Go to H—l you d—d Yankee Son of a B—ch
A Gold Rush Voyage Journal

by Paul F. Johnston

Buckley booked passage with a friend from his hometown of Manchester, Connecticut, on the Boston sailing ship Capitol. A relatively new vessel, the Capitol was built in 1847 at Newburport, Massachusetts, for Salem owners named Neal, and measured 149 ft 3 in. long and 687 tons burthen. She was re-registered on 22 January 1849— the day before she left for California—to Boston owners George K. Sampson and Lewis W. Tappan. Specifically chartered for the voyage to San Francisco, just before she cleared Lewis Wharf on 23 January, the charter principals "Brigham and others" boarded, collected the passengers’ "certificates of passage," and inspected the ship for stowaways. A ticket for the voyage amount to the Moses Chase papers at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, indicates that the fare allowed each passenger 750 pounds of baggage without additional fees, but the price of the ticket itself is not listed. It did stipulate that passengers were required to furnish their own bed and bedding.

The Captain transported somewhere between 213 and 248 passengers, divided among the first (ca. 12) and second cabins (201 or more)—the numbers vary among the various record-keepers. The Boston ship carried more forty-niners on this single voyage than any other Gold Rush ship; there were also a couple of wives and children aboard. The prospectors were divided into twenty-two companies varying in size from three to thirty-five individuals, with twenty-nine unaffiliated at boarding. These were stock companies, which the prospectors paid a fee to join, for which they received such benefits as room, board, mining tools and supplies, a share of any net profits, and other perquisites. Buckley was a member of the Springfield (Massachusetts) Company. The crew numbered four officers (a master and three mates), four cooks, two stewards and twenty-one crewmen.

The Captain’s 1849 voyage was especially well documented one; there are no fewer than three other journals from the same California passage. One by William J. Towne, a machinist from Andover, Massachusetts, is at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Another is by Chester C. Hosmer (b. 1823) of Springfield, Massachusetts. Hosmer, having traveled in California in April 1850 and stayed there until his death in 1879. His illustrated voyage journal is at the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. A third, by Louis K. Adams, is at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The Peabody Essex also has the small pocket diary from Captain’s captain, Thorndike Proctor, from that voyage, containing daily navigational positions and the log of passengers, (with hometowns and some professions).

Buckley’s journal is unique within the Capitol group in that it contains a wealth of detail about the life and times of the passengers aboard an 1849 Gold Rush sailing ship. Most voyage diaries merely record the winds, weather, and daily positions, commonly copied from the ship’s logbook. Occasionally writers strayed into philosophical or emotional reflections or offered brief snapshots of daily events, but none recorded the depth and detail of social activity sustained in the Buckley journal over the 178-day journey to California. Buckley was a keen observer of human nature and a detailed reporter—some might say a gossip—of how the crew and passengers spent their time aboard the long trip. Nearly every day of the almost six-month voyage earned an entry and presented stories of the hundreds of young men grouped up in a very confined space for a long time. For example, Buckley sketched a detailed provided passage in the Second Cabin, and on 24 January wryly described his quarters as “my apartments a chamber Six ft long two ft. wide about five feet high.”

A month later, Buckley devoted an ironic entry to the chaotic below-decks area where the second-cabin passengers lived:

“[The] vast and magnificent dining salon is crowded full notwithstanding its magnitude…from the Fore Hams and the main diet people are all hams were returned anonymously the following evening. Later in the voyage, two hams were stolen, and one or more of the first cabin passengers stole some of the mate’s drawers. On 9 July, just a couple of weeks before arrival at San Francisco, thieves broke into the ship’s lower hold and stole some ship’s stores. Captain Proctor posted a broadside offering a $215 reward and informed the passengers that all aboard should be interested in apprehending the thieves, “so damages may fall on the right parties.” Proctor further threatened to clear the ship of any liability for short car-

