

Asbury Harpending: A Pennyrile Native Numbered
Among the Founders of San Francisco

A Paper Presented to
The Athenaeum Society
November 2, 1978

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San Franciscans are funny people! They have more than their measure of human peculiarities. Name most any new or unusual or liberal movement and the odds would be good that it had its start in San Francisco: the gay rights movement, anti-neuclear power, women's lib, anti-war protests, anti-you-name-it. They are exceedingly proud of the great men, the honorable men, the bandits, the crooks, the adventurers, the great scholars, the wide variety of men who made the city's colorful history. By any measure, the name of a man born and raised near Hopkinsville has to be included in the list of the greats of San Francisco - his name is Asbury Harpending.

Harpending's father, Asbury Senior, was quite well to do and owned considerable acreage in Christian, Caldwell and Lyon Counties. The family was residing in Christian County on the farm (later known as the Dr. L.G. Harris residence) some 4 miles out of Hopkinsville on the Princeton Road in 1839 when Asbury Junior was born. They moved to Caldwell County south of Princeton near Eddy Creek in 1843. The elder Harpending, in an effort to provide an education for his son, enrolled him in the local Cumberland College in Princeton of which he was a trustee. Other events were to prove of far more interest to the younger Harpending. At the age of 15 he ran away from the academy to join General Filibuster Walker's expedition to Nicaragua. In all, 120 Kentuckians were stopped by Uncle Sam as they sailed down the Mississippi

River. Harpending and most of the rest somehow eluded their captors and wandered back home. Walker was not so fortunate; his sentence: execution by a firing squad.

The wandering fever was unabated, however. Harpending Senior gave his permission to Junior, then barely 16, to try his luck in California. Instead of going to New York and taking passage, Asbury again went down the Mississippi to New Orleans. The nation was embroiled in a financial crisis at this time. State paper currency was only good within the borders of the state of issue. Asbury had only his ticket, \$5 in gold and a revolver. At Panama 1000 people were crowded onto a steamer built for 400 passengers. Living conditions were appalling with the most meager of provisions. Foodstuffs consisted of practically no vegetables or fruit. The ship's Purser had laid in a private supply of oranges and bananas which were hidden in two secret compartments. A hungry mob broke into one of these compartments and cleaned it down to the last orange peel. The Purser was in a delima for he knew that the next night they would find the second store. Harpending offered to buy the lot and the Purser sold it to him for \$10. Harpending only had his \$5 in gold but was able to buy the lot anyhow. A fruit auction was promptly held on deck. An itinerant gambler - broke - helped with the auction and even though he stole half of the profits Harpending still realized \$400 in gold.

This was a decent stake for California in 1857. Among those who had witnessed the fruit auction was Harvey Evarts who was on his way back to California after visiting

Eastern banks. Evarts invited Harpending to accompany him to several mine sites and his suggestions paid big dividends. Harpending cleared \$6,000 in reworking several out-of-the-way and abandoned pit mines. He invested in hydrolic mining and hit it rich, clearing \$60,000 - this before his 17th birthday.

Mining camp talk spoke of riches in the Utah mountains. These he visited but somehow didn't invest. His attention turned to Mexico. Few knew this desolate land - shrouded in mystery and intrigue. It was well known that it was immensely rich in minerals but also absolutely lawless and so overrun with bandits that it would take a standing army to protect any investment. At this time even the most adventerous had not ventured into the interior. Many Californians later, of course, took advantage of these mineral riches for their own immense profits and for California. Harpending outfitted a small vessel with trading goods, provisions for 6 months and a mining outfit, powder, tools and general mining equipment - and little money. Stopping first at the small American colony in the coastal town of Mazatlan and, despite dire predictions, hired a knowledgable - also broke - Mexican guide who led him and his party through the Sierra Madres and the Durangos to an old mine site of fabulous riches 200 miles east. The old Mexican Don knew his business and managed to either elude or make peace with the dozens of robber bands all of whom were armed to the teeth. This mine was of such riches that with careful sorting from its open face, cargos averaged \$500-\$600 a ton. Ore was

taken to the coast in mule or burro trains in unreduced or rock form so that bandits had little incentive for robbery. Crude reduction works at the coast prepared the rich ore for the numerous purchasers. Return mule trains brought goods and supplies for sale or trading in the interior. The new mining community was treated with the highest wages, nightly dances, bullfights, and they became fiercely loyal. Harpending returned to San Francisco in 1860. He was still not quite 20 years of age - with over a quarter million dollars banked and the owner of a mine he estimated worth over a million dollars. His reputation had preceeded him in a grand way. The stories of his fabulous wealth and his blood curdling experiences were of the sort to grossly exaggerate. Harpending was ranked at this point as one of the best known figures in early California history and at a time when the state's destiny hung by a thread.

