



# “Won’t Be Home Again”: A Lynn Grocer’s Letters Home from the California Gold Rush

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the travels of John Batchelder Peirce, a 46-year-old grocer from Lynn, Massachusetts, who left New England for San Francisco, with dreams of striking it rich during the California Gold Rush. In a series of letters he wrote to his wife, Peirce details his fears, political beliefs, and adventures, while chronicling his daily life in the boomtown. He also examines the conflicts between Southerners and abolitionists that helped define early San Francisco politics. Michael Gutierrez is a lecturer in English composition at the University of Miami.*

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*I look forward to meeting all my friends again with great pleasure, but I fear I shall not be satisfied to remain at home after tasting for two years the great comforts of such a climate as we have here, and living in such a whirl of business excitement as I do here. I fear I shall be very homesick to get back even before my three months visit is out.*

— John B. Peirce from San Francisco, letter home to his wife Hittie in Lynn, Massachusetts, October 19, 1851.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Peirce to Sarah “Hittie” Ann Hallowell Peirce, October 19, 1851. Box 1, Folder 2, John Batchelder Peirce Papers (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts).

On December 5, 1848, ten months after the end of the Mexican War, President James K. Polk confirmed to Congress what newspapers had rumored for weeks: gold in California. The skeptics disappeared, and the rush was on. California had been seen as just another spoil of that controversial war but now seemed to vindicate it. Polk proclaimed that “the accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by authentic reports of officers in the public service.”<sup>2</sup> Seemingly reasonable men – farmers, merchants, artisans – abandoned their homes and families in search of fortune and glory. They embarked on a journey that took them thousands of miles from home and would cost them at least a year away from their families. To get there, they would trek across the continent by wagon, venture by ship around Cape Horn, or cross the Isthmus of Panama. Hard saved money might be lost. More importantly, they might die. But why were dreams of gold enough to brave the obvious risks? Historian Malcolm J. Rohrbough argues that “America at midcentury may have been a land of opportunity, but among those faced with the prospect of working hard jobs for long hours and low pay, as well as for those confronting debt and failure amid prosperity of others, it also generated much dissatisfaction.”<sup>3</sup>

This deep discontent with the present, along with poor hopes for the future, persuaded many to venture west. Everyone knew the risks. Even newspapers that had drummed up so much curiosity with hyperbole and rumor hid neither the danger involved nor the poor prospects for success. A year after Polk’s announcement, stories trickled back from the first rush of gold seekers. Not all the news was good. The *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* wrote:

Although gold exists in such quantities in California, there are many serious, unanswerable objections to undertaking the arduous and hazardous enterprise of procuring it in the first place, of those who survive the exposures, the dangers and the diseases of the country, certainly not more than one in five will be able to leave it with more than a fair remuneration for his

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<sup>2</sup> J.S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 48. H.W. Brands *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*. (New York: Anchor Press, 2002), 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 259.

labor... This is supposed by good judges to be the most reasonable estimate that can be made. At any rate it renders the expediency of a journey to California in pursuit of gold sufficiently doubtful.<sup>4</sup>

Gold's allure eventually persuaded many to ignore the well-described risks. Men left for California en masse. Prior to the Gold Rush, there were no more than 8,000 in California. By 1850, the population had swelled to 93,000. Even after the initial rush, many followed the "49ers." By 1852, the population had nearly tripled to 264,000.<sup>5</sup>

One such man who departed after the first rush of gold seekers was John Batchelder Peirce, a 46-year-old grocery owner from Lynn, Massachusetts. On February 16, 1850, over a year after President Polk's confirmation of California gold, Peirce sailed from New York harbor on a steamer bound for Panama. He left his wife, Hittie, and their five children behind in his father's care.<sup>6</sup> While away, he wrote his wife a remarkable series of letters chronicling his adventures in San Francisco. His letters offer not only a window into the events of the Gold Rush, but into the mind of a man who sought to revitalize his life by starting anew in California. The obvious risks of death and destitution did not deter Peirce. At first glance, his sojourn might seem foolish. He was solidly middle class, highly educated, and held strong ties to the Lynn community. All of his children were enrolled in school. His eldest son, Alfred, attended a private, secondary boarding school in Boston.<sup>7</sup> Peirce was a proud New Englander and an avid abolitionist who was intolerant of Catholics and Southerners, both of whom were immigrating to California in large numbers. Despite these deterrents, he ventured west with confidence. The reasons why he moved to San Francisco and wanted to remain there are the consistent themes of his letters. He was not a reckless fortune hunter. Unlike many, he had no intention of working in the mines. He was too old for that and had endured too many long New England winters to brave the rivers with

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<sup>4</sup> *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, January 4, 1850, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Margo. *Wages and Labor Markets in the United States, 1820-1860*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip P. Chase, "On the Panama Route During the Gold Rush to California," Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publication. (Boston, 1932), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Peirce to Hittie, March 17, 1851. Box 1, Folder 2, John Batchelder Peirce Papers (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts). In addition to the originals, a typescript of most of Peirce's letters to Hittie Peirce is available at the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston) in Box 1, Folder 1, John Batchelder Peirce Papers. The letters were transcribed by Phillip P. Chase.

a pan and spend his nights inside a tent. Instead, he opened a grocery store in San Francisco and profited from the hordes of miners passing through on their way to the interior.

