

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **William Heath Davis**

Huntington Library at San Marino has just published the biography of William Heath Davis, under the title "An American in California, 1822-1909." This important publication was compiled by Andrew F. Rolle and sells for \$4.25.

Many American pre - Gold Rush pioneers embraced aspects of the Spanish culture but modified it by Yankee enterprise. William Heath Davis was one of these. He wrote a fascinating book, "Seventy-five Years in California," an informal history of the state from the Mexican era up to its admission into the Union, written in a chatty style by a man who knew personally many of the people described in the text. The book did not see the light of day until 20 years after the author's death.

Davis was the son of a Yankee father and Hawaiian mother; the island of Oahu was his home until he was 16 years old. At that time, in the year 1838, after two trips to California aboard his stepfather's trading vessels, he was apprenticed to his uncle, Nathan Spear, a prosperous merchant in San Francisco. Later Davis himself engaged in the mercantile trade. From a modest beginning he, with various partners, established what became San Francisco's largest trading emporium. He became prominent in the city's life and made a quick fortune.

Early in 1850 Davis became interested in a plan to found a new city on the ocean side of the old pueblo of San Diego. Davis was well acquainted with the area and knew the old town was handicapped by its distance from the water, so the author, Andrew F. Rolle, tells us on the jacket of "An American in California."

It was an ambitious program to build a new city, aside from being an expensive one, and although Davis built a considerable community and a \$60,000 wharf, the town failed. Still, he is considered by some to be the father of San Diego. The costly speculations there, coupled with his losses in the Great San Francisco fire in 1851, left him only the Estudillos, the illustrious family of which his wife was a member.

Davis became a rancho, managing the family estates in Alameda County. It was during this period that he founded San Leandro; sensing also that one day the oak-covered slopes along the eastern shoreline of San

Francisco Bay would support a large population; Davis tried to purchase these attractive sites. Had he been successful, he might also have become the founder of Oakland.

Andrew Rolle, the author of "An American in California," a native of Providence, R.I., is a graduate of Occidental College with a Ph.D. degree from the University of California at Los Angeles. He is now assistant professor of history at Occidental. His research upon which "An American in California" is based covers many important aspects of the economy of California and Hawaii before 1850. This authoritative biography of a California pioneer also sheds light on special areas of interest, such as the New England-Canton trade, Russian activity along the Northwest coast and Alaska, the Hawaiian sandalwood traffic which Davis' father virtually controlled, the Pacific Coast hide and tallow commerce, the Gold Rush, and California's rancho society and later urbanization.

"The biographer writes: "As ship and landowner, trader, civic official, town founder and rancho, Davis' career faithfully mirrors the role he and his contemporaries played in paving the way for California's Transition from frontier province to modern state."

At the time of San Francisco's great earthquake and fire in 1906, Davis' manuscript, contained in two dispatch boxes and ready for the printer, was in his office in the Montgomery block. He tried to enter the building to save the book upon which he had labored for many years but was restrained by the U.S. Marines. As it happened, the building did not burn, but when Davis returned for his manuscript it had mysteriously disappeared.

Eighty-four years of age at that time, Davis was then faced with the heartbreaking task of reconstructing his book from the fragments and notes which he had kept in his home. He died three years later in 1909, and his heirs passed the papers on to other hands. Fortunately, they were later acquired by the Huntington Library, and due to the hearty cooperation, of this institution the book was finally assembled in its present form "Seventy-five Years in California." It was published in 1929 by John Howell of San Francisco and carried the dedication to "Herbert Hoover: Exemplifier of American Ideals and Foremost Californian."