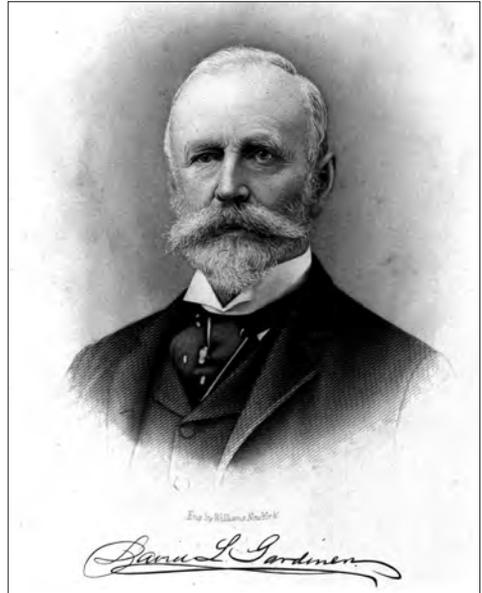


# David Lion Gardiner: A Yankee in Gold Rush California, 1849-1851

By Molly McClain

In the 1840s, San Diego consisted of a few dozen small adobe houses in the area now known as Old Town. Ships anchored at the southwest end of Point Loma where large board houses had once housed great piles of cattle hides. The economic vitality of the region had largely disappeared by the time that Richard Henry Dana published his bestselling book, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), with its lively descriptions of the Mexican pueblo. Fewer than 150 people lived in San Diego by the middle of the decade, as many of the wealthy *Californio* ranching families had moved away.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48) transformed the San Diego region by drawing in new investors, among them David Lion Gardiner who came from New York to seek his fortune



An engraved portrait of David Lion Gardiner in his later years. Courtesy of the East Hampton Library, Long Island Collection.

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**Molly McClain**, professor of history at the University of San Diego and co-editor of *The Journal of San Diego History*. The descendant of a *Californio* family, she is the author of a number of works on San Diego history including her forthcoming biography, *Ellen Browning Scripps: New Money and American Philanthropy, 1836-1932* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017). She thanks the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation for its support of the journal.

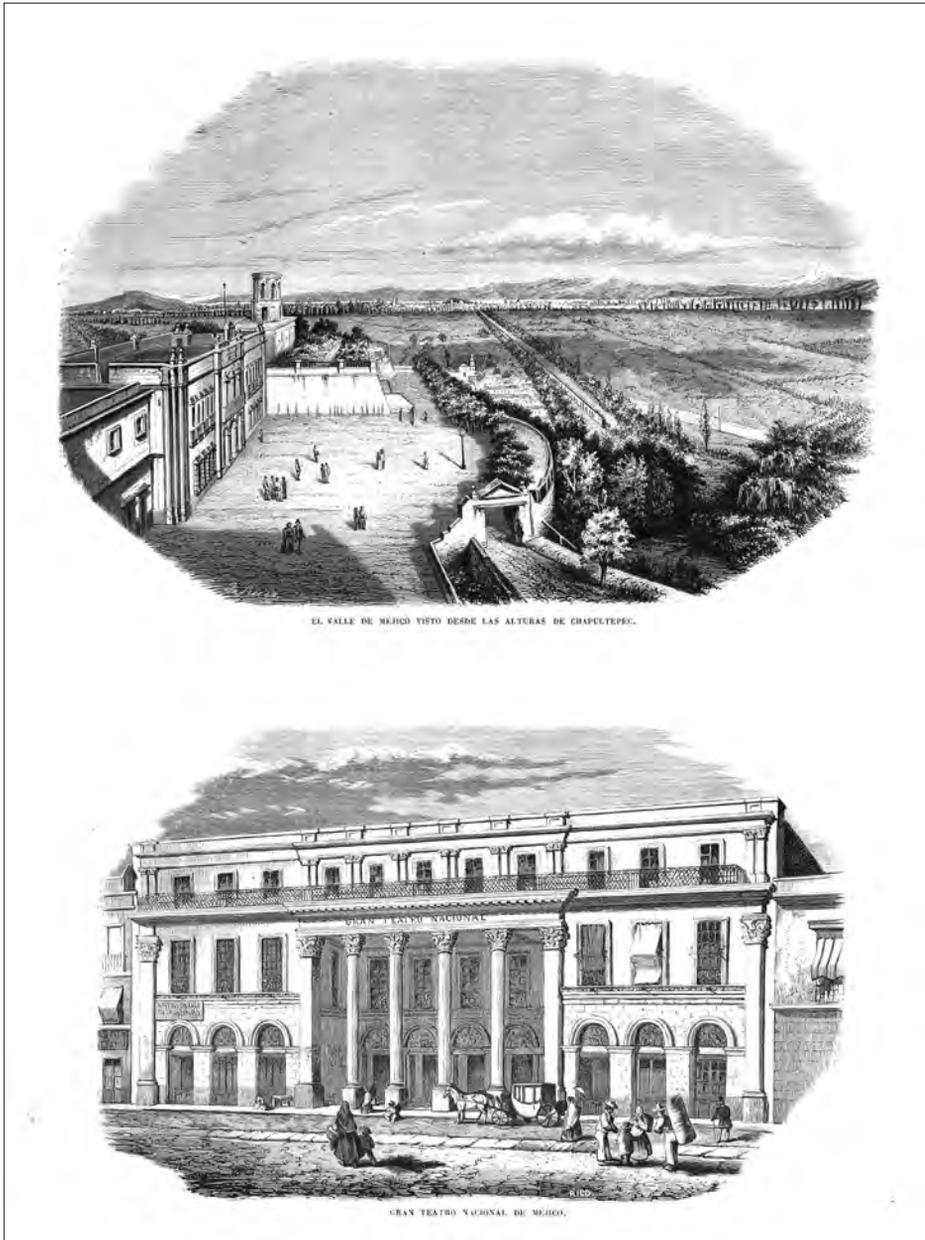
during the Gold Rush. Uncomfortable with the reckless pursuit of profit that he witnessed in San Francisco, Gardiner set up a mercantile business in San Diego. He built the first stone house on Point Loma and owned what later became a valuable property adjoining the Santa Fe Railroad Depot downtown. His surviving letters to family members tell the story of his experience in California between 1849 and 1851. They also reveal the capitalist origins of modern San Diego.<sup>2</sup>

David Lion Gardiner (1816-1892) was descended from one of New York's earliest English settlers. His ancestor Lion Gardiner (1599-1663) was a seventeenth-century military engineer employed on several projects in New England. In 1639, he purchased Gardiner's Island, formerly Monchonock, from a native tribe and passed the property to male heirs and their descendants. Privateers and smugglers, including the legendary pirate Captain Kidd, frequently visited over the course of the eighteenth century. Occupied by British forces during the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, Gardiner's Island is the only U.S. property still held as part of a royal grant from the English Crown. It remains the property of the Gardiner family. The Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation, a charitable foundation, continues to preserve the region's tradition and heritage.

