



# THE HISTORICAL TIMES

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## Sam Sheldon's journey continues

Roles as  
prisoner,  
gold miner  
add to his  
adventures

By THERESA  
OVERHOLSER

EDITOR'S NOTE:  
Words in *Italics* are  
Sam Sheldon's own.  
Punctuation has  
been standardized.

(Second of two  
parts)

Samuel Sheldon's  
melancholic letter of  
June, 1840, was  
indeed his "last" to  
his mother and

sisters for a long time. In it he apologized for not corresponding more frequently, but he had been in Texas again, and now was home in Canton, Mississippi. *I have been more of a cosmopolite since I last visited you I believe than I ever was before, not so much through choice either, as because circumstances seemed to require it. Many are of the opinion that we Locomotives forget all earlier ties and I believe I have heard even you express yourself much to that effect.* In spite of this somewhat feeble justification, Sam still did not write to his family again for at least a year. They began to grow uneasy



about the overly long and growing gap. His sister Debbe's husband, John Pascal Devinney, wrote to Sam's sister Ann, who was away from home teaching, in June of 1841: "We hear nothing from Sam'l Sheldon and have come to the conclusion to write to the Postmaster at Canton next week." Postmasters of that era were the source of general information in their area, and could be trusted to forward any inquiries about Sam's whereabouts to someone who might have information.

Unbeknownst to the family, during the very week that they mailed their letter to Ann, Samuel was

embarking on perhaps the greatest adventure of his life.

### **The Texas Santa Fe Expedition**

It seemed as though the whole of the Republic of Texas was in a state of excitement that spring. Men from near and far were congregating in Austin to answer a call for volunteers to the Texas army issued by President Mirabeau Lamar. Lamar planned to open a trail and establish a potentially advantageous commercial relationship between Austin and the town of Santa Fe. Troops were needed to escort a convoy of large wagons loaded with merchandise hundreds of miles north and west through largely unknown Kiowa- and Comanche-held wilderness. "This expedition will furnish an ample field for adventure," said a newspaper announcement of the call. Volunteers flocked to Austin, and into the lively throng of men preparing their horses and weapons and supplies for the mission rode Sam Sheldon. *In the month of March I came to Texas on business, with the intention of returning by the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, but having arranged matters so that it became unnecessary for me to return home so early, I joined the Santa Fe expedition.*

In addition to satisfying his need for adventure, Sam saw an opportunity to make some money from the expedition. He quickly borrowed a few hundred dollars and bought a load of merchandise to transport in one of the government-supplied wagons. With luck he would make a small profit by selling it in Santa Fe. On June first he signed up as a member of the army and was assigned to Company D, one of five companies of the military escort. Riding his own horse and bringing a rifle, pistols, and a Bowie knife, he proceeded to one of several encampments near Austin to await the order to march.

After much delay all was ready, and in the third weekend of June the group of over three hundred men, twenty-plus wagons drawn by six or seven pairs of oxen each, a cannon, and a herd of seventy cattle got under way, Sam's Company D proudly in the lead. The army was accompanied by merchants, drivers, adventurers, servants, and a couple of journalists. There was one conspicuous omission in the list of travelers: there were no native guides to lead them over the easiest and safest route, where they would find enough grass for the horses and

cattle, and sufficient water for all during high summer, which was at its start.

The route north took them over seemingly endless rolling prairie. The scene was grander than anything Sam had seen before: massive herds of buffalo; a fierce evening stampede of all their horses and cattle; a flash wildfire that towered over them before blowing away from the encampment, visible all night long dancing in the distance. Samuel was enchanted. *Of romance a lover, even from youth, in a land of beauty he linked himself with adventurous men; and with them journeyed in the wild where nature's choicest landscapes greet the view, mid the fairy pleasure grounds of roaming beasts and wild untutored men...To hear the wild bird song and tread a soil unbroken by his race was joy—how brief!*

As the expedition went into the second month of breaking its own road, travel became arduous. The course to take toward Santa Fe grew more and more vague. Potable water and fresh grass were scarce, the supply of beef was dwindling, and men were weakened by the grueling effort of moving onward. Indians were more evident; at night they would make off with horses and cattle from the camp, and a few men who were separated from the main party were killed and scalped. Finally, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, a group of one hundred men mounted on the best of the horses were sent out to make their way to Santa Fe and send back provisions and guides to the rest of the troops, who made camp and waited. Samuel was among those chosen to go ahead.

Descending and ascending deep and wide canyons, moving over ground so rocky and rough that the shoes on some of their horses' feet were torn off, it took these men two weeks to reach the settlements east of Santa Fe. Their food supplies had been depleted within five days, so they relied on anything they could find that they could wolf down—berries, snakes, one buffalo, a broken-down horse. Suffering from thirst, hunger, and exhaustion they finally made contact with a herder who sold them twenty sheep. They didn't care, while they rested and satisfied their hunger, that they had ridden into the middle of disputed land; serious trouble awaited.

The war for Texan independence from Mexico had ended in 1836, only five years in the past. Since then the Republic of Texas avowed that its border was the entire length of the Rio Grande, which

would make the eastern portion of what is now New Mexico part of Texas. Mexico, however, held onto that territory as its own, so an army's entering the area near Santa Fe was looked on as an invasive act. Mexican leaders had heard of the expedition and posted soldiers to confront the Texans as enemies. The Texans, exhausted and outnumbered, and falsely promised amnesty, put down their arms without a fight. They were taken prisoner and the Mexican leaders narrowly voted not to execute them, but to take them to Mexico City, a distance of around 1,500 miles. *Anon they were beset with dark and dusky foes, then captives made and so led o'er many a weary league.*

The Texans were bound together in small groups and began their trek on foot on September 20<sup>th</sup>. The same fate befell the rest of the expedition soon after. The prisoners were barely clothed by this time, and were allowed only one blanket apiece. There would be little shelter, and food and water were scarce. Somewhere just north of El Paso Samuel and three others managed to escape, but were easily tracked by Indians and Mexicans to a hill overlooking the Rio Grande valley. *Again he was a captive; then they said his life was forfeit, and muttered curses on him. In front arrayed these armed warriors, bade them arrows take from out their quivers and ready make their firelocks. One last look, O World! World! Beautiful! O beautiful!... He would that he had been a better man. But most he thought of others, of the few that would bemoan him.* He only had a few moments for reflection, then, *brief consultation was held and with cords they bound him, and with taunts and jeers led him on to his fellows.* An eyewitness stated later that as punishment the escapees were tied to horses by ropes around their waists and made to trot behind for several miles.

Some time near Christmas the prisoners entered Mexico City. They were jailed but led out in chains during the day to clean the streets of the city. Almost at once negotiations were begun for the release of the American citizens among them. Samuel wrote a letter to the American envoy in Mexico stating his citizenship and asking for intervention. Finally, in April he and thirteen others were released and sent on their way to Vera Cruz on the Gulf of Mexico for transport to New Orleans. He was free, *yet scarce felt himself such, 'til on the sea shore standing he beheld aloft his country's banner upon a tall ship waving; the*



**Samuel was given this certificate from the President of Mexico granting him free and safe passage to leave the republic after his release from prison.**

*full heart then o'erflowed in tears in spite of manhood, though tearless amid his darker fortunes.* He was free, and soon would head to Ohio and the healing embrace of his family.

### **With his family in Granville**

Of course, life had moved on in the four years since Sam had last been in Granville. His stepfather, Martin Root had died in 1838, and the Root children were one by one transferring their inherited shares of the farm to their brother Moses. In 1841 Moses signed an agreement granting his stepmother, Sam's mother Deborah Root, the "free use of the room she now occupies in the cabin on my deceased father's estate and as much garden and fruit of all kinds that are on the farm as she may want for her use and water from the well." Then in 1842 Moses sold 107 acres, including the cabin, to Debbe and John P. Devinney. Deborah and Ann would live there with the Devinneys for the rest of their lives.

