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GEORGE MCKINLEY MURRELL

“There Is More  
in Luck than Work”



The Letters of a Young Kentuckian  
in the California Gold Rush (1849-1854)

Edited by Juliette Bourdin





“THERE IS MORE IN LUCK THAN WORK”

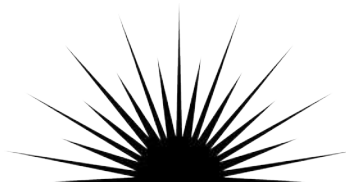
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George McKinley MURRELL

*“There Is More  
in Luck than Work”*

The Letters of a Young Kentuckian  
in the California Gold Rush  
1849-1854

Edited by Juliette Bourdin



LES PERSÉIDES  
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# Introduction

On January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall found a gold nugget on John Sutter's mill at Coloma, near Sacramento, in California.<sup>1</sup> Customarily, this seemingly tiny incident is identified as the start of the California Gold Rush of 1849. This discovery may be compared to the first tremor of an earthquake,<sup>2</sup> as the rumor started to spread like waves, first throughout California itself, then to the closest regions such as Oregon, Hawaii and Mexico (from which most of the earliest gold seekers originated, also known as "forty-eighters"), before traveling to more remote regions and countries, and eventually going around the globe. In the East of the United States, people heard the news in the Summer of 1848, but did not believe what sounded like tall tales, until President James K. Polk, on the strength of Colonel Mason's report,<sup>3</sup> confirmed on December 5, 1848, that gold was present in vast quantities in the California mountains:

It was known that mines of the precious metals existed to a considerable extent in California at the time of its acquisition. Recent discoveries render it probable that these mines are more extensive and valuable than was anticipated. The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation.<sup>4</sup>

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1/ About John A. Sutter, see notes in items 9 and 17.

2/ Another appropriate image, used for instance by historian Malcolm J. Rohrbough, is that of a stone which, after being dropped in a smooth body of water, creates an endless series of outward circles. See M. J. ROHRBOUGH, "'We Will Make Our Fortunes—No Doubt of It': The Worldwide Rush to California," in K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. 55.

3/ Colonel R. B. MASON, *Report*, Monterey, California, August 17, 1848, 31st Congress, 1st session, House Executive Document 17, January 24, 1850, p. 528-536.

4/ J. K. POLK, Fourth Annual Message, December 5, 1848, *The American Presidency Project*, <<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/200618>> retrieved November 22, 2022.

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The president's words triggered the scramble to California. Dragging people not only from the United States, but also from places as far-off as Chile, Australia, China, or Prussia, the Gold Rush truly became a mass movement from 1849 onwards, and can be counted among the world's seismic events for its countless short-, middle- and long-term effects. Not only did it drastically accelerate the disruption of the social, economic, ethnic, and environmental realities of mid-19th-century California, but it also intensified the sectional conflict that had been brewing in the United States around the question of slavery, and which was to tear the country apart a decade later. Beyond the riches that were extracted from the California rivers and mountains in the course of a few years,<sup>5</sup> it was the rush itself—i.e., the migration of such vast hordes of people—that had the deepest and most lasting impact.<sup>6</sup> While in early 1848 California counted only about 7,300 Hispanics and Anglo inhabitants,<sup>7</sup> the official censuses recorded a total population of about 92,000 residents in 1850 (making it possible for California to join the Union that same year), and 380,000 in 1860.<sup>8</sup>

In the early years of the Gold Rush, the typical hopefuls were young, single men, the male population accounting for 90% of the entire migration, especially in 1849. In 1850, the population in the mining districts was even 97% male. Yet, there were a variety of profiles, as every corner of the country as well as every social class was represented, including Southern slaveowners who brought one or more of their slaves along with them,<sup>9</sup> as was the case of George

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5/ Kenneth N. Owens states that, "By best estimates, more than \$345 million in gold, calculated at contemporary value, came from the northern California Mother Lode between 1848 and 1854, the peak years of the gold rush." K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

6/ M. A. EIFLER, *The California Gold Rush: The Stampede that Changed the World*, New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, p. 1.

7/ W. BEAN, rev. S. B. STOLL, "California," in H. R. LAMAR, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 154.

8/ See Table 19 "California – Race and Hispanic Origin: 1850 to 1990," in C. GIBSON and K. JUNG, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1970, and By Hispanic Origin, 1790 to 1990, For the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States*, Population Division Working Paper No. 56, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., September 2002, p. 37. It is estimated that, by 1855, at least 250,000 people had joined the California Gold Rush. See K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

9/ M. J. ROHRBOUGH, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, p. 1; E. JAMESON, "Where Have

McKinley Murrell, the author of the correspondence published in this volume.

\*

George McKinley Murrell was born in Barren County, Kentucky, on May 15, 1826, to Samuel Murrell (1792-1890) and Elizabeth Reid Murrell, *née* Sterrett (1802-1865).<sup>10</sup> He was the first-born and only son of a family of seven children. His sisters were Mary Ann “Mollie” (born 1828), Sallie (1830), Maria “Marie” (1833), Ellen (1836), Eliza (1838), and Chalia (1841) (see the Murrells’ genealogy in figures 3, 4, 5). Murrell’s ancestors were from Virginia on his father’s side and of Irish descent on his mother’s side. His parents, both born in Virginia, spent almost their entire lives in Bowling Green, Warren County, Kentucky, in a mansion that they turned into a stagecoach stop and tavern.<sup>11</sup> Samuel Murrell was a free mason,<sup>12</sup> a wealthy farmer and slaveholder. In 1850, his real estate was estimated at \$17,700, and he owned 27 slaves,<sup>13</sup> which

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All the Young Men Gone? The Social Legacy of the California Gold Rush,” in K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All*, *op. cit.*, p. 202-229.

10/ The genealogy of the Murrells and other families and individuals could be determined in most cases via online databases, particularly the official records (United States censuses, slave schedules, birth, marriage and death registers, etc.) available on the website FamilySearch hosted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (<https://www.familysearch.org>), as well as via the Internet database Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current (online database of cemetery records), hosted by Ancestry (<https://www.findagrave.com/>). In order to lighten the numerous notes in the present volume, these sources are not systematically given in extenso.

11/ The Samuel Murrell House, located 9737 Louisville Rd., Bowling Green, Kentucky, was registered as a landmark in 1976 (see figure 5). See NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, United States Department of the Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form: Susannah Henry Madison Log House and Murrell’s Stagecoach Stop,” March 26, 1976. A photograph of the Murrell house is also available here: KENTUCKY MUSEUM SPECIAL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS, “Samuel Murrell House, Warren County, Kentucky,” *KenCat Online Collections*, Western Kentucky University. The URLs for both references are available in the bibliography.

12/ When Samuel Murrell passed away in 1890, his obituary in the papers hailed him as the “oldest mason” in Kentucky. He was said to have joined the Allen Lodge, No. 28, of Glasgow, in Barren County, Kentucky, and “received the Master Mason’s degree in 1816.” He was also saluted as a veteran of the War of 1812. See “Oldest Mason Dead Again,” *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, Ind.), September 21, 1890, p. 5.

13/ These 27 slaves were composed of 15 adults between age 18 and 70 (7 men and 8 women), and 12 children and youth, below age 18 (8 boys and 4 girls). In

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was far above average for the border state of Kentucky, where most owners usually had from one to seven slaves.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, those who found comfort and security at home did not join the Gold Rush to California.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite his family's wealth, George McKinley Murrell caught the gold fever that spread like wildfire throughout the United States, as was the case of many other youth in the vicinity. These young men, who were friends, relatives, neighbors or mere acquaintances, decided to form a joint-stock company they called the Green River California Company (or Green River Mining Company) after the river running near Bowling Green, and to venture out together to cross the plains, mountains and deserts of the American West all the way to the California diggings.<sup>16</sup> Their company gathered residents of Bowling Green as well as Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and comprised about 50 people

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1860, Samuel Murrell still owned 20 slaves, with 11 adults (5 men and 6 women) and 9 children (6 boys and 3 girls), and his real estate and personal estate were valued respectively at \$27,000 and \$13,000. See the U.S. Census and Slave Schedule for 1850 and 1860, for Warren County.

