

[NO.66 FALL 2004](#)
[BENE LEGERE](#)
[NEWSLETTER OF](#)
[THE](#)
[LIBRARY](#)
[ASSOCIATES](#)

- [The Building of a Great Library: Hubert Howe Bancroft and The Bancroft Library.](#)
- [Mysterious Disappearance: Noted Professor of Berkeley Has Skipped. Said To Be Short in His Accounts.](#)

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The Building of a Great Library: Hubert Howe Bancroft and The Bancroft Library

Hubert Howe Bancroft was born on May 5, 1832 in Granville, Ohio, the son of Azariah Ashley Bancroft and Lucy Howe Bancroft.

Granville, Ohio was a community steeped in the Puritan tradition-strenuous observance of the Sabbath; fundamental emphasis on thrift and work; and the importance of education. Of these three habits, Bancroft adopted only the work ethic, and at sixteen, he left school to work in the bookstore owned by his brother-in-law, George H. Derby, in Buffalo, New York. For six months he folded and stitched reports in the business' bindery. When that portion of the business was sold, Bancroft was assigned to the accounting department. He was discharged after six months by the head bookkeeper.

Bancroft was determined to start his own bookselling venture. His brother-in-law lent him both fare back home to Granville and several cases of books to sell. He borrowed a horse and wagon from his father and spent the next four months traversing Ohio and selling his books to whoever would buy them. He was so successful that by the end of the summer he had paid off all of his accounts, and was invited back to the Buffalo bookshop to become a clerk at the annual salary of \$100.

In 1850, Bancroft's father sailed from New York to the gold fields of California. Other members of the Bancroft clan were soon to follow. In 1851 an order for a large shipment of books came from a family member in Oregon. The Derby bookstore filled this order and three others coming from the West. Two of these three shipments met with disaster, but the third shipment netted a 75% profit. Derby began to think that the Pacific Coast might be a golden business opportunity and so sent Hubert Bancroft, a boy not yet twenty as his agent, and \$5000 worth of goods to California for sale. It took five weeks for Bancroft to make his way from New York to California via the Panama route. "...Why my late employer, supposed to be possessed of ordinary bookselling sanity, should have sent me at such an age, to such a place, and for such a purpose as to sell and publish books, I could never imagine," Bancroft recounted later.

On April 1, 1852, Hubert Howe Bancroft arrived in San Francisco and wandered the town of muddy streets, gambling houses, and steep hills. Two days later, Bancroft traveled by steamer to Sacramento where it was decided that Sacramento would be a better business location for a bookstore business than San Francisco. Bancroft sent a letter back to Derby advising him of the decision. Derby's responded by sending a shipment of books via the Cape Horn route that would take eight or nine months to reach Bancroft.

In the meantime, Bancroft took the boat to Marysville to look for his father and oldest brother, Curtis, who had been the first members of the Bancroft family to

travel to California. There he joined his father in working in a quartz-mining operation that, after months of arduous physical labor, neither one had anything to show for his efforts. In November, Hubert Bancroft traveled back to Sacramento to meet the shipment of books, where he learned of Derby's death from cholera. Knowing that his widowed sister would be in need of money, he knew he had to quickly sell the shipment. Bancroft also recognized that Sacramento, after suffering from recent extensive fire and floods, would not work as a business site, and so returned to San Francisco. There he quickly made a deal, sold the entire shipment, and found himself among the ranks of the unemployed.

In May of the following year, he left San Francisco for Crescent City to seek new opportunities. He arrived in Crescent City with a case of books and stationery that he had obtained on credit in San Francisco. Bancroft soon made arrangements with the local general store to provide bookkeeping services for \$50 per month, with the added privilege of sleeping in the store and using a portion of the store's shelves to sell his books and stationery. Bancroft was so successful that although two years later, when the general store and gone into bankruptcy, Bancroft's personal accounts showed a profit of nearly \$8,000.

Bancroft returned to New York, where his widowed sister lent him the \$5,500 he had realized from the sale of her husband's books. With this financial backing, and with nearly \$10,000 worth of books and stationery provided on credit by various New York publishers, Hubert Howe Bancroft launched a stationery and book business in San Francisco, in partnership with his close friend, George L. Kenny. The firm of H. H. Bancroft & Co. soon opened its doors near the corner of Montgomery and Merchant Streets.

Business flourished and soon Bancroft returned to New York netting more than \$60,000 in goods shipped on consignment. On this trip, he met the woman he would later marry, Emily Ketchum, of Buffalo, New York, with whom he would have a daughter, Kate.

