



California State Parks

Video Transcript



The Larkin House at Monterey State Historic Park: A Tribute to Thomas Larkin

Good morning and welcome. We're at the Larkin House. My name is Lisa Bradford. I'm a State Park guide, and I will be your guide for the house tour today. We're going to be looking at a home which is often known as a prototype of Monterey Colonial style architecture, which is a blend of Anglo architectural features combined with traditional Mexican adobe brick construction. When this house was built in 1835 by Thomas Larkin, an American merchant living in Monterey, it was one of the largest homes in the city. It was a full two-story height home and faced what was then the main street in town. Let's go ahead and step inside.

As soon as we step into the home, you'll notice that we're entering into a central hallway, which was a key architectural feature for the Larkin House at that time. The central hallway design basically stated that this was an American home. The hallway separated the downstairs living space into a parlor area, which is located to my left and the store that Thomas Larkin ran out of this home over here to the right. Let's step inside the parlor.

One of the most prominent features of a two-story home made out of large, sun-dried adobe bricks, is the depth of the walls that were used to hold up the weight of the second story. An adobe brick is very heavy; it weighs approximately 35 pounds apiece. And in order to hold up the second story, two widths of brick were used in the load-bearing walls. Thomas Larkin wanted to create an American style home in what was then Mexico, and he imported a lot of things to create this ambiance, such as window glass from Boston, trim and mill work also imported from the East Coast. We know that he employed many American and British ship's carpenters to be able to create these types of features for his home.

Thomas Larkin was very successful in the business that he ran out of this house. He and his wife, Rachel, whom he met in crossing from Boston out to California in 1831, were married and would eventually raise eight children in this home. Not all of them lived to adulthood. But as the business succeeded, Thomas and Rachel became a part of the prominent society in Monterey. Thomas also became involved in the political arena as well, beginning in 1844 when he was appointed to the position of U.S. Consul to Mexico, serving under President Polk. It was in this position that the U.S. and Mexico entered into war two years later in 1846. Consul Larkin is in fact with us here today. Consul Larkin?

MAN PORTRAYING THOMAS LARKIN: Oh, good morning. Welcome. Lieutenant Sherman told me we might be receiving some visitors. I am Thomas Larkin, American Consul here, and I gather you've all come here looking for opportunity in California. I do want to welcome you and extend to you whatever support and help I can give you since I am essentially the

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American government here at this time. I know this must be very strange to you, here thousands of miles away from your homes, but I want to urge upon you the confidence that the choice you've made is a wise one.

California is a land of tremendous opportunity, and I believe you will find that the opportunities that await you here will enrich you, and not only will you benefit, but you will also benefit Mexican California, or now American California. I myself have come here from the East, as you may well know. My wife, Rachel, and I arrived some 15 years ago. I came from Boston, where I gather a number of you also hail from, and came here to join my half-brother John Rogers Cooper, or Juan Bautista Cooper as he was known during the Mexican days, in his business here, and I have certainly prospered. My wife and I were able to build this fine home, as you can see, in somewhat of a New England style, which has become popular here of late. We set up business and created a store and eventually, of course, I was appointed Consul by the President.

Now that the war itself is over, I think you will find that the lands to the east and to the north will open up. Those of you who are interested in farming or in ranching, or those of you who come here with skills, will find immense opportunity as more and more people come to this area. I think you will also find the Californios to be a wonderful people. You may find it somewhat difficult to communicate with them. Many of you, I imagine, do not speak Spanish, but more and more of the Californios are learning English. Reverend Colton, the alcalde, and I have actually started a school, and many children are coming to it where a young lady, Mrs. Olive Isbell, is teaching them English, as well as, of course, reading and writing and basic figures and things of that nature.

Certainly, you will find that there are some Californios who are nervous around you. I think many of them are afraid that we come here not to live and not to build, but to conquer. Obviously you must find that a bit strange since you are not soldiers, you are yourselves businesspeople, craftspeople, farmers, but the Californios have lived for a number of years with the fear that the United States would be coming here and taking their land away from them. Well, we certainly have no intention to do that, and I of course will work hard to prevent that.

The valleys to the east, especially the valley of the San Joaquin, has vast, just countless acres of, land, which is rich and ready for the plow. Or, if you prefer to raise cattle, there are herds of cattle there, many of them wild cattle, which are yours for the claiming. The same goes with horses. The valley of the San Joaquin teams with horses and cattle, not to mention wildlife.

My wife, Mrs. Larkin, is not here right now, but I'm sure she'll be happy to speak to you ladies about the opportunities here for you, the challenges of living here in California. She's actually at our other home down near the Customs House, dealing with some problems with food storage. We did have an invasion of mites, I'm afraid, which are a constant trouble here, but that's nothing you haven't encountered on the East Coast. It is my belief that in the near future goods will flow far more readily between the East and the West Coast. I foresee a day in the not too distant future when we will in fact see rails joining the East and West Coast. I think it is inevitable that the railway will connect California to the rest of the United States. When that will be I cannot predict, but it is inevitable.