Migrants to California were rarely motivated by financial desperation. Traveling costs prohibited the poorest and most destitute from emigrating. Only those with a large savings or willing investors could afford it. While most traveled overland by wagon, many, like Peirce, sailed to Panama, crossed the Isthmus by boat and mule, and then sailed to San Francisco. Neither option was cheap, nor pleasant. Although traveling overland cost less, it was more dangerous and took more time. A family of four could travel from Independence, Missouri, to California for approximately \$600.<sup>8</sup> A trip through Panama cost between \$500-\$1,000 per person, but was much quicker.<sup>9</sup> During a period when the average white-collar worker in New England made \$500 per year, these sums were beyond the reach of many.<sup>10</sup> As a result of the nature of their journey, many gold rushers traveled through Panama, an estimated 40,000 out of 100,000 in 1849.<sup>11</sup> Many prospective miners worried the gold would be gone upon their arrival. In addition, most were individual men who left their possessions home with their families. They were not settlers but short-term speculators. They preferred the Panama route out of sheer comfort and safety. Indeed more than 90,000 Gold Rushers returned home via Panama between 1850-1852.<sup>12</sup>

Peirce first pondered leaving in December of 1849 and boarded the *Cherokee* three months later. His decision upset his wife, Sarah Ann Hallowell Peirce, who was known to her husband as "Hittie." The couple had been married for eighteen years and had three children: Alfred, Mary, and Alice, ranging in age from ten to fourteen. Although Alfred was away at school, Hittie would still be responsible for raising her two daughters without her husband. She refused to bless her husband's venture and never changed her mind. While her letters are missing, the ongoing argument between the couple is apparent from his letters. He extols San Francisco – the weather, the business climate, the emerging civic culture – while referring to New England with an ambiguous mixture of pride and distaste. Although he grumbles about New England's cold weather and poor business climate, he praises the region's culture and values. Although he misses his

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<sup>8</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 27-28.

<sup>9</sup> Rohrbough, *Days*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Margo, *Labor*, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Holliday, *World*, 529.

family, he does not want to return home. He believes they should follow him. This desire seems to color all of his observations about San Francisco. While Hittie repeatedly accuses her husband of abandoning her, Peirce never agrees. His prolific letter writing attested to his loyalty and his desire to remain connected. Oftentimes, he wrote four or five letters a week. As Rohrbough points out in his book *Days of Gold*, "Quarrelling between husbands and wives sometimes started over a perceived lack of concern for the family and the failure on the part of one or both parties to write regularly. Letters were a symbol of interest and support." Peirce never failed to communicate. But Hittie believed he had disregarded her wishes by embarking on his trek.<sup>13</sup>

It is apparent that moving west could dramatically upset a family. Most emigrants left behind relatives and friends they might never see again. The decision could not have been easy. Even a temporary move like Peirce's caused discussions and conflicts between spouses. While temporary relocations to the West were unusual except during the Gold Rush, the essential discussion about whether to emigrate was similar to those of permanent western migrants. Travelers had varied reasons for moving. Western men were often accused of seeking adventure. Although this is true in some instances, in *The Plains Across* historian John Unruh argues that most western travelers left because of "financial difficulties, the hope of economic improvement in the Far West, the search for better health, or political and patriotic considerations, before admitting to general restlessness."<sup>14</sup>

However, Unruh's analysis ignores the role of women in decision making. This is one critical difference between most overland travelers and Gold Rush travelers. Women rarely sought gold in California. The decision of whether to leave, however, illuminates larger gender conflicts. In *Women's Diaries of the Western Journey*, Lillian Schlissel argues that women were reluctant to move to satisfy the material and adventurous needs of their husbands and were forced west because of their lack of power. Schlissel writes, "one must suspect, finally, that many women judged the heroic adventure of their men as some kind of outrageous folly thrust upon them by obedience to patriarch ritual."<sup>15</sup> In *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, historian John Faragher concurs that men often dragged women west. He argues, "Not one wife initiated the idea [of migrating];

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<sup>13</sup> Peirce to Hittie, June 8, 1851 and June 25, 1851.