The well-fortified harbor at Rio de Janeiro is one of the largest in the world. Well-protected by high mountains encircling the shore, it was the most common stopping point on the east coast of South America for Gold Rush ships. On 14 February, Buckley described a meeting of second cabin passengers, who appointed a court of three to meet with Captain Proctor and air their grievances regarding what they considered abusive behaviors on the part of the first mate. Setting a pattern with the passengers he would break only once during the long voyage, Captain Proctor promised he would look into it and do whatever he could to accommodate them. Theft was an occasional problem. One evening in early March, two hams were stolen from a barrel on deck, causing considerable speculation among the passengers. The captain in posted a $10 reward, and the hams were returned anonymously the following evening. Later in the voyage, two galls of brandy were stolen, and one or more of the first cabin passengers stole some of the mate’s drawers. On 9 July, just a couple of weeks before arrival at San Francisco, thieves broke into the ship’s lower hold and stole some ship’s stores. Captain Proctor posted a broadside offering a $215 reward and informed the passengers that all aboard should be interested in apprehending the thieves, “so damages may fall on the right parties.” Proctor further threatened to clear the ship of any liability for short car-

T he Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History acquired two California Gold Rush voyage diaries quite independently of each other but together they add considerably to our understanding of the real-life experiences of those who made a go of getting to the West Coast in 1849. The first was the Alexander Van Valen archive, acquired in 2006 and published in part in Sea History 137, the second was written by Benjamin S. Buckley and came to the museum from the public library in Loda, Illinois, in 2010.

The Van Valen archive preserved the story of a young New Yorker who left behind his wife and two toddler daughters in January 1849 to seek his fortune in California. He returned two years later, having netted considerable profits from his hometown of Manchester, Connecticut (possibly Chatham) around the Northeast, the two stories diverge dramatically.

Sea History 149, Winter 2014–15
goes, which could have had a significant impact on the prospectors. No resolution of that last theft was attempted during the voyage.

In early March, Capt. Capitól called at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Aside from a few remarks on the beauty of the hill encircling the harbor, Buckley was uncharacteristically quiet during the nine-day layover. It was left to fellow passenger Chester Hosmer to describe a human body floating past the ship as she anchored on 9 March. Hosmer further detailed how Capt. Capitól’s passengers visited the town, as well as the surrounding sugar plantations and mountains in the background, but the only other event of note during the layover was an outbreak of cholera on another American vessel bound for California. Buckley confirmed his Rio remarks about the provisions, which were contrary to MacAuley’s account in his journal. We are again weig’d anchor and on our way out of the harbor.”

A month later, Buckley described the hazing of a steward, the son of a wealthy family, and his suspension and later reversal. In a very scientific manner on some 3-4 pigs on which we are to be regaled tomorrow.”

Nearly all of the ships in the crowded anchorage at Valparaíso, Chile, were American vessels en route to San Francisco for the Gold Rush.
Killer or Gulliver, I wonder what their anxious wives and mothers would say if they knew how their dear husbands were acting.”

Leaving behind forty-four American ships at anchor, Capitól cleared Valparaíso on 19 May amid rumors of stowaways from the British frigate Asia. Some Royal Navy sailors boarded and retrieved two shipmates. A third stowaway, “more fortunate than his comrades,” revealed himself after the ship had left, reporting aft to the captain. Proctor told him to go on duty, and that he’d be put on the next British man of war. Some of Capitól’s passengers had neglected to pay their shoreside Valparaíso bills in the rush to depart, so the Star Hotel’s proprietor was compelled to hire a boat and chase the Capitól to collect his due.

Toward the end of May, the passengers began preparations for their landfall in San Francisco—carving powder horns, making and painting tents. The Lewiston Falls Co. purchased a spare spar from Captain Proctor “and [were] heavily employed working it up into masts for their boat, sweeps etc. for the purpose of getting up the river to the gold mines.” The Salem Co. lost the boat they brought on board over the side in a gale.

Around the same time, there was an altercation on the quarterdeck between Captain Proctor and a Mr. Allen, one of the first-class passengers. Buckley reported that Allen insulted the captain and refused to leave the quarterdeck when ordered to do so. Towne’s diary recounts that the captain sent for his revolver, and so did Mr. Allen. The passenger was forcibly ejected and not permitted to return until a letter of apology was delivered to the master.