Gardiner grew up among the educated elite of New York City and East Hampton, Long Island. His father David Gardiner, Sr. was a Yale College graduate, a lawyer, and a state senator. His mother Juliana MacLachlan descended from a Scottish Jacobite family who had amassed a brewing and real estate fortune in New York. The eldest of four children, Gardiner attended the Clinton Academy in East Hampton before matriculating at Princeton College and graduating in 1836. Admitted to the bar in 1842, he practiced law in New York and briefly served as an aide-de-camp to President John Tyler.<sup>3</sup> His brother Alexander, meanwhile, was Clerk of the U.S. Circuit Court and an unofficial aid to the President.<sup>4</sup> One sister, Margaret, married New York merchant John H. Beeckman, while another, Julia, married President Tyler in 1844. Julia served as First Lady for eight months before retiring with her husband to their plantation, Sherwood Forest in Virginia.<sup>5</sup>

Coming of age during a period of rapid social and economic change, Gardiner recognized that the future belonged to those willing to try their luck. As a young man, he had witnessed the arrival of the "Age of Steam" and the substantial fortunes derived from steamboats and textile mills. The Erie Canal (1825) opened the rich agricultural lands of the Midwest to settlement, beginning New York's transformation from a third-rate port into a great commercial *entrepôt*. Upstart investors like Cornelius Vanderbilt were in the process of becoming very rich.<sup>6</sup> The Gardiners, while wealthy, could not compete with the growing number of millionaires in New York City.





Engravings published in *El Museum Universal* (July 15, 1857) show Mexico City from Chapultepec Castle, above, and the *Gran Teatro Nacional de Méjico*, below, where Gardiner and his companions attended a ball. Courtesy of the *Biblioteca Virtual de Prensa Histórica*, Spain.

the abundance of riches and offering camping and mining equipment for sale. By early 1849, entrepreneurs in the New York area had begun to organize group trips to California. They offered passage either by sail around Cape Horn or by

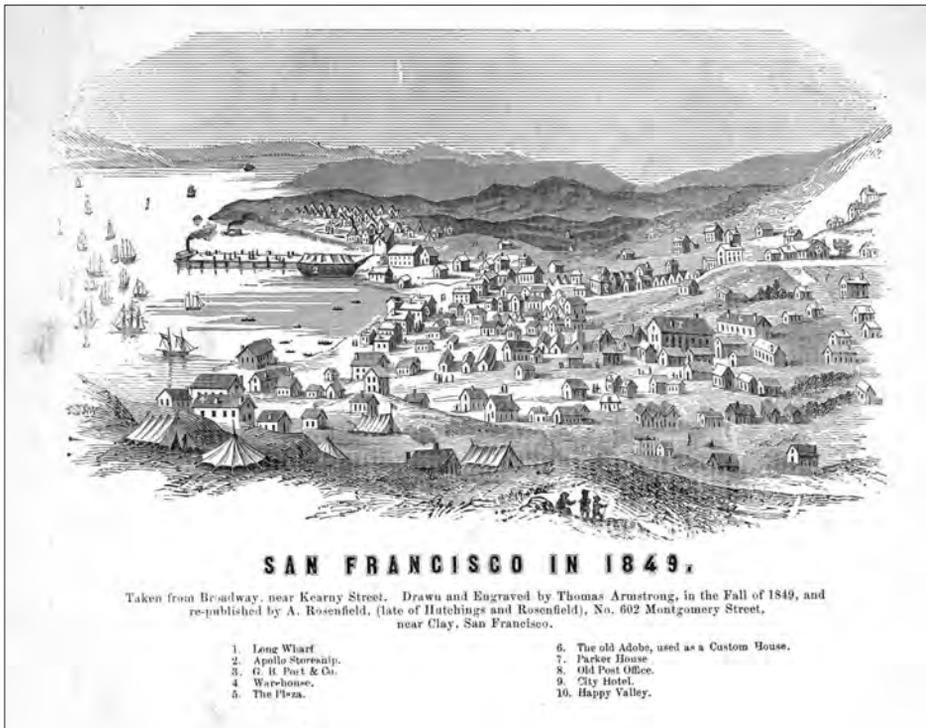
steam to the Isthmus of Panama and on to San Francisco. Steam travel was not cheap, with costs as high as \$600 per person (approximately \$19,200 in 2016 dollars).

Some of the earliest companies to leave for California were composed of well-to-do easterners who could afford the price. An editorial in the *New York Herald* noted that many “educated, intelligent, civilized, and elevated men, of the best classes in society” had joined the Gold Rush.<sup>7</sup> They did not necessarily intend to pan for gold but to increase their fortunes by selling dry goods and investing in land. Gardiner organized one such elite company. Intelligent and resourceful, he was open to new experiences and gifted at making friends. He was also a good judge of character who attracted men who were disciplined, stable, and interested in making money. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had just ended the U.S.-Mexican War, so it was only a matter of time before Alta California became a U.S. state.

In January 1849, Gardiner took sail on the *Eugenia*, a small vessel, along with fourteen companions, including Andrew H. Hitchcock, B.F. Voorhees, Lloyd Minturn, and Henry F. Smith.<sup>8</sup> Voorhees, a correspondent for New York’s *The Home Journal*, wrote a series of articles about their adventure from New York, through Mexico, and up the coast to California.<sup>9</sup> Gardiner, meanwhile, contributed letters about his experience to New York’s *Journal of Commerce*.<sup>10</sup> They decided to follow the same route taken fewer than two years earlier by General Winfield Scott during the U.S.-Mexican War.

Gardiner and his company landed in Veracruz, Mexico, where they picked up two former U.S. Army wagons and made their way to Mexico City. It took them one month and \$100 to reach their destination. Gardiner wrote, “It has been a constant matter of wonder to me how our army could have reached the city of Mexico against the obstacles thrown out by the Mexicans and the superior advantages they possessed in the way of natural defenses.” These obstacles included ravines, mountains, and narrow passes. They arrived in the capital on February 7, 1849, sunburned and flea bitten, having slept either outdoors in tents or indoors on the stone floors of *corrales* along with animals and fellow travelers.<sup>11</sup>

In Mexico City, Gardiner spent a few weeks gathering supplies and doing some sightseeing. He viewed the cultural legacy of the Spanish Empire in the form of cathedrals, parks, and museums that held relics of the ancient history of Mexico. Arriving during the first week of carnival, he had the opportunity to attend a ball at the *Gran Teatro Nacional*, an enormous opera house constructed only a few years earlier. This was his first glimpse of the cosmopolitan splendor of Mexican elites. Although New York had nothing to compare to this scene, Gardiner acted the part of the patriot. He claimed that he did not see “a single handsome face” and that the elegant cuisine did not compare to the food he had tasted at home.<sup>12</sup>



In the autumn of 1849, the population of San Francisco began to swell with the arrival of newcomers seeking their fortunes in the Gold Country. Courtesy of The Huntington Library.