14/ F. J. HOOD, ed., *Kentucky, Its History and Heritage*, Saint Louis, Forum Press, 1978, p. 3, 90. Since many of the early settlers came from Virginia (just like Murrell's ancestors), slavery was found in the border state of Kentucky from the beginning of white colonization. As of 1850, there were officially 210,981 slaves in Kentucky, accounting for about 21,5% of the total population. See Table 32 "Kentucky – Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990," in C. GIBSON and K. JUNG, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1970*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

15/ M. A. EIFLER, *The California Gold Rush*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

16/ This was typical of the Gold Rush of 1849: Many Argonauts formed joint-stock companies in their native city or region to finance the trip to California, each member contributing the same amount to gather the necessary funds for the company's outfit (wagons, teams, provisions, etc.). The vast majority of emigrants being "greenhorns" about to embark on a perilous adventure, they gathered in joint-stock companies to find security in number, avoid loneliness in unknown territory, learn the tricks of the trade with more experienced companions, and also more easily convince family members or other creditors to lend them the money they needed for the enterprise. Most joint-stock companies wrote constitutions or established rules, typically prohibiting drinking and swearing, and imposing the respect of the Sabbath. Some of these companies resembled military units, with titles and ranks and strict discipline—at least at the beginning of the journey. Along the way, some members would decide to leave, and many companies would eventually be dismantled in California. See notably David Morris Potter's thorough introduction about the Charlestown Company in V. GEIGER and W. BRYARLY, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly*, ed. by D. M. POTTER, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1945, p. 1-73; see also the case of the Wolverine Rangers in J. S. HOLLIDAY, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002 (1981), p. 51-55, 459-

as of April 22, 1849.<sup>17</sup> As could be ascertained by a close study of the 1850 U.S. Census and Slave Schedule, most of the twenty or so young men from Bowling Green belonged to slaveholding families; however, only George M. Murrell and one James O. Hill left with family slaves. Murrell was accompanied by Reuben Murrell,<sup>18</sup> and Hill traveled with a “black boy” named Sam (or Samuel) Hill (see items 1, 9).<sup>19</sup>

George McKinley Murrell and Reuben left Bowling Green in late March 1849, and traveled by boat on the Barren, Green and Ohio rivers to go first to Louisville. Then, they embarked on a large steamer bound for St. Louis, in which city they took another steamer up the Missouri River all the way to Independence, Missouri, one of the main “jumping-off” places for the overland trails.<sup>20</sup> There, they bought a wagon and ox-team and waited with their “Green River California Company” for the grass to be sufficiently abundant before starting the months-long journey to California.

Murrell wrote home soon after his departure, his first letter being penned near Owensboro, Kentucky, on March 28, 1849. He continued to send letters along the way until May 31, when he reached Fort Kearny,<sup>21</sup> on the Platte River (item 12), after which point postal services were no longer available. Once in California,

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465; J. P. REID, “Tied to the Elephant: Organization and Obligation on the Overland Trail,” *University of Puget Sound Law Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1977, p. 139-159.

17/ C. W. HASKINS, *The Argonauts of California: Being the Reminiscences of Scenes and Incidents That Occurred in California in Early Mining Days*, New York, Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1890, p. 407-408.

18/ Throughout his correspondence, Murrell was inconsistent in spelling Reuben’s first name, writing it also Reubin, Rehubin, Rhewbin, Rheubin, Rheubing, Rhuben, as well as using the frequent nicknames Reub or Rheub. The more formal “Reuben” spelling will be used in this introduction and the notes.

19/ In its issue of March 31, 1849, *The Louisville Daily Courier* (Louisville, Ky.) mentions Reuben Murrell and Samuel Hill (p. 2). James O. Hill’s mother and older brother owned 6 and 7 slaves respectively in Warren County in 1850 (see item 9). See also the short biographical notes in the items for the young men named Campbell, Skiles, Crosthwait, Ellis, Torian, Sale, Freeman, Cole, and Herd (or Heard) (see index). For a historical sketch of Warren County—which, however, never mentions that the county’s founders were slaveowners, nor that there was an important black community—see M. SECRIST, *Warren County, Kentucky: History Revealed Through Biographical and Genealogical Sketches of Its Ancestors*, [s.l.] M. Secrist, 2013, p. 5-27.

20/ About the “jumping-off” places, see item 1.

21/ About Fort Kearny, see item 12.



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Murrell gave a retrospective account of the rest of the trip, explaining that, on August 19, while traveling along the Humboldt River in the Great Basin, he took the Lassen Route, which was presented as a “cutoff” (i.e., a shortcut in emigrant parlance), but was actually longer and sometimes harder than the Truckee and Carson Routes.<sup>22</sup> Curiously, his slave Reuben remained with the company, who chose the Carson Route (alluded to in item 25), while Murrell turned onto the Lassen Route, “for the purpose of going ahead & looking out a location” (item 13). Like all other emigrants who made the same decision, he described much suffering on that itinerary, although, luckily for him, he was at the vanguard of the train, while the conditions grew much worse for those in the rear. Murrell finally arrived in Sacramento in mid-September, where he joined Reuben and the rest of the company (see figure 7). George and Reuben then spent a few weeks in Sacramento before going up to the mining area of El Dorado County, settling first in Georgetown. From 1849 till 1854, Murrell remained in the northern mines, mostly in Placer and El Dorado County, along the south branch of the North Fork of the American River, and then at Long Bar and Big Bar, on the Middle Fork of the American River (see figure 6), resisting the urge to join local rushes, such as the one to the Klamath region in late 1850 and early 1851 (see item 34). So, unlike many miners, Murrell moved very little in the course of his five-year stay in California, particularly after the Spring of 1851.<sup>23</sup>

As for mining and “making his pile,” Murrell was confronted with the harsh reality of California prices. As he said in June 1850, “I have no difficulty in making money but the trouble is to keep it” (item 25). He was also unlucky with his first mining operations, informing his father in July 1850 that his company was “sadly discouraged,” and admitting that “it would be humiliating for me to come home without haveing made something” (item 27). He invested much money over and over in different claims, only to find himself with perhaps just enough to pay for his journey home at the end of his

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22/ About the Lassen Route, see items 13 and 18.

23/ Murrell himself commented that “This rambling about is not only injurious to the miners themselves but every species of buisness & trade is injured thereby,” adding, not without a touch of self-mockery, that “Fixedness of purpose & regularity of pursuit are the concomitants (I might say the substance, the very essence) of success & prosperity, Nevertheless one Geo M Murrell being a living refutation of the correctness of that rule in all instances” (item 65, October 1853).

extensive stay in California. But Murrell did not only work as a miner. While he had Reuben hired out as a cook, he also launched himself in the mule-packing business between Greenwood and Long Bar, in El Dorado County, from October 1850 to early 1851 (see items 30-34), and then established at Long Bar a boarding house and, apparently, also a store—though he never gave much detail about this activity—between February and September 1851 (see items 36, 40, 41, 43, 45, 46, 48). In the Summer of 1852, he was also hired by William H. Pratt—who became a prominent citizen of California—to take care of his business while he was away (item 58).

