

CHAPTER 4

Seth Washburn Jr Leads His Brothers West During the Gold Rush

In January 1848 – a few months after Putney’s “War of 1847” – gold was discovered in the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. The telegraph had not been invented, and news traveled fastest by ship. That year news of gold spread along the Pacific Coast and outward, bringing in gold seekers from Mexico, Hawaii and Chile, then Australia and China, as well as the United States.¹

By late 1848 American newspapers had printed a multitude of stories about California gold, and Vermont newspapers carried the news to Putney. Sample clippings from Windham County newspapers appear below.

California Gold.
Knowing the great desire to have authentic intelligence of the state of things in California, we give to-day, in full, an official report from a Government officer. It will be seen that even the rumors which have reached us, did not exaggerate the truth, and this official corroboration of them has already created a mania which will pour Northern adventurers like an avalanche upon the shores of California.
We hear daily of vessels fitting out for that country from many of the sea-ports—twenty or thirty of which, it is said, are to sail from New York, and half that number from Boston, in a few days. California will have a population of 50,000 in less than a year, if the accounts from the gold regions continue to be of the character they now are, and all other industrial pursuits will be abandoned in the search for gold.
The effect of such sudden wealth upon nations or individuals has never been productive of good, but of corruption, effeminacy, and the multitude of evils that come in their train.
One good effect, however, is pretty certain to flow from this excitement. It will fill up that part of the country with hardy and enterprising adventurers from the free States, and effectually exclude slavery from New Mexico and California.

CALIFORNIA GOLD. We understand that interesting dispatches have been received at the War Department from Col. Mason, the present commanding officer in California, respecting the astonishing fertility of the gold mines in our new acquisition. It exceeds calculation, and almost reminds us of the treasures of Aladdin. These documents will probably accompany the report of the Secretary of War to Congress. The accounts are said to be wonderful. Sixteen whalers are reported as having been deserted by their crews. The smallest article of merchandise that happens to be in requisition, is said to command a great value in exchange for gold. The quantities daily dug up are very large.
We presume one of the first duties which Congress will be called upon to discharge, will be the preservation of the valuable public property which is thus attracting so many adventurous spirits, to gather the golden fleece of the modern Jasons.—*Union.*

The clipping on the left is from the *Vermont Chronicle*, Dec 6, 1848, published in Bellows Falls; the clipping on the right is from the *Vermont Phoenix*, Dec 15 1848, published in Brattleboro.

¹ Caughey, John Walton, “The California Gold Rush” (Univ. of Cal. 1948), pp. 23-24.

Sceptics who found reports from California dubious were rebutted by U.S. President James K. Polk in his December 5, 1848 State of the Union Address. The President announced that:

accounts of the abundance of gold in [California] are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts . . . from personal observation. Reluctant to credit the reports in general circulation as to the quantity of gold, the officer commanding our forces in California visited the mineral district in July last for the purpose of obtaining accurate information The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large

This abundance of gold and the all-engrossing pursuit of it have already caused in California an unprecedented rise in the price of all the necessaries of life.²

News of California gold must have interested the Washburn brothers, living in their small house on Westminster Road in Putney. The family did not have a farm, or a father, or a house big enough to live in as adults. The seven brothers, rapidly outgrowing the little house, did not have deep roots in Putney (other than extended family scarred by recent events).

In 1849 books and pamphlets were published explaining how to travel to the “gold fields” and how to mine gold.³ Most gold seekers swarming into California did not plan to live there. They were young men who, after making “a few thousand dollars, returned by way of San Francisco to their former homes.”⁴

During Seth Washburn’s last year of high-school, it appears that he was preparing to become a teacher (like several of his older half-brothers). In late 1850, while still in high school, Seth attended the Teachers Institute of Westminster. A year later, however, he decided that the opportunity to make good money in California should not be missed. The timing of his trip, his destination (the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains), and his family circumstances (a large, fatherless family with no farm in a very small house), all support the inference that the Gold Rush drew Seth to California.

