

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey Convention

The publication of President James K. Polk's annual message authenticated the discovery of gold in California on Dec. 5, 1850 and gave impetus to the gold rush to California. Most of the male population of Monterey left their families and sweethearts and went off in the "Gold Rush."

Gen. Bennett Riley arrived in Monterey to assume the office of civil governor of California, under the instructions of the U. S. secretary of war. It was Gen. Riley who issued the proclamation calling for a Constitutional Convention to be held in Monterey Sept. 1, 1849. The delegates assembled in Colton Hall (named for Alcalde Walter Colton, the builder.) This historic two-story structure of adobe and rock is now city-owned and houses an historical museum.

The convention consisted of 48 delegates and was presided over by Dr. Robert Semple. He was a printer by trade who had studied dentistry, law, and medicine. In 1825 he left Independence, Mo., and traveled west to Sutter's Fort. He joined Fremont's dragoons but in 1846 requested discharge to establish the weekly newspaper, The Californian, with Colton.

The delegates adopted a constitution patterned after those of New York and Iowa. Aside from the usual provisions for the protection of life and property, the election of state officials and the convening of a legislature, it fixed the boundaries of the state and outlawed slavery. It was signed by all delegates Oct. 13, 1849.

Monterey County was one of the first of California's original counties numbering 27 in all. California was admitted to the Union on Sept. 9, 1850, when President Fillmore signed a bill adopted by the U. S. Senate on Aug. 13 by a vote of 34 to 18 and by the House of Representatives on Sept. 7.

There are 43 historic buildings, mostly adobes, still in existence in Monterey, either used as homes or as businesses. The State of California owns seven of these, the History and Art Assn. two, and the National Trust one, and the remainder are privately owned.

The Monterey History and Art Assn. Ltd. was organized in 1930 and incorporated under the laws of the State of California in January of 1931. Since the first meeting of

the group of prominent citizens of the Monterey Peninsula at the Custom House, the association's primary objective has been the preservation of those reminders of historic Monterey; the old adobe houses and significant buildings of Spanish, Mexican and American California.

The association also has obtained through gifts, purchase and loans numerous articles for exhibition in the public museums such as the Custom House, Stevenson House, Pacific Building, First Theatre, Casa de Oro, and Colton Hall. It has taken an active part in impressing upon the people of Monterey the inestimable value of their heritage, and the importance of retaining for succeeding generations of Californians, adopted or native-born, those irreplaceable relics of a bygone age which embody the state's romantic history.

The association sponsored the route through Monterey indicated on the street by a red line, which when followed, guides the visitor to all the historic places in Old Monterey. These sites also are indicated with markers erected by the association.

Monterey also should be proud of all the "firsts" we have here: first Brick House, first Custom House, first Theatre, first Constitutional Convention, first American Flag over the Custom House, was the first capital of California, had the first and only American and French consulate, first newspaper, The Californian; first printing, first recorded religious service, first trial by jury, first alcalde, first post office, first county seat, first convent where Maria Concepcion Arguello, daughter of a prominent Californian, was the first woman to enter the new novitiate.

W. E. P. Hartnell, an Englishman with neither wealth nor fame, founded the first English-speaking school of higher education here. He spoke and read Latin, Greek, German, French, Spanish and Russian. He started his school in Monterey and later built Hartnell College about 25 miles away, near Salinas,

We, in Monterey, are proud of the fact that the city was the capital of the Pacific empire from the Rockies to the sea, from the State of Oregon to Mexico from 1776 to 1849. Every event of major importance between these periods began and ended in Monterey.