

Gold Rush Mail and John Q. Jackson

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“You will take good care and write often when I tell you that I live upon your letters, with a small sprinkling of pork and bread.”

J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In*

In these days of instant messages and email, we can hardly imagine what it must have been like for the miners of 1849 and 1850 longing to hear from home. In every diary from the early days of the Gold Rush, miners lamented not hearing from loved ones, family and friends. Loneliness and homesickness affected nearly every man.

The United States Postal System was slow to get a handle on the problem facing them with the sudden, unexpected migration of thousands of men, and the few women, who headed to California from literally all over the globe.

The very first post office in California was opened by Special Post Office Agent William Van Voorhies in San Francisco in February of 1849. Even after it and several other post offices were opened, the mail was slow and unreliable. The mail had to travel first from one ocean to the other, then to main distribution centers in San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton and Marysville, then it had to make it on foot, by stage, by horse or some combination of the three into the remote mining camps.¹

Auburn became a hub of transportation and services very early in the Gold Rush. It was centrally located between Sacramento City, whose post office opened in August of 1849, and the mining camps along the North Fork of the American River and up in the hills to places like Iowa Hill. Trading posts and general merchandise stores, often combined with a saloon and a rough boarding house, opened in Auburn shortly after the first miners appeared. We know that William Gwynn was here in July 1849 and opened a store/saloon/boarding house. Hudson House was also here by July and opened a store/saloon/boarding house.²

The first winter of the Gold Rush in the Auburn area was particularly harsh. It seemed that the rain would never end. Miners camped along the river were driven out by high water, roads became almost impassable. More and more miners came into the village of Dry Diggings and early in the Fall, they renamed the village – Auburn. By Spring of 1850, Auburn was well established with stores, saloons, boarding houses, gambling houses and restaurants.³

A central concern for the miners gathered in Auburn was the overwhelming need to send and receive letters. After the long journey to even get to California and months in search of gold, many had no contact with home for a year. The fledgling mail service in California just couldn't keep up with the demand for service. In October of 1849 over 45,000 letters had accumulated at the San Francisco post office along with uncountable numbers of newspapers and packages. A miner waiting in line at the S. F. post office could often count on standing for five to six hours. Many enterprising men forsook mining and found greater profit in holding a place in line and then selling that place to late comers. Historian Leonard Davis wrote that there was no regular mail service in Auburn until March of 1851 and then it was sporadic. There was no daily postal service in town until June 1858. ⁴

Besides the need for mail service, another pressing need of the miners was what to do with his gold dust or even after selling it to a local broker, what to do with his cash. Into this void stepped individuals and express companies. Often times, letters and even gold was entrusted to a fellow miner who was headed home, but more often it was express companies that came to the aid of the miner. The first express company to advertise its services in Auburn was Joseph W. Gregory's Express followed by Hunter & Company in 1851. These early express companies could forward gold, packages and letters, insure the cargo, and provide bills of exchange.⁵

Adams and Company and Wells, Fargo and Company soon made their appearance in Auburn by 1852. The express offices in Auburn were all doing quite well and even had the express men vying for prominence by racing from Sacramento to Auburn. Banker and express man, E. M. Hall would hold the record for some time after making the 45- mile trip from Sacramento to Auburn, bringing election returns, in one hour and 50 minutes.⁶

One notable young express man in Auburn was John Quincy Jackson; he had arrived in California in 1849 on the steamer Glenmore. He was 17 years old. After trying his hand at mining and storekeeping, Jackson went to work for Gregory's Express. When Wells, Fargo & Company bought out Gregory's at the end of the year 1852. Jackson became the local Wells, Fargo agent. ⁷

The twenty-year-old held enormous responsibility in his job for Wells Fargo. He bought gold from miners and even traveled once a week to Murderer's Bar and other outlying camps to buy gold on the spot. Charles T. Blake, the Michigan Bluff Wells Fargo agent, claimed that a good agent could identify over one hundred "varieties" of gold and could tell what region or even which mine they came from.⁸

