

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A French Foothold

France was an important factor in the history of California before its acquisition by the United States and she was as anxious to get a foothold here as either Great Britain or the United States. After the capture of Monterey in 1842 by Commodore Jones, France took immediate steps to place a Consulate in California.

The exact dates for the first French consul are not known, but as early as Nov. 3, 1842, Francis Guisot, minister of foreign affairs, wrote to one Bosseron, whom he addressed as consul at Monterey. Later however, on Oct: 28, 1843, the fiery Louis Gasquet was appointed and, on his arrival, sometime later he established his headquarters in the adobe building then located at Fremont and Abrego streets. The adobe was later moved to its present location on El Estero and is now used as Girl Scout headquarters.

A complete story of the French consulate in California from 1843-1845 ran serially in the Quarterly of the California Historical Society. The author was Abraham P. Nasatir, who was accorded the privilege of translating the documents in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. These archives were taken from a "box dedicated to the consulate at Monterey" and consist of letters written from the French consulate which the citizens of Monterey and the History and Art Assn, saved when they moved the old adobe building to El Estero.

From the number of letters sent out from this now historic building, it evidently was one of Monterey's busiest places during the "roaring forties."

That this adobe was also the scene of much entertaining is seen in one of the letters written by Gasquet while in route to Monterey.

He was asking for funds for the consulate and says:

"He will only be able to install himself there after having made costly repairs and changes. He will be obliged to furnish it and as the agent who will represent France and will be called upon to receive the authorities and influential men of the country, as well as the officers of the royal Marine who will come into these quarters, he cannot content himself with the more than simple furniture of Californians. He will have to bring complete furnishings from Paris; I say from Paris, for if he wished

to buy them here, the same furniture would cost him four or five times as much.

"And, moreover, must we not take into consideration the position of this agent? Regulated to the end of the earth in a paltry town which offers no recourse against boredom, deprived of the joy of family, what would remain to him if he did not have pleasant quarters where he might find in his comfort a compensation for his isolation?"

"He will be obliged to hire at least two-house servants and even then will be badly served and robbed in the bargain. The Indians are not adaptable to different tasks. They believe in the division of labor; that is why I say it will require at least two servants."

That the servants lived up to his expectations is shown in another letter, from which we quote: "It is impossible to get honest servants here," and he was forced to commandeer a 14-year-old mess boy from a French boat that was in port.

He did not like the Indians anyway, as they had "murdered three men at the outskirts of Monterey a short time before and forced all honest people to go heavily armed and in charge of groups."

With the French consulate in Monterey, France became a real menace as her people were the only foreigners liked by the natives, and Consul Gasquet was continually writing of the fertile country and fine opportunity for a French colony. He asked for a gunboat to be held in Monterey Bay for its "moral effect," and for his government to establish a protectorate in California.

He complains of the number of American immigrants and the foothold they were making. France was having internal troubles at home, however, and could not listen to her ambitious consul in Monterey.

His picture of the Mexican rule is illuminating. He says: "Everyone here wants to command, and none obey." He writes of the swaggering drunken Micheltoreno's "cholos" robbing and killing and it was through his efforts that Mexico made amends for the assaulting and robbing of sailors from the French whaler "Angelina," an incident that caused international complications.