

# H.M.T. Powell and San Diego

*We arrived at San Diego very tired at ½ past 7. Did not know where to go or what to do. It was dark. A serious time. At length, Walter, Keane, and self were taken in at the Dragoon Quarters and the rest got a tent. Our supper was coffee and crumbs of biscuit.*

--H.M.T. Powell, December 3, 1849.

The diary of a tired traveler from Illinois provides a rare, colorful account of early San Diego. Of an estimated 80,000 gold-seekers who found their way to California in 1849, relatively few stopped in San Diego. Fewer still left recorded narratives of their time here. The journal of H.M.T. Powell, published in 1931 as *The Santa Fe Trail to California, 1849-1852*, is considered by historians to be one of the most important accounts of the Gold Rush era.

Powell left Greenville, Illinois on April 3, 1849, joining other “forty-niners” from his town on the road to California. Little is known about Powell beyond his journal entries, which suggest he was a schoolteacher with a wife and children. Recording his daily adventures in a leather-bound letter book, Powell describes a hard journey over the Santa Fe, Gila, and Colorado trails, across the deserts of the Southwest, leading to San Diego.

Sickness dogged the travelers from the start. As the wagon train moved west from St. Louis, cholera began to strike down the emigrants. “The road today seemed like a lengthened Cemetery,” Powell wrote in mid-May. “The mounds of graves of the Emigrants thrown up at intervals on either side of the road and the remains of cattle and mules strewn in all directions was but a dismal sight.”

In early June, the Greenville party decided against taking the most common route, west through the South Pass across the Rockies, and took the less-traveled Santa Fe route instead, hoping for better grass for their cattle. It was a harsh passage, marred by incessant bickering among the men. The most quarrelsome traveler may have been Powell, who constantly complained about his health, the poor food, his fellow emigrants, and the barren landscape.

“All of Camps are ‘dust holes,’ Powell lamented as his party crossed southern Arizona. “We eat dust, drink dust, breathe dust, and sleep in dust! What this God-forsaken country was made for, I am at a loss to discover.”

Arriving in San Diego “exactly eight months from the time our wagons left home,” Powell was “weary and worn out both in body and mind, not knowing what to do next.” With only \$2.50 in his pocket, Powell pawned his watch and shotgun. He also began sketching the town, earning a few dollars for his drawings and maps. Powell proved to be superb artist and his pencil images of Old Town and the Mission San Diego de Alcalá are among the first known views of San Diego.

Powell apparently had thoughts of starting a school in San Diego. But discussions with Miguel de Pedrorena and “Mr. Fitch,” probably a son of the late merchant Henry Delano Fitch, went nowhere: “Dec. 8<sup>th</sup>. Saw Don Miguel. Do not believe he has done anything. Fear the school will fall through. Got the blues horribly.”

The Illinois schoolteacher was also disappointed in the town and its activity. “Dec. 8<sup>th</sup>. The Public Square is boarded in for a bull fight; miserable affair.” “Dec. 15<sup>th</sup>. Their manners here are detestable.” “25<sup>th</sup> Xmas Day – California sports on Plaza; men in masks. Could not make it out.

One man had horns that he tried to gore the others with, but whether he represented a bull or the devil I could not learn.” “Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>. A Mexican soldier of Carrasco’s command murdered another right here in town last night. So little notice was taken of it that I did not hear of it until this evening.”

The virtuous Powell was appalled by the drinking and gambling he saw in San Diego. “Gambling rife here, Sunday or no Sunday,” he complained, and “Everybody gets drunk here.”

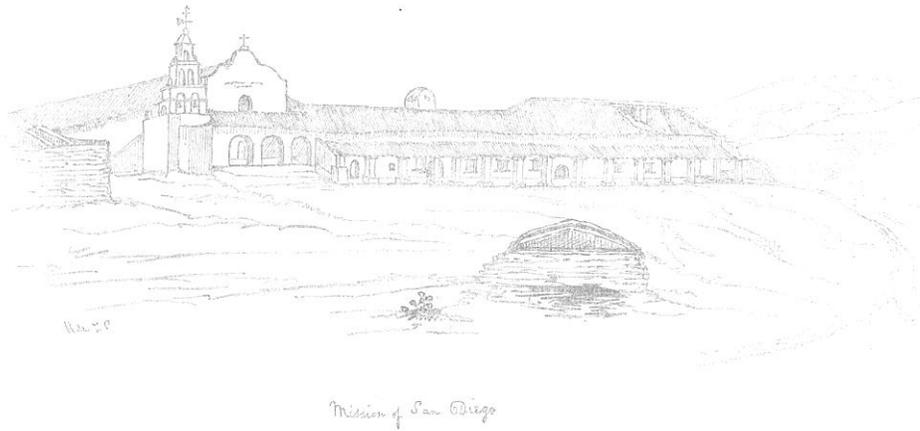
He was particularly offended by the behavior of the U.S. soldiers in town, describing them as “drunkards, profane swearers, and gamblers.” When Powell was evicted from his living quarters in a wagon borrowed from a Captain Hayden, he was told the wagon needed to be moved “to plough up the ground for a garden.” Powell decided the “the true reason was that [Hayden] was piqued at me, because I saw him gambling last night—Sunday!”

