

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Custom House

The Monterey Custom House reservation, to which the State Division of Beaches and Parks obtained title from the federal government in 1930, is the spot where Commodore John Drake Sloat landed, raised the American Flag and took possession of California for the United States in 1846.

It was on July 7, 1929, that simple ceremonies were held and the building was officially opened to the public.

The first Custom House on the California coast, it had its beginning away back during Mexican rule, when the port of Monterey was of much more importance than that of San Francisco.

The building was erected about 1827 and enlarged under Mexican and American regimes; the old adobe structure symbolized the three main periods in California history, during each of which Monterey was the state capital.

Well preserved and from time to time restored through the efforts of the local community, the Monterey History and Art Assn., the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West and the California Division of Beaches and Parks, this building, with its exhibit of early California relics, placed there mostly by the history and art group, has long been a shrine for students of history and for patriotic citizens.

More than 9,200 persons have already visited the Custom House since last Jan 1, and the number increases steadily each year.

Purchase price paid by the state to the federal government was \$20,000. Half was contributed by public-spirited citizens of the Monterey region, the remaining half was provided from state bond funds. It is interesting to note here that a small group of prominent men of Monterey, who had not cashed their World War 1 bonuses contributed these to the cause.

The tract contains approximately 1 ½ acres. Under authorization of Congress, it was sold to the state at half its appraised valuation.

The Custom House of Monterey, more than a century old, and the beach, ancient in time, are linked with El Estero and the early Presidio church. These units are intimately related to a chain of historic sites and

buildings which, when taken as a whole, constitute a foundation for long-range preservation planning that challenges vision and imagination.

Old fashioned vessels used to anchor just below the Custom House bluff. The ships were mostly deep, round-bottom craft that held no end of Latin Bibles and church furniture and wine for exchange with 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, three feet thick and covered with whitewashed plaster.

A porch extends around the lower and upper story; the tile roof is still a part of the building. In 1915 the roof was completely retiled, some of the tiles are said to have come from San Antonio Mission.

A boat and crew of coast guardsmen were attached to the Custom House in the Spanish days, so history relates, for contrabandists were thick on the coast. These men were mostly Englishmen and Yankees, keen to appreciate riches 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 duties.

The Old Custom House was more than a place for collection of tariffs. Ships brought news of the world as well as merchandise, so 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 board beam was let into the convenient pillars. On this beam they lounged and smoked until they wore the plaster from the wall and left marks of their shoulders in the adobe, just as folds to today in 1964.