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# **“Liar, Liar! Pants on Fire:” Asbury Harpending’s Civil War California**

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# "Liar, Liar! Pants on Fire:" Asbury Harpending's Civil War California

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Dr. Robert J. Chandler Collection

The truism that survivors write history is apparent in *The Great Diamond Hoax and Other Stirring Episodes* in the life of Asbury Harpending (1913). This volume of alleged memoirs contains grand adventures, but, like Harpending's mining schemes, they do not pan out. Its century of existence has given it an undeserved authority.

The book is a compilation of 38 daily installments in the *San Francisco Bulletin* in September and October 1913 providing entertaining tales of the founders of San Francisco 50 years before. In retrospect, these stirring episodes in the life of Asbury Harpending are a striking insight into his modus operandi with colleagues and clients.

I have no comments on the 1872 diamond-salting venture of the title, but will concentrate on two of Asbury Harpending's Civil War escapades: (1) joining an alleged plot by the Committee of Thirty in January and February 1861 to capture Fort Alcatraz, Fort Point, Mare Island, and Benicia Arsenal, and (2) participation in a traitorous scheme in March 1863 to use the schooner *J.M. Chapman* as a Confederate States of America privateer to seize gold-laden Pacific Mail steamships.

Asbury Harpending (1839-1923) was born into a land-owning Kentucky family. He arrived in California, by his account, in 1857, and promptly engaged in profitable mining ventures. Harpending's height at 5 feet, 11 inches made men look up to him: he was taller than most in the 1860s. Harpending had a convincing way with words, both written and spoken, and the charm to captivate others. His imagination was boundless.



Asbury Harpending, prevaricator extraordinaire.

In 1975, David Lavender, biographer of the famous banker William C. Ralston, found Harpending to be "a kind of private demon, leading Ralston on from one wild speculation to another." If Harpending could persuade the leading financier of the 1860s and 1870s, who controlled the rich Comstock Lode, to invest money unwisely in such schemes as the Great Diamond Hoax, historians ought to be wary. They are not.

For instance, in 1958, legendary Los Angeles book dealer Glen Dawson praised Harpending in his forward to the University of Oklahoma's reprint of the memoirs in its *Western Frontier*

Library series. That Harpending "could write with authority and a minimum of extraneous detail about events for which contemporary records are scant: the Confederate secret society known as the Knights of the Golden Circle, [and] the *Chapman case*" amazed him.

Dawson closed his remarks giving Harpending a free pass. "It is not my purpose in this foreword, however, to render a verdict on Asbury Harpending," Dawson said, while the book jacket proclaimed, "it is generally accepted as a truthful narrative." Since my first published comments 30 years ago, writers who should know better continue to accept this liar at face value.

### THE FICTIONAL COMMITTEE OF THIRTY

Harpending is the source for the story that in early 1861 a Southern Committee of Thirty pledged to raise 3,000 men to capture the forts ringing San Francisco. "Everything was in readiness by the middle of January, 1861," Harpending wrote.

Harpending's tale revolved around the alleged actions of famed attorney Edmund Randolph, who "was one of our committee," to enlist General Albert Sidney Johnston, commanding the Department of the Pacific, in the plot. Although Randolph was, Harpending claimed, "on the closest terms with General Johnston," the honorable general abruptly refused. Shocked, Randolph went "stark crazy" and "indulged in all kinds of loose, unbridled talk."

Seeking to save the mission, three leaders of the committee, including Harpending, called on the general to find where he stood. Johnston emphatically declared he would "defend the property of the United States with every resource at my command, and with the last drop of blood in my body." The general's firmness rapidly dissipated this Southern plot. However, the only true statement in Harpending's story is his assessment of Johnston's upright character.

How so? For Harpending's version to contain any truth, the prime participants Johnston, Randolph, and Harpending, had to meet.

Albert Sidney Johnston sailed into San Francisco aboard the *Uncle Sam* on January 14, 1861, and took charge of the Department the next day. A month later, on February 15, he received orders from General Winfield Scott to secure the bay area forts and did so.

Writing to a son on April 9 from San Francisco, Johnston said, "I am a stranger here, and have no conversation even with any one who desires such a result or entertains such views." I have found no evidence that Johnston and Randolph knew each other.

