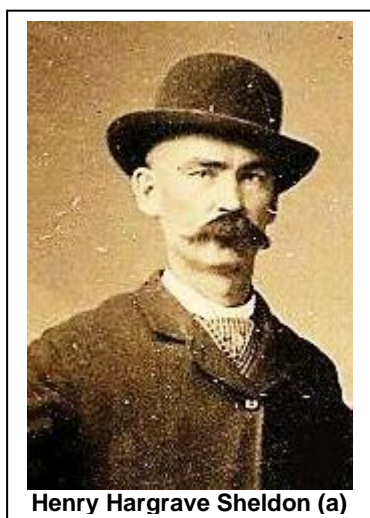


THE WEST COAST SHELDONS – HENRY HARGRAVE SHELDON

Sheldon C. Bachus

It is said that 19th century immigrants to California and the West Coast came in three successively larger waves: those arriving in the 1840s seeking land; those in the 1850s searching for gold; and those in the 1860s and afterward looking for a new or better life¹.

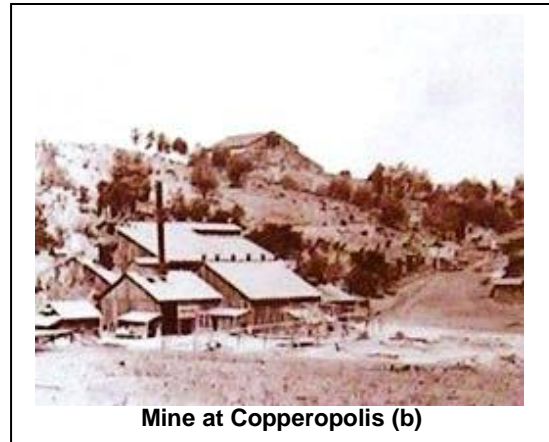
After enduring the hardships of the Great Basin badlands and then struggling over the precipitous mountain passes of the Sierra Nevada, the Bartleson-Bidwell party arrived in California's great Central Valley just before the winter of 1841. This small band of thirty-two men and a single women² represents the first wave of adventurous Americans hoping to settle in the benign but bountiful hills and valleys of Alta California. Seven years later in January 1848, James Marshall would discover gold in the South Fork of the American River, which in turn prompted a far larger wave of American immigration – a wave that transformed California from a lethargic Mexican colony to a dynamic American state in 1850. Arguably, California statehood would not have occurred as quickly had gold not been discovered, and if the region had not been subjected to this second and significantly larger influx of immigrant “49er” gold seekers. By the early 1860s the search for gold had exhausted most of the easily mined deposits, and had been replaced by a subsequent quest for silver sought in part to fund the Union's prosecution of the Civil War³. Later in 1869, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad, a third wave of immigrants streamed overland, seeking to settle in the still great open spaces of the Far West⁴. Henry Sheldon was among this still continuing migration of Americans seeking to improve their lives and fortunes along the eastern shore of the Pacific Ocean.



Henry Hargrave Sheldon⁵ was born in Troy, New York, on August 30, 1820. The son of the local justice of the peace, Daniel Sheldon, he represents the sixth generation of Sheldons in America descending from John Sheldon, who originally immigrated from Warwickshire, England in the mid-1600s to Pawtuxet in Providence County, Rhode Island. Little is known of Henry's early life, however, unverified but reasonably consistent genealogical records⁶ show that he married Laura Porter Thayer on June 6, 1843. Interestingly, Laura was born in Troy, New York, on August 19, 1820 – just 11 days before her husband. From this it would probably be safe to assume that Henry and Laura were schoolmates, and that they were in all likelihood married in Troy. Additional evidence indicates that their marriage ceremony was performed by “ the Rev. Dr. Nott”, however, this is conjecture and is subject to verification⁷. Seven years later at the age of 30, Henry is listed in the *1850 Federal Census* as living in

Bristol in Hartford County, Connecticut, where he worked as a copper mine clerk⁸. At the time of the 1850 census, Henry and Laura had three children -- Charles Saber born in 1844, Dexter Brittan born in 1846, and Laura Frances born in 1848. In the ensuing decade the family grew to include three additional children – Frederick Nott born in 1854, Henry in 1856, and Mary in 1858. The *1860 Federal Census*⁹ shows that the family had moved to Warren, New Hampshire where Henry was employed as the superintendent of a lead and silver mining operation.

