When Money Was Necessary to Make Dreams Come True: The Cost of the Trip from Vermont to California via Panama

Scores of Vermonters dreamed of striking it rich in the gold fields, but the cost of traveling to California was beyond the means of most. Some families not only raised the funds for the prospective miner’s trip but also for his wife’s when he asked her to join him in the land of opportunity. Chastina W. Rix of Peacham faithfully kept an accounting of the expenses on her 1853 trip, which totaled $408.64, equivalent to $11,312.18 in 2007 money.

By LYNN A. BONFIELD

When the discovery of gold in California was announced in 1848, many Vermonters, like men throughout America, dreamed of fortune. They planned to rush to California—only to find their plans unfulfilled for the lack of money. The cost of the trip was a hurdle often impossible to overcome. Diaries and letters of the time, as well as announcements for steamer tickets in the New York papers, placed the total cost at two to four hundred dollars for the sea
transit over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and the land crossing of the
Panama or Nicaragua isthmus.\textsuperscript{1} The dream of success in California de-
depend on raising the funds, often borrowing from family who must
have thought the investment worthwhile, as a surprising number of them
raised the necessary money for men to go by sea.\textsuperscript{2}

Some of these fortune hunters failed in the mines but saw other eco-
nomic opportunities available in California and decided to remain in
the West. Those that were married wanted their wives to join them.
These entrepreneurs, now Californians, faced the dilemma of persuad-
ing their wives to come to the golden state. Not only did they request
that their wives risk the dangerous journey but also they made it clear
that the women would travel without their husband’s protection. The
expense for men to return home to accompany their wives more than
doubled the cost, a sum beyond the means of most. To persuade reluc-
tant wives to make the trip, husbands promised that together they would
make a new life in California, one more comfortable than was possible
at home. In June 1852, Alfred S. Rix of Peacham, Vermont, “invited”
his wife, Chastina, to journey to San Francisco. Alfred, a teacher and
lawyer, pointed out that the West offered many good opportunities with
no rigid limitations set by “old blue partisans” committed to “the estab-
lished notions and customs.” Thus he described the “home” situation to
his wife in letters urging her to join him.\textsuperscript{3} After months of fretting over
the decision, Chastina agreed.

Although the gold rush produced a volume of letters and diaries sec-
ond only to the Civil War,\textsuperscript{4} few detailed expense accounts from travel-
ers to California have survived. One from Vermont that has been pre-
served was kept by twenty-nine-year-old Chastina Walbridge Rix. She
left Peacham on January 17, 1853, and arrived in San Francisco on
February 16. In the back pocket of her travel diary, Chastina tucked a
sheet of paper, $4\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ inches, folded in fourths, on which she logged in
pencil each expense incurred on her trip to join her husband. Her ac-
count combined with scattered figures from correspondence of other
travelers presents a good picture of the cost of the trip from Vermont
to California.

Chastina listed her expenses roughly in order of payment, and al-
though she did not date the items, her travel diary makes clear the date
of each expenditure. She entered thirty-three items starting with “Fare
to N.Y. 7.25,” the cost of the trip by railroad from Barnet, Vermont,
where she boarded the cars at the depot closest to her home in Peacham.
Her last listed item, out of order, was “For bath .24” while in Panama.
She recorded no expenses over the final leg of her trip by steamer to
San Francisco, a distance of 3,500 miles.
Chastina W. Rix’s financial account, Rix Family Papers, California Historical Society.
For Portage 405
Portage 15
Came one of the 200 lb. bags 10
Drum of lard 10
Ticket on Rail Road 50 c.
For Inspect. boys 1.00
For Lodging 3.00
Bill at Hotel 41.25
Total Amount 23.56
Account of Costs of Chastina Rix’s Trip from Vermont to California, 1853

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fare to N.Y. [railroad]</td>
<td>7.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorandum [journal]</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fare at Springfield [hotel]</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carriage to Hotel [N.Y.]</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transporting baggage</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent on Silver [changing money]</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Copperfield [book]</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef &amp; crackers</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill at Hotel [N.Y.]</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket [steamers]</td>
<td>305.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Total]</td>
<td>317.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Porterage [across isthmus]</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postage [letter to her mother]</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave one of the party [for services]</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemonade</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piece of pie</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket on Railroad [Aspinwall]</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For supper at Gorgona</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For lodging [at Gorgona]</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill at Hotel in Cruces</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat up the River</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
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<td>[Total]</td>
<td>18.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baggage [on boat]</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mule for me</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native to carry Bub [her son]</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For my trunk</td>
<td>20.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing to Hotel [at Panama]</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fare at Hotel</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supper at Restaurant [at Gorgona]</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting on board ship</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trunk to the shore</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording ticket</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fare at Orange Grove [hotel]</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Total]</td>
<td>72.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For bath [added later]</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL COST OF TRIP:</strong> $408.64</td>
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Three times on the month-long trip, Chastina totaled her costs: first, the trip from Vermont to New York with a one-night stay at Springfield, Massachusetts, and the steamer ticket all the way to San Francisco, including meals, for $305; secondly, traveling across the isthmus of Panama from disembarking in Aspinwall to taking the railroad to Barbacoas and the boat ride to Cruces and Gorgona; and lastly, traveling over the mountains to the city of Panama, accommodations for two nights, and the costs of boarding the steamer on the Pacific. The aggregate cost for Chastina of her trip from Vermont to San Francisco via the Panama route, using her addition, was $408.64, equivalent to $11,312.18 in 2007 money.5