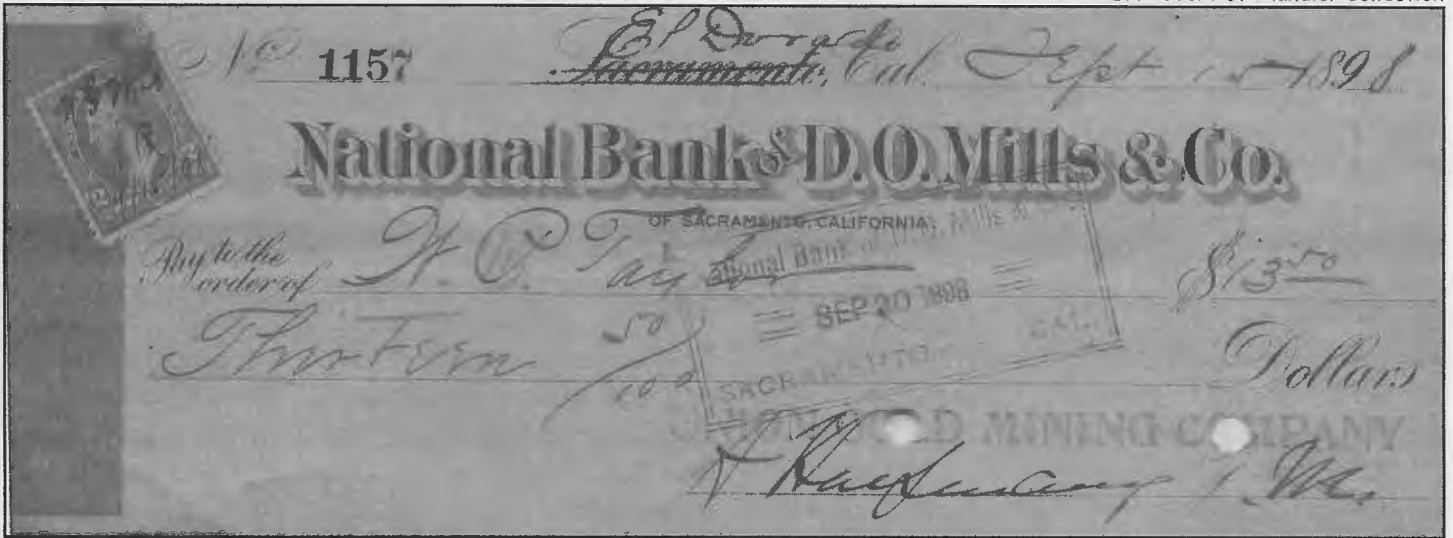
At this time, Edmund Randolph did not support the South. He was a candidate put forth by Republicans and Northern Democrats to be United States Senator. He informed a member of the legislature (which elected Senators then) on January 9, that he "was against secession," an independent California, and "in favor of the state remaining in the Union."

From January 9 through February 28, 1861, Randolph was in Sacramento. During the first 18 days, he bolstered his senatorial changes, but significantly, from January 26 through the last day in February, tuberculosis confined him to a sick bed. He was unable to walk and had to be carried to the river steamer bringing him home. Sick in Sacramento, Randolph was in no condition politically or physically to meet in San Francisco with the Committee of Thirty or General Johnston.

Lastly, was Asbury Harpending able to meet with the Committee or the general? He claims that "in the fall of 1860, I returned to San Francisco" from Mazatlan. After 40 years of research, the California Digital Newspaper Collection makes damning Harpending's credibility infinitely easier.

If the Committee of Thirty had everything "in readiness by the middle of January, 1861," as Harpending says, he was not in San Francisco to know it. The *San Francisco Alta California* on January 29, 1861, reported that "the steamer *Senator*, Capt. Seely, arrived in port last evening [the 28th]," and it included "A. Harpending" among the passengers.

Furthermore, this coastal steamer brought up the *Los Angeles Star* of January 26, and



Asbury Harpending thrived on enticing suckers to invest in his mining properties and his convincing unrestrained imagination drew in even the most knowledgeable financiers.

that of January 19, which is missing from the microfilmed file. The *Alta* clipped the *Star's* report of the new town of Potosi, information it gained "from Mr. A. Harpending, who arrived in this city on yesterday [January 18], from the Vegas silver mining region." This mining district was "thirty miles westerly from the Vegas [that is, Las Vegas, Nevada], six miles from the Mountain Springs, and four miles from the [Los Angeles to] Salt Lake Road." The paper continued, "Mr. Harpending is on his way to San Francisco to have the ores of various leads assayed."