As he traveled up the rivers from New Orleans to Ohio, still suffering the troubling psychological effects of his recent experiences, Sam worried that bad tidings of his family awaited him. *You know it had been a long time since I had heard from you, and I approached home with a fearful presentiment that I was to be met with some distressing intelligence. I need not say how happily I was disappointed, and my cup of joy sparkled to the brim.*

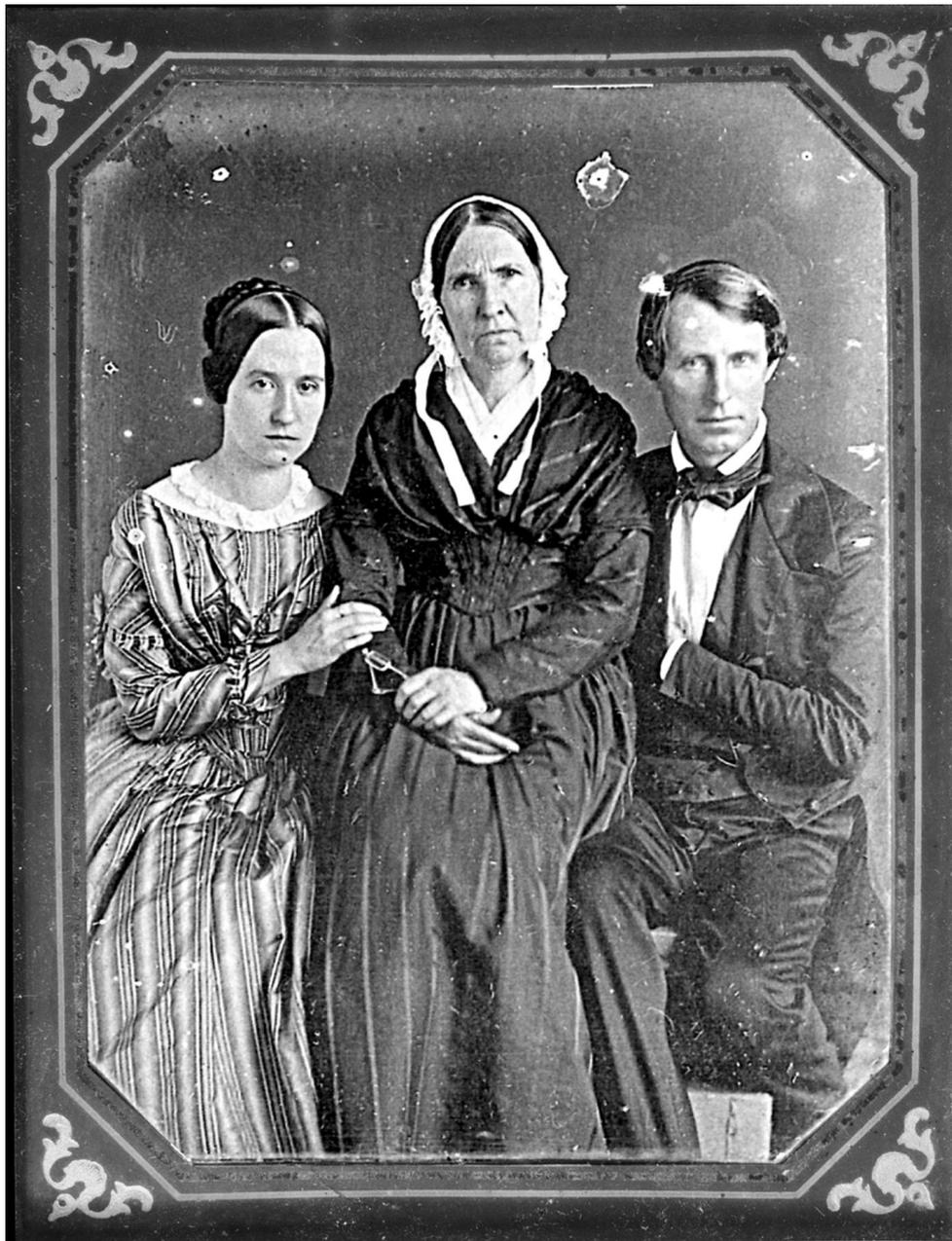
Sam had an idyllic summer, eating, resting, and renewing old friendships. He entertained and was entertained by Debbe's children: Warner, five years old, and Emma, one. Toward the end of his visit he helped harvest apples from the same trees he had planted years before. The family packed some of the apples into barrels to ship to Mississippi, where they were a rare commodity. And all too soon it was time to return to career and friends in Canton. The parting was painful. *I never enjoyed a visit more and certainly never left you with deeper regret. And indeed it was only by not permitting my mind to dwell on it, that I summoned resolution to meet our parting with tolerable composure.*

### **Back to his Mississippi home**

In Canton he became something of a celebrity after his Texas adventure, and the ladies fluttered around, asking him for

the favor of an apple picked by his own hands. His gentlemen friends urged him to write the story of the expedition, saying flatteringly that Sam's account would be better than some that had already been printed in the newspapers. However, his only known writing on the subject was a long third-person poem he composed for Ann.

And then it was back to business. He still was in debt from the Panic of 1837, and also owed friends for the loss of merchandise on the Santa Fe expedition. So, after declaring bankruptcy, Sam



**Ann Sheldon, Deborah Sheldon Root and Samuel Sheldon. The decorative mat around the Daguerreotype is called a Philadelphia mat and was used exclusively in Philadelphia during the mid-1840s and helps to determine that this photo was taken by Marcus Root during the Sheldon's trip east.**

*commenced again at the bottom of the ladder.* This time he prospered. He was in demand as an attorney, frequently appearing in court. He became a member of the local Democratic party and joined with its members in writing a resolution advocating that the United States annex Texas as a slave state, a serious issue throughout the country. He was a faithful member of the small Presbyterian congregation, acting informally as a lay minister. He also went back into the merchandising business, opening a mid-sized dry goods shop which featured

fashionable hats and clothing, plain and fancy yard goods, shoes, carpets, glassware, and much more.

All of this business, however, couldn't restrain Sam's itchy feet or stifle his love of being on the move. Over the six years from 1843 through the end of 1848 he visited Granville three times, and traveled to New York City to buy wholesale goods for his store at least twice. One memorable summer he arrived in Granville toward the end of July. He admired the family's new house on the Devinney farm and met Debbe's youngest children, Helen and baby Sammy. He spent time catching up with his brother Paul, who, widowed and remarried, now lived in Granville and had a handsome son, Alvanus.

About the first of August Samuel, his mother Deborah, and his sister Ann left together for Southampton, Massachusetts, so that the ladies could visit with family. Sam left them in Southampton and went by boat down the Hudson River to New York City. *A pleasant trip, the scenery on the river is lovely beyond description.* Sam spent two weeks in New York buying merchandise, then rejoined Deborah and Ann to escort them to Ohio. Just before leaving New York City he wrote fussily to Ann: *You will need a parasol, you had better get it the first convenient opportunity and Mother a bonnet. Get a good article. Do not buy a dress unless you hear from me again.* On their return trip the three paused in Philadelphia, where they visited Sam's stepbrother Marcus Root, now a fashionable photographer. They sat in Marcus' studio for their portraits, then were off to Baltimore and the National Road, over which they would travel most of the way home. Sam as usual went on to Cincinnati, and thence to Mississippi on board a steamboat.

