

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Custom House Still Stands

"The Monterey Adobe Custom - House to Be Torn Down. California Belonged to Spain When It Was Built. And the Vessels That Came for the Mission Were Cleared There."

These were the headlines of a newspaper clipping dated 1893 which is pasted in the Honore Escolle scrapbook presented 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 home on Hartnell street 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 says. "It stands at the end of Alvarado street and seawards it literally hangs over the bay. There are seats under the portico, and these are regarded as public property. On moonlight evenings the porch which looks over the ocean is always tenanted, for a better place for love-making was never designed."

"This is the first custom house on the California coast, and had its beginning away back during the Mexican rule, when the Port of Monterey was of much more importance than that of San Francisco," the article: goes on.

"Old - fashioned vessels used to anchor just below the Custom House under the bluff on which It stands. The ships that used to come here were mostly deep, round-bottom crafts that held no end of Latin Bibles and church furniture and wine to exchange with the missions for hides, tallow and wool.

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

Continuing the description, the article reads: "A porch extends around the lower and upper stories and the tile roof was long ago replaced by ordinary shingles, except for one end of the oldest part of the building, where the tiles still remain." This was written in 1892. About 1915 the roof was completely retiled with handmade tile,

some of which, it has been said, came from San Antonio Mission.

The 1893 newspaper article also says 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 anchor 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 committed this same offense. There was and is glass in the upper portion of the doors and most of the light came in there.

The article continues, "There was a boat and crew of coast guardsmen attached to the Custom House in Spanish times, for contrabandists were thick on the coast. These men were mostly Englishmen and Yankees, keen to appreciate the riches that were to be gained by trade with the missions. Monterey was the port of entry for the whole territory of Alta California. There were three officers with imposing titles to collect the duties."

The old Custom House was more than a place of collection of tariff rates. The ships brought in news of the world as well as merchandise for California, and the officers and soldiers from the presidio, as well as the mission folks, used to gather there to hear the tidings. It was for their accommodation that a broad beam was let into the convenient pillars. On this beam they lounged and smoked until they wore the plaster from the wall and left the marks of their shoulders in the adobe, just as folks do today in 1963.