

“Go to H—l you d—d Yankee Son of a B—ch”

A Gold Rush Voyage Journal

by Paul F. Johnston

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History acquired two California Gold Rush voyage diaries quite independently of each other, but together they add considerably to our understanding of the real-life experiences of those who made a go of getting to the West Coast in 1849. The first was the Alexander Van Valen archive, acquired in 2006 and published in part in *Sea History* 137; the second was written by Benjamin S. Buckley and came to the museum from the public library in Loda, Illinois, in 2010.

The Van Valen archive preserved the story of a young New Yorker who left behind his wife and two toddler daughters in January 1849 to seek his fortune in California. He returned two years later, having netted less than \$500. The Buckley manuscript tells a completely different story. Although it, too, was written by a young forty-niner from the Northeast, the two stories diverge radically.

Benjamin S. Buckley was born in northern Connecticut (possibly Chatham) around 1821 into a prominent family with eight siblings. A father is mentioned in the journal, but no mother. Buckley was unmarried and in his late 20s when he left for the California gold fields in late January 1849. Judging from the content and penmanship of his journal entries, he was very well educated.

Buckley booked passage with a friend from his hometown of Manchester, Connecticut, on the Boston sailing ship *Capitol*. A relatively new vessel, *Capitol* was built in 1847 at Newburyport, Massachusetts, for Salem owners named Neal, and measured 149 ft. 3 in. long and 687 tons burthen. She was re-registered on 22 January 1849—the day before she left for California—to Boston owners George K. Sampson and Lewis W. Tappan. Specifically chartered for the voyage to San Francisco, just before she cleared Lewis Wharf on 23 January, the charter principals “Brigham and others” boarded, collected the passengers’ “certificates of passage,” and inspected the ship for stowaways. A ticket for the voyage among the Moses Chase papers at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, indicates that the fare allowed each passenger 750 pounds of luggage without additional fees, but the price of the ticket itself is not listed. It did stipulate that passengers were required to furnish their own bed and bedding.

The *Capitol* transported somewhere between 213 and 248 passengers, divided among the first (ca. 12) and second cabins (201 or more)—the numbers vary among the various record-keepers. The Boston ship carried more forty-niners on this single voyage than any other Gold Rush ship; there were also a couple of wives and children aboard. The prospectors were divided into

twenty-two companies varying in size from three to thirty-five individuals, with twenty-nine unaffiliated at boarding. These were stock companies, which the prospectors paid a fee to join and from which they received such benefits as room, board, mining tools and supplies, a share of any net profits, and other perquisites. Buckley was a member of the eight-man Springfield (Massachusetts) Company. The crew numbered four officers (a master and three mates), four cooks, two stewards and twenty-one crewmen.

Capitol’s 1849 voyage was an especially well documented one; there are no fewer than three other journals from the same California passage. One by William J. Towne, a machinist from Andover, Massachusetts, is at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Another is by Chester C. Hosmer (b. 1823) of Springfield, Massachusetts. Hosmer married in California in April 1850 and stayed there until his death in 1879. His illustrated voyage journal is at the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. A third, by Louis K. Adams, is at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The Peabody Essex also has the small pocket diary from *Capitol*’s captain, Thorndike Proctor, from that voyage, containing daily navigational positions and the ship’s passenger list (with hometowns and some professions).

Buckley’s journal is unique within the *Capitol* group in that it contains a wealth of detail about the life and times of the passengers aboard an 1849 Gold Rush sailing ship. Most voyage diaries merely recorded the winds, weather, and daily positions, commonly copied from the ship’s official logbook. Occasionally writers strayed into philosophical or emotional reflections or offered brief snapshots of daily events, but none recorded the depth and detail of social activity sustained in the Buckley journal over the 178-day journey to California. Buckley was a keen observer of human nature and a detail-oriented reporter—some might say a gossip—of how the crew and

Moses Chase of Newburyport, Massachusetts, was a member of the one of the largest companies aboard the *Capitol*, the 35-man Newburyport Company.

