

Shadows of the Past" presents an Antebellum history of the common citizen. Fifteen intriguing chapters explore historical events that challenged ordinary society and how common citizens responded to often violent and tragic circumstances.

Shadows of the Past: Chronicles of Life in Antebellum America

By B. P. Stricker

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SHADOWS OF THE PAST

Chronicles of Life in Antebellum America

B. P. STRICKER

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About the Author

B. P. Stricker is a dual degree holder with a Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Xavier University and a Master of Arts degree in American History from American Public University. He has a strong passion for the history of the United States, particularly the chaotic and tumultuous period of Antebellum America and the struggles of the ordinary people during that time. *Shadows of the Past* is his first venture authoring a book, and he anticipates continuing this challenging undertaking in the future. Originally from Ohio, he currently lives in Florida with his wife, Keri, and their dog, Max.

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Chapter 1

Awful Calamity

If a man's hour comes, be he brave or coward, there is no escape for him when he has once been born.

—Homer, *The Iliad*, 762 B.C.

The Antebellum Period was a time of significant and rapid transportation improvements for the nation. Transportation during the early years of the period was relatively simple, but it was evolving. The primary means of moving people and goods was the horse, used either with a rider or attached to a carriage or wagon. Waterways were also used to transport goods over short and long distances. Flatboats, keelboats, and barges were the principal means of transporting cargo and travelers. However, the invention and improvement of the steam engine to power steamboats significantly changed how commodities and passengers were moved throughout the country.

The steamboat offered several advantages over previous methods of transportation. Steamboats could transport a larger quantity of highly demanded supplies and provisions and reach their destinations faster than other types of conveyance. They could also travel upstream against the water current, which was a significant improvement over other water vessels. Other boats could slowly progress against the current, but it was an arduous and exhausting task. The steamboat did not need any power source other than one or two men fueling the boat's engine with wood and, later on, coal. This invention proved to be a more cost-effective way for merchants to transport their products to markets, which had been a laborious, expensive, and time-consuming process before.

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Because the country relied heavily on rivers and canals for moving products and people, enterprising businesspeople recognized the profit potential in the steamboat industry. Entrepreneurs took advantage of the need and began investing in it as a private venture. Unlike other sectors, no public or government funding was available for steamboat building. However, these forward-thinking individuals saw an opportunity for significant profits and eagerly competed with each other to attract passengers and merchants to use their steamboat lines for hauling their cargo.

In 1826, only one hundred forty-three steamboats were operating in America. By the 1850s, the number of steamboats had significantly increased, most traveling on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers and their tributaries. Some of these boats were like extravagant floating mansions, able to house hundreds of passengers and provide accommodations for overnight stays of up to a week. These larger steamboats were popular among both pleasure seekers and the wealthy upper-class segments of society for their offerings of luxurious services, beautiful decor, comforting ambiance, and magnificent accommodations. All pleasures that most people aspired to experience at least once in their lives.

The *Princess*, a majestic vessel whose home port was New Orleans, epitomized the grandeur and extravagance of how the affluent traveled. In 1859, a newspaper in Mississippi described the *Princess* as a vessel one could look upon as a castle:

The steamboat *Princess* was about four years old. She was built specifically for the long-established packet line between this city, Vicksburg, and the intermediate landings and was necessarily from the character of the patronage incidental to this trade, a first-class packet complete in all her appointments, spacious, strong, swift, with all the appliances for comfort that have so wonderfully changed the character of steamboat building in the last ten years and which made her indeed a 'moving palace.'¹

1 "The Disaster to the *Princess*," *The Yazoo Democrat*, March 5, 1859.

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The allure and romance of a steamboat journey were undeniable, even though most were far from elaborate. Most of these boats were built primarily to transport goods from one place to another. While these cargo boats sometimes carried passengers, the number of passengers was usually much fewer than the larger, more elegant steamboats explicitly designed to attract customers.

Incredibly popular as steamboats were with the public, they were not known as the safest mode of transport. Unfortunate and unexpected incidents were frequent due to numerous issues. The boat's captain and crew's maritime expertise significantly impacted the ship's handling during its journey. Regrettably, at times, the captain and crew had deficient navigational abilities. Overuse of steamboats also led to inadequate maintenance, increasing the risk of mechanical failures during travel. The boats could also become entangled in narrow waterways, resulting in the vessel and its passengers being grounded for long periods in shallow water. At other times, if the boat became caught in deeper water, the force of the current could cause it to partially submerge and, on occasion, sink completely.

The steamboat's most dangerous aspect was its most essential one—the steam engine itself. Despite being a marvel of modern technology, the steam engine had limitations. If pushed beyond its capabilities, it was not unusual to experience a breakdown. If pushed too far, the engine could combust, igniting any flammable cargo onboard and the ship's wooden frame. Sadly, when this happened, the outcome was often a catastrophic disaster. The steamboat *Lexington* was the victim of one such tragedy on January 13, 1840, shortly after it set sail from New York for Stonington, Connecticut.

The *Lexington* had one hundred forty-three passengers on board and was carrying a cargo of one hundred fifty bales of cotton. On the day the *Lexington* set sail from New York with a final destination in Boston, its commander, Jacob Vanderbilt, reported that he could not captain the boat on its journey because of an illness. Vanderbilt's replacement was a veteran seafaring captain named George Child. An article in the January 21, 1840, edition of the *Rutland Herald* reported the “awful calamity:”

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The *Lexington* left New York for Stonington [Connecticut] on Monday, 3 o'clock P.M., having, it is believed, about *one hundred and fifty passengers*. A large quantity of cotton was placed upon her decks. At 7 o'clock, when about two miles from Eaton's Neck, the cotton took fire near the smoke pipe.

The boat was headed to shore as soon as the efforts to extinguish the fire proved unsuccessful. She was provided with three boats—yet such was the panic which took possession of all minds that they were hoisted out while the boat was still under headway and immediately *swamped*. The engine, a few minutes later, gave way leaving her utterly unmanageable. The scene which ensued is described as most appalling.

Captain Chester Hilliard, of Norwich, a passenger on board from whom we have gathered these few particulars, states that soon after the engine stopped, the passengers began to leave the boat on boxes, bales, etc. In company with one of the Firemen, he [Hilliard] was so fortunate as to secure a cotton bale, to which he lashed himself. He remained upon this bale, the wind blowing off Long Island shore, until 11 o'clock this morning, when he was taken up by the sloop, *Merchant*, of Southport.²

Only four people survived the ship's fire. Captain Chester Hilliard, a passenger on the *Lexington*—not its captain—was the only passenger to survive. He was interviewed two days after the incident and provided a more precise account of what occurred aboard the *Lexington*. In a letter to the same newspaper, his interviewer, Captain Brooks of the steamship *Nimrod*, provided Captain Hilliard's description of the incident:

The boat left New York at 3 o'clock—he thinks with about 150 passengers and full freight. At about half-past 7 in the evening, hearing the cry of fire, he ran on deck and saw the fire bursting through the woodwork round

2 "Awful Calamity," *Rutland Herald*, January 21, 1830.

