

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The gently rolling landscape around Monterey, California is characterized by ochre soil and dusky green oak trees that outline the clefts and canyons between hills. Made rich in the warm sunlight, this color scheme embodies the ambiance of California for many people. It also incorporates two important natural resources abundant in the area; earth and wood, which came to play a part in local architecture. Plentiful in the region, these materials were united most poignantly in the Monterey Colonial style, an ingenious and intensely regional architectural form that is, in itself, a symbol of California.

A hybrid wood frame and adobe earth construction, as well as a melange of Anglo and Hispanic aesthetics characterize buildings of the Monterey Colonial style. The form stems from the 18th and 19th century fashions of the East Coast and traditional Hispanic styles of the West Coast. First conceived by Boston merchant, Thomas O. Larkin, in the 1830's, the type was imitated by both American settlers and Mexican colonists in the Monterey area. It became a prominent trend and influence in California architecture and left an indelible mark on the historic streets of Monterey. (Figure 1) From that city the style spread to

other pueblos; to places like Los Angeles, Sonoma, and Petaluma, but in none of those locations did quantity and variety exceed what existed in Monterey. Buildings like Los Cerritos Adobe, The Blue Wing Inn, and Vallejo's home all faithfully followed the Monterey Colonial style, but in their locales they were novelties, not character defining signatures of place, as in Monterey.

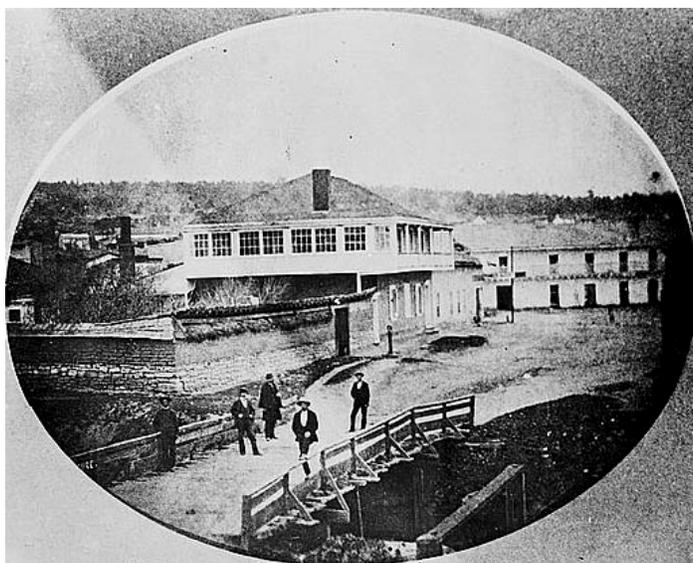


FIGURE 1: Circa 1875 view of the Cooper-Molera Adobe, and excellent example of the Monterey Colonial style. Source: Hague, Harlan and David J. Langum. *Thomas O. Larkin: A Life of Patriotism and Profit in Old California*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 39.

As with many icons of historic architecture, time has blurred the forms of many Monterey Colonial buildings, however, they have continued to provide a foundation for vernacular architecture in California. The style lent its architectural detailing and cultural symbolism to revival styles and related styles, and has proven its

archetypes worthy of recognition and preservation through its cultural significance as well as its architectural merit.

This study will not only delve into the history and evolution of the Monterey Colonial type, but the meaning of the style; a topic somewhat more intangible, but perhaps most critical to the style's importance. It is the cultural implications – the importance to the people who built and used these buildings – that will reveal the full significance of the style. Studying how and why Monterey Colonial buildings were built and used will lead to a deeper understanding of their historic period and the cultural climate that produced them.

