

Book



notes

**Gold Rush Port:
The Maritime Archaeology of
San Francisco's Waterfront**

By **James P. Delgado**

University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2009
256 pages, hardcover, \$45
ISBN 9780520255807

One of the pleasures of having a command of San Francisco history is telling out-of-town visitors that there are Gold Rush ships buried under the very streets they walk on. Add the fact that portions of Battery, Sansome and Montgomery streets used to be the waterfront, and you definitely have someone's rapt attention. It's a history unique among American cities and a story admirably told by James P. Delgado in *Gold Rush Port: The Maritime Archaeology of San Francisco's Waterfront*.

The author has a dual purpose for writing his book: to put forth a different thesis about the city's origins and to use recent discoveries in maritime archaeology to prove it. In doing so, he gives readers of all interests something to chew on.

Delgado posits that the Gold Rush, far from creating San Francisco's meteoric rise in population and wealth, merely accelerated a process which had begun before James Marshall first saw a flicker of gold in a tailrace in Coloma. The city was already connected to trading partners in the Pacific and beyond; in Delgado's words, it was already part of a "maritime frontier." In addition, maritime capitalists already in San Francisco were perfectly poised to take advantage of the expanded trade opportunities that the Gold Rush provided.

This concept is fleshed out over the course of the first few chapters and then the fun starts. The second half of the book is a detailed description of a number of specific maritime archaeology sites along San Francisco's waterfront: the ships *Niantic* and *General Harrison*, Hoff's Store at Battery and Sacramento, and a building used for storage at 343 Sansome Street. The author's measured, academic language cannot conceal his enthusiast's glee at the discovery, excavation and inventory of these sites. He links the archaeology to his thesis, yet never allows his argument to overshadow the thrilling waterfront stories. Finally, the book's back matter contains very useful appendices about cargoes and commission merchants.

My one problem with the book has to do with editing. The number of typographical errors I found is not acceptable in a work of this caliber. For example, the Sansome Street site was called "343" and "334" in the same paragraph. Words and dates are left off the end of a few sentences. On a map of

the archaeological sites, "Pine" Street is written "Vine" Street (really, we're not in Hollywood). Delgado is diligent in providing references for his thesis, but they are put in parentheses within the narrative, and this breaks up the flow of his writing; these would have been better as footnotes. Although he mentions a lithograph of the aftermath of the 1851 fire, he uses another image of the fire in progress in the illustration section, instead. I would have liked to see the post-conflagration view, especially as it was mentioned in the narrative.

As the historian for Levi Strauss & Co., I was fascinated to read the few references to the ship *William Gray*, which resides beneath the fountain at Levi's Plaza on Battery Street. However, when I wanted to go back into the book to read about the ship again, I found that the *William Gray* was not referenced in the index, despite the fact that it was mentioned more than once and also figured in a chart of excavated Gold Rush sites.

These quibbles in no way detract from the fact that *Gold Rush Port* is one-stop shopping for anyone interested in the city's maritime history. It should take its place alongside John Kemble's *The Panama Route* as an essential reference for anyone interested in the salty side of San Francisco history.

**Reviewed by Lynn Downey
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**"California Landscapes: Gifts to
The Huntington's Art Collections"**

From The Huntington Library website:
www.huntington.org

Exhibit open through September 6, 2010
Scott Galleries, Chandler Wing • Phone 626-405-2100

The landscape of California as depicted by a variety of 20th-century artists will be explored in a small exhibition of paintings, watercolors, drawings, prints, and photographs from The Huntington's art collections.

Acquired as gifts over the past 50 years, these portrayals of the state's dramatic vistas — rocky coastlines, barren deserts, vast agricultural fields, suburban hillsides, and forested Sierra Nevada mountains—complement the library's extensive holdings of materials relating to the history of California and the West.

The display includes works by Guy Rose, Marion Wachtel, and Percy Gray — artists who employed Impressionist and Tonalist styles to portray sun-kissed California landscapes — as well as Modernists such as Edward Weston, Paul Landacre, and Rinaldo Cuneo, who present an abstracted view of nature, often concentrated on effects of light.