A Guide to the Tubbs Cordage Company records

HDC0496

San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, National Park Service

2015, National Park Service

**Title:** Tubbs Cordage Company records  
**Date:** 1850-1981  
**Identifier/Call Number:** HDC0496 (SAFR 18874)  
**Creator:** Unknown  
**Physical Description:** 28.5 linear ft.  
**Repository:** San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, Historic Documents Department  
Building E, Fort Mason  
San Francisco, CA 94123  
**Abstract:** Tubbs Cordage Company records (SAFR 18874, HDC 496) includes correspondence, accounting ledgers, deeds, contracts, estate papers of the Tubbs family, billheads, and receipts of the Tubbs Cordage Company spanning the years 1854 to 1981. The Tubbs Cordage Company was family-owned from its creation in 1856 until it was sold in 1986. Some of the business papers are also personal in nature such as property owned and estates. The collection has been processed and is open for use without restriction.  
**Physical Location:** San Francisco Maritime NHP, Historic Documents Department  
**Language(s):** In English.  
**Access**  
This collection is open for use unless otherwise noted.  
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**Processing Note**  
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**Preferred Citation**  
[Item description], [Location within collection organization identified by Collection Number/Series Number/File Unit Number/Item Number], HDC0496 (SAFR 18874), Tubbs Cordage Company records, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park  
**Acquisition Information**  
SAFR-00001  
In 1988, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park acquired this collection from Golden Gate National Recreation Area.  
**Historical or Biographical Note**  
From its beginning in 1856 until well into the twentieth century, the Tubbs Cordage Company was the largest rope making firm on the Pacific coast. For over a hundred years the original plant at the Potrero district in San Francisco was the headquarters of the company. In order to maintain a near-monopoly in the cordage industry, branch mills were subsequently founded in Portland, Seattle, Manila, and Orange, California. The founding brothers, Alfred and Hiram Tubbs, ran the business until their deaths in the 1890s, and from then until 1986, Tubbs Cordage was owned and managed by their familial heirs. Only in the 1960s did Tubbs Cordage finally abandon its San Francisco factory, in order to consolidate its works in Orange and adapt to modern times by producing rope made with synthetic fibers. Then, in 1963, Tubbs donated its Victorian-era rope-making machinery and a Victorian wood frame building to the National Maritime Museum in San
In 1886, shortly before its sale to an eastern firm, the company also donated its old photographs and the business records which form this collection to the Maritime Museum. (A separate scope and content guide has been written for the photographs, collection #P92-030.) These records document the activities of the Tubbs Cordage Co. in all five branches for over a hundred years.

Alfred L. Tubbs, originally of New Hampshire, came to San Francisco in 1850 as the representative of a Boston wholesale house in order to sell its merchandise. On his own, Tubbs then entered into partnership with William Folger to form a ship chandlery firm that same year. The business prospered, and Alfred's older brother, Hiram, came to join him in San Francisco in 1853. The following year, Folger and Tubbs dissolved, to be replaced by the firm of Tubbs and Co. Alfred and Hiram continued to sell ships supplies, but, now (in partnership with the eastern shipping firm Flint, Peabody, and Co., which supplied capital and transported hemp from the Orient to San Francisco), they planned to open the first rope making factory on the west coast.

A surveyor's map on linen (Box 4, folder 2) of the factory site in the Potrero district indicates that the Tubbs brothers planned the purchase of this land as early as 1853. After construction of the factory buildings and the importation of both rope making machinery and skilled rope makers, Tubbs and Co. produced their first rope in mid-1856. Researchers seeking an overview of this beginning can turn to two important items: "Expenses at Rope Walk per day of Ten Hours" (Box 1, folder 16) which lists employees, their pay, product and average profit in late 1856; and an article in the S.F. Bulletin, January 7, 1857 (Box 29, folder 1) about the new Tubbs rope walk in the Potrero district.

Throughout its early history the Tubbs cordage firm showed a strong tendency to buy out the competition and remain the only important rope maker on the west coast. In 1877 the Tubbs brothers purchased the Pacific Cordage Co. of Oakland, only to dismantle it and move the machinery to San Francisco. In 1890, when an eastern cordage firm tried to invade the western market, Tubbs Cordage not only bought up their supply of rope but hired their salesman, Edward Everett, who remained with Tubbs for half a century. Finally, in 1892, Alfred and Hiram Tubbs purchased Portland Cordage Co. of Portland, Oregon. The manager they installed, Samuel Mears, stayed with the firm for many years and wrote many letters which survive in the present collection.

The deaths of Alfred and Hiram Tubbs in 1896 and 1897, respectively, found the business in healthy shape. The presidency of the company passed to Alfred's son Austin in 1897, and then to his other son, Alfred S. Tubbs, after Austin's death in 1899. A friend of the family who later married into it, Henry D. Nichols, became a director in 1902, vice-president in 1910, and served as president from 1935-1960. Many other family members served in similar capacities, some for many years.

