

Carroll Yesteryears
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Seeking Adventure Out West
By Richard Cunningham

In the spring of 1849 two young Carroll County men joined a “company” of 35 adventurers that left Baltimore for California aboard the Baltimore-built schooner *Creole*. Their group included men from Hagerstown, Emmitsburg, Frederick, Leesburg, Ellicott’s Mills (today’s Ellicott City) and Baltimore County and City. Each man contributed \$1,000 as his share to fund an expedition to explore business opportunities opening up due to the gold rush. Although many Marylanders went West during that period, Ephraim P. Engel and John Landers were the only members of the *Baltimore and Frederick Mining and Trading Company* from Carroll County. Engel’s parents and siblings are buried outside Uniontown at Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren, and Landers’ family rests in Middleburg. Whatever happened to Ephraim Engel and John Landers?

Searching for travelers who set out more than 170 years ago is no easy task – family memories have faded and much of the documentary evidence no longer exists. Moreover, although most of the Company’s men returned to Maryland to extend their legacies, others died en route or lived out their years in California. Discovering their stories required some dogged sleuthing, a bit of luck, and the cooperation of researchers in many places, including the Historical Society of Carroll County. Here’s how the story unfolded.

Ephraim Engel, 21, and John Landers, 24, departed with the rest of the Company from Fell’s Point on April 23, 1849, sailed south in the ever-warming weather across the Gulf Stream, past Cuba, and four weeks later anchored at Chagres, a squalid village on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama. They boarded the *Orus*, a small steamer, that worked up the Rio Chagres, transferred to native-paddled canoes, and finally switched to mules that carried them over the mountains to the ancient Spanish city of Panama on the Pacific. It was an extraordinary experience for men from Maryland — the tropical forests were covered with lush foliage and flowers, crocodiles prowled the waters and exotic birds and monkeys filled the trees. Those forests also incubated cholera. Within days three of the group died and the glowing euphoria of adventure was replaced by deep resentment at being misled about the dangers of the Isthmus. One of the dead was the Company’s energetic president, George Henry Waesche from Double Pipe Creek (now Detour). He died June 11 and was buried in the city of Panama, but remembered in ceremonies held at his Methodist Episcopal Church in late July of 1849. Waesche’s son, William, returned home immediately after his father’s death, leaving the Company to its fate.

In Panama the situation worsened. The city was filled with hundreds of anxious Americans unable to proceed further because the modern steamships they expected had not yet arrived. Fortunately, the Company was able to rent rooms in the old city, and after two weeks the group chartered the English brig *Corbiere* and spent 83 days “bouncing around on the Pacific” until they sailed into the Bay of San Francisco on September 9th. They immediately set up tents near Portsmouth Square in the center of San Francisco, only two blocks from the undeveloped waterfront that would shortly become one of the world’s busiest ports. The journey had taken over 20 weeks and covered more than 6,000 miles.

Within days of their arrival in San Francisco, Company members were assigned to explore business opportunities. Six men left for the mining district; others went to Sacramento City to establish a freight enterprise; some purchased a small brig to operate on the rivers; and three men scouted nearby timbered areas as a site for their major asset – a 15-blade steam sawmill that could supply burgeoning San Francisco with fresh-cut lumber.

By mid-November most of the Company had settled north of San Francisco in Marin County where they erected the pre-fabricated buildings and sawmill machinery they had shipped around Cape Horn aboard the Baltimore vessel *Andalusia*. For the next 20 years that sawmill operated under various owners, and the timbered valley they pioneered is known today as Baltimore Canyon. Ten men decided to remain in Marin County and became some of its first merchants and elected officials. Their stories can still be extracted from county files and local histories, but other Company members gradually dispersed, some returning to wives and children in Maryland as early as 1850, and others going home when their fortunes changed. A few, including Engel and Landers, moved around the mountains of California for the remainder of their lives.

For 60 years after landing in San Francisco, Ephraim P. Engel worked as a miner in four counties that spanned the gold region. Old records describe a hardy man about 5 feet 10 inches tall with bright blue eyes. He died a resident of Sonora, Tuolumne County at about age 82 and lies in an unmarked pauper's grave in the town's old cemetery. It was a long life for someone who "roughed it" over so many years.

When Ephraim's father John Engel died in 1870, his account book revealed \$1,000 given to his son in 1849 to pay his share in the Baltimore and Frederick Mining and Trading Company venture. Ephraim was due another \$2,828.23 from the estate, but whether that money ever reached him remains a mystery.

John Landers, the eldest son of Robert and Susan Landers of Middleburg, presented a more difficult search. Scattered records reveal that he worked in the 1870s as a miller near what later became Sequoia National Park. In 1854 his younger brother William Wallace Landers also came west, working in the same area and gradually amassing land and cattle worth a sizeable fortune. Other brothers — George Bruce, Robert, and Upton — lived there periodically as well. John died unmarried in 1903 at age 78, thousands of miles from Middleburg and years removed from his optimistic departure for the Gold Rush. He is buried with William and Robert in a tiny cemetery on a beautiful and remote mountain road that links the Mojave Desert and California's great Central Valley.

Guest columnist Richard Cunningham lives in Marin County, California, where the Baltimore and Frederick Mining and Trading Company set up its sawmill about 170 years ago. His research didn't end with an earlier article written for the *Carroll County Times*. It eventually involved tracing Ephraim Engel's path to "the colorful little Sierra town of Sonora where [he] is buried." It also included a trip to Panama where Richard and his wife hired a guide to walk part of the

mule trail used by the adventurers in 1849. “We wandered on portions of the ancient *Camino de Cruces* and spent another day within the old walled city of Panama, following the Company's footsteps, and of course searching within its ancient cemetery.”

Research sometimes becomes a driving force in a person’s life. In recent correspondence with Historical Society volunteer Mimi Ashcraft, Richard revealed new information and wrote, “What other esoteric research topic would provide such a rationale for adventure?”



Image 1: Credit Library of Congress – Caption: Portsmouth Square in downtown San Francisco as it appeared in 1851 shortly after the Baltimore and Frederick Mining and Trading Company adventurers camped there upon arrival in 1849.



Image 2: Credit Library of Congress – Caption: This Currier and Ives print captures a typical scene of Gold Rush miners like Ephraim Engel working in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada mountains.