Concluding, who wishes to believe that in two weeks from the end of January 1861, when Harpending arrived in San Francisco, until the middle of February when General Johnston secured the forts, and all the while Edmund Randolph was sick in Sacramento, that a 21-year-old mine speculator from out of town and otherwise unknown, convinced 29 desperate Southerners plotting armed warfare to make him a leader? Put bluntly, neither a Committee of Thirty nor an armed plot to capture San Francisco in early 1861 existed.

What was the origin of this fantasy? Harpending's plan to capture the forts resembles a scheme he wrote down in 1863. Then he proposed to have supporters raise ten men each in 100 towns around Sacramento.

The prosecution introduced this document on October 6, during the trial of the *Chapman* conspirators, along with its oath of allegiance. Co-leader Alfred Rubery and Joseph G. Baldwin, Jr. composed this oath in 1862.

In 1913, Harpending pushed back the plot and oath two years in time. The group of 100 gathering 10 men each became a Committee of Thirty, each raising 100 men, while members swore fealty to the "Southern States" rather than the "Confederate States of America," as in Rubery's oath.

### THE CHAPMAN AFFAIR

Failing to find investors for his Las Vegas mines, Harpending ventured south to Mazatlan, Mexico. He was there in 1861 rather than 1860, as he wrote. Harpending spent his entire mining career promoting distant, isolated and marginal frontier mines. All were risky financial ventures that blossomed under his gift of gab rather than bullion production.

*Chapman* trial testimony placed him on the bark *A.A. Eldridge*, which departed on April 29, 1861. On September 9, he boarded the steamer *Panama* at Mazatlan, which deposited him in San Francisco on September 19, 1861.

"The *Guadalupe de Los Angeles*, better known in San Francisco as the Harpending Mine," was



the manner "Harry" introduced a mine near Mina Prietas on January 20, 1863. He added that it "is owned mostly by citizens of Marysville." Located 150 miles from Mazatlan, and although rich, it had been abandoned. With trips by Harpending and others in 1861, Californians became interested, but when "Harry" wrote the *Bulletin* in 1863, actual mining had not begun. The mine had just installed four water-powered iron-gearred arrastas to pulverize ore. As with most of Harpending's ventures, it was more promise than actuality.

What was the *Chapman* affair? Harpending proposed to obtain a letter of marque from the Confederate government authorizing him to outfit an armed ship to prey on Union shipping. In particular, he intended to capture three Pacific Mail steamers, two southbound to Panama filled with gold, and one northbound. Ridgley Greathouse (1831-1902) and Alfred Rubery (b. 1841) were his co-conspirators.

This privateering dream floated among the privileged sons of the Southern gentry. Their middle-aged parents had done well before and during the Gold Rush, but their sons were restless. Harpending, and especially Greathouse, came from Kentucky aristocracy. Greathouse's first cousin Lloyd Tevis towered in San Francisco finance and commerce. Rubery's Birmingham family was privileged and had money from a hardware business. Widespread knowledge of the scheme sucked in young oath-writer Baldwin and ultimately led to his death. Alabama-born Joseph G. Baldwin, Jr. (1844-1864) was the son of a former California Supreme Court justice, who had practiced law with A.P. Crittenden.

In addition to contemporary newspapers beginning March 16, 1863, when federal authorities captured the ship and the trial testimony starting October 3, two of the principals left accounts. Harpending's 1913 embellishments received widespread distribution and acceptance, but in 1868, longtime Southern Democratic Party journalist and historian James O'Meara interviewed Greathouse and published a more reliable account in the *Californian* in April 1882.

On his return from Mexico in 1861, Harpending began plotting. On February 21, 1862, he asked miner George D. Roberts in Grass Valley to raise \$2,000. A slippery promoter, Roberts later joined Harpending in the Great Diamond Hoax.

In the spring of 1862, Harpending and Colonel H.T. Templeton crossed from Acapulco to Vera Cruz to obtain the papers. Templeton, from Yreka, had a similar mind set, promoting mining and real estate investments. Newspapers in June 1861 placed him among the Southern politicians who met beginning in December 1860 to form an independent Pacific Republic. Tales told along the trail could have inspired Harpending to concoct the Committee of Thirty.