<sup>14</sup> John D. Unruh Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West*. (Urbana, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Western Journey*. (New York: Schocken, 1982), 15.



it was always the husband. Less than a quarter of the women writing recorded agreeing with their restless husbands; most of them accepted it as a husband-made decision to which they could only acquiesce.”<sup>16</sup> Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey, author of *Frontier Women*, disagrees. While many women reluctantly migrated, according to Jeffrey, most were not “passive spectators.” They either overtly struggled against the decision or supported it. “Their support for emigration reveals that despite an ideology assigning men the responsibility for making economic decisions, women also participated in decision-making and shared men’s opportunism.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite similarities between permanent and temporary migrant families, there were important differences. Rohrbough outlines the differences in *Days of Gold*. He argues that the venture to California “carried a different range of risks and rewards: it was a temporary, rather than permanent change of place; at the same time, it was extended in duration. It meant the prolonged absence of a member of the household for a period of years, rather than months. Finally, the trip involved the expenditure of family resources to finance a journey.”<sup>18</sup> Most men migrated alone. Temporarily uprooting the family was impractical because it required selling the home, moving belongings, higher travel costs, and endangering children. By going alone, however, men risked wrecking their marriages. Wives worried that men separated from their families were more susceptible to vice. They also worried that their men might never return. Jeffrey agrees that “letting a man go west alone, unless it was only to prepare a homesite, was a risky venture at best, even if the rationale was that of improving family finances. Women’s magazines condemned gold fever because it unhinged men, making them feel ‘free as a bird’ as they flew from ‘many cheerful fireside . . . many a happy home.’”<sup>19</sup> As a result, few women initially migrated to California. If women protected societies’ morality, as many believed at the time, a world without women was dangerous.

Peirce himself despaired about the few women in San Francisco. In order to attain the moral virtue of New England, he believed the city needed more than “one women to eight or ten men.” According to Peirce, half the women in San Francisco were prostitutes. He wrote, “only one half who bear the garb and form of women are worthy of their sex and names, but

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<sup>16</sup> John M. Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 163.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier*, 30-31.

<sup>18</sup> Rohrbough, *Days*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier*, 31.

poor degraded beings, devoted to the baser animal existence only." Peirce also abhorred the men paying them. He wrote that the prostitutes were "living only to gratify the passions and grosses [sic] appetites of animals, more guilty still, who call themselves men. I cannot call them men and women – they are mere brutes, bearing the form of men and women." San Francisco's heady, alcohol-filled nightlife also bothered Peirce. He wrote, "I have so far avoided all spirituous liquors, have not drunk even a glass of wine since I left home. It is thot [sic] very odd here, where all judge and jury liquor up on all occasions."<sup>20</sup>

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Peirce arrived in San Francisco on April 14, 1850, after enduring a miserable journey through Panama that left him stranded in Chagres for weeks while waiting for a ship to take him to San Francisco. Upon reaching San Francisco, he wrote Hittie, "I . . . like the appearance of things here for as well as I had expected to find it. . . . My prospects for business look as favorable as I had reason to expect."<sup>21</sup>

Although most California immigrants sought their fortune in the mines, many like Peirce believed they could make a greater profit by selling goods, services, and real estate to the miners. In 1850, 37% of California residents worked in other types of labor besides mining. That number would increase over the decade, as mining became more mechanized, and hence more expensive. By 1860, only 22% of Californians worked in the mines.<sup>22</sup>

In November 1850, seven months after arriving, Peirce promised Hittie that he would return in February 1852. He told her not to worry about money and to give their children everything they needed for their education. "Do not fail to have good teachers and good books and a good piano for the girls, and consider the money well spent for it will come back with interest in the happiness." Peirce hinted, however, that he might stay longer. He considered asking his sister Martha to join him to "keep house." He also remarked upon the business environment he had begun to succeed within. "Most everyone who does well here is contented and wants to stay, those who do not curse it and clear." This was precursor to a December 1850, letter in which he declared, "I suppose I shall have to stay here five

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<sup>20</sup> Peirce to Hittie, first three quotes from July 4, 1851; last from July 16, 1851.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, February 17, 1851. Chase, "Panama," 27.

<sup>22</sup> Margo, *Wages*, 123.



years after all. I like it so exceedingly.”<sup>23</sup> His abrupt change in plans must have upset Hittie.