As the 1840s waned, Samuel, now in his late 30s, was *as prosperous as I could expect to be, surrounded by friends and what the world calls happy.* He purchased 4,400 acres of flat land in the northwestern part of the state of Mississippi along both sides of a small tributary of the Coldwater River. And, sadly, and perhaps concealed from his family, he paid property taxes for owning five slaves. Whether the land and the slaves were purely investments or were the groundwork for a plan to become a cotton planter someday, he never mentioned them in his letters. He continued to run his store, and the tax lists show that he usually was making a good profit. And then Adventure seduced

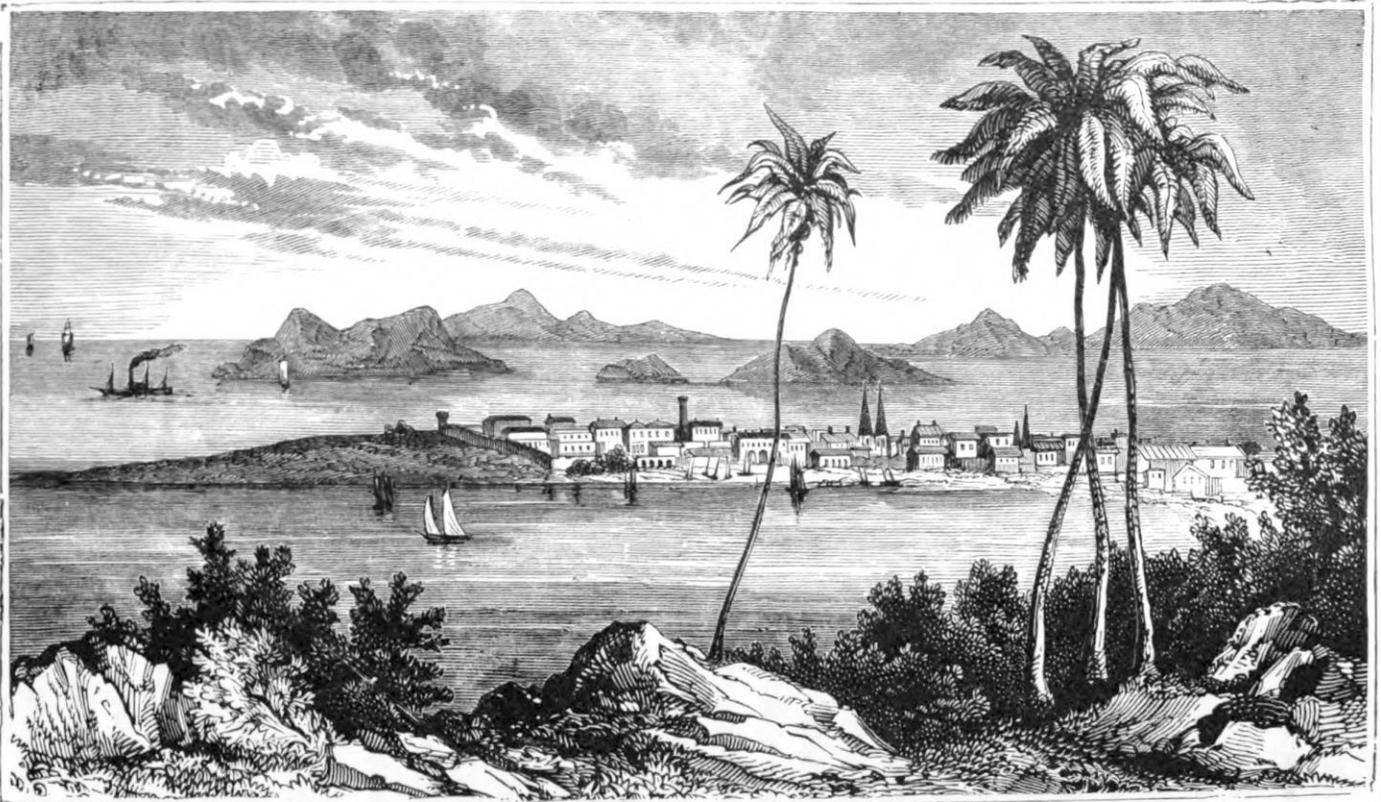
him once again.

This time the whole country was involved in the affair; thousands of men from every state and all walks of life were excitedly booking sea passage or forming overland traveling companies with one goal in mind: to find wealth in the gold fields of California.

### **The California Gold Rush**

*New Orleans, 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 1849--My Dear Mother, ... I have now taken passage on the U S Mail Steam Ship "Isthmus." She expects to sail on Monday next for Chagres [on the Caribbean side of Panama]—we go from there to Panama [City] on the Pacific where we expect to meet another U S Mail Steam Ship bound for San Francisco California.* Sam had carefully given his family no forewarning of his decision, no time for them to try to talk him out of going. Now as he neared departure he wrote at length, anticipating and deftly parrying their concerns for him. *And now Mother I may tell you that I have found it a very "uphill sort of matter" to write you that I was going for I fear the intelligence will pain you. For I know the distance seems to you much greater than to me, and the obstacles to be overcome more difficult...I will therefore state for your satisfaction that I have friends from Canton and this city going out with me so that I am likely to be well cared for, and besides providing ourselves with money a plenty we take letters of credit to provide for contingencies...we moreover some time since shipped provisions around Cape Horn. You see I am unusually communicative for me, that your apprehensions for me may be allayed. Besides, my Mother, is not our God a God everywhere?*

Samuel and his companions had been preparing for their splendid adventure for several weeks. The foremost thing they needed was money, a lot of it. They needed cash to purchase and amass all sorts of mining and camping gear, sturdy clothing and boots, and weapons. *Before leaving New Orleans we laid in provisions, substantial and delicacies in great variety and the best that the market could afford. Cooking utensils and most of the necessaries for housekeeping in or out of doors was not overlooked.* They also needed cash for transportation. The route they were going to take to California was one of the most expensive, because they would need to buy steamship tickets for the two legs of the trip, as well as to arrange passage across the Isthmus of Panama



PANAMA.

**The rooms rented by Sam and his companions would have looked out onto this scenic view of Panama Harbor.**

from the Caribbean to the Pacific side; neither railroad nor canal went through Panama in those early days. Sam had several avenues for raising the funds: he sold or leased his store in Canton to a milliner; he also petitioned the "Late Republic of Texas" for payment of \$435.00 for his services in the Santa Fe expedition as well as for the loss of his horse and weapons. And while there is no evidence of what he actually did, he probably sold his enslaved persons, or arranged for them to be taken into the households of friends.

On February 19<sup>th</sup> forty-five high-spirited and optimistic men heading for California set off down the Mississippi aboard the *Isthmus*, Sam's little group of six among them. Once the steamer entered the Gulf of Mexico many of the passengers suffered from seasickness. Sam, having traveled by sea more than once, was not among them. Instead he spent time on deck relaxing and enjoying himself. *One day when the sea ran high and many were seasick and others fearful, I felt a kind of wild excitement in looking out upon the foaming waters and seeing how all unconcernedly the brave old oaken steamer, dashed about so that it seemed to be a mere bubble on*

*the billow, still held her course onward.*

Ten days out from New Orleans, after stopping at Kingston, Jamaica to take on coal, the *Isthmus* anchored at the mouth of the Chagres River in Panama. Her passengers were met by Indians in canoes who rowed them to the small village on the shore, *the houses with mud walls and thatched roofs.*

This was the gathering spot for the hundreds of adventurers who were arriving every day. Here Samuel's company grew temporarily from six men to eight. One of the original six happened to be a well-known correspondent to the New Orleans newspaper, *The Picayune*, and in a letter to the paper gives the details of the trek across Panama: "We left Chagres on the 4<sup>th</sup> in canoes for Gorgona [an inland town forty miles upriver from Chagres]. Our party consisted of Messrs. Baird, Sheldon, Lattimer, Coulter, Booker, Sullivan, Dr. Bumsted, and myself" [James L. Freaner]. He describes the jungle foliage on the banks, the cool, perfumed breezes, and the exotic animals and birds on every side which "we amused ourselves with shooting from our canoe." At Gorgona they left the canoes and walked over twenty miles to Panama City, hiring local natives to

carry their supplies, which Freaner estimated to weigh about 4,000 pounds all together.