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the chimney. All was confusion and terror in a moment. He ran up to the wheel to advise running for shore, which Capt. Childs informed him they were doing, he being at the wheel. He then ran down on deck.

An attempt had been made to rig the fire engine onboard but did not succeed. They rushed for the boats, and jumped in, to the number he thinks of 20 in each and lowered them down while the boat was under full headway and they were filled immediately and he is of the opinion that not one of the persons in them escaped. The lifeboat was thrown over, but caught the water wheel, and was lost. He saw several passengers floating with life preservers, but think none survived until morning. He advised to tumble over the cotton bales and assisted, he thinks, in getting over 10 or 12, and lashed himself to one. He remained on the bale of cotton and was taken off by Captain Meeker of the sloop *Merchant*.³

Three other people on the boat—all crewmembers—survived the ordeal. They included Stephen Manchester, the boat's pilot, and Charles Smith, a fireman. Like Captain Hillard, both were rescued while adrift in Long Island Sound by the sloop *Merchant*. The fourth survivor was the *Lexington's* Second Mate, David Crowley. Seaman Crowley drifted aimlessly for nearly two days, grasping onto a bale of cotton, and finally washed ashore fifty miles east of the incident. Exhausted and dehydrated, he struggled to pull himself on shore and finally reached a nearby house, where the residents immediately helped him inside and called for medical assistance.

The ship's surviving pilot, Stephen Manchester, later provided a vivid account of the destruction of the *Lexington*. An excerpt of his testimony explains how quickly the boat was consumed by fire:

When I first heard the alarm of fire, about half-past 7 o'clock, someone came to the wheelhouse door and told

³ Ibid.

me that the boat was on fire. My first movement was to step out of the wheelhouse and look aft; saw the upper deck burning all around the smoke pipe, the flames were coming up through the promenade deck. I returned into the wheelhouse and put the wheel hard-a-port to steer the boat for the land. I then thought it very doubtful whether the fire could be extinguished.

We had not yet headed to land when something gave way, which I believe was the tiller rope. The engine was then working, and the boat fell ahead more to the eastward, Captain Child then came into the wheelhouse, and put his hand to the spoke of the wheel, and, as he did so, the rope gave way; presumed it was the rope attached to the wheel; at the same time the smoke came into the wheelhouse, and we were obliged to go out. I suspect he went aft, but I never saw him afterward.

The main deck now fell in as far as the capstan, and the people had by this time got overboard, some of them drowned, and others hurried on to the baggage cars, the raft, and other things. What was left of the main deck was now on fire, and got us cornered up in so small a space that we could do nothing more by throwing water. There were then only eight or ten persons astern on the steamboat, and about thirty on the forecastle. They were asking me what they should do; and I told them I saw no chance for any of us; that if we stayed there, we should be burned to death, and if we went overboard, we should probably perish.

I then took a piece of spun yarn and made it fast to my coat, and also to the rail, and so eased myself down upon the raft. There were two or three others on it already, and my weight sank it. I held on to the rope until it came up again; and when it did, I sprang up and caught a piece of railing, which was in the water, and from thence got on a bale of cotton, where there was a man sitting; found the bale was made fast to the railing; I took out my knife and cut it off. At the time I cut this rope, I saw some person standing on a piece of railing, who asked me if there was room for another. I made no

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answer, and he jumped and knocked off the man that was with me, and I hauled him in again. I caught a piece of board, which was floating past, and shoved the bale clean off from the raft, and used the board to endeavor to get inshore at Crane Neck Point, in which I could not succeed.⁴

Panicked passengers tried to plunge lifeboats into the frigid water but were unsuccessful. Waves immediately flooded the lifeboats and sank them. One lifeboat drifted too close to the boat's paddlewheel and was crushed by its rotation, sending its passengers into the freezing winter water. The burning steamboat drifted for hours offshore. The flames consuming it could be seen from the shores of Connecticut and Long Island. It finally sank at 3:00 a.m.⁵

An official inquiry was conducted to investigate the circumstances surrounding the tragic events of the *Lexington* incident. The conclusion was that the fire resulted from a defect in the ship's design, making it more susceptible to an accidental fire than other vessels. That defect had to do with the ship's boilers. The boilers were initially built to burn wood but had been retrofitted so coal could be used as fuel. Excessive amounts of coal were fueling the boilers on the *Lexington* because of the bitter winter weather. When sparks from the boat's overheated smokestack set the casing on fire, the flames ignited bales of cotton stored improperly on deck and too close to the smokestack. The result was a fire that spread incredibly fast, consuming most of the steamboat within minutes. Although the *Lexington* was sailing on inland waters, its predicament was worsened by the rough winter waters of Long Island Sound.⁶

The "moving palace" mentioned earlier, the *Princess*, a very different vessel than the moderately accommodating *Lexington*,

4 S. A. Howland, *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States* (Worcester, MA: Dorr & Howland Publisher, 1840), 182-185.

5 Kim Sheridan, "Appalling Calamity": Loss of the Steamboat *Lexington*. <https://connecticuthistory.org>.

6 William Frohlich, "What Happened to the Lexington?" May 16, 2019, Huntington Historical Society, New York.

faced a similar fate. However, it was navigating an inland river with milder winds and currents. The ship was a sidewheel paddleboat. It was a modern marvel of production and epitomized the classic image of an elegant Mississippi riverboat. It was only four years old in 1859 but had already received significant renovations to its mechanics and accommodations. It arguably could be claimed to be one of the most attractive and swiftest steamboats sailing on the Mississippi River.⁷

On February 27, 1859, the *Princess* made port at Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It needed to resupply and pick up passengers traveling to New Orleans for that year's Mardi Gras celebration. The crew maintained the ship's engine pressure while docking to make up for lost time from the layover. When it left Baton Rouge, the *Princess* had an assortment of cargo and was carrying about four hundred passengers. As the ship left port, there seemed to be no problems, then suddenly, about six miles downstream, disaster struck.⁸

James Morris Morgan, about thirteen years old at the time, had gone to the river to see if his parents—who were supposed to travel on the *Princess*—had left as scheduled. He provides a shocking depiction of the terror that occurred:

The *Princess* had just drawn out into the stream, and as I stood watching her as she glided down the river a great column of white smoke suddenly went up from her and she burst into flames. She was loaded with cotton. As though by magic the inhabitants of the town gathered at the riverside and in the crowd, I spied my brother-in-law, Charles La Noue, in a buggy. He called to me and I jumped in alongside of him. We dashed down the river road in the direction of the burning boat. The high levee on our right shut out the view of the river, so we could only see the great column of smoke.