Though Peirce must have known how much his separation pained his wife, he continued to change both his return date and motives for staying. On January 3, 1851, he wrote that only financial considerations prevented him from returning home. He was making more money in San Francisco than he ever had in Massachusetts. “Money is truly very convenient. I wish I had enough and would make a bee line for home in short order. I have never for a moment regretted coming here. I only regret the necessity which absents me from my dear family – my heart is at home with you in the family circle.” However, in a letter dated just two days later, he praised San Francisco and insinuates that he was staying for non-financial reasons. He wrote, “People come and go. The steamers are full both ways and so are the sailing vessels. A great many families are arriving, every day, by ships and steam. We are bound to have a great city here, and a great county around about here.” In the same letter, he retreated from setting a firm return date. “I freely confess for the most part the year has been a pleasant one. As to the dollars and cents account I do not take that into view. I trust however in this respect I am the gainer but another year must determine this also.”<sup>24</sup>

By March 1851, his changing pronouncements had strained Hittie’s patience. Despite the money Peirce sent to her at regular intervals, she remained unhappy with his absence, wanting him home as soon as possible. Her concerns provoked a sharp response from Peirce: “I notice your charge for me never to come home with the idea of coming back – well if I take that as your wish I shall have to stay a long spell before I see you and the children.” In another letter from March 1851, Peirce further defended his decision to move west and once again invoked financial necessity. “I do not want money for my own sake but to use for the interest and happiness of my family. I feel sure I can do vastly better here than home. I should be quite unfit to do business at home after this year of California experience. I could not come down to the two cent profits at home.”<sup>25</sup>

Although Peirce prospered financially in San Francisco, especially in comparison to his business in Lynn, he arrived just as the city’s boom was waning. The city’s oscillating economy mirrored the Gold Rush itself. In

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<sup>23</sup> Peirce to Hittie, November 24, 1850 and December 1, 1850.

<sup>24</sup> Peirce to Hittie, January 3, January 15 and January 19, 1851.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, March 10 and March 14, 1851. Letters generally took 4-6 weeks to travel between San Francisco and New England.

his history of San Francisco, Roger Lotchin writes, "After a short slump caused by the general exodus for the mines, the first wave of affluence commenced in 1848 after the initial gold discoveries and lasted until late 1849 or early 1850. For the next two years depression prevailed." The depression did not end until the spring of 1852.<sup>26</sup> Entering into this world, Peirce and his two partners set up a grocery store in a rented warehouse on Sacramento wharf, 500 feet from the shore on the corner of Sacramento Street and Battery: Fay, Peirce & Willis, San Francisco.<sup>27</sup> The warehouse was large – two stories, eighty feet long and twenty-five feet wide – with wood interior walls and an iron exterior that protected the structure from the catastrophic fires that frequently left the city in ashes.<sup>28</sup>

By all indications, Peirce's grocery was a success. In his first seven months, he made 100 percent over cost. In addition, he sent home large amounts of money to his wife, including \$500 in October of 1850 and \$250 in April of 1851.<sup>29</sup> While Lotchin argues that San Francisco was in the midst of a depression, workers there still earned more money than Eastern workers. A San Francisco artisan averaged \$6.18 per day in 1851, while a New England artisan averaged \$1.40 in 1850.<sup>30</sup> In his letters, Peirce continuously reiterated his happiness with the San Francisco economy. The anxieties of the New England economy, more than anything else he mentioned, pushed him to California. Working on credit – both loaning and owing – was at the heart of his Lynn business. In San Francisco, everything was paid at time of sale, in gold. He wrote, "there are no credits in trade, and we either get our pay for goods at once, or we lose it at once. We don't do as we used to in the states, keep our business at arms length and six months ahead. I do not intend again to take or give a note to any living man unless I alter my mind."<sup>31</sup>

Despite San Francisco's well-known economic pitfalls such as fires and busts, Peirce preferred losing his money in an instant, rather than meandering for months, anxiously awaiting returns. He wrote, "The anxiety of my last two years business at home wore me out faster than ten years would here. We go to sleep at night and our money is in our safe or in Bank, or else in goods, and we feel better to see goods burn up before our eyes than

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<sup>26</sup> Roger Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Peirce to Hittie, February 6, 1851, February 16, 1851.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, February 6, 1851.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, January 19, 1851, January 21, 1851, April 20, 1851.

<sup>30</sup> Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 48. Margo, *Wages*, 68, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Peirce to Hittie, September 12, 1851.

to see scamps who have secured our confidence plunder us of our earnings.” His business experiences in Lynn deeply affected Peirce, leaving him a bit jaded. His pronouncements hint that he was running away from Lynn more than he was running to California. He wrote, “when I think of the scoundrels in the states who have fleeced me in this way, I almost dread to go home. It will open so keenly my feelings of bitterness.”<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to San Francisco’s economy, New England’s brought small profits along with high risk. Small shop owners were especially in peril. Between 70 and 90% of small businesses closed prematurely. Most businesses were susceptible to strong seasonal downturns, and all worried about recurring national depressions.<sup>33</sup> In his article on small business owners, “We Are Not Afraid to Work,” Bruce Laurie argued, “more perilous still were the chronic slips and slumps that rippled the national economy following the War of 1812 – the panics/depressions of 1819, 1837, and 1857, as well as the quick, sharp dips in between. Every downturn large and small claimed myriad shops.”<sup>34</sup>

