

California Pioneers of Santa Clara County

Essay Contest

Adult Entry

The McKee Family Letters

Russell H. Robinson
10825 W. Estates Dr.
Cupertino, CA 95014
408-253-2529
russ1011@ix.netcom.com

Table of Contents and Illustrations

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	5
Photo Joseph O. McKee	7
McKee-Lundy House	8
A painting of a Typical Braque	9
Photo Sarah and Captain Henry McKee	11
Photo Josiah Belden –First Mayor of San Jose	12
Letter—24 June 1850	13
Letter – 11 July 1850	13
Letter --September 1850	13
Letter—Sunday 27 October 1850	14
Letter—January 1851	15
Letter—4 March 1851	16
Letter—13 March 1851	16
Letter--23 March 20, 1851	17
Letter--7 April 1851	17
Letter--7 April 1851	18

Table of Contents (continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Letter--8 June 1851	19
Letter--11 June 1851	19
Letter--31 June 1851	19
Letter--5 August –7 September 1851	20
Letter--7 November 1851	21
Letter--20 January 1852	22
Letter--Sunday 22 February 1852	23
Letter--11 February 1852	23
Letter--5 May 1852	24
Letter—27 May 1852	24
Letter—30 May 1852	25
Letter—15 June 1852	25
Painting of Clipper Ships – The Greyhounds of the Sea	26
Letter—17 June 1852	26
Letter—9 July 1852	27
Letter—11 July 1852	27
Letter—August 1852	27
Letter—1 February 1853	24
Photo--Gravestones The McKee Family –Oakhill Cemeterary	28

McKee Essay References and Illustrations

1. Joseph Olcott McKee Photo—South Bay Yacht Club-Alviso, CA –(Page 3)
2. McKee-Lundy Home Photos- Gayle Frank and Maria Lorentto --(Page 4)
3. Painting of Typical Barque – (Page 5) www.sailingships.okett.net/barque
4. Sarah and Captain Henry McKee (prior to 1849) Family files (Page 7)
5. Josiah Belden Photo---(Page 8) http://wikipedia.org/wiki/file:josiah_belden.jpg
6. Clipper Ship – Greyhounds of the Sea – (Page 22) [www.anmm.gov.au/data/clipper ships](http://www.anmm.gov.au/data/clipper_ships)
7. Two Years Before the Mast, and Twenty-Four Years After, R. H. Dana, Jr. –
(Page 9) Harvard Classics, Page 93-94
8. Grave Markers--Photo – McKee Family Plot Oakhill Cemetery, San Jose (Page 25)

The McKee Family letters
The Joseph Olcott McKee and Family Story
—a look back in the past—
By Russell H. Robinson
Staff Commodore and Historian—
South Bay Yacht Club-2012

Introduction

Joseph Olcott McKee was a prominent member of this community and was the first Commodore of the South Bay Yacht Club in Alviso, CA, when it was incorporated in 1896. The club was founded, however, in 1888 and he was active in the starting of the club. Hanging in the South Bay Yacht Club's historic clubhouse which was built in 1903 in Alviso is a photo taken of him when he was probably in his late 60's at the wheel of his sailing vessel, Comrado. The photo is very much that of a sea captain with a long white beard and captain's clothing. From other documentation we learn that he was only 5 feet 6 ½ inches tall, but from the photo he appears to be a very tall man. As the historian for the South Bay Yacht Club, I often wondered what his early life was like, where did he come from, what instilled his love of sailing, and who were his family?

This story will attempt to give the readers a glimpse into his life through some letters written back home to his mother by his father, Henry, others, and by himself.

When Captain Henry McKee who was Joseph Olcott McKee's father arrived in San Francisco, he started writing letters to his wife, Sarah, describing what the area was like and what he had been doing. The family retained these letters, and it

is from them that a great deal of information can be obtained reflecting on what the area was like in the 1850's.

In 1991 descendants of the family, Donise and Scott Ferrel, painstakingly transcribed from photo copies the hand written letters into a typed form. They took care not to change any aspects, but rather to transcribe the material as it was written. They presented this material in a loose leaf book of 159 pages to Kenneth McKee Coykendall who was a grandson of Joseph Olcott McKee on his 93rd birthday. In searching the South Bay Yacht Club archives a copy of these documents was found. It is this writer's intent to also not change the content of the letters, but to condense the information found in some of these (over 100) letters and information so that the reader might get a flavor of what life in this area was like in the mid 1800's.

Joseph also wrote a few letters to his relatives back east along with those sent by his father. It is apparent from the content of the letters that Sarah did write to Henry but none of these have been found except one. In this letter, Henry copied the information from one of Sarah's letters and sent it to Joseph.