At last, in a state of great excitement, we arrived at the plantation of Mr. Conrad. 'Brother Charlie' jumped

7 Kelby Ouchley, *The Disaster of the Steamboat Princess*, March 14, 2014. 64 Parishes.

8 Ibid.

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out of the vehicle and ran toward the house while I made the horse fast to a tree. I then mounted the levee from where I could see floating cotton bales with people on them; men in skiffs, from both sides of the river, were rescuing the poor terror-stricken creatures and bringing them ashore.

From the levee, I rushed into the park in front of Mr. Conrad's residence and there saw a sight which can never be effaced from my memory. Mr. Conrad had had sheets laid on the ground amidst the trees and barrels of flour were broken open and the contents poured over the sheets. As fast as the burned and scalded people were pulled out of the river they were seized by the slaves and, while screaming and shrieking with pain and fright, they were forcibly thrown down on the sheets and rolled in flour. Some in their agony could not lie still, and, with the white sheet wrapped round them, looking like ghosts, they danced a weird hornpipe while filling the air with their screams. Terrified by the awful and uncanny scene, I hid behind a huge tree so that I should not see it but no tree could prevent me from hearing those awful cries and curses which echo in my ears even now.

Suddenly, to my horror, one of the white specters, wrapped in a sheet, his disfigured face plastered over with flour, staggered toward my hiding place, and before I could run away from the hideous object, it extended its arms toward me and quietly said, 'Don't be afraid, Jimmie, it is me, Mr. Cheatham. I am dying—hold my hand!' And he sank upon the turf beside me. Although dreadfully frightened, I managed between sobs to ask the question uppermost on my mind: 'Can you tell me where I can find my father and mother?' The ghostlike man only replied with a cry which seemed to wrench his soul from his body. He shivered for an instant, and then lay still. A slave passing by pointed to the body and casually remarked, 'He done dead.'

When I found 'Brother Charlie,' he was ministering to the maimed, but found time to tell me my parents had

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stopped at Baton Rouge in the night and thereby had saved their lives. I returned at once to my home, where I was comforted in the strong arms of Katish, my old black nurse.⁹

The explosion of the *Princess* was unexpected, and the intensity of the blast made everyone within hearing distance wonder what had occurred. Countless newspaper reports provided vivid and detailed coverage of the devastation. The *Yazoo Democrat*—a Mississippi newspaper—offered the following account of the demise of the *Princess* and many of its passengers:

There appears to have been not the slightest warning of the tremendous explosion, which took place about 10 o'clock on Sunday morning whilst the packet was on her way to this city, and but a short time after she had left Baton Rouge. Four of the large, powerful boilers exploded at once, driving aft clearing all before them, and the whole upper cabin, staterooms, hurricane deck, texas [deck], and all, fell in almost immediately, and in a few moments, the flames burst forth. The shock was sudden and so tremendous, so utterly unlooked for, as apparently to have bewildered the bravest and most experienced men.

The force of the explosion, or some other lucky accident, gave the boat a turn towards the bank. She soon struck on a sand bar that jutted out into the river from the shore where she grounded. The mate on duty, with several of the crew, jumped on the bar and succeeded in making the boat fast. In the meanwhile, those who were uninjured busied themselves in endeavoring to rescue their unfortunate companions buried in the burning ruins of the cabins and gathered in which were many ladies and children. All who could be moved were taken on the sandbank, there to await,

⁹ James Morris Morgan, *Recollections of a Rebel Reefer* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 3-5.

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in a state of agony and horror that can faintly be imagined, the hand of rescue from some passing vessel.¹⁰

The boat had no manifest that would have recorded the names of her passengers. Still, it is estimated that from seventy to two hundred unfortunate travelers either drowned, burned to death, or were otherwise injured. Responsibility for the catastrophe was attributed directly to the ship's engineer, who was obsessively determined that the *Princess* reach New Orleans on schedule after the layover in Baton Rouge, where additional passengers had been boarded:

The *Vicksburg Whig* of Thursday last says among the many incidents related to us of the terrible disaster, we have been told that one of the subordinate engineers, while dying, related to a lady the circumstances of the explosion, and in his dying moments exclaimed, 'I told him she would not bear so much steam!'—evidently referring to the foolhardiness of the engineer who was killed, and who was determined to run her to New Orleans within a certain time or blow her up.¹¹

The Antebellum Era faced many other severe accidents involving passengers traveling in steamboats. Most of them involved boiler explosions, as in the April 25, 1838, disaster of the steamboat *Moselle* as it left Cincinnati, Ohio, destined for St. Louis, Missouri, with two hundred fifty-eight passengers on board.

The *Moselle* was built in a Cincinnati, Ohio, shipyard and was rumored to be one of the fastest vessels on river waters. It had proved itself as such in several trips to and from Portsmouth, Ohio, and to and from St. Louis, Missouri, making those journeys in record times. The only competition for the *Moselle's* swiftness was the *Ben Franklin*, which departed on the Ohio River from Cincinnati just minutes before the *Moselle* left port.

¹⁰ Ibid., "The Disaster to the Princess."

¹¹ "The Princess Disaster," *The Opelousas Courier*, March 26, 1859.

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The *Moselle* was captained and owned by a young mariner named Perrin. He was proud to be the commander of the fastest steamboat sailing the inland rivers and intended to maintain his boat's reputation at all costs. His intent, to prove the worthiness of his ship, was to make up lost ground and overtake the *Ben Franklin*, which was well ahead of him heading for St. Louis. If Perrin had any chance of catching the *Ben Franklin*, he knew he would need the total capacity of all four of the boat's boilers at total capacity upon departure. Excess steam building up in the boilers was hazardous while a steamboat was docked. Most steamboats let off steam when docked for safety purposes. But Captain Perrin was adamant about allowing the steam to build in the boilers while passengers boarded. The *Richmond Enquirer* newspaper memorialized one crew member's reaction to the captain's order:

The engineers remonstrated, but in vain. One of them opened the furnace doors to diminish the heat, at which the captain became very angry, and had them closed. The engineer seeing this, and anticipating the result, stepped on board a raft which lay alongside, and the moment after the *Moselle* put off, the correctness of his judgment was verified by the awful catastrophe.¹²

At about five o'clock, the final passengers boarded the boat. Once it was pushed safely from the dock to begin its journey, the captain ordered the crew to apply full steam from all four boilers. The crew complied. It only moved a matter of yards from the dock when spectators on shore witnessed the traumatizing occurrence:

The whole of the vessel forward of the wheels was blown to splinters; every timber (as an eye witness declares), 'appeared to be twisted, as trees sometimes are when struck by lightning.' As soon as the accident occurred, the boat floated down the stream for about one hundred yards, where she sank, leaving the upper part of the cabin out of the water, and the baggage, together with

12 "The *Moselle*," *Richmond Enquirer*, May 13, 1838.