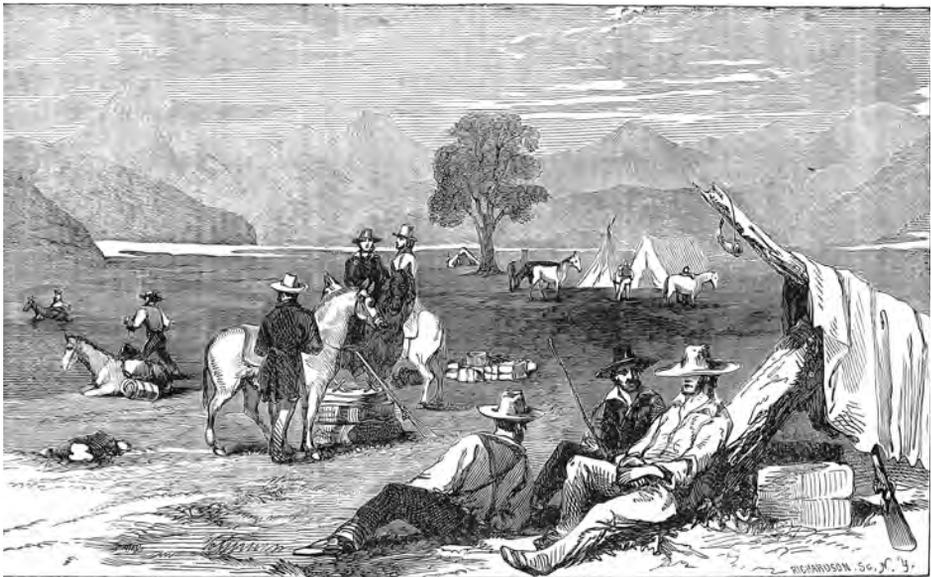
From there, Gardiner and his companions headed via Guadalajara to San Blas where they arranged passage on the bark *Mary Frances*. In San Blas, Gardiner found several hundred Americans, among other foreigners, awaiting passage to San Francisco. The more he saw of his countrymen, the more he appreciated the members of his party, all of whom were free from “dissipation and vices of every kind.”<sup>13</sup> He saw his first gold nugget and heard tall tales of abundance. He came to believe that even if “millions of people” headed to Sacramento there would be enough gold for all.<sup>14</sup> Had Gardiner paid closer attention, he might have realized that gold, like other mineral resources, would require intensive labor and a significant investment of capital. He saw, but did not understand, the significance of 60 lower-class Mexicans who traveled with them on the *Mary Frances*. They were being shipped to California to work the quicksilver mines of New Alameda by a British mercantile and banking firm—Barron, Forbes & Co. of Tepec, Jalisco.<sup>15</sup>

Gardiner and his party left the *Mary Frances* at Mazatlán and secured passage to San Francisco on the brig *Antonia*, a faster vessel filled mainly with American passengers. After a sea voyage of approximately 23 days, they arrived at the

fog-bound entrance to San Francisco Bay. On the morning of April 25, 1849, they made their way into the harbor. Gardiner's first sight of San Francisco, with its roughly made clapboard houses, tents, and dusty streets, did not dampen his enthusiasm. He noted with astonishment the exceptionally high prices of real estate and the opportunities for profit, but he decided not to remain in the city. Determined "to see the *elephant*," he headed directly to the goldfields.<sup>16</sup>

In May 1849, Gardiner and his party took a schooner up the Sacramento River to a landing three miles from Sutter's Fort, which they found in a dilapidated state. Making their way up the North Fork of the American River they began dry digging, using picks and crowbars to cut through beds of slate rock while standing knee-deep in water. "Imagine a gang of Irish laborers at work digging at the bottom of a canal," he wrote to his mother, "and you may form some idea of the figures we cut."<sup>17</sup>

Gardiner found himself in good company among other East Coast elites. In Sacramento, he met the twenty-nine-year-old Archibald C. Peachy, an attorney for John Sumner who formerly had been a philosophy professor at The College of William and Mary.<sup>18</sup> Gardiner also ran across Charles Upton Shepherd, a lecturer in natural history at Yale College, who was driving a team of oxen. "Persons coming here are all bent on making money," he wrote, "and undertake anything for the sake of it."<sup>19</sup>



*The Gold Region in Upper California Encampment in the Sacramento Valley. Engraving of a Gold Rush scene published in Holden's Dollar Magazine, 1849. By J. H. Richardson [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.*

Gardiner learned that several eastern political figures had made their way to California, including: Wilson Shannon, a former congressman for Ohio who had spent a year as Minister to Mexico; Thomas Butler King, a congressman from Pennsylvania; and David C. Broderick, who had been politically active in New York.<sup>20</sup> He also encountered people he had known at home including "old Ross," his uncle's overseer from Sag Harbor, and two seamen from East Hampton.<sup>21</sup> He told his mother, "Everyone expresses the utmost surprise at my being in California, and I almost think sometimes that it is no place for me."<sup>22</sup>

Gardiner compared his rough-and-ready life in the goldfields to the refinement of New York society and the comforts of life at home. He slept in a tent on the bank of the river and rarely took off his clothes at night, at first claiming that he enjoyed the "novelty" of the adventure and had never been in better health.<sup>23</sup>

It was not long, however, before Gardiner was ready to give up on gold and find another route to fortune. He wrote to his brother Alexander, "No amount of gold would induce me to undergo the privation and suffering incident to a gold digger's life."<sup>24</sup> Instead, Gardiner planned to invest in land at the junction of the Feather and Sacramento Rivers where he imagined there would one day be a large town. He asked his brother to send him a dozen frame buildings in the cottage style that could be rented from \$2,500 to \$3,500 per year.<sup>25</sup> He also set up a mercantile company in Sacramento with a partner, Benjamin W. Bean, a former New Yorker.<sup>26</sup> By August 1849, Gardiner had the reputation of being "one of the leading and most successful pioneers."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, severe illness caused him to reconsider his future as a Sacramento businessman. In the summer of 1849, he contracted typhoid fever as a result of the crowded and unsanitary conditions at Bear Creek where he and his partner had set up a trading post to sell goods to miners.<sup>28</sup>

After recovering, Gardiner decided to relinquish his business interests and return to San Francisco in September 1849. The city had changed dramatically in the five months since his arrival in California. From a few adobe houses, tents, and ramshackle houses grew a city filled with houses two- and three-stories high. The harbor "astonishes the beholder," he wrote,