The gold rush experience cost well above the average yearly income of Americans in 1850,6 and some families provided the funds for the trip not only once for the male adventurer but often a second time for his wife. Married couples going to California were people of some wealth, often well educated and socially prominent like the Rixes.7

Expenses from Home to Isthmus

Chastina traveled with her two-year-old son, Julian, nicknamed Bub in the New England custom of calling first-born males Bub, meaning brother. Apparently, the boy did not need a ticket on the various modes of transportation taken on the trip—railroad, carriage, steamer, boat—as there was no accounting for him. Clara Walbridge, her twenty-two-year-old sister, also accompanied Chastina. Unlike her fastidious older sister, Clara did not keep a running financial record, although she noted some costs in the three letters she wrote home, two along the trip and one summarizing her travels after arriving in San Francisco.8

Although the cost of the steamer ticket was the largest expense of the trip, few travelers noted the actual cost in their diaries and letters. Women accompanied by men usually would not pay for services and therefore might not know the cost. Such was the case of Olive Colegrove of New York, who traveled to meet her husband-to-be, Cornelius Cole, in late 1852 with her brother and two of Cornelius’s brothers. She wrote in great detail of the weather, steamer, meals, natives, and crossing the isthmus, but never mentioned specific costs.9 Likewise Delia Marcella Hammond Locke of Abington, Massachusetts, omitted mention of the ticket cost in the reminiscence of her 1855 trip with her husband and his father. By then, the railroad across the isthmus had been completed, and the juggling of transportation modes experienced by early travelers, including Chastina, was no longer necessary. Although Delia did not list the cost of the steamer ticket, she did note the necessity of a ticket on the railroad because of an occurrence on the cars in
Aspinwall. As she tells the story, a woman had put her ticket in her carpetbag that had been placed in storage so she could not produce it when requested. Delia’s husband helped solve the crisis, the ticket was produced, but her account remains silent on its cost.\textsuperscript{10}

Men going to the mines might not have mentioned the cost of the steamer ticket from New York to San Francisco because it may have been common knowledge. Local newspapers occasionally listed the

\textit{Daguerreotype taken in Danville, Vt., in September 1852 of Chastina W. Rix and her son, Julian, to be sent to his father, Alfred S. Rix, in California. From the author’s collections.}
estimated cost, as did *The Caledonian* published in St. Johnsbury, which in February 1851 put the cost of going to the California mines at $350.\textsuperscript{11} This is a smaller amount than Hale Rix of Dalton, New Hampshire, needed for the trip. His brother, Alfred, noted in his journal in early 1851: “In all I have been to an expense for Hale of about 475.”\textsuperscript{12}

Four gold seekers from Peacham, Chastina’s hometown, wrote letters home but did not mention the steamer ticket price: John S. Way, who left in January 1850; Alfred S. Rix, Chastina’s husband, who left in October 1851; Dustan Walbridge, Chastina’s brother, who also left in October 1851; and Ephraim W. Clark, who left in December 1851. Fortunately, Ashbel Martin, who traveled with Ephraim, wrote that the steamer ticket for each was $185.\textsuperscript{13} A Walden man, Andrew Roberts, who left Vermont in January 1852, wrote his wife, Mathilda, that when he arrived in New York, he “found Brother Ellis and Boardman and that they had bought our tickets as far as the Isthmus 35 dollars each.” This must have been steerage passage. Once in Panama, Andrew wrote Mathilda that he expected “it will cost me about 200.00 hundred dollars to get from home through [to California].”\textsuperscript{14}