In these letters the cost of items are mentioned. Various references give the value of a dollar in 1850 compared to what it might be worth today. A dollar in 1850 was worth approximately \$25 in today's dollars. So to understand what items cost in California in 1850 the reader should multiply the cost stated by 25.

San Francisco was growing rapidly. Historical data shows that the population in 1848 was approximately 1000. A year later in 1849 the population had grown to about 25000 after the word got out in 1848 that gold had been discovered at Coloma, California. It was into this rapidly growing population that Captain Henry McKee and his son Joseph Olcott McKee came.



Joseph Olcott McKee was a successful ships captain, architect, builder, farmer and orchardist. He had a farm near what is today McKee Road and a portion of his farm later became the site of San Jose High School. The home he built there was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and Joseph died in 1907 so he did not build another home on that site. However, one of the homes he did design and build was for his daughter, Isabella McKee Lundy. It still stands at 592 North 17th

Street between Jackson and Empire Streets. The mantel from the destroyed home was preserved in the McKee-Lundy home.



McKee-Lundy home -- Courtesy of Gayle Frank and Maria Lorentto

Joseph Olcott McKee was born on 7 May 1831 in Cromwell, CT, to Henry and Sarah (Sage) McKee. Joseph's ancestors immigrated to this country from Scotland around 1765. Henry, as well as his brother William were ship captains and sailed from the East Coast ports to the West Indies and beyond. Henry had another brother in California also named Joseph who was a merchant and not a sea captain like his brothers. By age 17 Joseph Olcott McKee, Henry and Sarah's son, was an able bodied seaman also sailing on various ships. At age 19, in 1850,

he came to San Francisco around South America's Cape Horn with his uncle Captain William McKee on his uncle's sailing vessel. The voyage in those days took about 6 months. Joseph's father, Henry, came to San Francisco soon after William. Many historical references say that Joseph came with his father on the ship Isabella, but these letters may prove otherwise. This fact is documented in a letter from his Uncle William to his brother, Captain Henry McKee, dated 31 May 1850. Which was written at sea and waiting for Henry upon his reaching the port of San Francisco. He says that Joseph is fine except that he has been seasick when the seas were rough.

His Father Henry, as Captain of the Barque, Isabella (in which he was part owner), arrived in San Francisco on 17 June 1850. The wooden three-masted Barque was the most common type of deep-water cargo-carrier in the middle of the 19th century.



A painting of a typical Barque is shown here.

An article in the Daily Alta California, dated 21 June 1850, tells of its arrival, and that Captain Henry McKee was master. The sailing vessel had put into port at Valparaiso, Chili, on its way from New York to take on goods for sale in San Francisco. A bill of lading was also published in the Daily Alta Californian a couple of days later listing the contents of the ship. It contains items such as flour, barley, chocolate, raisins, walnuts, figs, sweetmeats (candied fruits) potatoes, and a few cases of fine preserved meats. Included are woodcock, capon, moor fowls

(turkeys, pheasants, etc.), pigs, pettitoes (pigs feet), hares, partridges, and sardines. I think it very interesting that today, when our seasons in California are opposite to those of Chili, we still obtain much of the same products from there. In these times, however, most are fresh and not preserved. The vast difference is the shipping time; today, hours by air or a few days aboard a fast ship, where in the time of the Isabella, it took around two months to make the trip.

While a sailing ship carrying cargo took about six months to come from the East Coast to San Francisco around the tip of South America, letters could make the trip in about 6 weeks by a quicker route. Steam ships on both sides of the Isthmus of Central America (near where the Panama Canal is today) would bring goods and passengers to and from locations on either side of the land mass. Transit across the Isthmus was arduous and expensive, but the time of transit was greatly reduced. The letters mostly came by this route.



Sarah and Henry McKee—(prior to 1849)

24 June 1850 (This is Henry's first letter to Sarah)

In a letter from Henry to his wife Sarah, Henry talks about Joseph receiving a letter from his grandfather, Russell. He also tells her that Joseph was working on shore for a company unpacking and preparing furniture for sale. He describes Joseph's "house" which is 6 feet by 8 feet, wooden sides up to 4 feet, and an old sail for a roof. It has a small stove for cooking, and a bunk for sleeping, plus his trunk for furniture.

Henry tells Sarah of visiting Josiah Belden who is Henry's cousin, and who at the time is the Lord Mayor of the City of San Jose. In an early letter William

refers to the City as El Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe as the name of the city to mail letters to.

It is during this time that California became a state and the name of the city changed to The City of San Jose. Josiah Belden came to California with the Bartleson–Bidwell party in 1841, and was elected Mayor of San Jose on April 6, 1850. He served one term. He also served in the legislature of the new State of California. Henry tells that Josiah is a very successful businessman and the owner of much property that Josiah is renting. He goes on to say that Josiah is a well-respected member of the community.



