

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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COLTON HALL

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COLTON HALL

For some years prior to the American occupation of California there was no formal school building in Monterey. There was no assembly hall where town meetings might be held; neither was there any special building for the municipal government. During the Spanish era and most of the Mexican, the presidio buildings were used for most municipal purposes, and the school was held wherever a room could be obtained.

As soon as the American forces had become established in Monterey, the officials began to think of building a school-house and town hall.

Towards the end of July 1846, just before leaving for Southern California, Commodore Stockton appointed the Reverend Walter Colton as alcalde for Monterey. Colton was the chaplain of the U. S. S. Congress, Commodore Stockton's flagship, in which he had arrived in Monterey only a few days before.¹ The reverend alcalde, although without any special training or any knowledge of Mexican law, discharged the duties of his office with such intelligence, tact and impartiality that when Monterey was restored to civil authority two months

1. Z. S. Eldredge, History of California, III, 88.

later, September 15, the citizens elected him to succeed himself, although there were six other candidates seeking the office. He it was who impaneled the first jury in California. He was co-editor and partner in the ownership of the first newspaper, the Californian, published in the State, in Monterey, on August 15, 1846.²

Being a man of ideas, Colton thought about building a town hall and school. He had no money with which to buy building materials and hire laborers as the municipal treasury was empty. Nevertheless he drew plans for the building and set about devising ways and means by which to make his plans materialize.

No sooner did he take office, on Thursday, July 30, 1846, than he became virtual dictator of Monterey. He immediately prohibited all boisterous or disorderly conduct, closed all saloons, stopped all gambling, and suppressed all Sunday amusements. The regulations which he made he enforced very rigidly, and anyone who was caught breaking them was fined heavily, imprisoned, or sometimes both punishments were meted out.³

At that time Monterey did not have a very good or

2. W. D. Ames, "The story of Colton Hall" in Sunset magazine, XIV, 520-525.

3. J.M. Guinn, History of Monterey and San Benito counties, I, 275-276; W. Colton, Three years in California, 19.

secure jail. The prisoners were usually sentenced, in order to keep them busy, to do labor. The Reverend Mr. Colton soon got the idea of using that prison labor to build his schoolhouse. He also started a campaign to collect donations from the citizens, to be used towards erecting the hall. Furthermore, town lots were sold occasionally out of the municipal lands and that money went into the city treasury, so the alcalde set aside a portion of this for his building funds. Fines from gamblers and other sinners were collected quite frequently and these also went into the school fund.

By early March 1847, he had his plans all made and was ready to start work. On Wednesday, March 4, 1847, he wrote:⁴

In the meantime I shall set the prisoners quarrying stone for a schoolhouse and have already laid the foundations. The building is to be sixty feet by thirty - two stories, suitably proportioned, with a handsome portico. The labor of the convicts, the taxes on rum, and the banks of the gamblers, must put it up. Some think my project impracticable; we shall see.

The work went on slowly for many months. Some white stones were quarried in the neighboring hills and used in the body of the building. Every now and then the money would give out; then Alcalde Colton would have to resort to unusual

4. W. Colton, Three years in California, 188.

methods to collect more funds. A good example of how he gathered his money for the work took place on Wednesday, May 11, 1847. A large group of gamblers arrived in town on that day and lodged themselves at the Astor House, one of the few hotels. That evening they started a monte game, and one of Colton's scouts reported it at once. The alcalde took a squad of soldiers, and under cover of darkness reached the hotel, unsuspected by the players. He stationed his guards at the two doors, which served as entrances, to catch anyone who might attempt to go out. Then Colton started up the stairs to the room where the gambling was in progress. Immediately he heard a whistle and footsteps flying into every part of the edifice.

When Colton entered the upstairs room, there was only a man from Sonora reclining against a table and calmly smoking a cigarette. Colton said "Good evening" to him and then asked to be introduced to his companions. At first the man pretended ignorance, but soon a feigned snore broke from a bed in a corner of the chamber. That was a man named Dutre whom Colton called to him and asked him to call the rest. He pointed under the bed and there were seen a half dozen pairs of feet pointing in all directions. The alcalde ordered the men to turn out. From under the bed came the six, covered with dust and feathers, which set them all to laughing at one another over their appearance.