When the three came together is speculative. O'Meara assumed that Harpending, Rubery, and Greathouse arrived together on the steamer. When the *St. Louis* docked on May 18, 1862, "R. Greathouse" was on the passenger list. He had been east visiting his family in Kentucky. Harpending, on the other hand, said that Greathouse joined him soon after his return. After that, Rubery and his Canadian friend Alfred Aumond became part of the plot. Rubery was to supply money.

Rubery had gone to New York City to collect a debt for his brother John. John went into bankruptcy, while Rubery went to California. "Rubery was an irresponsible, devil-may-care sort of fellow, jolly under all circumstances," famed police detective Isaiah W. Lees recalled in the *Bulletin*, March 28, 1889, and thereby a good companion for Harpending. Passenger lists, though, are silent on his arrival, but in June 1862, Rubery was looking at ships with Harpending. The lack of funds and no ship in hand in February 1863 indicates that Greathouse joined last.

In June 1862, Harpending and Rubery checked out the fast two-masters *Josephine* and *Neva*. When Rubery proposed to buy the clipper brig *Josephine* with a draft on Francis Rubery of Birmingham, the seller refused. Robert B. Swain testified, "There was an air of mystery about Rubery that I did not like." He saw Harpending walking with Rubery and then leave, and when negotiating, "Rubery could not

refer to anybody here; he said nobody knew him. He had brought no letters of introduction; he told different stories." That fall, George H. Coe, also formerly from Yreka, reported from Victoria that the *Otter* was too slow.

One Sunday, Rubery and Joseph G. Baldwin, Jr. 18, composed "in the name of our common rebel hood," to use one of Baldwin's phrases, one of the oaths found on the *Chapman*. John B. Felton, Baldwin's brother-in-law, confirmed the handwriting was his. The grand jury indictment for treason filed on August 31, 1863, listed "Joseph G. Baldwin Junior, Mill Owner" in Empire City, Nevada. Baldwin went into hiding and died on August 14, 1864, due to exposure to the elements escaping the law.

Sometime after his return to California, Harpending wrote a sister in Illinois, "I am a rebel and am already watched." Rubery wrote to Coe in Victoria on August 12, 1862, observing that he was also suspect "in consequence of my association with Harpending on whom considerable political suspicion rests."

Obviously, Swain's unease spread to Federal officials and the two decided to leave. "I start to-night with Harpending for Lower California and shall be absent about two months," Rubery added. The barque *Denmark* cleared for Mazatlan and Guaymas the next day.

The *Denmark* did not return until January 21, 1863, taking 30 days from Mazatlan with a cargo of Carmen Island salt. Although Harpending and Rubery were not among the listed passengers, only in January did their search for a ship and crew begin in earnest.

Freedom for Southern slaves completely unnerved Harpending and he wrote a hifalutin' call to arms to the Southern men in California. "In his proclamation of the 1st of January," Harpending pronounced, "The tyrant has taken one step too far." On New Year's 1863, "the tyrant Abraham Lincoln, wrote, signed and caused to be published, our death-warrant." The Emancipation Proclamation fired his desire to find a ship.

In January 1863, Harpending approached a Captain Benedict, but he dropped out when no one would cash Rubery's draft on London,

and three weeks later, Harpending offered to sell the letter of marque.

However, perhaps through Templeton or Coe, Ridgley Greathouse, the younger brother in a banking, mercantile, and transportation family in Yreka, came to their aid.

On Sunday, March 1, according to *Chapman* captain William Law, Greathouse talked to attorney A.P. Crittenden on the legality of the venture. Crittenden advised against it and Greathouse dropped out. However, Harpending and Rubery induced him to reconsider, and on March 2, 1863, Greathouse paid for the fast schooner *J.M. Chapman*.

Using a pretext to aid Liberal Mexican General Placido Vega, the governor of Sinaloa, they purchased two bronze, five-foot rifled Dahlgren 12-pounder boat howitzers (boxed as an "oil mill") and various small arms to hide among a general freight including 789 flasks of quicksilver, and cleared the schooner for Manzanillo. The plotters proposed to discharge the freight there and refit the ship as a privateer on uninhabited Guadalupe Island.

The leaders were Ridgeley Greathouse, 31, Captain William C. Law, 39, Asbury Harpending, 22, mate "Lorenzo L. Libby," [who used an alias to prevent Confederates in Charleston from seizing his property] 26, and Alfred Rubery, 21.

