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Guide to the George M. Davidson Papers

WA MSS S-1452



by William K. Finley and Susie R. Bock

August 1989

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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CALL NUMBER: WA MSS S-1452

CREATOR: Davidson, George M(George Mathiot)

TITLE: George M. Davidson papers

DATES: 1848-1866

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 2.5 linear feet (3 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: George M. Davidson's diary and correspondence describe an 1849 overland trip to California. This material records the hardships of the journey, encounters with Indians, life in the California gold mines, and his establishment of a general store in Pine Grove. There are business records such as store inventories, bills from suppliers, a mining work ledger, bullion receipts, and informal certificates for mining shares in Butte County and Sierra counties, California.

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

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.davidson>.

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 donated to the library in 1963 by Lindley E. Eberstadt.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

The George M. Davidson 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

George M. Davidson Papers. Yale Collection of Western Americana. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Scope and Contents

The George M. Davidson Papers document Davidson's overland journey to California in 1849 and the operation of his general store in Pine Grove at the Sears Diggings, Sierra County, California. There are some personal papers and miscellaneous mining records for Butte and Sierra counties. The papers span the period 1848 to 1866, but the bulk of the collection dates from 1849 to 1855.

The papers are arranged in three groups, Personal Papers, Financial and Business Records, and Mining Records.

[Personal Papers](#) consists of Davidson's 1849-50 diary, correspondence for 1848-55, and a portrait of Davidson. The diary covers 153 days from May 12 to October 20, 1849, describing Davidson's "trip across the plains" and his arrival in the California gold fields. Early entries focus on the deaths of emigrants and animals and the general despair and turning back of many emigrants. Much attention is given to the hardships and hazards en route: cholera attacks, straying and stolen cattle, Indian encounters, buffalo hunting, separation from the main wagon train, difficult terrain, bad weather. Despite the numerous hardships, Davidson's optimism remained high on his arrival at the gold mines. "[The] country looked all day as though there might be gold in all the hollows we passed" (October 14). He complains, however, of high prices, and his entries for October 10 and October 18 list the going prices for a number of items. The diary ends on October 20, 1849, shortly after Davidson's arrival in California. It reveals nothing of his mining activities or his life in California.

Several of Davidson's letters reinforce the impressions recorded in his diary. A rather lengthy letter of May 12, 1849 to his brother Lewin details the gathering of provisions prior to leaving Savannah Landing, Missouri, and numerous obstacles and miseries encountered early on the journey:

"All of the emigrants here have suffered desperately with the Cholera [;] its one string of graves from here [a campsite apparently some thirty-five miles from Savannah Landing] to the Settlement, in fact graves have become so common they are hardly noticed. . . . We have become so used to see Cholera that its not noticed half as much as fever is. . . . The whole of the route thus far is full of old waggons deserted, some broke down[,] others lost their stock[,] others their friends and have become so sick of the trip that they [are] willing to sell everything they have if they can only get home once more. . . . I thought I had seen some little distress in my life but nothing like what I have seen thus far on the trip."

Later letters from California comment on Davidson's establishing a general store in Pine Grove and depict the isolation and hard life of the typical mining community. A letter to Davidson from C. G. Jessup, a prospector who owes him money, reveals firsthand the disappointment and penury many faced after fruitlessly working the mines for some time.

A letter from Davidson to his brother on January 12, 1853 mentions his new-found prosperity in his general store. "I regret I did not go to selling goods when I first came to this country." The same letter adds, "If a man is fortunate in this country he will make money fast, but if not, it is one of the hardest countrys in the world to make a living in. You hear only of those who have made their pile and gone home but nothing is said of the thousands that have not a dollar to help themselves with."

[Financial and Business Records](#) are organized in three groups reflecting different areas or projects. There are financial accounts for 1843-49, when Davidson lived in Fredericktown, Missouri. The most substantial records concern his general store in Pine Grove. Account books, 1849-55, contain inventories, individual client accounts, debt accounts, and miscellaneous notes. Most volumes are small, under fifty pages, contain several types of records, and overlap chronologically. Two of the account books (folders 9 and 18) are more substantial and contain sales data taken from the day books (a chronological listing of sales, folders 27-32) and re-ordered into individual accounts. Accounts dating 1852-55 record what Davidson purchased in Marysville to retail in Pine Grove (folders 23-26). The cash book and bank books (folders 34 and 35) also contain business records. Finally there are records of Davidson's transactions with Everts Snell & Co., a postal service for which Davidson may have served as a local office.

The [mining records](#) are related to Davidson's interests in Butte and Sierra counties.

Collection Contents

Personal Papers

Arranged alphabetically.

b. 1, f. 1	Correspondence	1848-55
b. 1, f. 2	Diary of a trip across the Plains, with financial accounts	1849-50
b. 1, f. 3	Diary, holograph copy in unknown hand	n.d.
b. 1, f. 4	Portrait of George Davidson (photograph of an oil painting)	n.d.

Financial and Business Records

FREDERICKTOWN, MARION COUNTY, MISSOURI

b. 1, f. 5	Personal financial accounts	1843-49
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PINE GROVE STORE, SIERRA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Arranged by record type and chronologically.

b. 1, f. 6-14	Account books	1849-53
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b. 2, f. 15-22	Account books	1853-55, n.d.
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b. 2, f. 23-26	Accounts for purchases in Marysville	1852-55
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b. 2, f. 27	Day book	1852
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b. 3, f. 28-32	Day books	1852-66, n.d.
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b. 3, f. 33	Cash book	1853-55
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b. 3, f. 34	Bank book, account with Adams & Co., Marysville	1853-54
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b. 3, f. 35	Miscellaneous financial and business records	1852-57
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EVERTS SNELL & CO. (POSTAL SERVICE, PINE GROVE STORE)

b. 3, f. 36	Express lists	1852-53
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b. 3, f. 37	Accounts	1852-54
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Mining Records

Arranged chronologically.

b. 3, f. 38	Mining claims in Butte County and Sierra County, California	1852, 1854
b. 3, f. 39	Bullion receipts	1854-55
b. 3, f. 40	Mining work record	

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

California -- Gold discoveries
Pine Grove (Sierra County, Calif.)
West (U.S.) -- Description and travel

Genres / Formats

Account books -- United States
Daybooks -- United States
Diaries -- United States

Occupations

Gold miners -- California

Names

Davidson, George M(George Mathiot)