Colton and his secretary then went through the house and found the rest of the gamblers stowed away in every imaginable position. Some were under beds, others in them; several were in closets; two were in a hogshead, and one was up a chimney. A man from Missouri who was known as "the prairie-wolf" was found between two bed-ticks, with his coat and boots on, and half smothered with feathers. He was the leader and always started a monte game wherever he went. All went into gales of laughter at his appearance as he stepped out from his hiding place. Even the alcalde of San Francisco was caught in Mr. Colton's net, although he did not gamble and had gone there just to witness the excitement.

The reverend dictator then assembled his victims, numbering about fifty, in the big saloon and told them that the only thing he had to say was that each one would pay a twenty dollar fine. Most of them began to grumble and argue that Colton had no proof that they were gambling since he found no cards or money, and that they had a right to sleep in or under their beds, in closets or anywhere else that they chose. The alcalde replied that where they slept was none of his concern but that the only way to get out of their scrape was to pay up. Dr. Semple, Colton's partner in publishing their newspaper, was one of those caught, so he was the first to pay and advised the rest to do likewise without grumbling. He said that the money was to be used in building a schoolhouse

where, he hoped, their children might be taught better principles than those shown by the example of the fathers. With that "the prairie-wolf" paid and the others soon followed in turn. With all these fines and the hundred dollars which the hotel keeper had to pay, Mr. Colton filled quite a large bag with more than one thousand dollars. Then, bidding the chagrined sinners a pleasant good night, he and his secretary departed, well satisfied with their evening's reward.⁵

The work on the town hall progressed very slowly. There was always difficulty in finding skilled workmen among the prisoners who were constructing the building. Stonecutters were especially hard to get. One day one of the prisoners, an Englishman, began to criticise the stone work done by another prisoner. It was thus discovered that the first one was a stone-cutter. He was at once set to work at his trade but he pretended utter ignorance of the art and spoiled a number of blocks. At that, Colton ordered the man put to work at the bottom of a deep, dry well to drill and blast the rock. After several days of that work and finding that the well was to be dug some thirty feet deeper, the stubborn prisoner decided that it was better to work out in the open air, and asked to be put back at stone cutting. His request was granted and thereafter his stone work was of the

5. W. Colton, Three years in California, 195-196.

finest type.⁶

The work on the schoolhouse dragged along throughout 1847 and into the summer of 1848. Then came the gold rush and everybody left Monterey. Carpenters, masons, and day laborers threw down their tools and ran away to the mines, leaving Colton with his hall half completed. No more building was done on it until the fall of 1848 when the miners began to return. The work was picked up where it had been left off, and finally, on Thursday, March 8, 1849, the schoolhouse stood completed.

Colton described the hall thus:⁷

The town-hall on which I have been at work for more than a year, is at last finished. It is built of a white stone, quarried from a neighboring hill, and which easily takes the shape you desire. The lower apartments are for schools. The hall over them - seventy feet by thirty - is for public assemblies. The front is ornamented with a portico, which you enter from the hall. It is not an edifice that would attract any attention among public buildings in the United States: but in California it is without a rival. It has been erected out of the slender proceeds of town lots, the labor of the convicts, taxes on liquor shops, and fines on gamblers. The scheme was regarded with incredulity by many; but the building is finished, and citizens have assembled in it, and christened it after my name, which will now go down to posterity with the odor of gamblers, convicts

6. W. Colton, Three years in California, 199.

7. Ibid., 356.

and tipplers. I leave it as an humble evidence of what may be accomplished by rigidly adhering to one purpose and shrinking from no personal efforts necessary to its achievement.

The hall, when finished, was of New England style, rectangular in shape, 70x30 feet, two stories, with a slightly sloping shingled roof. It is situated on a low hillside, facing the east, and there is now a small park in front of it. There is a large portico over the front entrance which reaches from the ground to the roof. It is supported by two large columns of the Ionic order. Two doors from the second story open into the portico balcony, which has a wooden railing around it. At the base of the portico are three steps leading to the level of the main entrance, which consists of two large doors. A hallway runs through the center of the building from front to rear doors on the first floor. On each side of the hall on the first story is a large room 30x30 feet. These two rooms were originally used as schoolrooms; later they were used for different purposes by the city government. On the front of the building there is a row of three windows on each floor, on either side of the portico. There was a fireplace and chimney at the north end of the building.