At some point in the mid-1860s Henry decided, as did many of his fellow east coast Americans, to pursue the opportunities offered in California on the far edge of the United States' western frontier. Most likely he sailed from New York to Colón, portaged the Panama isthmus to what is now Panama City, and then proceeded by sea on to San Francisco. His first documented presence in California appears in the *1866 Great Register of California*, which reports him to be a mine superintendent and voting resident of Copperopolis¹⁰. Founded in 1860 and originally known as Copper Canyon, Copperopolis is located in the Sierra Nevada foothills between Stockton and the gold town of Angels Camp, made famous by Mark Twain for its legendary jumping frog contests¹¹. During the Civil War, copper was in great demand by the Union army, and by 1863 the rich vein at Copperopolis was annually producing over \$1.5 million worth of ore, which was shipped around Cape Horn, eventually to be smeltered into brass at east coast armament factories in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. When Henry first arrived in 1866 or shortly before, Copperopolis was estimated to have a population of over 10,000. With the end of the Civil War, however, the market price of copper plunged from \$0.55 to \$0.19 a pound, mining operations became far less profitable, and both the size and prosperity of the town diminished significantly.



As recorded in the *Great Register of California* of 1866, Henry Sheldon had satisfied the Calaveras County residency requirement for voter registration by November 22, 1866. From this record, however, it is not clear how long he had been in California prior to 1866, or whether his family had accompanied him to the West Coast. Most likely, Henry's family remained in Connecticut. There are several reasons for this assumption. First, although in becoming California's largest city San Francisco's civility had matured beyond the violent vigilantism of the previous decade, life in California's mining camps during the Civil War era remained a very rough and raw experience. This was a life to which Henry did not want bring his wife and children. Likewise, given the fact that Henry was a mine superintendent, he was well paid for his work, most likely received free room and board from the mining company, and therefore could live and work in the camp frugally while adequately supporting his family back East. Another factor also to consider is the difficulty of moving a family West prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad – although the journey overland or by sea had become less hazardous than it was for the 49ers, it nonetheless remained arduous and not without danger.

By 1870 Henry had finally reunited with his wife and children in San Francisco. Based on U.S. federal census records¹², it appears that the family lived in Ward 11 of the 2nd Supervisorial District – probably near current San Francisco's Noe Valley neighborhood¹³. The census documents cited here indicate that only four children – Dexter, Laura, Mary and the younger Henry -- resided with Henry and his wife. Frederick, then 16, is reported as living with the Babcock family in the same ward and district, and that he was employed there as a delivery clerk¹⁴. Additional information found in the Sheldon Family Association archives indicates that Henry's eldest son, Charles, had died of unspecified causes in Washington D.C. on June 18, 1864. It is not clear if Dexter accompanied his father west, however, voter registration records¹⁵ indicate that he was a resident of Mokelumne Hill, the county seat of Calaveras County, in 1867. Reflecting his father's occupation, it is quite likely that Dexter worked in placer mining

operations until the remaining gold was exhausted by the late 1860s, and then decamped from the Sierra foothills and settled with the family in San Francisco in 1870.

Although U.S. federal census records indicate Henry was a resident of San Francisco in 1870, the California state *Great Register* of voters for 1872, shows, as it did six years previously in 1866, that he was still a voting resident of Copperopolis in Calaveras County¹⁶. From this it can be reasonably assumed that Henry spent most of his time supervising the mine in Copperopolis, and returned only to San Francisco in 1870 for census enumeration purposes, and to be with his family. Given the continuing depressed market price of copper, Henry departed Copperopolis sometime shortly after 1872, as his voting residence is given as 934 Pine Street in San Francisco per the 1876 *Great Register*¹⁷. This address, between Taylor and Mason streets, indicates a structure, which if not extant in 1906, was certainly destroyed by the great earthquake and fire of that year.