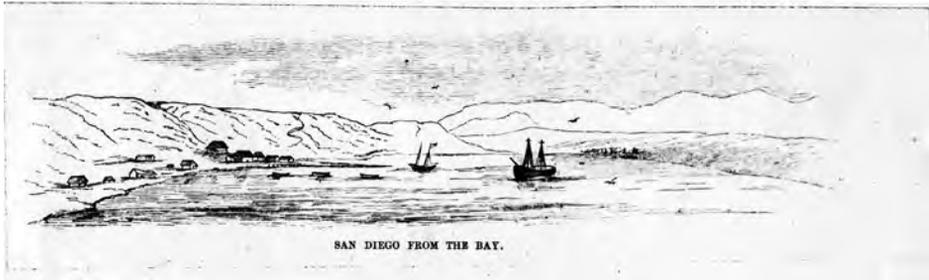
Here, within the short span of a few months are collected some 500 vessels, principally large ships, and crowded within the circumference of a mile the representatives of every nation under the sun including the Musselman [Muslim], the Moor [North African], Chinese, and Hindoo [Hindu], bringing with them the products of the east and west in the greatest profusion; every foreign luxury is to be obtained here at less rates even than in New York, while the products of our own soil (California) are most difficult to obtain.<sup>29</sup>



Photograph of the Daily Alta California newspaper offices in San Francisco, 1851. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Gardiner stayed for a time in the home of naval officer Rodman McCamley Price, former prefect and *alcalde* (mayor) of Monterey and a delegate to the first constitutional convention of California.<sup>30</sup> Other acquaintances in San Francisco included Julius K. Rose, a lawyer who later developed a winery in the Napa Valley; Charles P. Wilkins,<sup>31</sup> son of a former Secretary of War; and Frank Turk who practiced law. Gardiner later took up residence in a boarding house run by a Mrs. Eager who formerly lived along the Hudson River just north of New York City. She had worked in the mines and accumulated what Gardiner described as “quite a snug property.”<sup>32</sup> He came across news of his brother-in-law John Beeckman who, with his cousin Henry Beeckman Livingston, had headed to Sacramento to set up a mercantile operation with Gardiner’s former partner, Benjamin W. Bean.<sup>33</sup> Gardiner’s friends who had accompanied him through Mexico, meanwhile, had returned from the diggings to take up work in business or law.<sup>34</sup> He remarked, “I am so constantly meeting familiar faces that I, at times, hardly realize the fact of being so far from home.”<sup>35</sup>

Gardiner might have stayed in San Francisco but the chaotic nature of the market and his lack of capital persuaded him that he could make no great fortune there. Prices fluctuated wildly, and it was impossible to determine what commodities might be needed at any given time. Gardiner wrote to his brother, “You can form no idea of the state of the market from one week to another or hardly from one day, its fluctuations are so great.”<sup>36</sup> He was also troubled by the windy and damp weather, which he considered not at all “conducive to longevity.”<sup>37</sup> He wrote, “I think this the most disagreeable climate and gloomy winter I ever experienced.”<sup>38</sup>



A sketch of San Diego harbor, c. 1850. ©SDHC #9497-17.

In early February 1850, Gardiner decided to make his way down the coast to San Diego where the development of a new town promised opportunities for trade and real estate development. He understood that San Diego had one of the best harbors on the coast, and that steamers regularly stopped on their way to and from Panama. It was also the point of embarkation for '49ers who had crossed the plains via the Santa Fe Trail and were bound for San Francisco. The *Daily Alta California* reported in December 1849 that the port of San Diego had "taken quite a start. Quite a number of Americans have gone down there recently and established themselves in business for the winter. A number of frame houses are in the process of erection and many others are being shipped from this port [San Francisco]. The town is represented to us as being quite a bustling, lively, little place."<sup>39</sup>

Gardiner's companion in this venture was fellow New Yorker John R. Bleecker. The nephew of the auctioneer and real estate agent Anthony J. Bleecker, John Bleecker had energy, integrity, and "considerable business capacity."<sup>40</sup> Together, they invested several thousand dollars in commodities suited to the San Diego market including flour, coffee, tea, and other dry goods. At the time, San Diego's trade was chiefly with the inhabitants of Sonora and Baja California, Mexico. They also contracted with Captain Lawrence B. Edwards and the crew of the schooner *Sierra Nevada* for the delivery of 63,000 feet of high quality lumber to San Diego, where building materials were relatively scarce. Purchasing the load at \$150 per thousand feet, a contract that was considered "very favorable" among other San Francisco businessmen, Gardiner bragged, "no one supposed but that I should realize several thousand dollars immediately upon my arrival" in San Diego.<sup>41</sup>

Gardiner arrived in San Diego on February 20, 1850. A former Mexican pueblo, San Diego was a recently established county in the State of California. Built of adobe, it still looked much like the Mexican villages that Gardiner had traveled through on his way to the Pacific Ocean. But it was set apart by its reputation for agricultural products: "the finest grapes and every variety of vegetable as well as grass and grain in abundance, cattle are also plenty."<sup>42</sup> Under previous

Mexican rule, thousands of acres of land had been turned into cattle ranches operated by Alta California families like the Argüellos, Alvarados, and the Estudillos.

In the 1850s, San Diego had a growing population of Americans, Peruvians, Hawaiian Islanders, and Europeans, among others. Gardiner estimated that 1,000 people lived there, but he expected that number to increase rapidly as the city was the terminus of the southern route across the Great Plains. Drawing on an old trope about the “indolence” of the Mexican inhabitants, Gardiner told his brother that he anticipated “an entire change” with the arrival of Yankee settlers who knew how to exploit such resources.<sup>43</sup>