Seth took advantage of a new travel route from the east to the west Coast. America’s transcontinental railroad would not be built until 1869, and the Panama Canal was not completed until 1914. In 1849, however, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company began transporting passengers from Panama City, on the west coast of Panama, north up the Pacific coast to California. This allowed travelers from the northeastern United States to take a ship

² See <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/polk/stateoftheunion1848.html>.

³ Caughey, pp. 48-54. When gold was discovered California belonged to Mexico, after being a Spanish province for over a century. The area was ceded to the United States later in 1848 as part of the settlement of the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). California became a state in 1850.

⁴ “The Annals of San Francisco,” Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon, & James Nisbet (D. Appleton, 1855), p. 300.

from New York City down the Atlantic coast and around Florida to the village of Chagres, on the eastern coast of Panama. Chagres was on the “Isthmus” – a narrow section of Panama. From Chagres one could cross west over the Isthmus, about 30 to 45-miles to Panama City on the Pacific Ocean. From Panama City a Pacific Mail steamship took passengers north past Mexico and up the California coast to San Francisco. This trip – from the Northeastern United States to San Francisco – took about a month and cost a little over \$200. In 1855 the Panama Canal Railway linked the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, speeding travel time. Even before the railway link, however, it was much faster to go by ship and overland across the Isthmus of Panama than cross the United States by land.

Age 19 in February 1852, Seth left Vermont alone bound for California. He boarded a steamship (probably in New York) for the over 2200-mile trip to Chagres. He then crossed the Isthmus to the Pacific Ocean and in mid-March took the steamship *Panama* north up the Pacific coast, arriving in San Francisco Bay on April 1, 1852. The *Sacramento Daily Union* on April 2, 1852, reported that, “The *Panama* arrived at 12 o’clock, yesterday. She brings mail and 594 passengers, of which 36 are ladies” One of its passengers was “S.C. Washburn.”⁵

Prior to 1847, San Francisco was a small village of only a few hundred persons called “Yerba Buena.” The Gold Rush quickly turned that village into a teeming city. By the end of 1849 25,000 persons lived there, and by 1860 there were 56,802 San Francisco residents. The town in which Seth Washburn arrived in early 1852 was new, wild, and rapidly expanding, populated by newcomers flooding in from all over the world. It was animated by the flow of gold brought by miners working to the east. Reportedly “from ten to fifteen dollars’ worth of gold dust was about the usual proceeds of an ordinary day’s hard work.” “[A] large proportion of the miners were earning such sums as they had never even seen in their lives before, and which, six months earlier, would have appeared a downright fable.”⁶

