

Open for Viewing . . .

Casa Soberanes

"The House of the Blue Gate"

KATHERINE GREENBERG

"Monterey, as far as my observation goes, is decidedly the pleasantest and most civilized-looking place in California. . . . The soil is as rich as man could wish, climate as good as any in the world, water abundant, and situation extremely beautiful."

Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*

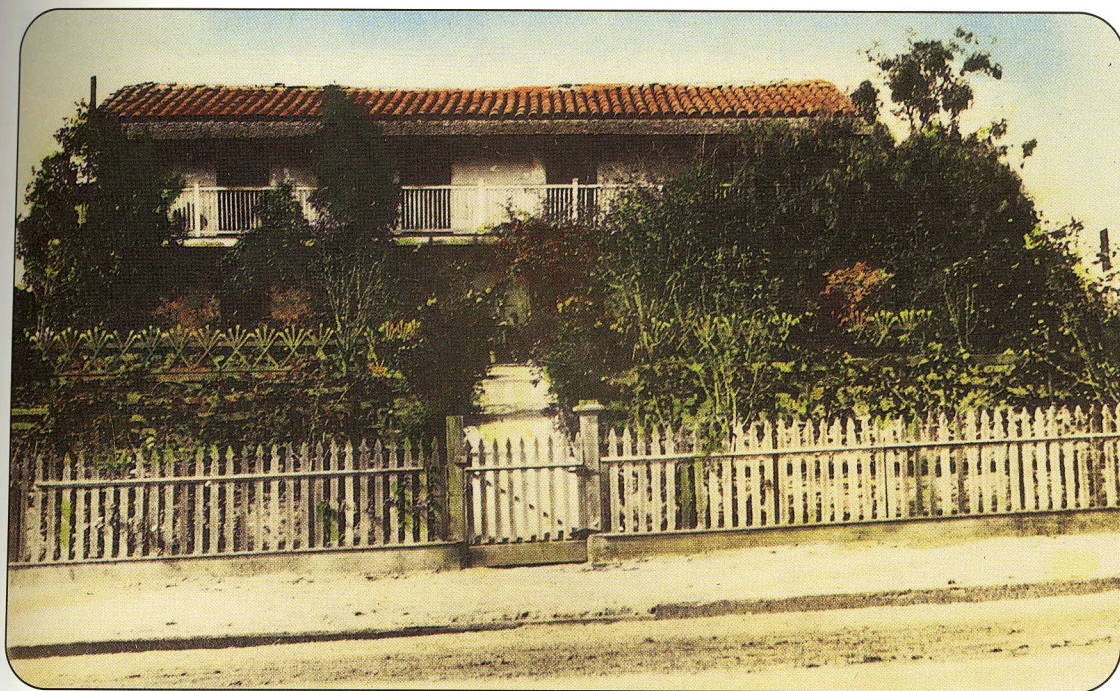
As a child, I was enchanted with Auntie Mayo's old adobe house in Monterey and its delightful garden. The luster of shell and the sheen of bottle glass caught my eye when I played in the garden. On closer examination, I discovered rows of abalone shells, old wine bottles, and whale bones—remnants of Monterey's past—that were used to border paths. This was a wondrous place, enclosed by a tall cypress hedge with a blue gate, where time seemed to have stopped in an earlier age.

My great-aunt, Mayo Hayes O'Donnell, was the last owner of Casa Soberanes, also known as "The House of the Blue Gate," before it became a state historical monument. Her legacy was to preserve the historic house and garden for future Californians. The property has a long and fascinating history going back to the days when the Spanish flag flew over the presidio of Monterey.

On a visit to Monterey in 1835, Richard Henry Dana wrote, "The town lay directly before us, making a very pretty appearance; its houses being of whitewashed adobe. The houses—about a hundred in number—were



Casa Soberanes—"House of the Blue Gate."
Author's photograph



Casa Soberanes from the street, circa 1900. Photograph courtesy Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library

dotted about, here and there, irregularly. There are no streets nor fences except that here and there a small patch might be fenced in for a garden."