Many men mailed their first letters home from San Francisco with its busy post office, or when they arrived at the mines, forgetting the cost of the trip as they assured their loved ones of their good health and high spirits. In fact, most letters from California noted health, conditions, and success rather than expenditures. The most common question asked from the home front was the date of the miner’s return. Twenty-five-year-old Charles Jackson answered on June 10, 1854, this question posed by his sister: “This country possesses many advantages over Vermont in regard to money making.” Charles added that he hoped their father would not sell any of the family land. “I’ll try to pay him as fast as I can,” Charles promised, expressing the burden of debt he felt toward his father, who must have supplied the funds for his trip. The amount of the debt was not mentioned.\textsuperscript{15}

Another Vermonter, George Fisher, Jr., wrote from Marysville, California, to his father in Waltham on March 25, 1850: “I have made out to get to the end of my journey.” He gave no mention of costs along the four-month trip that included five days crossing Panama and five weeks on the Pacific side waiting to buy a ticket north. His news of having dug three hundred dollars worth of gold in three weeks overwhelmed any other subject.\textsuperscript{16}

Some women noted the cost of their steamer ticket as part of a compelling story they wanted to tell. Sarah Brooks of Boston remembered years later that she had paid $315, full price, in April 1852 for first cabin accommodations only to be told once on board the *Illinois* that she had
to settle for a second cabin place as the first cabin was full. She still la-
mented the loss years later when she published her reminiscence in
1894.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1861, Julia Twist on board the \textit{Ariel} found herself the only woman
at the breakfast table the second day from New York because the rough
seas had made most of the passengers sick. Julia, whose family origi-
nally lived in Milford, Connecticut, wrote in her diary on February 3:
“The bill of fare is inviting but there are few to enjoy it. The Capt. says,
I think you are a brave woman and deserve the premium. I told him
after paying $200, I could not afford to lose my meals.”\textsuperscript{18} The cost of
Julia’s ticket in 1861 of $200 was much reduced from Chastina’s ticket
cost of $305 in 1853.

Henry Spiegel wrote more than a dozen letters to his family in Ben-
nington during his trip with little mention of expenses. He did note that
when the steamer he and his company traveled on encountered a se-
vere storm on the Atlantic in April 1850, the men found after surviving
the scare that they “have no fresh watter to drink as we lost a tank by
salt watter getting into it when we had the Storm and we have to drink
ale at 18 cents per glass which draws hard on the pocket but cannot be
helped.”\textsuperscript{19}

The cost of transporting baggage was another expense of the trip. Al-
fred Rix, well aware of the high cost of carrying luggage, had written
Chastina detailed instructions on ordering a strong box to send around
Cape Horn. She did and filled it with “my all that has cost me so many
hard days labor—to first earn & then make.”\textsuperscript{20} When Martha Fargo
boarded a ship in New York in 1864, she was told her baggage was over
the allowable rate. The official asked if she was related to Wells Fargo,
the great express company, and she coyly answered, “yes,” and her bag-
gage went free.\textsuperscript{21}

Upon landing in Aspinwall, Chastina wrote in her travel diary on Jan-
uary 31, 1853: “Began this forenoon to take off the baggage to the shore
& passengers paid the natives $5.00 for taking them ashore—a most ex-
orbitant price.” She and Clara spent an extra night on their steamer,\textit{Ohio},
thus saving the cost of one night’s accommodation on land.\textsuperscript{22}

On some trips, as the steamer approached the isthmus, the officials on
board began to weigh the passengers’ luggage, as reported by Martha
Grover Smith traveling from Maine with her husband of one year. She
wrote in her 1854 diary:

\begin{quote}
The Officers of the Boat are weighing the Baggage preparitory to
cross the Isthmus they charge 15 cents per lb for all Baggage we have
got 58 lbs. This Company are a set of Pirates they will cheat you out
of your last Dollar and then steal your Clothing.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}
Julia Twist had a similar reaction. Writing on February 9, 1861, she told of the ship officers on the Ariel weighing trunks:

Today our trunks are taken from our rooms, carried on deck, weighed and checked preparitory for crossing the isthmus. All over 50 lbs. we must pay 10¢ per pound, and many, not knowing this, have brought 3 and 4 trunks besides chests, which cost them quite a little sum. Mine weighed 75 so I had to pay $2.50. There is great dissatisfaction on all sides. Mrs. D. 140, consequently she had $9 to pay. Some paid $30, $40, and as high as $60. It is a swindling operation from the beginning.

EXPENSES ON THE Isthmus

Once voyagers landed on the isthmus, they had to travel about sixty miles across land to the city of Panama on the Pacific. Using a combination of railroad, boat, and mule, the travelers had to meet necessary expenses for transportation, food, and overnight accommodations. Many letter writers noted these costs, but none described the kind of money used to pay the bills. In New York, Chastina spent twenty-four cents changing money, probably bank notes from Vermont to coins needed on the isthmus.

