

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **A Business Man**

Stephen Chapin Davis was 17 years old when he came to California, to find his gold not in the mines but in the field of business. Many of the gold-rush fortune seekers left accounts of their travels, but few were as young as this diarist.

Young Davis Wrote in a journal entitled "California Gold Rush Merchant," just published by the Huntington library. The book was edited by Benjamin B. Richards, at present librarian at Knox College, Galesburg, Ill. His graduate studies at Claremont in Southern California fostered an intense interest in California history.

It was in July 1850, that this 17-year-old Nashua, Vt., boy, Stephen Davis, and his brother, Josiah, sailed to San Francisco and the gold country by way of Panama. He had been a newspaper vendor, so naturally Stephen packed to California some 500 copies of New York newspapers which he sold at great profit to news-hungry argonauts far from home.

Stephen Davis continued to spend his time and energy as a business man rather than as a gold seeker in California. He traveled to Sacramento and to the southern mines, he bought stock of "pickles, cheese, segars" and other provisions including Eastern and San Francisco newspapers. He set up a store at one time in Long Bar on the Yuba river and at another he purchased a house on Vallejo street by trading his tent, counters, scales, empty barrels, and the like for it. He made a profit by tearing down the house and selling it for scrap lumber.

The original of Davis's diary is in the Huntington Library. It is a 750-page "Records" book, purchased in Boston. At one point in the notations Davis Stated that he had "sold my rifle for \$20 more than I paid for it, and my boots at 100 per cent profit."

Detailed accounts in the diary tell of the uprisings at Charges, the hardships of the Isthmus crossings, a flood in the San Joaquin area, the aftermath of the San Francisco fire, and Stephen's own struggle to transport supplies for his business in the mining district.

Davis was a reporter, as his entry of May 5, 1851, reveals: "The Capt. (of the river steamer at Sacramento) shouted to the assembled multitude that San Francisco was in ashes, that \$10 million worth of property was

destroyed by fire on the night of May 3. The effect upon the crowd was so powerful as to be worth noticing. Some shouted, some groaned, some cried 'I am ruined.' All felt that a great calamity had befallen California."

Another human-interest notation read: "This is Thanksgiving, which is celebrated by us by partaking of a dinner of wild ducks roasted, stewed quails, mince pie and a very fine watermelon just picked from the vines, all of which we heartily enjoyed."

Benjamin B. Richards, the editor of the diary, notes that young Davis might have become a big man in California if he had remained., He went home, carrying several thousands of dollars' worth, of gold dust. In 1856 he died in Vermont, at the age of 23 years, presumably of tuberculosis.

After Stephens's death the journal passed into the hands of his brother Capt. George E. Davis; a later rubber stamp on the flyleaf reads: "Providence. R. I., Abbott Davis, Oct. 26, 1901." Years later, in 1923, the diary was put up at public auction by the American Art Assn. in New York, listed in the catalogue of the sale as "California, Item 82, Reminiscence Manuscript," along with a collection of George Washington letters and other rare Americana, including books, broadsides, pamphlets, and even ship models. Thus, it came attention of Henry E. Huntington. His bid for Item 82 was accepted, and the diary returned from New England to California to become Huntington Manuscript 521.