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LISA: Across the central hallway from the parlor is this room, today furnished with beautiful dining room furniture, but this was in fact Thomas Larkin's general merchandise store. This place was chock-a-block full of barrels and crates, boxes, burlap sacks, because Larkin sold everything here from salt and sugar to bolts of material to pieces of American furniture, such as sofas, tables, chairs, and mirrors. He designed this room to have a second entrance from the main street. If you came to Larkin's store, you would be entering through this door.

Thomas Larkin and his wife, Rachel, lived here in the home up to 1850, but because of the shift of commerce from Monterey to San Francisco and Sacramento, it was necessary for them to move and to be where the action was. We know that Thomas Larkin lived only until 1858; he died in October of that year, only 56 years old, but had amassed a millionaire's fortune in the course of his lifetime here in early California. His wife, Rachel, lived on a few years beyond her husband, passing away in the 1860s. The two of them had created a very successful marriage, as well as a successful home and life for themselves in California. The success of Thomas Larkin's store required that he put an addition onto the house. We're going to step into that room right now. Follow me.

The back section of the house was an addition Thomas Larkin put on in 1837 and housed primarily his office space, which would include a wall safe for all that money he was making. Later on, after his appointment as U.S. Consul, we know he kept correspondence from President Polk in here. The other item that was in the house that belonged to Thomas and Rachel while they lived here is Thomas Larkin's desk. It's a beautiful piece of furniture, mahogany-stained cherry wood inlaid with bird's eye maple. We know Thomas Larkin spent a lot of time at this desk. He was a very meticulous note taker and kept extensive records of his business agreements, as well as his expenditures for this home. It cost Thomas Larkin almost \$5,000 to build the complete home in 1835 through '37. His original manuscripts are today housed in the Bancroft Library, and those papers have been compiled into a book format—a ten-volume set today known as the Larkin Papers. We're going to go upstairs and take a look at Thomas Larkin's living quarters on the second floor. Follow me.

Thomas Larkin designed his house so that the second floor was primarily living and sleeping quarters for his family, as opposed to the public and business areas down below. Initially this room was part of a much larger space almost identical in size to the parlor below. But as Larkin was putting the addition of the office on, he chose to partition the walls and to create a formal guest bedroom, which is what we have in place today. In 1922, his granddaughter Alice Larkin Toulmin moved into the home and was required to upgrade plumbing, heating, and electricity. So, as we go through these upstairs bedrooms, you will see evidence of the modernization—electricity, skylights, and bathrooms.

Across the hallway from the formal guest bedroom are located the two original bedrooms for the house. This particular room is furnished with Alice Larkin Toulmin's beautiful furniture. But it was Alice who told us that this was the room that was shared by her grandfather Thomas and her grandmother Rachel. If that's the case, then seven of their eight children would have been born in this very room.

When Harry and Alice took up residence following 1922, here in Monterey, they transformed part of the upstairs rooms into their own personal bedrooms. This room was one of the original

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bedrooms and was taken up by Harry as his own room. Harry was an amateur archaeologist, and you can see some of his wonderful tomb findings in the case above the bed.

This large room, which today holds Alice's collection of oriental pieces, which she collected during her travels in India and China, was at one time an upstairs sitting room for the Larkin family. Notice the depth of the window wells—we have just one width of adobe brick upstairs as opposed to the double width and the 3-1/2 feet deep walls on the first floor. Alice Larkin and her British husband, Harry Toulmin, lived lives of adventure, romance, and travel before settling in Monterey in 1922. When Alice passed away in 1961, she bequeathed the house, as well as all of her beautiful belongings, to the State of California so that her grandfather's story would be told.

WOMAN PORTRAYING ALICE LARKIN TOULMIN: As you probably know, this house had been in my family for quite some time when it was owned by my grandparents. However, they sold it, and when I grew up, I felt that was a tragedy because it had been so important to the history of our family. Also this house was the scene of an incredible romance between my grandparents, and I felt that my own relationship with my husband had many similarities to that, and I wanted to purchase the house myself. My husband, Harry, and I had initially met in Egypt, and my father, not terribly approving of my conversation with Harry, parted us, and I didn't see him for a couple of years. Harry found me, remarkably, at a party in England where the first words he said to me were that he had "searched the world for me." We've been together ever since. All the furniture in this house I purchased myself and I have brought here from various parts of the world, from China, from Egypt, and it was important to me that I leave this house and the legacy of my relationship and also the remarkable relationship my grandparents had to the State for people to enjoy.

LISA: Alice and Harry Toulmin lived lives of romance and adventure and travel before coming to settle down in Monterey after 1922. In 1961, Alice Toulmin left the home to the State Parks and California so that her grandfather's story could be told during our tours here at the house. Thomas Larkin himself, after leaving Monterey in 1850, had this to say of his early days in Monterey, "Those early days were halcyon days. We shall never see their like again." On that note I'd like to thank you for coming with me today and having a chance to visit the Larkin House.

Running Time: 17:34
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