Retreating to a “mud hovel” rented for \$6 a month, the cranky Powell busily drew maps and sketches: “Sold two to the bar-keeper at A. J. Smith’s for \$5.00 and 2 to a young fellow of the name of Johnson for \$8.00, who gave order for two maps as also did Mr. Lynch for two more . . . Curtis did not pay for his. Don’t like his ways.”

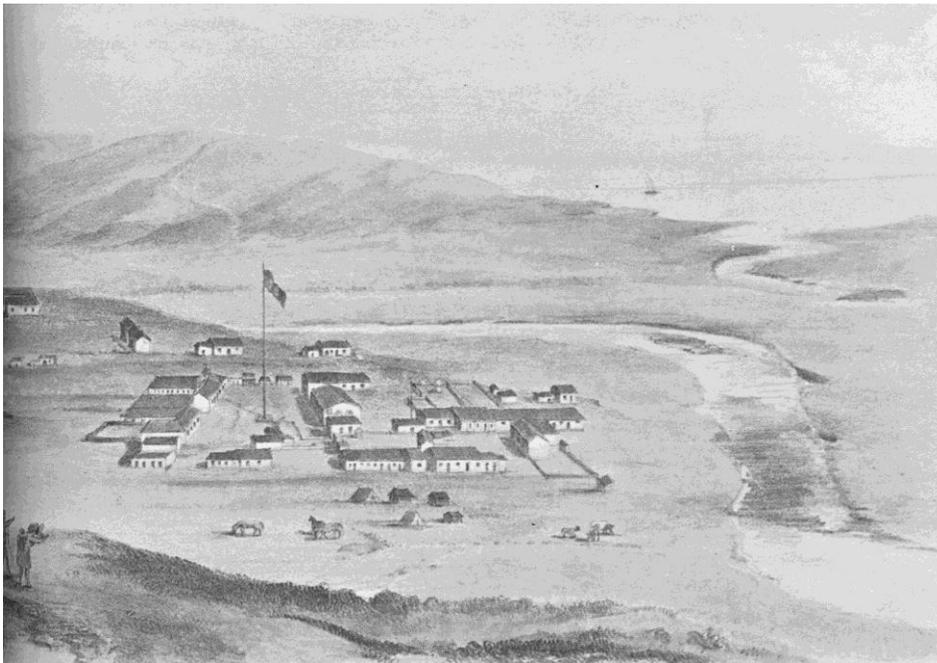
Powell’s sketch of the Mission San Diego proved especially popular. Powell sold one to the prosperous Juan Bandini and another to Mayor Joshua Bean (the older brother of Judge Roy Bean and “Law West of the Pecos” fame). A sketch sold to Lt. Cave Coutts survives today as the earliest preserved image of the mission. Coutts would later falsify the date on the drawing and erase Powell’s signature, replacing it with his own.

With his prospects poor in San Diego, Powell struggled to save enough money to buy a wagon and team of oxen. On March 9, 1850, he recorded in his diary: “Made my adieux to the few I knew and left San Diego, I hope for ever.”

Powell would struggle for nearly two more years in California. Traveling north he spent time in Los Angeles, leaving the earliest known sketch of that city. In San Jose, he served briefly as a Justice of the Peace. After a brief attempt at panning for gold in the Sierras—“hands blistered, arms and ankles skinned, back almost broke”—Powell booked steamer passage from San Francisco, and headed home via Panama. His journal concluded on March 24, 1852, with the words, “Wednesday. HOME.”



Powell's drawing of the Mission San Diego de Alcalá. From *The Santa Fe Trail to California, 1849-1852*. Another version was embellished slightly by Cave J. Coats who altered the signature and date of the sketch.



Powell drew Old Town from his view on Presidio Hill. From a later lithograph reproduced in Pourade, *The Silver Dons*.

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