A Large Adobe

In 1842 Rafael Estrada built the two-story adobe, now called Casa Soberanes, on a gentle slope overlooking Monterey Bay. Rafael obtained the large lot, a hundred varas square (approximately one and three-fourths acres), and a land grant in the Salinas Valley when he was only twenty-one, through influential family connections. He served as warden of the Customs House; his stepbrother, Juan Alvarado, was governor of California at the time.

Marriage to Concepción Malarin in 1844 enhanced Rafael's status in the community and their large adobe home became a center of social gatherings for the prominent families of Monterey. In 1860 Rafael sold the property to his cousin Ezequiel Soberanes who had been a



Antique sundial with abalone shells and old wine bottles edging the gravel paths, lavenders and valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) beyond. Author's photograph

frequent visitor. The Estrada family then moved to Rancho San Lucas, in Southern Monterey County, to live on the same land that my father would farm many years later.

Ezequiel and his wife, Maria Ignacia, lived in the adobe for thirty-five years. Seven of their thirteen children were born there, and Casa Soberanes was filled with the sound of children playing in the garden. "Many hours were spent grinding the corn that grew tall against the back wall, or preparing bright red peppers to dry in the sun," wrote Augusta Fink in *Adobes in the Sun*.

By the time Ezequiel died in 1895, the house had fallen into disrepair, and the garden was neglected. Ezequiel Soberanes Jr, a gardener at the Carmel Mission, inherited the house from his father. He and his wife, Dolores, made repairs to the house and planted the garden. Old photographs show that by 1905 a thriving garden filled the front yard, enclosed by a picket fence. A young pepper tree (*Schinus molle*) was planted to replace the large eucalyptus tree near the entrance, potted plants adorned the front of the house, and grape vines grew over the back porch. The Spanish had brought both pepper trees and grape vines to California in the early years of settlement, and had planted them extensively in the mission gardens and around their adobe homes.

When Ezequiel Jr died in 1922, the property was overgrown and again in need of repair, so his widow sold the house to Jean Booth. Having traveled extensively throughout California, Jean had acquired an appreciation for historic buildings. She made the old adobe her home and married Reuben Serrano, whose grandfather, Florencio Serrano, had served as *alcalde*, or mayor, of Monterey when Casa Soberanes was first built.

The original house had whitewashed adobe walls, large redwood timbers, and a tile roof. In the 1920s Jean and Reuben restored and modernized the neglected adobe. They installed a wood floor of fir planks, over the original hardpacked adobe floor, and added a wood veranda across the front of the house below the cantilevered balcony. The distinctive blue gate dates from this period—the same vibrant blue that I saw on a patio gate in Andalusia in southern Spain.

Jean created a beautiful terraced garden and built a wall of Carmel stone to enclose the garden, replacing the old board fence. She then planted a row of Monterey cypresses (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) along the wall, and wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*) to cover the pergola. In the back garden she added a fig tree and an apricot tree, both early Spanish introductions, along with three old roses: 'Lamarque', 'Alister Stella Gray', and the tea rose (*Rosa × odorata*).

Preserving History

In poor health in 1941, Jean moved and left the adobe in the care of her dear friends, Mayo and William O'Donnell. Ten years later, Mayo Hayes O'Donnell, by then a widow, acquired the deed to the property. As the highlight of the city's 183rd birthday celebration in 1953 (commemorating the June 1770 landing in Monterey of Father Junipero Serra and Gaspar de Portola), Mayo gave her home, with its period furnishings and garden, to the State of California. Mayo retained life tenancy so she could continue living in her beloved adobe.