Josiah Belden – First Mayor of San Jose

Henry continued to sell what goods he had left on board the Isabella until about July of 1850. He then assigned the goods to a merchant on shore, and he made ready to sail south to Valparaiso, leaving San Francisco on 13 July 1850.

11 July 1850

Prior to leaving, Henry writes to Sarah that he is making ready to leave San Francisco for Valparaiso. He tells her of receiving her letter, sent 27 May, and that it arrived on 6 July. He says that he sometimes gets so homesick and downhearted that he can hardly stand it. He says, however, that he feels he must stay here (California) and try to earn something before coming home.

----Henry has Joseph finish the letter---

Joseph writes to his mother and tells her he is doing fine in his little house, and that he has met others from home. One of who is Jim Smith who has gone off to the mines. Joseph comments that "Jim Smith will probably get sick of it and return soon, as not more than

one in ten make enough to pay their way at mining."

Henry's voyage to Valparaiso took 69 days and he arrived in port on 19 September 1850. At the time, another ship, the Condor, was in port and was collecting cargo to return to San Francisco. This made some of the goods scarce. Henry was obliged to stay longer than he wanted, in order to collect enough cargo so he could also sail back to San Francisco. Having finally collected a shipload, he sails north on 16 October and arrives back in San Francisco on 13 December. He was 55 days at sea this time.

September 1850 (Written in Valparaiso)

While in port at Valparaiso, Henry writes a letter to his young children still at home with Sarah, and one also to Sarah. He tells them of what he does at sea to navigate using a sextant and also how long it takes to get from one location to another. As an example, he tells them that it takes about 75 days to go from New York to Cape Horn which is at the far southern tip of South America. He tells them about Valparaiso, which at the time, is a city of about 50,000 people. He also

reflects on San Francisco and the life there and its religion and morals. In his words about these, he says “some but none too much” and that respectable women are scarce.

Sunday 27 October 1850 – South Pacific Lat. 11.09 Long. 92.20

Henry is at sea, returning to San Francisco, and writing to Sarah that he is still very homesick and says he has been away almost a year. He says he still has hopes of prospering so that he can be able to return to the bosom of his dear family. In this letter, he copies some of his ship’s log (from 18 Oct. to 13 Dec.) telling what their location was, the kind of weather, wind, etc. In the log for 16 October, he says the ship is leaking badly, but will have to wait for calmer weather to do repairs. In the log for 13 December, they had sailed into San Francisco Bay, but the winds were blowing very heavy and their anchor started to drag. He says, “Away we went over toward the opposite shore.” He said he expected to go on the rocks and lose the ship. Fortunately, the anchor caught on some rocks and the ship was stopped. At about the same time the wind changed and they tried to put up sails and move away from danger. The anchor would not come up, and they lost both anchor and chain. Fortunately, they were able to anchor later with another anchor in a safe place.

Many old anchors were lost either because of being snagged on the bottom or due to unexpected storms. Richard Dana Jr. in “Two Years Before the Mast” tells of how this happened. Many anchors had to be set free to save the ship. This was called slipping the cable. When possible the ship would return to retrieve the anchor if the anchor marker was still in place on the surface. Otherwise the anchor was lost.

Soon after arriving back in San Francisco, he writes to Joseph telling him that his Uncle Joseph’s store in San Francisco had burned down. At the time,

Joseph's brother, William, was also in port so they all gathered on Henry's vessel. Fire was very common in the early days of San Francisco, but fortunately, this fire was contained within the store area. Henry says he has taken his brother on board with a few things he has been able to salvage from the burned store.

January 1851

A letter from Henry to his wife's sisters, Sophronia and Harriet, gives an account of taking a small boat on New Year's Eve with his brother, Joseph, down to San Jose to visit Henry's son, Joseph. This writer, as a sailor on San Francisco Bay, can attest to the changeable weather. In wintertime, the winds are very light or non-existent until a storm approaches. On this voyage, they had to row for about 30 miles until a light breeze came up. Hoisting sail, they sailed toward the entrance slough to Alviso. Before arriving, a dense fog fell over them, and they had to drop an anchor as they could not see the entrance to the slough. Going further in the fog might have them running aground. They spent a very cold night huddled up in the boat waiting for the weather to clear. The fog lifted in the morning, and they located the entrance. At the time, it probably was the entrance to the Guadalupe Slough and not the present entrance of the Alviso Slough. The connection between the Alviso Slough and the Guadalupe River was cut through later to shorten the transit time. The Guadalupe Slough still exists but no longer connects to the Guadalupe River.

