

---

## **Photographs of W.C. Ralston and His Mansion in Belmont, Calif., 1872-1874**

Processed by Chris McDonald.

The Bancroft Library

University of California, Berkeley

Berkeley, CA 94720-6000

Phone: (510) 642-6481

Fax: (510) 642-7589

Email: [bancref@library.berkeley.edu](mailto:bancref@library.berkeley.edu)

URL: <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/>

© 1996

The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.

---

## Photographs of W.C. Ralston and His Mansion in Belmont, Calif., 1872-1874

**Collection number: BANC PIC 1987.018--AX**

The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720-6000  
Phone: (510) 642-6481  
Fax: (510) 642-7589  
Email: [bancref@library.berkeley.edu](mailto:bancref@library.berkeley.edu)  
URL: <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/>  
Finding Aid Author(s):  
Processed by Chris McDonald.  
Finding Aid Encoded By:  
GenX

© 2015 The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.

---

### Collection Summary

**Collection Title:** Photographs of W.C. Ralston and his mansion in Belmont, Calif.

**Date:** 1872-1874

**Collection Number:** BANC PIC 1987.018--AX

**Photographer:** Eadweard Muybridge

**Extent:** 11 photographic prints, various sizes; albumen; compiled on 4 mounts, 26 x 29 cm. or smaller. 11 digital objects

**Repository:** The Bancroft Library.

University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720-6000  
Phone: (510) 642-6481  
Fax: (510) 642-7589  
Email: [bancref@library.berkeley.edu](mailto:bancref@library.berkeley.edu)  
URL: <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/>

**Languages Represented:** Collection materials are in English

### Access

Collection is available for use.

### Publication Rights

Copyright has not been assigned to The Bancroft Library. All requests for permission to publish photographs must be submitted in writing to the Curator of Pictorial Collections. Permission for publication is given on behalf of The Bancroft Library as the owner of the physical items and is not intended to include or imply permission of the copyright holder, which must also be obtained by the reader.

Copyright restrictions also apply to digital representations of the original materials. Use of digital files is restricted to research and educational purposes.

### Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Photographs of W.C. Ralston and his mansion in Belmont, Calif., BANC PIC 1987.018--AX, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

### Digital Representations Available

Digital representations of selected original pictorial materials are available in the list of materials below. Digital image files were prepared from selected Library originals by the Library Photographic Service. Library originals were copied onto 35mm color transparency film; the film was scanned and transferred to Kodak Photo CD (by Custom Process); and the Photo CD files were color-corrected and saved in JFIF (JPEG) format for use as viewing files.

### Acquisition Information

---

Unknown.

**William C. Ralston**

William Chapman Ralston was born near Plymouth, Ohio in 1826. Shortly thereafter, his family moved to Wellsville, Ohio, on the banks of the Ohio River, where the young Ralston would become enchanted with the promise of adventure to be had on the river boats on their way to and from the Mississippi River and New Orleans. As a teenager, Ralston pursued his ambition, and went to work as a deck hand on the Mississippi River. Gifted with both a talent for numbers and natural charm and wit, he quickly became head clerk of the river boat Constitution. During this time Ralston met Cornelius Garrison and Ralph K. Fretz, then partners as river boat merchants, whom he greatly impressed with his prodigious skills and initiative. In 1849, upon hearing of the discovery of gold in California, Ralston immediately left for San Francisco. En route, he was delayed in Panama, and was there hired by Garrison and Fretz. They, along with Charles Morgan of New York, had exploited the Gold Rush traffic across the Isthmus of Panama and established the profitable shipping firm of Garrison, Morgan and Fretz. Ralston rose to become a junior partner in the firm, and was often called on to handle its most delicate negotiations.

After visiting San Francisco in 1851 --by captaining a passenger steamer the entire distance with no prior experience --and having been impressed with its potential for development, he moved to the still quite lawless town in 1854 and immediately expanded the shipping firm to include banking as well. Quickly earning a reputation as an honest and reliable banker, Ralston just as quickly began investing in the development of San Francisco and formulating a vision of the city as being the financial, industrial, and cultural center of the Pacific Coast, if not the entire nation. Because of political differences with Morgan and Garrison --who, as mayor of San Francisco by then, was opposed to Ralston's investing in the Vigilance Committee of 1856 --their partnership was dissolved. He then formed the banking firm of Ralston and Fretz, which he soon reorganized to form the firm of Donohoe, Ralston and Company after entering into partnership with Joseph A. Donohoe.