It seems that, as time went by, his parents started to pressure him to come home. Being the first-born and only son probably accentuated the family's insistence. In December 1850, for instance, he wrote his friend Sandy Gossom, "I reckon my Dady will want to be sending *'funds to bring me home on'*" (item 33). That same month, he wrote his sister Sallie, "I am afraid that father, hearing of my many misfortunes, has written for me to come home" (item 41). In June 1851, Murrell answered his mother that he was not ready to return to Kentucky in view of what he saw as promising prospects (item 43). In August, he confessed to his sister Sallie: "I am almost afraid to get a letter from home, for fear it will urge upon me to come home since hearing how unfortunate I was in the spring" (item 44). In February 1852, he candidly wrote his father (item 53):

You will have perceived from my last letters that I have rather avoided speaking about my buisness & how I am getting along in a pecuniary point of view. Now this course hase not been adopted through any disrespect or from any want of confidence in you. But owing to the many reverses that have attended me in my various occupations &c, And the flattering manner in which I have sometimes spoken of my prospects, I have concluded that It is best for me to preserve a silence upon that score, least [lest] I might encourage hopes in the bossoms of my friends that may not be realized on the one hand, And on the other I might speak in such disparageing terms as to induce you all to become over solicitous for my return home.<sup>24</sup>

In his letter dated April 12, 1853, Murrell admitted that his mining operations proved a complete failure and that he was practi-

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24/ For more on the transcription of the letters, see Editorial Procedures.

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cally broke. Yet, he wrote his father with the probable purpose (his letter is unfortunately incomplete) of convincing the latter to finance his latest plan: “The Buisness to which I allude is the buying & driveing of cattle & sheep to this country across the plains.” This plan, however, was never carried out—though others did enter the cattle and sheep business on the overland trail and were successful (see note in item 61).

A year later, in the Spring of 1854, Murrell finally gave up, not without a certain bitterness: “It is humiliating to come home without any thing after a five years campaing in a land of gold. And sometimes I am almost persuaded to say that I never will. Pride & a love for the home circle have long war[r]ed with each other. For a long time it was a doubtful contest. But love for father, mother & sisters has finaly prevailed” (item 67). So ended George McKinley Murrell’s five-year adventure in the California Gold Rush.

### **A Precious Contribution to a Rich Historiography and Vast Subject**

The historiography of the California Gold Rush reflects the importance of this event at all levels. Bibliographic references are so abundant that aiming at exhaustivity is a vain attempt, and would be unnecessary for the present volume. In fact, as Kenneth N. Owens indicates, “Before 1860, according to the exhaustive, magisterial bibliographical guide prepared by Gary Kurutz of the California State Library, an amazing total of 285 books and pamphlets about gold rush California and the routes to the gold fields had appeared in print.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, even history books were published relatively soon after the event, as for instance Soulé, Gihon and Nisbet’s *Annals of San Francisco* (1855), and Franklin Tuthill’s *History of California* (1866). Printed histories of the Gold Rush then appeared in several “waves,” starting in the 1880s with Charles Howard Shinn’s *Mining Camps* (1884), Theodore Henry Hittell’s *History of California* (1885), Josiah Royce’s *California, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San*

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25/ K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All*, *op. cit.*, p. 1. See the bibliographies compiled in the late 1990s, G. KURUTZ, *The California Gold Rush: A Descriptive Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets Covering the Years 1848-1853*, San Francisco, Book Club of California, 1997; R. L. SANTOS, *The Gold Rush of California: A Bibliography of Periodical Articles*, Denair, Alley-Cass, 1998.

*Francisco* (1886), and the 6th volume of Hubert Howe Bancroft's *History of California*, which focused on the Gold Rush (1888). Local history books must not be forgotten either, such as Chamberlain and Wells's *History of Yuba County, California* (1879), Angel's *History of Placer County* (1882), and Sioli's *Historical Souvenir of El Dorado County, California* (1883), to cite examples that proved useful to this edition. Another wave of historical interest began in the 1940s and early 1950s, coinciding with the centennial of the Gold Rush, with scholars such as Rodman W. Paul (*California Gold*, 1947) and John Walton Caughey (*Gold Is the Cornerstone*, 1948, later retitled *The California Gold Rush*). More recently, the New Western History initiated a movement that led scholars to revisit the Gold Rush with new approaches and perspectives, notably with a focus on American Indians, women and minorities. For example, Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush* (1982); Paula Mitchell Marks, *Precious Dust* (1994); Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold* (1997); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp* (2000); Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy* (2000); Kenneth N. Owens, ed., *Riches for All* (2002); Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (2007); Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier* (2015); to name a few.

Most importantly, first-hand accounts of the gold rush became available almost immediately, beginning with miners' letters appearing in newspapers throughout the United States, as well as through published memoirs and testimonies. For instance, one key correspondent was Alonzo Delano, whose letters were available in the *Free Trader* (Ottawa, Illinois) and *True Delta* (New Orleans),<sup>26</sup> and whose experience was published in 1854 under the title *Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings*. Another key witness from the early years of the California Gold Rush was Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, better known as "Dame Shirley," the pen name she used in her letters to her sister, which were reprinted in *The Pioneer: California Monthly Magazine* in 1854-55 and later in book form for the delight of Californiana enthusiasts. Other early testimonies include New York journalist Edward Gould Buffum's *Six Months in the Gold Mines* (1850), Englishman William Kelly's *A Stroll Through the Diggings of California* (1852), John David

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26/ His letters were collected in book form in 1952. A. DELANO, *Alonzo Delano's California Correspondence: Being Letters Hitherto Uncollected from the Ottawa (Illinois) Free Trader and the New Orleans True Delta, 1849-1852*, ed. by I. McKEE, Sacramento, Sacramento Book Collectors Club, 1952.

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Borthwick's *Three Years in California* (1857), as well as Lawson B. Patterson's *Twelve Years in the Mines of California* (1862). In the 1880s-90s, as the first generation of pioneers began to pass away, many memoirs and reminiscences were published, notably books by John H. Brown (1886), Charles D. Ferguson (1888), Charles W. Haskins (1890), William Graham Johnston (1892), to name a few of these old-timers. However, some of the most important accounts appeared later, particularly the journal that Joseph Goldsborough Bruff<sup>27</sup> kept on the trail in 1849 and in the California diggings, which was only made available to the public in 1949; William Swain's diary, edited in J. S. Holliday's now classic *The World Rushed In* (1981); or William B. Lorton's 1849 journal to California, which recently came out under the title *Troubadour on the Road to Gold* (2020).

In other words, much has already been published about the California Gold Rush. Yet, it remains such a multifaceted event that, as historian Dale L. Morgan said, "much painstaking investigation will have to be undertaken, and many fortunate finds made, before we can feel that at any point we are approaching the limits of the subject."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, primary sources such as the rich, elaborate letters written by George McKinley Murrell can only contribute to our understanding. In truth, Murrell's letters have not been completely overlooked by historians, but they have been used almost exclusively in reference to his slave Reuben,<sup>29</sup> and sometimes for a rare quote about his journey to California.<sup>30</sup> Reuben's presence is

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27/ J. G. BRUFF, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851*, ed. by G. W. READ and R. L. GAINES, New York, Columbia University Press, 1949.

28/ See Dale L. Morgan's introduction to J. A. PRITCHARD, *The Overland Diary of James A. Pritchard, from Kentucky to California in 1849*, ed. by D. L. MORGAN, Denver, Fred A. Rosenstock and The Old West Publishing Company, 1959, p. 13.