### From Panama to San Francisco

Panama 17<sup>th</sup>  
March 1849—

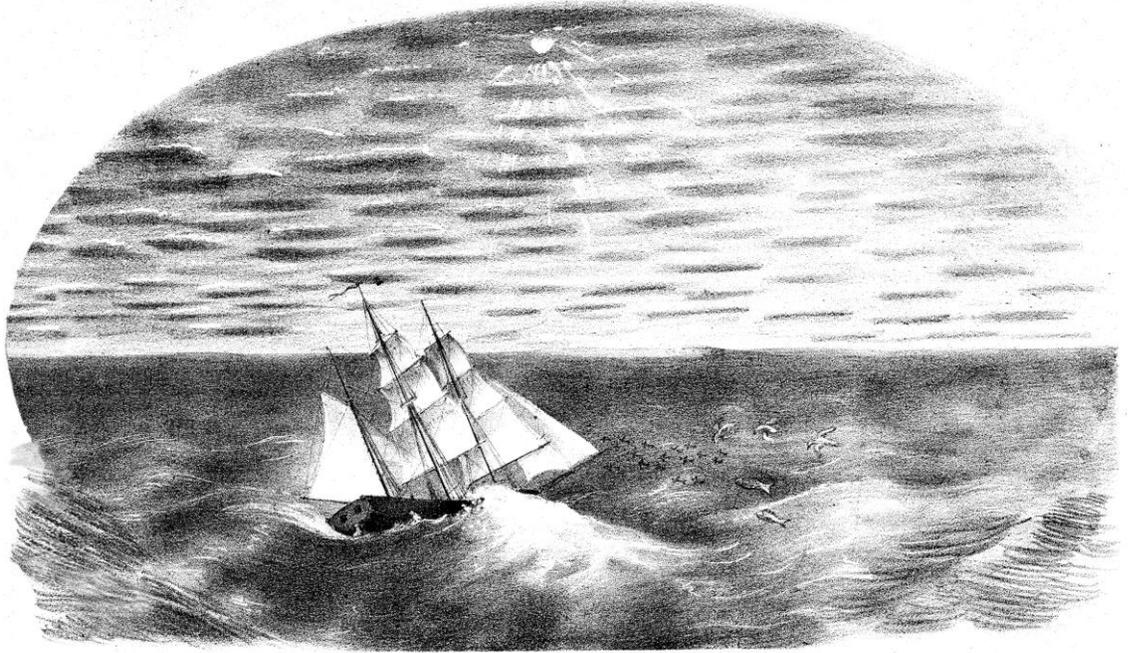
Dear Ann... I have now been here more than a week and the prospect of getting away to say the least is not very flattering. I

have therefore looked about to make myself comfortable. We are four of us in company with a servant, plenty of provisions, in good health and money enough to answer our purpose. We have hired three large rooms on the third story of a large building beautifully situated near the harbor--one we use for a dining-room, the other two for bedrooms. They communicate the one to the other by large folding doors, the windows of each are of the same size as the doors, which makes them very airy and for this climate cool...From a balcony on the east we have a view of the harbor.

After the Spanish style we have a kitchen on the same floor with little furnaces where our servant officiates as cook using for that purpose char coal somewhat after the style that I used to do up things in Mexico. Here, understanding a little more Spanish than the rest of the boys, I do the marketing. So now you may just imagine me with my market basket on my arm trudging along about the time it is early morning looking this way and that to see what of fruit, vegetables, fowl, meat, or anything else I can add to my own supplies to make us a nice dinner.

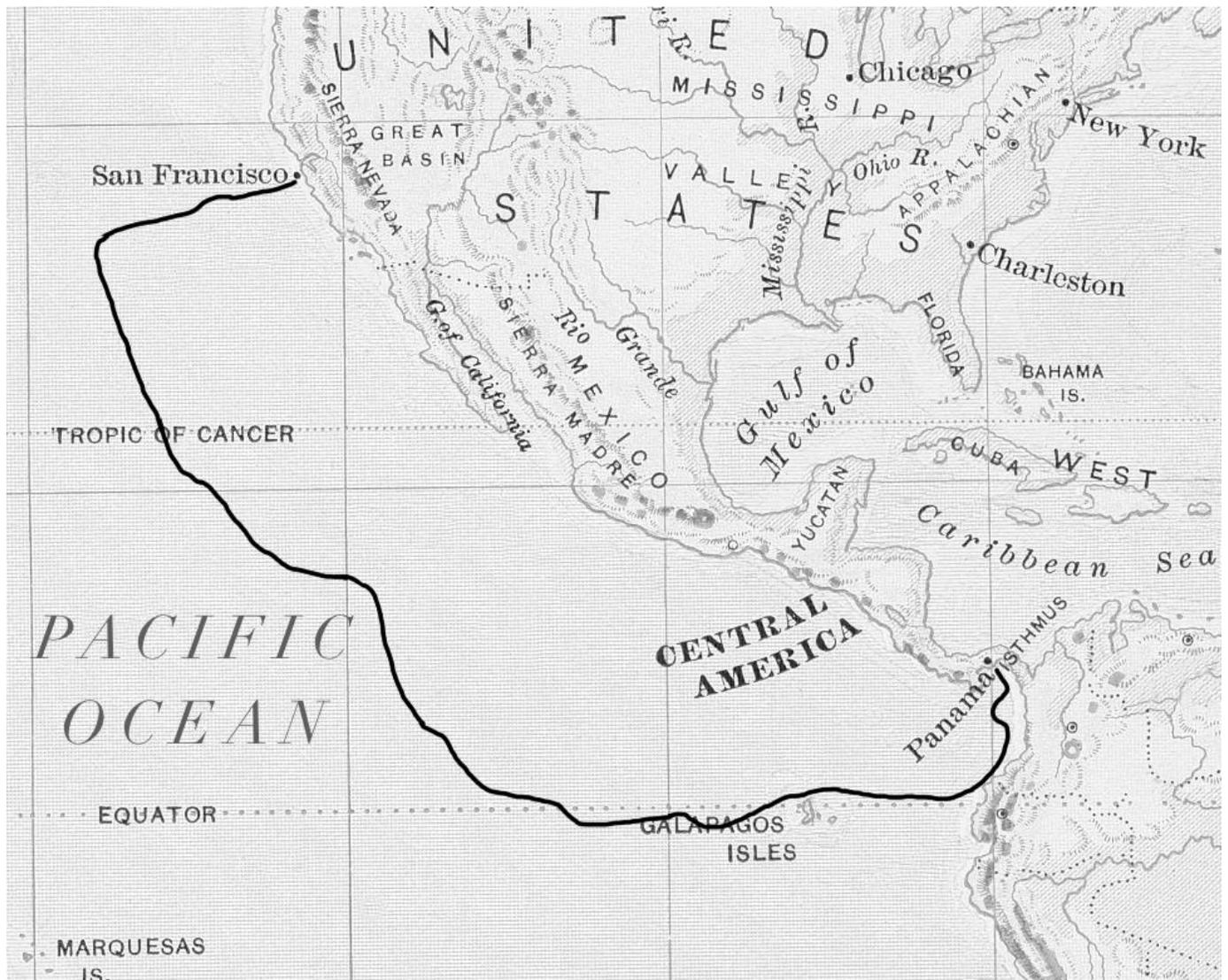
The next five weeks would demand all of Sam's optimism and patience, as well as a quantity of his cash.

Adventurous Americans were streaming into Panama to await ships to take them to California. The problem was that the number of potential passengers was many times more than could be accommodated on the scheduled ships. Frustrated



voyagers gathered at the harbor daily to watch for any sign of another sail or smokestack, while the lucky few journeyed on to imagined riches in the gold fields. Speculators and boat owners quickly took advantage of the demand, outfitting any seaworthy vessel to carry passengers, charging whatever the market would bear for berths which were often just sleeping spaces on a crowded deck. It wasn't until the beginning of May that the bottleneck began to clear. Sam and his friends waited until they heard, through the United States Consul, that a sailing ship, not a steamer, would be arriving soon from Rhode Island via the long route around South America. The *Niantic* was a whaler retrofitted to transport passengers and their gear to San Francisco. Tickets were selling at \$150 for a space in steerage and \$250 for a tiny cabin. Sam and two companions purchased cabin tickets, the fourth man of the group chose steerage, and all anxiously awaited the grand day of her sailing. The "servant," who had traveled from New Orleans at Samuel's side, was not included among the *Niantic's* passengers, and nothing more is known about his fate.