They made their way up the meandering waterway to Alviso, unloaded their boat, and took a wagon ride to Santa Clara which was about 6 miles away. They visited with Joseph, and in the evening paid a visit to Mayor Josiah Belden. The next morning, when they arrived in Alviso about 10 a.m., they found the tide was out and their boat was sitting in the mud. Henry stayed with the boat while the two Josephs, Uncle and Nephew, went to hunt ducks and geese. Henry reports in the

letter that there were tens of thousands of the birds. The guns they were using were not shotguns where the shot is dispersed in a large pattern but used cap and ball shot. The ducks or geese had to be hit squarely to bring them down. About noon, the tide had returned and the boat was re-floated. The trip back took them until the next morning about 7 a.m. They found themselves next to Captain William McKee's vessel and went aboard, a cold and hungry pair they were. As the reader can see, it was difficult to move about the area, but going by water was still one of the more acceptable methods. Steamships were making the trip between Alviso and San Francisco, and up to Sacramento and Stockton, but they were very expensive. A stagecoach also made the trip almost everyday, but was expensive.

4 March 1851

Henry writes to Sarah that Joseph has started to farm in San Jose. He has partnered with Ralph Stocking. They have built a small house, which is 13 feet by 10 feet, one story with two rooms. One is the kitchen and the other is the parlor and bedroom.

13 March 1851-- from the McKee-Stocking Rancho

Henry writes to Sarah that he is spending 3-4 days with the boys. He says that he took with him a sow and five pigs he had on board. He says he was offered \$175 for them on the way to San Jose. He tells her that the price for pigs are very high at present. He goes on to tell her about the cost of other items, as examples, he cites that hens are \$4, and eggs are \$2 per doz. and butter is \$1 per ½ pound and milk costs 37 ½ cents per quart. Henry also tells Sarah that Josiah's wife has presented Josiah with a son about 6 days ago.

23 March 1851

Henry tells Sarah of his plans to go again to San Jose to visit Joseph, and that he has sent some gold specimens to her. He asks for some small token from the children like locks of hair. He is very lonely and misses his home and family, and this is coming out in his letters. He says that he has little to do so he goes ashore and loafs around. At the time, the primary mode of transportation between San Francisco and Sacramento were steamboats, and as he described them, propeller boats. By this time there was a number of these craft making the voyage to and from Sacramento so there was a real competition. He tells of five being in port at one time and hawkers on the shore trying to lure passengers aboard. He tells about one of the propeller boats named the WestPoint and the one way cost was now only about \$5 for a cabin and meals or as low as \$1 for a space on the deck where none of that was available.

In this letter he says that they have had considerable rain which is good for the farmers. He tells Sarah that Joseph is developing his farm and is digging a well and installing a windmill. This will pump the water but it probably would not have to work very hard as the water table in the Santa Clara Valley was fairly high. Areas in the valley had artesian wells and some said that digging a posthole might produce a well. Even today, in a wet season, some of these old artesian wells show water at the surface.

7 April 1851

Henry writes to his young son, John Culbert McKee, who is still at home with his mother. He praises the young man for a recently received letter saying it was written and composed well. He goes on in the letter to tell his son about his ship and about the others in San Francisco. Old photos show a sea of masts of the vessels lying at anchor. Many were abandoned as the crews jumped ship and

headed for the gold fields. Henry tells of one such ship that has had her masts removed and has a house built on the deck. The vessel is being used as a store, boarding house and washing facility. This temporary establishment is aground in the mud. Henry says in the letter that a strong gale came up and the whole structure was blown over on her side and away went everything. Goods, clothes, cooking tools and men and women went helter skelter in a heap. Most of the goods were destroyed, and small boats had to be used to reach her to cut a hole in her side so what was left inside could be saved.

Henry says that many old ships are fixed in that way. One method he says to get the hulls closer to shore is to attach empty casks under them at low water and then when the tide comes in the hull will float higher. By this means they can be brought closer to shore. Many have temporary walkways built out to them. It is obvious today, when excavations are made in the low-lying areas in San Francisco, that they are digging up some of those old vessels.

7 April 1851

Henry writes that spring is starting to arrive, and the short rainy season has ended, and there is now lovely weather. He says the fine weather is inspiring and has a buoying effect on the people. They are out walking, riding and enjoying the delightful spring sunshine. In this letter he mentions the fine views afforded from various portions of San Francisco and vicinity. In Henry's words, "a stroll to the top of Telegraph Hill exhibits a scene of grandeur unsurpassed in California along with the harbor and its mast forest and the rugged golden gateway that bars the surges of the Pacific."

8 June 1851

Henry writes to his son, Joseph, that he has a prospect to carry the books and records from San Jose to the new seat of government in Vallejo. Apparently, he did get the job for which he was paid \$200. The State capitol was first established in San Jose. When General Vallejo offered to build a new capitol building in Vallejo, the decision was made to move the capitol there. The move was made, but in a short time, the seat of government was moved again to Benicia.