California had been populated heavily during the 1850's by Southerners coming to seek their fortunes. Probably as many as 30-40% of the population were Southerners, fully as many residents were of Mexican or oriental background who, if they had feelings in the matter, leaned toward the cause and sympathy with the south. The election of 1860 and its choice of Abraham Lincoln resulted, of course, in the almost immediate paralysis of federal authority in the states of the deep south. The attitude of California, the new, financially affluent and important state on the Pacific, was paramount at the moment. The key to holding the state and keeping it in the Union fold was San Francisco. Charged with responsi-

bility for the defense and security of the city was a Kentuckian, Albert Sidney Johnson, who was to gain fame - and his death - a few years later on the battlefield at Shiloh as a Confederate general. Fortifications guarding the city - all with the supposition that any attack would be from the sea - were the Point guarding the entrance to the Bay and a fortified island guarding this same entrance. The island in later years, came, of course, to be called Alcatraz. The federal arsenal where some 30,000 stands of arms were stored stood adjacent to Fort Point. But a handful of federal troops were available for action. The vulnerability of defenses were obvious to all.

Shortly after the election of Lincoln, a group of 30 business leaders, all rabid southern sympathizers, met in secret session and vowed to lead a movement to carry the city, the state, and Nevada along with it, out of the Union and, as a first step, to establish a Republic of the Pacific. Taking an active leadership role in this secession movement from its beginning was Asbury Harpending. As an initial step, each of the 30 leaders was to contribute or find contributors for a "war chest" of three million dollars to finance the rebellion. This sum was quickly pledged. Step two was to recruit and train, in secret, 100 men each. With the number of former Mexican War Veterans, Indian fighters, ^{of all types,} adventurers, ^{of} such a number was no great problem. All organized resistance was to be paralyzed by one simultaneous attack on federal installations. Training progressed in secret locations. Everything was in readiness by the middle of January, 1861.

It only remained to strike the fatal blow.

General Johnson learned of the plans and publicly - and quite bluntly - let it be known that the federal installations under his command would be held to the last man. His integrity and his ability as a military leader were well known and certainly, above reproach. Even so, being so badly outnumbered, the city and the state may well have fallen had not a second event transpired at this point. The Comstock Lode was discovered in the Sierras and silver in great abundance began to flow from the mines which were thought to have been worked out. Virginia City was born. As fate would have it, several of the Committee of 30 had direct financial interests in this new bonanza. Huge profits from silver replaced their southern sympathies and the secession movement ground to a halt in California just as the shells began to fall on Fort Sumpter.

Harpending, despite having invested - and lost - \$100,000 to the War Chest was still to gain a measure of notoriety in the events to come. General Johnson, ^{immediately} ~~shortly~~ after the outbreak of hostilities, resigned his federal commission and offered his services to the Confederacy. Shortly thereafter he was in command of the Army of the Tennessee. Fort Donaldson and Fort Henry had fallen, the Kentucky lines of defense collapsed, Nashville was occupied. Confederate and Union troops were moving toward a confrontation at a point along the Tennessee-Mississippi border called Pittsburg Landing and Shiloh.

Harpending, not being unaware of the flow of gold

and silver out of the port of San Francisco to finance the Union cause, had made his way back east in an attempt to make contact with Confederate leadership. His route led again through the robber bands of Mexico's desert highlands to the port of Vera Cruz where he boarded a blockade runner and arrived shortly thereafter in Charleston. His acquaintance with General Johnson led to a conference with Davis and his war cabinet, an observers role at Shiloh, and a commission as a Captain in the Confederate Navy. Harpending now secretly made his way back to California where a new chapter was to unfold.

A new York based packet, the J.M. Chapman, arrived in San Francisco after a record breaking voyage around the Horn. Following several unsuccessful attempts to purchase satisfactory vessels, Harpending and several intimates negotiated for purchase of the Chapman. The plan being to sail her to Mexico, arm and provision her at that point and then to use her to capture mail packets along with their rich stores of gold and silver designed for the federal treasury outbound from San Francisco. The Chapman was duly purchased and loaded with box upon box of small arms, gunpowder, cutlasses, small cannon, etc. all neatly stenciled with the words "mining machinery". A crew of 20 handpicked southern sympathizers was recruited. An engineer, pilot and navigator proved somewhat more difficult but these too were at last located. All was in readiness for sailing on the night of March 14, but the newly hired pilot was not to be found. All during the rainy and overcast night Harpending and the rest-