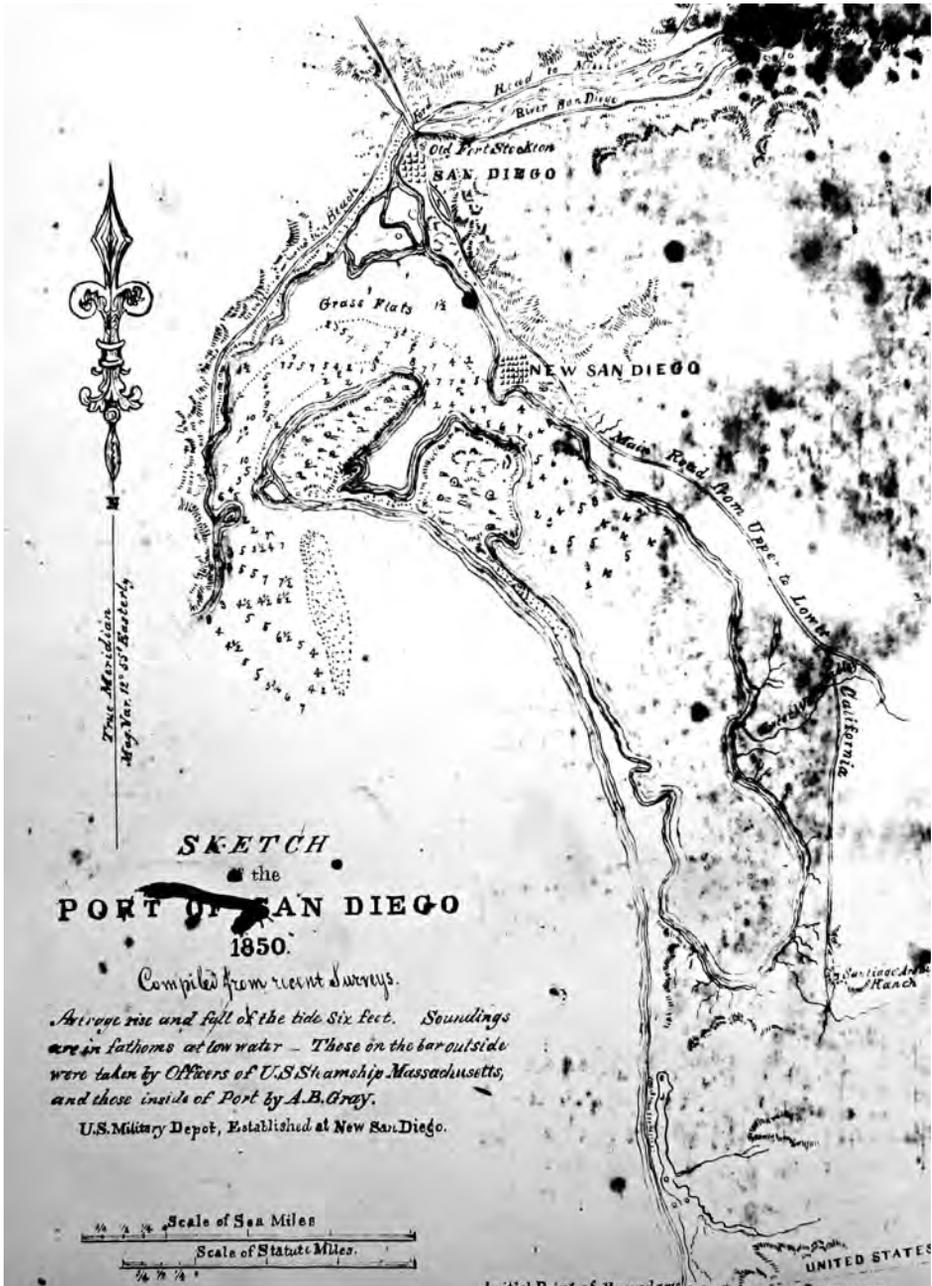


*Engineer and surveyor Andrew B. Gray recognized the advantages of building a harbor in New Town, later downtown, San Diego. ©SDHC #11813.*

Soldiers, ship captains, and merchants were among the early American residents of San Diego. Gardiner met a number of U.S. Army officers who lived at La Playa, located at the southwest end of Point Loma, in a wood frame house occupied by Major Samuel P. Heintzelman and his wife. William Heath Davis also lived there with his wife María de Jesus Estudillo and her mother.<sup>44</sup> Cave J. Coats owned the Colorado House in the plaza at Old Town and married into the Bandini family. John Stewart, a sailor and carpenter from Maine, lived with his wife Rosa in an adobe now known as the Casa de Machado y Stewart. Thomas Wrightington, who also married into the Machado family, operated a general store. Philip Crosthwaite, a young Irishman who had arrived in California in 1845, married María Josefa López and settled in the pueblo. Other residents included Abel Stearns, Jonathan (Juan José) Warner, Henry D. Fitch, James W. Robinson, and Louis Rose.<sup>45</sup> Gardiner noted that one early settler, Albert B. Smith, had led such a secluded life that “he had almost forgotten his friends and country until the incursions of Yankees after the war awoke him from his slumbers.”<sup>46</sup>

Gardiner and Bleecker did not have immediate success in their capitalist enterprise because a large quantity of timber had been unloaded and sold just days before the arrival of the *Sierra Nevada*. Gardiner, however, was not unduly concerned, particularly as they managed to sell 3,000 feet at \$200 per thousand

to the U.S. Army for barracks to be built in La Playa. He expected the price of lumber to reach as high as \$300 per thousand in the winter of 1851, particularly if immigration continued at the same rate.<sup>47</sup>



Andrew B. Gray's map of the Port of San Diego, c. 1850. ©SDHC Archives.

Soon after their arrival, Gardiner and Bleecker obtained a lot just east of La Playa and began to construct the first stone building in San Diego. The crew of the *Sierra Nevada*—four were carpenters from Sag Harbor, Long Island—helped to build it. Gardiner wrote, “It appears a little singular that after an absence of more than a year from home that I should be surrounded in this distant portion of the globe by a number of my own people and they engage in erecting the first business house in a new town on the Pacific.”<sup>48</sup>



*William Heath Davis and his partners promoted New Town. Gardiner described him as an agreeable companion, “sociably inclined.” ©SDHC #11816.*

The house went up quickly, to the surprise of many. “The constructing of a building of its size in four days perfectly astonishes the natives,” Gardiner wrote, “and they hardly know what to make of it, when they see sailors turning their hands with such facility to carpentering, they cannot comprehend how a man can be a carpenter and sailor at the same time.” He estimated that “it would take them six months to put up a building which could be accomplished by Yankees in as many days.”<sup>49</sup> This was due to the fact that adobe houses were notoriously difficult to build, requiring as many as 1,000 mud blocks.<sup>50</sup>

By the time it was finished, San Diegans had christened it the “*Grande Casa*.” At 1,280 square feet and two stories high, it was one of the more substantial structures in San Diego. Gardiner used the first floor as a store and office and divided the second floor into four rooms. “It is decidedly the best house in this part of California,” he told his mother, as it was both comfortable and warm.<sup>51</sup> It was also conveniently located for commercial activities as it fronted the harbor. “The steamers anchor within a stone’s throw of it,” he wrote, “and their mails are opened in my office.”<sup>52</sup>

Gardiner anticipated that the development of mercantile operations would end the dominance of Boston merchants operating sailing vessels along the Pacific Coast. In the past, U.S.-owned ships visited Alta California ports two or three times per year with an assorted cargo. It was the custom to give several fandangos (Spanish dances) on board. After partying for days, sometimes even weeks, the captain would open up his hold and commence trading. Gardiner wrote,



*A native of Burgos, Spain, Miguel de Pedrorena encouraged the development of New Town before his death in 1850. ©SDHC #7467.*

“Immense fortunes have been acquired in this trade, but the system will now be abolished by merchants and traders on shore.” Already, the enterprise shown by “new adventurers” had taken the old ones by surprise “and by competition entirely outstripped them.”<sup>53</sup>

There was also potential for a whaling industry in San Diego. From the deck of the schooner, Gardiner saw numerous California gray whales, many of them between 50 and 60 feet in length. One could produce 60 pounds of oil. They came within a hundred yards of *Sierra Nevada*, “gambling and frolicking about” with their spouts ascending into the air on all sides. Because of the economic value of this information, Gardiner asked his

mother, to whom he was writing, to either destroy his letter or keep it safe.<sup>54</sup>