29/ Some examples are R. M. LAPP, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 68, 78; A. S. BROUSSARD, "Slavery in California Revisited: The Fate of a Kentucky Slave in Gold Rush California," *The Pacific Historian*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1985, p. 17-22; S. L. SMITH, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle Over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015; K. WAITE, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

30/ See for instance W. BAGLEY, *With Golden Visions Bright Before Them: Trails to the Mining West, 1849-1852*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. One of the few exceptions to the rule is historian Andrea G. McDowell, who focuses

undoubtedly one of the most interesting aspects of these letters, but it is not the only one. Taken as a whole, these letters tell more stories and reveal other threads, presenting a general picture of the Gold Rush based on an individual's distinctive experience. Not only does it offer a testimony about life on the overland trail and in the mines from beginning to end, but it also provides myriad details about the settling of California and the mores and customs of the time, as well as an intimate and personal account of one man's experiences, almost a "self-portrait" as he put down on paper his thoughts, feelings, hopes, qualms, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, for the benefit of both scholars and general readers, this volume provides a transcription of the archival material that was donated to the Huntington Library in 1969 by Clifford Chickering Burton (1917-2000), a great-grandson of George McKinley Murrell's. This collection is composed of 67 letters that Murrell wrote from his departure in March 1849 to his last and unfortunately incomplete letter of 1854. Most were addressed to members of his immediate family (his father, mother, and sisters, especially the two closest to him in age), and a dozen of them to other relatives and friends. Murrell wrote profusely and consistently: 15 letters have survived from 1849, 18 from 1850, and 18 from 1851. However, based on the extant letters, it appears that he wrote less frequently as time went by. The Huntington collection includes only nine letters from 1852, six from 1853, and one from 1854. Based on his own references to other items that seem not to have survived, Murrell may have written twice as many letters as the number held by the Huntington.<sup>32</sup> He also kept a journal of

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on Murrell's mining operations. See A. G. McDOWELL, "From Commons to Claims: Property Rights in the California Gold Rush," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, p. 1-72, and A. G. McDOWELL, *We the Miners: Self-Government in the California Gold Rush*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2022.

31/ To quote Jane Apostol, the author of the only article dedicated to these letters as a whole, George McKinley Murrell "left one rich legacy: his letters with their poignant record of a young, romantic Forty-niner." J. APOSTOL, "'The Fickel Goddess Evades Me': The Gold Rush Letters of a Kentucky Gentleman," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, vol. 79, no. 2, 1981, p. 99-121 (p. 121 for the quote).

32/ For instance, in item 4, he lists the names of those to whom he had already written, and quite a few of these letters are not part of the collection; in item 12, he states, "I write a letter home every 3 or 4 days, whether you get them or not I think it is doubtful"; and in item 28, he says that he had already written about 50 letters home, meaning that the archive may include only about half of his correspondence. As for his writing less often as time went by, this is suggested by

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his trip from Kentucky to California, since one of the extant letters includes a long excerpt that he copied from this diary (see item 18). In October 1849, he wrote his sister Sallie that he had “full & minute notes of the whole country from here to the states” (item 15), and he mentioned again the “extensive notes that I took of the route in 49” (item 61, April 1853). Alas, the very detailed journal has probably disappeared.

The items of this Huntington collection are all letters written and signed by Murrell, with the sole exception of a quick note added by his friend and traveling companion Andy B. Anderson (item 9, May 1849) and, notably, a few messages that were dictated to him by his slave Reuben (item 14, October 1849). Some rare items were left unsigned but were in his own hand (items 18, 19, 28, and 64).

Paper being a rare and expensive commodity at the time, Murrell typically used every inch of space available to give his news in as much detail as possible, and he often inserted in the margins shorter notes to one or several of his sisters. As Murrell himself said on one occasion, “Yet there is another page before me & something must be said to fill it up” (item 62, Spring 1853). And when he didn’t have much to tell his family, he would simply write down his thoughts. This is how—if we dare a Joycean allusion—we see emerging, step by step, with small strokes, a self-portrait of the Forty-Niner as a young Kentuckian, offering thereby a slice of life and a nugget of history. The fact that the letters were written over a span of five years adds much to their interest, all the more so since few Forty-Niners continued their diaries at the end of their trip to the California diggings, or gave an account of their adventures from the moment of their departure for the gold mines till their return home. As Dale L. Morgan and James R. Scobie remarked, “Most Forty-Niners have much to say about their trials and tribulations in getting to California, little about their experiences after arriving.”<sup>33</sup> For that reason alone, Murrell’s letters are particularly valuable.

In the first place, these letters offer a precious account about life on the overland trail and in the California diggings. In parallel to his various businesses and occupations, Murrell observed life

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Murrell telling his father that, “as a general thing I mail a letter eve[r]y two weeks” (item 40, may 1851).

33/ See the introduction to W. PERKINS, *Three Years in California: Journal of Life at Sonora, 1849-1852*, ed. by D. L. MORGAN and J. R. SCOBIE, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1964, p. 1.



around him and commented on it in his letters to family and friends. And although he sometimes indulged in some pompous prose that revealed his passion for romantic literature, he also turned out to be, as Merrill J. Mattes noted, an “acute observer, with strong legible hand,”<sup>34</sup> who described his environment in interesting details. Recurring topics were prices in California, his eating habits and state of health, etc. He also mentioned the successive massive waves of emigration to California, the development of political and legal institutions in the new State, the relationships between miners and other communities, and the frustrating mismanagement of postal services. But Murrell also broached less common subjects, such as the abundance of wildlife, the beauty of the mountains, the incredible ability of Kanaka divers, the particularities of Chinese miners, as well as many political events and cultural trends happening at the time (for the full range of subject matter, see index).

### Reuben Murrell, a Slave in the California Gold Rush

The presence of Reuben Murrell, a slave,<sup>35</sup> in this Gold Rush adventure, is not the least interesting aspect of these letters, although we discover him indirectly, through George’s descriptions, or through Reuben’s own letters home dictated to his young master (see item 14). Indeed, primary sources about slaveholding

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34/ M. J. MATTES, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other Western States and Territories, 1812-1866*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 192.

35/ Some other Forty-Niners testified to the presence of slaves who accompanied their masters in California. See for instance C. W. HASKINS, *The Argonauts of California*, *op. cit.*, p. 69-70. Their precise number is not known, though. As Kevin Waite sums up, “Historians estimate that southern slaveholders forcibly transported between 500 and 600 bondpeople to California during the gold rush, though more recent evidence has suggested that as many as 1,500 African American slaves may have reached the Pacific coast by the early 1850s.” K. WAITE, *West of Slavery*, *op. cit.*, p. 32. About the experience of Black Americans in the Gold Rush, see R. M. LAPP, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, *op. cit.*; S. A. W. MOORE, “Do You Think I’ll Lug Trunks? African Americans in Gold Rush California,” in K. N. OWENS, ed., *Riches for All*, *op. cit.*, p. 161-175; W. L. KATZ and Q. TAYLOR, *The Black West*, Golden, Fulcrum Publishing, 2019, rev. ed.; about slavery in the mining camps, see notably S. L. SMITH, “Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 1, February 2011, p. 28-63.