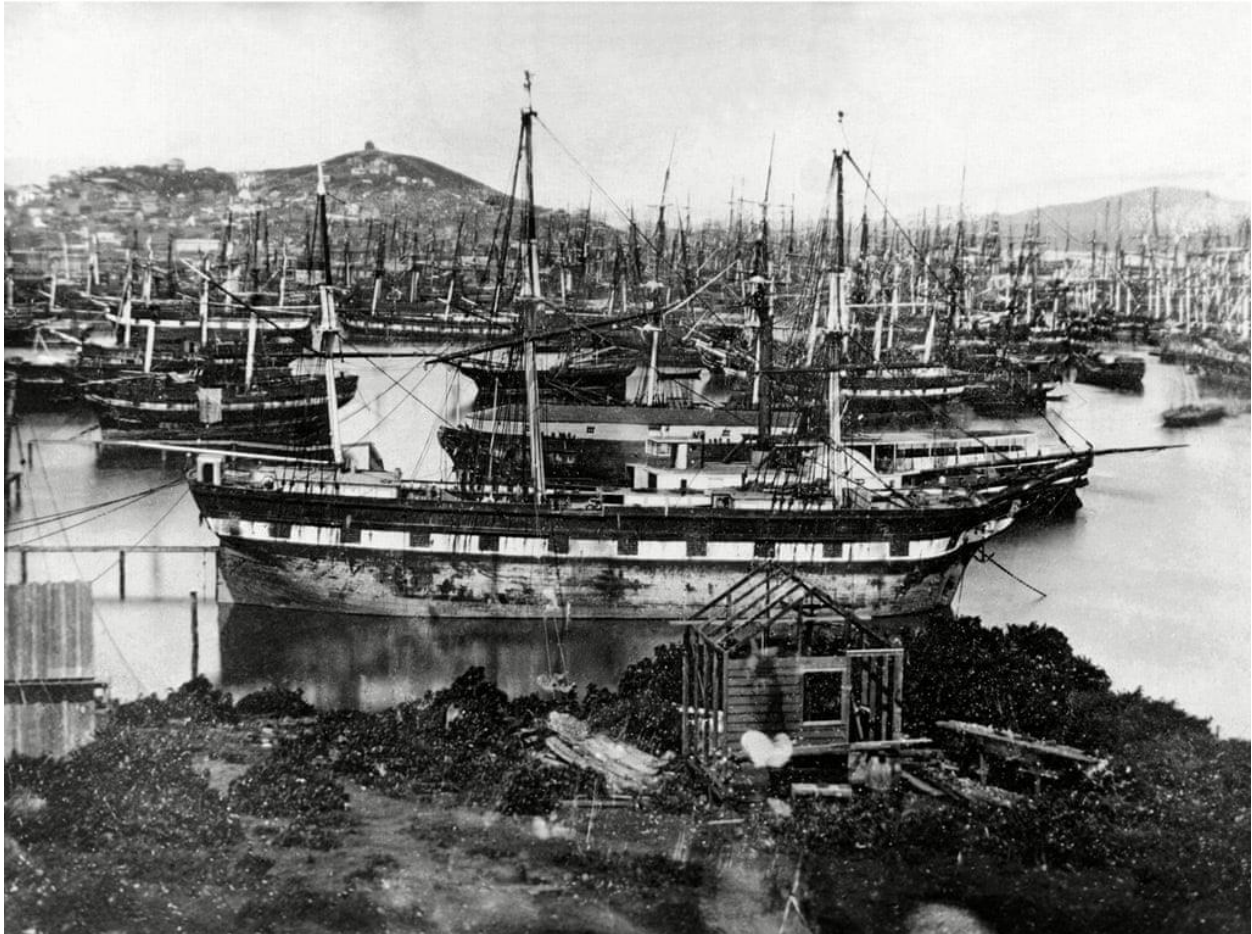
In 1852 Seth Washburn was one of 66,988 new arrivals in San Francisco – almost double the number from 1851 – from countries worldwide, including upwards of 20,000 Chinese nationals.⁷ The young city extended only about eight city blocks back from the waterfront. Shipments of outgoing gold from San Francisco in 1852 listed by the Custom House amounted to over 45 million dollars. That did not include unlisted gold carried away by individuals, and amounts exchanged at the hundreds of saloons and gambling houses. The rush to San Francisco was such that dozens of arriving ships were abandoned in the harbor by crewmen who left to

⁵ A first-person account of traveling in the early 1850s from New York to San Francisco, via the Panama Isthmus, appears in “California Gold Rush Merchant; the Journal of Stephen Chapin Davis,” edited by Benjamin B. Richards (Huntington Library Publications, 1956), available on-line at <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services//service/gdc/calbk/072.pdf>. Like Seth, Davis was a young rural New Englander who had lost his father, became a “Gold Rush Merchant” in California, and returned home with several thousand dollars only to die prematurely.

⁶ “The Annals of San Francisco,” Frank Soulé, et al.

⁷ *Id.* at 411-412.

seek gold. When Seth Washburn arrived, San Francisco Bay was jammed with empty ships, as depicted below.



Abandoned ships in San Francisco Bay, 1850 – a measure of the intensity of the Gold Rush.

Seth left San Francisco on foot for Mariposa, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about 165 miles to the east.⁸ The Sierra Nevada mountains extend 400 miles north to south on the eastern side of central California. They contain a multitude of peaks from 8,000 to over 14,000 feet high. In the opening years of the Gold Rush, a “small army of early miners” arrived in the Mariposa region.⁹

A lucrative business at the time was selling supplies to miners. Merchants set-up shop in tents, shacks or wagons, stocking the necessities: “flour, ship’s biscuit, jerked meat, salt pork, whiskey, picks, shovels, boots, shirts – and added whatever else could be had.”¹⁰ Supplies sold

⁸ This information is based in part on the Wawona Washburn Hartwig research papers in the Yosemite Archives.

