Finding aid of the James Hewston Jr. Letters C058480

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Title: Hewston Jr., John Letters
Identifier/Call Number: C058480
Contributing Institution: Society of California Pioneers
Language of Material: English
Storage Unit: B001620
Storage Unit: C058480
Physical Description: 1.0 folder (1 volume containing 25 handwritten letters)
Date (inclusive): 1853 to 1858
Abstract: Correspondence from John Hewston Jr to Professor J.C. Booth, the Melter Refiner of the U.S. Mint at Philadelphia. The letters discuss the construction of the mint, supplies required to cast the gold, and the chemical and geological concerns of the refining process.
creator: Hewston, John, Jr., fl. 1853
creator: Rosecrans, William S. (William Starke), 1819-1898

Conditions Governing Access note
Collection open for research.

Conditions Governing Use note
There are no restrictions on access.

Preferred Citation note

Donor
Gift of Miss Rowena Beans, date unknown.

Biographical/Historical note
John Hewston Jr. was the assayer at the San Francisco Assaying and Refining Works. In 1856 he established the Laboratory for Practical and Analytical Chemistry in connection with Kellogg and Humbert’s Assay Office. Later in his career, he was a brigadier general of the California National Guard.

James Curtis Booth (07/28/1810 – 03/21/1888) was a United States chemist who was the melter and refiner at the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia for many years. He and his former pupil Richard Sears McCulloch both invented methods of refining California gold that involved combining the ore with zinc, and the two men agreed to combine their inventions into a single patent, which they sold to an interested industrialist.

Related Archival Materials note
These letters were published by the Society of California Pioneers in 1953 under the title “Letters of John C. Hewston, Jr. On the Establishment of the U.S. Branch Mint in San Francisco”

Scope and Contents note
John Hewston Jr. came to San Francisco in November 1853 as Melter and Refiner at the US Mint in San Francisco. The letters are to Professor James Curtis Booth of the US Mint in Philadelphia. They deal with the challenges and successes of the Mint operations from finishing the Mint facilities, refining techniques, financial problems, and failures and pettiness of the leadership of the Mint in San Francisco during its initial years. The letters cover the period from 1853 to 1858. These handwritten letters from Hewston to Booth comprise 25 pieces of correspondence. There are two letters at the end also addressed to Booth, one from a E. Justh and the other from Maj. Gen. WS Rosecrans inquiring about nickel ore and mining.

The letters reflect the challenges of operations in isolated San Francisco where all communications were by monthly steamer to the East Coast via Panama. The work of the Mint and the payroll were intermittently funded during the initial years. Technical problems included getting pure water for refining, lack of stamping equipment, and efficiency of existing procedures and equipment. The letters tell of repeated problems caused by Mint Superintendent Dr. Birdsall, including favoritism and corruption. Often received gold was salted with iridium to inflate weight and value. Hewston left the Mint in 1855 to join Kellogg and Humbert doing assay work, but he continues reporting to Booth on Mint problem. He reports one instance were the blowers at the Mint failed resulting in gold ore being blown out of the smokestacks. He collected 3 barrels of ore from neighboring rooftop which yeild 70 oz of gold.

The final letter on 06/04/1858 askes for Booth’s help with problems with East Coast Banks complaining that K&H bars were overstating their value.

Existence and Location of Originals note
The Society of California Pioneers, 300 Fourth St, San Francisco, CA 94107.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Birdsall, Lewis Aiken, Dr.
Booth, James Curtis, 1810-1888
California, Northern - History - 19th century.
Gold mines and mining -- California -- History.
Mint of the United States
Old United States Mint (San Francisco, Calif.)
San Francisco Bay Area (Calif.)--History