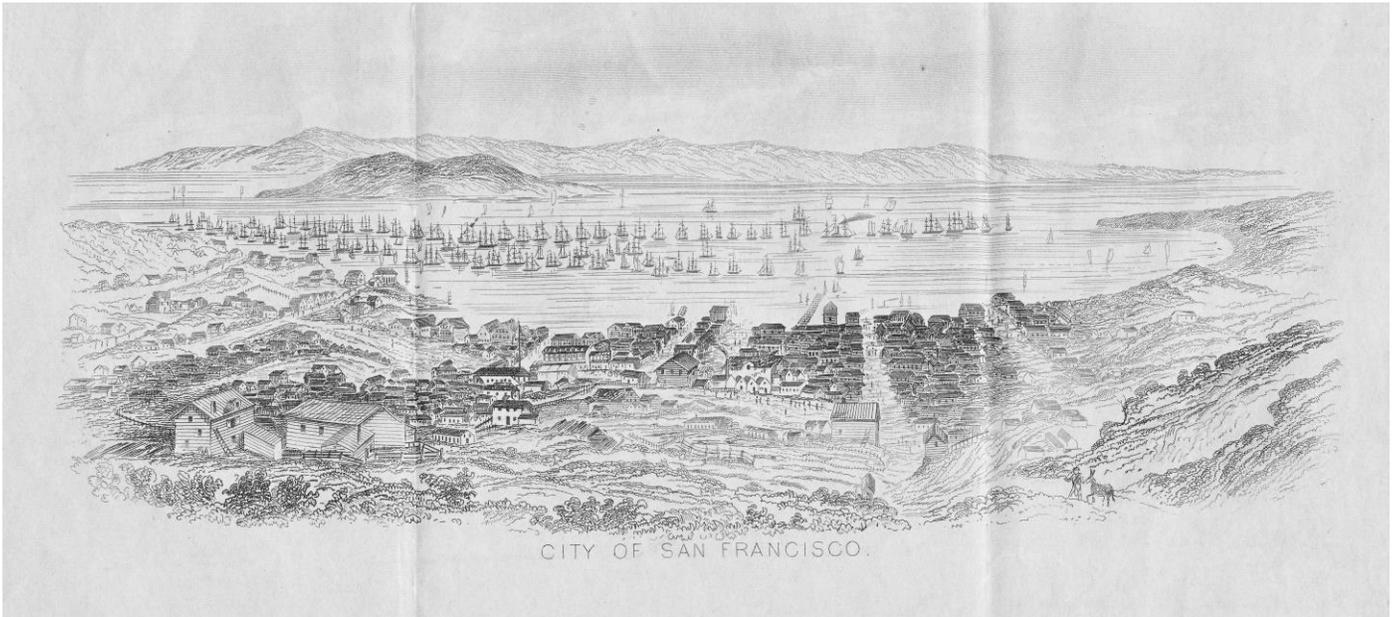
At long last, on Tuesday, May 1st, The *Niantic*, at anchor five miles out from the shore, began taking passengers on board from rowboats that spent the whole day ferrying men across to the ship. Boarding continued until late afternoon of Wednesday. Finally, at 8 p.m. the anchor was drawn up, and, to tremendous cheers from the 246 passengers, they



**The route of the ship *Niantic* went far to the west before favorable winds took her to San Francisco.**

were underway—southward. For nearly two weeks the ship worked her way south and west along the coasts of Colombia and Ecuador until she had nearly reached the equator. She turned directly west and spent another two weeks slowly moving past the Galapagos Islands and on into the empty Pacific, barely moving north or south of 0 degrees latitude. The passengers, uneasy and perplexed, had been grumbling all along. If they had been on a steamer they would have been in San Francisco already! A committee of cabin passengers visited Captain Cleaveland to find out what was going on. The Captain very sternly told the men that they had no reason to be mistrusting his skill. The route that steamers took was very risky for a sailing ship, which might never be able to make its way to California through the winds and currents. He was going to proceed westerly until he could catch favorable trade winds, then change course, and see them safely to port.

The men were mollified but still anxious when, near the last day of May, the winds changed. John Letts, one of Sam's fellow passengers, kept a journal which was later printed. As Letts put it, "Then, while all were asleep about 2 am, everyone was suddenly aroused by the call 'All hands!' and the sudden careening of the ship! We soon found why by going on deck, for the ship was headed northwest under full sail, and a sparkling breeze. For days she bowled along and never once during the voyage altered tack or sheet...We were headed the right way, every hour was bringing us nearer to the 'promised land.'" On June 27<sup>th</sup>, after two days of calm winds and imperceptible movement, the *Niantic* turned and headed northeast toward California as the winds strengthened. John Letts captured the dramatic moment of arrival: "On the morning of [July] 4<sup>th</sup>, the sun rose in a cloud of mist...At 12 o'clock we felt a slight breeze and the mist rose like a curtain, displaying to our astonished vision the coast of



**Sam sent this letter to his sister Ann on Valentine's Day, 1850. In the letter he led her on an imaginary excursion around the San Francisco Bay area.**

California. A simultaneous shout burst forth, and our very ship seemed to bound with enthusiasm."

### **Going to the mines**

After two months at sea, which were *all things considered more pleasant, or rather not so unpleasant as I expected*, Sam spent a short time just getting his bearings in San Francisco. It was unlike anything else he had ever experienced. The town was teeming with men setting off for the mining districts; not even newly docked sailors were immune to the allure of easy wealth. *Great numbers of almost all classes of persons from different parts of the U.S. have already come here since the gold fever has been raging and three or four vessels have daily arrived since I have been here, most of them crowded with passengers. There are already 120 or 150 sail lying idle in the harbor deserted by their crews. Our vessel was deserted before she had time to land her passengers with their baggage.* Regarding the booming town itself, he observed: *every description of labor is paid for at enormous prices, common laborers at the rate of one dollar per hour, mechanics more than that...this place is growing very rapidly but full of gambling, drinking, and every species of dissipation.*

Sam and his companions soon left San Francisco. *Tomorrow or the day after I expect to leave for the mining district, and have concluded to go up the San Joaquin and try one of its tributaries: which one I*

*cannot say until I have been up and looked about a little...I write in camp amid the confusion of the preparations going on about me to [go] away from here tomorrow—sitting upon my blanket, my portfolio on my knee.*

It took over two weeks for the men to reach an area on the Tuolumne River that they felt might yield a quantity of gold. For the months of August and September they labored mightily by daylight and slept on the open ground at night. Sam wrote to his mother on September 5<sup>th</sup>, *It is night and I have scarcely an inch of candle—no candlestick. My candle I have stuck on a bit of tin and put it on my hat to make it high enough so that I can see.* He did not tell her if he was finding much gold, but he hinted at being successful: *So far as my observation has extended, working men are pretty uniformly doing very well...I consider myself a tolerable worker for one who has always been considered and frankly acknowledged himself—lazy...I am making a living.*

By the end of September Sam must have done well enough that he felt comfortable leaving the exertion of mining behind for a while. *I have been circulating all through the southern mining district at a compass of about one hundred miles just to see what I could see and hear what I could hear—not a very profitable employment certainly—but I worked for the money like an honest man, and spent it like a gentleman.* And by the end of November he and his friends were back in San Francisco to stay for the

winter. There was money to be made through labor or investment; the city was growing so fast that even some of the old sailing ships, including Sam's *Niantic*, were moved onto shore and fitted up as buildings. *What was little more than a town of tents in July is now a city with long lines of fine houses.* During the hiatus Sam continued his habitual exploration of his surroundings. The quickly-expanding cemeteries of the area were among his favorite spots for study and contemplation. In February he wrote a splendid letter to his sister Ann, imagining that she was mounted on a pony beside him and that they were taking in the views all around the bay.