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many struggling human beings, floating on the surface of the river.

It was remarked that the force of the explosion was unprecedented in the history of steam; its effect was like that of a mine of gunpowder. All the boilers, four in number, burst simultaneously; the deck was blown into the air, and the human beings who crowded it were doomed to instant destruction. Fragments of the boiler and human bodies were thrown both to the Kentucky and Ohio shores, although the distance to the former was a quarter of a mile.

Captain Perrin, master of the *Moselle*, at the time of the accident was standing on the deck, above the boiler, in conversation with another person. He was thrown to a considerable height on the steep embankment of the river and killed, while his companion was merely prostrated on the deck, and escaped injury. Another person was blown to the distance of a hundred yards, with such force, according to the report of a reliable witness, that his head and a part of his body penetrated the roof of a house. Some of the passengers who were in the after part of the boat, and who were uninjured by the explosion, jumped overboard. An eyewitness says that he saw sixty or seventy in the water at one time, of whom not a dozen reached the shore.¹³

About fifty percent of the two hundred and fifty-eight passengers onboard the *Moselle* at the time of the explosion were either killed, injured, or missing. The rest were saved by rescue efforts after the explosion or were simply unaccounted for.¹⁴

Laws were in force addressing safety aboard these boats, but safety was often overlooked for speed, comfort, and profit. Congress passed the Steamboat Law of 1832, but those operating the boats generally ignored compliance with any congressional navigation laws. In the early 1850s, approximately seven boiler

13 James T. Lloyd, *Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* (Cincinnati, OH: James T. Lloyd & Co.), 89 – 91.

14 *Ibid.*, “The *Moselle*.”

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explosions on separate steamboats killed nearly seven hundred people.

Realizing the first law was a failure, Congress made a second, more authoritative attempt in 1852 to regulate the safety of steamboat transportation. The law, among other things, provided regulations for the construction and inspection of steamboat boilers, periodic inspections of the vessels' hulls, requirements to have effective firefighting and evacuation equipment onboard, and mandated that all steamboat operators carrying passengers be licensed. During and after the Civil War Era, the problem of passenger safety while traveling on steamboats and the frequency of steamboat disasters continued. The *Sultana* disaster in 1865 stands as the worst in maritime history, claiming the lives of over one thousand people.

Further Reading:

S. A. Howland, *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States* (Worcester: Dorr, Howland, and Company, 1840, 2012)

George Byron Merrick, *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

K.T. Rowland, *Steam at Sea: The History of Steam Navigation* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1970)

Chapter 6

Quibbles of Law

Here you have, then, a truly golden age with halcyon days.

William T. Coleman, circa 1849

The Antebellum Period is often thought of as mostly involving issues and events occurring in the northern and southern states. But during that period, the United States expanded from the East Coast to the West Coast and beyond. The nation, proclaiming the right of “manifest destiny”—the belief that the country was destined to expand its borders throughout the entire North American continent—began acquiring huge expanses of occupied and unoccupied territories.

Ten years after Texas declared its independence from Mexico, the United States annexed the republic and made it a state of the Union in late December 1845. Also, in 1846, the Oregon Territory was acquired from England as the result of the Oregon Treaty. Land acquired in 1848 after victory in the Mexican War provided the country with immense territories in the Southwest. Newly formed states were joining the Union at a record pace. Expanding the nation’s borders from its East Coast to its West Coast and from the northern to the southern borders opened up an immense region for population growth and economic development., always with the obstacle of the enslaved at the forefront.

At that time, California was the country’s most western territory. It had been part of Mexico since 1821, but in June 1846, the Bear Flag Revolt against Mexico succeeded, and California declared itself an independent republic. It was a short-lived Republic of California. Federal troops and United States settlers

were already present in the area and had assisted in the fight for California's independence from Mexico. The republic was only a few weeks old when the United States Navy and federal troops on the ground initiated a quick and successful invasion. The new Republic of California was no more. It was officially under federal military authority.

For the most part, the territory remained undeveloped and sparsely populated. Then, in January 1848, a monumental happenstance occurred. James W. Marshall, while involved with building a sawmill on Johann Sutter's property, found some small trinkets in a stream. After close inspection, those trinkets turned out to be gold. Henry W. Bigler, who was working with Marshall at the mill, years later offered a first-hand account of the discovery:

Just when we had got partly to work, here came Mr. Marshall with his old wool hat in his hand, and stopped within six or eight yards of the saw pit, and exclaimed, 'Boys, I have got her now.' I being the nearest to him, and having more curiosity than the rest of the men, jumped from the pit and stepped to him, and on looking in his hat discovered say ten or twelve pieces of small scales of what proved to be gold. I picked up the largest piece, worth about fifty cents, and tested it with my teeth, and as it did not give, I held it aloft and exclaimed, 'gold, boys, gold!'¹

There are conflicting accounts of when gold was first discovered in California. Some accounts claim the discovery was made as early as 1841. However, the influx of settlers and miners from far reaches of the country began in 1848 when President James Polk notified the public that lucrative amounts of gold had been located in California near San Francisco. The president encouraged citizens to endure the burden and travel to California to populate the state and make the most of the opportunity to

1 James S. Brown, "Comprising California Gold—An Authentic History of the First Find, with the Names of Those Interested in the Discovery," *The Magazine of History* 48, no. 3, extra number 191 (1894): 8.

profit from the state's gold reserves. The *Eufaula Democrat* newspaper explained the excitement reported in New York about the discovery of gold in California and how it would affect those who are willing to risk the journey:

The news from California has caused a tremendous excitement in this city. Official letters have reached here that the late accounts about the gold mines discovered in the neighborhood of San Francisco is not only correct, but in all probability falls below the mark. The crews of whaling ships in the harbor have all turned to gold washing...

Today and yesterday a perfect emigration fever has sprung up, and the new line of mail steamers for California and Oregon will no sooner begin to run than even Texas will be forgotten in the brighter prospects of California. If the whole population of California turns out to wash gold, they must, of course, get their provisions from New York or Philadelphia, so that in the end the farmers and mechanics in old states will be made to share in the prosperity of the new.²

Americans hoping to make their fortune by mining for gold flowed into the San Francisco area from across the country. The prospect of striking it rich also attracted settlers from other countries as far away as China and Australia. In 1846, San Francisco was a sleepy town of about 200 residents. Most of those residents knew and helped each other when assistance was needed. With the influx of gold miners in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the town suddenly became a strange place to them.

