

The Los Angeles Public Library
Local History Collection
Biography

NAME Alexander, David W. (deceased April 29, 1886)

Occupation Merchant

Address

Birth (Date and Place) About ¹⁸¹² 1800, Ireland

FATHER

Birth (Date and Place)

If Deceased, When

MOTHER

Birth (Date and Place)

If Deceased, When

IF MARRIED, TO WHOM Mrs. Francis Mellus, nee

Adelaida Johnson
Birth of Same (Date and Place) 1830, Guaymas, Mexico

If Deceased, When December 25, 1922

When Married November 7, 1864, Los Angeles

CHILDREN (Married Names of Daughters)

Martha

Elizabeth

Ynez

Joseph W.

Samuel

TITLES OF BOOKS, ARTICLES, MUSIC, OR OTHER CREATIVE WORK

(In the case of printed matter, please give date and publisher; of periodical publications also name of magazine and date.)

REVIEWS, CRITICISMS, AND OTHER BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES

(Please note printed matter concerning yourself or your work. We would appreciate any such material you may send, clippings, reviews, portrait.)

Los Angeles County Vital Statistics and Probate records
Security Trust & Savings Bank pamphlet, Ranchos de Los Santos, The story of Burbank
McGroarty, Los Angeles from the mountains to the sea, v.1
McGroarty, History of Los Angeles County, vol. 1
Willard, History of Los Angeles City
Workman, City that grew (Portrait)
Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California (Portrait)
Bell, Reminiscences of a ranger
Federal census of Los Angeles City & County, 1850
Layne, Annals of Los Angeles, pp 29, 63, 67
Security Trust & Savings Bank pamphlet, El Pueblo (Portrait, p. 32)
Warner, Hayes, Widney, Historical sketch of Los Angeles County, 1876
Illustrated history of Los Angeles county, 1889

Alexander, David W.

by Clare Wallace

4/26/39

SKETCH

The first Federal census of 1850 after California became American, gives the age of David W. Alexander as fifty-five years, and his nativity as Irish. Other accounts state he had been a trader in New Mexico after having spent much of his youth in Mexico.

He came overland with the famous Workman-Rowland party from Salt Lake City, arriving in California in 1841.

After settling here he ranched a short period at Rincon Rancho, in the vicinity of San Bernardino, and then joined that small but notable group of pioneer California merchants. This handful of men, which included Abel Stearns, Henry and Francis Mellus, and John Temple, introduced trade and commerce to western and southern California, hitherto devoted to ranching on vast scales. Infrequent visits of sailing vessels supplied the ranches with foreign goods, mostly finery from Spain or Mexico.

All of these early traders engaged in cattle husbandry and ranching. Each either was upon arrival, or shortly afterward became, a Mexican and Catholic to comply with Mexican law which excluded foreigners from owning land or settling in the country.

Mr. Alexander acquired almost 12,000 acres divided between holdings in Tujunga and historic La Providencia Rancho, prior to American occupation.

He was a commission man for other and an independent trader. In the years between 1844 and 1849, with John Temple he had the first store in the country. It was a general merchandise establishment located on the flats of San Pedro from which the partners handled every want of the population. Shipment or forwarding, and the trading and salting of hides was a very important feature of their business as hides were practically the only form of money in the county.

Temple and Alexander created a sensation comparable to that of the first railroad by bringing a four-wheel vehicle into the pueblo in January, 1849. Except for a local-made cart belonging to mission priests it was the first carriage seen in southern California. The importation was a rockaway, costing \$1000, along with two American horses, all coming from New England around the Horn on the customary windjammer.

Mr. Alexander participated in Mexican political affairs with what would seem to be extraordinary tact. There are no records connecting him to outstanding feuds with the testy Mexican public administrators such as are associated with the names of other American traders of the Mexican era.

Though he served on the American side in the war between the United States and Mexico in 1846-7 and was one of those captured and made prisoner at the Rancho del Chino of Colonel Isaac Williams, the Californians paroled him unharmed. Later, when hostilities ceased, they chose him as regidore to serve from January 2, to June 29 1850, in the Ayuntamiento which administered pueblo affairs until the United States assumed charge.

The first ten years following Americanization of California he continued to be active in public affairs. In the first elections held in July of 1850 he was elected to the City Council, then called the Common Council, and appointed president of that body. With Manuel Requena he was the only member to serve out the entire term.

Reelected to the same office the following year Mr. Alexander resigned September 25, 1851, before the expiration of the second term.

Upon his return from Europe in 1852 he was elected county supervisor.