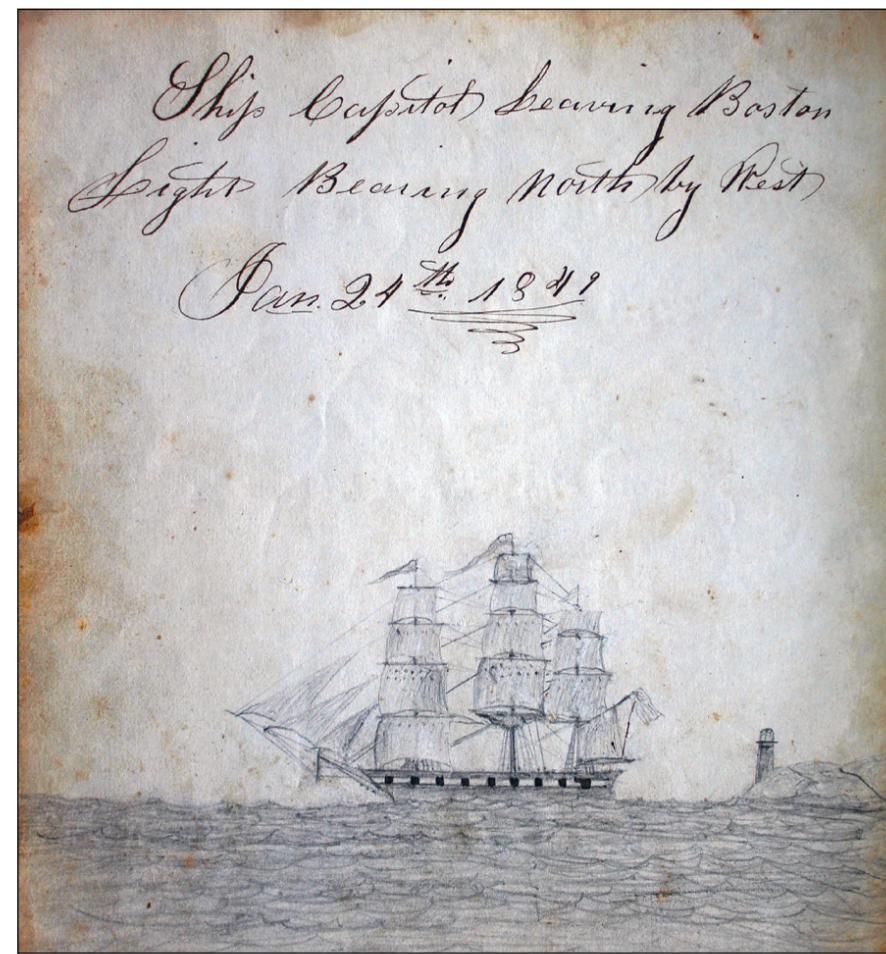
passengers spent their time aboard the long trip. Nearly every day of the almost six-month voyage earned an entry and presented stories of the hundreds of young men cooped up in a very confined space for a long time. For example, Buckley had booked passage in the Second Cabin, and on 24 January wryly described his quarters as “my apartments a chamber Six ft long two ft. wide about three ft high.”

A month later, Buckley devoted an ironic entry to the chaotic below-decks area where the second-cabin passengers lived:

“[The] vast and magnificent dining saloon is crowded full notwithstanding its magnitude...from the Fore Hatch to the main d[itt]o is another row [of chests] some three or four wide and two or three deep...the Stewards Room, outside of which are hung or piled up Bags of clothing, chests water pails Valises etc from the Mizzen Hatch to the Stern is nearly same as the other parts... Lots of chests piled wide and high with bags of clothing, water pails, ropes, nails, hammocks, Hats, valises, India rubber suits, oil cloths, life preservers, Boots, Shoes, and everything that can be hung... This magnificent saloon is brilliantly illuminated with splendid Chandeliers the whole of which emits as much light as a tallow candle would in the Boston theatre...”