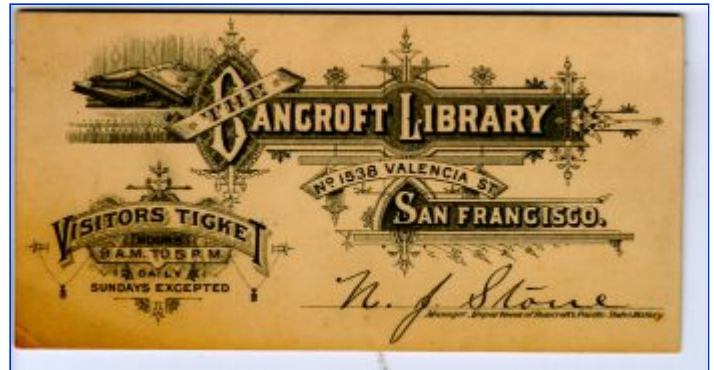
During the next eight years the H.H. Bancroft & Co. continued to expand until it took over first the entire three-story Merchant Street building, and then required the construction of a new and larger facility. New departments of printing, engraving, lithography, bookbinding, and music and musical instruments were added to the business.

Several small businesses were purchased, with their entire stock and machinery moved to a new location. Soon the Bancroft Company was said "to manufacture a full line of blankbooks from the smallest memorandum book to the largest and most expensively bound ledger or county assessment-roll at prices and quality to compete with those of any eastern manufacturer." In Bancroft's day, business relied upon bound volumes to be used as account books, ledgers, daybooks, etc. These items required not only printing, but bookbinding as well, and became a primary source of revenue for the firm. In addition, the lithography department was called upon to produce more than 20 million labels in just one season for cans of Oregon and California salmon. And in the fruit-canning season, the call for labels was just as great.

It is said that anyone who sells books runs the risk of becoming a book collector. This proved to be an understatement in the case of Hubert Howe Bancroft. One day in 1859, Bancroft realized that it might aid the editor of his "Pacific Coast Handbook" if all the books pertinent to the subject were located in one place.

Soon all 60 or 70 books pertaining to California and the west were grouped together on shelves in the office. In reviewing these titles, Bancroft began to realize the potential for book collecting as an aid to publishing. A while later when visiting another bookstore, he came upon several pamphlets about California in the 1850s. He bought them and immediately added them to the shelves in his publishing office. From then on, wherever he went, Bancroft would be on the look-out for other items to add to his collection. "There were not three men in California, I venture to say, who at that time knew anything either of the intrinsic or marketable value of old books," said Bancroft. Bancroft's collecting philosophy became "buy every picture, map, manuscript, pamphlet, or book that dealt with the subject of California and/or the Pacific Coast." He believed that completeness was more important than apparent value, as he felt that the most insignificant item could be of great value when made a part of a larger collection.

By 1862, Bancroft had found so few new items to add to his collection from the bookstores of California or the east coast that he began to think that his collection was complete. However, when he visited Europe, including London and Paris booksellers later that year, he collected enough books on California and the Pacific



Visitor's Ticket c. 1880.

coast to fill 12 packing cases. In 1866, Bancroft and his wife spent nearly a year and a half in Europe, traveling and collecting more books for the library. Due in large part to his purchases in London, Bancroft's collection had grown to nearly 10,000 volumes. Once again Bancroft felt he had successfully collected everything on the subject.

However, late in 1868 he learned of the great Mexican collection formed by José Maria Andrade, which was going to be sold at auction in Leipzig, Germany. Represented by a London book dealer, Bancroft purchased one-third of the 7,000 lots offered. This successful auction purchase encouraged Bancroft to add more to his collection through auctions and booksellers' catalogues. In 1868, Bancroft had about 10,000 volumes; in 1869, 16,000 volumes; and ultimately he felt the collection totaled 60,000 volumes. The rapid growth of the collection required a larger and larger space to safely house it. Bancroft was very afraid of fire. On several occasions, fire came very close to the building, and once the building was almost destroyed-the fire put out just in time to save the library. Bancroft began to look for the ideal location for the library. He considered such cities as Oakland, San Rafael, San Mateo, and Sonoma. He also seriously considered placing the library near the University of California as Bancroft was sure that his collection would be important to this "great institution of learning."

However, in the end he determined that a San Francisco location would be more beneficial to his work. Bancroft had a two-story brick building constructed at Valencia and Mission streets. Iron shutters were added to all windows and doors

to further guard against fire. This new building had plenty of room for the 35,000 volume collection.