On 22 June, a mutiny was narrowly averted when the ship passed through a heavy gale. For the first time since clearing Boston, the main and fore hatches had to be battened down. The captain ordered the Spencer taken in, but it proved impossible in the heavy winds and seas, so he ordered it cut down to prevent the loss of a yard or topmast. The crewmen refused outright to go aloft, but the second mate, a “regular Bull dog of a Seaman,” ordered two men to follow him up, and under his lead they finally obeyed.

Buckley was a pious man, and he recounts in some detail the religious services aboard Capitól. They began the first Sunday out of Boston, and the Sabbath was regularly observed unless heavy weather intervened. There were preachers aboard, and they delivered regular Sunday sermons imploiring the passengers to retain their religious natures despite the difficult environment. Hymns, prayers, and Bible readings filled out the services, of which there might be up to two per day.

Buckley’s diary ends on Thursday, 20 July 1849, with the drop of the “Mud Hook” in San Francisco Bay. A large group of passengers sang a lengthy song to the ship’s officers, which was mostly a satire on the food they were served over the course of the 178-day voyage. Buckley stops abruptly after recording every line and verse of the long tribute to the crew. There is no mention of what happened to him, his company, or any shipmates in the Gold Rush after Capitól dropped anchor.

Unlike forty-niner Alex Van Valen, who came back from his two years in California with less than $500, Benjamin Buckley had better luck at prospecting. In the margins of his journal, he recorded that on 30 October 1849, after only four months in California, he sent $300 back east to his father. Five months later on 30 March 1850, he sent $1,000 east to his account at the New Bedford Savings Bank. Only a month later, he wrote a $1,000 check to his brother Chauncey. On New Year’s Day 1851, he sent a $1,200 check to his account at the Fairhaven Bank in Massachusetts. Biweekly for the next month he sent his sister Adelia $200 checks, and on 1 April he sent a check for $500 to his father and brother Chauncey. Finally, he recorded a $100 gift to his brother William to fit him out for mining, for a total outlay of $4,500. Of course, this amount did not include his expenses or whatever monies he may have kept in California banks. To top it off, starting on 25 November 1849, he also began earning money by leasing out a 15-foot patch of ground 18 feet deep, ultimately collecting $500, in monthly payments of $62.50!

Continuing research is silent on Buckley’s departure from California and his destination when he first returned east. Years later, the 1860 census recorded him as a farmer in the village of Loda, Illinois, about 100 miles south of Chicago. At the time, he was still single, and boarding at the house of a local physician. In June of that year, he purchased his first two plots of public land (through the Homestead Act), and some notes in the back of the journal indicate he was a cattle rancher in 1861–62. He likely sold beef to the Union during the Civil War; in any event, he must have been reasonably successful during that period, because in 1867 he purchased another twenty-four public lots. The 1870 census listed him as a district superintendent in Loda and married to his wife, Julia. The 1880 census, which contains Buckley’s last entry, listed agriculture as his occupation. Genealogical research to date has revealed no further information on Buckley’s life or death.

Nevertheless, Benjamin Buckley’s long and remarkably detailed journal aboard the Boston ship Capitól offers an unparalleled snapshot of life aboard a Gold Rush ship, and the varied activities undertaken by young men in their prime in the adventure of a lifetime. The fate of the Capitól is as little known as Buckley’s later history. The ship is listed in San Francisco in the Weekly Alta California through 4 August 1849, but is gone by the 31 August issue. In October 1855, she was re-registered in Baltimore to owner Richard D. Fenby, and her final registration was surrendered in Liverpool on 20 February 1857, the ship having been abandoned at sea. Hopefully, further research will reveal more details of this ship and Benjamin S. Buckley, the forty-niner she transported to the California Gold Rush.

Paul F. Johnston is Curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. The Buckley Gold Rush voyage journal is in the Dibner Library at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (NMAH). Portions of the Van Valen archive are on display in the permanent exhibit On the Water at the NMAH. Assistance for this article is gratefully acknowledged from the Jones Library, Amherst, MA; the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA; the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park; the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley; and from Dr. Matthew Rassell, Christopher Kostas, Michael D. Smith and Peter B. Boyne. Charles R. Schultz’s seminal book Forty-Niners “Round the Horn (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1999) was consulted for this article. To view more images from Buckley’s and Hasmer’s Gold Rush journals, visit our website at www.seahistory.org.