On 14 February, Buckley described a meeting of second cabin passengers, who appointed a court of three to meet with Captain Proctor and air their grievances regarding what they considered abusive behaviors on the part of the first mate. Setting a pattern with the passengers he would break only once during the long voyage, Captain Proctor promised he would look into it and do whatever he could to accommodate them.

Theft was an occasional problem. One evening in early March, two hams were stolen from a barrel on deck, causing considerable speculation among the passengers. The captain posted a \$10 reward, and the hams were returned anonymously the following evening. Later in the voyage, two

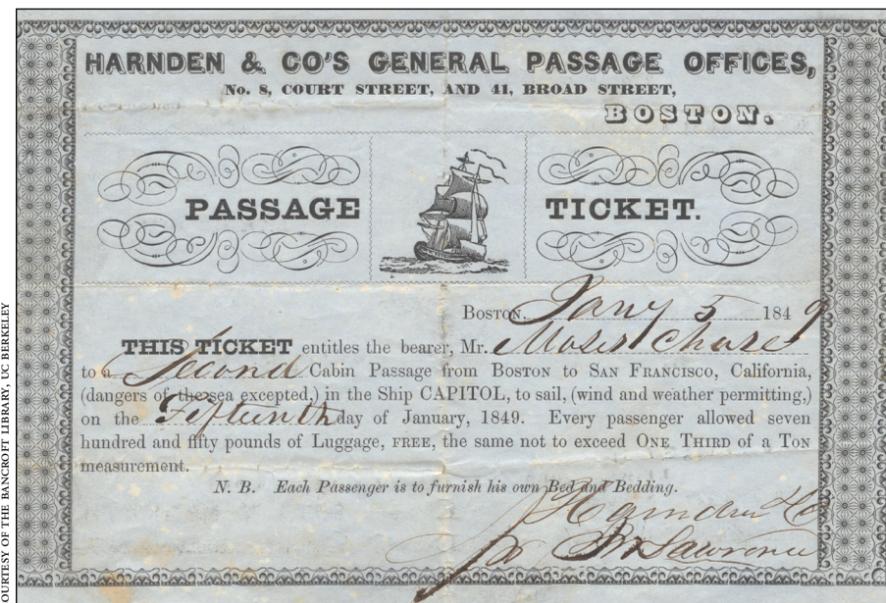
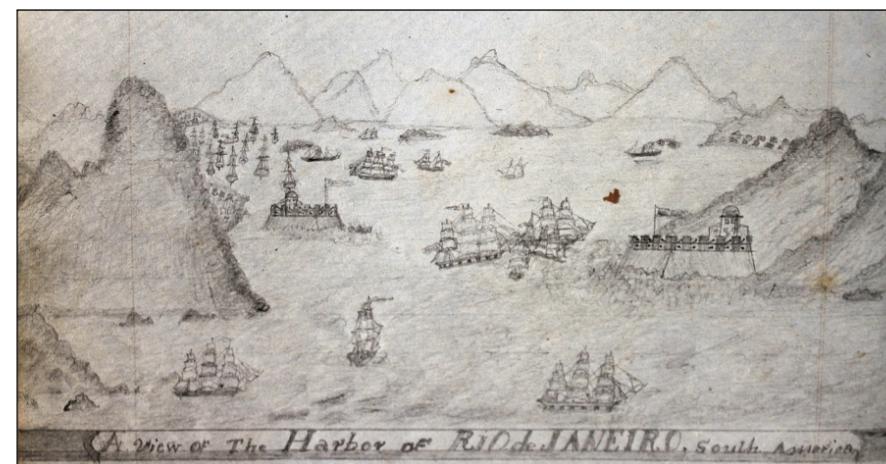