The New England economy frustrated Peirce and seems to have convinced him to leave. The San Francisco economy pulled him to stay. It was not only profits but also the hopes of greater profits and prospects that new economies like San Francisco’s offered and an old, seemingly saturated economy like Lynn’s did not. Peirce wrote:

I feel now as if this was the line of duty, to myself, my family and creditors, but I again repeat if the happiness of my family forbids this course I shall submit, that this, if I could find half as good a prospect at home as I have here. I could not consent to become a servant or a menial or a street broker for they are deprived of all independence of thought or action. I must do something respectable for my family’s sake here or there. This is not easy to do at home where all the walks of trade for which my experience fits me, are crowded, while here I am all fitted with growing prospect to look forward to.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Laurie, “We Are Not Afraid to Work: Master Mechanics and the Market, Revolution in the Antebellum North,” in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*. Ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston. Routledge. (New York, 2001), 54.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>35</sup> Peirce to Hittie, April 20, 1851.

Peirce also argued this point in a later letter, explicitly contrasting the East and West. "It is a wonderful country and one gets attached to it for its freshness and variety. The old states have been worn out and exhausted by competition, soil, commerce and trade."<sup>36</sup>

On May 4, 1851, Peirce's luck in San Francisco turned and forced him to live up to his boasts about preferring California's hazardous economy over Lynn's economy. "Today I write with a sorrowful heart. Our beautiful city is a heap of ruins. Our store, our pleasant home, a smoldering mass of rubbish."<sup>37</sup> The city had been on fire before. On Christmas Eve, 1849, fire destroyed one square block. Four months later another fire destroyed three blocks. Fires burnt blocks again on June 14, 1850, and September 17, 1850. But the fire of May 4 was by far the largest, destroying nearly a quarter of the city, part or all of twenty-five square blocks.<sup>38</sup> On May 6, Peirce estimated that he had lost nearly \$20,000 worth of goods, plus the building he rented. The iron doors he had written to Hittie about earlier, doors meant to stop fires, did nothing. With his home destroyed, he was compelled to rent a room on a ship anchored in the bay. Luckily, however, his safe was found in the wreckage, and he recovered \$10,000. While others were discouraged and spoke of returning east, Peirce remained undeterred. He wrote Hittie, "Now I supposed you will say is the time for you to come home. No, there is more need for staying now than ever. Business will be better than before. And by next November you will look for me to start home or visit as before proposed."<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, he was right. San Francisco recovered. It was at the center of the Gold Rush. Though geographically removed from the fields, San Francisco was where people and supplies entered the state, and where most of the gold departed from. The Gold Rush built the city. In 1848, 1,000 resided in San Francisco. By 1851, the city had over 30,000 permanent residents and was the fourth largest port in America.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, it was still a rough city. Peirce's letters depict widespread drinking and prostitution, with occasional episodes of violence. In one letter, Peirce recounted the events of the previous week in a matter-of-fact fashion. He wrote:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., May 25, 1851.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., May 5, 1851.

<sup>38</sup> Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 174-175.

<sup>39</sup> Peirce to Hittie, May 6, May 9, and May 21, 1851.

<sup>40</sup> Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 45.

The poor fellow gored by the bull died and was buried today. He was a boat man. Sunday was a fatal day. Eight men drowned in the Harbor sailing, boat capsized, one man shot accidentally by his own gun, another poor fellow shot himself with a pistol. So the world goes, sorrow and trouble, sickness and death the world over. I can think of nothing of interest to write you and my dry, dull head is unable to manufacture anything agreeable or worth your reading.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these events, Peirce believed a New England temperament was taming and refining the city. Whether or not this actually occurred is incidental. Peirce *wanted* the city to develop a New England character. He was uninterested in seeing the city develop a unique California personality. He maintained that New England possessed the noblest culture that he knew of and that New Englanders' influence only benefited the city's maturation. He wrote, "we are now in fact remov'g New England from the Atlantic to the Pacific and everything here is daily assuming a New England aspect."<sup>42</sup> He concluded, "I hopefully look forward to see San Francisco heed the pressure of New England influence which is everyday getting to be more and more felt, as moral externally as N. York. She is probably internally as much so today, and as moral and religious too in a few years as our pious city of Boston, which in the eye of the world really stands upon a hill in this respect."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, he feared that San Francisco politics, and hence the economic and moral institutions of the city, would be corrupted by Southerners. "Political influences in California I think are more Southern than Northern. The Northern men are engaged in business leaving political affairs to those who have nothing else to do."<sup>44</sup> But mostly what Peirce's letters indicate is his interest and excitement in helping establish a great city. New England was founded long before his birth. The Puritans and Revolutionaries had already been canonized. But now he had arrived in a place just being molded, and this excitement awakened a younger man within him. He took pride in the city's progress and repeatedly referred to the city's construction in the possessive. In a letter from December 1850, seven months after his arrival, he noted that nearly every aspect of the city