Sutro Tunnel (c)

After his return to San Francisco in 1876, we have no clear evidence to show that Henry met Adolphe Sutro there, or if he journeyed to Virginia City in Nevada seeking employment as an accountant with the Sutro Tunnel Company. In any case his efforts were successful, and Sutro Tunnel Company records archived by the Bancroft Library indicate that Henry was working as Sutro's chief accountant beginning in 1878 in Virginia City¹⁸. Named after its founder, successful financier and future mayor of San Francisco, Adolph Sutro, the Sutro Tunnel drained the

Virginia City silver mines tapping the Comstock Lode. Started in 1869, the Sutro Tunnel intersected the main shaft of the Savage Mine 1,640 feet below its Virginia City opening. At completion in 1878, the tunnel exited near Dayton, after passing through six miles of the western Nevada mountains. Shortly prior to selling his stock in the Sutro Tunnel Company and moving to San Francisco, Sutro assigned Henry additional management responsibilities, including oversight of mine operations. In this capacity in October 1879 Henry accompanied former President U. S. Grant on a tour of the Sutro Tunnel. An article from the 1879 *General Telegraph News* refers to Henry as the tunnel's "Superintendent", although it is not clear that Sutro had yet formally transferred that title to him¹⁹. Shortly later in 1880, however, Sutro wrote Henry a letter, which would indicate certainly by that point Henry had assumed full responsibility for managing the tunnel²⁰.

Quite clearly 1880 census documents show that Henry and his wife lived essentially separate lives with Henry managing the mine tunnel and residing in Sutro, Lyons County, Nevada²¹; while his wife Laura was far across the Sierra Nevada and California's great Central Valley in western Sonoma County, about 70 miles northwest of San Francisco²². The 1880 census also indicates that by the summer of 1880 Laura, who was then nearly sixty years old, had moved with her grown son, Dexter (age 34), and daughter, Laura (age 32), from an urbanized San Francisco to a rural valley on what had been only several decades earlier the final edge of the western frontier. With \$1,129.50 paid in U.S. gold coins²³ Laura and Dexter bought 38 acres on the headwaters of Green Valley Creek five miles south and west of Sebastopol in western Sonoma

County. Interestingly, the official Sonoma County map of 1890²⁴ showing the location of the Sheldon property was drawn by the county surveyor, Lucius Edgar Ricksecker, whose daughter, Alice, married Dexter Sheldon in 1884. Discussions²⁵ with Raymond Sheldon, Dexter's son, indicate that it was through Ricksecker that Dexter came to meet Luther Burbank²⁶, who offered agricultural advice to the Sheldons regarding what trees and crops they should plant on their property. In the 1890s the family expanded the farm to include an inn, which they called Inwood, and to which



Sheldon Family Farm in Sonoma County about 1890 (d)

they hoped to attract vacationers from San Francisco, many of whom would journey up the North Pacific Coast Railroad which passed through nearby Freestone on its route to the Russian River vacation area. Unfortunately, most travelers continued on to the River, and subsequently both the inn and farm failed financially. The former Sheldon property at Inwood is located in what is known today as Furlong Valley in western Sonoma County²⁷. The town of Sutro, where Henry Sheldon lived in the early 1880s is now a ghost town on the edge of the Great Basin, near Dayton, Nevada²⁸.

Although documentation is sparse, it appears that Henry retired from the mining business during the late 1880s. Unfortunately, the 1890 federal census, the first to be automated by machine processing, was destroyed in a fire in the Commerce Department building in Washington, DC, in 1921, so there are no specific census records indicating where Henry was living as he entered the last decade of the 19th century. However, the *1894 Sonoma County Voter Register*²⁹ shows him residing in rural western Sonoma County, presumably on the family farm at Inwood. Later the 1900 federal census³⁰ similarly shows him still at that location as he commenced his 80th year along with the new century. As a less than positive commentary on the status of women in 1900, Henry's occupation is listed in the census as "Landlord" and that of his wife, Laura, is left blank except for the notation "wife" – although she retained title to the family's property along with her son, Dexter. Although requiring further research, records provided by the Sonoma County Genealogical Society³¹ preliminarily indicate that Henry died in 1903 on the Sheldon farm at Inwood.

In retrospect the life of Henry Hargrave Sheldon is reminiscent of Wallace Stegner's novel, *Angle of Repose*³². In this sense Henry's journey to the California frontier, his prolonged stays in the rough mining camps of the Sierra foothills and western Nevada, and the long separations from his wife, Laura -- all seem in many ways to parallel the life of, Oliver Ward, the central character in Stegner's novel. Nonetheless both men found their angle of repose: Oliver Ward in the memories of his grandson, and Henry Hargrave Sheldon in the redwood covered hills surrounding his final home in western Sonoma County.

