California’s Monterey: Discovering Early California History

By Lee Foster

Few California sites contributed as much to the historical story of early California as Monterey.

Today it is easy to immerse yourself in the story of the Golden State, both secular and sacred, at this mid-state coastal location.

Perusal of history at Monterey is both a timeless and timely pursuit of the potential traveler. There is a timeless beauty in the tales of the early Spanish pioneers of the region. However, that timeless story became front page news in 1987 when Pope Paul II visited the Carmel Mission and inspected the final resting place of the pioneering Franciscan, Junipero Serra.

The historical story of Monterey extends beyond its early secular and sacred origins.
The Victorian houses of Pacific Grove grew out of a Methodist seaside camping retreat. John Steinbeck immortalized a chapter of recent Monterey history with his novel, CANNERY ROW, depicting the sardine fishery and its workers.

Monterey history includes all these fascinating episodes, which remain vital today.

SECULAR EARLY MONTEREY

From the earliest days of Spanish presence in California until the Gold Rush, Monterey was the principal town. A presidio of soldiers and the mission were founded here. The inhabitants eagerly awaited the arrival of Boston merchant ships ready to trade an assortment of goods for California cattle hides.

Today you can glimpse that early world by getting a Path of History walking map. The map amounts to a 2.7-mile self-guided tour showing the adobes.

Get the map at your first stop, Pacific House, near the Wharf. Pacific House is one of six buildings open to the public as a California State Historic Park.

Pacific House exhibits describe the early Spanish days. Adjacent, the Custom House shows an assortment of the goods, such as metal plows or ceramics from China, which were so eagerly sought by the Californios, as the early Spanish in California were called.

All goods coming in to California were supposed to go through the Custom House.

Plazas around Pacific House and the Custom House recreate the open architectural feel of early Monterey. Within this area, with its fountain, are some intriguing details from later Monterey life, such as the Italian bocce ball courts, where you won’t hear a word of English.

A few blocks inland are several residences that are part of the Historic Park. All are clearly marked on the walking map.

Writer Robert Louis Stevenson lived in the French Hotel, now called the Stevenson House, briefly in 1879.
The Cooper-Molera family adobe contains memorabilia from these illustrious pioneers.

Consul Thomas Larkin’s early house and gardens are open to the public on certain days of the week.

The Casa Soberanes is an example of an early family adobe.

Colton Hall, the site of the first California constitutional convention, recreates the deliberations of the late 1840s, before the capitol moved to Sacramento, close to the Gold Rush riches.

All these structures are open to the public, but check at Pacific House for tour times. Interiors of the houses are open only during specified tour times, when a guide will tell you the story. Coordinate your walk with the time of tours.

Richard Henry Dana’s comments about California from his book TWO YEARS BEFORE THE MAST can be seen sprinkled through these buildings on placards. The book, a recommended period reading, is sold at Pacific House.

Mornings are the best time to visit these structures because the early morning light falls amply on their facades, which become shaded and darkened by later afternoon. Most early California structures, whether houses or missions, were positioned to catch the early morning light for the practical need to warm the buildings.

The gardens at these residences and adjacent to Colton Hall are elaborate and especially colorful in spring or summer. The Stevenson building offers a cozy back garden with benches; Cooper Molera boasts an ambitious herb garden; and Casa Soberanes presents an elaborate front flower garden.

Many other adobes can be viewed from the outside, using the Path of History map as a guide. One adobe, Casa Gutierrez, now houses a restaurant, 590 Calle Principal.

**SACRED EARLY MONTEREY**

The site to explore for the sacred history of Monterey is the Carmel Mission along Rio Road in Carmel.
Junipero Serra founded this Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo in 1770. Carmel was the second of the 21 missions that Franciscans founded in California from 1769-1821.

Exterior of historic Colton Hall in Monterey, California

Here you can pass the sarcophagus of the indefatigable mission builder, Serra, a capable executive who changed the course of California life more radically than anyone.

As a linguist and namer, Serra decided on many of the appellations that now describe the landscape, from Carmel to San Diego.

As an agriculturalist, he inaugurated the vegetable, fruit, and cattle industries for which California is famous.

The view of the restored mission facade and front gardens suggests the fountains and vegetation that surrounded the Franciscan enclaves.

A small museum adjacent to the church contains some remarkable artifacts, including 603 volumes in a library that Serra accumulated here from 1770-1800. His
colleague, Fermin Lasuen, catalogued the library about the year 1800, marking the books, so it is known that these were volumes used in that early era.

Aside from the library, peruse the liturgical vestments and chalices, the kitchen, and the early California oxcart. Anyone who has read about the exploits of Gaspar Portola and his heroic early exploration in California will be intrigued with an authentic leather shield and lance from one of Portola’s soldiers.

Photos lining the wall of the mission museum show its appearance from the 1850s onward, including a dramatic photo of giant squash plants growing in the fertile soil adjacent to the structure.

As you leave the museum, you pass into a large courtyard that was typical of the mission style. Carmel Mission’s potential was never realized because the Indian population was too meager. The courtyard consists of a large fountain and elaborate gardens, all part of an active contemporary parish and school.

VICTORIAN AND 20TH CENTURY MONTEREY

The small town of Pacific Grove on the Monterey peninsula boasts the oldest continuously-operating lighthouse on the Pacific Coast and some impressive Victorians.