During World War II, a common warning was "Loose Lips Sink Ships." In Civil War San Francisco, loose lips alerted the authorities. When the *Chapman* attempted to sail out of San Francisco on March 15, 1863, customs officials, police officers, and the U.S. sloop-of-war *Cyane* were waiting to nab them and did so. While Harpending was chewing up and burning the letter of marque and instructions, police detective I.W. Lees remembered, "Rubery was very insolent and had to be quieted by force." Below decks, they found 15 armed men.

All soon had free lodging at Fort Alcatraz and the two ship's officers voluntarily turned States' evidence. Tried and quickly convicted in early October, the court sentenced the three ringleaders to ten years imprisonment. President Abraham Lincoln pardoned Rubery in December 1863 as a favor to John Bright, an English parliamentary

leader and friend of America. Greathouse sued for release under the President's proclamation of general amnesty that December and won freedom for himself and Harpending.

### FACTS VS. HARPENDING'S LIES

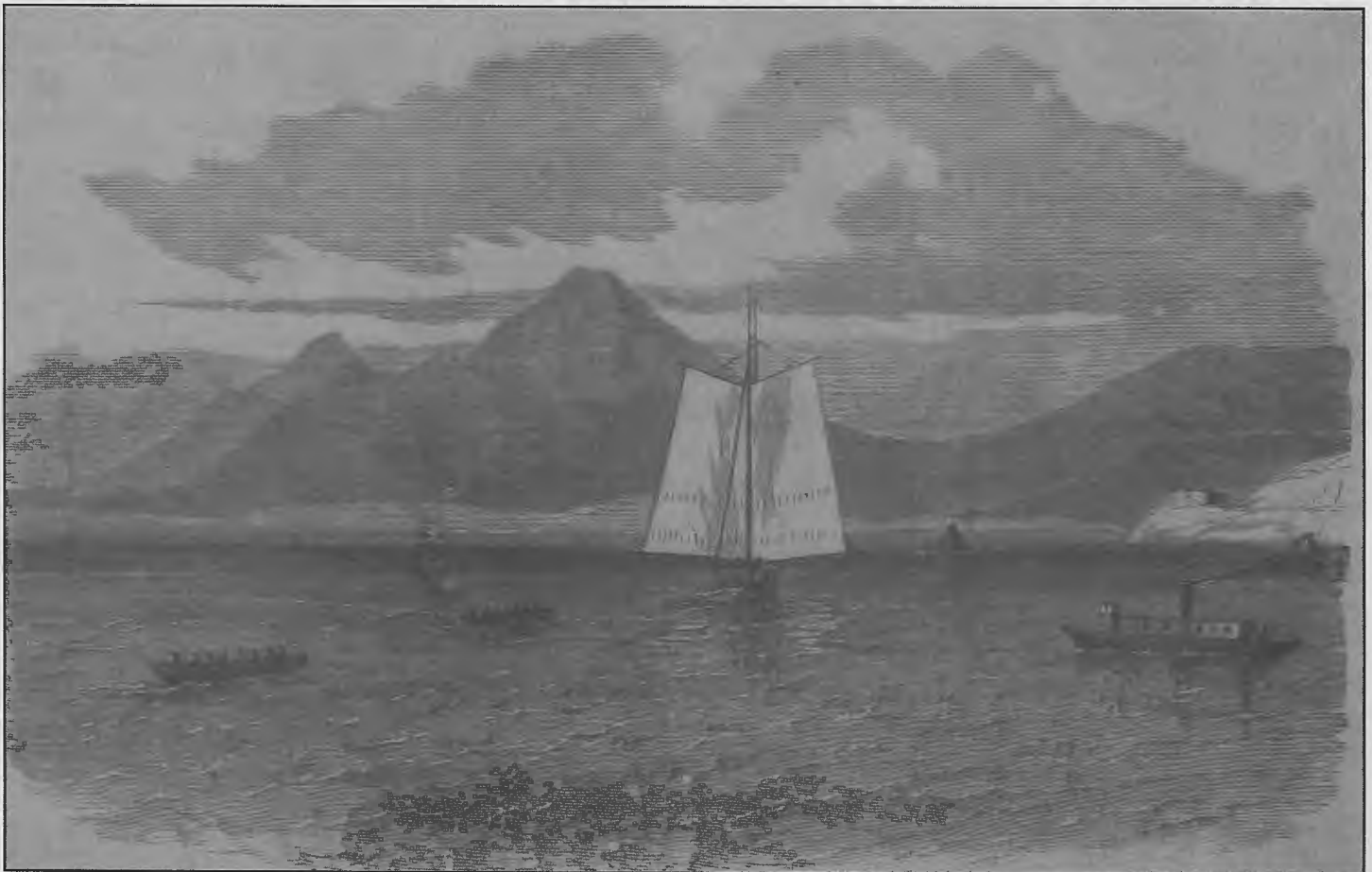
The devil is in the details, and again and again Harpending comes up short. According to Harpending, he traveled with Colonel H.T. Templeton by steamer to Acapulco, crossed Mexico on horseback to Vera Cruz, all the while fighting bandits and having horses shot out from under them. While Templeton went to New York to catch the California steamer, Harpending caught a blockade runner from Vera Cruz into Charleston, and then needed several days to navigate the Richmond bureaucracy to receive his letter of marque and captaincy in the Confederate Navy from

