

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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No Sign Left Of Old Jails

When Monterey was the governmental residence and chief military post of the province of Alta California, there was an old Spanish jail built in 1806. It was a sort of small military prison, but afterward degenerated into a common jail, as such being used for several years.

Some of the most noted prisoners of California's early troublesome times were incarcerated between its substantial walls.

The historical structure stood at the back of the old Abrego store, almost surrounded by buildings of various kinds, and could only be seen from the alley way by which it was entered. On this account it was rarely seen by tourists who were looking up the interesting places in the old capital. Until the committee in charge of arrangements for the semi-centennial anniversary of the American occupation of California in July, 1896, discovered the old place and put a signboard upon it, telling its name and age, many of the Monterey residents did not know it was a relic of the Spanish rule.

The building was a genuine adobe, its walls being made of the huge sunbaked rock that later experience taught Montereyans to use for the 6 or 8 feet of their adobe house, and commodious, strongly-built and comparatively comfortable prison for those days.

In the old picture collection of the History and Art Association there is a photograph of Jules Simoneau and Jules Tavernier, an artist of early Monterey, standing at the doorway of the old jail.

A second stone and adobe jail was ordered erected sometime between the years 1832 -34, by Governor Jose Figueroa, sixth Mexican governor of California. Since that period California street has been renamed- Munras avenue but in those long - ago times the jail was near the corner of California and Pearl streets. It was used as an army and civilian jail until 1850, when the city notified the officials at Ord Barracks (now Monterey Presidio) that the city would require sole use of the same.

To show the condition of the jail as far back as 1840, the following is a partial quote from a communication sent to President Tyler by a number of citizens of Monterey:

"To his excellency, John Tyler, president of the United States:

"On the morning of the seventh of April, one thousand eight hundred and forty, we your petitioners, citizens of the United States of North America, and many more of our countrymen, together with several H.B.M subjects, engaged in business in Monterey and its vicinity, were, without any just cause or provocation most illegally seized, taken from our lawful occupations, and incarcerated in a loathsome prison in Monterey . . .

The room in which we were confined, being about twenty feet square, without being floored, became very damp and offensive, thereby endangering our health, at times, one had to stand while another slept . . ."

In 1842 a committee, appointed to visit the prisons of California gave a very grave report on the Monterey jail. When the building was wrecked, its site for many years later was occupied by Jules Simoneau's restaurant and Tom Watson's butcher shop. The latter building has also passed on.