It is important to identify the style's cultural influences specifically, as they will best depict the physical development of the type. While some argue that little credit should be given to Americans for the development of the type, and that all forms in the Monterey Colonial style can be derived from purely Hispanic sources, it is hard to believe that Thomas O. Larkin, an American, built the first Monterey Colonial style house based on Mexican precedents he had never witnessed. The fact that his architectural foray was so quickly and closely followed by the endeavors of very prominent Mexican citizens – in obviously imitative gestures – shows that the style must have been a new idea in California when Larkin developed it. The thought of well-established Mexican citizens waiting for a foreigner to set a trend that already existed near at

hand is unlikely. A Mexican incorporating New England or Southern elements into their native architecture without the influence of an American would be as unlikely as an American using Mexican elements without the proximity to Hispanic tradition. Thus, it was an equal exchange of ideas, but Thomas Larkin's presence in California can be identified as the catalyst that brought the style into being.

The Monterey Colonial style has been called a "belated application of the philosophy of Manifest Destiny" and some wish to reject it as a distinct category of architectural style, arguing that it is simply an anomaly of traditional Mexican architecture demonstrated by those elite citizens who could afford to elaborate on the common examples of the style.¹ With this statement, the vernacular character of the Monterey Colonial style is refuted. Though this opinion does not represent the majority, this study aims to explore these and opposing ideas and formulate an opinion on the true sources of the Monterey Colonial style's architectural influences and vernacular traits.

The body of available information on the Monterey Colonial style touts the unique building methods of the type and the few individuals that were primary in its conception. But, as a vernacular style - essentially created by its time, location, and people - exploring the wider cultural and social climate surrounding it is critical to understanding the significance of the building type. The intent of this study is to consider

and discuss the building methods and aesthetics of the style as they relate to influences such as cultural traditions of construction, climate and geography, and social use of space. The goal is to explain not only how the buildings were constructed, but how they were construed and what that means today. The justification of continued efforts to preserve the type by supporting proper interpretation with sensitivity to the cultural intent that created it is the ultimate ambition.

The efforts that have gone into the preservation of these unique Monterey structures will also be addressed. Study of the preservation challenges facing the style will help formulate a prognosis for the historic buildings' future survival by exploring the cultural intent that made the buildings important at their conception and give them significance today. It will demonstrate a continuation of the valued tradition of the Monterey Colonial style, express the style's importance to history and place, and provide a strong case for the continued maintenance and restoration of those Monterey Colonial buildings still in existence.

Though a few Monterey Colonial structures remain scattered throughout the state, a valuable collection of these buildings remains intact, in their original locations, at the Monterey State Historic Park. A visit to this enclave of the Monterey Colonial style was, of course, necessary to fully understand the topic. Experiencing Monterey Colonial style buildings and historic sites first hand lent to a general sense of the

presence the style has in its setting and the way it interacts with its environment and inhabitants. Textual research then formed the foundation on which the historical and cultural discussion was built. As neither intimate depictions of life in Monterey Colonial buildings, nor biographical accounts of many builders or residents were widely available, an important methodology employed was informed speculation and deductive reasoning. A portion of this study departs from formal research and embarks on an exploration of the architecture, witnessed first hand, with deductions made about its relation to cultural identity in Monterey. This method is best represented in the study of three households of differing cultural backgrounds and the residential designs that resulted from those personal influences.

By way of the common individual, the broader cultural climate shaped this vernacular style more than the few influential individuals who devised and first proliferated the type. That which is less tangible and yet most important is the underlying influence of society and culture that was unconsciously integrated into the form and appearance of the style. Those encompassing influences molded the style and made it important, continued the tradition of significance, and makes a case for why existing Monterey Colonial style structures should be preserved and appropriately interpreted. The range of purposes that Monterey Colonial

style buildings served and the meanings and uses that they had for the society that inhabited them is the tangible source of their significance.

Notes:

¹ David Gebhard contests the Larkin House as a prototype of the Monterey Colonial style. Though well accepted as the first of its kind, he claims that other, earlier examples simply were not as well documented and so have been lost to history. He believes that all elements of the Monterey Colonial style can be found in Spanish and Mexican buildings and that credit should not be so readily given to American influence in design. (Brak, Mark L. *Domestic Architecture in Hispanic California, The Monterey Style Reconsidered*. Edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Vol.4, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 173.