Gardiner and Bleecker looked forward to the growth of a new town in San Diego. In early 1850, plans were well underway for a 32-square-block development located on the southern end of the harbor, facing Coronado. Although the area depended on regular shipments of potable water from Old Town, it had the potential to be a commercial center. Andrew B. Gray, then a surveyor for the U.S. Boundary Commission, and William Heath Davis, together with José Antonio Aguirre, Miguel de Pedrorena, and the local army quartermaster, Lieutenant Thomas D. Johns, obtained a deed that allowed them to subdivide the area and build a substantial wharf and warehouse.<sup>55</sup> They persuaded the Army to build additional barracks in what later would be called New Town. Gardiner and Bleecker, meanwhile, purchased property at the foot of D Street (now Broadway). On April 3, 1850, Gardiner wrote, “Capitalists have within a few weeks commenced the building of houses and wharfs by which I hope to be largely benefited.”<sup>56</sup>

Bleecker proved to be a good business partner: temperate, economical, and “fond of making money.” Gardiner wrote, “I should not be surprised if we should continue in business together while we remain in California.”<sup>57</sup> They accepted only cash transactions and by the autumn of 1850 had formed a limited partnership that advertised itself as “Gardiner & Bleecker, Shipping and Commission Merchants, San Diego, California.”<sup>58</sup> The partners typically started their day at 6 a.m. While

one prepared breakfast, the other attended to trading. If he had no business to occupy his time, Gardiner would take a small boat across the bay to Coronado. Sometimes he took his gun to shoot rabbits, ducks, and quail; other times he fished for their supper. Occasionally, he and Bleecker would kill a seal so that they could use its oil in their lamps.<sup>59</sup>

Gardiner's only complaint was lack of variety in his diet. In April 1850, he wrote, "I have not tasted of a potatoes [sic] or vegetable of any kind for more than a month. Fish and bird constitute with hard bread our principal diet."<sup>60</sup> The soil and climate produced abundant fruit and vegetables, but the natives only cultivated enough for their own use. Gardiner wrote, "The time will soon arrive when gardening will receive attention and will prove a greater source of wealth than the gold mines to those who first enter into the business."<sup>61</sup>

One evening, while dining in Old Town, Gardiner encountered a former acquaintance, Dr. John Conger, the brother of Abraham B. Conger, a New York lawyer. Conger had taken the southern route across the U.S. and "suffered considerable privations and fatigues." Rather than head to the goldfields he remained in San Diego. He earned a living teaching several Spanish-speaking young people in Old Town while continuing to practice medicine, a profession that Gardiner hoped "never to have need of."<sup>62</sup>

Conger, along with Lieutenant Thomas W. Sweeney and Henry C. Matsell, were engaged in a scheme to grow vegetables on a 400-acre farm located in a valley seven or eight miles from San Diego. Gardiner was dubious about their ability to run such an operation, writing that they appeared "entirely ignorant of both the theory and practice of farming."<sup>63</sup> He later noted that the farm had not



House of José Antonio Aguirre built before 1830, NE corner of San Diego Avenue and Twiggs Street, 1909. ©SDHC #1135.

achieved its potential due to the “mismanagement and ignorance of Conger.”<sup>64</sup>

Other new settlers had considerably more savvy. Gardiner spent a good deal of time in the company of Davis, Heintzelman, and John E. Summers, all of whom were “agreeable companions and sociably inclined.” They shared a desire to turn San Diego into a port of entry. Collector of Customs James Collier, meanwhile, was lobbying Congress to make San Francisco the only port of entry along the California coast. This would mean that cities like San Diego and Santa Barbara might pay as much as 300 percent more for imports due to the high rates of freight. Gardiner and his friends even talked about foiling Collier’s “selfish interests” by turning Southern California into a separate territory or state.<sup>65</sup>

In 1850, Congress conceded port of entry privileges to San Diego and other coastal cities as a test before making a final decision. Ultimately, San Francisco was chosen as the only port of entry on the California coast.<sup>66</sup> Gardiner petitioned his brother Alexander for assistance in having him appointed Collector of Customs for San Diego. Alexander was well connected politically and in touch with their brother-in-law, the former President Tyler. Although party politics were unlikely to influence the selection of officers in such a remote state as California, Gardiner still asked his brother to forward his request to Tyler who, in turn, could relay it to Millard Fillmore who had recently stepped from Vice President to President after the death of President Zachary Taylor. Gardiner emphasized, “*You know I supported General Taylor’s election.*”<sup>67</sup> Failing in that attempt, he later asked Alexander to procure for him “some fat office here,” writing that he could not afford to take any government position that “did not pay well.”<sup>68</sup>

By 1851, Gardiner had become far more realistic about the possibility of



*New San Diego U.S. Army Barracks built c. 1850. Etching, c. 1880. ©SDHC #10547-1.*



"View in Wall Street from Corner of Broad," New York. When Gardiner returned to New York in 1852, Wall Street was still decades away from becoming the financial heart of the nation. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration #513348 [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons.

making a fortune in California. His brother Alexander, on the other hand, continued to ship pre-fabricated houses, wagons, and foodstuffs from New York to San Francisco in the hopes that they would realize a substantial profit. Again and again, Gardiner warned him about the uncertainty of the market, expressing frustration with his credulity. "It appears to me that every person who comes here is at once supposed to become a millionaire, almost the moment he enters the golden gate, and should he be here *six months* and his name be connected with some *new town speculation* he at once gains a reputation for immense wealth in the States." In reality, two-thirds of those who realized a fortune "became as suddenly bankrupt."<sup>69</sup>

The death of two family members caused Gardiner to consider leaving California. In 1850, Gardiner learned that his brother-in-law John Beeckman had died as a result of accidentally discharging his gun. The shot went through his right lung, killing him instantly.<sup>70</sup> In March 1851, Gardiner received news that Alexander had died at the age of thirty-one as the result of a short illness. Shocked, he found it hard to come to terms with the fact that he would never see his brother's face again. He wrote to his sister Margaret, "It is a source of constant anxiety to me that I am so far separated from you all."<sup>71</sup>

San Diego, meanwhile, was booming. In the summer of 1851, New Town boasted a 600-foot long wharf at the foot of present day Market Street, hotels, and saloons. Davis, a leading promoter, bought a number of pre-framed lumber "salt



In 1852, Gardiner took up residence with his mother, Juliana M. Gardiner, who lived at Castleton Hill on Staten Island, later known as the Gardiner-Tyler house, c. 1900. Collection of the Staten Island Museum.

box” homes from New England. Other entrepreneurs included Ephraim W. Morse, a Massachusetts farmer and schoolteacher who set up a trading house in New Town with his partner Levi Slack.<sup>72</sup> Ames & Pendleton operated a wholesale and retail operation on California Street, while George F. Hooper kept a general store on Fourth Street. The city also acquired its first newspaper, *The San Diego Herald*.<sup>73</sup> At the center of the new development was a plaza named after Juan Pantoja, the Spanish navigator and cartographer who mapped San Diego Bay in 1782.<sup>74</sup>

