

Seaborn Settlers: The Atlantic to Pacific Passage in the Gold Rush Era

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American migration to California by sea began July 31, 1846, with the arrival of the ship *Brooklyn* at the San Francisco Bay, carrying 238 Mormon settlers, 100 of whom were children. Fleeing persecution in the east, they were religious refugees who sought to meet up with the main body of Saints traveling overland with Brigham Young. Although whalers and Boston traders had been putting into the bay for several years, the *Brooklyn* was the first known vessel to carry families around Cape Horn to California. With some trepidation, it sailed through the Golden Gate shortly after the Bear Flag Revolt kicked off the Mexican American War. The *Brooklyn*'s passengers more than doubled the population in the Bay Area and soon turned sleepy Yerba Buena village near the abandoned Spanish Presidio and Mission into the vibrant city by the sea, the "Emporium of the West."

Unbeknownst to either country as the treaty ending the Mexican American War was about to be signed, gold was discovered at Coloma. Samuel Brannan sent newspaper reports by express riders to eastern newspapers. The new military governor sent official reports and physical proof to President James K. Polk, who affirmed the truthfulness of rumors about the discovery during his annual address to the nation. He had been urging settlement of the Oregon Territory and acquisition of the strategic Pacific port. Suddenly a quarter of a million people, motivated by "gold fever," sought any means of getting there as fast as possible.

Despite the \$600 cost to sail from the east coast to the Pacific shores, only a small percentage of immigrants to the west traveled by covered wagon. Sailing was cheaper and safer than the California and Oregon Trails. From the Gold Rush until 1869 with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, the vast majority of immigrants from the eastern states, the midwest, and Europe reached the west coast by sea around Cape Horn, or by a combination of sea and rail routes, crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific through Latin America.

Ship passenger lists provide useful genealogical data for the years in which freight and passengers were dependent on maritime transit. In the railroad era, passage might have been booked from the European point of origin across the Atlantic with connecting tickets for the train. In this case, passenger lists and naturalization records can still assist genealogical research. If train tickets were purchased after arrival, documentation of the rail travel is not available.

- **Olive Tree Genealogy** at <http://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/index.shtml>
- **Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild** at <http://www.immigrantships.net/>
- **Steven Morse One-Step** search engines for various ports at <http://www.stevemorse.org/>
- National Archive's **Famine Irish Passenger Record Data File** (FIPAS) documents 700,000 New York arrivals from 1846 to 1851.
<http://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=180&cat=GP44&tf=F&bc=sl>
- **Ancestry.com's Immigration and Travel** search page accesses over 60 million names.
<http://search.ancestry.com/search/category.aspx?cat=40>.
- See **Ancestry's Card Catalog** for Boston, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820-1954; Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1800-1948; and Baltimore Passenger Lists, 1820-1948 and 1954-1957.
- **San Francisco Genealogy** at <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/californiabound/cb188.htm>
- **Ship Brooklyn passengers** at <http://shipbrooklyn.com/passengers.html>

ATLANTIC TO PACIFIC ROUTES

- **Via Cape Horn:** 24,000 miles in 5-6 months. The clipper *Flying Cloud* set a record of 89 days from New York to San Francisco in 1851.
- **Via the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Lake Nicaragua:** Cornelius Vanderbilt's steamships from the east coast deposited passengers on the Mosquito Coast (Nicaragua) for a train ride with the **Accessory Transit Company** to Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific where another steamship would transport the passengers the rest of the way to San Francisco. This route was the quickest and cheapest route. Thanks to a corporate battle, Vanderbilt's companies were soon carrying 2,000 passengers a month at a fare of \$300 each, later reduced to \$150.
- **Via the Isthmus of Panama:** William Aspinwall and George Law jointly ran the east coast to Panama leg. Aspinwall built up the Panama to San Francisco leg with his Pacific Mail and Steamship Company. Passengers took a steamship from New York to Cuba to Chagres, Panama, then traveled one week by mule across the isthmus, avoiding local bandits if possible, to wait for passage on a steamer to San Francisco on the Pacific side of the isthmus. Total journey for \$600 in 4 weeks (several years' salary for a laborer). Many took Charles Morgan's Empire City Line from New Orleans to Cuba to Panama. See US, New Orleans-Passenger Lists, 1820-1902 on FamilySearch.org. A stagecoach line and railroad preceded the famous Panama Canal building.
- **Via stage coach across Mexico from Vera Cruz to San Blas/Acapulco or Ventana** to pick up a ship from San Blas to San Diego, San Pedro/Los Angeles, Monterey or San Francisco.
- **Isthmus of Panama Passenger Information.** Lists of ship passengers and wagon trains bound for California between 1848 and 1873 were transcribed from newspaper microfilms. Names are linked to the Pacific-based ship they later boarded for the final leg of the journey to San Francisco, whenever possible. <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/californiabound/cbindex.htm>
- **Passenger Lists for those bound from New York to California for the Gold Rush, published 1851-1860 & 1865-1873 in the New York Daily Times.**

