
San Francisco Committee of Vigilance records

Finding aid prepared by Jennifer L. Martinez.

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

Manuscripts Department

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Descriptive Summary

Title: San Francisco Committee of Vigilance records

Dates: 1853-1858

Collection Number: mssVigilancecommittee

Creator OR Collector: San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856

Extent: 3,750 items

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Abstract: This collection contains letters and documents related to the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856, a vigilante group that formed in San Francisco, California, and functioned for five months. The letters and documents are related to individuals making charges or giving information about suspects or prisoners to the group.

Language of Material: The records are in English.

Access

Open to qualified researchers by prior application through the Reader Services Department. For more information, contact Reader Services.

Publication Rights

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Preferred Citation

[Identification of item]. San Francisco Committee of Vigilance Records, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Provenance

Purchased from Augustin S. MacDonald in 1916 and Sigurd Frederickson in 1931.

Biographical Note

The San Francisco Committees of Vigilance of 1851 and 1856 were formed when crime became widespread in the city of San Francisco in the wake of the Gold Rush. In 1856, the murder of James King of William sparked the reactivation of vigilante activities. King, a San Francisco newspaper editor, was shot by James. P. Casey, a corrupt official, after King attacked Casey in the columns of his paper. Immediately 10,000 men hastened to join the vigilantes, and William T. Coleman was again chosen as leader. Opposition to the vigilance committee was led by California Supreme Court Justice David S. Terry, but the efforts of his group were largely ineffective. The "Great Committee" of the vigilantes functioned for five months, then surrendered its powers to a regularly constituted civil authority.

Scope and Content

The collection contains letters and documents related to individuals making charges or giving information about suspects or prisoners to the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856. It also contains completed applications for membership, lists of members and members of the executive committee, and financial documents. More specifically the collection contains material related to the murders of James King, the assault of Sterling Hopkins by Judge David S. Terry, abstracts from the files of the Recorders Court and Court of Sessions, showing the most important arrests by the city police, 1853 to 1856, and Report by the Grand Jury on county affairs for the term ending June 1, 1856

Arrangement

Although the collection has been sorted, it essentially remains uncataloged. It includes 10 boxes, six bound volumes, and 1 rolled item.

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the [Huntington Library's Online Catalog](#).

Personal Names

Casey, James P.

Coleman, William Tell, 1824-1893

King, James, 1822-1856
McGowan, Edward, 1813-1893
Terry, David Smith, 1823-1889

Corporate Names

San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856

Subjects

Vigilance committees -- California -- San Francisco -- History -- Sources
Vigilants -- California -- San Francisco -- History -- Sources

Geographic Areas

San Francisco -- History -- 19th century
San Francisco -- Politics and government -- 19th century

Genre

Application forms -- California -- 19th century
Documents -- California -- 19th century

Box 1	Unclassified papers. 1853-1856
Box 2	Correspondence, depositions, etc. from the files of the Investigating Committee, relative to denounced members and other suspicious characters (B-W).
Box 3	Papers related to ballot box stuffing and fraudulent elections. 1854-1856 112 pieces
Box 4	Applications for membership (A-G). 1856
Box 5	Applications for membership (H-Q). 1856
Box 6	Applications for membership (R-Z). 1856
Box 7	Blank forms.
Box 8	Paid bills.
Box 9	Account books/Authorization to collect funds.
Box 10	Small box of realia. Envelope containing six bound volumes, including muster roll for Company D. Rolled item: San Francisco Committee of Vigilance 1856 membership certificate for James Ludlow.