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Forty-Niners are few and even scarcer in published forms.<sup>36</sup> These messages dictated to George give us some hints about Reuben's personality, notably that he was very religious (e.g., item 2), as when he asked his brother Sam "whether you all have had a revival of religion among you all since I left & whether you have been dutiful in keeping up the worship of God," or when he wrote the family's neighbor and friend Sandy Gossom that he remembered "the day when we parted from each other on the streets of Bowling Green, when you told me to remember that supreme being whose eye ever beholds us" (item 14).<sup>37</sup> Curiously, as far as close relatives were concerned, Reuben wrote only to his brother Sam, whereas his three other letters were addressed not only to "Master Sam" (Samuel Murrell), but also to "Master Sandy Gossom" and "Master Dick & Miss Caroline Patterson," who were friends and neighbors of the Murrells'. We also learn indirectly that Reuben's own relatives wrote letters to him, too: "The latest intelligence I have from home is a letter written to him by the darkies and bears date May the 28<sup>th</sup>" (item 29, August 1850). It seems that Reuben suffered from loneliness and homesickness, and was apparently eager to return to Kentucky and see his family again. George wrote that Reuben "is anxious to see you all again" (item 33, December 1850), that he "often speaks of goeing home," being "anxious to get Back" (item 36, February 1851), and that he "wishes to come home next fall,

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36/ For other slaveowners who brought their slaves along with them, see for instance the case of North Carolinian Robert Dickson, who came to California with a few slaves in 1852, described by historian Malcolm J. Rohrbough (*Days of Gold, op. cit.*, p. 211-215); the case of one C. Churchill, from Kentucky, who went to California with 9 slaves, 4 of whom died en route of cholera, described by the clerk of the company in his diary (P. F. Castleman, Philip F. Castleman Diary: 1849-1851, BANC MSS C-F 50 Film, Bancroft Library); see also the examples of Tennesseans, presented in W. T. DURHAM, *Volunteer Forty-Niners: Tennesseans and the California Gold Rush*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1997.

37/ About slavery and religion, Lowell H. Harrison remarks that, "Although some masters had little interest in religion either for themselves or their slaves, others viewed it as an important element in the lives of their bondsmen. In many instances there was a sincere belief that a master was committed to extending the blessing of Christianity to those in bondage. Indeed, this belief provided one of the major justifications for the existence of slavery. Other masters more cynically saw in the teachings of Christianity a defense against possible slave insurrections, the great haunting fear of any slave community. Surely, a slave should be willing to accept earthly slavery in return for the possibility of life eternal in the hereafter." L. H. HARRISON, "Memories of Slavery in Kentucky," in F. J. Hood, ed., *Kentucky, Its History and Heritage, op. cit.*, p. 112.

money or no money" (item 38, April 1851). However, Reuben never had the chance to see his family again: He accidentally drowned in the river, along with Henry Augustus Perkins, a mining partner of George Murrell's, in the Spring of 1851 (as alluded to in items 40, 44 and 48).

The relationship between George and Reuben can also be perceived through these letters, although they give almost exclusively the master's point of view. George Murrell's affection for Reuben seemed genuine, and he always gave news about him to the family. Also, he generally closed his letters by sending his love to all the family "white & black." After Reuben's death, however, his salutations to the family slaves became an occasional "Remember me to the servants," "Remember me to the blacks," and "My love to each member of the family, white & black" (items 44, 45 and 48, August and October 1851), before disappearing from his correspondence.

Reuben's fidelity to his young master is perceptible in various ways. Firstly, as mentioned above, during their overland journey, George Murrell took the Lassen Route, hoping to arrive sooner in California, and left Reuben with the main train, which suggests that he trusted Reuben entirely. In a similar fashion, later on, in California, he hired Reuben out and left him with the other employer while he was going about his mule-packing business, seeing Reuben only every couple of days, as was the case in the Fall of 1850 (item 30).

Secondly, Murrell alluded to abolitionists who apparently tried to convince Reuben to escape slavery, but he wrote that Reuben "will be true to me while we stay here & accompany me home in spite of the abolitionist who have been tampering with him" (item 17, January 1850), confirming in November 1850 (item 31): "I have never had the least trouble with him. Nor do I anticipate having any with. By his course he has won the esteem & respect of all who know him. And whilst resideing in the midst of the most fanatical of the abolition party, I do not think that their contaminateing & poisoning principles has in the least weakened his fidelity & devotedness to me."

Thirdly, and more importantly, George Murrell repeatedly expressed that Reuben was eager to go back to Kentucky and rejoin his family, which was undoubtedly the strongest of incentives that prevented him from running away. As Stacey L. Smith explains, escaping "was rarely an obvious, easy, or even desirable option.

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Like enslaved people living in the U.S. South, California slaves who considered running away faced impossible choices between liberating themselves and maintaining ties with loved ones.”<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, some other elements are food for thought and hint at one more potential reason for Reuben to remain faithful to George. Indeed, although Reuben’s precise role in California is never made entirely clear, Murrell’s letters allude to Reuben’s own hopes that they will make a fortune, implying that part of the money could have been exclusively his.<sup>39</sup> In his letter of October 1849 (item 14), George Murrell told his father: “Rheubin says that there is no country like home but he would not be satisfied to return without making some money. He has great confidence that he is going to be lucky.” This suggests that Reuben would have been allowed to keep some of the money he might have made, though doubts remain. In his January 1850 letter (item 17), in which he mentioned the abolitionists, Murrell also wrote that “Rheubin is well & is very desirous to accumulate money” and that “He expects his master will do something great for him when he returns.” The nature of this “something great” is not specified, but we might get a clue from several press articles about emancipation meetings that took place in Kentucky in the spring of 1849, in the context of the State Constitutional Convention, notably one meeting held in Bowling Green on May 12. On this occasion, James Madison Pendleton,<sup>40</sup> a Baptist Minister, emphasized the fact that, about forbidding the introduction of more slaves into Kentucky, “many *slaveholders* present felt that such prohibition would be

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38/ S. L. SMITH, “Remaking Slavery in a Free State,” *op. cit.*, p. 45.

39/ Rohrbough also tried to guess what might have been the arrangement between Dickson and his slaves, and his comments may provide some clues about Murrell’s case: “Where their money-making activities differed from those of most 49ers was in their use of African-American slave labor. However, their slaves had a degree of independence in their work unusual for the institution of slavery, but appropriate to the gold fields. Mining involved a repetitive work routine in search of incremental bits of wealth, and only the most rigid supervision could ensure absolute honesty, suggesting that what seems to have been the arrangements these slaveholders pursued, trust and an agreement to share a portion of the returns, were probably the best for effective use of slave labor. Or perhaps the white Southerners had great confidence in the fidelity of their black property.” M. J. ROHRBOUGH, *Days of Gold*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

40/ For a portrait of James Madison Pendleton (1811-1891), a nonconformist antislavery Southerner, see V. B. HOWARD, “James Madison Pendleton: A Southern Crusader Against Slavery,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1976, p. 192-215.

highly salutary” (emphasis added). Indeed, albeit a slaveholder himself, Samuel Murrell had apparently acted as chairman of this meeting of the “friends of emancipation,”<sup>41</sup> which also produced the following resolution:

*Resolved*, That we are not willing to disturb, or to aid others in disturbing, the right of masters to their slaves now in being in Kentucky. But whilst this is our position, we are at the same time wholly averse to any increase of slaves in this State, believing that such increase would be highly detrimental to the best interests of the free people of this Commonwealth, whether they be owners of slaves or not.

*Resolved*, Therefore, that we desire that a clause shall be inserted in the proposed new Constitution of this State, by which the further introduction of slaves into this Commonwealth shall be utterly prohibited.

*Resolved further*, That we are willing, that, in future emancipation of slaves by their owners, such emancipation shall be required to be accompanied by colonizing them in Africa, or some place beyond this Commonwealth.<sup>42</sup>

Emancipation, therefore, might have been what Reuben had been promised by Samuel Murrell, should he remain faithful to George. This would explain in part Reuben’s devotedness to his young master, as well as his wish to “make his pile,” if ever, for instance, Reuben had been told he could use his gold to buy his own freedom.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Reuben remained a slave, and his status was made clear when George Murrell hired him out as a cook at a boarding house for \$10 a day when their efforts at digging proved unsuccessful. Reuben earned a living for the two of them while George Murrell appeared to stand idle or at least unable to make as much money. Realizing how profitable it was, Murrell regretted not

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41/ In its issue of May 18, 1849, *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), mentions (p. 3) that Samuel Murrell was in the chair and that the meeting’s proceedings were “signed by forty-two highly respectable citizens of Warren, fifteen of whom, we are informed by Capt. McGowan, are slaveholders.” See also *The Louisville Daily Courier* (Louisville, Ky.), May 18, 1849, p. 3.

