

Guide to the Thomas J. Van Dorn Papers

WA MSS S-1319



by William K. Finley

August 1989

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: WA MSS S-1319

CREATOR: Van Dorn, Thomas J., 1817-1880

TITLE: Thomas J. Van Dorn papers

DATES: 1847-1869, 1847-1856

BULK DATES: 1847-1856

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 0.25 linear feet (1 box)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers consist of Thomas J. Van Dorn's letters to his wife, Henrietta Frances Wilbur Van Dorn, and his diary of an 1849 journey of a Jerseyville company from St. Joseph to California. This material describes the landscape, rigors of travel, encounters with Indians, communities on route, and life in mining camps at Bear Creek, Sacramento, and Weaverville Dry Diggings. Letters to his wife dating from 1865-1869 describe his business in Yazoo City, Mississippi. There are business contracts between Van Dorn, William Sharon, and others.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.vandorn>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.vandorn>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

The collection was purchased by Yale on the William Robertson Coe Fund in 1965.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Box 1, folder 15: Restricted fragile material. For further information consult the appropriate curator.

Conditions Governing Use

The Thomas J. Van Dorn Papers are the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Thomas J. Van Dorn Papers. Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Scope and Contents

The Thomas J. Van Dorn Papers at the Beinecke Library consist of a diary of Van Dorn's journey from Illinois to California in 1849-1850, letters from Van Dorn to his wife Henrietta during the journey and from his early months in California, later letters to his wife (1864 to 1869) from Mississippi and elsewhere, letters to Henrietta Van Dorn from various individuals between 1847 and 1863, miscellaneous business papers and contracts, and miscellaneous items. The papers span the years 1847-1869, with the bulk between 1847 and 1856.

Thomas Van Dorn's diary describes his journey to California in 1849 with H. W. Burton and Henry Page as part of a Jerseyville company of some twenty-five wagons leaving St. Joseph, Missouri in May, 1849. According to Van Dorn, the expedition grew to over two hundred wagons. At one point, he mentions hearing that over 2300 wagons are ahead of his group on the trail; and on another occasion he refers to a "constant stretch of encampments." The diary describes, often in some detail, the initial departure from St. Joseph, the gathering of provisions, camp life, the changing terrain, unusual landscape features, plant and animal life, encounters with Indians, the fording of rivers or maneuverings on steep inclines or descents, etc. The entries give explicit evidence of problems encountered on the trip: cholera and other diseases, death of oxen and horses, lack of good water and grass, breakdowns of wagons, bickerings among the emigrants, Indian thefts, inclement weather, and the discouragement and turning back of many emigrants.

Despite these many formidable problems, the tone throughout the journey is generally one of optimism, fueled by continual rumors of the abundant riches in the California gold fields. Van Dorn's entry for August 18 reports "news from the Diggins [sic] that a \$100 per day is small labors in the mines."

Among other topics covered in the diary are encounters with other wagon trains, buffalo hunts, Mormon guides and ferries (operations "quite as profitable as labors in gold digging"), and forts and small communities passed en route (including a description of Fort Laramie on June 13).

Several entries describe the emigrants' attempt to enjoy themselves despite the rigors of the journey. The entry for July 2 reports the eager anticipation of a July 4 celebration. "We shall lay by and celebrate the glorious 4th. in a way that will amuse the savage herds and show them this westward march will open a new field to the extention [sic] of Liberty and drive savage barbarity and Mexican stupidity before the march of civilization and enterprise."

After Van Dorn's arrival in California in September, the diary entries are much less frequent and extensive. Entries after September 10 describe life in the mining camps or in Sacramento. The tone of the entries becomes noticeably more pessimistic as Van Dorn tries his luck first in the mines around Bear Creek, then at Sacramento and the Weaverville Dry Diggings. His entry for the week of September 16-23 records, "The

week did not close very encouragingly and some of our men are beginning to rail down upon California, and with no brightening hopes of a successful enterprise, begin now to despair of their bright anticipations." Yet he adds, "Perseverance will bring all right at the end"; and on November 19 he proclaims:

"Those who emigrated to this country to make it a permanent place of residence cannot help but do well, even without going to the mines. The only disappointment this country can offer to those who come to make money, is that portion who expected to light suddenly upon a bank of gold and return in a short time with a fat harvest. Some few do this, but many will fall short. . . ."

