

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Adobe as Building Material

Lt. Joseph Warren Revere, U.S. Navy, in 1848 in command of the military district of Sonoma, wrote in "A Tour of Duty in California," published in 1849, a chapter on "The Adobe vs. Frame House" and a "Lay Sermon – What of the Future?" which remains entertaining reading after 122 years. Lt. Revere was a lineal descendant of Paul Revere of Revolutionary War fame. He spent some time in Monterey before the Gold Rush.

He wrote: "I will add a few scraps which might be interesting." And indeed they are. "The adobe (brick) is the chief building material of the Californians. They are made of mud, mixed with chopped straw and then dried in the sun. Each adobe is about 2 feet long and 1 foot wide; consequently they also are of great thickness. They serve a very excellent purpose in the climate of California, and are very cheap; besides those who carry out frames of houses will probably find it quite as expensive and difficult to erect and finish them as to procure the adobes and have a house built of them. These movable houses are mere balloons, and are a constant source of expense in the way of paint and repairs. I should prefer to rely on the adobe."

There are two old sketches by the author, one of Monterey and one of San Francisco as they looked when Revere was in California. Of them, he writes, "The view of Monterey will give the reader an idea of the adobe house. The town of San Francisco contained, in the beginning of 1848, only about half a dozen of these adobe houses and the value of the picture lay in the view of the harbor, taken from the shore." The drawing, he reports, had been lately lost or pilfered.

Writing further on the history of the adobe brick, Revere made the statement: "The adobe is one of the most ancient building materials. It is beyond all doubt the same brick which the Pharaoh commanded the captive children of Israel to make without straw – a thing wholly impossible. Thus, by this simple link, is Western America directly connected with the most remote antiquity, and associated with one of the most interesting passages of Holy Writ. The adobe is still found in Babylon and in the ruins of that city itself, and other ancient cities of Asia."

Revere's prophecy for California bears repeating: "Perhaps 100 years hence, some curious bookworm, while exploring a musty library, may light upon this then forgotten volume, and will be tempted to find out what was said and predicted of California at the eventful period of her annexation to the United States, and the discovery of her mineral wealth.

The poor Indians will then have passed away; the rancheros will be remembered only as the ancient proprietors of broad lands, which will then have passed into a more enterprising race who are about to succeed them; the grizzly bear will live only in books and in tradition; the elk will have become extinct; the wild horse will be seen no more; author, editor, publishers, readers, all will have passed away and mingled with the dust (my being an exception, of course) and the philologists will have so marred our noble English language that these poor pages will be intelligible only to the learned.

"Child of the future! What will thou see? Will not a hundred million free and happy human beings inhabit the great republic then still the United States of America – their habitations extending from the shores of the boisterous Atlantic to those of the placid Pacific?

"And California – what will she then be? Will she have fulfilled the promises of this our day, and be the highway of a mighty commerce, and replete with enterprise and opulence? Will she have become populous and enlightened, the seat of the arts and learning, the generous rival of her elder sisters in all that is lovely and of good report among men? Son of a hopeful age! The response may not reach "the dull, cold ear of death' but heaven grant it may be such as, if living, we should most wish to hear?"

Written 122 years ago by Lt. Joseph Warren Revere, USN.

And I must add that I believe that we here in Monterey are doing what we hope will be our meeting of responsibility to those forementioned questions. You, dear reader, can help further by being a proud and participating Californian by attending and supporting all of the many beautiful events in this, our 200th Bicentennial year.