11 June 1851

Henry asks his son, Joseph, about an offer that was made to Joseph to become master of a vessel of about 40 tons which would move hay and other goods to the San Francisco market. He advises Joseph to take the steamer from Alviso to San Francisco and stand by the pilot so that he could learn the course, and where the shoal water was. He also advises him to mark in his mind where the onshore landmarks were so he could get a better understanding of how to navigate the South Bay. Few know that the southern part of the Bay is very shallow and the mud flats on a very low tide are exposed. There is a channel but it is poorly marked, even today, so care must be taken to safely navigate around the mud flats. Joseph did become the master and made many trips to San Francisco and back. It is about this time that Joseph starts spending some time at the farm and part as master of one ship or another. His partner Ralph Stocking does the same.

31 June 1851

Henry writes that Edwin Stocking (a relative apparently to Joseph's partner) will start for home tomorrow and Henry is sending some gifts with him. He says he is sending Sarah a piece of gold that he wants her to have made into a ring. He is also sending a bracelet for Abby and a music box for Katy. Joseph also sent

items for his mother. Joseph had apprenticed as a cabinetmaker at home, and was skilled wood worker. He had a lot of idle time on the six-month voyage to California to make some of these items.

Henry tells Sarah that there had been another big fire in San Francisco that had burned 11 squares (blocks). Fire was a constant threat as the buildings were poorly constructed with a lot of combustible materials and fire-fighting apparatus was rather limited.

Joseph tells his mother that he has taken a job running a sloop of about 40 tons transporting goods between San Jose/Alviso and San Francisco. (For the reader, when tonnage is stated it relates to the carrying capacity of the vessel). He is taking the job for the summer and has just completed his first trip. He says he has left Ralph Stocking behind in charge of the farm. He also tells her that things are coming along nicely on the farm.

5 August to 14 September, 1851

In a letter which covered events from 5 August to 14 September brings Sarah up to date on what has happened over this past month. He tells her of buying a sloop called Kitturah, which is 33 tons burden for \$3,000. He has a partner in this venture, a young man by the name of Henry I. Rippey, and they intend to haul cargo to Stockton and Sacramento. Their first cargo is 33 tons of coal and 45-½ doz. of wooden fence rails. While away, his brothers, William and Joseph, had bought a scow from Macondray & Company. The scow is to be owned by all three and Joseph has asked his father to stop and help him rig the vessel. For the reader, a scow is a shallow draft vessel that can carry a large load on board. An example of such a craft, The Alma, still exists at the Hyde Street Maritime Museum in San Francisco.

Henry writes to his family in a later letter that the Kitturan has been lost due to a fire. The fire started near the stove and burned the vessel as well as a cargo of hay. He says he had a good many things on board and all were lost. He says that even though it seems he is born to bad luck, he is not discouraged, and he is in hopes of “coming out right side up yet.”

7 Novovember1851

Henry tells of his having a new cabin built on the sloop and that he has to make do. He tells of moving into a hold on his boat way forward, and making his bed at the bottom of the hold. He says it is very uncomfortable. He notes that “the fleas are biting in fine style and the rats are squealing for we have got plenty of them on board”.

It is in this letter that Henry tells of being very homesick. He tells Sarah, however, his best prospects of getting a living are in California compared to coming home and going to sea. He asks what are her thoughts of joining him in California. He wishes that she could sell all of the property he has at home except the house she lives in and for her to join him in California.

He starts trying to convince her to come, but he is also telling her what to expect. He tells her that she would grumble about high prices, but that she would probably get used to it like everybody else does. As an example, he tells of stopping at a fruit stand and inquired “about the price of pears, 25 cents a piece says the man.” “I can’t eat any pears says I at that price. What do you ask for grapes? 37 ½ cents per pound, whew, what do you ask for watermelons? A dollar a piece for good ones, such as they would charge about 6 cents at home.” “Well I can’t eat any fruit tonight says I so I will go without it.”

In this letter, he tells Sarah that his business is doing very well. He says in 35 days his freight business has brought in \$1700 so his part is \$850. He says it

costs about \$300 per month to sail the vessel and he is clearing \$700 per month. Again, remember that \$1 in 1850 is worth \$25 today.

Henry writes that Joseph is also doing well with his boat. He says that he has all the business he can do, but his vessel is not as profitable as his. But still Joseph is making a good living.

20 January 1852

Joseph writes to his mother and tells her about his farm. He says he has started a new way of farming and has a new improved style of ploughing. He has rigged the plough so that it does not take a man to hold it, and only requires a man to drive the team. This saves not having to pay the wages of the extra man of \$50 per month. With this method he says he can break two acres of ground in a day, and do the best job in the county.

