

John Judson Ames and the San Diego Herald

After surmounting difficulties and suffering anxieties that would have disheartened any but a “live Yankee,” we are enabled to present the first number of the Herald to the public.

--John Judson Ames, the San Diego *Herald*.

San Diego’s first newspaper, the *Herald*, appeared on May 29, 1851, only twelve days after the first issue of the Los Angeles *Star*—the earliest newspaper in Southern California. The editor and publisher of the *Herald* was thirty-year-old John Judson Ames, a towering, six-foot six-inch “live Yankee” from Calais, Maine.



John Judson Ames (1821-1861).

Ames had come west with the Gold Rush, arriving in San Francisco in October 1849. He came penniless and began his California career by working for other “forty-niners”--hauling trunks and luggage with a borrowed handcart. But the ambitious Ames had a literary bent, experience running a newspaper in New Orleans, and an interest in politics.

In late 1850, Ames visited San Diego. There were fewer than 700 people in the former Mexican pueblo but prospects for a Southern transcontinental railroad seemed hopeful. If San Diego could secure the railroad before San Francisco or Los Angeles, it would become an important town, perhaps the leading city of California.

Establishing a newspaper in San Diego became Ames’ goal. But getting the broadsheet started was a nightmare. The transport of his printing equipment all the way from New Orleans to California across the Isthmus of Panama nearly ended in disaster. Ames explained in his first issue of the *Herald*,

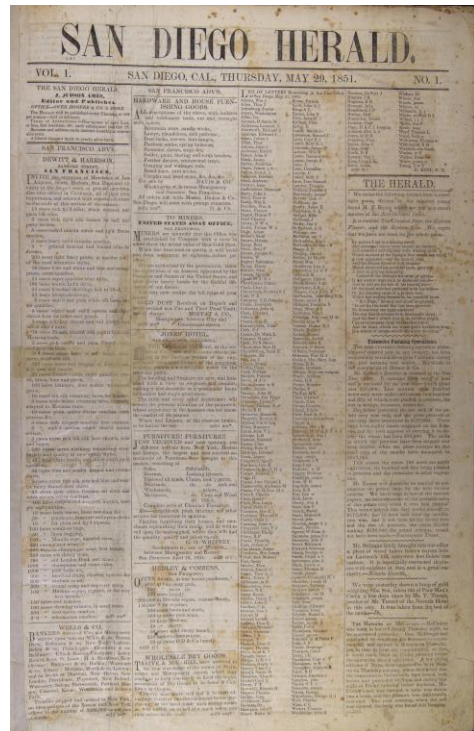
We issued our prospectus in December last, and supposed at the time that we had secured the material of our paper; but when we came to put our hand on it, it wasn’t there! Determined to lose no time, we took the first boat for New Orleans, where we selected our office, and had returned as far as the Isthmus, when Dame Misfortune gave us another kick, snagged our boat, and sunk everything in the Chagres River.

The tenacious Ames fished boxes of type and his 1200 pound press out of the river, fought off an attack of tropical fever, and--while waiting three months for a steamship to take him back to California—rebounded by starting the bilingual *Panama Herald*, the first newspaper ever published in Panama.

When Ames finally opened shop in San Diego he produced a four-page, four-column newspaper, measuring 12 by 18 inches. Advertisements—typically from San Francisco merchants—filled most of the columns, including the entire front page. News and opinion appeared on page two, spilling over to page three. Annual subscriptions cost \$10.

“Independent in all things, neutral in nothing,” was the Ames editorial motto but in the next few years the paper would mostly support Democrats, such as California governor John Bigler (1852-1856). But Ames could be a maverick at times. In 1855, the *Herald* suggested Texas hero Sam Houston for president. The next year Ames endorsed Millard Fillmore of the nativist “Know Nothing” party, and adopted a new slogan for the *Herald*: “Thoroughly American in principle, sentiment and effort.”

Ames’ years at the *Herald* were often interrupted by business trips to San Francisco where he courted advertisers and political contacts. In the summer of 1853, Ames left town to attend Democratic Party business in San Francisco. On the eve of his departure he announced to his readers: “We shall leave on the steamer for San Francisco, to be absent about two weeks. A friend of acknowledged ability and literary acquirements will occupy the ‘old arm chair’ during our absence.”



The friend was Lt. George Horatio Derby, 30, an army engineer who was stationed in San Diego to lead an engineering project on the San Diego River. Derby was a talented humorist and writer. Under the pseudonym of “John Phoenix” he produced six notable issues of the *Herald*, enlivening the columns with witty commentary and satire.

As editor *pro tem*, Derby would be remembered throughout California for a prank. Ames had often reminded his readers to vote for the Democratic candidate for governor, John Bigler. But overnight, Derby turned the *Herald*’s politics from Democrat to Whig and encouraged readers to support the Whig candidate, William Waldo. In the election, Waldo would carry San Diego, but narrowly lose to Bigler statewide.

Ames took the practical joke in stride and announced on his return: “Here we are again! Phoenix has played the ‘devil’ during our absence, but he has done it in such a good humored manner, that we have not a word to say.”

For most of the 1850s, Ames struggled to keep his *Herald* in print. Without a telegraph or railroad, he had to rely on the irregular appearances of the steamships

from San Francisco to receive news. Even newsprint supplies were erratic; a few issues of the *Herald* were printed on brown wrapping paper.

With profits dwindling, Ames decided in 1859 to try his luck in the rising Mormon community of San Bernardino. After printing a last issue of the *Herald* on April 7, 1860, Ames packed up his press and moved north to found the San Bernardino *Herald*. Tragically, only a few issues of the newspaper were printed before Ames died on July 28, 1861. There are no known surviving issues of this San Bernardino newspaper.

The nine-year run of the San Diego *Herald* nearly disappeared, as well. In 1901, San Diego pioneer E. W. Morse wrote to the San Diego Public Library and offered his complete run of the old newspaper, noting “there are no other copies of this celebrated publication in existence . . . the best and most appropriate place for [the *Herald*] is our own public library.” Preserved and microfilmed by the library, copies of Ames’ San Diego *Herald* continue to survive, providing an incomparable first-hand account of early San Diego.

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011).