The second story is taken up entirely by a large assembly hall 70x30 feet which originally was entered by a stairway in the rear of the building leading to a door in the

center. It was in this large room that public assemblies, dances and social functions of all kinds were held. Colton Hall, with its foreign style of architecture, did not harmonize with the low one-story tile roofed structures of Monterey, but it proved very useful to the city.⁸

Next to the south end of the building, Colton had the prisoners erect a jail. He operated on the theory that every bird should build its own nest. Since prisoners made a jail necessary, it was only right that they should build one. Thus on Monday, April 12, 1847, work was started on it, and it too was finished about the same time that Colton Hall was completed. The alcalde wrote at that time:⁹

A prison has also been built, and mainly through the labor of convicts. Many a joke the rogues have cracked while constructing their own cage; but they have worked so diligently I shall feel constrained to pardon out the less incorrigible.

The jail was a one-story edifice made from the same type of rock used in Colton Hall. It was about 40x20 feet with a low sloping roof with several chimneys projecting from it. The entrance to the jail was through a wide door on the east side about a third of the distance from the

8. L. B. Powers, Old Monterey, 230, gives an old picture of the original Colton Hall.

9. W. Colton, Three years in California, 193, 356.

south end to the north end. Three small barred windows lighted the cells on the east side.¹⁰

So urgent was the need for a public building in Monterey that no sooner had Colton Hall been completed than it was put to use. The first person to use it was the Reverend Samuel Hopkins Willey, who came to California on the first steamer to arrive there, the California, and landed at Monterey on February 23, 1849. He had been sent out as a minister by the American Home Missionary Society, and was a graduate of Dartmouth College.¹¹ Mr. Willey landed on Friday, February 23, and at eleven o'clock in the morning on the following Sunday, February 25, 1849, he preached his first sermon in California, in Colton Hall.

After the service, as he was walking about the town, Willey saw a number of little children on the streets, but could see no school for them. He then went to see Walter Colton, who was preparing to leave Monterey to join his family in Philadelphia. Willey suggested that he be allowed to establish a school. Colton approved the idea, and told Willey that he thought many of the people would be very glad to send their children to school and to pay tuition if anybody would teach them. At this Willey requested that he be allowed the

10. A.G. Andresen, Historic landmarks of Monterey, 20, gives a picture of the jail and Colton Hall.

11. Z.S. Eldredge, History of California, III, 288.

use of one of the rooms in Colton Hall, which was granted to him.

Early in March the school began, with some fifty boys and girls in attendance. The school had to contend with one great difficulty, however; the children did not know English, and the teacher did not know Spanish. Nevertheless, a number of stray primers and alphabets, picture books, spelling books, and blackboards were gathered together and by means of sign language and drawings the school work progressed slowly. It continued in that fashion for six months, until September 1, 1849, when the Constitutional Convention met and the school had to be closed.¹²

During the time the school was in progress, there were several impromptu hangings enacted at the jail next door. Those were the wild days of the gold rush and there were many desperate characters drifting about the country. A number of them were captured in the vicinity of Monterey and lodged in the jail. The citizens would then assemble, and very soon thereafter the guilty person would be dangling from a piece of rope. This was especially true if he happened to be a half-breed Indian or Mexican and his victim a white man. Malefactors were hanged with little ceremony and without benefit

12. S. H. Willey, in California miscellany, VI, 29-30, Bancroft Library.

of clergy or consent of the law. It seemed to be a custom, whenever a bad man was captured, to take no chances with a sentimental jury. Then, too, once the rope was knotted and he was safely despatched, his jailers could spend an easier evening at the saloon.¹³

Usually the hanging took place in the daytime while the school was in session. One day, however, a hanging took place during recess, and all the children flocked over to the jail to see the execution. Not until the murderer was safely hanged did the teacher call them back to the school, although the recess period had been over for some time.¹⁴

