

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Our First Mail

In these days when saving our historic sites and building is given so much publicity, it is of interest to tell about the adobe building that housed Monterey's first post office and the first mail that arrived on the Pacific mail steamer California.

The old post office, now marked only by its site, formerly marked the north boundary of the Old Plaza, lining up with the older Casa de Castro. Its old stone wall, which disappeared to make another parking lot, was the connecting link between the two buildings.

Even before the discovery of gold in California, there was interest in shipping and in travel to the state. Ships sailed from New York to the Isthmus of Panama, connecting haphazardly on the Pacific side with ships that plied the South American coast as far south as Callao. On the Isthmus, trains of pack mules transported mail and freight.

As time passed, a keen rivalry sprang up between the United States and England for the growing Pacific trade. Not until 1846 however—the war with Mexico having given this country a territorial stake on the Pacific—were positive steps taken to link the two sides of the continent more closely.

First,, a treaty was negotiated late in 1846 between the United States and the Republic of New Granada—of which Panama was then a part—by which this country was granted free transit across the isthmus and in return guaranteed New Granada's sovereignty.

The next year, 1847, the long-standing controversy over the boundaries of Oregon territory having been amicably settled between this country and England, the plan for regular mail service to California and Oregon was taken up in earnest.

Eventually, a bill was passed by Congress and signed by President Polk, authorizing an annual subsidy of \$290,000 for a line of steamers with semi-monthly sailing between New York and Chagres.

A later bill provided a subsidy almost as large for monthly service on the Pacific between Panama and the California coast, with its northern terminus at Astoria, Ore.

The Pacific line fell to William H. Aspinwall, a man of ample means and wide mercantile experience; the other went to a group headed by George Law, a capitalist previously identified with large railroad projects.

Of the two ventures, the Atlantic had to all appearances a far better chance for success; its steamers could draw trade from Central America and the west coast of South America as well as from California and Oregon.

The Pacific Mail Steamship Co. on the other hand, seemed a dubious gamble, for there was in 1847 little commerce between the country's east and west and no real prospect of more for many years.

The pioneer mail contracts required that five steamers, each of 1,500 tons, be placed on the Atlantic run, while operations on the Pacific called for three steamers, two not less than 1,000 tons and the third of 600.

Both companies began building the vessels at once; the first was finished in time to permit through traffic between New York and San Francisco before the end of 1848.

In preparation for regular service, the first of the Pacific mail steamer, the California, left New York in early October, 1849, bound on the round-the-horn voyage to her home port, Panama, there to start monthly round trips to California.

Meantime, the Atlantic company made ready the Falcon and dispatched her to Chagres on Dec. 1, timing her departure for arrival at the Isthmus at about the same time the California reached Panama, thus permitting passengers to cross over and re-embark with little delay.

The California reached Monterey Feb. 24, 1849. That was a happy, exciting occasion, for it brought the first mail to the first post office, and San Francisco was second.