Gardiner, however, felt the need to leave his business interests and return to New York. The journey through Mexico was now made easier by the establishment of an express line that transported passengers from Acapulco to Veracruz in 18 days. He took the brig *Nenuphar* from Veracruz and arrived in New York on June 5, 1851.<sup>75</sup> By July, he was once again involved in business, this time investing in real estate on behalf of his mother. He took up residence in the family house, Castleton Hill on Staten Island, where he remained until a bitter dispute with his sister Julia about the management of family property. In 1860, Gardiner married a distant cousin, Sarah Gardiner Thompson, daughter of a wealthy New York financier.<sup>76</sup>

San Diego did not develop as quickly as Gardiner and other early investors had anticipated. In the 1850s, San Francisco was the main port of entry on the Pacific Coast, limiting the development of other coastal cities. Army engineer and humorist Lieutenant George Horatio Derby visited San Diego in 1853 and

joked, “the calm waters of San Diego Bay remain unruffled by keel or cutwater from one year’s end to another.” He found two crazy old hulks at anchor at La Playa, a boarding house, and “a store marked Gardiner & Bleeker [sic]...the inside of which nothing could be bleaker, for ‘there’s nothing in it.’”<sup>77</sup>

New Town also failed spectacularly. After losing a fortune in a San Francisco fire, Davis could no longer afford to make investments in New Town. In 1852 and 1853, houses and businesses relocated to Old Town and the wharf was allowed to disintegrate. With the outbreak of the Civil War, U.S. Army troops were transferred to the East, leaving the barracks nearly empty. In 1867, a merchant from San Francisco, Alonzo E. Horton, was able to purchase 960 acres, called “Davis’s Folly,” for the bargain price of \$265 (\$4,380 in 2016 dollars).<sup>78</sup>

It was not until many years later that Gardiner’s investment in San Diego



*The Santa Fe Railroad Depot in downtown San Diego, 1887. Gardiner and his partner Bleecker held on to property opposite the depot until 1888 when they sold it for a record-breaking price. ©SDHC #3195.*

paid off. He and Bleecker held on to the land that they had purchased at the foot of D Street (Broadway) in 1850, save for a right of way granted to the California Southern Railroad. In the 1880s, railroad speculation put pressure on them to sell. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, having absorbed the California Southern and the Atlantic & Pacific, built a new depot in 1887, just opposite their property on D Street. This land was needed to secure a franchise along the waterfront. In January 1888, they sold the property to Charles A. Wetmore for over \$40,000 (over \$1 million in 2016 dollars). *The San Diego Union* described this as a “notable sale,” even at a time when the real estate market was booming.<sup>79</sup>

By this time, Gardiner was 72 years old, with little need for such a bounty. After the Civil War, he and his wife had lived a comfortable, if not opulent, life in Europe, returning to New York City in 1885. Their eldest son David inherited Sagtikos Manor in West Islip, Long Island, which had been occupied by the Thompson and Gardiner families since 1697. Their daughter Sarah Diodati Gardiner became a miniature painter traveling between New York and Paris. The youngest, Robert Alexander Gardiner, graduated from Yale and went into finance. In 1892, Gardiner died of pneumonia in his West Fifty-Seventh Street home.<sup>80</sup> His grandson Robert David Lion Gardiner and granddaughter Alexandra Gardiner Creel later inherited the family estate on Gardiner’s Island.

The story of David Lion Gardiner’s experiences adds to the context in which San Diego developed in the mid-nineteenth century. Its early residents, including the ‘49ers, were not gunslingers and gamblers prone to lawlessness and violence, as popularized in fictional tales. Instead, they were men and women eager to benefit from an expanding capitalist economy. In San Diego they found a temperate climate, an excellent harbor, and a population of educated and cultured people of Anglo, Spanish, and Mexican descent. It was a place where money could be made while still enjoying “the beauties of nature surrounding us,” as one early resident wrote.<sup>81</sup> San Diego continues to offer that promise today.

## NOTES

1. William Ellsworth Smythe, *History of San Diego, 1542-1908*, Vol. 1 (San Diego: The History Company, 1908), 139.
2. For more information about capitalism during the Gold Rush, see Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and Mark A. Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).
3. James E. Homans, ed., *The Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: The Press Association, 1918), 3:36-37; "David L. Gardiner," [obituary] *The New York Times*, May 10, 1892. For letters from President Tyler to Gardiner during his years in California, see the Tyler Family Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary.
4. Howard Gotlieb and Gail Grimes, "President Tyler and the Gardiners: A New Portrait," *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 34, no. 1 (July 1959), 4; Commissioner Alexander Gardiner was the federal agent charged with enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law against James Hamlet, a resident of Brooklyn, in 1850. The case drew public attention to the traumas of slavery. See Fergus M. Bordewich, *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise that Preserved the Union* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 362.
5. Howard Gotlieb and Gail Grimes, "President Tyler and the Gardiners: A New Portrait," *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 34, no. 1 (July 1959): 3-12; Lewis L. Gould, *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, 75. See also Theodore C. DeLaney, "Julia Gardiner Tyler: A Nineteenth-Century Southern Woman," PhD dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 1995; Evelyn L. Pugh, "Women and Slavery: Julia Gardiner Tyler and the Duchess of Sunderland," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 68, no. 2 (April 1980): 186-202.
6. Roberts, *American Alchemy*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 32. See also, Barry L. Dutka, "New York Discovers Gold! In California," *California History*, 63, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 313-319.
8. "Additional Intelligence of the Movements of the Migrating Parties to California," *New York Herald*, January 19, 1849.
9. David L. Gardiner (hereafter DLG) to Juliana M. Gardiner, Mazatlán, March 28, 1849, BANC MSS 2006/127 Box 1, The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. Unless otherwise noted, all letters from DLG are from the above collection.
10. James E. Homans, ed., *The Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: The Press Assoc., 1918), 8:37.
11. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Mexico City, February 7, 1849, Bancroft Library.
12. *Ibid.*
13. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Mazatlán, March 28, 1849, Bancroft Library.
14. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, Mazatlán, March 31, 1849, Bancroft Library.
15. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Mazatlán, March 28, 1849, Bancroft Library.
16. DLG to Sir [John Tyler], San Francisco, September 1849, Bancroft Library.
17. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Sacramento City, June 15, 1849, Bancroft Library.
18. *Catalogue of William and Mary College* (Williamsburg, VA: J. Hervey Ewing, 1855), 16. Peachy later helped to found the San Francisco law firm Halleck, Peachy, and Billings, and served two terms as a state senator. Robin W. Winks, *Frederick Billings: A Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45-46.
19. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Sacramento City, June 15, 1849, Bancroft Library.