After leaving the steamer at Aspinwall and taking the railroad to Gorgona, Emeline Day wrote in her diary on March 31, 1853: “Put up at the American Hotel very poor accommodations. There were several hundred stayed here paid 2.50 for supper, breakfast & lodging.” Eight weeks earlier, Chastina had paid only $1.50, but she too found the accommodations lacking: “We paid $1.00 each for a supper we could not eat & a dollar each for our lodgings—just a cot with no mattress.”

In a detailed letter on his Panama crossing, Henry Spiegel wrote in spring 1850 of his boat trip from Chagres to “a place called Daskenmanus, or in English Two Sisters [where] we could sleep in a cot for 50 cents, or on the ground for 20.” In the morning “we drank a cup of coffee and bought a Bread Cake for a dime.” When it was discovered that the river was low due to dry weather, he and other men from the Bennington company walked the last eight miles to Gorgona. “We hired a guide at 2 dimes each,” and along the way paid seventy-five cents for “a good dinner.”

The last part of crossing the isthmus was over the hills into the old city of Panama, usually made by mule. Women often cited in their diaries and letters their fear of this ride. The reasons for this dread are unclear. Women may not have been used to riding on mules, or they felt isolated from their traveling companions, or perhaps they felt insecure on the unfamiliar narrow hilly path. Some rode side-saddle “as ladies do,” in Chastina’s words, and some, as Clara pronounced, “rode astride with my bloomer dress.” Emeline Day gave details in her 1853 diary:
Suppose there were some six or eight or perhaps ten hundred crossed the isthmus today. Some on mules and some on foot. Besides them there were hundreds of pack mules, packed with two three or four large trunks. These the natives drove. The natives have huts or houses short distance along the road at which places they sell drink of all kinds to those who pay. We stopped at the halfway house and drank one cup of tea for which we paid two dollars a cup.30

Frugal Chastina must have foregone the drinks, as she does not list having tea crossing the mountains. Clara confirmed in a letter to her mother the price Chastina noted for this segment of the trip to Panama city: “25 dollars apiece for mules to ride and it cost us about 19 dollars each for our baggage.”31 Their baggage consisted of a small trunk carried by each sister holding only necessities for the trip. Mark A. Evans in August 1850 wrote his brother near Philadelphia that he had paid fourteen dollars for a mule to cross from Cruces to Panama:

My mule give out about half way and I had to lieve it and walk the rest of the road there is nothing but one track or path across from Cruces to Panama. It is not worth my while to try to describe it you can take the worst road you have ever seen and put it over the most hilly part of the country you have ever seen and it can not be half so bad.32

For the Walbridge sisters, traveling two and a half years after Mark Evans, the price for hiring a mule had almost doubled, and fortunately their mule made the distance. Prices may have varied through the years but the conditions of the road did not. Henry Spiegel, traveling with Elizah White, also from Bennington, became “sick with the Dysentary,” —he guessed from the food—so he and Elizah hired horses for twelve dollars each to complete the trip across to Panama, “traveling over the worst Road in the world which was covered with dead horses and mules and not a decent House on it and nothing worth seeing.”33

Once in the old city of Panama, Mark Evans admitted that he spent one-third more money crossing the isthmus than he expected. The travel writer, Ida Pfeiffer, who stopped in the city of Panama at the end of 1853, found that everything “is very dear, from the great number of passengers constantly arriving.”34 Clara too expressed alarm at the high cost at Panama and ended up borrowing ten dollars from Chastina. Like Ida, Clara attributed the prices to “so many people on the isthmus at once . . . I think it cost me 70 dollars to get across the isthmus.”35 This was a shocking sum for a Vermont teacher who had made ten dollars a month the previous year. The total of the expenses Chastina listed in her accounting on the isthmus was $77.45, which included $14.00 for a native to carry Julian over the mountains to Panama city. Historian Rodman Paul estimated the cost for crossing the isthmus in December 1849 as
thirty dollars. By the beginning of 1853, the natives evidently had increased their prices.

Crossing a year earlier than the Walbridge sisters, Luther A. Greene of St. Albans wrote to his wife, Adelia, from Panama, where he was stuck for several days trying to secure a ticket up the coast:

This is the greatest place for paying out money that you ever see I am now paying 12.00 dollars a week for board rather poore at that but good for this place nothing taist natural but we have got good pluck and stand well.

Emeline Day, however, found in Panama what she termed “good accommodations $1.50 per day.” The Walbridge sisters paid $1.20 for a hotel room in Panama and $1.50 for a supper Chastina “was so tired could eat but little.” After a night cooped up in a windowless room listening to the moans of a dying miner in the next room, the sisters moved in the morning to Orange Grove, a hotel outside the city, where the fare was $2.00 but “we got a breathe of good air now and then.” Here Chastina paid twenty-four cents, according to her account, for what must have been quite a luxury—a bath.