⁹ “One Hundred Years in Yosemite,” Carl P. Russell (Univ. Cal. Berkeley, 1947), Ch. II, “Mariposa Hills.”

¹⁰ Caughey, “The California Gold Rush,” p. 34.

for “fantastically high prices,” partly due to strong demand and the cost to merchants of transporting inventory from San Francisco to the mining area, as well as “the habits of reckless spending that became epidemic” among gold-happy miners.¹¹ One such merchant was Andrew S. Church, a New York native in California by 1851. He pitched a tent and began selling provisions to miners and travelers in a small village known as Bridgeport. It was about five miles from Mariposa, the County Seat of Mariposa County. Church soon earned enough money to build a store and a house. Soon he hired a clerk to help. That clerk was Seth Washburn.

After learning the business from Andrew Church Seth opened his own Bridgeport store. In the summer of 1856 Edward P. Washburn, then age 21, followed his older brother to California.¹² The two worked together in Bridgeport for several years, as “Seth C Washburn and Brother.” Edward’s 1912 obituary states that, “[i]n the early days of California Edward and his brother, Seth, were engaged in the gold mining and mercantile business.”¹³

In the Fall of 1856, in Bridgeport with Edward, Seth wrote the following letter to his mother Patty in Putney:¹⁴

Bridgeport Sept 30th 1856

Dear Mother

I rec’d a letter from you some two weeks since. I’m not positive that I have answered it. In all events I will now write you a few lines, in season for the mail of October 5th. I am very sorry to hear of the death of [neighbor] Mrs. Bruce and also of so much sickness at home. I hope I am not to hear of the decease of poor Edmund, of whose recovery you wrote me “there are no hopes.” How very much he has suffered during his protracted sickness. I am anxious for the health of Uncle Crawford and [indecipherable] to hear of his speedy recovery. We have been almost exempt from sickness of any kind here in the mountainous districts of Cal [indecipherable] for which we cannot be too thankful. I believe the climate of this state is much more salubrious than that of New England – I shall never think of passing another winter north.

Edward has received a letter from you and I presume will return an answer by this next mail. His health is good and prospects quite encouraging. I received a paper N.Y. Tribune from some of the boys for which I am obliged. I would prefer they should send some Brattleboro or other local paper. I have no time to write at length but must close. My love to all. ___ SC Washburn.

¹¹ *Id.* at 35.

¹² A January 25, 1865 California medical note states that Edward had been in California for “nine years.”

¹³ *Herald and News*, Randolph, Vermont, Jan 25, 1912, p. 9.

¹⁴ The author is grateful to Jill (Goodell) Garland, great-granddaughter of Julius F Washburn, for allowing him to review her collection of family records, including these letters.

In mid-1858 Edward wrote home that he and Seth probably would return to Putney the following spring. It seems likely that they were working in Bridgeport to earn money to buy a farm and a larger house for their Putney family. The letter also indicates that Seth had health problems as far back as 1857.

Bridgeport Cal June 15, 1858

My Dear Mother

Seth informed you in his last letter that we were doing business for ourselves. You were doubtless very much disappointed in learning of this arrangement. I suppose you have about concluded that Seth will never return. I think that you will see us both next spring.

We are doing a good business. Our trade is increasing every day, and our prospects are quite encouraging. We are selling twice the amount of goods that we were selling one year ago. I have no doubt but that we will clear this year from five to six thousand. We intend doing a cash business so that we will have nothing in the spring to dispose of but our stock of goods. Which we will be able to get rid of with but little trouble. We are now relieved of the disagreeable necessity of trading on Sunday – that day has been very quiet here since this Sunday law went into effect [requiring stores to close on Sunday] in comparison to what it was formerly. The law is generally observed and it will be enforced in all cases. This is the best law that has ever been enacted here – a good move toward a more civilized state of society.