The first trans-Atlantic steamship run was in 1838. The last of the Red Swallowtail packet ships ran in 1881. For a timeline of maritime migration, see <http://library.mysticseaport.org/exhibits/me-time.cfm>

Nearly everyone who returned to the east coast from California went via Panama or Nicaragua on their return home, regardless of how they got to California in the first place. Between 1848-1869 when the transcontinental railroad was completed, 808,769 passengers crossed the isthmus. The route was used to convey \$64 million worth of gold from California, and to bring in specie.

Cape Horn passage. Tens of thousands of passengers came to California via the Cape Horn route until 1850. New Englanders had been sailing around Cape Horn for many years, braving weeks of fierce storms and terrifying conditions in the southern latitudes. Thanks to navigational advances from Nathaniel Bowditch and Matthew Maury's charts, ships sailed from east coast seaports into the Gulf Stream, heading east across the Atlantic nearly to the Cape Verde Islands to pick up the trade winds, which slanted them SW across the Atlantic to put in at Rio de Janeiro. There, ships replenished their stores and continued their 13,328 mile voyage either through the narrow Straits of Magellan or by rounding the Cape itself. Battling gales, often driven back to the Atlantic, the lucky ones finally reached the Pacific. Exhausted vessels put in at Callao, the Juan Fernandez Islands, Valparaiso, or Talcahuano. Sailing far west of South America before heading north, ships were often becalmed before at last tacking east to the California coast to drop anchor in San Francisco Bay after five or six months at sea.

In the first year of the Gold Rush, at least 762 vessels sailed for California. 39,888 people arrived via

805 vessels between April 1849 and January 1850. By October 1850, 1,031 American vessels were en route to San Francisco, in addition to approximately 400 foreign vessels. The majority of vessels sailed from New York, about half as many from Boston, and a few dozen from New Bedford, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Philadelphia. The *John W. Cater* was the first Gold Rush ship to arrive in San Francisco. It was laden with \$70,000 worth of tools, fabric, hardware, building materials, and other items for sale. Eastern shipyards were busy converting whaling vessels and fishing schooners into what they hoped would be fit for the California voyage. Some vessels were unable to successfully around Cape Horn, and returned to Rio de Janeiro. America's Southerners were not major maritime participants in the Gold Rush because (1) New Englanders dominated the maritime trade, (2) European immigrants had swelled the population of the northern states, and (3) because most of the vessels sailing from southern ports were carrying cotton or general cargo to New York or Boston for San Francisco.

European vessels began sailing to San Francisco in great number in 1850 from Great Britain, France, Scandinavia, Germany, and South American ports. Liverpool, London, Halifax, Glasgow, Stockholm, Le Havre, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bremen, Hamburg, Genoa, Honolulu, Lahaina, Manila, and Hong Kong were the significant European departure ports during the Gold Rush. British shipowners sent their vessels on lucrative cruises from England to America's East Coast to California to China and back. Commonly, "mining companies" were established or lotteries held for tickets to California.

Most of the Cape Horn vessels were owned or chartered by co-ops or joint stock companies. Argonauts would pool their resources with funds from businessmen. Speculators financed others for a cut of the profits, but did not go to California themselves. Typically, about 100 enterprising parties would pay \$300 each to purchase a vessel, outfit and provision the ship, then use it as a home after reaching California. Many carried a speculative cargo of goods the company hoped to sell to fellow Argonauts. Often neighbors from a town or village would form a company.

102 of these joint stock companies amounting to 4,200 men, were incorporated in Massachusetts alone. Often the name of the company was chosen to reflect the location of origin, such as Bristol County Mining and Trading Association, or the Old Harvard Company of Cambridge. The intent was to work together in harmony and perfect equality in the division of the gain. Specific rules were enacted for orderly conduct on board. Many disallowed work on the Sabbath, gambling, drinking, or deals intended for personal benefit only. Return passage home was to be financed by the company for members who were injured or too sick to continue. Most companies created idealistic codes of conduct and were based on the concept of brotherhood. Unfortunately disagreement and discord became common throughout the monotonous voyages. Except for the passengers of the ship *Brooklyn*, "Every company disbanded immediately upon arrival or soon thereafter," according to Delgado (1990).

