Guide to the Alexander Van Valen Papers

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by Kiley Orchard

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Collection Overview

| Repository: | Archives Center, National Museum of American History |
| Creator:    | Van Valen, Alexander |
| Title:      | Alexander Van Valen Papers |
| Dates:      | 1849-1850 |
| Quantity:   | 1.5 cubic feet, 4 boxes |
| Language:   | Collection text is in English. |

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Purchased by the National Museum of American History from Cowan's Historic Americana Auctions in 2006.

Processing Information

Processed by Kiley Orchard (intern), 2008; supervised by Vanessa Broussard Simmons, archivist.

Preferred Citation


Restrictions on Access

Collection is open for research.

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Biographical Note

Alexander Van Valen was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, on June 25, 1819. He married Susan Maria Talmage, and the couple had twin daughters, Catharine Eliza and Sarah Maria, born June 2, 1845. Van Valen served as treasurer of the California Gold Mining Company, one of many companies formed to
participate in the 1849 California Gold Rush. Funded by two wealthy New York merchants, Henry A. Kerr and B. S. Clark, the company consisted of Van Valen and four men other men. Van Valen and his business partners agreed to spend two summers in California and pay Kerr and Clark one quarter of any profits made. Van Valen sailed aboard the San Francisco-bound Hersilia on January 22, 1849. Once in California, he and his company decided to try to strike it rich, first along the Mokelumne River and then up the San Joaquin River to Stockton. The trip proved unsuccessful, and Van Valen returned to New York less than two years later. He died on November 24, 1869.

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists mostly of the personal papers of Alexander Van Valen during his journey and subsequent stay in San Francisco, California, to participate in the Gold Rush, 1849-1850. Of particular interest are the founding documents of the mining company, his 85 page journal, and his many letters, mostly to and from his wife Susan. Also included are portraits and daguerreotypes of his family. This collection is especially valuable to researchers who are interested in the California Gold Rush, nineteenth century maritime travel, business history, and migration.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into two series.

Series 1, Personal Papers, 1849-1850
Series 2, Other Materials, 1849-1850

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
- California
- Gold mines and mining
- Mining

Types of Materials:
- Correspondence--19th century
- Daguerreotypes
- Diaries--19th century
- Hand coloring
- Maps--19th century
- Painted photographs
- Photographs--Daguerreotypes--1840-1860
Geographic Names:
California--San Francisco
San Francisco (Calif.)--1840-1850
Container Listing

Series 1: Personal Papers, 1849-1850

This series consists mostly of Van Valen's personal correspondence and his 85 page diary documenting the 199-day journey aboard the bark *Hersilia*. Van Valen describes the voyage and aspects of passenger life. The diary includes a list of the ship's passengers, hand-drawn maps, sketches, and business agreements. Once in San Francisco, Van Valen writes about the city, mining operations, day-to-day life, and other miners. After the diary ends, handwritten letters provide descriptions of the environment and day-to-day life. The collection also contains portraits of Van Valen and his family and a daguerreotype of his wife and daughters. There is an unknown piece of writing in the "Map" folder and an American Seaman's certificate declaring Van Valen a United States citizen.

Box 1, Folder 1
Certificate, 1849

Box 1, Folder 1
Diary, 1849
[View Digitized Material]

Box 1, Folder 2
Diary (photocopied/typescript), 1849

Box 1, Folder 3
Letters, 1849 March-1849 August

Box 1, Folder 4
Letters, 1849 September-1850 February

Box 1, Folder 5
Letters, 1850 March-1850 August

Box 1, Folder 6
Transcribed letters, 1849

Box 1, Folder 7
Transcribed letters, 1850

Box 1, Folder 8
Typescript letters, 1849

Box 1, Folder 9
Typescript letters, 1850

Box 1, Folder 10
Daguerreotype, undated

Box 2, Folder 1
Alexander Van Valen portrait, undated

Box 2, Folder 1
Susan Talmage Van Valen portrait, undated

Box 3, Folder 1
Map, undated

Box 4, Folder 1
Catharine Eliza and Sarah Maria Van Valen portrait, undated
Series 2: Other Materials, 1849-1850

This series consists of a "Keepsake for the 1987 conference of the Western History Association, held in Los Angeles, California." Authorship of the diary attributed to William H. Hoyt and Alexander Van Valen, with the latter thought to be the probable author of the major portion. Also included is a volume of songs by Mr. Willis.

Box 3, Folder 2  
*Incidents of a voyage to California, 1849: a diary of travel aboard the bark Hersilia, and in Sacramento*, 1850

Box 3, Folder 3  
Songs by Mr. Willis, circa 1850