Notes and References

[All references below designated by **[URL]** indicate material directly accessible on the Internet.. Assuming readers are online via a Wi-Fi or similar ISP connection, they may click on these URLs and access supporting documentation containing additional text, images and maps.]

- ¹ Starr, Kevin, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, (1973 and 1986). Represents the definitive statement of California’s role in the American western movement.
- ² Carter, Lyndia, “Nancy Kelsey, *The First White Woman to Cross Utah*” **[URL]**, *History Blazer* (November 1996). Quoted as saying, “Where my husband goes I can go. I can better stand the hardships of the journey than the anxieties for an absent husband”, Nancy Kelsey accompanied her husband, Ben, and approximately thirty other settlers over 2000 miles with the Bartleson-Bidwell Party in 1841. After the loss of all their oxen in the western Nevada badlands, she accompanied the party, carrying her infant baby on her hip, over the Sierra Nevada mountains on foot.
- ³ Brewer, William H., *Up and Down California*, Francis P. Farquhar, ed., 3rd edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974 (1st edition © 1966). This journal provides both an excellent picture of California in the early 1860s, as well as a comprehensive survey of both the new state’s natural and specific geological resources. Brewer was second in command of the Whitney expedition, which was commissioned by the State legislature in 1860 to inventory and assess California’s “silver, tin, quicksilver and even coal” resources. His journal makes frequent references to the Civil War, and the importance of the Whitney expeditions efforts to the Union effort.
- ⁴ Ambrose, Stephen E., *Nothing Like It In The World*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Provides an historical overview of the building of the U.S. transcontinental railroad, and the impact of its completion in 1869. It focuses especially on the engineering and construction effort necessary to cross the Sierra Nevada, as well as the importance of California’s “Big Four” – Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Charles Crocker and Mark Hopkins – in ensuring its success.
- ⁵ _____ For purposes of genealogical documentation, all Sheldon family members are identified by the Sheldon Family Association (SFA) genealogical reference number system. SFA reference numbers for Sheldon family members named in this article are Henry Hargrave (S5343), Daniel (S2106), John (S0008), Charles Saber (S5343x1), Dexter Brittan (S5343x2), Laura Frances (S5343x3), Frederick Nott (S5343x4), Henry (S5343x5), and Mary (S5343x6). SFA references appearing only in these notes include Raymond Rinke (S5343x23) and Sheldon Conner (S5343x23111).
- ⁶ _____ "Ancestral File," database, *FamilySearch* **[URL]** (<http://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.2.1/M1GG-5JB> : accessed 2014-02-07), entry for Henry Hargrave Sheldon.
- ⁷ Thayer, Bezaleel, *Memorial of the Thayer Name*, Oswego: R. J. Oliphant, Steam Book & Job Printer, 1874, p. 21. Although providing a detailed genealogical review of the Thayer family, this now dated work is suspect in light of current and more rigorous genealogical research techniques. For example, he cites (*loc. cit*) that after their marriage, Henry and Laura Sheldon “settled in Grass Valley, California” which, as documented here, is in error.
- ⁸ _____ *1850 U.S. Federal Census* **[URL]**.
- ⁹ _____ *1860 U.S. Federal Census* **[URL]**.
- ¹⁰ _____ *1866 Great Register of California* **[URL]**.