### Living the California dream

Then, when spring came and the weather allowed the miners to return to digging, Sam's life took another unexpected path. Before he had a chance to leave for the Tuolumne, he encountered a former acquaintance from Mississippi, Major Pierson Reading. Although five years younger than Sam, Reading was already well-established in California, having arrived in 1843. He had worked for John Sutter, the man at whose mill gold was first discovered, and had acquired the title of Major while serving in California during the Mexican-American War. Reading invited Sam try his luck mining in the far northern part of the state, where he owned a ranch of 26,600 acres along the upper part of the Sacramento River. Sam accepted the invitation, but it would seem that he spent only a short time looking for gold.

Instead he found a less risky way to make a living while still enjoying the sublime scenery and unlimited prospect for exploration that were at the heart of the nearby Sierra Nevada mountains.

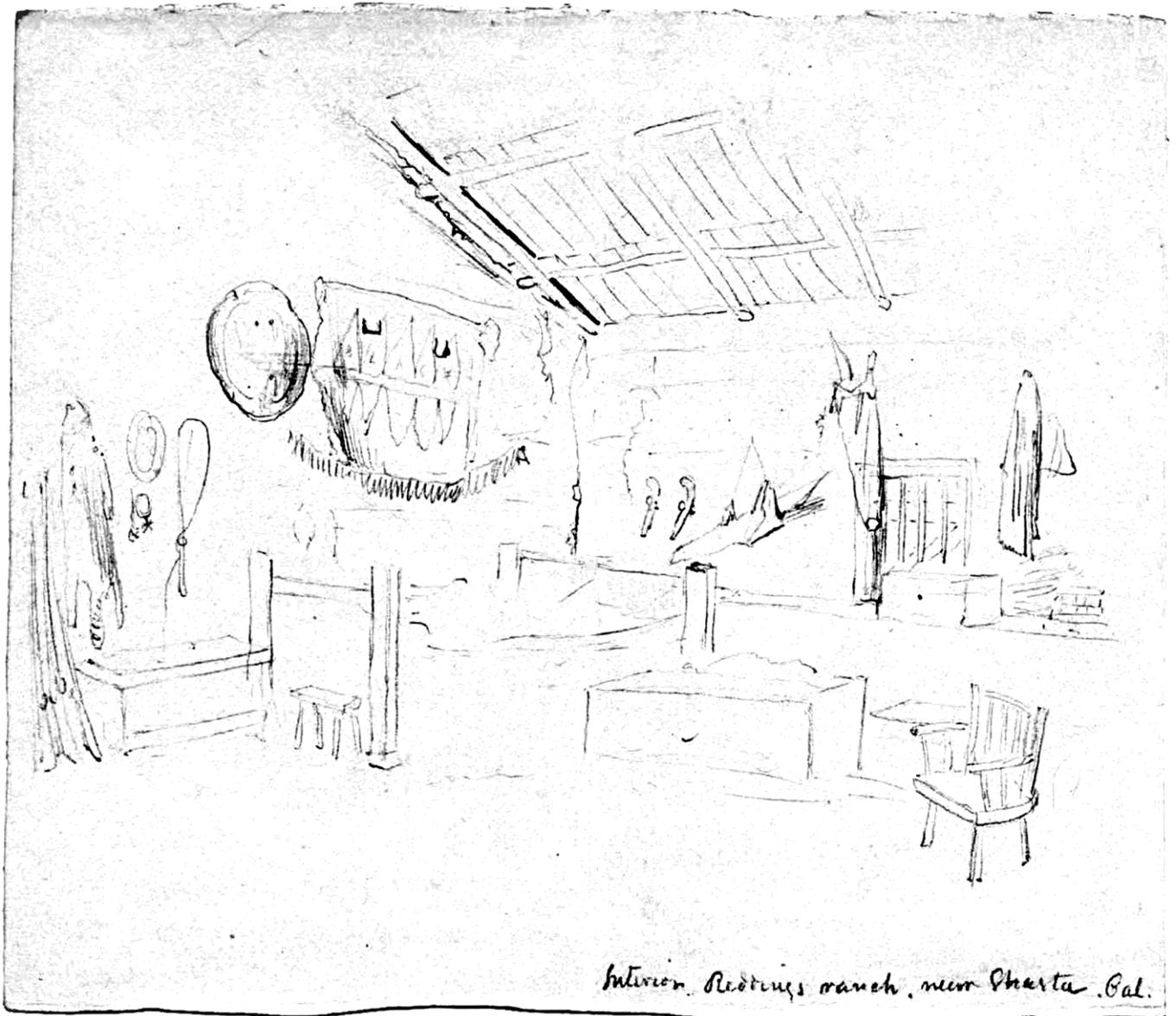
Sam and Reading very quickly became close and trusted friends. Sam lived in Reading's adobe home, but staked a claim to a few hundred acres on the opposite shore of the Sacramento from the Reading ranch with the intention of farming. At the same time, he began working as Reading's "agent in California to transact my business in my absence." One of his first duties in that capacity was weighty.

At that time in California, conflict between Native Americans and white settlers and miners was inevitable. Soon after California became a state in



1850, the United States government assigned commissioners to negotiate with the various tribes. Eighteen treaties were drawn up placing the Indians on reservations and supplying them with cattle, flour, clothing and tools. Commissioner O.M. Wozencraft, assigned to deal with the northern part of the state, purchased some cattle and began visiting various ranches to hold treaty-signing meetings with tribal leaders. When he reached Reading's, Reading himself was either absent or very ill, so Samuel received the visitors and the cattle. The treaty was signed in his presence and his name was affixed as one of the witnesses. But the treaties were never ratified by Congress and the President, and consequent complications regarding the purchase price, quality, and distribution of the cattle were litigated for years afterward.

Reading was made Special Agent for the Indians of Northern California by President Fillmore in May of 1852, and given an appropriation of \$25,000 to use for their benefit. It is not clear how long he served in this capacity, but in August of that year President Fillmore nominated Samuel B. Sheldon to