By 1849, the city's population increased to nearly 25,000. By 1852, it had expanded to 34,000. The town now had over one hundred saloons, almost fifty gambling houses, and more than 500 businesses that sold liquor. Brothels flourished because of a predominantly male population. Miners with newly acquired money from gold mining flocked into the city to spend, drink, gamble, and obtain female companionship. All of this

2 "The Gold Mine Fever," *The Eufaula Democrat*, November 14, 1848.

unsurprisingly increased the crime rate from inconsequential to critical. Property damage was now commonplace, violent assaults occurred daily, and the murder rate soared. San Francisco had indeed become the “wild, wild, west,” especially for certain ethnic groups.

Those who came to San Francisco from outside the United States and those who were native to the United States but deemed “undesirable” soon found themselves the target of personal violence. As a result, ethnic groups were compelled to settle together to protect themselves. It worked to a certain degree. But, with little to no law enforcement presence, there was nothing at the time that could prevent the tormenting of minorities or suppress the escalating crime rate, especially from local gangs.

One particular gang of criminals—with previous ties to the Bowery and Five Points gangs in New York—formed in San Francisco. Many of its members were from a recently discharged regiment that served in the Mexican War. Known as the Hounds, they claimed to be a defense league but, in reality, were a nativist troop whose objective was to prevent immigrants and certain natives from prospecting for gold anywhere gold fields were located. They were determined to expel all they deemed undesirable, not just from the area but from the country.

Initially, business owners employed members of the Hounds to track down sailors who purchased supplies after deserting their ships to pan for gold but failed to satisfy their accounts. The Hounds were somewhat successful with this venture, but the proceeds for the gang were not satisfactory to them. They eventually realized a more accessible and profitable return could be made by raiding immigrant camps and settlements and stealing whatever they desired.

However, the gang’s presence also affected the townspeople, who were not necessarily the gang’s intended targets of aggression. Initially, the public had a laissez-faire attitude toward the Hounds, ignoring their actions out of self-centeredness. They had no concern for the immigrant populations in their area and considered themselves invulnerable to the Hound’s activities. Their indifference to the Hounds proved beneficial to the band of aggressors. It allowed them to anchor themselves in the community and act with complete freedom to do as they pleased.

Annals of San Francisco provides an account of how the uncontrolled Hounds secured their position within the San Francisco community:

The 'hounds' were the natural consequence of such a state of things. A party, calling themselves by that name, was first faintly heard of towards the close of 1848, but it was only in the spring of the following year that their depredations excited much notice. In the desire to make fortunes easily and in a hurry, the overtoiled people of San Francisco paid little attention to anything but what immediately concerned themselves individually, and much crime was allowed to be committed with impunity because nobody cared, or had time to think about it, or to interfere in the matter. Thus, the 'hounds' had perpetrated many outrages perpetrated many outrages before public indignation was fully aroused.³

The Hounds feared no one or nothing because no adequate legal authority was in place to address their mayhem. They came and went as they pleased. They committed thefts and vandalized property. They ate and drank without any hint of paying for anything. They threatened citizens with violence if anyone attempted to interfere. Their terror in the town grew to the point that the uninvolved public was quickly becoming as much victims as the foreigners and native population in San Francisco:

To such a daring extent were matters carried that the body, proud of their strength and numbers, attempted a sort of military display, and on Sundays, armed with bludgeons and loaded revolvers, paraded the streets, in open daylight, with drum and fife playing, and banners flying.

It was in the dead of night, however, when their outrages were done. There were then neither lights in the unformed streets, nor a police force to watch over

³ Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York, NY: D. Appleton & Company, 1854), 554.

the safety of the town. The well-disposed citizens, fearful of brawls, retired early to their dwellings, and the more noise and rioting they might hear at a distance, the closer they crept into bed or prepared their weapons for the defense alone of their own proper domiciles.

At such times, the 'hounds' would march to the tent of known Chilenos, and tearing them down, rob and spoil the contents of value, and shamefully maltreat and even murder the inmates. At other times they would content themselves with extorting by threat large sums of money and gifts of jewels and articles of value from all classes of foreigners and sometimes from Americans themselves, though it was seldom they meddled with the latter.

A favorite sport was to intrude themselves, even in open day, in a numerous gang, upon taverns and hotels, and demand high priced drinks and food, which on receiving, for people were too much afraid of their lives and property to refuse, they would recklessly destroy the furniture nearest at hand, and forthwith decamp as boldly as they had entered, without troubling their heads as to who should pay for the damage or the articles consumed.⁴

The intimidated public still took no action. The Hounds continued their terroristic operations for months. However, during a specific attack by the Hounds, the circumstances of the raid changed everything. A member of their gang was shot and killed by a Chilean immigrant attempting to protect himself and his fellow refugees. The Hounds were outraged. In the following days, they regrouped and reorganized, now calling themselves the "San Francisco Society of Regulators," broadcasting the dangers of having South American immigrants in their community and guaranteeing protection to the residents of the city in their quest to eliminate the objectionable immigrants from the area:

⁴ *Ibid.*, 556.

Armed with firearms and heavy sticks, and under the command of one dressed in regimentals, whom they called *Lieutenant*, they paraded through the town in their usual ridiculous fashion, and towards evening proceeded to attack various Chilian tents. These they violently tore down, plundering them of money and valuables, which they carried away, and totally destroying on the spot such articles as they did not think it worthwhile to seize.

Without provocation, and in cold blood, they barbarously beat with sticks and stones, and cuffed and kicked the unoffending foreigners. Not content with that, they repeatedly and wantonly fired among the injured people, and amid the shrieks of terrified women and groans of wounded men, recklessly continued their terrible course in different quarters, wherever in fact malice or thirst for plunder led them.

This was in broad daylight; but there were no individuals brave or foolhardy enough to resist the progress of such a savage mob, whose exact force was unknown, but who were believed to be both numerous and desperate.⁵

Lawlessness in and around San Francisco pushed its citizens to their breaking point. The town had a political structure with elected officials filling certain offices, but the administration was disorganized and grossly incompetent. Many of the area's elected and appointed officials were open to accepting financial benefits from the illegalities occurring in their towns. The state of ineffective leadership finally fortified a group of prominent citizens to confront San Francisco's Alcalde [mayor and judicial magistrate], Thaddeus Leavenworth, and plead for some decisive action. Alcalde Leavenworth listened to the complaints from the band of residents and, on July 16, 1849, issued a public proclamation for the citizens of San Francisco to meet at Portsmouth Square to consider their options:

⁵ *Ibid.*, 557.