Less than a day out of Boston, artist and journal keeper Chester Hosmer wasted no time in sketching his home for the next six months—one of only two known pictures of the Gold Rush ship. The other is also in the Hosmer journal, depicting *Capitol* in a gale.

gallons of brandy were stolen, and one or more of the first cabin passengers stole some of the mate’s doughnuts. On 9 July, just a couple of weeks before arrival at San Francisco, thieves broke into the ship’s lower hold and stole some ship’s stores. Captain

Proctor posted a broadside offering a \$215 reward and informed the passengers that all aboard should be interested in apprehending the thieves, “so damages may fall on the right parties.” Proctor further threatened to clear the ship of any liability for short car-

The well-fortified harbor at Rio de Janeiro is one of the largest in the world. Well-protected by high mountains encircling the shore, it was the most common stopping point on the east coast of South America for Gold Rush ships.



goes, which could have had a significant impact on the prospectors. No resolution of this last theft was recorded.

In early March, *Capitol* called at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Aside from a few remarks on the beauty of the hill encircling the harbor, Buckley was uncharacteristically quiet during the nine-day layover. It was left to fellow passenger Chester Hosmer to describe a human body floating past the ship as she anchored on 9 March. Hosmer further detailed how *Capitol's* passengers visited the town, as well as the surrounding sugar and coffee plantations and mountains in the background, but the only other event of note during the layover was an outbreak of cholera on another American vessel bound for California. Buckley confined his Rio remarks to "After a week of trouble and suspense we have again weigh'd anchor and are on our way out of the harbor."

A month later, Buckley described the hazing of a steward, the son of a wealthy merchant earning his passage to San Francisco. Apparently the steward made a remark disparaging the second-cabin passengers, saying that some shoulders (meat) were too good for them. The passengers responded with a visit in the middle of the night putting a live pig in his bunk and a noose around his neck, then threatened to toss him overboard.

Food was certainly one of the more important aspects of *Capitol's* six-month voyage; Buckley wrote more about it than any other subject. The passengers were divided into sixteen messes of 11–17 individuals; these messes were set up for food collecting and eating, and were mostly independent of the prospecting companies. The messes rotated being first in the galley to pick up meals. One company placed a stove in the pig pen on the weather deck and even hired a cook for the voyage for \$85, "by which they fare better than their neighbors." The first-cabin passengers, as might be expected, were served better food than the second cabin. Breakfast and supper were both served at eight bells (8AM and 8PM); dinner was served in the early afternoon around 2PM.

Only a week out of Boston, the second cabin passengers elected a delegate to complain to Captain Proctor about the quality of the food. Proctor "promised to do all in his power to make the passengers comfortable." The next morning, the second cabin's

breakfast was lobsouse, "a kind of hash composed of the remnants of everything fried up with molasses and fat." Dinner that same day was Boston ham and rice, "which is considered a great treat." There were numerous other passenger complaints about the food and the coffee throughout the voyage.

On 1 February the "between deckers" (second-cabin passengers) were served roast beef. It had been planned for the first cabin, but the cook decided it would not last long enough to serve to the original group. Along with the roast beef, that meal included duff, or a blend of "flour a little lard and a few raisins boiled together and if dry would make a good Substitute for Dornan Cement." Table manners were wanting, and everyone was "compeled to grab and snatch our food and eat out of [their] hands without knife or fork like dogs, and all for gold."

On 9 February, Buckley wrote: "I wonder if we are going to have any breakfast this morning. Eight bells and here it is. Hash, composed [of] potatoes mashed together with a sprinkling of Beef, just enough to Say Beef and Coffee...had it with the grounds all in the part that cost the money and twenty fifth quality Ships Bread..." A typical evening supper might include a portion of salt horse (beef) and duff, "the latter article composed of Flour, Raisins and some fat, all boiled together and which is relished very much by all hands..." One evening meal served applesauce and dandifunk, defined as "crushed hardtack, molasses and grease then baked." There was occasional talk of making soup out of dolphins that they caught, but it never actually made it to the table. By mid-May, Buckley noted that a daily routine had emerged, "with Scouse for breakfast, Horse for dinner and hard bread with tea for Supper."

