
Finding Aid to the Charles Thompson Blake Letters and Miscellany, 1849-1865MS 204A

Finding aid prepared by California Historical Society staff.

California Historical Society

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Collection Summary

Title: Charles Thompson Blake letters and miscellany

Date (inclusive): 1849-1865

Collection Number: MS 204A

creator: Blake, Charles Thompson, 1826-1897

Physical Description: 5 folders(0.3 Linear feet)

Repository: California Historical Society

678 Mission Street

San Francisco, CA, 94105

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URL: <http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org/>

Physical Location: Collection is stored onsite.

Language of Materials: Collection materials are in English.

Abstract: Consists of 70 handwritten letters from Blake to his parents and sister, a notebook listing mining supplies, and miscellaneous notes and drafts of monetary transactions. The letters describe Blake's 1849 voyage from New York to California via Nicaragua on the ships *Mary* and *Laura Ann*; his gold mining activities in Kelsey, Sarahsville, Georgetown, and particularly Michigan City, with details on mining claims and mining techniques; incidents concerning law and order; and descriptions of gold assaying for Wells, Fargo & Co. Includes hand-drawn maps of Michigan City claims, as well as two letters from Blake's father to his son, George, concerning Blake's voyage and including a handwritten copy of a letter from travel and mining companion Roger Baldwin to his sister. Also includes one letter from Sherman Day to Jesse D. Carr, discussing political and day-to-day conflicts pertaining to Day's work as an elected official.

Access

Collection is open for research.

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Related Collections

Anson S. Blake Papers, MS 204

C. T. H. Palmer Papers, MS 1623

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Charles Thompson Blake Letters and Miscellany. MS 204A, California Historical Society.

Microfilm negative

Identifier/Call Number: MS 204A

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Day, Sherman, 1806-1884

Laura Ann (Ship).

Mary (Ship : 1843-1854).

Wells, Fargo & Company.

California--Gold discoveries.

Gold miners--California--Correspondence.

Gold mines and mining--California--El Dorado County.

Gold mines and mining--California--Placer County.

Gold--Assaying.

Letters.

Manuscript maps.

Michigan City (Calif.)--Gold discoveries.
Mining claims--California.
Central AmericaLetters 1-6
Drought effectLetters 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 35
Gold miningLetters 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 29, 31, 32, 39, 58a
IdahoLetters 69, 70
LawLetters 6, 36
PoliticsLetters 46, 58, 58a
OregonLetters 66, 67, 68
San FranciscoLetters 4a, 6, 9, 12
VoyageLetters 1-6
Water ditch projectLetters 32, 38, 39, 42, 43, 45, 48, 55
Wells Fargo Express Co.Letters 34, 35, 42, 62, 63, 67, 68

Accruals

No additions are expected.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

The Charles Thompson Blake Letters and Miscellany were given to the California Historical Society at the bequest of Anson S. Blake, 1959.

Processing Information

Processed by California Historical Society staff.

Biography

Like thousands of others responding to the discovery of gold in the year 1849, Charles Thompson Blake boarded a ship at New York City bound for Nicaragua and the gold fields of California. Born the eldest son of Eli W. Blake of New Haven, Connecticut on Oct. 21, 1826, Thompson graduated from Yale University in 1847. Two years later he embarked on his journey to California with his friend Roger Baldwin. Their friends Edwin Tyler and Charles T.H. Palmer had preceded them to California.

They arrived in San Juan de Nicaragua in late March, 1849 and spent four months crossing Central America. After securing passage in Realjo aboard the brig *Laura Ann*, Blake and Baldwin sailed for California. Despite suffering shortages of water, rancid food and blistering heat, all aboard arrived safely in San Francisco 76 days after departing Realjo. Stopping briefly in San Francisco, Blake traveled to Sacramento, bought supplies and secured passage to the gold fields near Georgetown. There, he and his three companions established claims.