As Bancroft continued to use his collection, he realized that he needed to add other types of materials. He began to collect newspapers and manuscript materials. He sent people to various government offices to make copies or abstracts of historical documents. He got many hundred other people to dictate statements of their pioneer experiences. He purchased several hundred scrapbooks of Benjamin Hayes. Bancroft stated, "There is no other state or country whose historic data have been so thoroughly collected at so early a period of its existence, especially none whose existence has been so varied and eventful, and its record so complicated and perishable."

Hubert Howe Bancroft had three qualities working for him as he strove to build his magnificent library-he was a professional book dealer, he had wealth, and he was a meticulous searcher. However, it was his collecting philosophy that really shaped the collection. Bancroft's collecting was broad in scope and focused on the western half of North America instead of only on the western United States or just on California. In addition, his collecting was all-encompassing-he collected books, pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides written by known authors or by amateurs. He didn't limit himself to first editions or fine bindings.

Beginning shortly before 1870, Bancroft began to feel the urge to write. He felt that history writing "...to be among the highest of human occupations, and this should be my choice." At first he thought he would write an encyclopedia of the Pacific states. He planned to write a series of very small volumes and set out to recruit a cadre of writers.

But after much cajoling and letter writing, and after many personal appeals, it began to become obvious that the project was doomed. Although many expressed enthusiasm for the project, Bancroft knew that some people would actually get around to writing anything, others would write only what they wanted to write and not what Bancroft had requested, and still others would write only if Bancroft did the necessary research. In the spring of 1871, Bancroft abandoned the encyclopedia project.

The cancellation of the encyclopedia, the recent death of his wife, Emily, and business hard times, took their toll on Bancroft's health. To help lift him from his despondency, he took a vacation trip to the east to visit friends and family. On his visit Bancroft recalled that a young lady asked him, "The next ten years will be the best of your life; what are you going to do with them?" It was this single question that formed Bancroft's ambition for most of his life. Bancroft decided he would write a complete and detailed history of the western half of North America.

Thus set, Bancroft returned to San Francisco to begin work. He soon realized how difficult a project he had assigned himself. Bancroft recognized two stumbling blocks. First, he had not yet read even a quarter of the books in his library. He figured that if he read for eight hours each day, it would take him more than 400 years to get through them. He knew he must rely on help from other writers-he just needed to figure out what type of help was needed. Secondly, the collection had no subject index. He had no idea which volume focused on what material. Again he knew he must rely on others to help create this index. In Bancroft's day, library cataloguing and classifying were new ideas. In fact, Harvard's library had just acquired its first card catalog.

After many false starts and at great expense, these two stumbling blocks began to fall away. The index took more than twenty men, some of whom worked at it for a number of years, and cost almost \$35,000 to complete. Bancroft also hired a cadre of assistants to outline subjects, write up first drafts of chapters, or a series of chapters. More than 600 people worked on the history project during its 20 years of operation. If Bancroft had begun this work today, he would have used a staff of Ph.D.'s in history. But in the 1870s, people with that level of education and training were not readily available so he used who he could find. Those few individuals that could do what was asked of them were retained; the others, let go. At the end, Bancroft noted that only six employees came to be regarded as indispensable.

Thus Bancroft began the work on his histories-a task at which he often worked eleven or twelve hours each day and took nearly twenty years to complete. The works, when completed, totaled 39 volumes comprising more than 30,000 pages. Scores of notetakers made notes on slips of paper, cut into strips, which were then placed by subject into paper bags hanging by clothes pins onto a clothesline that was strung across the workroom. Because this project was before the advent of the typewriter, all notes were done in handwriting, and usually were done in ink.

Bancroft was so devoted to his task that he declined a Republican nomination for Congress in 1875, and refrained from marrying in fear that a wife would interfere with his work. However, on one of his trips east Bancroft met Matilda Coley Griffing, whom he married in October 1876. They would have four children: Paul, Griffing, Philip, and Lucy. It is said that a better historian's wife could not have been found. Mrs. Bancroft encouraged his work and, in fact, wrote a description of the library and the history project that was printed in several newspapers. In return, Bancroft made his wife and children the center of his life, and his children were said to remember him as extremely attentive and generous.

To be continued in the next issue.

The Bancroft Library was acquired by the Regents of the University of California in November, 1905, and eventually transferred to the Berkeley Campus in the months following the April, 1906 earthquake and fire-having again survived destruction. The celebration of the Bancroft Centennial will begin in the fall of 2005.

[\[top\]](#) [\[prev\]](#) [\[next\]](#)

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