

MOLLY McCARTHY

Frontier Diaries

Transporting the daily habits of home

No matter how they got there—over land, by sea, or by a circuitous combination of both—western migrants in the rush that followed the whiff of gold at Sutter’s Mill often found their baggage lighter at the end of their long journey. Some blamed the elements. For Stephen Chapin Davis on board the steamship *Philadelphia* in July 1850, the enemy was weather. After enduring four days of a wretched storm, Davis complained in his diary of “not having anything dry on board” and that all his possessions, even his food, had “been soaked in salt water.”¹ Weather and other hindrances routinely conspired against ambitious travelers hoping to transport the trappings of home to new outposts out West. Forced into hard and often wrenching decisions, travelers unloaded possessions along the way. The more portable the keepsake, the more likely it was to survive the grueling trek.

This may help explain the ubiquity of a particular kind of diary in collections of western Americana. Known colloquially in the mid-nineteenth-century as a pocket diary, today we’d call it a daily planner. Although it had roots in the colonial almanac, its printed contents appeared more modern, with features such as calendar pages, postal rates, interest tables, and preformatted sections devoted to daily diary entries and cash accounts. The title page of a Kiggins & Kellogg edition from New York read “Daily Pocket Diary for the year 1858: for the Purpose of Registering Events of Past, Present, and Future Occurrence.” It might seem ephemeral from our vantage point, but these unassuming stationery items were not just a matter of convenience or making do with whatever was at hand. They were brought along with commitment and conviction, carrying as much weight as a cherished tea set or family Bible. Published and printed in distant cities such as Boston and New York and containing features keyed to those locales, the daily planner allowed migrants to maintain ties to the places they left behind and to transplant entrenched cultural habits to their new homes.

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 2, Number 4, pps 8–13. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2013 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2012.2.4.8.

John Mason, an overland immigrant, purchased his 1858 *Pocket Diary* published by Kiggins & Kellogg when he had already been living in California nearly four years. Enduring the overland trek from St. Louis and along the California trail, he had arrived in Sacramento in June 1855 and found work on river steamers heading in and out of Sacramento. On an end leaf of the three-by-four-inch volume with a foldover or “tuck” closure, he penciled a simple inscription, a mark of ownership: “John T. Mason, Sacramento.”² While it’s unclear where Mason bought the diary, the real mystery is why. What was the use of having a diary whose monthly calendar pages contained the times of sunrise and sunset for New York, or advertisements for the wide selection of books and stationery in Kiggins & Kellogg’s new storefront at “123 and 125 William Street, Between John and Fulton Sts.?” Perhaps Mason was a New York native and, like rereading a cherished letter from home, found comfort in having a diary printed in his hometown. But a nostalgic attachment to the symbols of home alone cannot explain how frequently these diaries turn up in the archives.

James and Madilia Scofield, cousins in southern Connecticut before each set out separately for California in 1849, became husband and wife five years later in 1854. By that time, Scofield had abandoned any hope of striking gold and opened a general store in Stockton selling miner’s supplies and household goods. Like Mason, both



In Auburn Ravine, 1852

Many frontier settlers such as these pictured in Auburn Ravine, circa 1852, transplanted their diaries and the habits that accompanied them from homes back east.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY.

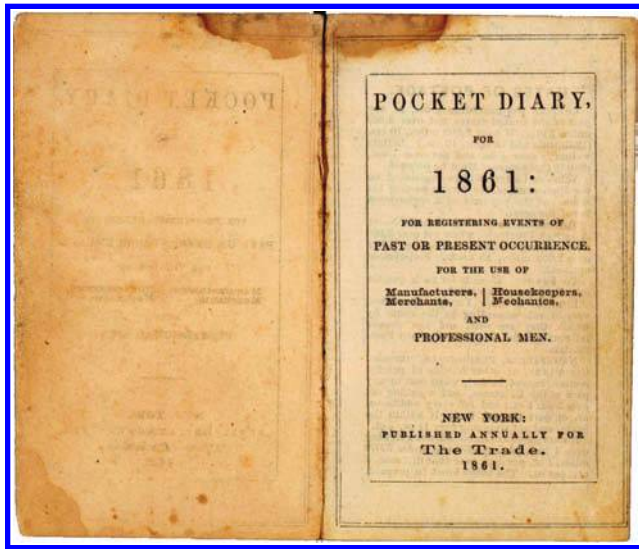
The real mystery is why.