Through at least the 1940s the company's leadership was energetic, and Tubbs continued to expand. In 1904, the Portland Cordage Co. (which though wholly owned by Tubbs was separately managed) built a new branch mill in Seattle, the Portland Cordage Co. of Seattle, to serve the Alaska trade. Very shortly afterward, Samuel Mears commissioned Captain H. L. Heath to purchase manila hemp fiber in the Philippine Islands for the various Tubbs mills, a development which ultimately led, in 1922, to Tubbs' purchase of the moribund Capstan Rope and Twine Works of Manila and its rehabilitation in 1923 as the Manila Cordage Co. This branch of Tubbs was presided over first by Capt. Heath (until 1933), and then by Howard P. Strickler, who had worked for Heath since 1905 and stayed with Manila Cordage until 1961.

One final expansion should be noted here, namely, Tubbs Cordage's merger in 1947 with the Great Western Cordage Co. of Orange, California (founded in 1924 as Western Cordage). These two firms had been associated with each other since the 1930s, and the merger was apparently one of friendly cooperation.

Even while continuing to expand, Tubbs Cordage experienced the beginning of its contraction. The Portland Mill had closed in 1932, but it was the post-war period and the introduction of synthetic fibers which forced Tubbs to reevaluate itself. In 1960 it commissioned the Stanford Research Institute to write a report on trends in the cordage industry and to make recommendations for Tubbs Cordage Co. (These reports may be found in Box 2, folders 33-34). As a result of these findings, Tubbs closed both its historic mill in San Francisco (1961-1962) and the Seattle mill (1964) and consolidated its North American production in Orange. The original plant on Palm Street in Orange was kept for the production of hard fiber rope, and a new building nearby on Cypress Street was purchased for the production of synthetic fiber rope.

During this time the Manila Cordage Co. continued to be owned by Tubbs, and a new factory building for synthetics was completed in Manila in 1964. In the early 1970s, however, American ownership of land in the Philippines was threatened with nationalization, and so Tubbs sold 60% of Manila Cordage to local owners.

During the 1970s the Tubbs plant in Orange had a healthy output, producing four to five million pounds of product a year, but their profits were drastically cut by foreign imports beginning in the early 1980s. A series of other misfortunes in the 1970s-1980s further undermined Tubbs' viability. Much capital was invested in the promising carpet yarn industry, a venture which failed. Attempts to capture eastern markets by establishing new factories, first in Reading, Pennsylvania, then in Austin, Texas also did not last long. These and other ventures are described in the scope and content notes to the photograph collection.
At last, in 1986, the Tubbs Cordage Co. passed out of the Tubbs family ownership. It maintains its identity as a subsidiary of the Frank W. Winne Co. of Philadelphia, a cordage firm which was founded in 1895. Winne continued production in Orange only until 1989, when the Tubbs Cordage office was moved to Tucson, Arizona. No cordage production occurs in California, but the Winne office in Orange is one of twenty of the company’s sales outlets.

Three books have been written about the Tubbs Co., each of which is available in the Maritime Research Center. The first and longest is "Men of Rope" by David W. Ryder, which was commissioned by Tubbs and published in 1954. While it contains valuable information, it discretely omits much regarding the personalities of the Tubbs management personnel, and labor issues such as strikes. "California’s Master Ropemakers" by Maria Teresa Colayco, brings the Tubbs story up to date (1977), while her book “The Ropemakers” (1975) concentrates on Manila Cordage Co. These books serve as readable introductions to the Tubbs history.

Collection Scope and Content

Tubbs Cordage Company records (SAFR 18874, HDC 496) includes correspondence, accounting ledgers, deeds, contracts, estate papers of the Tubbs family, billheads, and receipts of the Tubbs Cordage Company spanning the years 1854 to 1981. The Tubbs Cordage Company was family-owned from its creation in 1856 until it was sold in 1986. Some of the business papers are also personal in nature such as property owned and estates. The collection has been processed and is open for use without restriction.

The Tubbs cordage Company records cover, with varying degrees of completeness, the period from 1850, when the Folger and Tubbs ship chandlery firm was founded, to 1961, when the Tubbs Cordage abandoned its San Francisco factory to consolidate its operations in Orange, California. A few scattered items from before and after these dates are also in the collection. Numerous records exist for all five of the branch mills during this period: San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Manila, and Orange, giving insight into such matters as the plant layout and machinery, management, labor relations, raw materials, and rope products. Inevitably, there are gaps in the records. For each of the five branch mills, there are periods which are well represented by documents, and other periods which are not. Likewise, certain management figures such as Alfred L. Tubbs, Samuel Mears, and H. L. Heath left many revealing letters which are in the collection, while others, such as Hiram Tubbs, did not. Certain documents which David Ryder had access to for his book "Men of Rope" e.g. the "Letter Book" of the 1850s, are not in the collection. Nevertheless, there are many important resources which Ryder did not have or that he failed to exploit, making possible a richer history of the West coast cordage industry than has yet been written.