President Jefferson Davis.

With documents in hand, Harpending headed west to arrive in Corinth, Mississippi, on April 4, 1862. Attached to the staff of General P.G.T. Beauregard, on April 6-7, he saw the battle of Shiloh in west Tennessee and the death of General Johnston. About three months later, a blockade runner deposited him at Aspinwall to join passengers picking up the Pacific Mail steamship across the Isthmus at Panama. "I did not return to California," Harpending wrote, "until late in the month of July" when socially prominent Mrs. Charles S. Fairfax of Marin smuggled ashore his Confederate documents sewn in her dress.

Caveat Emptor. Harpending spun a great story with little truth. Perhaps the strong Rebel colony in Mazatlan gave Harpending the idea. Ornithologist, merchant, and mining investor Andrew Jackson Grayson, who forwarded men, including

*Pictorial War Record*



Two boats from the U.S.S. *Cyane*, 22 guns, and the steam tug *Anashe* carrying custom officials and San Francisco police officers rush to capture the *J.M. Chapman*. (From an issue of the New York weekly *Pictorial War Record*, 3 vols, September 3, 1881-November 1883, p. 299).



his son, and letters to the Confederacy via Texas, ran the show. In fact, just five months after the capture of the *Chapman* and before the trial of the conspirators, Grayson sent a private courier to the Confederate president, similar to what Harpending claimed to have done via Vera Cruz.

On August 21, 1863, Grayson, too, wanted a letter of marque and he proposed a second version of Harpending's scheme. Southerners would outfit a small, fast, screw steamer being built in San Francisco so that "the commerce of our enemies could be greatly shaken on the Pacific," he told Jefferson Davis. Grayson's treachery is laid out in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington 1921) Series II, Volume 1: 421-423.

With Harpending, though, time was too

short to visit the South. As before noted, from a letter introduced as evidence, on February 21, 1862, Harpending wrote Roberts in Grass Valley and then claimed to have reached Corinth on April 4. Cramming travel from California, to Acapulco, Vera Cruz, Nassau—blockade runners picked up their cargoes here, Mexican ports had nothing—Charleston, Richmond, and Shiloh, into 6 weeks was virtually impossible.

Here is a better scenario. On February 11, 1862, the *Sonora* sailed for Panama with H.T. Templeton as a passenger and reached Acapulco on February 18. Most likely, after writing Roberts, Harpending departed on the *Golden Age* on February 21, reaching Acapulco on the last day of the month.

Templeton and Harpending then traversed 500 miles between Acapulco and Vera Cruz by

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*



Harpending's rebel privateer *J.M. Chapman* anchors under the guns of the sloop-of-war *Cyane* off Alcatraz on March 15, 1863. (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 9, 1863).



way of Mexico City. Mexican roads grew dangerous with civil war between royalists and Liberals, coupled with the foreign occupation of Vera Cruz and the French invasion that culminated with the Mexican victory at Puebla on Cinco de Mayo, 1862. Travel across Mexico at best would have been slow and difficult.

In fact, Harpending's journey ended at Vera Cruz. Mate Libby testified, Captain "Law said, in Harpending's presence, that Harpending ought to be Second Lieutenant because he (Harpending) had traveled across the country on horseback to obtain a letter of marque, and spent nearly every dollar he had in the world to get it. Harpending replied that he still had a little money left." A trip to Richmond was not part of the story. As back up, James O'Meara relying on Greathouse's word, declared that Harpending "had obtained from a Confederate agent at Vera Cruz, Mexico, letters of marque and reprisal."

