

The Doorknob Collector



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The Pacific Mail Steamship Line

By Allen S. Joslyn

In the second half of the 1840s the Pacific Coast of the United States was solidifying. The northern part, west from the Continental Divide, was disputed with the British Empire.

We claimed “54 50”, which reached up almost to the Russian area of Alaska. The British took the position that the border should just continue West on the 49th parallel from the Lake of the Woods in Minnesota. After much huffing and puffing about Manifest Destiny from the American side, both countries decided that a third war in 70 years was not a good idea, especially since the United States was largely busy with Texas and Mexico. In 1846 a Treaty followed the British line and the border was set, mostly. ⁽¹⁾



Americans were streaming into the fertile soil of the Willamette Valley in Oregon, and California was an appealing, if largely unpopulated, area. It thus seemed to be a good idea to bind the area closer to the United States by regular (subsidized) mail delivery.

William Henry Aspinwall ran a major sail-driven shipping company which traded with Europe, South America and China, and acquired the lucrative mail contract. The idea was to transport mail and passengers by another company’s ships to Chagres, on the East Coast of Panama, across the isthmus by land, and pick them up on the West Coast with steam ships belonging to the Pacific Mail Steamship Line. On October 6, 1848, his first steamship departed for Pacific service, having to round the Cape of Good Hope to get to the Pacific. Meanwhile, developments were afoot in the mountains of California (which the United States had just acquired from Mexico). One morning in January, 1848, William Marshall picked up an interesting bright pebble, which he and John Sutter decided was gold. GOLD !!

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That news took a long time to spread to the East Coast. It was extremely difficult to traverse the uncharted way West. There was no telegraph, no pony express, no railroads. People who managed to travel to Oregon very rarely came back. By the end of August, however, a letter and samples of the gold were dispatched to Washington, arriving in late November, 1848. President Polk then announced the discovery of gold. The madness began.

The Pacific Mail Steamship, California, arrived on the West Coast of Panama in happy ignorance of what had happened, expecting to carry only a few passengers to California. It was greeted by a mob frantic to get to the gold fields. Those permitted to board were picked by lottery.

Upon arrival in San Francisco on February 28, 1849, the ship experienced a black hole – the crew all departed for the gold fields. There are pictures of the San Francisco harbor filled with empty ships. It took months to recruit new and much better paid sailing crews. On the eastern coast of Panama, a similar collection of empty ships grew.

Some competition broke out. In 1850, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company began to compete with the U. S. Mail Steamship Company for the New York to Chagres trade, and the latter fired up competition for the Panama to San Francisco route. By 1851 this problem was solved, in the best monopolistic tradition, when each bought the other out. By 1866, Pacific Mail Steamship acquired the Atlantic Mail Steamship Company, thus controlling both legs of the journey. And William Aspinwall was one of the founders of The Panama Railroad, which finally spanned Panama from coast to coast in 1855. These separate but allied companies were hugely profitable. The Steamship Company returned up to 30% on an investment, and was running up to 23 steamers in 1869. But, of course, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 spelled the end of the Panama route.

The company adapted, starting the first regular trans-pacific steamship service to Asia (Yokohama, Hong Kong and Shanghai) in 1867. In that year, it also ran ships to the West Coast of South America, and to Central America, Europe and Australia by connecting lines.

But back to the Gold Rush. Well, before the East Coast went mad, the news reached Asia (a shorter and straight sail). Adventurers began to arrive from Australia. And news of “the Golden Mountain” reached China, beginning wholesale immigration to the United States. China was in turmoil, and the possibility of a couple of years abroad, returning with untold riches to one’s village, was irresistible. The Chinese not only joined the rush, but also labored mightily to build the Transcontinental Railway. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company carried large numbers of Chinese and Japanese. Before the Gold Rush, it is estimated that there were fewer than 50 Chinese in the United States, many Circus attractions. By 1852 the Customs House in San Francisco recorded some 20,000 Chinese immigrants, and by 1872, there were more than 100,000 Chinese on the Pacific slope. The introduction of the steamship cut the travel time from Asia from as long as 80-100 days to 4 or 5 weeks.

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Pictured on the right is part of an illustration from Harpers Weekly of May 20, 1876, entitled “Chinese Emigration to America – Sketch on Board Pacific Mail Steamship ‘Alaska’”.