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At 3 o'clock of that day, the whole honest part of the community seemed to turn out at the place appointed...Mr. Samuel Brannan then addressed the meeting, and denounced in forcible terms, the depredations and many crimes of the 'hounds.' Upon his motion, a subscription list was opened for relief of the sufferers by the riots of the previous evening. Next, It was suggested that the citizens organize themselves into a police force to apprehend the criminals and drag them to justice. This was immediately done; and two hundred and thirty people of those present at the meeting enrolled themselves as special constables.⁶

The newly authorized volunteers immediately moved to apprehend and arrest the Hounds who had invaded the Chilean settlement. When confronted by the unlikely band of agitated residents, the Hounds predictably resisted being taken into custody. Ultimately, over twenty Hound members were finally subdued and hauled from their lair to jail. At the time, San Francisco's only jail was an old, decrepit schoolhouse called the "calaboose," which was not large enough or secure enough to house the number of Hound members arrested. So, the prisoners were transported to the harbor and secured aboard the United States ship *Warren*, anchored in San Francisco Bay. There, they remained until their court hearing began.

On the same day of the arrests, the volunteers elected two prominent community members as associate judges to ease the burden on Alcalde Leavenworth, who was overburdened with hearing all the prisoners' cases. They also quickly assembled a special grand jury. That grand jury promptly handed down twenty different indictments against members of the Hounds for various crimes, including conspiracy, riot, robbery, and assault with intent to kill.

At trial, the defense attorneys attempted to confuse the magistrates and the juries by insisting that the evidence used at trial and presented by the prosecution's witnesses was contradictory and so unreliable that it could not be trusted. But

6 Ibid., 557-558.

the courts and juries disagreed. Samuel Roberts, the leader of the Hounds, was found guilty of all the counts of which he was charged. Eight other gang members were found guilty of one or more identical charges. The court wasted no time in passing judgment. Samuel Roberts and another Hound member named Saunders were sentenced to ten years imprisonment, with hard labor and no chance for parole.

The other convicted Hounds received lesser terms of hard labor. They were also given substantial fines. Some defendants were deported from the California Territory with a warning never to return to California or any other part of the United States. Others who escaped punishment at trial received justice a short time after their release. Miners had a code of justice that differed from authorized court standards. When a handful of Hound members began a crime spree in several mining camps, the miners joined forces, hunted down and captured their attackers, and swiftly dealt out justice on the spot by hanging them.

The San Francisco residents' ordeal with the Hounds was only a temporary solution to their problems. The remainder of the gang lingered in the immediate San Francisco area and continued clandestine criminal activities. The city found it difficult to eliminate them entirely. The gang's connections with other influential members of the community, who prioritized their interests over those of the residents, were deeply rooted.

As well, gold mining was attracting people worldwide who were eager to improve their lives and fulfill their hopes of financial riches. Consequently, San Francisco and the entire state of California experienced not only the arrival of United States inhabitants but an unprecedented influx of unanticipated immigrants. To rid their land of criminal menace, some foreign countries released and deported convicts to the gold fields of California. The already incredibly crowded city of San Francisco saw its population expand to nearly 30,000 people by 1850.

Along with its new residents came new complications. The city was ill-prepared to accommodate all the needs of so many newly arrived immigrants, most of whom could not speak English. With the arrival of so many poor, uneducated, and unemployed immigrants, crime in the city dramatically increased. The residents were in a difficult situation that did not

seem to have a solution. Neither the executive, judicial, legislative, or administrative systems could meet the needs of the general public.

People crowded into derelict areas of the city, which in and of itself increasingly produced criminal behaviors and criminal factions. The district of San Francisco, known as Sydney Town, later renamed the Barbary Coast, became infamous for its concentration of law-breaking opportunists. It was the base of a notorious gang known as the Sydney Ducks, whose influence in the criminal factions of San Francisco was formidable. Theodore Henry Hittel, in his book *History of California*, described the Sydney Town environment:

Low drinking and dancing houses, lodging and gambling houses of the same mean class, the constant scenes of lewdness, drunkenness and strife, occupants of these vile abodes had everyone, more or less, been addicted to crimes; and many of them were at all times ready, for the most trifling consideration, to kill a man or fire a town...Even the police hardly dared to enter there; and if they attempted to apprehend some known individuals, it was always in a numerous, strongly-armed company. Seldom, however, were arrests made. The lawless inhabitants of the place united to save their luckless brothers, and generally managed to drive their assailants away. When different fires took place in San Francisco, bands of plunderers issued from this great haunt of dissipation, to help themselves to whatever money or valuables lay in their way, or which they could possibly secure. With these they retreated to their dens, and defied detections or apprehension.

Fire, however, was only one means of attaining their ends. The most daring burglaries were committed, and house and person rifled of their valuables. Where resistance was made, the bowie-knife or the revolver settled matters, and left the robber unmolested. Midnight assaults, ending in murder, were common. And not only were these deeds perpetrated under the shade of night; but even in daylight, in the highways and

byways of the country, in the streets of the town, in crowded bars, gambling saloons and lodging houses, crimes of an equally glaring character were of constant occurrence.⁷

The Sydney Ducks were a well-organized gang of marauders made up mostly of Australian immigrants. They existed side-by-side with the Hounds but had a much more extensive criminal network, making them a more challenging problem. The Duck's power and influence permeated the San Francisco political machine and the city's business enterprises. Their connections within their criminal underworld and the political system in place made it tremendously challenging to obtain a conviction when and if any of them were arrested and tried:

If arrests were made, the prisons were insecure and there was little or no difficulty in effecting escapes. In most cases the trouble of escaping, however, was avoided by furnishing bail; and, as the bail was worthless, it was easy to procure any amount of it. In the very rare cases, in which criminals were ultimately brought to trial, convictions were next to impossible. Between venal judges, perjuries, removals of witnesses and suppression of evidence, acquittals were practically sure.

There was no fear whatever of the law, because there was no danger that anyone that had a particle of money or influence could be found guilty or punished; on the contrary offenders came to regard a criminal prosecution as a farce, dull and dreary perhaps but perfectly harmless, and looked upon the courts as a protection against the possible infliction of private vengeance.⁸

7 *Ibid.*, 565-566.

