



A Coastal Celebration

Travel back in time as Monterey marks its 250th anniversary.

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Colton Hall
was the site of
California's 1849
constitutional
convention.



Below, left and right:
The Custom House is
California's first state
historic monument.



Six years before delegates signed the Declaration of Independence, Spanish explorers gathered under an oak tree overlooking Monterey Bay. On June 3, 1770, along the same sweep of scenic coast where native Rumsien Ohlone communities fished and foraged for food, the Europeans held a mass and claimed the land for Spain.

“That’s the beginning of Monterey as we know it today,” says Dennis Copeland, Monterey’s museums and archives manager. “Since then, the city has always celebrated its anniversary in one way or another.”

In 2020, Monterey marks its 250th anniversary with public art openings, theatrical performances, community picnics, and cultural events honoring the Rumsien people and subsequent settlers who shaped this city’s grand history. Monterey served as the capital of California under Spanish and Mexican flags. Delegates later wrote the state’s constitution here. California’s first newspaper, theater, and public library all operated in Monterey, and many of the community’s original adobes still welcome guests.

Several well-preserved adobes date back to the early 1800s, when Mexico gained independence from Spain. Monterey became a key commercial port under this new government, welcoming traders from France, Great Britain, and beyond. Merchants paid taxes at the Custom House, now a waterfront museum that explores Monterey’s trading days.

“The Custom House is California’s first state historic monument, and it really tells a story of transformation,” Copeland says. “When the Mexican

government opened California to various foreign vessels, it made small-town Monterey more cosmopolitan. Some of those international traders and ship captains decided to stay here, and it created a true melting pot.”

Commodore John Drake Sloat raised an American flag above Monterey’s Custom House in 1846, claiming 600,000 square miles of land for the United States. The changeover paved the way for the California constitutional convention held in Monterey three years later.

The Custom House and Colton Hall, where delegates drew up plans for California statehood, are two highlights on Monterey’s Path of History. Part of Monterey State Historic Park, the self-guided downtown walking tour spotlights 55 significant sites and buildings — from Mexican-era adobes, to a stretch of whalebone sidewalk, to the hotel where Robert Louis Stevenson wrote one of his books. Golden sidewalk plaques line the Path of History’s meandering route, and California State Parks organizes guided walking tours of several featured

Stevenson House
was briefly home
to Robert Louis
Stevenson in 1879.



Right and below:
Built in 1847, the
Pacific House is now
home to museums.

buildings (dates and times vary by the season). Visit the state parks website (parks.ca.gov) for tour times, along with self-guided walking tour maps and details about a related mobile phone tour.

The Path of History maps are also located at the Pacific House, a two-story adobe set steps away from the Custom House. This 1847 structure illustrates the engaging, and often surprising, histories of some of Monterey's most noteworthy sites. Originally built as a home for a local businessman, the Pacific House has since served as a hotel for sailors, a courtroom, a church, a ballroom, a newspaper office, and a law agency.

Today, first- and second-floor museums showcase indigenous artwork and articles from Monterey's Spanish and Mexican past. The adjacent Memory Garden, which once accommodated rowdy bullfights and bear fights, is now a fountain- and flower-filled refuge.

Two blocks away, the Old Whaling Station also started out as an adobe home. The Old Monterey Whaling Company moved its headquarters and employee housing into the building in 1855. These days, the Old Whaling Station opens mainly for special events. Outside, however, you'll find delicate, diamond-shaped sidewalk tiles crafted from whale vertebrae and set in place during the region's 19th-century whale-hunting heyday. Next door, displays in the First Brick House document Monterey history and architecture.



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Above and below: John Steinbeck started writing *The Pearl* while living in the Lara-Soto Adobe in 1944.

Follow Pacific Street past Casa Serrano, an 1843 adobe that housed one of California's first schools, and turn right to reach the Lara-Soto Adobe. Currently part of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, this small Pierce Street building played an important role in literary history. Salinas-born novelist John Steinbeck bought the property in 1944. Though he stayed for less than a year with his wife and their young son, Steinbeck started writing *The Pearl* while living in the home.

Colton Hall occupies much of the next block. Like many of its early Monterey neighbors, the stately stone structure has a diverse past: It has held the county courthouse, the city police headquarters, a public school, and a hospital. Perhaps best known as the site of California's 1849 constitutional convention, the building buzzed with activity for six weeks as 48 delegates outlined the articles of statehood.

"The constitution created in Colton Hall brought together American Brits and the Californios, people of Spanish heritage who were born here, to become part of this new country. The document itself was bilingual — English and Spanish. The delegates made California a free state. They also gave women the right to own property, which was virtually unheard of in the United States at that time. It was a very progressive constitution," Copeland says.

During Monterey History Fest each October, a convention reenactment



Below and left: The Old Whaling Station was home to the Old Monterey Whaling Company in 1855.



takes place in the same room where representatives gathered for the convention. Throughout the year, the free Colton Hall Museum maintains exhibits that showcase those meetings, along with Golden State history and life in early Monterey.

A few blocks over, the 1830s-era Stevenson House once operated as The French Hotel. Its most famous guest, the author Robert Louis Stevenson, checked in for a few months in late 1879. In addition to romancing Fanny Osbourne, the woman he later married, Stevenson penned *The Old Pacific Capital* while based in the downtown adobe. A collection of his books and personal belongings headline current Stevenson House displays.

As Monterey commemorates its 250th anniversary, the city is also celebrating the renewal of a major Path of History destination. Anchoring one end of Alvarado Street since the 1820s, the 2.5-acre Cooper-Molera Adobe complex is a throwback to Monterey's early Mexican port city days. Three generations of the Cooper and Molera families occupied the campus, which includes two original adobe homes, an adobe warehouse, a corner store, and wooden barns surrounded by a rustic wall.

A recent National Trust for Historic Preservation-led renovation restored the campus' Cooper and Diaz adobes and refreshed exhibits in the two museum spaces. Crews rebuilt the surrounding gardens, now bright with native plants and flowers. The refurbished Cooper-Molera store houses Alta, a chic bakery

with house-made pastries, breads, and lunch items. Chef Ben Spungin worked at Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur and Carmel Valley's Bernardus Lodge before opening the popular cafe.

This year, the property's former warehouse will reopen as Cella, a restaurant with garden seating and a menu that features local ingredients.

"Cooper-Molera is a good example of adaptive reuse in a historic site," Copeland says. "It's home to an intriguing blend of history and heritage, local foods, and some major events and celebrations."

While major events that celebrate Monterey's own anniversary will end in late 2020, cultural leaders are planning Path of History updates that include new signage and an expanded route featuring additional structures. It's all part of a continued effort to honor and highlight the city's past for present-day audiences.

"It's quite a tapestry that we can share with people here," Copeland says, "in terms of both the absolute beauty of this place and Monterey's rich heritage."