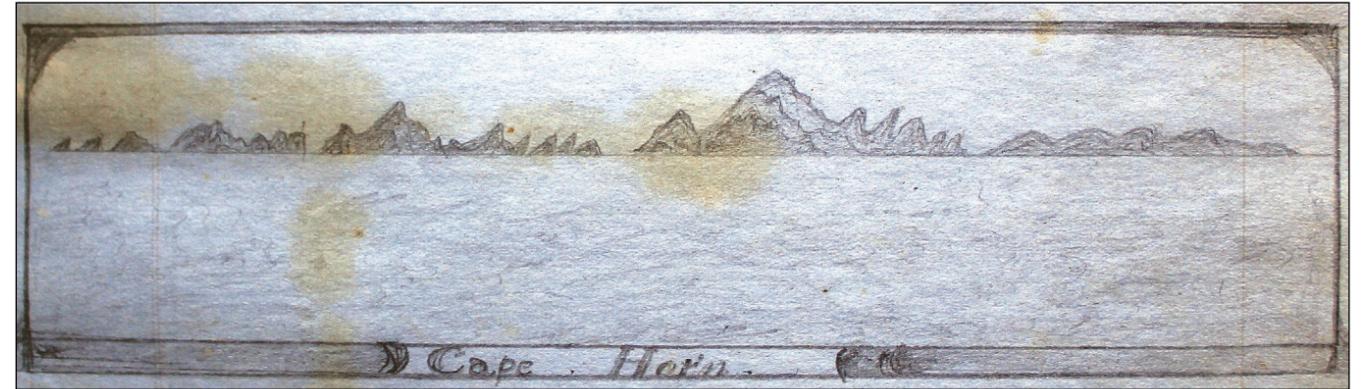
Aside from food, Buckley's main interests lay in how his fellow passengers passed the time. Games were especially popular, including such card games as whist, old sledge, all fours, and euchre. Board games mentioned were backgammon, dominoes and checkers. No mention was made of any actual cash changing hands; gambling for money was likely prohibited aboard *Capitol* in the interests of a peaceful passage. Song and dance were popular in the evenings, with tunes produced by two violins, a flute, a fife, penny whistles, and drums (tin pans).

Sometimes the racket grew so loud that the captain was forced to intervene on behalf of his off-watch crew trying to sleep. The young forty-niners responded poorly to these official censures. "Songs of the most obscene and disgusting kind are sung during the evening notwithstanding a lady the wife of Mr. Harris one of the passengers is within hearing of every word." On 21 February, Buckley noted "Oh! Jerusalem what a noise some twenty or more between decks singing [Negro] Songs, with the perspiration rolling off in torrents so Walk Jaw Bone." Trials of strength, sparring, and dog fights were also mentioned in passing, and there was talk of a Neptune ceremony in advance of crossing the Equator, but it never materialized.

One February day, a Salem, Massachusetts, passenger presented a lecture on the history of writing from its origins to the present day. It was so well received that the passengers formed the Atlantic Debating Society, complete with a constitution and bylaws. Throughout the voyage they debated such weighty topics as whether the California gold mines would be beneficial to the United States (no winner); if the Bible was the inspired word of God (yes, by a 3:1 margin); whether talent or circumstance has more influence on a man's success (both); whether capital punishment should be abolished (no winner recorded); and whether gold or women had more influence over men ("the women carried the day as usual").

There was a major celebration on George Washington's birthday, for which \$46 was collected among the passengers. February 22nd dawned with a seven-gun salute, followed by noon and sunset salutes of the same. There were large tubs of punch and lemonade available throughout the day, and some decent-quality cigars were passed out. Washington's farewell address was read by an elected "president," followed by an original ode with six four-line stanzas sung by the "choir" to the tune of *Hamburg*. Buckley recorded every word.