From 1850-1852 county affairs were administered by the Court of Sessions, composed of the county judge and two associate justices. Los Angeles County at the time of Americanization was as first created by Spain and Mexico, embracing all of the present county, San Bernardino, and Kern counties. It was not until elective citizen

boards took over administration of the county that development of its resources was begun.

Mr. Alexander was a leader in such undertakings, both as supervisor and sheriff. He led the movement to open up wagon roads, and was a member of the board which voted funds necessary to lay the first road over the San Fernando mountains. Up to then communication northward over these roughest of the southern Sierras was by the steep and treacherous old Mexican pack trail through wild chaparral thickets.

During all of Mr. Alexander's public offices he maintained his extensive trading and forwarding operations. The firm of Alexander & (Francis) Mellus located in a two-story adobe at the juncture of what is now Spring and Temple streets, carried on general merchandising and a considerable trade in hides.

In the fall of 1852 the barque Eureka, under charter to the partners, landed at San Pedro the first invoice of goods consigned directly to Los Angeles. She was then laden with hides and tallow for the return to Boston around the Horn.

The previous year Mr. Alexander had brought in from Salt Lake ten heavy freight wagons, the first seen in this part of the country, and augmented them later with the purchase of a whole train of 16 wagons and 168 mules from Chihuahua, at a cost of about \$30,000.

With this equipment supplanting the ox-drawn carreta, heavy freighting over the old Spanish trail to Salt Lake City and over the mountains northward was begun.

Don David himself was in charge of the first heavy ten-mule team of the first train going north over the San Fernando. He was known to be an experienced frontiersman, and though they had a terrible time of it - they were three days going one mile in San Francisquito Canyon, building their road as they advanced - the train reached Fort Tejon with cargo intact. That was in February of 1855.

At the time of this exploit he was in partnership with Phineas Banning in a staging, forward-

ing, and supply business at San Pedro.

Mr. Alexander was the first collector of the port of San Pedro. He and General Banning occupied various other public offices, so much so, that they administered the government of San Pedro over a period of time.

In 1855 Mr. Alexander sold out his interest to Banning; Alexander and Mellus dissolved in 1858. Henceforth he continued in business alone. As the years advanced he became a heavy owner of landed properties, and up to within a short time of his demise his name is found on various civic committees.

After his marriage to the widow of his former partner, Francis Mellus, he made his home in Wilmington. He died there April 29, 1886.

ANECDOTES AND PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS

The name of David W. Alexander is probably not as glamorous as that of some of the other foreigners who became dons of early California, but it is one of the most respected in pioneer annals.

Don David was so well and favorably established in public life in the Sixties that he was considered a conservative and his businesses a tradition.

In the lawless Fifties he was one of the most courageous and active members of the citizen organizations formed for the protection of the community from vandalism. As a Ranger he often rode far into trackless country in pursuit of criminals.

Unlike Abel Stearns or John Temple who prudently remained neutral in the Mexican War, Don David took an unequivocal position and served on the American side.

He was the "strong and stubborn" type of adventurous pioneer, forthright in his convictions and ready to back them up with all his resources.

He lived to be a very old man, and when preparing for the inevitable he readily acknowledged his infirmities of body, but not of spirit, and made his will.

In a terse, but exquisitely lucid document, he disposed of his earthly possessions, and decreed:

"I desire that my obsequies be decent but simple, trusting my soul to the mercy of God through the merits of His Love, rather than to the intercession of mortal priest."

ANCESTORS OF DISTINCTION OR LOCAL INTEREST

(Please include names of local interest as "forty-niners," or any one connected with the affairs or development of the state or city, as officials, professional men, merchants, etc.)

EDUCATION (Schools, Colleges, Degrees, Etc.)

CLUBS, LEARNED SOCIETIES, ETC.

RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION Protestant

POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS Democrat

RESIDENCE IN CALIFORNIA SINCE 1841

SKETCH

(Please make this as full as possible, giving business affiliations, positions of honor or trust with dates if possible.)

Merchant; trader; transportation, forwarding, and
commission business; pioneer California farmer and
stockman; public administrative affairs (Mexican &
American); city and county official

CITY: City Council,
President, July 1, 1850-Sept. 25, 1851
Election Inspector, February 16, 1854

COUNTY: Supervisor, 1853-1855
Sheriff, 1855; 1876; 1877

FEDERAL: Mexican War 1847
First Collector of Customs, San Pedro

CIVIC ACTIVITIES:

In 1851, member of the Volunteer Police, formed
under Dr. Alexander W. Hope, of 100 leading
citizens. (The city's first police force.)

1853, member of original Rangers, the mounted
force formed to protect the city and county from
freebooters and assassins.

Written by: Clare Wallace
April 26, 1939