

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Best and Surest Debtor

When Thomas O. Larkin submitted his list of outstanding men who were important figures in the American conquest of California, at the request of Secretary of State James Buchanan in 1846, he very rightfully included the name of Thomas Oliver Larkin. The list and biographical sketch of each man was later printed in the Pacific Monthly in 1863 and was headed: "The Prominent Men of California in 1846."

The biography of Larkin follows: Born in Massachusetts, 1802; arrived in Monterey in '32, setting up as a merchant there the following year; by '46, due to shrewdness, industry and more than average ability, he had become both prosperous and influential. Although he retained his American citizenship and served from 1844 as U.S. consul, he maintained close relations, business and personal, with local officials. Believing that the territory would eventually be annexed to the United States, and from '45 onward, working toward that end under secret instructions from Washington, Larkin did much to further the plan, discharging his difficult task with tact and good sense. His hopes for a peaceable transfer blasted by the Bear flag revolt, he continued to render able services by cooperating with the American forces. His official duties ending with the signing of the peace treaty, he lived for a time in New York, returning to California in '53 to manage his extensive properties. He died at San Francisco in 1858.

John A. Sutter, Larkin thought should be included in the list of prominent men in California in 1846. He became an American citizen, although he was a native of Switzerland. General Micheltorena appointed Sutter alcalde and commandante at the Sacramento settlement. In 1863, when the biographical sketches of the important figures in the American conquest were published in the Pacific Monthly, Sutter continued to hold the same by the tacit consent of both Californians and foreigners. He was described as of good information and improving talents, held large tracts of land. His cattle was on the decrease because of overrating his means of paying laborers; his establishments consisted of farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, saddlers, hatters, tanners, coopers, weavers, and gunsmith shops, which was then beyond his means of keeping up.

In 1844 the Pacific Monthly reported that Sutter mustered over 100 armed men (foreigners) to assist Micheltorena, that he had influence over a great part of the people of Sacramento, was active, enterprising, well informed but too sanguine. "He lived in expectation of this country's belonging to the United States," the writer declared.

Sutter was described as being a man capable of many different offices: now much borne down with debt from the loss of two or three harvests by dry weather, and from too largely expanding his business. The writer reported in the Monthly: "Captain Sutter has a quadrangular fort of 160 yards long, and 100 yards wide, built entirely of adobes, and protected by bastions having some 14 or 15 cannon mounted. This square encloses all the houses and workshops of himself and people, with large gates which, when closed, render it impenetrable to Indians, or any common force. He has some armed Indians, with a large stock of arms and ammunition. This establishment, the first on the Sacramento, was begun in 1839, and fortified against the Indians."

It is also revealed in the sketches that Captain Sutter in 1846, owed the Russian American Company on the northwest coast, \$30,000. The Mexican government had proposed resuming [assuming?] this and other debts and taking Captain Sutter's establishment. In 1845, when the U.S. consul conversed with the Russian governor, he was convinced that Captain Sutter was the best and surest debtor, and objected to any arrangement that the Mexican government might make, and Sutter would not vacate the place for any sum that could be obtained.

(More Tomorrow)