Scofields preferred a New York-manufactured datebook to anything local. Year after year, until their eventual return to Connecticut (after making their fortune!), the Scofields remained loyal customers of the *Daily Pocket Diary . . . for the Use of Private Families and Persons of Business, Published Annually for the Trade*. The title continued on, listing the diary’s key features such as a banking table, counting-house calendar, and a “blank space for memorandums for every day in the year.”³

For customers like the Scofields, the decision to purchase a New York planner over a blank book or local almanac may have been for lack of alternatives. It took some time for West Coast cities such as San Francisco and Sacramento to rival the variety and sophistication of the publishing output of Eastern firms. Apart from travel manuals, local newspapers, and a variety of regional almanacs, Western cities turned out a limited print fare at mid-century. Most guides were published in St. Louis or Cincinnati, cities that had a much more vibrant publishing scene. *The Great Western Almanac for 1846* was published by Joseph McDowell in Philadelphia, of all places. *Sloan’s Almanac and Traveler’s Guide for 1851* was published by W.B. Sloan at 40 Lake Street in Chicago. Some western publishers partnered with eastern firms to put out even the most basic print matter. In order to publish *The Prairie Almanac for 1857*, Thomas Orton, proprietor of the Western Book Emporium in Davenport, Iowa, teamed up with a New York firm and borrowed copy from the *United States Almanac* for that year. Likewise, *The California Almanac for 1849* had San Francisco on its title page but was printed by George Rand in Boston. Nelson Slater, originally of Champlain, New York, now of Sacramento, collaborated with P.L. Platt to write *The Traveler’s Guide Across the Plains, Upon the Overland Route to California*.⁴ Nevertheless, the limited variety in Western bookstores seems inadequate to justify the lengths customers were willing to go to import a daily planner from back East.

Diaries bridged the distance

For a long time, I puzzled over the prevalence of these commercial diaries in collections of Western migrants.



Mary Carpenter Diary, 1861

Diaries such as this one published in New York in 1861 are not uncommon in the collections of western immigrants.

IMAGE COURTESY OF UC IRVINE, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

They certainly delivered on those virtues suitable for the traveler, such as portability and durability, which was a big part of their appeal. But the reference matter was all wrong, having more to do with the world they left behind than the one ahead. They contained monthly calendar pages with tide tables and calculations for Boston and/or New York, railroad tables with New York as its origin. I soon realized that the popularity of this Eastern diary represented more than convenience. The daily planner shrank the distance between coasts, mentally if not physically. It allowed the Scofields to imagine they were closer to Connecticut and helped them replicate what they left behind with a portable, inscribable symbol of home.

The daily planner was the material embodiment of a cultural habit of daily record keeping that could be traced to the Protestant pledge to “improve the time.” The serially dated spaces in a prefabricated diary had a way of making one persevere with the daily task of “keeping account,” whereas a blank page in a journal could be more forgiving of the passage of time. Madilia Scofield confessed as much when she noted in April 1856 that she’d neglected to write in her journal for several days “on account of sickness.” However, she did manage to record a few lines in her daily register in hopes “that I may improve [the time] in a proper maner.”⁵

The kind of diary the Scofields chose was key to the process of making California feel, at least for them, more like Connecticut.