Finally arriving in Panama, Henry Spiegel wrote home that “everything is high but Panama hats,” so he bought two, one for Elizah, his traveling mate, and one “not quite so good” for himself. At the Fruit Market, Elizah bought twenty oranges for a dime, no doubt remembering his thirstiness on the voyage to the isthmus. Thirty-one-year-old R. C. Hunter, crossing Mexico to California, wrote to his wife in Rutland in March 1849 that “for supper [he bought] oranges 2 cts a piece large as two such as we commonly get in Vt.” Oranges in winter months must have been a treat to Vermonters.

After his long walk and horseback ride to Panama City, Henry Spiegel wanted his shirts washed. The cost was a dime each, he wrote, adding that this “is quite cheap as they have to fetch all the watter they use on muels about 7 miles from the country and the watter we have to drink is not better than the watter in Muddy Brook,” a stream near his home in Vermont.

While waiting in Panama for the Pacific steamer in December 1851, Mary Ballou of Alexandria, New Hampshire, put her needle skills to work and “earnt 12 Dollars while there making Pants.” At the time Mary was in Panama, the expense of drinking water was borne by the travelers. The seamstress wrote “we paid ten cents a quart for water; it had to be brought a long distance on mules.” Also in 1851, Harriet Butler of New York spent four days in Panama. She enjoyed seeing the sites and attended mass. In her 1891 reminiscence she noted going “to
the Olde Nunery to get a drink of water paid two bits for it.”43 By early 1853 when Chastina and Clara arrived in Panama, the water situation may have improved for they do not mention paying for it. Knowing the sisters, they would have held tight to their purses and suffered.

Both were conscious of the high cost of the trip. Clara regretted that she had to borrow money from Chastina and wrote her mother that “I am sure I spent money only when it was absolutely necessary.”44 If this were true for Chastina, so often described as practical and frugal, there must be a good reason for her buying at the start of the trip a copy of the popular novel, David Copperfield, published in 1850. Chastina saw herself as a well-educated woman and may have wanted to carry a book to demonstrate her status. She thought she was intellectually superior to most women and looked critically at “the richly dressed ladies” and those people from New York “who monopolize every place that is descent on board.”45 Anyway, she paid fifty cents for this book in New York even though her earlier evaluation of Charles Dickens after reading one of his stories in Harper’s was, “I cannot say that I admire Dickens’ writing.”46 Not once on the journey did Chastina note in her diary or letters that she read anything, not even David Copperfield. Louise Ely, on the other hand, read every word of the best seller and wrote in her diary on July 4, 1858, “Finished David Copperfield this morning and feel quite lonely without him to go to.” Louise may have had more time on her hands than did Chastina, as she traveled with her husband to the South Sea and China before landing in San Francisco.47 Later in the year Chastina did share Louise’s enthusiasm for Dickens. Once in San Francisco she and Alfred read aloud Dickens’s Bleak House and were “all abundantly pleased with it.”48

**EXPENSES ON THE PACIFIC**

Clustered together in Chastina’s account are expenses associated with leaving Panama and boarding the Golden Gate. She paid eighty cents to get her trunk to the shore and listed “Getting on board ship 1.10,” meaning both her trunk and her person carried by natives. Following this is an item, “Recording ticket 2.50,” the system whereby the purser identified the names of travelers, which he passed on to the San Francisco newspapers who published lists of arriving passengers. A year after Chastina’s trip, Martha Morgan boarding a steamer in Panama wrote in her diary, “Got our tickets and had to pay a tax of $2[.]00 for hospital fees.”49 It is unclear what Martha meant by hospital fees. The only way to board the steamer at this port was on top of the shoulders of a native, a scenario often resisted by women travelers but one they all had to accept if they were to go to San Francisco. Jonathan Dean Long of Brookline,
Massachusetts, described in his diary the process of boarding a steamer in Panama and listed these expenses in his entry for July 20, 1853:

Had to pay $2.50 port charges, 20 cents to a native to carry [our baggage] to the water, then 10 cents to put it aboard and 50 cents to row it to the steamer. There is no wharf here and the vessels cannot come within 50 feet of the shore. All things that go aboard have to be carried on the shoulders of the natives, and the passengers run the risk of having to take a cold bath.50

Clara, in a summary of her trip written to her mother, reported what must have been a nerve-wracking experience without giving the details: “I paid a man 3 dollars to go back for my trunk and he got back to the steamer about 5 minutes before we started.”51

On the steamer on the Pacific, Chastina listed no expenses. Other travelers, however, noted spending money on the trip to San Francisco. In 1861 Julia Twist described the drinking water on board as “yellow as rain water that had stood for some time and as warm as if it had been heated on a stove.” So when ice was available for twenty-five cents a pound, she and three others purchased a pound for dinner. Traveling eight years after the Walbridge sisters, Julia’s ship, Uncle Sam, broke a shaft and was forced to stop in Acapulco for repairs. Julia wrote of the new scene:

The natives are not allowed on board, but come alongside in canoes . . . They bring oranges, limes, coconuts, eggs, coral, and sea shell. When you wish to buy anything they throw up a line attached to a basket. Down goes the money, and up comes your goods.