Ten years after his arrival in San Francisco, Ralston was one of the most powerful bankers on the West Coast. He was held in the highest esteem for his professional integrity, his generous financial support of both new and needy enterprise, and his visionary financial ingenuity. Even his social graces would play an important role in his grand design of building San Francisco into the "Paris of the West." He often entertained heads of state and other foreign dignitaries at his lavish 120-room estate in Belmont, impressing upon them the newly-formed distinction of San Francisco as one of the great cosmopolitan cities of the world. With time, his ambition to develop the region only increased.

In 1864, disappointed with the limitations of his firm and with Donohoe's interest in East Coast investing, Ralston dissolved the partnership and set about to form an even more powerful and versatile organization. With the support of D.O. Mills and Louis B. McLain among others, Ralston founded the Bank of California, which upon its opening was the richest bank in the West and the third largest in the nation. Ralston was now able to fully pursue his development strategies and invested even more liberally in such enterprises as the California Silk Factory, the Mission Woolen Mills, the Kimball Manufacturing Company, the Pacific Rolling Mills, the West Coast Furniture Company, the Cornell Watch Company, the San Francisco Sugar Refinery, the Grand Hotel, the Hunter's Point Dry Dock, the Reclamation Works at Sherman Island, and the San Joaquin Valley Irrigating Works. His commitment to the cultural wealth of San Francisco led him to support the building of an opera house, public libraries and parks, schools, and such landmarks as the Palace Hotel and the California Theater. Ralston was the first treasurer and one of the first regents of the University of California. Despite his lavish spending and tremendous influence, he kept an extremely low profile, for which he was honored by the Southern Pacific Railroad in their naming of the San Joaquin Valley town of Modesto (Spanish for "modest".)

Ralston's fortunes would eventually turn, however, as he fell victim to excessive investment habits and zealous speculation. In August of 1875, after the failure of a deal to sell Ralston's recently acquired Spring Valley Water Works to the city of San Francisco, and after losing key monopolies --especially in the Comstock Lode mining region --the Bank of California's stability was challenged by the press and a panic took hold in San Francisco's financial district. Worried depositors immediately made a run on the Bank, leading to its abrupt closure and collapse on August 26. The next day, a Bank of California board of director's committee investigation determined that Ralston had used millions of the Bank's dollars to finance his personal investments and asked Ralston to resign. Ralston immediately complied to the request, and pledged all his personal assets toward the recovery of the Bank. That same evening, while swimming from North Beach toward Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay --as was his frequent custom --Ralston drowned, the apparent victim of asphyxia. Long remembered for his generosity, selflessness, and financial genius, William C. Ralston is arguably more responsible than any other figure for the development of San Francisco from an 1850s Gold Rush boom town to the thriving financial and cultural center it became in the 1870s and in many ways has continued to be up to the present day. His death is said to have occasioned the greatest public display of mourning ever witnessed in San Francisco.

**Eadweard Muybridge**

---

Edward James Muggeridge was born on April 9, 1830 in Kingston-on-Thames, England. He was the second of four sons born to John Muggeridge and Susanna Smith Muggeridge. John Muggeridge was a grain, coal, and timber merchant and Susannah Smith Muggeridge came from a prosperous family engaged in the business of carrying by barge. At the age of 22 Edward decided to go to America and he changed his name to Eadweard Muybridge. He took the spelling of his first name from the "Coronation Stone," which had been discovered in Kingston in 1850. Seven Saxon kings had been crowned upon this stone and two kings named Eadweard appeared on its plinth. As for the spelling of his last name, the "muy" may have been added to reflect some Spanish ancestry.

Upon his arrival in New York, Muybridge secured employment as a commission merchant for the London Printing and Publishing Company. One of his first friends in the U.S. was daguerreotypist Silas T. Selleck, who sparked Eadweard's interest in photography. When Selleck went West and established a successful photography studio, Muybridge soon followed. In 1855 he settled in San Francisco, where he opened a bookstore at 113 Montgomery Street. In his free time Muybridge explored California; he was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the state that he began to think about photographing landscapes. Muybridge was aware of the potential of new photographic markets in America and he considered the possibility of photography as a second career. In 1860 he returned to England where he spent several years regaining his health (he was injured in a stage coach accident during the trip from SF to NY) and studying photography more seriously. Around 1866 he returned to America, altering his surname from Muygridge to Muybridge. When he arrived in San Francisco he joined Silas Selleck in the photography business. The following year Muybridge took his "Flying Studio" to Yosemite and made numerous photographs which were presented in 1868 under the pseudonym "Helios". Over the next couple of years he made photographs of the San Francisco Bay Area, Alaska, and the Pacific Coast.