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20. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, July 1, 1849, Bancroft Library.
21. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Bear River, July 21, 1849, Bancroft Library.
22. Ibid.
23. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, Sacramento City, June 15, 1849, Bancroft Library.
24. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, July 1, 1849, Bancroft Library.
25. Ibid.
26. Gardiner later had considerable difficulty in obtaining the profits from his share of the partnership. Bean went on to partner with Gardiner's brother-in-law Beeckman to develop a new town, Butteville. Alexander Gardiner to Julia Gardiner Tyler, New York, June 7, 1850, John H. Beeckman Papers, California State Library, Sacramento. See also DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, January 18, 1851, Tyler Family Papers, Group G, Box 2, Folder 3, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.
27. John H. Beeckman to Margaret Gardiner Beeckman, August 7, 1849, Beeckman MSS, Sacramento.
28. Ibid. Gardiner's servant James Robinson, a black steward and waiter, cared for him during his illness. Gardiner told his brother that Robinson, "known to the best families" of Charlestown, MA, had died at Sacramento City in October 1849, and requested that a notice be placed in a Charlestown newspaper so that his friends would know of his passing. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, January 31, 1850, Bancroft Library.
29. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, September 30, 1849, Bancroft Library.
30. Price was not elected to the House of Representatives for California, sold his property, and returned to New Jersey where he was elected to Congress in 1851 and later served as the Governor of New Jersey. Gardiner estimated that Price invested \$2,500 and returned home with \$200,000. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, November 30, 1849, Bancroft Library.
31. Gardiner reported that Charles P. Wilkins was said to have disgraced himself by appropriating several thousand dollars from the Quartermaster Depot and decamping to Sonoma. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, September 30, 1849, Bancroft.
32. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, January 31, 1850, September 30, 1849, Bancroft Library; DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Francisco, September 30, 1849, Bancroft.
33. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, September 30, 1849, Bancroft Library.
34. Gardiner told his mother that, like thousands of others, none of his companions had been successful at the mines: "[Andrew H.] Hitchcock is here doing nothing at present, i.e., lying upon his oars— [Lloyd] Minturn is at Pueblo San Jose keeping a hotel and speculating in real estate—[B.F.] Voorhees who wrote for the 'Home Journal' is engaged in mercantile pursuits and doing a profitable business." DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, November 30, 1849, Bancroft Library.
35. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, January 31, 1850; DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
36. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, July 31, 1850, Bancroft Library.
37. DLG to Sir [John Tyler], San Francisco, September 1849, Bancroft Library.
38. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, January 31, 1850, Bancroft Library.
39. Iris Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone*, rev. ed. (San Diego: Sunbelt, 2016), 76.
40. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, January 31, 1849.
41. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library. The *Sierra Nevada* belonged to Oliver Wade and William C. Sleight of Sag Harbor, New York. The crew consisted of carpenters and other craftsmen from Long Island who ran the vessel in return for three-fifths of her earnings. They included Captain Edwards and his brother Osborn Edwards; first

- mate Charles B. Loper; and Nathan Hedges, a son of Captain S. Hedges of East Hampton.
42. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  43. Ibid. In 1850, the population of San Diego County was 798, with 650 people living in the city. Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone*, 78-79.
  44. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  45. Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone*, 64, 76. For information on some of the early settlers, see Andrew F. Rolle, "William Heath Davis and the Founding of American San Diego," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (March 1952): 33-48; Donald H. Harrison, *Louis Rose: San Diego's First Jewish Settler and Entrepreneur* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005). See also, Deborah Moreno, "'Here the Society is United': 'Respectable' Anglos and Intercultural Marriage in Pre-Gold Rush California," *California History*, 80, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 2-17.
  46. Smith left San Diego for New York in February 1851 to visit some friends. He took with him a letter of introduction from Gardiner to his brother Alexander. Gardiner described Smith as "a very worthy but plain uneducated man. He came out here many years since on board a vessel engaged in the hide aging business on this coast, and has resided here ever since, having married a Spanish woman." He told his brother, "If you have anything to send me when he is ready to return you could not probably entrust to safer hands." DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, February 3, 1851, Tyler Family Papers, Group G, Box 2, Folder 3, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.
  47. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library; Rolle, "William Heath Davis and the Founding of American San Diego," 34.
  48. Ibid. Gardiner described Captain Edwards as "a very kind man thus far," adding, "the whole crew have shown me much respect and a desire to advance my undertakings. I have reason to be satisfied with the manner in which they have fulfilled their contract."
  49. Ibid.
  50. Engstrand, *San Diego: California's Cornerstone*, 63.
  51. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, April 3, 1850, Beekman MSS, Sacramento.
  52. Ibid.
  53. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  54. Ibid.
  55. *Louis Rose*, 54. The 160 acres of pueblo land, purchased for \$2,304, was bounded by Fourth Street, Broadway, and the waterfront. Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), 22.
  56. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, April 3, 1850, Beekman MSS, Sacramento.
  57. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, May 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  58. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, November 2, 1850, December 3, 1850, Bancroft Library; advertisement, *Daily Alta California*, April 19, 1850, 1.
  59. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, April 3, 1850, Beekman MSS, Sacramento.
  60. Ibid.
  61. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, May 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  62. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, March 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
  63. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, May 3, 1850, Bancroft Library. Gardiner described Matsell as the brother of George W. Matsell, the chief of police in New York City.
  64. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, June 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.

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65. DLG to Juliana M. Gardiner, San Diego, April 3, 1850, Beeckman MSS, Sacramento.
66. Other cities were Sacramento, Benicia, Stockton, Monterey, and San Pedro. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California, 1860-1890*, Vol. 7 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890), 141.
67. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, November 2, 1850, Bancroft Library.
68. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Diego, December 3, 1850, Bancroft Library.
69. DLG to Alexander Gardiner, San Francisco, August 31, 1850, Bancroft Library. For information on the goods shipped to California, see Alexander Gardiner Account Book, 1831-1851, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
70. Henry B. Livingston to Gilbert L. Beeckman, Fremont, April 27, 1850, Beeckman MSS Sacramento. Gardiner helped Beeckman's cousin Henry B. Livingston solve issues surrounding the estate.
71. DLG to Margaret Gardiner Beeckman, March 15, 1851, Yale University Library, Gardiner-Tyler Family Papers, MS 230, Box 14, Folder 349.
72. Smythe, *History of San Diego, 1542-1908*, 281.
73. Ibid., 318.
74. Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *The Story of New San Diego and of its Founder Alonzo Horton*, 2nd ed. rev. (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1979), 17.
75. "Pleasant Route to and from California," *The San Diego Herald*, June 5, 1851, 2; "Arrived," *New-York Spectator*, June 5, 1851.
76. DeLaney, "Julia Gardiner Tyler," 231-238.
77. John Phoenix [George Horatio Derby], *Phoenixiana; or, Sketches and Burlesques*, 11th ed. (New York: D. Appleton, 1856), 202.
78. MacPhail, *The Story of New San Diego*, 14.
79. "A Notable Sale: Transfer of the Gardner & Bleecker Property," *The San Diego Union*, January 10, 1888; "The Boulevard," *San Diego Union*, March 27, 1888.
80. Homans, ed., *The Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 3:39; "David L. Gardiner," [obituary] *The New York Times*, May 10, 1892.
81. Andrew Belcher Gray to William Heath Davis (copy), New Orleans, April 27, 1851, "Gray, Andrew B.," vertical file, SDHC.