During the spring of 1849, the people of California petitioned Governor Riley to form a territorial government. Thus, on June 3, 1849, General Riley issued a proclamation calling for the election of delegates to the State convention. The election was held on August 1, 1849, and forty-eight delegates, from all parts of the State, were elected. Towards the latter part of August the members of the convention set out for Monterey and by September 1 were all present in the town.¹⁵

13. C. S. Brooks, A western wind, 62.

14. G. McFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 72-75.

15. Z. S. Eldredge, History of California, III, 282-287.

The Constitutional Convention assembled for the first session on Saturday, September 1, 1849, in the large room on the second floor of Colton Hall. Several long tables were placed at the north end of the room, at which the delegates sat. A wooden railing running across the hall from front to rear divided the room at the middle, the south end being reserved for spectators who visited the convention.

The first meeting was of short duration; it was adjourned until the following Monday. When it reassembled, two days were spent in discussion as to the qualifications and admission of additional members from various districts.¹⁶

As finally constituted, the convention consisted of forty-eight members. Two came from San Diego, five from Los Angeles, one from Santa Barbara; San Luis Obispo had two; Monterey had six; seven were from San Jose; San Francisco sent eight, Sonoma three; Sacramento had eight, and six were from San Joaquin. The age of the oldest delegate was fifty-three and that of the youngest twenty-five years, the average age of the members being thirty-seven years. Eight of them were natives or old residents of California; the rest came from the eastern states and other parts of the world. Among the members were fourteen lawyers, about as many farmers, nine merchants, five soldiers, two printers, one doctor,

16. T. H. Hittell, History of California, II, 756-757.

and one who described himself as a gentleman of elegant leisure.¹⁷ Among the native Californians were several who understood no English, so William E. P. Hartnell was appointed as official interpreter for the convention and the business was carried on in Spanish and English.

The assembly was organized on September 4, at which time Robert Semple was elected president and William G. Marcy, son of the secretary of war, was elected secretary of the convention. Caleb Lyon and J. G. Field were chosen as his assistants, and J. Ross Browne was employed as reporter for the convention. A sergeant-at-arms and a doorkeeper were also chosen.¹⁸

After several days of discussion, when it became evident that the deliberations of the convention would be extended for several weeks, the question of pay for the officers was discussed and the following salaries were agreed upon for them: The secretary was granted a daily allowance of \$28; assistant secretaries were to receive \$23; the engrossing clerk, \$23; the sergeant-at-arms, \$22; copying clerk, \$18; interpreter, \$28; interpreter's clerk, \$21; the chaplains, \$16; the doorkeeper, \$12; and the page, \$4; all

17. T. H. Hittell, History of California, II, 757.

18. Z. S. Eldredge, History of California III, 290-291.

of which were reasonable salaries for public officers in those gold rush days.¹⁹

At the session of September 3rd, the Reverend Samuel H. Willey was observed to be among the spectators, so the delegates invited him to open the session with a word of prayer, which he did. As we have already seen, he had preached his first sermon in Colton Hall and had also established his school there.²⁰

During that session of the convention it was also resolved that thereafter all their deliberations should begin each day with prayer. Therefore, the Reverend Mr. Willey and Father Ramirez, pastor of the old Presidio Church, were invited to officiate on alternate mornings.²¹

A complete roster of the members of the convention was as follows: Robert Semple, John A. Sutter, Thomas O. Larkin, Mariano G. Vallejo, William H. Gwin, H. W. Halleck, William M. Stewart, Joseph Hobson, Thomas L. Vermeule, O. M. Wozencraft, B. F. Moore, William E. Shannon, Winfield S. Sherwood, Elam Brown, Joseph Aram, J. D. Hoppe, John McDougal, Elisha O. Crosby, K. H. Dimmick, Julian Hanks, M. M. McCarver,

19. G. McFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 64.

20. In the late 1860's the Reverend Mr. Willey helped to found the College of California in Oakland. In 1869 the College was converted into the University of California, which is located at Berkeley.