less crew waited and watched in vain for the pilot to appear and to raise anchor and move from a most dangerous position. As the dense fog and mist traditional for the San Francisco Bay began to slowly lift in the early hours of the next morning, the shapes of three boatloads of Marines, boarding party detachments from the U.S. Navy warship Cyane came sharply into view. The warship itself with all guns manned and trained on the Chapman could now be seen just a hundred yards away fully prepared to blow the smaller ship to bits. Retreat was impossible and attack most unrealistic. Harpending, the officers and crew, quickly surrendered to the Marines. Following a period of imprisonment, the officers and men were brought to trial where the crew was pardoned under the general amnesty provisions then being observed for prisoners of war. Harpending was a special case, however, with the jury taking but a few minutes to find him guilty of high treason against the United States. He was incarcerated in the new federal prison facility established on Alcatraz, a small island in the bay surrounded by ^{the} most treacherous of currents. The months of imprisonment wore on when finally amnesty, too, was granted to Harpending. Rumor at the time suggested that some considerable money changed hands in the decree but proof was never found. Rags to riches and now back again to rags, Harpending found himself penniless in a city where the many strong Union sympathizers now in complete power had a most dim view of his sudden prison release and of the events which had led up to his imprisonment. He was wanted by many, even had a price on his head by a few Union Army officials.

Harpending, with the loan of a few dollars from several still loyal friends took to the back trails and headed back to his first love - mining in that desolate mountain area near the border of California and Nevada. As luck would have it for the third time, Harpending found a rich vein of gold. He generated capital enough to purchase hydrolic machinery, surrounded himself with loyal and rugged miners and within two years had recouped much of his fortune. To keep life interesting, he and his miners warded off two different attempts by the Army to bring him again to justice.⁹ With the end of the Civil War, California faced unprecedented growth and development. San Francisco was the center of the new wealth for shipping, mining, agriculture, and industrial development. The railroads were coming, bringing with them the promise of still further riches. Harpending sold his flourishing mining development and reinvested in San Francisco real estate buying considerable acreages of the "worthless" swampy land at the edge of the city along Market Street on the Bay Shore. Suffice it to say, the acreage was included - certainly promoted by Harpending - in the second phase of the city's mushrooming growth. Harpending built a luxury hotel - the Grand Hotel probably the best in the West at that time. Other buildings, city streets, prestige residential areas all were to appear on his drained, filled and now highly desirable Market Street development. His influence began to be felt in Sacramento when questions of railroad franchises, taxation policies, etc. as related to San Francisco were argued. Harpending was now a millionaire. His monies, too, in in-

creasing amounts were being invested in highly speculative mining ventures in Nevada, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona.

A considerable portion of his time was to be spent during the late 1860's and early 1870's on the investment markets of New York and in London. Quick riches seemed the order of the day and stock in mining companies was the wildest card of all. And there were buyers and sellers in abundance for this gamblers paradise. Restrictions and regulations were unknown, swindlers were quite able to provide bogus stock for all takers, yet, apparently, just enough legitimate offerings were bought and sold to keep the securities market from absolute chaos.

Rumors of a fabulously rich diamond field began to be heard on the stock markets of New York and London. Harpending, then in London, received a lengthy cablegram from his old friend in San Francisco, William Ralston, President of the Bank of California, who reported that he had just purchased a half-interest in a diamond field. Ralston had worked with Harpending previously on a number of real estate deals, was urging his old friend to return to invest in and to manage these new properties. Baron Rothchild of the world famous London investment firm, too, had received word of the find and was pressing Harpending to further explore this new financial opportunity. Harpending quickly surrendered to the pressure, the opportunity and the excitement, and boarded a ship for New York thence immediately by train to California.

It seems that late in 1871 two roughly garbed miners had entered Ralston's Bank of California in San Francisco and

asked to place several large and heavy bags in their vault. Bank tellers had told them that they would have to know the contents of the bags before they could do so. The men said their names were Phillip Arnold and John Slack, and they begged the young gentleman in charge of the bank's vault not to reveal their secret. They hesitantly opened the bags which revealed what appeared to be an immense fortune in rough, uncut diamonds which they said they had discovered while prospecting for gold.

William Ralston, who, of course, soon learned of the diamonds, was excited beyond measure and got in touch with the miners again. They seemed dazed, confused and overwhelmed by their find and not being completely familiar with area geography could not give the exact location of the field. The details they reported seemed reasonable. Finally Ralston persuaded them to sell a half interest so the property could be developed. They agreed to lead an inspection team there provided the men were blindfolded during the trip. This provision was agreed to and the team, including Harpending, set out. Leaving the train at a remote station in the desert, the team mounted horses and traveled three days under the guidance of Arnold and Slack. Using but their pocket knives for tools, the team found a large quantity of real diamonds. In addition to diamonds, smaller quantities of rubies, sapphires and emeralds were also found. The teams' enthusiasm and excitement knew no bounds. Upon their return to San Francisco, an assesment of their find was made. One of the stones weighed 103 carats for which a San Francisco jeweler

tentatively offered \$96,000. Tiffany's of New York valued a small part of those already in Ralston's possession at a reported \$150,000. As a further check on the authenticity of the new field, Henry Javin, world's foremost mining and engineering authority at the time, was commissioned to visit the site and make his report. Javin did visit the site and returned equally enthusiastic, even purchasing a number of shares of stock. His report which set a value of the site at more than \$50 million removed all doubt in the financial world as to the authenticity of the find.

