

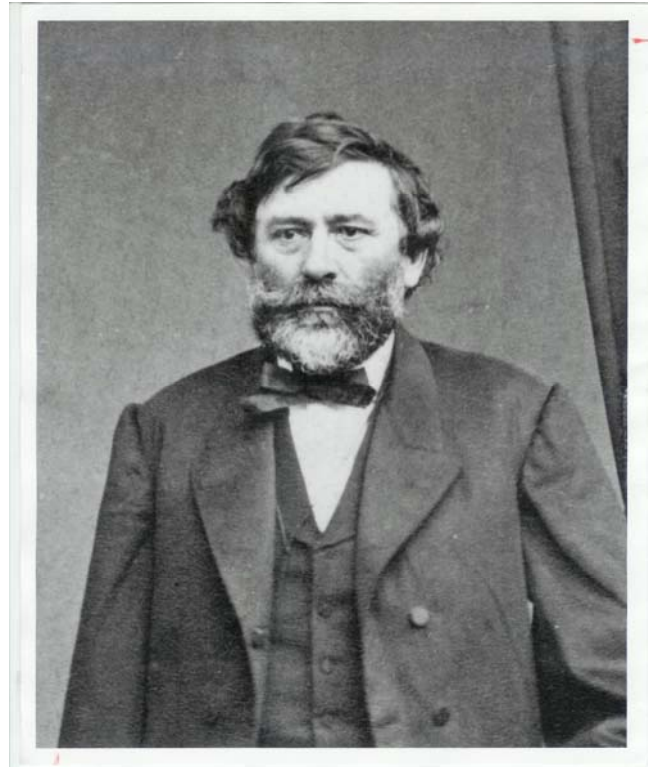
“Agoston Haraszthy”

Pioneer Agoston Haraszthy is recognized in state history as the “Father of Winemaking in California.” He is also known as San Diego’s first county sheriff. But Haraszthy is most often remembered in San Diego for a legendary scandal that one local historian would call “the first instance of graft in California.”

Born in Pest, Hungary in 1812, Haraszthy immigrated to America in 1840. While later writers would erroneously say “Count” Haraszthy was fleeing political persecution in his homeland, he more likely was searching for economic opportunities unavailable in commercially rigid, imperial-ruled Hungary.

Haraszthy was joined by his large family in 1842. After several successful years in Wisconsin the family joined a wagon train headed for California. After a difficult nine month journey on the Santa Fe Trail, the Haraszthy’s reached San Diego in December 1849.

The town had barely 600 people at the time, with perhaps 200 more scattered in rural areas. San Diego was dreary looking but strategically located with good harbor, a strong military presence, and, as Haraszthy quickly noticed, a “genial climate.”



Agostin Haraszthy (1812-1869)

Haraszthy planted an orchard and wine grapes on the banks of the San Diego River, north of Old Town. While the vines prospered the ambitious Haraszthy also opened a butcher shop, and ran a stable and stage line with his neighbor, Juan Bandini. With several partners, he bought land for \$5 an acre near the bay. The 627 acres was formally called Middletown, but some would dub it “Haraszthyville.”

The family was popular and Agoston was elected county sheriff and town marshal. His father Charles was elected justice of the peace. Within six months of their arrival the family was firmly entrenched in San Diego business and politics.

But for all his local accomplishments, the San Diego legacy of Agoston Haraszthy would be a controversial stone jail.

In June 1850 the San Diego city council asked Sheriff Haraszthy to find a “good and secure” room to replace an aging adobe jail. When no suitable building could be found, his father Charles suggested building a new jail. The councilmen agreed and advertised for bids on a cement structure.

The lowest bid came from Agoston Haraszthy for \$4,995. With no apparent qualms over “conflict of interest” the sheriff got the contract.

The contract specified a jail house that was “durable and secure” and built in a “good and workmanlike manner.” The lockup would be 34 feet long by 24 feet wide, with ten foot high walls of 1½ foot thick cement. A six-foot wide interior hallway would separate two rooms, ventilated by windows with iron bars.

A labor crew employed by Haraszthy began construction in September 1850 at a site just below the town cemetery. The work did not go well. Heavy fall rains melted the cement walls and Haraszthy had to admit to the councilmen that his jail house had “fallen down.” Poor quality lime, he explained, had made the cement unworkable.

Haraszthy asked to be either relieved from his contract or provided with additional money to build a stone jail. The council pledged to increase the contract by \$2000 and Haraszthy’s crew began again, this time building walls of mortared cobblestones. The jail was finished in late January. A council committee inspected Haraszthy’s work and pronounced it satisfactory.

Less agreeable were the negotiations over the payment owed to Haraszthy. With the city coffers nearly empty, Haraszthy was given scrip instead of cash for the bulk of the debt. But Haraszthy’s stone jail was used without complaint for the next year, housing several city and county prisoners. Maintenance of the building, however, was seemingly ignored.