Through Casa Soberanes, Mayo became intimately associated with local history, and she wrote a weekly history column for the *Monterey Peninsula Herald*. She also served as president of the Monterey Peninsula Garden Club. In recognition of her years of dedication to preserving the history and beauty of California's first capital, she was presented with an antique Spanish sundial by the Monterey History and Art Association. Cast in stone with wrought iron numerals, it occupies a prominent place in the garden.

Each of the four owners of Casa Soberanes made important contributions to the home: "Rafael Estrada built it, the Soberanes lived there and gave their name to it, Mrs Serrano restored it with historic integrity, and Mrs O'Donnell popularized it and, by giving it to the state, preserved it for history," recalled Frances Grate, a guide for the Monterey State Historic Park. In 1965, a California State Senate resolution declared that "Mayo Hayes O'Donnell, perhaps more than any other individual, has kept alive the spirit of 'Old Monterey.'"



Casa Soberanes from the front gate, 1961. Photograph courtesy Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library

On a recent visit to Casa Soberanes, I found the home to be just as Auntie Mayo left it when she died in 1978. Insulated by adobe walls, the home is comfortable in summer and winter. The outer walls, measuring thirty-three inches thick, are covered with stucco and white-washed. The adobe bricks were made from adobe soil or clay; mixed with sand, water, and straw; poured into forms called *adoberas*; and dried in the sun. Adobe is the legacy of another age when daily life was more closely linked to the land.

Stepping Back in Time

To enter the blue gate, under the cypress arch, is to take a step back in time. The enclosed garden is a quiet retreat, protected from the intrusions of the modern world by the tall, clipped hedge of Monterey cypress. Many elements of

Spanish gardens are found here: a veranda, a vine-covered pergola, terraces, and a profusion of Mediterranean plants. Abalone shells and old bottles, used to delineate beds and paths, date from the Serrano and O'Donnell periods. They are typical of edgings used in early Monterey gardens.

The front walk, paved with tile-decorated brick and stone, leads up the center of the terraced garden, from the gate to the veranda. Colorful perennials enliven terraces on both sides of the walk, with informal gravel paths winding throughout the garden. This is a garden that invites discovery at a leisurely pace. The upper level of the front garden is divided by a wisteria-covered pergola. To its left a stone bench offers a place to pass the time, while the antique sundial marks the hours. A bird bath stands on the right side of the pergola, near a gnarled old pepper tree whose branches shade the front door.

The garden is planted with water-conserving plants that tolerate the shallow, rocky soil of the site. Although some plants have changed over the years, a fine collection of old jade plants (*Crassula ovata*) has endured for more than sixty years. An exotic bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*), Mexican fleabane (*Erigeron karwinskianus*), ivy-leaved geranium (*Pelargonium peltatum*), English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), Mexican sage (*Salvia leucantha*), pride-of-Madeira (*Echium candicans*), and valerian (*Centranthus ruber*)—these are just a few of the many sturdy plants thriving in lively combinations.

A fenced garden at the rear of the adobe was once a kitchen garden with fruit trees, herbs, and flowering plants. Hanging baskets of fuchsias and succulents adorned the branches of an old fig tree that stood near an olive, an apricot, and a pear—all planted in circular beds. Behind the detached garage, a potting shed and a small vegetable garden were hidden from view by a fence. This was a true *huerta*, a traditional Spanish garden combining productive and ornamental plants.

The garden is eclectic, like the old adobe itself, and reflects the spirit of the people who lived there. "Their hospitality knows no bounds; they are always glad to see you, come when you may; take a pleasure in entertaining you while you remain; and only regret that your business calls you away," wrote Walter Colton, *alcalde* of Monterey in 1847. Generations of family and friends have gathered to enjoy the ambience of Casa Soberanes, so reflective of its time and place. 🌿

Katherine gratefully acknowledges the generous contributions of Frances Grate and the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library to this article.

If you would like to visit . . .

The gardens of the Casa Soberanes are open, free to the public, daily except major holidays. Enter through the blue gate on Pacific Street at Del Monte Avenue, in downtown Monterey.

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