8 Theodore Henry Hittel, *History of California, Volume III* (San Francisco, CA: Pacific Press Publishing, 1885), 312.

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The citizenry of San Francisco, under the presumption they'd eradicated the Hounds two years prior, was once again under the dominant authority of another gang-influenced government. As in the past, citizen committees were created to address the problem. However, no legitimate proposals offered and discussed were enough to satisfy committee members that public safety could be reestablished. As is often the case, extreme action becomes inevitable when pushed too far. That impetus came with the robbery of a San Francisco merchant, that aroused the passions of the public:

On the nineteenth day of the month [February 1851], at about eight o'clock in the evening, a man entered the store of Charles J. Janson & Co. on Montgomery Street near Washington and asked to see blankets. Mr. Janson, who was alone in the store at the time, proceeded to show his blankets, when another man came in and asked for canvas. While he was exhibiting his wares to one of the men, the other silently approached from behind and, with a violent blow from a slung-shot [a weight attached to a long cord], felled the proprietor to the floor. He was thereby rendered insensible and probably was supposed to have been killed; at any rate the ruffians very hastily robbed the premises of all the money they could lay their hands on, consisting of two thousand dollars, and immediately fled.⁹

Public condemnation of the robbery and nearly fatal attack on Mr. Janson was rampant and frenzied. The least of which was a demand for enforcement action by the police. The following day, the police satisfied the mandate of the citizenry by arresting James Stuart, an escaped convict who had two months prior escaped jail after being charged with the murder of a local sheriff. Mr. Stuart adamantly denied his involvement in the assault and robbery. But, a couple of days after the robbery, the storeowner, Mr. Janson, recovered well enough to positively identify Mr. Stuart and vaguely identify a second man arrested for the

⁹ Ibid.

incident, Joseph Windred, who also denied that he had anything to do with the crime:

But the arrested man [Stuart] stoutly maintained that there had been a mistake in his seizure; that he had had nothing to do either with the robbing of Janson or the murder of [Sheriff] Moore, and that his name was not James Stuart but Thomas Burdue. No attention, however, was paid to his denial; several persons who had known Stuart pronounced him to be Stuart, and there seemed to be no reasonable doubt upon the subject.

It was difficult to be mistaken for the reason that he was a peculiar-looking man—tall, inclined to stoop, beard remarkable black, long and pointed, his hair a rich brown, fine and wavy and reaching below his collar. He had lost a joint from one of his fingers, had a little slit on one of his ears and a scar over his left eyebrow. His eyes were black, glittering and restless; his nose aquiline; he had a defiant way of raising his head and looking about him; and his gait was a long measured step or stride, like that of a person pacing off ground.¹⁰

The following day, the prisoners were moved from their jail cells to the courtroom to begin proceedings. A large crowd of spectators had gathered on the streets outside the courthouse. Several people in the crowd agitated the swarm of people into hysteria for vengeance, claiming no justice would occur and the prisoners would escape any punishment. A group from the crowd stormed the courthouse and into the courtroom, attempting to seize the prisoners, but the astute judge had stationed a military company nearby. Once the mayhem began, the military company was called in and, after forcing the unruly crowd from the courtroom, hastily escorted the prisoners back to their jail cells.

The agitated crowd continued to loiter in the streets. A splinter group of calmer citizens separated themselves from the mob and quickly formed a committee to consider what actions, if

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

any, they could take. Samuel Brannan, a prominent community member, argued that the crowd needed to take radical action to protect themselves and the community from further victimization. He stressed that the city deserved more than a simple trial in which the accused, once again, walked away free. He continued that it had happened too often in their recent past to have faith in the untrustworthy judicial system to take appropriate action on the crime problems that everyone was enduring. He demanded it was time for the citizenry to take the matter into their own hands:

In answer to a proposition to try the accused the ordinary way he [Brannan] said that he was surprised to hear people talk about grand juries, recorders and mayors. He was tired of such talk. The prisoners were murderers as well as thieves; and he knew it; and he would die or see them hung by the neck. He was opposed to any farce in the business. There had been enough of that eighteen months before, when the people in the affair of the Hounds, allowed themselves to be made the tolls of the judges. It was time that the people asserted their authority.¹¹

In the end, calmer heads prevailed, at least temporarily, and the prisoners were tried in ordinary court, where both were found guilty and sentenced to fourteen years in prison. However, one of them escaped. Windred was able to cut a hole in the wooden floor of his cell and free himself. Stuart, however, was handed over to authorities to stand trial for the murder of Sheriff Moore. He was quickly convicted of the sheriff's murder and just as quickly put to death at a public hanging.

But crime still did not abate. It increased, and an incident in May once again drew the public's anger, convincing them that the community, not the judicial system, needed to handle the city's seemingly uncontrollable crime problem. A fire that could have burned the entire town to the ground broke out. The frustrated public was convinced it was the act of arsonists. Thousands of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 315

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agitated citizens assembled and decided the governmental body was inadequate for maintaining any sense of orderliness or community protection. As a result, in June 1851, the empowered people founded San Francisco's first Committee of Vigilance, stating in the Committee's constitutional preamble the reasons necessitating the association's formation:

Whereas, it has become apparent to the citizens of San Francisco that there is no security to life and property, either under the regulations of society as it at present exists, or under the laws as now administered, therefore, the citizens whose names are here unto attached, do unite themselves into an association, for the maintenance of the peace and good order of society and the preservation of the lives and property of the citizens of San Francisco, and do bind ourselves, each unto the other, to do and perform every lawful act for the maintenance of the law and order, and to sustain the laws when faithfully and properly, administered. But we are determined that no thief, burglar, incendiary or assassin shall escape punishment either by the quibbles of the law, the insecurity of prisons, the carelessness or corruption of the police, or laxity of those who *pretend* to administer justice.¹²

It wasn't long before the Committee of Vigilance was presented with the opportunity to display its resolve and demonstrate its commitment. On June 10, 1851, a Sydney Duck gang member named John Jenkins broke into a store on the pier and stole a small safe. He escaped, but not unnoticed, to a rowboat he'd left at the pier and began to row away into San Francisco Harbor. However, bystanders noticed he was struggling with a large, heavy sack on his way to the pier. They sounded an alarm by ringing a large bell on the waterfront located at the California Engine House. Nearby Committee members quickly responded to the alarm and gave pursuit in

¹² "Organization of the Vigilance Committee," *Daily Alta California*, June 13, 1851, Volume II, no. 185.

their boats. Mr. Jenkins, realizing his situation was gravely jeopardized, heaved the sack containing the safe overboard. He was soon overtaken by those pursuing him, taken into custody, and returned to the pier.

