

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Solid Fortune Founded on A Dollar

The mention of James Lick in Friday's Diary seems to call for still more data on the life and work of this interesting man who had an undeniable influence in the early days of California—especially in San Francisco and Santa Clara Valley—and who gave so generously to a number of important projects.

James Lick had come to California early in 1848 with \$30,000 and the tools and work bench of his joiner's trade. A Pennsylvanian of German extraction, he had traveled far and made a solid fortune in his 51 years. His biographers tell us that as a youth an unhappy love affair had sent him from his Pennsylvania home out into the world with a dollar in his pocket. At Hanover, Pa., Alexandria, Va., and Baltimore he learned organ making, furniture making, and piano making; then traveled to Buenos Aires where he established a successful furniture and piano manufacturing business. After a trip to the scene of his youthful disappointment he returned to South America, this time setting up as a piano maker in Valparaiso and then, after four years, in Lima. Again he was successful. He traveled in Europe for the better part of a year, returned to Lima, and in 1847 sold out and headed for California. In January of 1848 he arrived in San Francisco.

From 1848 until his death many years later Lick added to his fortune a hundred fold. He built the Lick House, he gave generously to the Society of California Pioneers in both real estate and in financial gifts and set up the famous Lick Trust.

When Lick arrived in San Francisco he found a town of some 200 buildings, but his faith was great in the future of the West and he set about single-mindedly buying up lots. Within three months he owned more than 50, and by autumn the total was 60. His investment came to \$6,762. It formed the nucleus of the three million dollar estate which he left at his death in 1876, according to the Pioneer Society records.

One of these lots was a gift to the society and upon it the members built the first Pioneer Hall. Upon another the second hall was to be built. From the estate was to come a sum of money "greater than we ever hoped for," announced D. J. Staples, the president of that year.

Lick seemed to have a kind of sentimental interest in the welfare of the Society of California Pioneers, although he was a man of notably unsociable habits. He had been a member since 1853. Although the minutes of the society do not record that Lick attended a single meeting, he apparently watched closely the activities of the group from his home at Alviso, in the Santa Clara Valley.

Following the gift of the lot on Montgomery street where the hall was built, Lick gave property on Fourth street between Market and Mission. Three years later the gift was a deed to a vacant lot immediately behind Pioneer Hall on Gold street was received from Mr. Lick by the society. For these gifts the Pioneers in appreciation voted to appropriate \$500 from their treasury "to procure a gold medal to be presented to James Lick in recognition of his generous donation to the society."

During a period of discussion as to the advisability of building onto the Pioneer Hall Lick made another unexpected gift which solved the problem. In February of 1873 he suddenly presented another lot, 80 front feet on Fourth street between Mission and Market. Still another gift came months later when he gave an additional lot, "40 feet front, and adjoining the lot formerly donated."

To show their appreciation still further the members of the Pioneers elected James Lick president of the society, a position he held until his death three years later. It was an honor conferred upon him, so it is told in "This Sudden Empire," in much the same spirit as the earlier election of Thomas Oliver Larkin. Lick never assumed office, nor was he expected to. He was in his late 70's and growing ill. He had left his Alviso home and was living in a small room in the Lick House, the most pretentious hotel on the Pacific coast until the Palace Hotel was built in 1875.

In his will Lick left \$700,000 for the astronomical observatory—the Lick Observatory was built in 1888. He wished to establish a public bath for the people of the city, and marked \$150,000 for that purpose. The Lick Baths served the city until 1919. For erecting and maintaining the Lick Old Peoples Home he set aside \$100,000, and to the City of San Jose for the establishment of an orphanage he gave \$25,000. The second largest specified sum, next to the observatory, was for the founding of a school of mechanical arts, the school in San Francisco now known as Lick-Wilmerding.

When the trust was finally discharged in 1895, the
Pioneers and the Academy of Sciences each received
\$604,654.08.