The Confederates had an agent in Vera Cruz ready to hand them out. On May 17, 1861, Secretary of State Robert Toombs appointed John T. Pickett, a former U.S. Consul in Vera Cruz, a confidential agent to Mexico. If Pickett found that Mexicans wished to outfit privateers, he had the vested power to issue letters of marque. On January 1, 1862, Pickett reported to Toombs that on June 21, 1861, he had appointed Clifton Markoe (c. 1814-1868), an American merchant in Vera Cruz, "agent to receive applications for letters of marque," and gave him "five blank commissions." Three months after Pickett's report, Harpending received one of these.

Contrary to Harpending's chronology, he was aboard the *Orizaba* when it sailed from Panama on March 31, 1862. Passengers arrived in San Francisco on April 17, to read morning papers filled with news of Shiloh. The *Bulletin's* columnar passenger list carried these two names in sequence: "Colonel Templeton, Mr. Harpinger." Two syllables are correct, and Harpending did not sign his name with a distinct "d" or "g."

Harpending's return date in July 1862 and the involvement of Mrs. Fairfax are even more outrageous out-and-out lies. In June, as ship

sale advertisements showed, Harpending was in San Francisco checking the *Josephine* and *Neva* and in July, Mrs. Fairfax was not aboard any steamer. She sailed on the *Sonora* on February 11, 1862, incidentally along with Colonel Templeton, and did not return until November 15, 1862, aboard the *PMSS Constitution*.

When Harpending came to the *Chapman* itself, he picked controversies where none exist. Harpending dogmatically stated, "The ship was called plain '*Chapman*.' Historians have seen fit to name it the '*J.M. Chapman*,' for what reason I am not aware. Probably it was a case of what literary folks are pleased to call 'poetic license.'"

The schooner was always the *J.M. Chapman*. The *Alta* recorded its arrival on February 18, 1863, under that name and her owners advertised the *J.M. Chapman* for sale on February 27 and 28. These three notices appeared before Greathouse bought the vessel, but Harpending dissembled to establish his authority and veracity.

"Poetic License" exists solely in Asbury Harpending's imagination. He forever placed himself at the center of action surrounded by important people. I will continue with his major embellishments, leaving picked nits in the first version of this article in *The Californians* in January 1985.

Harpending's version of his imprisonment and his belittling of Greathouse are equally suspect and more dangerous. Contemporary accounts after March 1863 made Greathouse the leader. When mate Libby wished to escape, he testified, "I induced a soldier to take me to Greathouse's room." Furthermore, the *Morning Call* of May 25, 1863, reported that Greathouse—not Harpending—planned a mass escape from Alcatraz on May 21.

The oldest of the conspirators had taken charge. O'Meara found Ridgley Greathouse imbued with "a fearlessness of every danger" and a born leader. "He was naturally bright, and of quick, comprehensive intellect, with a frank, manly, prepossessing face, and singularly winning manners."

What does Harpending say? Following their

capture on March 15, 1863, he declared, "Great-house was released after a few days of confinement on bail." Soon, during a half-intoxicated visit to the island prison, Greathouse's "senseless" and "foolish talk" induced Lorenzo Libby to turn informer and his testimony assured their conviction.

Once again, Harpending deceives. Great-house was imprisoned for almost six months. He left only on September 9, after the indictment and less than three weeks before the trial when his rich cousin Lloyd Tevis bailed him out. Furthermore, Harpending's lack of friends willing to post his \$15,000 bail belies the financial genius he assigns himself in the 1860s.

Instead, Harpending's attack on Greathouse is an attempt to shift blame for their convictions. Harpending and Rubery wrote or received all of the documents captured on the *Chapman* and introduced as evidence. Unsurprisingly, Rubery later joined Harpending in the Great Diamond Hoax.

Subtracting verified descriptions from Harpending's whole leaves little reliable. Historians using these fabricated memoirs uncritically will be led and have been led astray as certain as Harpending misled Greathouse, Rubery, and Ralston and hundreds of unknown mining investors. The past requires that its secrets be unlocked. A historian must be a detective. Meantime, Asbury Harpending continues laughing over his longest running hoax.

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