An even larger and more elaborate celebration was held for Independence Day, requiring a 4½ page entry in Buckley's notebook. It started in the middle of the night with all the ship's lights being extinguished simultaneously, while all the tin noisemakers from the galley were dropped on deck from the main topmast for maximum effect. Buckley wrote: "the Sleeping passengers aroused



Cape Horn has the reputation as one of the roughest spots in the world, belied by this benign sketch of the rocky coastline. Sailing ships going from Atlantic to Pacific would try to round Cape Horn in the summer months to avoid the worst of the rough winds and weather.

from their Slumbers were Seized with a sudden panic and not realizing their situation commenced hollowing whistling shouting crying and every tin dish tin pail or plate was drumd on til scarce a whole vessel was left—it semed as though Some demon was present..." A more formal order of exercises began at 10AM with prayers, songs, speeches, addresses, readings, toasts, and other activities celebrating the Fourth of July.

Fishing for sharks, porpoises, and flying fish; observing penguins and whales swimming alongside; snaring albatrosses; setting dogs to fighting—all served to pass the long days at sea. Watching boxing matches also moved time forward, and even Buckley participated once. Unfortunately, he hit his opponent too hard, decked him and "for

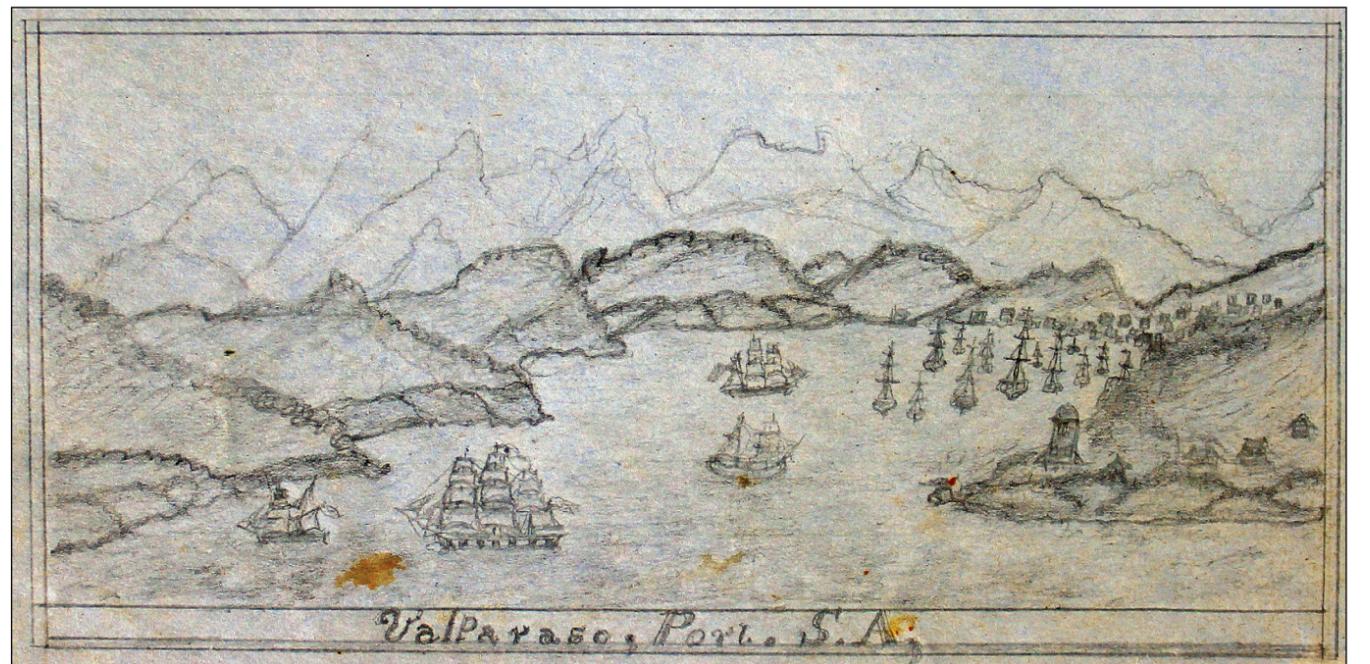
some time after getting up he was so effected by it that his mind was partially deranged."

