Finding Aid for the Matthew Van Benschoten Fowler [Diary], 1851

Cataloged by Citlali Sosa-Riddell, with assistance from Laurel McPhee; machine-readable finding aid created by Caroline Cubé.

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Descriptive Summary
Title: Matthew Van Benschoten Fowler [Diary]
Date (inclusive): 1851
Collection number: 170/102
Creator: Fowler, Matthew Van Benschoten
Extent: 61 leaves : paper ; 26 x 20 cm.
Abstract: In this diary, U.S. Customs inspector M.V.B. Fowler describes daily life in San Francisco, and a southbound trip aboard the steamship Panama, from San Francisco to Panama.
Language: Finding aid is written in English.
Repository: University of California, Los Angeles. Library Special Collections.
Los Angeles, California 90095-1575
Physical location: Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact the UCLA Library Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.
Restrictions on Access
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Processing Note
Cataloged by Citlali Sosa-Riddell, with assistance from Laurel McPhee, in the Center For Primary Research and Training (CFPRT).
Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Matthew Van Benschoten Fowler [Diary] (Collection 170/102). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.
UCLA Catalog Record ID
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Biography
Matthew Van Benschoten Fowler was born on Aug. 16, 1814 and died on May 9, 1881. He was a U.S. Customs Inspector in San Francisco in 1851.
Scope and Content
M.V.B. Fowler, a U.S. Customs Inspector stationed in San Francisco in the early 1850s, records daily events and observations about his work, the surrounding areas, and a voyage south aboard the Steamship Panama in this small, possibly incomplete diary. In the first section, Fowler describes the merchants who arrive at the busy port, the waves of immigrants, and makes general comments on the hardships of seafaring life. He spends his off-duty time exploring San Francisco and describes the city’s buildings, the Presidio, Golden Gate Strait, and harbor. The diary also provides detailed descriptions of the city government, the Legislature, and San Francisco town life, often supplemented with newspaper accounts. Notably, Fowler seems particularly concerned with crime and lawlessness, a possible reflection on the ensuing lynch law that prevailed in San Francisco at the time. In this vein, he attends the sensational trial of Captain Walker (ff. 14), and comments on the passage and reconsideration of the Divorce bill (ff. 43). He also records his account of the fires that damaged San Francisco in this period. Almost daily, Fowler mentions his unhappiness, his inability to secure a better job, and the loneliness of missing his family, though he seems fairly active in the community. For example, he sits on a committee to have Jenny Lind, the famous singer (ff. 42), give a performance in San Francisco. Entries are consistently dated, though in some sections of the manuscript, entries appear under the names of boats. Presumably, Fowler recorded those entries while stationed on the boats docked in San Francisco harbor. After the dismissal from his post, Fowler begins a walking tour (ff. 34) in which he visits Santa Clara and San Jose. This section of the diary describes the Mexican adobes and missions. Fowler’s diary concludes with a short description of his abrupt trip home to New York City, via the steamship Panama and an overland walk across the Panama Isthmus. He mentions the flow of boat traffic, relates the stories of fellow passengers, quotes local prices for goods, and records the weather.
Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library’s online public access catalog.

**Subjects**
- Customs administration--San Francisco--California--19th century.
- San Francisco--California--Commerce--19th century.
- San Francisco--California--Social life and customs--19th century.

**Genres and Forms of Material**
- Manuscripts.

**Related Material**
- The second part of this journal was published in the *Southern California Quarterly*, 5:3 (September 1968).

Bound Manuscripts Collection (Collection 170) . Available at UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

| ff:1-33: San Francisco daily life |
| ff: 34-44: Walking tour of Santa Clara, San Jose, and San Francisco 1851 April 6 - 1851 April 14 |
| ff: 44-62: Aboard the steamship Panama 1851 April 15 - 1851 May 2 |
| ff: 63-65: Arrives on land to cross Panamanian Isthmus en route to New York City 1851 May 2 - 1851 May 5 |