The company of Blake, Tyler, Baldwin and Palmer remained together for several years, combining their efforts and meager profits to buy and sell claims as each exhausted its worth. These included both placer claims and coyote claims. During this period, Blake established himself in Michigan City, a small mining community east of Nevada City. Between 1852 and 1856, a severe drought struck California, and placer mining suffered. Blake and his partners realized that the future of mining in the Sierra would depend upon both capital and water. Thus in 1852, the company embarked upon a water project to bring water to the claims. They sold stock to raise capital, and dug 18 miles of ditches over the next five years.

But poor health plagued Blake on several occasions, and so in 1853, he took employment with Wells Fargo Express Co. as an agent. His duties included assaying gold dust and handling routine banking matters. A popular local figure, he was encouraged to run for State Assembly more than once, though he continually declined. Blake remained employed with Wells Fargo Express Co. for the next ten years in Michigan City, Yankee Jim's, Folsom, and in Oregon and Idaho Territory.

Despite his employment with Wells Fargo, Blake and his associates formed the Eldorado Water Company about 1854. The Eldorado Water Company controlled virtually all of the water rights in the Michigan City area. Also during this period, Blake corresponded with his father in New Haven regarding the Blake Rock Crusher, an invention which aided in mining quartz and in building roads.

In 1863, Blake went to Idaho working there on and off until 1871. He married Harriet Stiles, a long-time Connecticut acquaintance, in 1868. They lived for a time in San Francisco, moving to Berkeley in 1887. They had several children, Anson Stiles (b. 1870), Eliza (b. 1872) and Edwin Tyler (b. 1875).

In 1873, Blake bought an interest in, and became secretary of a macadamizing company in Oakland, California. The Oakland Paving Company, which used the Blake Rock Crusher, was presided over by C.T.H. Palmer. Following Palmer's death in Feb. 1897, C.T. Blake became president until his death in December of that year.

Scope and Contents

The Charles Thompson Blake Papers consist of 70 handwritten letters spanning the years 1849 through 1864, as well as typed transcripts of most of the letters, a notebook of mining supply entries and various notes and drafts of monetary transactions.

An avid correspondent, Blake wrote fluently regarding the voyage to California, the social life, customs and history of Nicaragua, through which he passed, and the hardships of ocean travel in the 19th century.

More importantly, however, C.T. Blake detailed life in the mining camps of California during the Gold Rush period. Corresponding often with his mother and father, Blake described not only his personal ventures, but detailed mining processes such as placer, coyote, hydraulic and quartz techniques. He commented on national and local politics, frontier law and the monotonous, hard-working life of mining towns. Two excellent stories of law and order in the mining camps are presented in the trial of a local scoundrel, and in the vigilante prosecution of corrupt county officials. As a Wells Fargo Express Co. agent, he provides valuable descriptions of the assay business, including the valuation of gold dust and its minting into bullion bars.

Several of Blake's later letters contain drawings, maps (see letters 38 and 43) and diagrams of the Michigan City claims, as well as mining techniques and equipment. In addition, an engraving on stationery provides a picture of Michigan City as it appeared in the mid-1850's.

Two letters in the collection, authored by Roger Baldwin, concern the voyage to California. One letter from Charles' father to another son, George, describes Charles' departure from New York. These letters are equally detailed and readable. There is also a letter from Sherman Day to Jesse D. Carr, May 25, 1870, discussing political and day-to-day conflicts pertaining to Day's work as an elected official.

Also included with the collection is a notebook, presumably kept by Blake, with extensive lists of supplies needed for mining, notes on botany and some sketches; receipts for receipt of funds from A.G. Stiles for interest in the Tajo Mine, and a check drawn on the Bank of California in 1875 to Clara Gow.

Folder 1, Letters 0-6	Voyage to San Francisco 1849 February-1850 February
Folder 2, Letters 7-48	1850 April-1856 December Note Includes two manuscript maps, with Letters 38 and 43, of Michigan City, California and environs.
Folder 3, Letter 49-70	1857 July-1864 August, 1870 May Note Includes letter from Sherman Day to Jesse D. Carr, May 25, 1870.
Mixed materials 4, Letters 1, 6, 11-15, 28-70	Typescripts 1849-1864
Mixed materials 5	Monetary receipts, notebook 1863-1865, 1873, undated