After being stranded for more than a week, the natives offered a service to the passengers: “Today we send out our washing. Price $2.50 per dozen.” Julia added that “this draws on the purses of some poor folks on board.” Continuing to object to the drinking water, she reported that “the natives make an earthen vessel which they call a monkey, which keeps the water very cool. We bought one today and give three bits for it and like it very much.”

Passengers on the Uncle Sam, like many others traveling on the Pacific, enjoyed an unusual experience along the shore. Julia described it thus: “Just as we were leaving the shore, half a dozen little natives came swimming and crying [to] catch dimes. We threw a dime and down went the crowd and one caught the precious bit.”52 Chastina too was impressed enough to write a line on this spectacle: “Acapulco is dreary looking place even if it is in a tropical climate. The most attractive sight I saw was the native boys diving for dimes.”53 It is not likely that any were thrown by Chastina or Clara.
RAISING FUNDS FOR THE TRIP

Upon landing in San Francisco, the Walbridge sisters wrote to their mother, Roxana, in Peacham, and she soon spread the news to her other children scattered throughout Vermont. “It cost the girls about 9 hundred dollars to go,” she wrote a daughter in Hardwick, adding that “it will take some time for Clara to earn four hundred and fifty dollars [for the return trip] and take care of herself [there] beside.” Roxana may have exaggerated the numbers a bit, but she made it clear that she expected Clara to have her adventure, turn around, and return to Vermont. She had no hope that Chastina would return, as she knew a wife’s duty to her husband was to go where he decided to settle.

How were the sisters able to afford the trip to California? For Chastina the answer is clear. In November 1852, Alfred sent her $250 to augment what she had from their work in Vermont. In addition, after Alfred left for California in October 1851, Chastina had continued to make loans at interest to several Peacham townsmen. Before leaving Vermont, she collected two loans totaling ninety-five dollars. Clara, on the other hand, may have saved some money from her years of teaching, but it would not have been enough. The answer is revealed in a letter dated June 30, 1853, from her lawyer brother-in-law, Alfred, to her step-father, Lyman Watts, enclosing “a Bill of Exchange drawn in your favor for $200” from Clara and her brother, Dustan. The amount of the loan to each remains a mystery. Their benefactor, Lyman Watts, who had married their widowed mother in 1840, when Clara was ten and Dustan was eight, made earlier loans to each—Dustan in the fall of 1851 when he accompanied Alfred to California and Clara in early 1853 when she accompanied Chastina. It is unknown what part their mother had in these procedures, but probably it was substantial. By the time of Clara’s trip, Lyman had not yet been reimbursed from Dustan, but as the owner of a large farm with no mortgage, he must have felt able to wait for his money. Alfred wrote:

Dustan, you will notice, has paid you the ordinary California interest of 3 per cent a month, & if you consider yourself paid he is satisfied. He would write you himself but is very busy. But he asks me to say that he regrets that he has been unable to send you the money before—he could have done so but not with justice to himself. He feels thankful for the aid you afforded him & hopes he shall never have occasion to help you out of an equally tight place.

Alfred continued in his playful style that Clara “sends the principal only on her debt—She wants the privilege of sending the interest in her own time and way—She dont think it fair to patronize Adam’s express altogether to the neglect of Eve’s.” By June 1853, Clara had earned
few female travelers noted in detail where they found the money for the trip to California, but some who sent money home clearly were paying back their families. Sons of Peacham farmers, Ephraim Clark and Ashbel Martin each sent money regularly from California, paying off their loans and then some. Alfred Rix and John S. Way, who also left from Peacham, traveled at their own expense with no debt to others. M. B. White of Topsham caught “California fever” in early 1849, as he wrote to a friend, and was “determined to cast in my lot among the adventurers; I think that I would not meet with quite as much opposition from my friends as I anticipated.” This wording may have been an indication that along with good wishes, his family was going to help him financially. Addison Pollard and Lyman Sheldon from Plymouth arrived at the diggings around Mormon Island, California, on November 8, 1853, and according to a diary kept by Isaac Pollard, Jr., they each got a good supply of money, about $155 each which beats me all to nothing. I tell them they have so much money that they will do very well to go home now, their pile is large as many have that have ben here 4 years. But they think they will stay a while and see if they can make it a little larger before they return. They spent since they left home, including fare ($50) about $125 each. It cost me to get here $250 and I had left when I got to Mormon island about $35.