Jackson worked long hours in his office. It was located on Lincoln Way in Old Town, the site of the present day Testa Building next door to the California Club. He bought gold, cleaned it, weighed it, packed and sealed it, accepted deposits, sold exchanges or money drafts (like modern day checks) and accepted letters and packages for transport. ⁹

On "Black Friday" of February 22, 1852 there was a run on Adams and Company. The local office paid out what it could before closing its doors but it was still short some \$20,000 in Auburn alone. Adams went out of business and Wells Fargo became the dominant express company in California. ¹⁰

Wells, Fargo and Company had a reputation for service and fairness and Jackson maintained that standard during the panic of "Black Friday." The run on Adams and Company prompted a run on the Wells Fargo office and young Jackson found himself paying out most of his cash on hand. His calm presence, and support of local businessmen who came to his aid, assured customers that their money was safe with Wells Fargo.¹¹

In a letter to his father, Jackson wrote that handling the "panic" was "one of the proudest moments of his life." Jackson continued working for Wells Fargo. He shipped enormous amounts of gold; he estimated that in 1854, he was shipping about \$80,000 to \$100,000 gathered from Yankee Jims, Iowa Hill and Michigan Bluff, about \$30,00 - \$40,00 from Rattlesnake Bar and some \$30,000 to \$50,000 from Auburn. He explained in one of his letters home, that he liked to pack the gold in boxes weighing 100 to 150 pounds "as that was how much he could lift up into the stagecoach. ¹²

Working at Jackson's side was his trusted companion," Jack, the hill dog." Jackson wrote that his "friend and counsellor and safeguard" was "one of the largest hill dogs I ever saw in any country." Jack weighed 128 pounds and was a "very intelligent and noble fellow." Jack was thought to be a bullmastiff breed. Jack has become a symbol for Wells Fargo today and used in many of the "teaching programs" they provide for classroom use. ¹³

John Q. Jackson continued as the Wells Fargo agent in Auburn until 1861. He was a well- respected young man who shouldered immense responsibility. He was engaged in the affairs of the town. When he was clearing up his financial details before moving back to Petersburg, Virginia, his real estate was valued at \$5,000 and his personal property valued at \$9,000. He sold a small house on Sacramento Street for \$100; his interest in the New England Mills, a saw mill, for \$2,000; and his Wells Fargo office for \$2,500 to Edward Hall and Benjamin Allen who took over as the Wells Fargo agents. ¹⁴

The young man who was discouraged to find so few single ladies in California finally married Mary Hester Aldridge in 1867. They would have three children, Annie Patton, Mary Willis and Eleanor Aldridge. Jackson, who listed himself as a tobacconist in the 1880 census was likely related to Charles Jackson who owned a renowned tobacco factory in Petersburg. He seemed to be doing very well as the census shows two house servants and a cook living with the family. John Quincy Jackson died in his birthplace at the age of 67 in 1899.¹⁵

¹ California Private Mails, 1849-1856 at rfracjola.com

² Leonard M. Davis, Dry Diggings on the North Fork (Auburn: Placer County Historical Foundation, 2015) p. 12

³ Ibid. p. 13

4 Ibid. P. 29

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. .29

7 Philip Fradkin, Stagecoach: Wells, Fargo and the American West. Google.com/books & Auburn Journal 7-13-2016

8 Robert Chandler, A Brief History of Wells, Fargo & Co. pioneergoldwordpress.com

9 Fradkin

10 Ibid

11 Wellsfargohistory.com

12 Anson Blake, Working for Wells Fargo, California Historical Society, Vol. 16 1937.

13 Wellsfargohistory.com

14 1860 Census, Placer Herald 11-23-1861, Deed Book G o. 438 & 444, Knox-McDonald database

15 findagrave, 1880 census

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June 2017