20 yards south of El Castillo, on a hill overlooking the Bay of Monterey. First named Fort Mervine in honor of its original commander, the post subsequently was known as Fort Stockton, and finally, until incorporated in the Presidio, as Fort Halleck.

Fort Mervine like the old Spanish presidio, had long been abandoned and forgotten when in 1902 the Army selected the site for the construction of barracks to house troops returning from service in the Spanish - American War.

The site of the El Castillo, north of the Serra Monument on the hill, is indicated by a marker. From the Castillo was fired only one shot in the Castro - Alvarado revolt against Governor Gutierrez in 1836. Its dugout

calaboose, used by the Mexicans for confinement of outlaws, continued to serve American authorities for some years after 1846 as a jail for the sobering-up of drunken Monterenos.

Of the site of Fort Mervine, General W. T. Sherman wrote in his memoirs; "The company of artillery was ... on the hill under command of Lieutenant Ord, engaged in building a fort whereupon to mount the guns we had brought in the Lexington, also in constructing quarters out of hewn pine logs for the men." Building of the earthworks and blockhouse, here described, was completed about 1847 by Company F, Third Artillery, and some of Colonel J. D. Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers under Lieutenants Ord, Sherman, and Halleck. The fort was dismantled in 1852. During the Civil War two long log huts built here were occupied by two companies of infantry, but these primitive barracks were removed after the war when the troops were withdrawn, and Fort Mervine was never rebuilt.