He writes that he is very pleased with the daguerreotypes that she has sent father. He writes he was up river with a load of cargo and got back to San Francisco where a man told him that father had received them, and that his father was away with his vessel. He said he stayed there for a few days and would not think of leaving until his father got in. He says at last, the happy day arrived and he got great pleasure to once more be able to behold my dear mother, brother and sisters. He says he looks forward to the hope some day in the not far distant future of again seeing them in reality. He says that his father is so proud of them (the Daguerreotypes of the family) that he shows them to everyone he knows.

In a striking account of the times, he writes that he went into town (San Jose), and saw a Spaniard hung(sic) for horse stealing. This had made the seventh man that had been hung(sic) in this town. He goes on to say that hanging is so common here that it is thought of no more than stringing up a bullock. He tells of the gallows being erected in the center of the square and that it has stood there for a

year, and stands there still in waiting for more victims. He says the Spaniards think it rather tough for Americans to come here and string up their countrymen for horse stealing. He says they really consider it an honor for a man to steal and not to get caught at it, for it displays so much cunning, a trait by them highly esteemed.

He further writes that their way to deal with this is that if the man is caught, have him return the horse or one of equal value. He reflects that there is quite a contrast between the two modes of operation.

Sunday, 22 February 1852

Joseph writes in this letter to his mother, and he tells her that since he wrote her about the hanging that one of his horses had also been stolen. He tells his mother that he has just received a letter from his father, and enclosed was one of her letters. He says that she spoke of coming to California. He says his father has spoken about it for a long time. The more he has talked about it, the more I like the idea.

He goes on to say his greatest objection was the difficulty in getting to California. He says the route across the Isthmus is too tedious and uncertain, that she should not come that way or any other, unless Russell or someone she could trust came with her. He says that Josiah (Belden) is talking of going home soon so when he returns back to California, perhaps, she could come with him. In this letter he tells his mother that his sister, Sarah, would do well here teaching school, but to learn Spanish as it would be worth \$1000 to her. He also says that his father has bought a lot in town (San Jose) and is considering building a house on it.

14 February 1852

In this letter Henry says he has received Sarah's letter dated 26 December so it has taken a little over 6 weeks to reach him. In this letter he and Sarah are

actively discussing her coming to California. He advises her to sell the house and land.

She has asked what the children can do to help their father. He says the oldest girls can make \$30 to \$40 each sewing, and that Sarah could get a chance as a teacher and do much better than the sewing. He says that John could go with him on the ships and he could take the place of the cook that Henry was already paying \$50 a month. He tells Sarah, however, she had to learn him to cook. So he continues that they all should be able to make at least \$150 a month.

As to the younger children he says they can raise poultry and sell eggs. He says eggs are now 2 to 2 ½ dollars a dozen and that fowls are worth \$2 to \$3 each. He advises her to bring her chickens, as it will not cost too much. He says he doesn't want her coming here to kill herself with hard work. But, he says that she and the children could earn more here in a month than they could there in six, and not work half as hard either.

5 May 1852

In a letter to Joseph, Henry agrees with him that it is probably better to buy a house than to build and much cheaper.

27 May 1852

In a letter to Captain Henry McKee, Josiah Belden tells Henry that he has appointed him as his Executor and to work with his wife and Mr. Otis Bowers to take charge of his estate. Josiah states in this letter that he has appointed various agents to handle his business in certain areas. As examples, Mr. Isaac Branham to act in Santa Clara County, and William J. Eames as his agent in San Francisco. Josiah advises Henry should he need legal advice, he suggests ex Governor Burnett who he says is a good lawyer and a pretty honest one.

30 May 1852

Henry writes to Sarah that a shirt that she has made for him and sent out does not fit. He tells her it is too tight around the neck and too tight across the bosom. This writer thinks that Henry may have gained a bit of weight or more likely muscle as he has talked of doing a lot of heavy work. Certainly more than a ship's captain would do at sea.

Henry says that Josiah Belden is there with his wife and youngest child and they will leave tomorrow for his name place. (Same as Henry and Sarah in Connecticut). He tells Sarah that he has asked Josiah to try and (hurry you off) to sell and come to California. Josiah has offered to loan the money for her passage should the property not sell right away. He tells her it will be fall soon and he is getting tired waiting for her. He asks her to talk to Josiah and let him (Henry) know when she can be ready to start. Henry and Sarah's daughter (also named Sarah) has told her sister, Abby, that she is not coming without Elbert (her beau). Henry asks what is the real situation.