-
- ¹¹ Twain, Mark, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*. New York: C. H. Webb. Republished by Oxford University Press (1997).
- ¹² _____ *1870 U.S. Federal Census* [URL] – Note: taken on August 9, 1870 in Ward 11 of the Second Supervisorial District, San Francisco County, this census shows Henry Sheldon to be a resident of the City of San Francisco, and that his wife Laura and his five remaining children are living with him.
- ¹³ _____ *1870 San Francisco Ward and District Map* [URL] - San Francisco Genealogical Society (ref: <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/elect.htm>; accessed 11 February 2014) – “Eleventh Ward, District No. 2—Bounded on the north by Sixteenth Street to Dolores Street, on the east by Dolores Street from Sixteenth Street to Ridley Street, on the north by Ridley Street and a direct line to the Pacific Ocean, on the west by the Pacific Ocean, on the south by San Mateo County line, and on the east by San Bruno Road to Folsom Street, thence on the east by Folsom Street to Sixteenth Street”. This citation also provides a detail *Ward and District Map* [URL].
- ¹⁴ _____ 1870 U. S. Federal Census, *FamilySearch* [URL] (<http://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MN6Y-HMF>; accessed 11 Feb 2014) California, United States; NARA microfilm publication M593, FHL microfilm 000545583, p. 214. Note: shows Frederick Sheldon in household of the George Babcock family.
- ¹⁵ _____ "California Great Registers, 1866-1910," *FamilySearch* [URL] (<http://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VTDR-P9R>; accessed 11 Feb 2014), Dexter Britton Sheldon, 1867.
- ¹⁶ _____ "California, Great Registers, 1866-1910," *FamilySearch* [URL] (<http://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VTDR-N44>; accessed 12 Feb 2014), Henry Hargrave Sheldon, 1872.
- ¹⁷ _____ "California, Great Registers, 1866-1910," *FamilySearch* [URL] (<http://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VT6L-92S>; accessed 12 Feb 2014), Henry Hargrove Sheldon, 1876
- ¹⁸ _____ “Adolph Sutro Papers”, BANC MSS C-B 465, *The Bancroft Library* [URL] University of California, Berkeley; Series 6 Sutro Tunnel Company records 1869-1888, Box 15, H. H. Sheldon, Accountant, 1878-79.
- ¹⁹ _____ “Grant at the Nevada Mines”, *General Telegraph News* [URL] New York: New York Times (October 30, 1879).
- ²⁰ Mercer, Frank, “A Few Memories of the Late Adolph Sutro”, *News Notes from California Libraries* [URL] Vol. 13, July 1918, p. 274.
- ²¹ _____ *1880 U.S. Federal Census* [URL] Sutro, Lyons County, Nevada.
- ²² _____ *1880 U.S. Federal Census* [URL] Analy Township, Sonoma County, California.
- ²³ _____ Sonoma County Assessor’s Office, *Sheldon Deed* [URL], 10/02/1880
- ²⁴ Ricksecker, L. E., *Sonoma County Map 1890* [URL] – inset showing location of Sheldon family farm.
- ²⁵ Sheldon, Raymond R., *Miscellaneous Anecdotal Conversations With Sheldon C. Bachus, 1955-1964*.
- ²⁶ _____, “Luther Burbank”, *Wikipedia* [URL] (accessed 10 March 2014);
- ²⁷ _____, *Map, Furlong Valley*, [URL] Sonoma County, California – when viewing this map online, use the scale slider on left margin to zoom in on exact the location of Furlong Valley.

-
- ²⁸ _____, Map, *Sutro Ghost Town* [URL], Dayton, Lyons County Nevada – when viewing this map online, use the scale slider on left margin to zoom in on the exact the Sutro ghost town.
- ²⁹ _____, *1894 Sonoma County Voter Register* [URL], p. 140
- ³⁰ _____, *1900 U.S. Federal Census* [URL], North Sebastopol, Sonoma County, California.
- ³¹ _____, “Sonoma County, California Death Records, 1873-1905”, 2nd ed.;– *Sonoma County Genealogical Society* [URL], (http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cascgs/dr_saslo.htm accessed 15 February 2014) – see specific document on file at the Sonoma County Library reference: S1630 ISBN: 0788416308 Son. Lib: 929.379418 SONOMA.
- ³² Stegnar, Wallace, *Angle of Repose*, New York, Penguin, 1992 (1st pub. 1971). It should be observed that Stegnar’s protagonist, Oliver Ward, in fact was accompanied by his family to the primitive mining camps of the West, while Henry Sheldon’s family did not join him either at Copperopolis or Sutro..

Image Credits

- a) Bachus, Sheldon C. -- electronically scanned tin-type image found in the estate of Raymond Rinke Sheldon.
- b) _____ “Copperopolis History – The Madam Felix Mining District”, *Copper Gazette* [URL], April 24, 2011.
- c) _____ “Sutro Tunnel”, *Wikipedia* [URL], (accessed March 13, 2014)
- d) Sheldon, Frederick Nott -- scanned sepia image found in the estate of Raymond Rinke Sheldon. Frederick Nott Sheldon, Dexter Sheldon’s younger brother, started his career as a photographer, and took a large number of photographs of the Sheldon farm in Western Sonoma.