Problems with the jail came to light in February 1852, when the *San Diego Herald* reported that two Indians jailed “for drunkenness, or some such disorderly behavior, effected their escape through the medium of a broken window.” A month later the newspaper announced that a horse thief had escaped from the jail in less than two hours.

About the same time the notorious Roy Bean entered the story. Many years before achieving fame as a Texas judge known as “the Law West of the Pecos,” Roy was arrested in San Diego. For shooting a Scot named John Collins, Bean was incarcerated in the stone jail. The shooting arose from a “private difficulty,” reported the *Herald*, possibly a duel. Bean would quickly make his escape from the jail—unguarded it seems—and disappear from San Diego.

Bean’s escape became legend. The *San Diego Union* recounted the episode in 1873 when it claimed Roy Bean had been the very first prisoner in the Haraszthy jail. “In an hour’s time he was again free, having dug out with a pen-knife.”

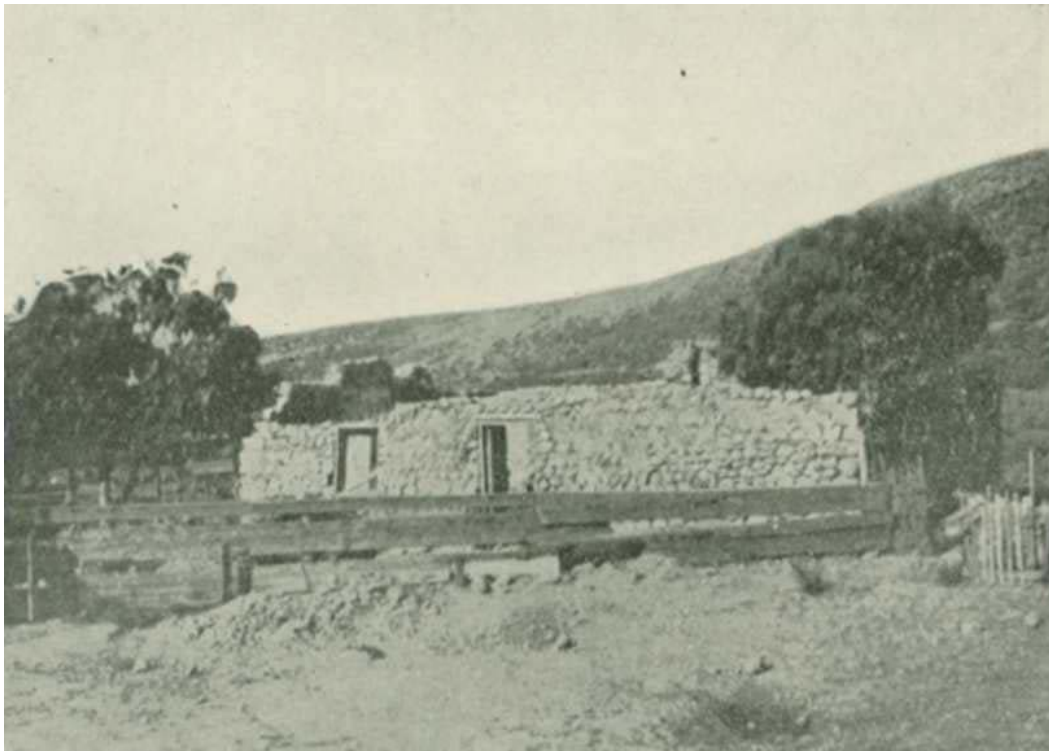
Later writers would embellish the tale. The most fanciful version appeared in Horace Bell’s 1881 account of early southern California--*Reminiscences of a Ranger*—which described a dramatic Roy Bean duel on horseback with a Frenchman. After his arrest, according to Bell, Bean’s distraught seniorita friends brought him “tools of escape” hidden among bouquets of flowers. With the smuggled tools “Roy cut his way through that miraculous concrete in less than no time.”

Haraszthy would not witness the Roy Bean episode or the decline of his jail. After representing San Diego in the state assembly in Sacramento, he would soon leave the town to take a post with the U.S. Mint in San Francisco.

In 1859, he attempted to collect on the old scrip the council had given him. The town officials refused payment and instead blamed Haraszthy for an “unworkmanlike” jail house even though they had approved the work in 1851.

San Diego historian William Smythe would cement the legend of the stone jail in his city history of 1908, when called the Haraszthy jail a “wretched job that had been foisted upon the town.”

Agoston Haraszthy ignored his San Diego troubles and moved on. Prospering in northern California he introduced more than 300 varieties of European grapes in the state and owned a Sonoma winery widely described as the “largest vineyard in the world.” After business reversals he moved to Nicaragua in 1868 and built a huge sugar plantation. The next year he would die in a bizarre accident. Falling into a river that ran through his property, he disappeared and was presumably eaten by alligators.



The Stone Jail late in life. From William Smythe, *History of San Diego*.

Originally published as “Winemaking icon left a sour taste in San Diego’s mouth,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 28, 2009.