This former Methodist seaside camp is the home of Point Pinos Lighthouse, a red-roofed structure whose Fresnel lens still warns ships along the Monterey coastal tip. Pinos has been showing the light since 1855, substantiating its claim as the oldest continuously-operating lighthouse along the California coast. The lighthouse can be viewed at any time, from some distance, as you drive the Pacific Grove coast road. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons you can enter the structure.

The Victorian architecture of Pacific Grove is a carefully-nurtured city amenity. Several Victorians have been turned into bed and breakfast inns and can be viewed along Oceanview Boulevard or a couple of blocks in from the sea. Be sure to see the Martine Inn (255 Oceanview Boulevard), Green Gables Inn (104 5th Street), Seven
Gables Inn (555 Oceanview Boulevard), Gosby House (643 Lighthouse Avenue), and Centrella B&B (612 Central Avenue).

“Our community takes much pride in preserving and celebrating its early heritage of Victorians,” says Marion Martine. “The bed and breakfasts and our spring Victorian House Tour open them up to the public.”

At the Ketchum Barn, a base for local heritage activity, or at the Pacific Grove Chamber of Commerce, you can procure a walking map of the Victorians. Houses of historical note have placards on them indicating their date of construction and first owner. A walking tour of the Victorians amounts to a pleasant afternoon in Pacific Grove.

In the 20th century, writer John Steinbeck did much to immortalize the Cannery Row sardine factory world of the Monterey waterfront. Steinbeck’s novel of that name appeared in 1944, just as the sardine population mysteriously disappeared. Eventually, shops and restaurants took over the aging buildings, as travelers became the catch of the day. When you walk along Cannery Row, you can still peer into the lab of Doc Ricketts, Steinbeck’s comrade.

The history of fishing in Monterey, from the dominating early Italian families to the recently arrived Vietnamese, is a colorful tale. Phil Anastasia, from the three-generation Italian fishing family that now operates Mike’s restaurant on the wharf, recalls how his father worked as a fish peddler in the 1920s.

“He would leave the wharf at 5 a.m. in his model-T and head inland to Watsonville and Castroville,” says Anastasia. “Much agricultural work was then done by Japanese and Filipinos, good fish-eaters. Sometimes he drove as far as King City, staying overnight in his truck. Then he would drive back, go out in his boat, and bring in another catch. His first motorized boat, bought in 1923, cost all of $200. He was an independent fellow who spoke little English and refused to let me enroll him in Social Security when he grew old.”

Monterey remains a viable fishing area, boasting the largest squid harvest in the U.S.
SEASONAL HISTORICAL CELEBRATIONS

Several of the historical pleasures of Monterey can best be seen at seasonal celebrations. Contact the Visitor Bureau for specific dates. They include:

*April: Monterey Adobe Walking Tour. At this time over 20 adobes, beyond the buildings in the Historic Park, are open to the public.

*April: Pacific Grove Victorian Home Tour and Good Old Days. On these days several of the Victorians of Pacific Grove, beyond the bed and breakfast inns, are open to the public. Locals celebrates with a pancake breakfast, parade, arts and crafts, and a Good Times Party.

*July 4: Hoisting of the American flag by Commodore Sloat. This re-enactment recalls the transition to the American era.

*November: Robert Louis Stevenson Unbirthday. The celebration occurs at the Stevenson house.

*December: Christmas in the Adobes. Festivities feature various Christmas activities, such as drinking Mexican chocolate or observing Victorian decor.

For the traveler who longs for an immersion in California history, at a site where that history survives with a tactile presence, Monterey is the place.

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MONTEREY: IF YOU GO

For more information on the area contact the Monterey Peninsula Visitors and Convention Bureau, PO Box 1770, Monterey, CA 93942-1770, 831/649-1770.

Among upscale lodgings, good choices would be the Hotel Pacific (831/373-4815) and the Monterey Marriott (831/647-4000). Both hotels are centrally located near the Monterey Fisherman’s Wharf and downtown. The Pacific has a pleasing early-California architecture that blends in with the surroundings. The Marriott is elevated with a good view of the Wharf from its roof restaurant. The Monterey Plaza
Hotel (831/646-5937) locates you along Cannery Row, directly over the water. Quail Lodge (831/624-1581) in rustic and sunny Carmel Valley is another of the region’s top resorts.

Pacific Grove’s Victorian bed and breakfast lodgings are also appealing. One noted for service and located near the beach is the Martine Inn, run by Marion and Don Martine (831/373-3896). Others to consider are: Centrella B&B, Green Gables Inn, Seven Gables Inn, and Gosby House Inn.

Among restaurants in Monterey, the abalone and Italian selections at Domenico’s are excellent. Domenico’s (831/372-3655) is on the Monterey Fisherman’s Wharf and presents a view of sailboats, yachts, and sea lions. Another Wharf restaurant, with a more modest decor but with excellent seafood, is Mike’s, run by the several-generation fishing family of Phil Anastasia. Try the grilled salmon at Mike’s (831/372-6153). Pacific Grove’s restaurant Fandango (831/372-3456) offers an eclectic and pleasing continental menu, emphasizing Basque food and a mesquite grill. Try the paella or seafood salad.