Mr. Jenkins's capturers escorted him to a room on the pier the Committee of Vigilance intended to use for its hearings. Once their prisoner was secured, they sounded the same bell the bystanders used when they saw Mr. Jenkin with the sack. Hearing the bell, other Committee members rushed to the Committee's office. It was late at night, but over seventy members of the Committee responded to the call for assistance:

They proceeded at once to try the prisoner and in the course of a couple of hours, after listening to all the testimony, which left no doubt on their minds, though he [Mr. Jenkins] maintained to the last that he was innocent, pronounced him guilty and sentenced him to death. As sentence was passed—it was then midnight—the bell of [the] California Engine House was tolled and gave notice of what was to follow. On being asked if he had anything to say for himself, Jenkins answered that he had not and that all he wanted was a cigar. This was given to him, and soon afterwards a glass of brandy and water. He was calm and apparently careless and probably did not realize the gravity of the situation.¹³

After finishing his cigar and brandy and spending a few minutes with a clergy member, the prisoner was ceremoniously marched to an old building on the pier. A stout rope was secured over a beam, and the noose was placed over Mr. Jenkins's neck. A group of the Committee members grabbed the loose end of the rope and quickly moved backward, pulling Mr. Jenkins off his feet. They continued to pull the rope until their prisoner was near the beam the rope had been thrown over and held him there dangling:

¹³ *Ibid.*, Hittel, 319-320.

He was a strong, healthy man and his struggles for a few minutes were very violent; but he had not spoken a word after leaving the committee room and was strung up and probably became insensible before he was fully conscious of what was taking place. The body was kept hanging for several hours, new hands relieving those tired of holding the rope.

Though the hour was so unseasonable, there were over a thousand persons present; but there was little or no noise and no confusion. Some of the regular authorities spoke of interfering; but they were ordered to stand back, and seeing that the people were terribly in earnest they found it prudent to do so.¹⁴

The Committee of Vigilance had opposition from some city officials and a minuscule segment of the community primarily due to its use of extralegal procedures. But being vastly outnumbered, no one dared interfere with the Committee's actions. It had the undying support of the overwhelming majority of the citizens. Consequently, interference by local law enforcement was scant and usually only amounted to threats. However, the Committee's arrest of two accused lawbreakers, Samuel Whittaker and Robert McKenzie, in August 1851 drew the attention and ire of the governor, John McDougal. Whittaker and McKenzie had been tried by the Committee and convicted of perpetrating "heinous" crimes. The Committee sentenced both of the men to death by hanging on August 21. However, the governor interceded.

The day before the hangings were to take place, the governor issued an emergency proclamation to the citizens and directly to the Committee of Vigilance, ordering them to aid the public officials in performing their legal duties and desist from respecting the Committee's extralegal proceedings. Accompanying the proclamation was a writ of habeas corpus ordering Sheriff John C. Hays to serve the notice in person to the Committee of Vigilance and take the two prisoners into his custody. Early in the morning of August 21, the sheriff, with

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 320-321.

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several deputies accompanying him, surprised the committee members in their headquarters. Presented with the writ of habeas corpus and recognizing they were at a significant disadvantage, the Committee peacefully released their prisoners into the sheriff's custody.

The committee members were irritated and resolute in enforcing their verdict against Whittaker and McKenzie. Their opportunity came that Sunday. On Sundays, the county jail allowed its prisoners to attend church services. As soon as the service started, thirty-six armed members of the Committee stormed into the church. The intruders held the congregation, including the jailer and guards, at gunpoint until Whittaker and McKenzie were hurried out and into a waiting coach.

The coach headed to the Committee's headquarters. Once the prisoners were secured, committee members rang the signaling bell, alerting everyone that a hanging was soon to take place:

At the sound the entire population seemed to leap; and immense crowds from every direction poured into the streets about the committee rooms. Those rooms were in the second story of a business house on the west side of Battery between California and Pine Streets. Over two of the openings intended for the reception of goods into the second story projected beams and at the end of each of those beams was a block and tackle. Within seventeen minutes after the prisoners were brought in from the jail, they were dangling by the neck from these beams—the loose ends of the tackle, which choked the life out of and suspended them, being held by members of the committee inside the building. There was said to be at least six thousand persons who witnessed the execution, and, as the wretches were pushed out of the openings and swung off, there was a long and loud and general shout of satisfaction from the multitude.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 329.

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No further action was taken against the committee by authorities regarding the Winfred and McKenzie hangings. It would have done no good even if they tried. The public had an unwavering conviction in the Committee's decisions and entirely supported any subsequent actions deemed necessary to restore harmony.

Toward the end of 1852, the 1851 Committee of Vigilance believed it had fulfilled its promise to the citizens of San Francisco of reestablishing law and order and administering justice to lawbreakers. The Committee deemed further actions were, at the time, unnecessary. The committee disbanded. In the end, the extralegal actions of the Committee of Vigilance restored social control of the city. Crime rates significantly decreased, and criminal gangs appeared to have been eradicated. The public was satisfied with the Committee's job, and most people looked forward to living peacefully in the city without the threat of being terrorized by criminals.

San Francisco was one of many cities in the Antebellum Era that formed vigilance committees to address rising crime and corruption. Nashville, New Orleans, and Philadelphia are just a few cities that felt crime was so extreme that a vigilance committee was the only answer. New York even had an underground railroad committee of vigilance to prevent the success of hired hunters attempting to retrieve runaway enslaved people who had fled their southern captivity.

Unfortunately for the citizens of San Francisco, crime began to increase again during the several years following 1851. To prevent a recurrence of terrorization of their city by another crime wave, the residents found it necessary in 1856 to form a second vigilance committee. That committee followed the same strategies as the first, and when it had satisfactorily completed its purpose, it also disbanded itself. The city never found a need to establish another one.

Further Reading:

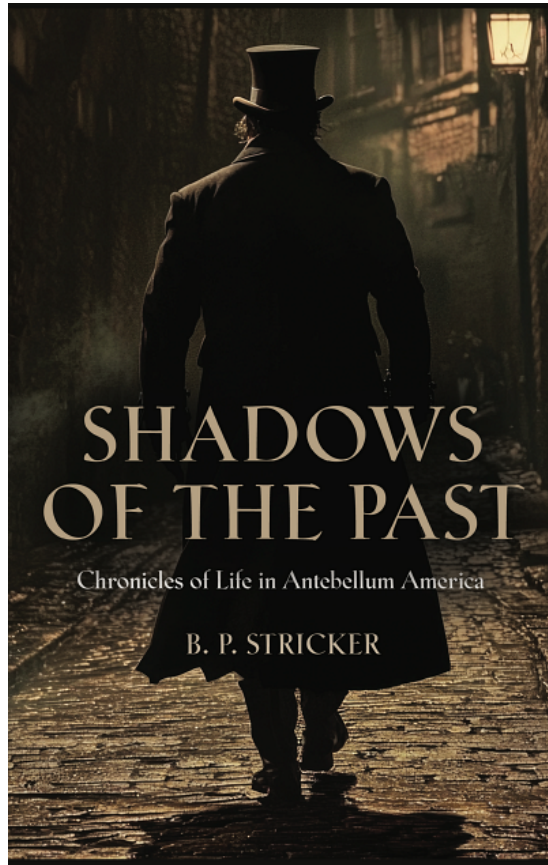
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