Some of the passengers held auctions and raffles of various items like pistols, cigars, knives, guns, and watches. William Towne's journal records that on 1 March, the *Capitol* put 270 letters aboard the ship *Milo* bound for New Bedford, indicating that a large number of passengers were writing home. The younger passengers enjoyed shoving each other around on slippery, storm-tossed decks until a victim from Salem took offense at this pastime. He swung a frying pan against the head of an offender and then pulled a knife on him. There was no more mention of shoving after this incident. On 24 March, "Prof. Morville of Nashua NH performed surgical operations

in a very scientific manner on some 3-4 pigs on which we are to be regaled tomorrow."

On 14 May, after rounding Cape Horn, *Capitol* reached Valparaiso, Chile. In contrast to the Rio visit, Buckley was very descriptive in his diary. He caught a small boat ashore for 25 cents and booked four days' lodgings in town at \$1.50/day. He visited all the city sights and complimented the local library. He further described how friendly the local women were, writing "often these loving dears clap their arms around your neck try to coax you along, when if you are virtuous enough to withstand their assaults, they tell you to go to H—I you d—d Yankee Son of a B--ch... The passengers...are all recounting their Amours with the Senoritas, their wonderful adventures are equaled only by the Jack the Giant

Nearly all of the ships in the crowded anchorage at Valparaiso, Chile, were American vessels en route to San Francisco for the Gold Rush.



Killer or Gulliver, I wonder what their anxious wives and mothers would say if they knew how their dear husbands were acting.”

Leaving behind forty-four American ships at anchor, *Capitol* cleared Valparaiso on 19 May amid rumors of stowaways from the British frigate *Asia*. Some Royal Navy sailors boarded and retrieved two shipmates. A third stowaway, “more fortunate than his comrades,” revealed himself after the ship had left, reporting aft to the captain. Proctor told him to go on duty, and that he’d be put on the next British man of war. Some of *Capitol*’s passengers had neglected to pay their shoreside Valparaiso bills in the rush to depart, so the Star Hotel’s proprietor was compelled to hire a boat and chase the *Capitol* to collect his due.

Toward the end of May, the passengers began preparations for their landfall in San Francisco—carving powder horns, making and painting tents. The Lewiston Falls Co. purchased a spare spar from Captain Proctor “and [were] heavily employed working it up into masts for their boat, sweeps etc. for the purpose of getting up the river to the gold mines.” The Salem Co. lost the boat they brought on board over the side in a gale.

Around the same time, there was an altercation on the quarterdeck between Captain Proctor and a Mr. Allen, one of the first-class passengers. Buckley reported that Allen insulted the captain and refused to leave the quarterdeck when ordered to do so. Towne’s diary recounts that the captain sent for his revolver, and so did Mr. Allen. The passenger was forcibly ejected and not permitted to return until a letter of apology was delivered to the master.

On 22 June, a mutiny was narrowly averted when the ship passed through a heavy gale. For the first time since clearing Boston, the main and fore hatches had to be battened down. The captain ordered the spencer taken in, but it proved impossible in the heavy winds and seas, so he ordered it cut down to prevent the loss of a yard or topmast. The crewmen refused outright to go aloft, but the second mate, a “regular Bull dog of a Seaman,” ordered two men to follow him up, and under his lead they finally obeyed.