We have neither of us received a letter from home for more than two months. I suppose you deferred writing expecting to see us there. . . . Seth's health is about as it was when he wrote last, not quite as good as it was last winter but much better than it was one year ago. I think that it will improve with the return of cooler weather.

How are all the boys? What are Frank and Henry doing? Has Frank given up the idea of going west? How do they all do at Uncle Crawford and [Uncle] John's? Please remember me to all inquiring friends.

I do not have time to write more now. Seth sends love to all.

Please write soon, your aff. son,

Edward.

In late 1858 Albert "Henry" Washburn, age 22, joined his two brothers in Bridgeport. A roster of passengers arriving in San Francisco on December 28, 1858 aboard the Pacific Mail steamship *Golden Age* includes "A. H. Washburn." Seth's brothers took the same route he did, but benefited from the new Panama Railroad across the Isthmus. In addition to the store, the brothers owned the "Washburn Mine" in Bridgeport or nearby Mormon Bar, another mining village. It appears that the store was the primary source of income; very little information is available about the mine.

In early 1859 Seth returned to Vermont. His health had not improved. Edward and Henry remained in Bridgeport. In May, 1859 Edward wrote Seth in Putney to report on affairs.

Bridgeport May 13 1859

Bro Seth --

I write you a few lines for this mail. We received your letters written at the Isthmus. Am glad to learn that you got along thus far so well, and that you were feeling better than when you left.

Business at present is tolerably good. Trade with the Chinamen is on the increase. We are selling nearly twice the amt. of Rice per week that we have usually sold. Quite a number of white men have gone to [Walkers?] River, but they are the kind mostly that we can dispense with without any great disadvantage to the trade.

I asked Capt. Holt the other day when they could pay us some money on their a/c he could not tell. Spoke as thought it would be some six or eight weeks before they would be able to pay anything. Their a/c at this time was 1400\$. I told him that we did not wish to make the a/c as large this summer as it was last. Had some pretty plain talk with him. He gave a deed of the House which is to be applied to the a/c in case they fail to pay us money on it in the course of five or six weeks. The House and watch will reduce it \$750. I gave him to understand that we did not want to ___ as much as ___ we had done. Told him that we wished to keep the account reduced. He seemed to take no exceptions to what was said. Thought they would soon have money ahead and be able to pay for their supplies as they got them.

P.C. [Appling] was here yesterday. Wishes to be remembered to you. Also Wm Malthus.

In late 1859 Edward wrote to oldest brother Benjamin Franklin Washburn in Putney and sent along some money:

Bridgeport Cal Dec 17th 1859

Bro. Frank –

At Seth's request I send you a Draft for four hundred dollars.

I have time to write you but a few lines. Would like to hear from you occasionally and learn how you are prospering, etc.

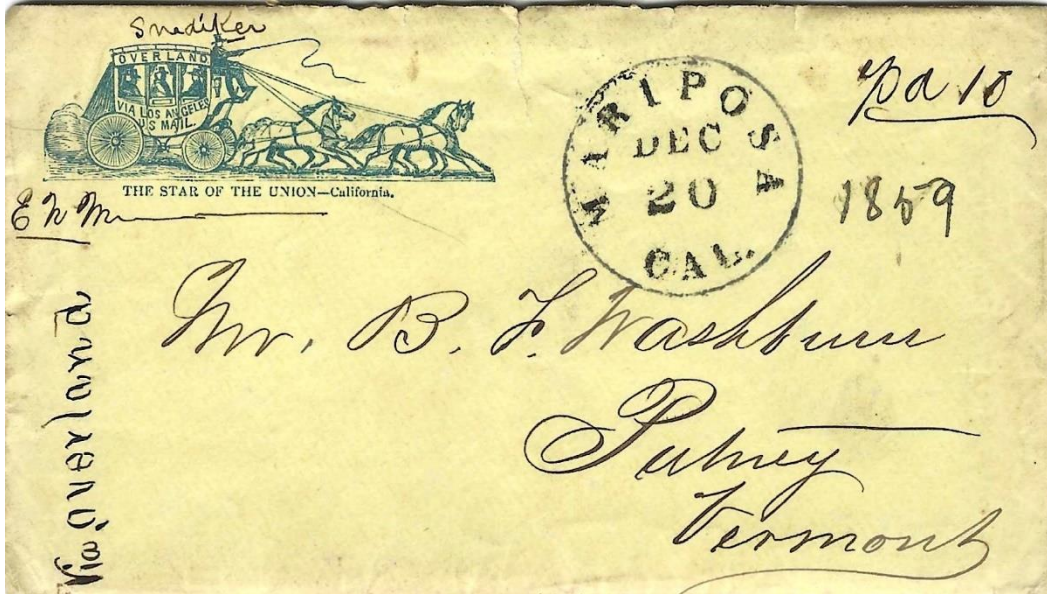
We are doing well in business – have a good prospect for the present winter. Are selling goods at a better profit than usual.