Entries for September 11 and November 19 reveal the price of food and other provisions and comment on price gouging in the mining districts. But Van Dorn clearly met with some success in the mines, for he notes on February 17, 1850, "Our diggings hang out beyond expectations. Up to last evening we had obtained \$2,000 from the Bar." Van Dorn's diary ends on April 5, 1850 with an entry from Sacramento.

Van Dorn's letters (22) to his wife during his journey and his early months in California often elaborate on his diary entries, describing various encounters and hardships. A letter of November 20, 1849 contains a description of Sacramento.

"The people live here in cloth houses. . . . There is undoubtedly more money in circulation here & greater opportunities for making it than in any portion of the world. The reports which we heard before leaving the States were not much exaggerated--in one respect they certainly were not [;] the mines are much more extensive but possibly the opportunities for taking out larger fortunes in a short time will disappoint many."

A revealing letter to Van Dorn on January 17, 1851 from an unidentified source in Six Mile Creek, Calaveras County, gives rather gruesome accounts of murders, lynchings, deaths from freezing, and Indian encounters.

By January, 1851 Van Dorn was back east in Alton, Illinois, attempting to prosper with a general store. Apparently unable to achieve success, he opened a store in Yazoo City, Mississippi, just after the end of the Civil War. Letters from there to his wife between July, 1865 and January, 1869 describe his business and the atmosphere in Yazoo City. A letter to Henrietta Van Dorn from Rachel Brown on August 7, 1863 discusses the war and its effect on civilian life.

Also in the collection (folder 9) is a complete list of provisions for Van Dorn and his companions for the westward journey. The collection also contains business contracts between Van Dorn and others, including several with William Sharon.

Miscellaneous items include Henrietta Van Dorn's 1846 algebra workbook and her holograph poem, "The Dying Wife to Her Husband."

Collection Contents

b. 1, f. 1	Diary: holograph	1848-50
b. 1, f. 2	Diary: typescript copy	n.d.
b. 1, f. 3	Correspondence	1846-48
b. 1, f. 4	Correspondence	1849
b. 1, f. 5	Correspondence	1850
b. 1, f. 6	Correspondence	1851-64
b. 1, f. 7	Correspondence	1865
b. 1, f. 8	Correspondence	1866-69
b. 1, f. 9	"Memorandum of Outfit, California Expedition"	[1849]
b. 1, f. 10	Contracts	1845-58
b. 1, f. 11	Sharon, William: agreements with Thomas J. Van Dorn	1850
b. 1, f. 12	Van Dorn, Henrietta: algebra workbook	1846
b. 1, f. 13	Van Dorn, Henrietta: "The Dying Wife to Her Husband" (holograph poem)	n.d.
b. 1, f. 14	Allard, Almira Baxter Wilbur: photograph	n.d.
b. 1, f. 15	Restricted Fragile Papers Restricted fragile material. For further information consult the appropriate curator.	n.d.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Frontier and pioneer life -- California
Gold mines and mining -- California
Indians of North America -- West (U.S.)
Overland journeys to the Pacific
Overland journeys to the Pacific -- 1849

Geographic Names

Amador County (Calif.)
California -- Gold discoveries
California -- History -- 1846-1850
Marysville (Calif.)
Sacramento (Calif.)
West (U.S.) -- Description and travel

Genres / Formats

Diaries -- United States

Occupations

Gold miners -- California

Names

Sharon, William
Van Dorn, Henrietta Frances Wilbur, 1826-1896
Van Dorn, Thomas J., 1817-1880