42/ *The Examiner* (Louisville, Ky.), an abolitionist paper, offered much detail in its issue of May 26, 1849. See the whole resolution on page 3.

43/ This was a fairly common practice at the time. See K. G. GOODE, *California’s Black Pioneers: A Brief Historical Survey*, Santa Barbara, McNally & Loftin, 1973, p. 59.

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having done so earlier on: “I have Rheube hired out at \$10.00 a day. And foolish I was that I did not have him hired all the time, I might have been a greatdeal better off” (item 29, August 1850).<sup>44</sup>

Without more evidence, we can only conjecture that Samuel Murrell might have lured Reuben with a potential emancipation, and, of course, it is impossible to tell whether the Murrells would have been true to their word. In any case, George Murrell’s letters provide a glimpse of the whole ambiguity that characterized both Reuben’s actual status and George’s position towards the institution of slavery. As for the Kentucky Constitution adopted in 1850, it remained particularly conservative and favored pro-slavery forces. Had Reuben survived and gone home, he might not have been given his freedom—and if ever he might have been freed, he would have been forced to leave the state, since the new constitution made it a “felony” for free blacks and emancipated slaves to live in Kentucky.<sup>45</sup> The fact is that the 1860 slave schedules show the Murrells still had slaves on the eve of the Civil War, with George himself, then settled in McLean County, Kentucky, holding five—including two reported as “fugitives from the state.”<sup>46</sup>

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44/ Other slaveholders realized that hiring out their slaves proved more lucrative than having them work with them in the mines. See the example of the Knoxes, a slaveholding family from Missouri: “In the spring of 1849 Reuben Knox set out for California with a group of family slaves. These included four men—Bill Hunter, Romeo, Lewis, and George—as well as two adolescents—thirteen-year-old Sarah and nine-year-old Fred. ‘I propose now to free them,’ Knox wrote of his bondpeople, ‘on the condition that they work for me one year in the gold mines of California.’ Knox hoped that the promise of emancipation would keep the enslaved people loyal on the journey. When the party arrived in Sacramento, Knox found that the familiar practice of urban slave hiring promised higher returns than taking the bondpeople with him to the goldfields.” S. L. SMITH, “Remaking Slavery in a Free State,” *op. cit.*, p. 34, also 38-39.

45/ Article X of the Constitution of Kentucky of 1850 addressed the question of slavery. It notably said that slaves shall not be emancipated without the consent of their owners, that slaveholders immigrating to Kentucky shall have the right to bring their slaves, that owners shall have the right to emancipate their slaves so long as the freed slaves shall leave the state. Indeed, Section 2 of Article X stated that “any free negro or mulatto hereafter immigrating to, and any slave hereafter emancipated in, and refusing to leave this State, or having left, shall return and settle within this State, shall be deemed guilty of felony, and punished by confinement in the Penitentiary thereof.” See KENTUCKY, *The General Statutes of the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, ed. by E. I. BULLOCK and W. JOHNSON, Frankfort, Ky., S.I.M. Major, Public Printers, 1873, p. 116-117.

46/ In the U.S. Censuses of 1850 and 1860, the slave schedules included a column entitled “Fugitives from the state,” designed to count “the number of slaves who,

## A Self-Portrait of the Forty-Niner as a Young Kentuckian

Besides the great interest provided by Reuben's presence, this correspondence also offers an intimate self-portrait. In one letter after another, we discover a young man endowed with a romantic soul<sup>47</sup> and a pious heart, who is much more versed in poetry and literature<sup>48</sup> than in the down-to-earth mining techniques. He also regularly expresses his political views, generally in the context of local, regional, or national elections. His allusions to politics in Kentucky, California and Washington highlight that he came from a Whig family strongly attached to the Union. Obviously, not all California miners were like Murrell, far from it; but the detailed descriptions of his state of mind do reveal the thoughts of a romantic Southern young man coming from a wealthy, slave-owning family in Kentucky.

His personal metamorphosis is clearly visible through his adaptation to his new environment. Though profoundly homesick soon after his departure (item 8, April 1849)<sup>49</sup> and feeling lonely for some time, Murrell eventually fell in love with California, particularly with the mildness of its weather, a growing infatuation—perceptible as early as May 1850 (item 23)—that he did not keep secret, telling his friend Sandy Gossom that he was “falling

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having absconded within the year, have not been recovered.” See UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, *Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000*, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, p. 12.

47/ To give just one example among many others, in item 3 (April 8, 1849), Murrell talks of having “a taste for the romantic,” and in item 17 (January 1850), we find a typical example of his inclination for a rather sentimental language: “But that intrusive tear is as short lived as the dew drop that glistens on the flower. The bright sun of anticipation arises & it dries away.”

48/ Poetry was classic reading in the mid-19th century. Dame Shirley wrote that her library consisted of “a bible and prayer-book, Shakespeare, Spenser, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Lowell's Fable for Critics, Walton's Complete Angler and some Spanish books.” See her seventh letter from Indian Bar, October 7, 1851, L. A. K. S. CLAPPE (“Dame Shirley”), *The Shirley Letters from The California Mines, 1851-1852*, ed. by C. I. WHEAT, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1949, p. 61.

49/ Homesickness was widespread among gold miners. As Mary Bennett Ritter sums up: “Life in a mining camp [was] not all hectic and exciting adventure. Monotony, disappointment, disillusionment and homesickness were frequent experiences.” M. B. RITTER, *More Than Gold in California, 1849-1933*, Berkeley, The Professional Press, 1933, p. 21.

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desperately in love with this climate" (item 33, December 1850), and then writing his mother, "The truth is that I am really falling in love with the climate & country" (item 36, February 1851). A clear sign of this evolution can also be observed in his sudden use of the first-person plural, when he eventually referred to "our California papers" (item 32, December 1850), repeating just a few months later that "One strong tie, Binding me to Ky & attracting me home, has been severed" (item 36), and then, in April 1851, that he is "somewhat weaned from home now" (item 38). This is even more obvious when, in February 1852, Murrell distanced himself from his beloved Kentucky, writing, "*We* have no sudden & extreme changes in the temperatures, such as *you* have in Ky" (emphasis added, item 53).

Murrell's correspondence also gives us an insight into other people's life stories and choices, thanks to online resources that now make it much easier to reconstruct the movements of people at the time, notably by cross-referencing official censuses, press articles, genealogical databases, etc., that are literally one click away. So, through thorough research, it was possible to identify most of the people Murrell referred to in his letters and, therefore, to see patterns emerge, particularly local, regional and even national webs. For instance, although Murrell did not work the mines with friends or acquaintances from his native Kentucky, he did meet miners from other regions of the United States with whom he formed new partnerships as well as friendships. By looking up each person referred to by Murrell in his letters, it was possible to check who came to California and eventually stayed, who returned home permanently or did another return trip to fetch their families and settle in California. It was also possible to see different webs being weaved at different levels, with a series of growing and sometimes overlapping social circles (e.g., close and extended family, friends here and there, business partners in California, slave-holding households in Kentucky, etc.). Murrell's interest in local and national politics can serve to illustrate this general overlap, showing how the Gold Rush almost instantaneously and simultaneously expanded and shrank the country, stretching its borders at such a great distance, and yet bringing California much closer with increasingly frequent news and interactions.