We are both well and hearty – How is mother's health? I have not time to write Seth this mail – will write next. Hope too that he is improving in health.

Please write when convenient and excuse my briefness.

Love to all –

Aff. Yours, Edward.



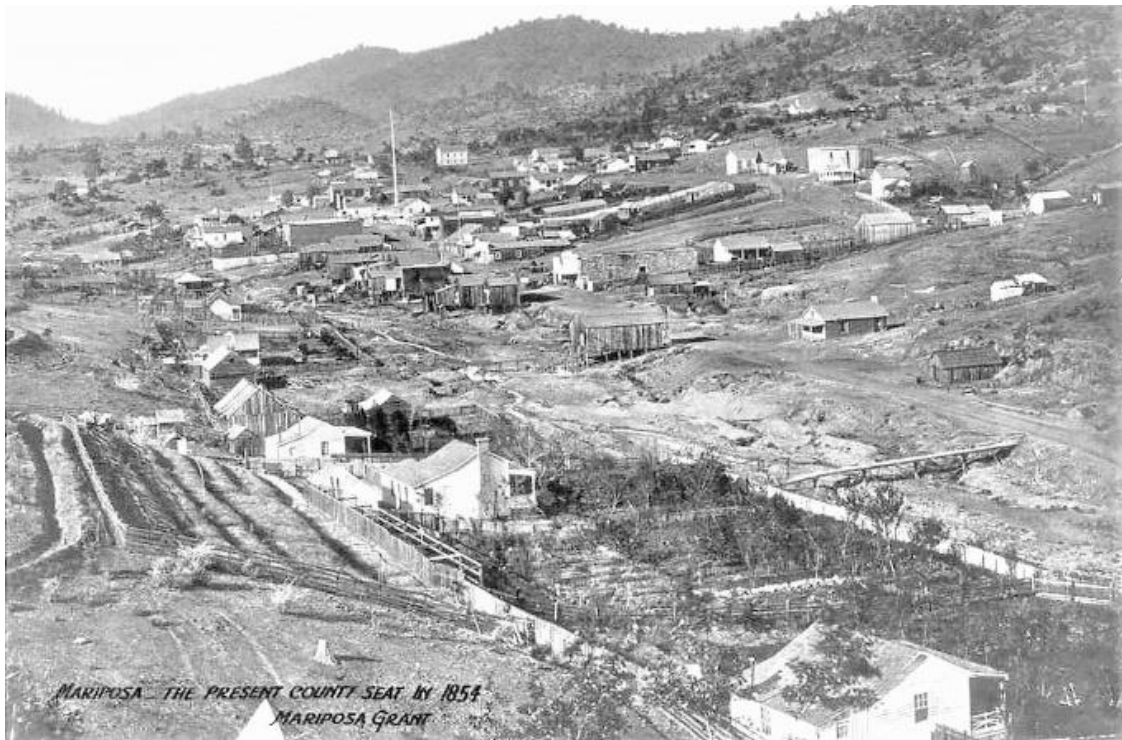
The envelope in which Edward Washburn sent his brother Frank the above letter.