Not much is known about Isaac, but he was good at giving the overall picture of the mines. When he set to return to Vermont in May 1855, he wrote Addison from San Francisco “to let him know how much we paid for our tickets and when we sail.” Unfortunately, he did not list in his diary the actual cost of the ticket.

Although most women’s diaries and letters are silent on the subject, many women traveling to California relied on family members to fund their expenses. While Chastina was struggling with the decision to make the trip, she investigated the possibility of traveling with Alice Locke, the promised bride to her husband’s brother, Hale Rix. In September 1852 when Chastina began to formalize the trip arrangements, Alice told her she could not go as “her brothers [in California] had not yet sent her the money.” One woman who spoke directly on the subject of paying the expenses, Jessie Anderson from Scotland, borrowed $341 from her brother for the trip. Once in California, she wrote her mother that she had decided not to return the full amount, considering how poorly he treated her on the trip where she took special care of his young daughter who was accompanying them. In fact, she wrote that she ended up paying him only $150.
Historian Brian Roberts has pointed out in his path-breaking book on the gold rush that many of the white men who went to the mines were middle class in origin, status, and values. His sample consists of literate men whose families preserved their letters and diaries. In fact, most of the stories by Vermonters who went to the California gold rush are the tales of men and women able to raise the funds necessary for the trip, usually from family members, whether they be husbands, brothers, fathers, or even step-fathers. Only those who could afford the trip or could borrow the money were able to travel to California during this exciting time. The Walbridge sisters, Chastina and Clara, were no exception.

NOTES

The author thanks the readers of this article whose suggestions are greatly appreciated: Allen F. Davis, William (Bill) M. Ferraro, Gary F. Kurutz, Karen R. Lewis, and Vermont History’s anonymous reader. Editorial practice: Quotes from letters and diaries retain the original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation; words added to the quotes have been placed in brackets and words left out of the quotes are indicated by ellipses.

1 Oscar Lewis, Sea Routes to the Gold Fields: The Migration by Water to California in 1849–1852 (N.Y.: Knopf, 1949), 238. Few Vermont men took the overland route to California, a distance of more than 3,000 miles.

2 From the Peacham area, more than two hundred men left for California by sea from 1850 through 1853, the dates considered the common years for the rush for gold. Lynn A. Bonfield, “Ho for California! Caledonia County Gold Miners,” Vermont History 74 (Winter/Spring 2006): 5–47.

3 Daily Journal of Alfred and Chastina W. Rix,” 30 June 1852, Chastina wrote that Alfred “invites me to come.” Alfred wrote his description of the leaders of Peacham, 14 June and 27 August 1850. The journal is in the Rix Family Papers, California Historical Society; hereafter cited as Rix Journal.


5 www.measuringworth.com. Chastina must have meant New York City when she wrote “NC” on her expenses sheet. In her travel journal she wrote, “we paid for our tickets to N.Y. $7.25.”

6 Brian Roberts, American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 22, gives the average American’s wages as between $200 and $300. Ernest L. Bogart, Peacham, the Story of a Vermont Hill Town (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 282, gives the average farmhand’s wages in 1854 as $13 a month or $156 a year. Most men from Peacham going off to the mines worked as agriculture laborers and did not own property. Lewis, Sea Routes, 11, writes that “$1,000, or even $750, was no inconsequential sum by the standards of the day.”

7 In this article, the author cites fourteen women who made the trip to California including four wives who joined their husbands and one woman who went to join her husband-to-be. All were from families of means, usually husbands in business or, as was the case with Alfred Rix, in law. In her research, the author found only one wife, who when asked did not agree to join her husband in California. Eliza Calder Brown, married to Chester Brown in 1847 and awaiting his return after his departure in 1851, refused to leave her family and comforts in Peacham. Lack of money was not mentioned. Alfred S. Rix, San Francisco, 26 June 1852, to Lyman and Roxana Walbridge Watts, Peacham, Edward A. Rix Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.