As mentioned above, by studying the composition of the joint-stock company and the exact presence of slaves, we could ascertain



that George McKinley Murrell and James O. Hill—who died of cholera soon after they left Independence, Missouri, and who was, interestingly, Murrell’s “most intimate friend & associate” (see item 9)—were the only ones to bring slaves along with them, which confirms that Murrell was the exception rather than the rule in his company, even though most of these young Kentuckians did come from slave-holding families. Interestingly, too, Murrell did not stick with the other young men from Bowling Green with whom he traveled to California. The joint-stock company lasted only the duration of the journey, and also experienced a split with the “Hopkinsville portion,” which was deemed “an incubus upon the progress of the company” and counted among them “five or six perfect scoundrels” (item 6, April 1849). But Murrell’s correspondence suggests that he was perhaps a bit isolated from the other Warren County boys, as they split in various smaller groups when they all reached the diggings, whereas he remained alone with Reuben (item 14, October 1849). Even his good friend Robert F. Strange, who joined the Gold Rush one year later, did not associate with him, but went his own way with other neighbors from Bowling Green. Nevertheless, despite the fact that all these young Kentuckians tried their luck in their own corners of the California diggings, and despite the vast distances separating them from their native Kentucky, the presence and pressure of the community back home could be felt even in the remotest parts of the Sierra Nevada through the ongoing correspondence with family and friends. To begin with, his parents wondered why he did not stay with his companions from Kentucky (item 26, June 1850):

You say that it seems strange & is a matter of some wonder with my friends at home that I should thus be found associated with strangers in a far off land & not with those my friends might naturally expect to find me. I shall be laconic on this point & only remark that *natural friends are sometimes most unnatural*. With some of those who accompanied me out here I was very loth to part. But when bidding others adieu I shed not one tear of regret, nor gave one look of sorrow. When we meet again I will tell you all. Till then let the curiosity of my friends subside, & rest assured that my course can be justified.

In a similar fashion, Murrell heard that some of the returnees drew a somewhat negative picture of him, commenting bitterly in a letter to his father (item 39, May 1851):



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And I now feel sanguine that, when I come home, that I will have along with me the convinceing proof that I am not the "*Indolent*," "*no account person*" that some of my very kind friends in th[e] country have represented me to be. Those representati[on]s were made with fully as much knowledge of me & my success as the parties making them have of generosity or any other noble trait of character. I was in this [c]ountry one year before they knew where I was or [w]hat I was doing. Yet in this ignorance of things they seek to injure my character by misrepresenting [m]e & exaggerateing their own puny success. Their malice, for I can term it nothing else, had its origin in envy & jealousy because I had Reuben along with me.

Thus, according to Murrell, some of the boys had been jealous because he was lucky enough to have one of the family's slaves at his side. It is also possible that they simply envied his family's wealth, symbolized by the fact that Samuel Murrell could spare a slave for his son's gold adventure, and even had the means to bring his son home should the latter be broke (see items 33 and 67), the cost of the trip itself being prohibitively high.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the neighbors' sarcastic comments might have been fueled by the fact that George did not *have to* work hard, unlike perhaps some poorer youth he knew. Indeed, Murrell's "indolence" was probably not entirely an exaggeration. He himself admitted not being exactly the hardworking type, candidly writing his mother: "I dont intend to hurt myself at work. That is a thing you know that I never did do" (item 38, April 1851), and again, "Am not overly fond of labor as you will know. No dainger of my hurting myself at it" (item 50, November 1851), and even exclaiming in a letter to a friend, "Oh, Jess, I do love to dream. So fond am I of it that I indulge in it even in my wakeing hours. I have been too much of a dreamer, too much of a visionary, since being in this country, otherwise I might have done better in a pecuniary point of view" (item 55, February 1852). Therefore, the portrayal made by some of his neighbors, who described him as an "indolent," was not totally erroneous after all—but his pride was hurt.

Actually, George M. Murrell's reasons for joining the Gold Rush were not entirely clear in the first place. On the one hand, there is no

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50/ Murrell wrote his uncle Dysart in June 1850 (item 25), "There are thousands of men here, Mr Dysart, who are becomeing alarmed less [lest] they should not make enough to carry them home next fall."

doubt that he was motivated by the prospect of “making his pile,” or at least gaining financial independence. For example, he wrote his father soon after his departure that he “seeks not gold to gratify an avaricious appetite but as a means of comfort in fut[ure]” (item 1, March 1849), and his sister Eliza a year later: “I cannot nor will not leave this country so long as the prospect is so good for bettering my condition in a pecuniary way [...]. And when I come back I do not expect it will be with a princely fortune but with a comfortable independence” (item 24, June 1850). On the other hand, in a letter to his friend John Grider, he does confess “a romantic desire to cross the Plains & see a little of mountain life” as a potential motive to come to California (item 28, August 1850). Perhaps, also, the gold fever that spread and took so many, in Kentucky as elsewhere, was enough to induce him to join the crowd, for fear he might regret one day having missed an incredible opportunity. As for his extensive stay in the California diggings, besides his falling in love with the local climate, his betting on new claims that he hoped would prove rich, and his confessing that “there is an excitement connected with all the business operations here that I love” (item 39, May 1851), another factor might have influenced his decision to delay his return to Kentucky: His wish to be as successful as some of his Bowling Green neighbors, so as to stand tall and soothe his hurt pride by disproving those who depicted him as an idler when they returned to Kentucky (item 39, May 1851):

If I am unsuccessful this summer, then will I conclude that I had better come home, & you may certainly look for me in the fall or winter. But on the other hand, should my present expectations be realized, I will not come home untill I can bring with me an Independency such a one as will overtop the small, Oh I should have said great, fortune of Campbell & Roberts, for such is the light that they would have it regarded in.

Despite his growing love for California, Murrell maintained close relationships with people back home through a regular and profuse correspondence, showing the strength of the bonds with family and friends left behind, as was the case for many California miners.<sup>51</sup> His letters reveal a close-knit family and neighboring community in Bowling Green, with members of the extended family generally

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51/ See M. A. EIFLER, *The California Gold Rush*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

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living nearby (he often saluted relatives and wrote to uncles and cousins as well), and marriages taking place among neighbors. Murrell often asked his sisters to give his regards to the young ladies of their neighborhood, inquiring sometimes about their marital status, and even telling his sister Sallie, "Write to me often, & for [goodne]ss sake tell the girls that they must not all mar[ry] [be] fore I get Back" (item 17). As time went by, he wondered if one of them would still want to marry him were he to return home (see for instance, items 11, 19, 32, 59, 66). His frequent comments about the ladies back in Kentucky, as well as the lack of women in California, show that marriage was a concern, even though he said at one point that bachelorhood tempted him, too: "Sometimes I think a bachelors life is the life for me, & I will shield my heart so as to render it invincible to the charms of the lovely fair. Then again I think so soon as I get back, I will set on foot negotiations for forming an alliance with the first pretty girl that falls in my path, splice & settle for life" (item 55, February 1852).

His close relationship with his sisters, particularly with those closest to him in age, is also an interesting aspect of these letters, suggesting the type of education they received, as well as the readings and games they enjoyed together. For instance, he wrote his sister Mollie (item 32, December 1850):

I was just speaking of the Past. And how is it possible for me to conjure up in fancy a single happy scene without thinking of you, for you were a companion & partaker in all my pleasures & sports. Whether it was a hazelnuting, blackberying, hunting hen eggs, chasing butterflies, building play houses, rambling over the meadows, plucking flowers, & all the other ten thousand little amusements that childhood seeks to while away the happy hours, so with those halcion days & scenes thou art inseparably connected.