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<sup>41</sup> Peirce to Hittie, July 27, 1851.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, March 17, 1851.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, December 18, 1850.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, January 13, 1851.

had improved: houses, stores, municipal services, and even the nature of the people. He knew these improvements would continue and he wanted to be a part of them. He concluded, "but with all there is still much to be mended. We cannot expect a city only two years old (since its new birth) to settle down into all the improvements of our old cities at once, but we are gett'g along finely towards it."<sup>45</sup>

Peirce also fell in love with the weather. In several letters, he recalled the bitter New England winters he had left behind. He did not want to leave and made it clear to Hittie that he would only return because of family obligations. Only his family kept him from finding complete happiness in California. "Were it not for Aunt Peirce and yr. father and mother I should be almost ready to take wife, children and all and settle down here for life. But on their account I shall not even invite you to accompany me back, when I return, as I know it would not be possible for them to be reconciled to part with you and the children."<sup>46</sup>

By June 1851, Peirce's letters to Hittie revealed the increasing conflict between the two. He continued to vacillate on his plans. In some letters he promised to return only with her permission, but in others he only offered vague promises not to return. In a June 1851 letter, he apologized for leaving without her consent. Her letters to him apparently touched upon the guilt he rarely revealed in his letters. His reply mixed regret and anger:

I willingly excuse your hard cuts about men forgetting their wives, and neglecting their children, for I suppose I deserve it all, but I beg you to be merciful as you can possibly, and try to overlook my sad delinquencies, as you see I have placed my future destiny in your hands, and shall be guided by your decision in the future. I feel guilty by using the husband's prerogative in leaving you without your consent, and solemnly again promise not to do it again. Will this satisfy you my dear wife?<sup>47</sup>

Six weeks following the fire, he and his partners opened a new store on the corner of Battery and Pine streets, a mile-and-a-half south of the old store. There he slept, moving off the ship he had inhabited since the fire.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., December 18, 1850.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., May 29, 1851.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., June 8, 1851.



The situation was unpleasant at times. In one letter he complains of fleas dwelling in his bed.<sup>49</sup> Business rebounded, however, and he was making money again. At one point, he pondered buying a \$75 embroidered shawl for his wife as a gift.<sup>50</sup> Over the next few months, he continued explaining to Hittie his reasons for leaving New England and repeatedly defended his decision to stay. Although his letters were often angry, at other times his writing became more passive, reserved, and even metaphysical. In a letter dated June 25, 1851, Peirce pondered his wife's displeasure with his move west, while ruminating about the nature of happiness, writing:

In reading your comments on the happiness we might have enjoyed if I had not left home, I am brot to a realizing sense of the uncertainty of human calculations and am very nigh running into a belief in destiny, altho I never could quite understand that everything was all arranged beforehand and all our efforts for or against are unavailling. I confess I know no rule by which to ensure a reasonable hope of happiness than to be guided by what to the mind in calm deliberation to be best and to follow that impulse which seems to be most in the way of duty.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, his bitterness towards his wife continued. He was happy in California and angry that she was neither happy for him nor grateful for the sacrifices he had made on behalf of her and their children. "I have had no cause to complain. I have no exposure, no trials, no troubles of a serious nature, and for the most part have enjoyed the sojourn here highly," he boasted. "I had hoped my family was pleasantly situated as to find no particular cause for unhappiness in my absence, being supplied with comforts, and surrounded with friends." He appeared to believe that his prolific letter writing should be enough of a gesture of commitment to smooth over Hittie's loneliness. He also charged her with not writing him enough. "You have instead of my presence my experiences and adventures in this strange land written out at length every fortnight. One would think you would be quite happy. It seems to me that I have the hardest part of the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, June 25, 1851.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, September 22, 1851.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, September 24, 1851.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, June 25, 1851.

bargain so far," he protested. "To be sure I get a few lines from home my only consolation."<sup>52</sup>

By July 8, 1851, Peirce had begun to temper his tone. He insisted that by praising California he did not mean to convince her to follow him, but instead demonstrate to her that his living conditions were "tolerable enough." For the next few months, Peirce continued to both reassure Hittie that he would not return to California again while extolling California because of his desire to stay. Even by mid-September, he held hope that she would change her mind and allow him to return for a second journey. He wrote, "I still adhere to my promise I shall never leave you again without your consent. You say also anywhere with me, so perhaps another year will see us perched upon the pleasant hillside in a snug little cottage overlooking our splendid bay, surrounded with all the comforts of California. Time will determine."<sup>53</sup>