Entirely satisfied with their new and glorious opportunity, Ralston and Harpending paid Slack and Arnold \$600,000 for their remaining half interest. They opened handsome offices to sell stock in the new mining venture, the San Francisco and New York Mining and Commercial Company. Money literally rolled in from all over the world.

In the meantime, the stories of fabulous wealth in a diamond field reached Clarence King and James Gardner, leaders of a government survey team for the western states. They were dubious so they proceeded to investigate. The site by now could be pinpointed by those having thorough knowledge of the area. Everything they found was amazing. They found gems in the loose desert sand, atop ant hills, in the crevices of rocks, everywhere. All of the riches though, were, curiously enough, in a rather confined area. One newspaper had even reported diamonds in the crotch of a tree which was erroneous because there were no trees at the site. King and Gardner found the fact odd, to put it mildly, that diamonds,

rubies, sapphires, etc. could be found naturally occurring in the same immediate area. The telling blow was the discovery of a partially cut diamond showing the unmistakable marks of the gem cutter's art. The die was cast. King sent a wire immediately to Ralston and Harpending and reported that the field was a gigantic fraud and that the company and the financial world had been duped. The storm broke with this revelation.

A search was made nation-wide for Slack and Arnold, the conspirators. Slack was never found. Arnold had moved back to Kentucky where he purchased large acreage near Elizabethtown. During the next months, he was to become something of a local hero having duped the yankee financial lords on such a grand scale. Arnold was sued to no avail, local juries failing repeatedly to convict him. He proceeded to open a bank in Elizabethtown but within a year or so was killed by a shotgun blast from a rival banker.

Little by little the explanation of the Slack-Arnold operation became clear. The year before the hoax, the two had been in Europe and had purchased large quantities of practically worthless industrial grade and discarded diamonds in the rough. They had secretly brought their purchase to the western states via way of Canada. They apparently had invested no more than \$35,000 total for the specimens used in the grand salting operation. Losses fell heavily on Ralston, Harpending, and two smaller investors.irate investors clamored for their money or the "hides" of Ralston and Harpending. Investors were apparently repaid in full. Repayment

of the debts all but bankrupted Ralston and Harpending. Within a year the Bank of California closed its doors and shortly thereafter Ralston was found dead in a "swimming" accident supposed at the time really to have been a suicide. Complete loss of prestige and creditability was an even greater loss to the two than the considerable monies involved.

Following the scandal, Harpending quickly sold his remaining parcels of San Francisco real estate at bargain prices and moved back to Kentucky to retire. He was now 33 years of age. From his father he took title to 1,200 acres of land some four miles southeast of Princeton on a little gravel road just off present-day KY Highway 514. This rather remote spot today is known in the area as Twin Springs for at the base of the hill two large all-weather springs still pour an enormous amount of water into nearby Eddy Creek. On the knoll above the Springs, Harpending constructed his mansion. The palatial residence has now disappeared but traces still remain and older residents recall the landscaped grounds, the fountains, and the elegant furniture. Many stories grew up around the mansion and its wealthy owner, placed as they were in this remote spot and whose style of life were quite foreign to Caldwell County in the late 1870's and 80's.

It was believed then - and perhaps now - that he was a participant and a co-conspirator in the Great Diamond Fraud of 1871-72 in California; that he, with others, had "salted" a mountain with worthless industrial diamonds which they then sold to unsuspecting investors for huge sums of money. It was said that he had fled to this remote spot to

escape prosecution, had erected a palatial home with his ill-gotten gains and planned to live out his days in closely guarded seclusion.

Even to the present time tales are told of a secret stairway running from the house to the stables where he kept a horse saddled day and night for a quick flight. There was also supposed to be a secret room where he could hide if necessary. It is told that the house had a solid gold bathtub with silver fittings (in reality it was copper). Also that a faithful negro was said to have lived in a cabin built at the junction of the entrance lane with the main road where he could signal a watchman in a tower on top of the mansion if a stranger appeared. And finally, it was said that Harpending disappeared in the middle of the night and was never seen again. The stories for the most part are untrue and his real life in California far more fantastic.

Harpending wearied of the retirement life and the inactivity of Caldwell County. He took a position again on the New York securities exchange but was unsuccessful, having lost the old gamblers' touch. His last years were spent with a daughter in California where he died in 1923 almost within sight of the place where he had gained fame - certainly notoriety.