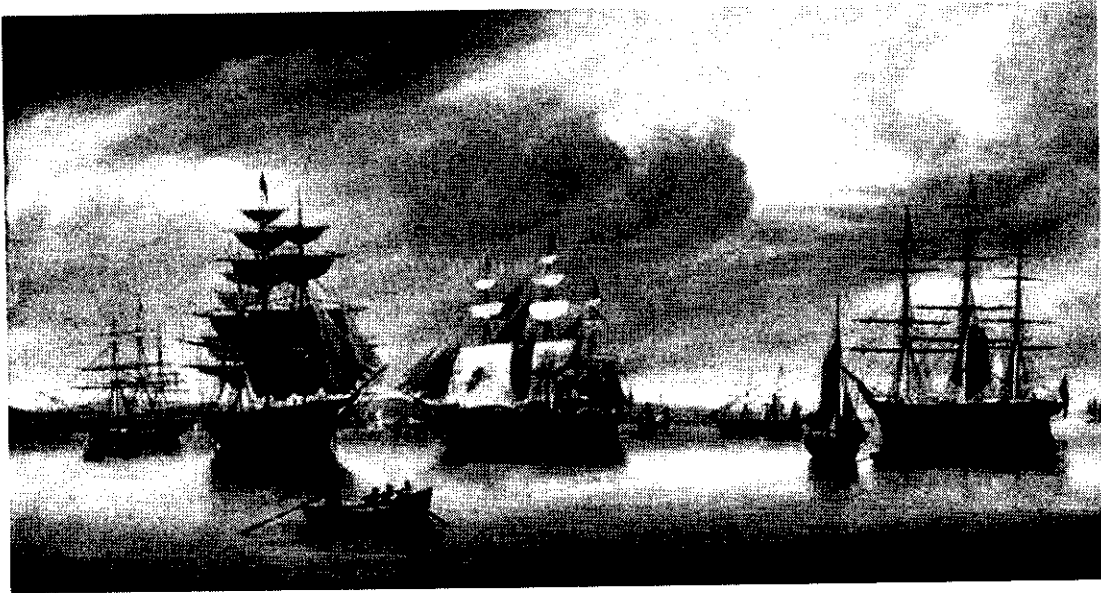
15 June 1852

Henry writes to ask her to tell Josiah that he has bought his partner, Brayton's, half of the sloop for \$1700. He has paid \$500 down and will pay \$500 a month until the balance is paid. He asks if Josiah, through his agents, could arrange for him to pay for the passage when she gets here. He also asks her to bring along some of her best furniture, as it will save buying it here.

It is apparent by his suggestions to bring the furniture and livestock that he intends to have her come by clipper ship around the Horn. Clipper ships were called the greyhounds of the sea because they were so much faster than a typical Barque such as Capt. McKee's, Isabella. Clipper ships were typically making the

passage from New York to San Francisco in about 105 days, just over 3 months. Other vessels were taking about 200 days or over 6 months.

The Clipper Ship, Flying Cloud, made a record passage in 1851. This vessel was 225 feet long on deck and made the voyage in 89 days and 8 hours. This record stood until 1989 when a different kind of boat, a catamaran, a twin hull, beat the record. The record still stands, however, for a monohull (single hull) vessel.



Painting of Clipper Ships --The Greyhounds of the Sea

17 June 1852

In the only letter that still exists from “the other direction,” Sarah writes to her son, Joseph. The bulk of the letter was copied by Henry and sent on to Joseph, as he wanted to keep the original.

Sarah tells Joseph of happenings at home. She says that he may get off of the idea of them coming out to California if it is a dull time with him. She does say that she hopes he has a prosperous summer so he can send for them. It is obvious that she has made up her mind to come to California and is making plans to do so.

9 July 1852

In a letter from Henry to his son, Joseph, he tells of his vessel being dismasted when a shroud (rigging that holds the mast up) parted in an eye aloft and down came the mast and everything attached to it. All went overboard. Using his skills and experience, he and his crew, rigged a jury mast out of the square sail boom and lashed that to the gaff mast aft. With this "jury rig," he was able to slowly bring the boat into port. Sailors even today, when they are far off shore, do similar emergency fixes to bring their boats in.

11 July 1852

Henry writes Sarah that he wants their daughter, Sarah, and her intended Elbert, to come to California and not stay behind. Much of the letter is to how their passage would be paid and that he would pay for Sarah's. He also tells how he would try to get Elbert set up for farming. Since it appears that Sarah and Elbert are engaged, he feels hurt that Elbert did not seek his consent. Henry is upset and forbids any further proceeding until they write to him. A search of the family's history shows that Sarah Marie did marry Elbert J. Wilcox before coming to California. Henry tells Sarah that his brother, Joseph, has also decided to bring his family to California, and perhaps they can all come together. Henry answers one of Sarah's previous questions and he tells her that he has decided to live in San Jose.