On October 11, 1851, he wrote that he would begin his passage home on November 15. By October 19, it was still not clear whether or not he was returning permanently to Lynn. It had been twenty months since he first left for California; and while he missed his friends and family, California's hold on his imagination and pocketbook was strong. "I look forward to meeting all my friends again with great pleasure, but I fear I shall not be satisfied to remain at home after tasting for two years the great comforts of such a climate as we have here, and living in such a whirl of business excitement as I do here. I fear I shall be very homesick to get back even before my three months' visit in Lynn is out."<sup>54</sup>

His feelings about returning home were obviously mixed. While he did not want to leave Hittie again without permission, the thought of staying in Lynn and returning to his former existence was difficult. He had escaped to the other end of the continent in search of a different life. To give up California and return to Lynn might seem like failure. He also seemed to have found a sort of happiness that he lacked back home, as he pleaded to Hittie:

You seem to dread my saying anything about coming back here. It lies with you. I shall not care without you, to stay any-time again... But it don't seem to me I am going home to stay [in Lynn]. I cannot conceal it. I have acquired a love for this

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., June 25, 1851.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., July 8 and September 19, 1851.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., October 19, 1851.

country and have been very happy here. I trust we shall be moved to do what is for the best good of all the family.<sup>55</sup>

On November 5, 1851, ten days before he planned to return for a visit, he again reassured Hittie that he would not leave New England without her permission. Simultaneously sad to leave San Francisco and guilty over coming in the first place, he attempted to explain his reasons. "I am glad to be assured of your continued kindness in speaking so leniently of my leaving you without your consent. I have not felt well about it, and can only promise again to consult your happiness in all future operations of so much importance," he declared. "I was convinced it was my duty to come and I should not been satisfied if I had not, but I should have obtained your consent to the measure or staid at home."<sup>56</sup> He had accepted that he might never return to California and that he would have to make do within the confines of his former life in Lynn:

I have now less expectation of returning here than ever before. But not because I do not like the country, not because I have changed my opinions as to this being the best country known to make money in, but rather from the feeling that happiness is attainable with small means if we are contented to live modestly, on small means. . . . I shall be very homesick [for California], I have no doubt to get back to business excitement of this fast going place and shall feel Boston to be a dull hole after living here so long.<sup>57</sup>

Five days later, he seemed to have accepted that he would not return to California. He was disappointed and once again placed the guilt upon his wife. "I cannot realize I am off in 4 days more. I don't see how I can go, but I suppose you will be disappointed if I back down now." In the same letter, he continued worrying about his financial fate if he returned to New England. "I am still in great doubt about making good business arrangements to remain in Boston, unless you are content to have me work as hard as ever at the same drudgery I have always been tied to. Business here is only a pleasure compared with anything I have ever done before and it will be hard to come back to old times again."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, November 5, 1851.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

On November 15, 1851, Peirce left San Francisco, sailing south aboard the steamer *Gold Hunter* for Panama with 124 other passengers. On his journey home, he never mentioned returning to California. In fact, he never mentioned California. Instead, he used the opportunity to write a travel narrative through his letters. He surveyed the people of Mexico and noted the idiosyncrasies of the other passengers.

The ship's passengers were returning with varied amounts of gold: \$1,000, \$10,000, \$15,000 "and some barely enough to pay the way."<sup>59</sup> In Acapulco, he mailed his letters and wrote another. He had been here before on his way to San Francisco and had a harsh view:

I can see but very little improvement in this place since I was here before...it is clean and well swept but the streets are narrow, and the people wholly under the influence of the Catholic priests and as deplorably ignorant as ever. I can see nothing in the destiny of these Mexican provinces but extermination.<sup>60</sup>

On his way to California, Peirce had taken the quickest possible path – New York City directly to Panama. Now that he suspected he would not be returning, he wanted to take the opportunity and see as much as possible. He planned to travel to Cuba and then take a ship to New Orleans. From there he hoped to travel up the Mississippi to the Ohio River and finally by train from Pittsburgh to Boston.