Bridgeport, like Agua Fria and Mormon Bar, was a small, hardscrabble mining town. Today those towns no longer exist. Bridgeport is memorialized by a historical marker reading:

In 1852 Andrew Church established a trading post where a road from the San Joaquin Valley crossed the Agua Fria Creek. The site, known as Bridgeport, was on the Fremont Grant, about five miles south of Aqua Fria, first county seat of Mariposa County. Church's store prospered as he sold supplies to travelers, farmers, and miners including 3000 local Chinese. The Washburn brothers of Wawona fame began their California endeavors as clerks in the trading post. As mining declined, Bridgeport faded, but survived as a stage stop for Yosemite-bound tourists. The old wagon road changed and improved, became the main route from Merced to Mariposa and Yosemite until the late 30's. Road re-routing signaled the end for Bridgeport. Its demise was slowed by local gold dredging and penny-ante poker in the back room of the old store.



Bridgeport CA in 1860



Mariposa CA in 1854

In the mid-1850s when the Washburn brothers labored as Bridgeport merchants, they were unaware that hidden deep in the Sierra Nevada mountains about 35 miles east of Mariposa lay an extraordinary geographical formation: a deep river valley between towering granite walls and glaciated domes, floored in luxurious meadows. Now famous as Yosemite Valley, it has been described as “the crowding of a multitude of romantic, peculiar and grand scenes within a very small space.”¹⁵ The general course of the Valley is nearly east and west, its length about eight miles. Not far away is the Mariposa Grove, containing over 500 giant Sequoia trees estimated to be 1000-2000 years old.

New York newspaper man Horace Greeley wrote in 1860:

Of the grandest sights I have enjoyed – Rome from the dome of St. Peter’s, the Alps from the valley of Lake Como, Mount Blanc and her glaciers from Chamoun, Niagara [Falls], and the Yo Semite, -- I judge the last named the most unique and stupendous. It is a partially wooded gorge, 100 to 300 rods wide, and 3,000 to 4,000 feet deep, between almost perpendicular walls of gray granite The isolation of the Yo Semite, the absolute wilderness of its sylvan solitudes, many miles from human settlement or cultivation, its cascade 2,000 feet high, though the stream which makes this leap has worn a channel in the hard bed-rock to a depth of 1,000 feet, renders it the grandest marvel that ever met my gaze.¹⁶

In June of 1855, “J.M. Hutchings, in company with three others and two Indian guides, [visited Yosemite Valley] for the purpose of sketching and describing it.”¹⁷ Hutchings retained San Francisco artist Thomas Ayers, who sketched the earliest image of the Valley (below).¹⁸ Upon returning to Mariposa, Hutchins described what they had found to an editor of the *Mariposa Gazette*, who published it on August 9, 1855. The description begins:

Having just returned from taking views of the Yo-Semity Valley and its waterfalls, it may not be uninteresting to your readers to mention a few little facts concerning the trip. I have no doubt ere many years have elapsed, this wonderful valley will attract the lovers

¹⁵ “Yosemite: Its Wonders and Its Beauties” by John S. Hittell (1868) (considered to be the first guide book of the area). Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “[t]he only spot that I have ever found that came up to the brag.”

¹⁶ *New York Independent*, March 1860, quoted in Hutchins, “In the Heart of the Sierras,” p. 21. A history of Yosemite Valley and its early inhabitants is provided by Linda Green, in “Yosemite: The Park and its Resources” (1987), “The First Inhabitants.” It is available on the internet at https://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_resources/.

¹⁷ *Daily Alta California*, Vol. 20, No. 6503, January 4, 1868, “Memorial of J. M. Hutchings and J. C. Lamon to the Senate and Assembly of the State of California.”

¹⁸ Hutchings wrote about the trip in his book, “In the Heart of the Sierras,” by James Mason Hutchings (Pacific Press Publishing House, 1888), available on-line at http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/in_the_heart_of_the_sierras/.

of the beautiful from all parts of the world; and be as famed as Niagara, for its wild sublimity, and magnificent scenery.