As a mindful older brother, Murrell also inquires about his sisters' acquisition of knowledge, encouraging the little ones to read and learn, and applauding the opening of a lyceum in Bowling Green (item 63, May 1853). Such comments given in passing tell us about the everyday life of a well-off Kentucky family in the mid-19th century.

Like many other miners, Murrell anxiously waited for letters from home, and complained about the bad management of the postal services, though his eagerness eventually receded with time.

But in late 1853, he could not help but remark that “My correspondants in Ky have dropped off one by one untill I have now left save the family circle except friend Jess Grider” (item 65). It seems that the adage “out of sight, out of mind” applied, and Murrell finally grew lonely in the California mountains (item 66, December 1853):

But sister, with all its beauties & charms I am beginning to sicken somewhat of it. There is a something wanting, an unwritten blank on the page of existence here. A balmy atmosphere, Romantic & Picturesque Landscape, Bright flowers, &c, &c, do not suffice to fill the whole mind with happiness. But we want congenial & kindred spirits, to partake of our enjoyments & mingle in our associations with those congenial spirits, the unwritten Blank would be filled out. [...] Man is a sociable creature, & without companions he cannot be happy for a great while.

Although his letters show that he could have easily stayed in the golden state, or at least was strongly tempted to do so, George McKinley Murrell eventually went back to Kentucky in 1854, without having made his pile in California, and without Reuben. Perhaps Murrell would have remained in California had women been more numerous to give him a chance to marry and settle there.

Like so many other miners, Murrell was unlucky in his prospects, having arrived too late for the gold that was more easily found or extracted, and being too poor to set up a large mining company and invest in heavy machinery.<sup>52</sup> As Mary Bennett Ritter sums up, “The losers at the mining gamble were many; the winners

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52/ As early as 1850, Edward Gould Buffum wrote a book about the gold mines of California, in which he anticipated the end of individual prospectors who would soon have to leave the work to large companies that had the means and money to invest in the proper machinery: “The era which follows the present successful gold-washing operations will be one, when, by a union of capital, manual labour, and machinery, joint-stock companies will perform what individuals now do. While gold can be found lying within a few inches of the earth’s surface, and the only capital required to extract it consists in the capability to purchase a pick and a shovel, there is no need of combination; but when the hills are to be torn to their very bases, the plains completely uprooted, and the streams, which flow down from the Sierra Nevada to be turned from their channels, individuals must retire from the field, and make room for combined efforts.” E. G. BUFFUM, *Six Months in the Gold Mines, from a Journal of Three Years’ Residence in Upper and Lower California, 1847-8-9*, Philadelphia, Lea and Blanchard, 1850, p. 107.

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few.”<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Dame Shirley wrote, “But in truth, the whole mining system in California is one great gambling, or better, perhaps—lottery transaction. It is impossible to tell whether a claim will prove valuable or not.” And she repeated this observation in 1852: “Gold mining is Nature’s great lottery scheme. A man may work in a claim for many months, and be poorer at the end of the time than when he commenced; or he may take out thousands in a few hours. It is a mere matter of chance.”<sup>54</sup> Murrell was not a workhorse (he said so himself), but he also concluded that gold mining was, indeed, a game of chance, repeating twice in his correspondence (items 44, 64), “There is more in luck than work.”

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After his return home, George McKinley Murrell became a farmer and married Mary Malvina Skiles (1831-1862) on February 26, 1855. They had two daughters, Josephine (born 1856) and Hannah (1857), and a son, William (1861). After the death of his first wife, Murrell married Sallie Dugan (1831-1875).

George McKinley Murrell died on September 16, 1872, in Warren County, Kentucky, at age 46. Though he was unsuccessful in his mining enterprises, his five-year experience as a Forty-Niner in the California Gold Rush undoubtedly remained the great adventure of his life, and his letters his richest and most enduring legacy.

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53/ M. B. RITTER, *More Than Gold in California, 1849-1933*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

54/ See her sixth letter to her sister, from Rich Bar, September 30, 1851, and her fifteenth letter, from Indian Bar, April 10, 1852, L. A. K. S. CLAPPE (“Dame Shirley”), *The Shirley Letters from The California Mines, 1851-1852*, *op. cit.*, p. 50-51, 136.

# Editorial Procedures

Here are clarifications about the editorial choices made for the present volume. To begin with, the letters are numbered for easier cross-reference (the item numbers being also used in the index instead of page numbers) and organized in three main sections, corresponding first to Murrell's trip from Kentucky to California from March to October 1849 (items 1-15), then to his mining operations in El Dorado and Placer County from January 1850 to April 1851 (items 16-38), and finally to his stay in Big Bar, El Dorado County, from May 1851 to December 1853 (items 39-66), Murrell's last letter being used as a fitting epilogue to his California adventure (item 67).

Overall, the transcription of the autograph letters remained relatively easy, Murrell's handwriting being generally legible (see figure 1). However, certain items, written in pencil and timeworn, proved more arduous to decipher. As is customary when publishing emigrant diaries and letters, the goal is to respect the author's spelling as much as possible. Also, like many 19th-century diarists, Murrell tended to display what we would see today as an unorthodox use of capitalization. His usage is faithfully reproduced, except when he forgot to capitalize the first word at the beginning of a sentence. Throughout the volume, square brackets are used exclusively for the editing.

The letters were checked thoroughly, so all the grammatical or orthographical errors in the text are Murrell's, and a [*sic*] is added on a rare occasion, notably when the structure of a sentence appeared odd ("piled on pile", for instance). But as the reader will soon notice, Murrell's spelling errors are sufficiently numerous to dispense with a systematic inclusion of [*sic*].

Nevertheless, some editing was necessary for the sake of easier and more fluid reading. For instance, duplicate words were simply deleted and, in order to avoid confusions or misunderstandings, a letter or syllable was sometimes added between square brackets to clarify the meaning of certain words, for instance when Murrell writes "angle" instead of "angel," "cannons" instead of "canyons," or "lest" instead of "least." The reader will also notice that, just like

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Reuben's first name, Murrell did not systematically spell certain words the same way, for instance "cholera" is sometimes written "cholra" or "colera." He also had particular habits, such as using the infinitive of a verb and adding "-ing," which can give some odd spelling such as "comeing" or "leaveing," or when he wrote certain words as one unique term such as "greatdeal." When the spelling left a doubt (e.g., when it was impossible to determine whether a letter was an *a* or an *e*), the correct spelling was systematically used. Some of the letters contain tears. Sometimes it was possible to fill in the blanks (in which case the word is indicated between square brackets with a question mark), and sometimes not (in which case [*tear*] is added). The mention [*illegible*] is used when it was impossible to decipher one or several words. When a term needs to be clarified, either an explanatory word follows between brackets, or footnotes are used so as to avoid confusions between the original text and editing explanations.

As Murrell generally did not include any punctuation marks and often drew his commas and full stops the same way, syntactic logic prevailed in this transcription, making it necessary to add a minimum of punctuation to render the reading easier and more fluid. Also, as said earlier, like most Forty-Niners and overland emigrants, Murrell tended to use all available space, because paper was scarce and opportunities to send letters home too few and very expensive. Endless text blocks, however, can be tiring and even off-putting, hence the organization in paragraphs to lighten the letters and allow for better reading. Murrell also underlined some words or phrases here and there. We respected this emphasis, but simply replaced the underlining by italicizing.

We attempted to check and shed light on every reference (people, places, techniques, quotations, etc.) made by George McKinley Murrell in his letters, aiming as far as possible at exhaustiveness. The numerous notes, inserted at the end of each item, are also intended to clarify Murrell's network of relations and provide information that may seem superfluous to the expert, but may prove useful to the reader at large.