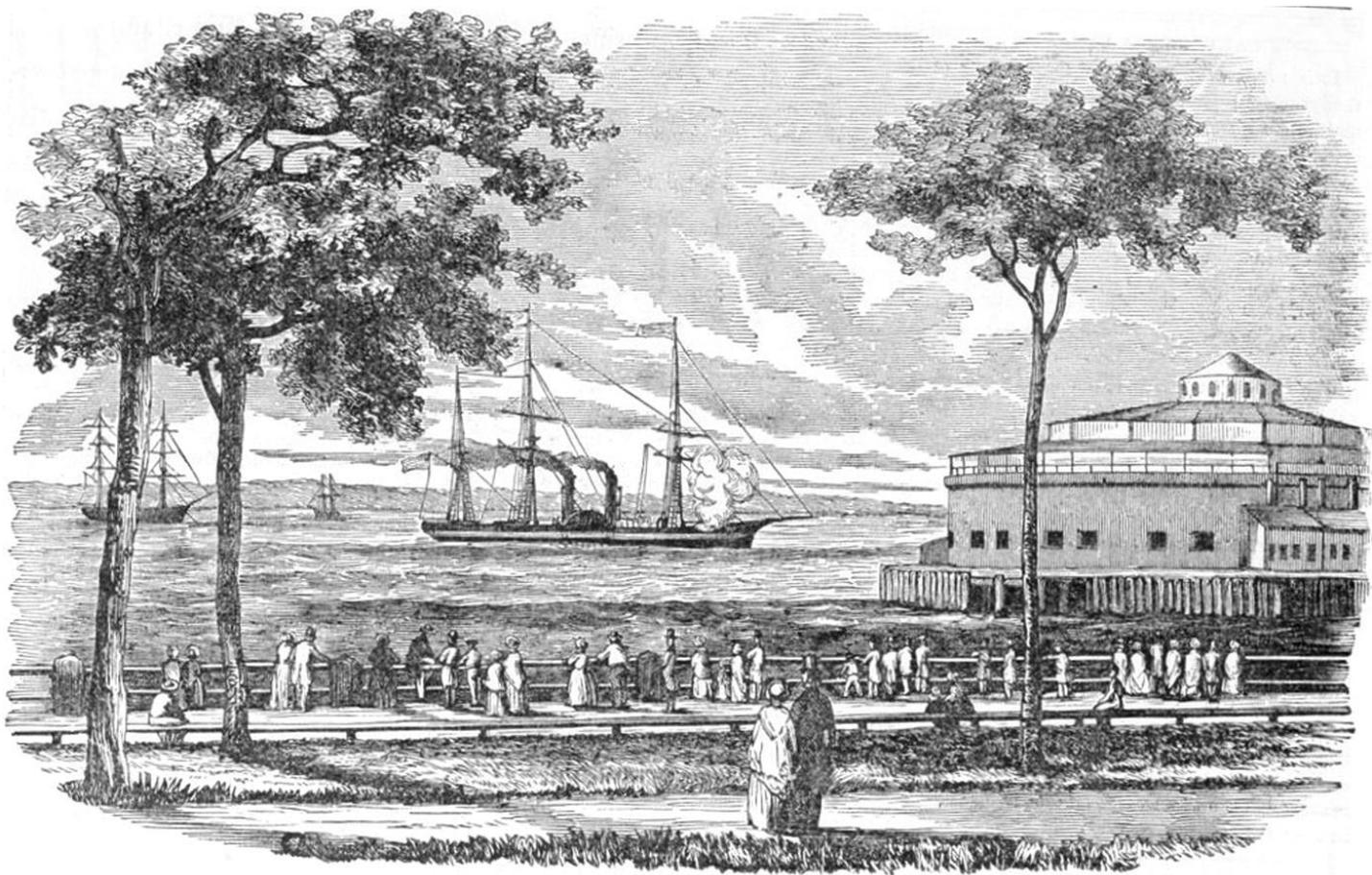


A visitor to Reading's ranch sketched this interior view of his home in 1852. This room could have been Sam's. Notice the hunting and fishing equipment on the walls, and the portable writing desk on the shelf beneath the window. *Used with the permission of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley*

be agent for the California Indians in place of Pierson Reading, "who declines." *I have accepted the appointment of Indian Agent for the northern department of California. The salary is \$3000 per year, not a high salary certainly for Cal., Yet it pays very well for the duty that is required of me. Besides I have other means of easily making my support here with which it does not at all interfere.* Within a year or two the government reorganized the structure of California's Indian Agency, and Samuel no longer held his position, but Reading and Sheldon continued to have what, for the time and place, were good relations with the local tribes.

Sam had begun farming his acres on the east

bank of the Sacramento while living at Reading's, but his heart was not into agriculture. *I raise chiefly barley and wheat, some corn, potatoes, etc. ...I work very little, am fond of hunting and chasing after wolves and rabbits with hounds, and have plenty of dogs, horses, guns and leisure time to indulge in my favorite amusement. In the summer season sometimes I fish. The Sacramento river abounds in fish, and among them are the mountain trout and the salmon and sturgeon. ...I spent a week or two in the mountains, saw our old childhood friend Mr. Jack Frost, and might, if I had wished it, stuck my head in a snow bank. ...I discovered one valley near the foot of the Sierra Nevada, beautiful, very beautiful, before*



**Sam returned from his final visit to Granville on this steamship from Panama. Cross-continental railroads were still years in the future.**

*unvisited as I believe by the white man, and was the first of my race as I believe to ascend one mountain peak and look down into the crater of an extinct volcano.*

### **A family of sorts**

Late in 1855 Major Reading went to Washington, D.C., to confirm his title to his ranch, and came back in May, 1856, with a bride. She was Fannie Washington, whom he had met in the capital city over the winter months. The couple arrived in San Francisco from Panama, then traveled to Sacramento and continued up the river to the smaller town of Red Bluff, where Sam was waiting with a carriage in which they rode the last twenty miles to the ranch. In June Sam wrote to his own family with the news: *I am not now however altogether as much of a Bachelor as I have been. I don't mean by that, that I am exactly married myself, but my friend Maj Reading is, so that we have lady about the house now, the shirt buttons sewed on and every thing in very nice order. Maj R. married last*

*spring in Washington City--an intelligent lady-like and I believe a truly pious woman...* He and Fannie fell into an easy friendship which lasted until circumstances parted them.

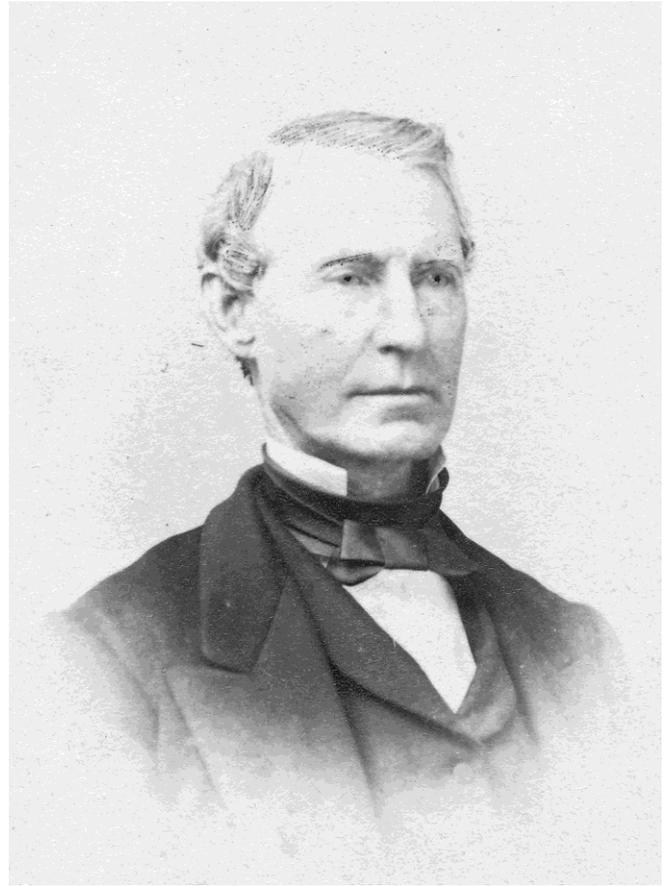
In early 1857 Samuel began to feel the need for his own trip East, perhaps on business for Reading, or perhaps to make a statement regarding the still-ongoing litigation in Washington, D.C., over the cattle purchased for the Native Americans. He also wanted to stop in Canton, Mississippi, *in relation to some business matters* and to visit old friends. He planned on going to Granville after these affairs were seen to. After several delays he was finally able to depart California in October and arrived in New Orleans in mid-November, headed for Canton where he hoped to stay for a few weeks, and then be at his mother's table for Christmas dinner. The few weeks grew to two months and, in early February, he finally arrived in Washington and checked into Brown's Hotel. He was still in that city on the 14th when he sent beautiful Valentine cards to Ann and to Emma and Helen Devinney. His visit to Granville

was probably much shorter than all had hoped and, as far as is known, was his last. On March 22<sup>nd</sup> he was already in Cincinnati, waiting for a boat to New Orleans. From there he was taking the steamer *Daniel Webster* to Panama, the railroad across the isthmus, and the steamer *Golden Gate* to San Francisco, where he arrived on April 29<sup>th</sup>, a trip that took only 24 days from New Orleans.