11 *The Caledonian* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.), 8 February 1851. The author thanks the staff of the St. Johnsbury Athenæum for preserving this newspaper.
12 Rix Journal, 22 January 1851; this figure may have included expenses other than the steamer ticket, often referred to as “outfitting” the miner. Alfred Rix also helped his older brother, Oscar. Alfred sent Oscar’s note for $125 to Chastina, which she recorded in the Rix Journal, 9 October 1851.
15 Charles Jackson, Montezuma, Calif., to Sarah L. Jackson, Vt., 10 June 1854, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont. The town in Vermont where his family lived is not noted in the letter. The author thanks Sylvia Bugbee and Chris Burns for help in researching this article.
18 Julia S. Twist, Diary, 3 February 1861, California Historical Society. The steamer ticket included meals.
19 Henry V. D. Spiegel, Panama, to John Spiegel, Bennington, Vt., 8 April 1850, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library.
20 Rix Journal, 16 November 1852.
21 Fargo-Rose Family Papers, California Historical Society. This story was in the undated commentary on Martha’s diary written by her granddaughter. There is no mention of the family being part of Wells, Fargo & Company.
24 Twist, Diary, 9 February 1861.
25 The author thanks Robert J. Chandler, senior research historian for Wells Fargo Bank, for information on money exchange and the need for coins in Panama. He wrote in an e-mail, 16 February 2007, that Chastina probably used “worn Spanish/Mexican coins” as that would have been “the prime circulating medium” on the isthmus.
26 Emeline Hubbard Day, Diary, microfilm copy, 31 March 1853, The Bancroft Library. As the first two pages of the diary are missing, her home town is unknown.
27 Chastina Rix, Travel Journal, 1 February 1853.
28 Spiegel, 12 April 1850.
29 Chastina Rix, Travel Journal, 2 February 1853. Clara Walbridge, 27 February 1853.
30 Day, Diary, 31 March 1853.
31 Clara Walbridge, 27 February 1853. These fees were comparable to those reported by other travelers. Lewis, *Sea Routes*, 186.
32 Mark A. Evans, San Francisco, 8 August 1850, to his brother near Philadelphia, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library. The author thanks reference librarian Tom Carey for referring her to this letter.
33 Spiegel, 12 April 1850.
34 [Ida R. Pfeiffer], *A Lady’s Visit to California 1853* (Oakland, Calif.: Biobooks, 1950), 69.
35 Clara Walbridge, 27 February 1853.
37 Luther A. Greene, San Francisco, to his wife, St. Albans, Vt., 7 February 1852, Vermont Historical Society, Barre.
38 Day, Diary, 31 March 1853.
39 Chastina Rix, Travel Journal, 2 February 1853.
40 R. C. Hunter, Gulf of Mexico, to Lorette Hunter, Rutland, Vt., 7 March 1849, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library.
41 Spiegel, 12 April 1850.
42 [Ballou, Mary B.], “I Hear the Hogs in my Kitchen”: A Woman’s View of the Gold Rush (Printed for Frederick W. Beinecke at the Carl Purington Rollins Printing-Office of the Yale University Press, 1961), 7. This quote is from her diary entry 25 December 1852 remembering the previous year’s stay in Panama with her husband.
Harriet Hitchcock Butler, Autobiography, 1891, California Historical Society. This was written at the request of H. H. Bancroft, mainly for her reminiscence of early San Francisco.

Clara Walbridge, 27 February 1853.

Chastina W. Rix, on board the Ohio on the Atlantic, to her mother, Roxana Walbridge Watts, Peacham, Vt., 29 January 1853, Edward A. Rix Collection.

Rix Journal, 22 April 1852.

Louise Foote Ely, Diary, 4 July 1858, California Historical Society.

Rix Journal, 6 December 1853.


Clara Walbridge, 27 February 1853.

Twist, Diary, 15, 19, and 21 February 1861.

Chastina Rix, Travel Journal, 11 February 1853.

Roxana Walbridge Watts, Peacham, Vt., to Sarah Walbridge Way, Hardwick, Vt., 29 May 1853, Walbridge-Gregory Family Papers, California Historical Society.

Rix Journal, 1 December 1851, 9 October 1852, 1 May 1853. None of these small loans made by Chastina were to men trying to get to California. In her recollection of traveling to California, which she wrote in their journal after it arrived in San Francisco, she noted receiving $250 from Alfred before she left Peacham.


M. B. White, Topsham, Vt., to “Friend Chase,” unidentified place, 4 February 1849, Raynors Historical Collectible Auctions, Catalog, 15 June 1906, 169. The author thanks Jeffrey Marshall for pointing out this item.

Typed manuscript, “References to Addison Pollard in the Diaries of Isaac Pollard, Jr.,” Vermont Historical Society.

Rix Journal, 21 September 1852. With no hint of who sponsored her trip, Alice Locke appeared in San Francisco in May 1853. She later married Hale.

Jessie Anderson, Mount Pleasant, Calif., to her mother, Scotland, 2 January 1853, California Historical Society.