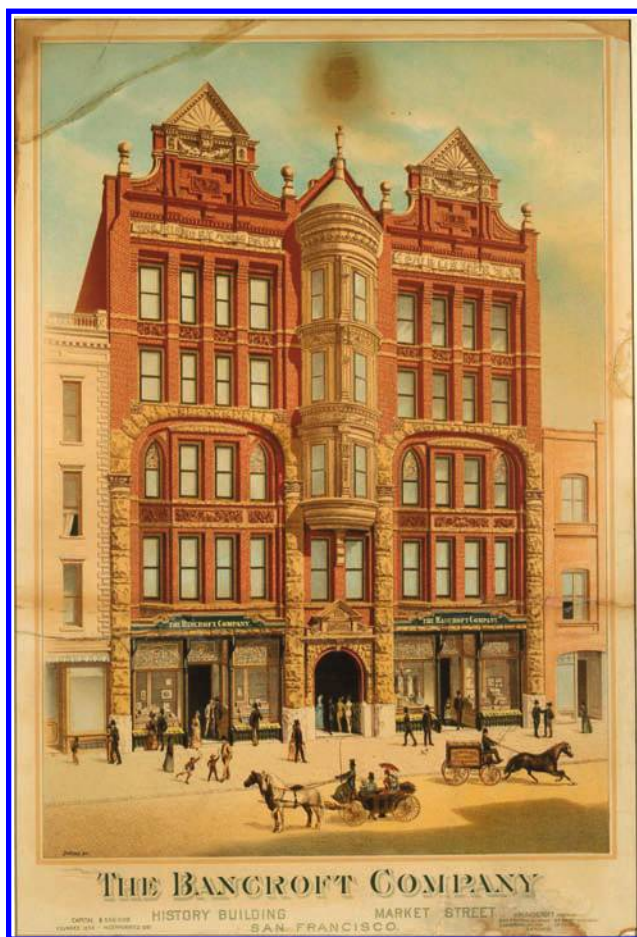
The order and regularity embedded in the diary’s format helped them transplant some of their Yankee values to a new, foreign, and oftentimes dangerous place. James Scofield acknowledged such perils when he recorded on 10 February 1854, that he had attended a murder trial. While he wished “the poor fellow a merciful sentence,” James admitted that “some rigid examples are necessary to break up the wanton use of fire arms.” The habit of keeping a daily diary was just one more convention the Scofields brought with them to their new home. In keeping that daily account, they recorded for posterity all those other customs they refused to forego, such as making calls on New Year’s Day, receiving visitors for tea, or attending Sunday services and lyceum lectures. Even April Fool’s Day was observed, as Madilia noted in 1856: “This is the first day of April. A day devoted by some to fool making. I believe the practice is quite prevalent here.”⁶

Just as the Scofields seemed intent, despite the new terrain, on maintaining their Yankee rituals of New Year’s Day visits and afternoon tea, John Mason peppered his diary entries with mentions of outings to the theater, buying “segars,” and attending “church.” Apart from the inscription that placed him firmly in Sacramento, a reader might not even realize what town or city Mason was writing in. There were but a few clues, such as the anomalous note that he’d given “25” cents to an “indian,” that Mason resided anywhere west of the Mississippi. He even chose to commemorate significant events of the American Revolution at the opening of his 1858 *Pocket Diary*: “the Battle of Lexington,” “Richmond destroyed,” the “battle of cowpens,” and “peace declared with Gt Brit.” It didn’t make him any less patriotic, or American, that he’d gotten many of the dates wrong.

In similar fashion, James Scofield remembered the day, 8 January, on which the final battle of the War of 1812 was fought in a blank space reserved for that day in his 1855 diary. He wrote: “To-day is the anniversary of the battle of New Orleans. No demonstration of whatever kind in this city.”⁷ James’s memorial to the final battle of the War of 1812 affirming America’s independence and opening up the settlement of the West reflects his sense of a shared history, though one not nearly as universal

It took a few years for Bancroft to realize the significance of the transplanted publication.

as in Connecticut. James seemed shocked that the anniversary passed unnoticed in Stockton. It is just this sense of communal history, tradition, and values that the pocket diary affirmed for customers like Mason and the Scofields. Although far from home, their loyalty to this commercial product signified that they were not willing to abandon their places of origin. Just because they were removed from the urban centers of the East to an outpost



The Bancroft Company, operating from its Market Street headquarters, published a commercial diary to rival Eastern brands and provide California with a daily planner all its own.

Illustration by Charles John Dickman.

COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY, UC BERKELEY.

experiencing its first turbulent years of statehood did not make them any less American.