Sam wrote to Ann when he at last reached home. He described his stopover of two days in Havana, Cuba, during which he toured the countryside and marveled at the grand homes and gardens of the well-to-do. On the Pacific leg of his return the passengers on the *Golden Gate* were entertained nightly by a troupe of professional singers bound for San Francisco. In Acapulco he purchased a basket of unusual seashells for Mrs. Reading. And in San Francisco he stopped at the bookstore of Hubert Howe Bancroft, a Granville native whose family and the Sheldons were well-acquainted, and who would make a name for himself as publisher of many volumes on the history of the West. [The University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library was named for him when the University purchased his 60,000-volume personal collection of books and manuscripts.] Sam had a letter for Bancroft, entrusted to him while he had been in Granville by Celia Bancroft Derby. He *delivered Mrs. Derby's letter to her brother H.H. Bancroft, purchased some books of him, and invited him to visit me. At home, friends, Indians, dogs, horses all gave me glad welcome.*

Except for frequent trips to Sacramento and San Francisco, Sam was indeed home. The Readings began to have children, the first a daughter, Anna, who enchanted Sam. *Mrs. R's little Daughter Anna toddles about wonderfully, and makes some most amusing stagers towards talking. And when Uncle Sam happens to be a little amiable over his pipe, he and she have a wonderfully social time.* Sam still lived in the Reading household and participated in work and excursions and holiday celebrations with the family. He was as much at ease with them as he was with his own family. He often read to them in the evening, frequently from Shakespeare.

Sam and Major Reading were sickened by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. *Reading and myself have both been terribly depressed in view of the distracted condition of our unhappy country. We have lost our nationality. Scoundrels and traitors*



**Sam sent this photograph to his family in 1866 when he was 55 years old.**

*north and south have ruined the best government that God has ever given to our race.* He wrote to his niece, Helen Devinney: *I know Jefferson Davis as I know your father—he was the representative to Congress from my district in Miss. I know also well some of his most brilliant officers. They think, they believe, themselves right, doubtless, though I think wrong, and some of them I have told so.* He also knew some of the important men on the Union side: *Gen. Fremont, Wood, McKinstry, Stoneman, Some of them I have been with for weeks together.* He mentioned in particular Nathaniel Lyon, the first Union general to be killed in the war. *Poor Lyon, my intimate friend, we ate, drank and slept together under the roof where I now write.*

But California was a long way from the terrors of the war, and life went on. In the same letter to Helen, Sam remarked on his own appearance. *I look good, might be courting some old gal or widow some of these days.* He might have been thinking of a young lady friend of the family, Miss Sallie Dangerfield, who was, at age 21, less than half Sam's age. It has been reported that Sam and Sallie were engaged, but that she thought better of the

arrangement and broke it off. Two years later she married a young English immigrant who was beginning to make a name for himself as an investor in Nevada silver mines. He went on to become a tremendously successful stockbroker and owner of thoroughbred race horses, one of the richest men in the country.

Through the 1860s Sam's letters became less and less frequent, especially after his mother died in 1866, and they typically contained reports on his crops and short anecdotes about the Readings. In April of 1867 he wrote: *For the past few weeks I have been alone. Maj. Reading and family have been in the mountains. Reading has been sick; and his affairs were getting into some confusion. So I remained behind to attend to them...I sent for our people yesterday, expect them with me in a day or two, think the music of the childrens feet pattering along the passage will do much towards relieving the loneliness of the old solitary.*

Reading died less than a year later. Fannie stayed on at the ranch for another three years, then left for Washington D.C. so that her children could attend school there. *I however still hold on to my old quarters.* In 1873 Sam moved onto his own farm for the first time. Within a few years Sam, no longer interested in either farming or hunting and fishing, sold his farm to his former employee and moved to San Francisco.

### **The last piece of the story**

In 1883 Helen Devinney received a letter headed "U.S. Supreme Court of Arizona, Judges Chambers.

My Dear Cousin Helen." The letter was from Paul Sheldon's son, Alvanus, who was now Associate Justice of the Arizona Territorial Supreme Court. Alvanus's life had been almost as interesting as his Uncle Sam's. He enlisted in the Civil War early on with others from Granville. He was wounded during battle but remained in the army until the war's end, then attended law school in New York City and worked for the New York state prison association. Later he became editor of the *Baltimore Herald*. He was appointed Judge in Arizona in the spring of 1883. That summer his old wounds were giving him much pain so he went to San Francisco to have a series of surgeries. There Alvanus was approached by Robert Simson, Major Reading's son-in-law, who informed him that Sam had heard that he was in



**Sam's nephew, Judge Alvanus W. Sheldon.**

town and wanted to see him. Alvanus continued with his story: "Uncle Sam is very much broken and quite feeble—his left lung troubles him a great deal. He is also quite weak and his voice trembles. His appetite is poor and his memory is becoming defective...Regarding himself he said nothing. He did say that there was a time when he was worth thirty thousand dollars but that it had all 'gone up the flue.' There are many things relating to uncle Sam that I learned from Mr. Simson and others that would no doubt interest you but I will defer until some future time..." The next correspondence from Alvanus was a telegram dated December 15, 1883. "Uncle Sam died this morning. Funeral tomorrow Sunday"

It wasn't until the following April that the family was able to pin down the circumstances of Sam's passing. Helen had written to Robert Simson, who very kindly related the story. Simson was married to Major Reading's eldest daughter, Jeanette. She was Reading's child from an earlier marriage or liaison, and had lived with relatives in Philadelphia until after Reading and Fannie were married and she joined the family in California. The Simsons lived near San Francisco and Sam spent much time with them in his last years. "He was always the quiet considerate gentleman." Simson said that Sam



**Sam was buried in this section of Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California. The section is “unendowed,” and has neither green grass nor special care. Sam’s grave is unmarked.**

*Photo courtesy of Jacob An Kittenplan.*

suffered from “gangrene of the mouth and palate and gums” which proved fatal. He was buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.

Simson wrote an account of Sam’s death to Alvanus at Tucson but received no reply. In January Alvanus was in San Francisco to revisit his surgeon, possibly because of complications from his operations, so Simson visited him in his hotel room and “delivered to him some personal effects of his uncle to be transmitted to his relatives at home—an agate seal with coat of arms, a gold pencil case, a locket with miniature, and some other things of little value.” Simson promised to visit Alvanus again in a few days, but when he was able to stop by Alvanus’s hotel he was informed that Alvanus had died suddenly. “The Judge’s effects including what I had delivered to him were taken charge of by Mr. A. L. Bancroft Publisher of San Francisco [Brother of Hubert Howe Bancroft]—I believe they were classmates—All these things including my letter will, I doubt not, be duly delivered by Mr. Bancroft to the Judge’s family.

### **Epilogue**

Sam Sheldon’s letters, about 120 of them in all, had been carefully saved by his sister, Ann. On her passing in 1882 they were tucked into a trunk with

others of her things and stored in the house on the Devinney farm. The farm eventually came into the possession of Sam’s nephew and namesake, Samuel Sheldon Devinney, and through him to his sister Emma’s sons, Frank and then Hubert Robinson. Hubert Robinson was not interested in farming, so in 1958 he sold the property to a family whose members still own it. Hubert and his wife Oese moved the Devinneys’ trunks and boxes to their own home in Granville, where, to her delight, Oese discovered the many, many family letters, and set about reading them, much to Hubert’s chagrin, because he considered correspondence to be private. Oese realized that the letters represented a truly grand picture of life in the nineteenth century with all its travails and opportunities and humanity. She established a foundation, The Hubert and Oese Robinson Foundation, for the preservation of the family’s history, first in the Granville Lifestyle Museum, and later in the Granville Historical Society’s archives and collections. History can be thankful to her.

**Theresa Overholser is a frequent contributor to *The Historical Times* and is the Granville Historical Society’s head archivist and a former member of the Board of Managers.**

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The Granville Historical Society is an all-volunteer, non-governmental not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization with membership open to all. Joining the Society is a delightful way to meet people who share a love of and interest in Granville's rich, well-documented history. Monthly programs, quarterly publications, and a museum that is open five days a week during the season are some of the ways that enable Society volunteers to share facets of what makes Granville so fascinating with members and guests. Volunteers are welcome in the Archives and Museum Collections areas, as well as museum hosts.

Please visit [Granvillehistory.org](http://Granvillehistory.org) for further information about all that we do and how you can get involved.

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