

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Custom House In 1893

"The Monterey Adobe Custom-House to be torn down. California belonged to Spain when it was built and the Vessels that came to the mission were cleared there."

These were the headlines of a newspaper clipping dated 1803, which is pasted in the Honore Escolle scrapbook presented several years ago to the Monterey History and Art Assn. by his granddaughter, Mrs. Mary Louise Blackwell of San Francisco, The Escolle family at one time owned the Stokes Adobe on Hartnell and Polk streets in Monterey.

The article goes on to relate, "There is a scheme afoot to tear down the old Custom-House at Monterey to make room for a prosaic hotel."

"The situation of the Custom-House is charming," the writer relates. "It stands at the bay end of Alvarado street, and seaward it literally hangs over the bays. There are seats under the portico, these are regarded as public property. On moon-light nights the porch which looks over the ocean is always tenanted, for a better place was never made for love-making.

"Old fashioned vessels used to anchor just below the Custom-House under the bluff on which it stands. This was the first Custom-House on the California coast, and had its beginning away back during the days of Mexican rule when the Port of Monterey was of much more importance than that of San Francisco," the article relates.

"The ships that used to come here were old-fashioned vessels that anchored just below the Custom-House under the shelf on which it stands. They were mostly deep, round-bottom craft that held no end of Latin Bibles and church furniture and wine in exchange with the missions for hides, tallow and wool.

"The foundation of the whole building is stone in rough, unhewn blocks, held together with adobe. The walls are of thick adobe bricks and rock, 3 feet thick and covered with plaster, whitewashed.

"A porch extends around the lower and upper stories and the tiled roof was long ago replaced by ordinary shingles, except at the end of the oldest part of the building, where the tiles still remain," writes the 1892 reporter. About 1915 the roof was completely retiled

with hand-made tile, some of which was said to have come from the San Antonio Mission.

The article also says that there were few windows in the old Custom-House, and these were heavily barred, for the building held much treasure in the days when the ships used to lie at the embarcadero under the bluff, and it was a pleasant trick of the traders to sell their cargo and then steal it back from the Custom House in which it was stored. Probably it was not only the traders who did this trick but some of the citizens of the community who committed this same offense. There was isinglass in the upper portion of the doors and most of the light came in there, this historian of 1893 declares.

Monterey was the port of entry for the whole territory of Alta California. There were three officers with imposing titles to collect the duties.