9 August 1852

This letter from Henry is to Joseph, his son, telling him that he has purchased bags for their wheat crop. This is the last letter from Henry as he died

31 October 1852. As can be seen, he was a prolific letter writer and if he were able, a letter to someone would have been in the collection. A shipping bill, dated 21 August 1852, shows that Henry's vessel was in port at Alviso.

1 February 1853

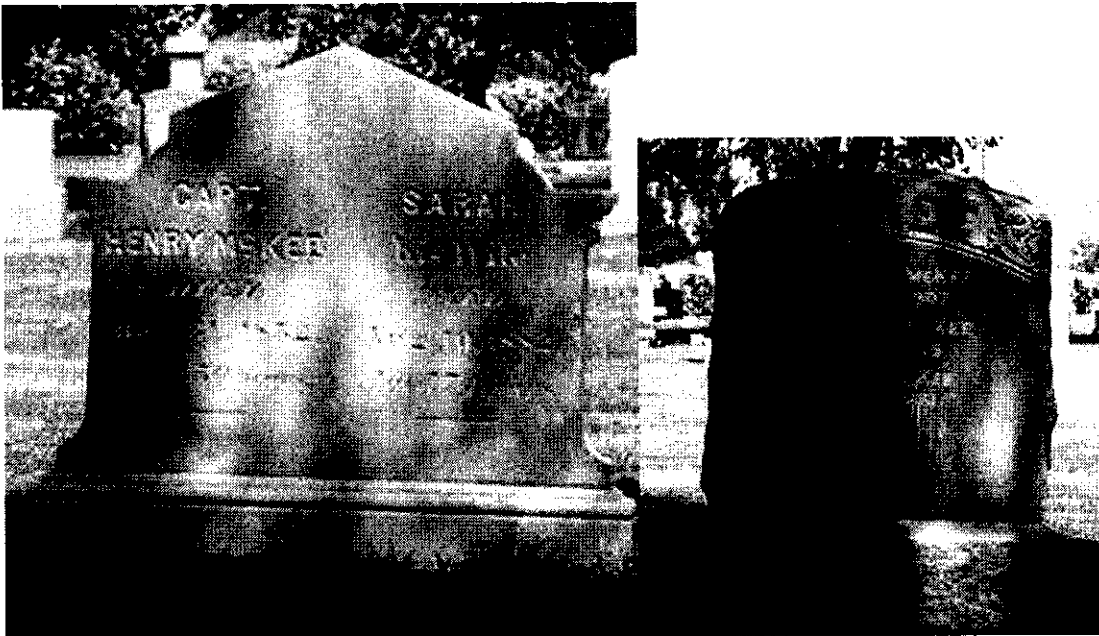
Sarah's sisters, Sophronia and Harriet, write to Joseph saying that they were saddened to learn of his father's death. They state that Henry's family is probably still at sea. When this letter is written, they tell Joseph that Sarah was concerned that Henry might be ill and die before they arrived in California. But, the day before they left, she had received a letter from him saying he was well. That letter was not found in the collection. The family sailed from New York, 15 October 1852, on the Clipper Ship, Flying Dutchman which was 190 feet long and capable of making 17 knots. The ship reached San Francisco, on 27 January 1853—a period of 104 days. Sarah sent a letter to her sisters dated November 19th saying that they should reach Rio de Janeiro the next day. The letter was probably sent from there. She obviously had not heard of Henry's death, which had already occurred. Various reports say he died in a "sailing accident" and others say he became ill and died. Perhaps some evidence can be found to clarify this event.

When his family arrived in January of 1853, Joseph meets them and tells them of Henry's passing away. He then starts efforts to hold the family together. Prior to his passing away, Henry had arranged to situate them in the Sutter House in San Jose. This was located near 21st Street and Jackson. It is reported that Joseph sold the shipping business in order to concentrate on his farm and his added responsibilities of his expanded family.

As reported earlier, he became very successful as a farmer and orchardist. His training as a cabinetmaker led toward his becoming also an architect and builder. He lived until he was 74 years old; he died of a heart attack. His obituary

reported that he was getting ready to go to Alviso so he could sail his ship, the Comrado. He is buried at Oak Hill Cemetery with his wife, Rachael (Clevenger) McKee, who he married 24 May 1855. She died 22 December 1915.

Captain Henry McKee, who was born 29 August 1802, and died 31 October 1852, and his wife, Sarah (Sage) McKee, who was born 29 August 1808. She remarried Mr. Mark Leavenworth in 1859. She died 11 August 1882; she is buried along with her first husband, Henry, in the family plot at Oak Hill Cemetery.



Gravestones --McKee Family Plot --Oakhill Cemeterary, San Jose