Collection Arrangement

Arranged into 11 series: Series 1: Operations, 1850-1967. This series includes the surviving business records for the Tubbs Cordage Co. from the gold rush into the 1960s, at the following locations: San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and the Philippine Islands. Ship chandlery records from the 1850s are included, as are the personal papers of Alfred Tubbs, which give the reader an idea of his activities outside of the cordage industry. Voluminous accounting records such as ledgers form a separate series, as do printed materials such as catalogs and price lists. Boxes 1-3.

Series 2: Real Estate Records, 1852-1920. Although not complete, these are extensive real estate records for the Tubbs factory land in the Potrero district and their office building at 607-613 Front St. in San Francisco dating back to the 1850s.

Series 3: Tax Records, San Francisco, 1858-1920. Real estate tax bills and receipts list the location of property owned by Tubbs Cordage Co., the valuation of the property, and the amount of taxes. Personal property tax notices (folder 6) list the personal property of Alfred L. Tubbs and the equipment owned by Tubbs Cordage at the Front Street office. Street grading assessments (folder 7) show the cost to Tubbs of street grading in the Potrero district in 1885.

Series 4: Tubbs Family Estate Papers, 1902-1919. This series includes estate papers for Susan A. Tubbs (widow of Hiram), Hiram Tubbs (relevant to his Tubbs island farm, and Elizabeth Chapman Tubbs.

Series 5: Cash Books, Ledgers, and Journals, 1854-1972. The surviving accounting books of Tubbs Cordage Co. and Tubbs family members fill twelve boxes. The first volume, the Tubbs and Company ledger (1854-1857), in box 6, reveals the extraordinary number of ships and leading San Francisco mercantile firms which Tubbs and Co. did business with, particularly in their ship chandlery line. Boxes 6-17.

Series 6: Associated Stockholders, INC., 1927-1939. This minor subsidiary of Tubbs Cordage Co. Box 18.

Series 7: Manila Cordage Co. Philippine Islands Allocation, 1939. In 1939, the cordage export business from the Philippine Islands was allocated to the several major Philippines cordage firms according to their size. This series of papers reveals the importance of Manila Cordage Co. relative to the other Philippines cordage firm. Box 19.

Series 8: Western Cordage Co. and Great Western Cordage Co., 1923-1971. In 1924 an important cordage firm using modern equipment, Western Cordage Co., was founded in Orange, CA (the name changed to Great Western cordage Co. in 1932). This company and Tubbs Cordage began to cooperate in the 1930s, when Tubbs supplied fiber to Great Western, and the two merged in 1947. Over a hundred folders reveal this company's business in southern California from its inception. Boxes 20-26.
Series 9: Catalogs, Brochures, and Price Lists, 1890s-1980s. The printed material produced by Tubbs forms a separate series. Early Tubbs cordage and Portland Cordage catalogs illustrate the range of products produced by these companies (folders 1-3, 6). A 1915 brochure illustrates the wonderful Tubbs exhibit, made entirely of rope, at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition (folder 4). A 1980 promotional binder displays Tubbs products near the end of its existence as a family-owned company (folder 13).

Series 10: Historical Retrospective, 1948-1971. The writing, publication, and distribution of David W. Ryder’s "Men of Rope" is documented in great detail in this series. For this purpose, a historical outline was compiled in 1949-1950 (folder 1) which might be useful to those becoming familiar to the Tubbs story for the first time. A list of officers and directors (folder 2) is also useful. Box 28.

Series 11: Periodical Clippings and Articles, 1957-1970s. Articles about Tubbs from newspapers and magazines form this series. Although it is the last series in the collection, some of the most useful documents are found here. A long newspaper article on the new Tubbs rope factory in Potrero district was written in 1857 (folder 1). Two articles on a strike at the Potrero factory in 1894 add a new dimension to Tubbs' history which was overlooked by David Ryder in "Men of Rope" (folder 1). Much information on Tubbs executives over the years can be gleaned from the clippings in this series, beginning with Alfred's and Hiram's obituaries (folder 1) and short articles on many others, such as T. H. Fortheringham, Samuel Mears, Henry Nichols, and Edward Everett (folder 2). Of interest is a collection of Tubbs Cordage advertising from the 1930s-1960 (folder 4) and articles mentioning the uses of Tubbs rope products, including in the movies (folders 5-6). Finally, a glossary of cordage terms (folder 15) should be useful to users of this collection who are unfamiliar with the specialized terminology of the cordage industry. Box 29.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Correspondence
San Francisco (Calif.)
Seattle (Wash.)
Portland (Or.)