21. Eldredge, History of California, III, 288.

Francis J. Lippitt, Rodman M. Price, Lewis Dent, Henry Hill, Charles T. Betts, Myron Norton, J. M. Jones, P. Sainsevain, José M. Covarrubias, Antonio Maria Pico, Jacinto Rodriguez, Stephen C. Foster, Henry A. Tefft, J. M. H. Hollingsworth, Abel Stearns, Hugh Reid, Benjamin S. Lippincott, Joel P. Walker, Jacob R. Snyder, L. W. Hastings, Pablo de la Guerra, José Antonio Carrillo, Manuel Dominguez, P. Ord, Edward Gilbert, Miguel de Pedrorena and A. J. Ellis.²²

After some six weeks of heated debates, the convention finally approved and signed a constitution for the State of California modeled after those of New York and Iowa. During those weeks other questions of great importance, such as slavery, boundaries, schools, State Seal, etc., were also settled.²³

On Saturday, October 13, 1849, the work of the convention was finished, the constitution was signed and sent to Governor Riley, and the body adjourned and departed from Colton Hall. That action brought to a close the most important event in the history of the building, and thereafter the hall was called by many "Constitution Hall."

After the exciting days of the convention had closed, Colton Hall returned to its rather quiet existence as a place for municipal assemblies and social functions such as

22. W. Colton, Three years in California, 11.

23. G. McFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 64-65.

dances and receptions. On January 2, 1850, at 1 P. M., the Monterey ayuntamiento held its first regular meeting since the Americans had taken possession. P. A. Roach had recently been elected alcalde, and presided at the meeting. Thereafter, Colton Hall became the town hall for the City of Monterey and remained such for many years. At one time 1851, while the city council was short of money, a Catholic society tried to buy the building for use as a young women's seminary. The people of Monterey raised a great protest, however, and the plan fell through.²⁴

After Monterey had ceased to be the capital and the custom-house had been abandoned, the city lost its importance and inhabitants began to move away. During those years, Colton Hall suffered from neglect, as did other buildings, and for a time was more or less abandoned. In 1891, the City Board of School Trustees developed the scheme to tear down Colton Hall so that it might use the stone and site for a new schoolhouse. The wall around it and the jail had been demolished before the people of Monterey awoke to save the historic building. Just in time, some of the most patriotic citizens, among them Mr. Harry A. Greene, Mr. Sargent Sr., and Colonel Lambert, called a mass meeting,

24. G. McFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 66-69.

which annulled the board's action and raised enough money to buy another school site.²⁵

The city could not afford to repair the hall until 1913. In that year Joseph R. Knowland, then a member of the State senate, proposed a bill to provide State funds for the repair of Colton Hall. On March 25, 1913, the State legislature passed an act providing for the appointment of a State board of trustees, consisting of three members, with authority to lease Colton Hall from the City of Monterey for ten years, and to take steps for the preservation, protection and improvement of the property. On July 24, 1909, George Bertold died and left a bequest of 10,000 dollars for the building's improvement and the beautification of the grounds. With that money and the State appropriation, work on the reconstruction began.²⁶

In carrying on this work, the city of Monterey cut Dutra Street west of and just back of Colton Hall, and also built Pierce Street by the north end of the building. A small park was laid out on the slope in front of and to the east of the hall. In this park was erected a fountain and inscribed on it is the poem "Monterey" by Daniel O'Connell, written in 1874.²⁷

25. G. McFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 66-69.

26. A. G. Andresen, Historic landmarks of Monterey, California, 20-21.

27. Powers, Old Monterey, 232.

Colton Hall was considerably altered in its reconstruction. The stairs leading to the second floor, which previously had been in the rear of the building, were moved to the front and now lead on either side of the portico to the balcony on the second story. A flagstaff was placed over the front of the portico and a fireplace and chimney were added at the south end of the building. The old jail was also rebuilt against the south end of the hall and changed to a considerable extent.²⁸

After Colton Hall had been restored in 1915, the City of Monterey, which had leased it to the State, then rented it from the State to use it as a city hall for the rest of the ten years.²⁹ In 1924, the building was again returned to the custody of the City of Monterey and continued to serve as city hall until very recently, when the new civic building was finished. At present Colton Hall still houses some of the municipal offices.³⁰

28. Andresen, Historic landmarks of Monterey, California, 21.

29. Powers, Old Monterey, 232.

30. A. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 204.

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