Buckley was a pious man, and he recounts in some detail the religious services aboard *Capitol*. They began the first Sunday out of Boston, and the Sabbath was regularly ob-

served unless heavy weather intervened. There were preachers aboard, and they delivered regular Sunday sermons imploring the passengers to retain their religious natures despite the difficult environment. Hymns, prayers, and Bible readings filled out the services, of which there might be up to two per day.

Buckley’s diary ends on Thursday, 20 July 1849, with the drop of the “Mud Hook” in San Francisco Bay. A large group of passengers sang a lengthy song to the ship’s officers, which was mostly a satire on the food they were served over the course of the 178-day voyage. Buckley stops abruptly after recording every line and verse of the long tribute to the crew. There is no mention of what happened to him, his company, or any shipmates in the Gold Rush after *Capitol* dropped anchor.

Unlike forty-niner Alex Van Valen, who came back from his two years in California with less than \$500, Benjamin Buckley had better luck at prospecting. In the margins of his journal, he recorded that on 30 October 1849, after only four months in California, he sent \$300 back east to his father. Five months later on 30 March 1850, he sent \$1,000 east to his account at the New Bedford Savings Bank. Only a month later, he wrote a \$1,000 check to his brother Chauncey. On New Year’s Day 1851, he sent a \$1,200 check to his account at the Fairhaven Bank in Massachusetts. Biweekly for the next month he sent his sister Adelia \$200 checks, and on 1 April he sent a check for \$500 to his father and brother Chauncey. Finally, he recorded a \$100 gift to his brother William to fit him out for mining, for a total outlay of \$4,500. Of course, this amount did not include his expenses or whatever monies he may have kept in California banks. To top it off, starting on 25 November 1849, he also began earning money by leasing out a 15-foot patch of ground 18 feet deep, ultimately collecting \$500, in monthly payments of \$62.50!

Continuing research is silent on Buckley’s departure from California and his destination when he first returned east. Years later, the 1860 census recorded him as a farmer in the village of Loda, Illinois, about 100 miles south of Chicago. At the time, he was still single, and boarding at the house of a local physician. In June of that year, he

purchased his first two plots of public land (through the Homestead Act), and some notes in the back of the journal indicate he was a cattle rancher in 1861–62. He likely sold beef to the Union during the Civil War; in any event, he must have been reasonably successful during that period, because in 1867 he purchased another twenty-four public lots. The 1870 census listed him as a district superintendent in Loda and married to his wife, Julia. The 1880 census, which contains Buckley’s last entry, listed agriculture as his occupation. Genealogical research to date has revealed no further information on Buckley’s life or death.

Nevertheless, Benjamin S. Buckley’s long and remarkably detailed journal aboard the Boston ship *Capitol* offers an unparalleled snapshot of life aboard a Gold Rush ship, and the varied activities undertaken by young men in their prime in the adventure of a lifetime. The fate of the *Capitol* is as little known as Buckley’s later history. The ship is listed in San Francisco in the *Weekly Alta California* through 4 August 1849, but is gone by the 31 August issue. In October 1855, she was re-registered in Baltimore to owner Richard D. Fenby, and her final registration was surrendered in Liverpool on 20 February 1857, the ship having been abandoned at sea. Hopefully, further research will reveal more details of this ship and Benjamin S. Buckley, the forty-niner she transported to the California Gold Rush. †

Paul F. Johnston is Curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. The Buckley Gold Rush voyage journal is in the Dibner Library at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (NMAH). Portions of the Van Valen archive are on display in the permanent exhibit On the Water at the NMAH. Assistance for this article is gratefully acknowledged from the Jones Library, Amherst, MA; the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA; the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park; the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley; and from Dr. Matthew Russell, Christopher Kostas, Michael D. Smith and Peter B. Boyne. Charles R. Schultz’s seminal book Forty-Niners ‘Round the Horn (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1999) was consulted for this article. To view more images from Buckley’s and Hosmer’s Gold Rush journals, visit our website at www.seahistory.org.