He arrived in Nicaragua on December 4, 1851. Five days later he boarded the steamer *Daniel Webster* and sailed for Havana.<sup>61</sup> Once in Havana, he was trapped in the city for five days waiting for another steamer to arrive. From the Hotel Cubano, he noted that the Cuban economy was built upon slave labor, concluding that "the condition of the Slaves is bad enough, but less severe than in the States."<sup>62</sup>

Peirce had been a fierce abolitionist in New England. In San Francisco, he had kept abreast of the anti-slavery movement through copies of *The Liberator* that Hittie sent him. He was interested in the news surrounding the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and even sent a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, about San Francisco's first fugitive slave case.<sup>63</sup> One San Francisco newspaper identified him as an abo-

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., November 10, 1851.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., November 21, 1851.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., November 29, 1851.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., December 4, 1851. December 9, 1851.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., December 16, 1851.

litionist. This understandably worried him. “I am willing to have my own name stand wherever I place it but I did not wish to bring in my [business] partners to so unpopular a subject.”<sup>64</sup> But mostly, his comments on slavery took the form of polemics against Daniel Webster. In one remarkable passage about Webster, Peirce wrote:

When liberty of Free [black] citizens of Mass. are at stake he [Webster] is silent. When Slavery claims a constitutional protection he is bold and rampant as a Lion. Oh, I am sick of this base sycophant to the Slave power. He has never dared to say his soul was his own in the Halls of Congress for liberty and northern rights for years. Now he is reacting . . . in defense of the Constitution protection of slavery – and these speeches will gull the political fools who read their political lessons only from Whig expounders. But he cannot blind the faithful, *and deserter from the cause of freedom* will be indelibly engraved on his page of history, which all his big words will not be able to cover over or obliterate. His successor I trust will not be found a dumb dog, who will browbeat by the haughty Southrons [sic].<sup>65</sup>

In Cuba, for the first time in his life, Peirce interacted with slavery and slave owners face to face. He sailed from Havana to New Orleans aboard the *Empire City* on December 19, 1851, arriving three days later on December 22.<sup>66</sup> Aboard the *Empire City*, he noted the prevalence of Southerners who defended slavery to him. He admittedly did not identify himself as an abolitionist to them. “I reckon I was the only northern abolitionist on board, and I have been quite interested in their [southerner’s] conversation. They all rank against the northern fanaticism, and would hang up an abolitionist with a good relish,” he wrote. “They mean those [abolitionists] who meddle with their slaves, induce them to run away, but I think almost any slave holder would talk upon the subject calmly if he was satisfied we had no designs to meddle with his slaves.”<sup>67</sup>

Despite Peirce’s strong abolitionist beliefs, he was remarkably generous towards slave owners: “I really do pity them that they cannot look at

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., April 8, 1851.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., June 26, 1851.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., July 8, 1851.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., December 19, 1851. December 22, 1851.

this subject [slavery] with a practical commonsense view, and see as any northern man can see, how much it would increase the pecuniary value of these states to have these fine lands cultivated by free instead of slave labor, and how much moral, social, and political value would be added to the present, by the change.”<sup>68</sup>

After two days in New Orleans, Peirce set sail up the Mississippi River aboard the *John P. Tweed* bound for Cincinnati. The boat stopped in Baton Rouge where Peirce observed a molasses plantation, worked by slaves. “There is more severity of discipline on the large estates than on the small ones, but the whole scene seems to me to be covered with a kind of gloom,” he wrote. “The true smile of content and happiness is not to be seen on the face either master or slave. The planter’s brow is as dark and gloomy as the landscape.”<sup>69</sup>

On January 8, 1852, Peirce arrived in Cincinnati. The next day he sailed up the Ohio River towards Pittsburgh, where he arrived on January 12. From Pittsburgh, he wrote his last letter to his wife:

Perhaps I may get home Sunday. I have almost forgot how you look, and I am impatient to see how grey and wrinkled you have grown. I am just as poor and thin as ever, my hair grown grey and the wrinkles sunk deep into my cheek. My eyes have grown dim, and my glasses indispensable.<sup>70</sup>

In the fall of 1851, Peirce had written that he was unsure whether he would ever be satisfied with the comforts of home after living an exciting existence in San Francisco. We will never know whether or not that turned out to be a prescient statement or one made in a moment of nostalgia for a life in California he would soon have to leave behind. After he returned to Massachusetts, Peirce opened a successful wholesale grocery, Peirce, Dana & Co., on Broad Street in Boston. He retired sometime in 1878 and died on September 2, 1889. He was eighty-eight years old. Whether he was satisfied with how the rest of his life unfolded, or instead lived out his remaining decades pining for San Francisco, only he could say. In either case, Peirce’s letters illuminate the mind of a man who was unsatisfied with the path his life had taken into his middle age; a life he desperately

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., December 22, 1851.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., December 22, 1851.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., December 26, 1851.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., January 8, 1852. January 9, 1852. January 12, 1852.



wished to change. Peirce took a bold leap: he left behind every person he knew and every point of reference he understood in hopes of partaking in at least one meaningful adventure he could write home about.<sup>71</sup>

HJM

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., October 19, 1851. Peirce, Frederick Clifton. *Peirce Genealogy*. (Worcester: Press of Chas Hamilton, 1880), p. 117.