Not until after the Civil War did West Coast publishers begin producing a commercial diary similar to those brands emigrants had carried with them. By that time even John Mason had replaced his New York-made diaries with a California “original,” *Bancroft’s Diary for 1872 Containing Useful Memoranda, and Tables for Reference*. Nearly twenty years after Hubert Howe Bancroft first arrived by steamer in San Francisco with a consignment of books and stationery, his brother A.L. Bancroft, entrusted with the business his brother had built, erected a five-story edifice to the family’s publishing empire at 721 Market Street, and announced that the “business has been remodeled to conform to the new order of things. It is selling goods upon the lowest possible margin of profits. Satisfaction guaranteed. The public are cordially invited to visit the new premises.”⁸

It may be no coincidence that this announcement appeared as an advertisement on the back page of *Bancroft’s Diary for 1872*, a California-branded diary viewed as an extension of Bancroft’s vision for “the new order of things.” Bancroft could hardly take credit for the design, a blatant copy of the formula Eastern publishers had found so successful and lucrative. That meant the basics were essentially the same, with calendar and diary sections formatted exactly as the Kiggins & Kellogg’s versions decades earlier. Only now Bancroft’s diaries, which included many different styles denoted as “No. 306,” and such, along the binding, were outfitted with data tailored for the local populace: fire alarm stations and hack fares for San Francisco, locations of the city’s public offices and buildings, monthly tide tables for San Francisco, distance tables from San Francisco to various points in the vicinity of San Francisco Bay, and a complete table of US stamp duties including the California Stamp Tax. Although not new or original, California finally got a diary all its own. It took a few years for Bancroft to realize the significance of the transplanted publication. In 1875, he applied to Congress for a copyright and renamed *Bancroft’s Diary* the *Pacific Coast Diary*.⁹

BANCROFT'S

PACIFIC COAST

D E A R S

FOR

1884,

CONTAINING

Useful Memoranda,

AND

TABLES FOR REFERENCE.

Published Annually.

SAN FRANCISCO:
A. L. BANCROFT & COMPANY,
BOOKSELLERS AND STATIONERS,
721 Market Street.
1884.

Title page of a Bancroft diary modeled after popular East Coast brands.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA.

By that time, the Scofields had decamped and returned to Connecticut. John Mason, however, converted to the *Pacific Coast* brand after abandoning river work and becoming a rancher in Colusa County. Others followed suit, such as Boston native John Thomas, who emigrated to California in 1857 and turned to lumbering after failing as a prospector. In addition to two large account books, Thomas kept daily records of deliveries, his health, and the weather in annual editions of the *Pacific Coast Diary* from 1874 to 1885. A.G. Peyton, a wood-chopper, trapper, and pit worker, used the daily entries in his *Pacific Coast Diary for 1875* to detail payment for various odd jobs in mining camps in Humboldt County. Even Nelson Slater, author of the 1852 edition of *The Traveler's Guide Across the Plains*, was using a *Pacific Coast Diary* by 1876 after settling in Sacramento as a minister and school administrator.¹⁰ Once it was adopted by Bancroft's prolific publishing house, the daily planner became more attuned to the needs of those newcomers to the Pacific Coast, the settlers who turned gold fields and port cities into centers of commercial and cultural exchange.

The popularity of this stationery product, a European-bred symbol of order and regularity, amongst the gold miners and fortune seekers in early California seems paradoxical—until we read them. The accumulation of mundane, daily entries reveal how critical and powerful these commercially-printed products could be in conveying a sense of place, both old and new. For these California transplants, the choice of a daily planner was consequential, not casual, and instrumental to their efforts to settle into the rhythms of a life in the West. **B**

Notes

- ¹ William Benemann, ed., *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849–1850* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), x.
- ² John T. Mason diaries, 1849–1888, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- ³ James M. Scofield papers, 1823–1923, American Antiquarian Society (AAS).
- ⁴ *Sloan's Almanac*, *Great Western Almanac*, and *The Prairie Almanac* in the Graff Collection, Newberry Library; *The California Almanac for . . . 1849*, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library; and Nelson Slater and Henrietta Slater McIntire papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- ⁵ Madilia Scofield 1856 diary, James M. Scofield Papers, AAS. To put these entries into broader, historical context, see Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and the English Diurnal Form, 1660–1785* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- ⁶ James M. Scofield papers, AAS.
- ⁷ John T. Mason diaries, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; and James M. Scofield papers, AAS.
- ⁸ The business records of A.L. Bancroft & Co., including samples of the “Pacific coast diaries,” are located at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- ⁹ John T. Mason diaries, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- ¹⁰ John Thomas diaries and account books, 1874–1885; A.G. Peyton diary, 1875; Nelson Slater and Henrietta Slater McIntire papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.