Crossing the Isthmus

The Isthmus of Panama is only 40 miles wide. Tens of thousands of gold seekers crossed Panama and Nicaragua to make connections with ships sailing north to San Francisco. By the 1830s, interest in Panama as a transit point became intense. In 1847, Congress began subsidizing two steamship companies – the United States Mail Steamship Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company on the Panama route to carry mail to California. The first Pacific Mail steamer left New York for the Pacific on October 6, 1848. The ship was built to accommodate 60 passengers, but carried more than 360, as gold fever had already set in. Routinely, passengers would be stuck in Panama, piled up waiting for a sailing vessel that could take them north. Ships would bring passengers from the Atlantic seaboard or New Orleans to Panama where they would disembark at Chagres. They crossed the Isthmus by mule or on foot, at times using small native canoes piloted by native boatman.

Because of the rivers shallow depth, steamers could not always reach the navigation head at Gorgona. Travelers either walked over the mountains or arranged passage with the mule train to Panama City. Unfortunately there was a woeful lack of vessels to carry travelers North. Disease killed many. Cholera malaria and general dissipation killed hundreds. Funerals were held daily. Conditions led to angry demonstrations, but there simply were not enough steamers. The voyage from Panama City to San Francisco averaged 20 days, with a stopover at San Blas or Acapulco for coal and additional provisions. It was 3,220 miles from Panama Bay to the Golden Gate, with stops at Monterey, San Diego, Acapulco, San Blas, and Manzanillo. A number of sailing vessels took passengers from Panama to San Francisco as there were not enough steamers. The United States Mail Steamship Company and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company were locked in fierce competition – which was good for the passengers because of price wars. “Opposition steamers” were condemned for their bad treatment of passengers and dangerous conditions.

Competing with Aspinwall was Cornelius Vanderbilt who opened a new route across Nicaragua. Peak use of the Nicaragua route was from 1851-1855. It was easier to navigate the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua than to deal with the Chagres River. Vanderbilt’s route was notorious for its unsanitary, unsafe conditions and utter disregard of passenger comfort. There were several disasters with considerable loss of life. Filibustering Yankee freebooters brought chaos.

A third hybrid route involved the 213 mile passage across Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec. There were regularly scheduled packet ships to Veracruz from 1850-1851. Travelers followed the National Highway over the mountains into the Valley of Mexico to the Pacific where ships were picked up at Ventosa or Mazatlan. Side wheelers and screw steamers were used along this route. The *Golden Gate* was not only plagued by accidents, but it transported 650 US Army troops to San Francisco in 1852, among whom cholera broke out killing one in six. Many Americans had their first experience with foreigners in Panama. Nearly everyone who returned to the east coast from California went via Panama or Nicaragua on their return home, regardless of how they got to California in the first place. Between 1848-1869 when the transcontinental railroad was completed, 808,769 passengers crossed the isthmus. The route was used to convey \$64 million worth of gold from California, and to bring in specie. There was very little money in circulation in California in the early years until the US Mint was opened in San Francisco in 1854. US currency was imported to California via the isthmus. Between 1849-1859, 20% of those who came to California went home again. The most important service by the Panama steamers was bringing the much coveted mail.

Suggested Reading

- Stephen Dando-Collins. Tycoon’s War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America’s Most Famous Military Adventurer. Cambridge, Massachusetts: DeCapo Press, 2008.
- James P. Delgado. To California by Sea: A Maritime History of the California Gold Rush (Studies in Maritime History)
- James P. Delgado. Gold Rush Port: The Maritime Archaeology of San Francisco’s Waterfront. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Marcus Lee Hansen. The Atlantic Migration, 1607-1860: A History of the Continuing Settlement of the United States. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1941.
- Charles Warren Haskins. The Argonauts of California, Being the Reminiscences of Scenes and Incidents That Occurred in California in Early Mining Days; by a Pioneer. Includes a compiled list of the "Names of Pioneers Who Came by Land and Sea to California in 1849."
- Michael H. Tepper. American Passenger Arrival Records: A Guide to the Records of Immigrants Arriving at American Ports by Sail and Steam, updated and enlarged. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing, 1993. (FHL 973 W27am 1993.)