[D]escending towards the Yo-Semity Valley, we came upon a high point, clear of trees, from whence we had our first view of this singular and romantic valley; and as the scene opened in full view before us, we were almost speechless with wondering admiration, at its wild and sublime grandeur. "What!" exclaimed one at length, "have we come to the end of all things?" "Can this be the opening of the Seventh Seal?" cried another. "This far, very far exceeds Niagara," says a third. We had been out from Mariposa about four days and the fatigue of the journey had made us weary and a little peevish, but when our eyes looked upon the almost terrific grandeur of this scene, all, all was forgotten. "I never expected to behold so beautiful a sight. This scene alone amply repays me for the travel." "I should have lost the most magnificent sight that I ever saw, had I not witnessed this!" were exclamations of pleasurable surprise that fell from the lips of all, as we sat down to drink in the varied beauties of this intoxicating and enchanting scene.

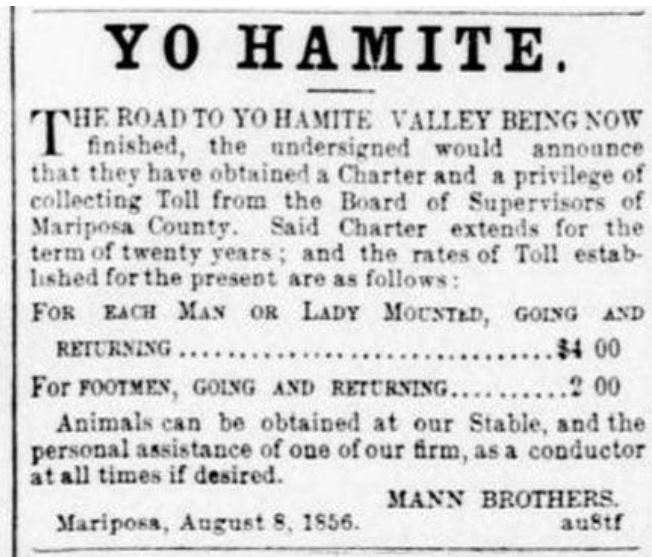
One of the first sketches of Yosemite Valley, made by Thomas Ayers during the 1855 Hutchings trip, appears below.



1855 sketch of Yosemite Valley by Thomas Ayers

In August of 1855 brothers Milton and Houston Mann made the trip into the Valley. The two Manns, joined by their brother Andrew "undertook construction of a toll trail between

Mormon Bar (below Mariposa) and Yosemite Valley. Their saddle route used existing Indian trails as far as present Wawona, then followed Alder Creek a short distance, reached the rim of the valley at or near Old Inspiration Point, and then dropped to the valley floor near the base of Bridal Veil Fall.”¹⁹ In August, 1856 the Board of Supervisors of Mariposa County approved the Mann’s request to collect tolls on “a good trail or toll road suitable to the travel of horses and foot passengers” commencing “near the Mormon Bar on Mariposa Creek,” proceeding to the South Fork of the Merced River, then on to “the lower end of Yo Hamite valley [sic], thence through the said valley to the upper end thereof near the great Natural Falls.” The entire distance of the trail was about 40 miles.²⁰



An August 1856 advertisement for the Mann brothers trail into Yosemite Valley, published in the Mariposa Gazette.

In 1864 American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt visited the Valley and painted several views, including the below “Valley of the Yosemite.”

¹⁹ “Yosemite National Park Roads and Bridges,” HAER No. CA-117, p. 4.

²⁰ The location of “the old Mann Brothers trail” today has inspired spirited discussions and the sharing of maps on internet Yosemite boards, such as <https://yosemitenews.info/forum/read.php?3,64282,64282>.



Bierstadt's 1864 "Valley of the Yosemite."

Henry Washburn, then living in Bridgeport, is believed to have trekked into Yosemite Valley on the Mann Brothers trail in 1860. He fell in love with it, and came to play a leading role in the history of the Valley and in the building of the now famous Wawona Hotel. Henry, Edward and John Washburn spent most of their adult lives in the area, with annual visits from youngest brother Julius (a Putney farmer). Their story is continued in Chapter 5.