In the Spring of 1871 Muybridge married Flora Shallcross Stone. A year later he became acquainted with the Leland Stanford family and this marked the beginning of his motion photography. Over the next couple of years, in addition to his motion studies, he photographed the Modoc Indians and U.S. soldiers in Northern California, Central Pacific Railroad and Union Pacific Railroad. In February of 1875, after being acquitted for the murder of his wife's lover, Muybridge went south to photograph Panama and Central America. He returned to San Francisco in November upon hearing of his wife's death. The rest of his career was spent primarily on the motion studies, first at Stanford University and later at the University of Pennsylvania. Eadweard Muybridge died May 8, 1904 at 2 Liverpool Road, Kingston-on-Thames.

#### **Scope and Content**

The Photographs of W.C. Ralston and His Mansion in Belmont, Calif. collection contains eleven photographic albumen prints taken by Eadweard Muybridge in 1874. The prints, some of which are stereograph halves, are gathered on four mounts --two prints being individually mounted, the remaining nine divided among two larger mounts. The collection features exterior views of the estate's various buildings and grounds; interior views of the dining room, ballroom, balcony and foyer; and a photographic reproduction of a portrait print of William C. Ralston by an unidentified artist.

The collection also includes a view of Sacramento from the State Capitol Building, which was probably taken in 1872 during Muybridge's visit to the city to photograph the property of former governor Leland Stanford.

#### **Background Note**

William C. Ralston acquired his estate --which he would fully remodel and name "Belmont," after the adjacent village --from the Italian Count Leonetto Cipriani in 1864. Ralston's renovations and expansions of the 42-acre property, many of which he designed himself, included crystal chandeliers; hand-etched glass panels; hand-crafted European furniture; silver plated doorknobs, railings and other fixtures; a bowling alley; tennis courts; a gymnasium and Turkish bath; a greenhouse; a carriage house and stable with stalls of mahogany inlaid with mother-of-pearl; a large residence called "Little Belmont" for the many servants; a dairy; a gas plant which supplied fuel to the nearby village as well as the estate; a slough; a blacksmith shop; and a private reservoir. Popularly considered the "White House of the West", and serving as a precursor to the Palace Hotel --which Ralston financed but did not live to see the completion of --the extravagant estate often marked the highlight of the San Francisco visits of many distinguished guests from the East Coast and abroad. Directed by Ralston's impeccable standards of hospitality and flair for entertainment, the estate also served as an adjunct to the negotiating offices of the Bank of California, winning over many a potential client. Ralston continued to make additions and improvements on the property until his death. Much of the estate still stands, and is the property of the College of Notre Dame.

---

**Sacramento -- Seen from the capitol. By Eadweard Muybridge.** BANC PIC 1987.018:01--AX

 <ark:/13030/tf900012rm>

**Single albumen stereo of photo by Eadweard Muybridge of interior of ballroom at Belmont -- W.C. Ralston estate at Belmont, CA.** BANC PIC 1987.018:02--AX 

<ark:/13030/tf5290105q>

**[Statue before mirror. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]**

BANC PIC 1987.018:03--AX  [ark:/13030/tf0v19p1rk](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf0v19p1rk)

**[Estate of W.C. Ralston, seen from across fields. Belmont, California.]**

BANC PIC 1987.018:04--AX  [ark:/13030/tf6v19p5cp](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf6v19p5cp)

**W.C. Ralston. [Photographic reproduction of drawing.]** BANC PIC 1987.018:05--AX   
[ark:/13030/tf3d5nb6bd](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf3d5nb6bd)

**[Dining room. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]** BANC PIC 1987.018:06--AX   
[ark:/13030/tf900012s4](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf900012s4)

**[Estate of W.C. Ralston, seen from hillside. Belmont, California.]**

BANC PIC 1987.018:07--AX  [ark:/13030/tf767nb8zm](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf767nb8zm)

**[Hallway. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]** BANC PIC 1987.018:08--AX 

[ark:/13030/tf4x0nb72b](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf4x0nb72b)

**[Piano niche. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]** BANC PIC 1987.018:09--AX 

[ark:/13030/tf3h4nb6kp](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf3h4nb6kp)

**[Parlor. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]** BANC PIC 1987.018:10--AX 

[ark:/13030/tf296nb4q5](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf296nb4q5)

**[Interior colonnade. Estate of W.C. Ralston, Belmont, California.]**

BANC PIC 1987.018:11--AX  [ark:/13030/tf8779p6cv](https://n2t.org/ark:/13030/tf8779p6cv)