Eventually the company failed to keep up technologically and lost some subsidized mail contracts. It was sold to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, and thereafter to the Grace Line, the Dollar Line and finally to the American President Line. It formally died 1949.

The bottom line, however, is that the Pacific Mail Steamship Company played a critical role in the development of San Francisco, California, the American West and the Pacific Basin.

But now for the knob (O-425). It probably is from the mid-1870-80s, and manufactured by Mallory Wheeler, since it has the same border and design on the back as A-311. VDA II reports it is found in two sizes.

Next time you are in New York at the Metropolitan Museum, look at the panel listing its original founders on the first floor. The list starts with J. P. Morgan, but goes on to include William Aspinwall, no small potatoes in those days.



(1) There continued to be a dispute over dividing up the islands off the West Coast, but Kaiser Wilhelm I eventually solved that, acting as an arbitrator. For those particularly given to historical minutia, we should also not forget the “pig war” of 1859 with the British, whose only casualty was said pig. In a disputed area, an American found a Canadian pig eating his potatoes, and shot it. This led to the interchange: “It was eating my potatoes” The response: “you keep your potatoes out of my pig”. Jets, as it were, were scrambled, but eventually the British commander declared “two great nations in a war over a squabble over a pig” was foolish. The incident is celebrated annually by raising the Canadian flag on the American national park where it took place.

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Wikipedia, Pacific Mail Steamship Company, The Panama Railroad , Oregon boundary dispute , The Pig War and William Aspinwall.

MEET YOUR FELLOW MEMBERS

Rhett Butler (#292)

By Vicky Berol

This article is a long overdue thank you and acknowledgment for the many contributions of Rhett Butler, Past President,

- (1) 25th Anniversary ADCA Convention Chair who has volunteered to host the 2016 Convention in Boston
- (2) Current Board of Directors member
- (3) The force behind digitizing the original catalogs in the ADCA archives, probably the most important step forward in adapting to the club to the internet age, and
- (4) Generous contributor to the ADCA.

Rhett joined ADCA in 1992. In 1997 he was elected to the Board and two years later he became Board President. Stepping down from Board President after one term, to head the Charleston Convention, he has continued on as a Board member.

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Rhett hosted in 2005 the 25th Anniversary ADCA Convention in his hometown. We were treated to the hospitality of the South with tours of historic houses and Ante-bellum plantations, to rides in horse-drawn carriages, a ghost walk and delicious southern bar-b-cues.

Rhett's background is as varied as his talent. He has studied painting, sculpture, jewelry making and pottery. In 1984 he graduated with a BA of Fine Art, Art History and Classical Studies from Hamilton College in New York. He continued his education in NYC's Parson School of Design and received his architectural training at The School of Architecture, Rice University (Houston), where he earned M ARCH (post professional degree) in 1992. He is a member of American Institute of Architects (AIA), The Construction Specifications Institute (CSI), The Door and Hardware Institute (DHI), the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America (ICA&CA) and the Friends of Georgian Group. He is a prolific designer of



hardware and a manufacturer of fine architectural builders' and cabinet makers' Early American, Federal and Georgian period hardware. He has received numerous awards.

In 1990 Rhett revived the firm E.R. Butler & Co. in New York City, which, with its acquisitions, goes back to 1827. The showroom is housed in the legendary Prince Street Works, the former silver manufacturing headquarters of Tiffany & Co., where many unique designs were crafted. E.R. Butler carries on the tradition set by its predecessors and by Tiffany. His works, and inventory, are in an 1887 former foundry factory in Red Hook, Brooklyn he acquired and repurposed. It survived Sandy, but with a lot of damage. In addition to his vast collection of hardware catalogues, it also contains a room of taxidermed animals. The Red Hook works are filled with a large range of high-tech metalworking and cutting machines – casting has been replaced, on the high end, by computer-driven milling machines.

A collector's collector, he is a proprietor of one of the worlds largest collection of fine architectural hardware - countless doorknobs and

knockers, cabinet pulls, along with hinges, finials and thumb latches, made variously of steel, silver, bronze, brass, porcelain, jade, amber and mercury glass. When asked "Why hardware?" Rhett responded "It is an amazing field - it incorporates design, history, material and sciences and rounds out my personal interests". But his inventory is not limited to hardware – it includes jewelry by renowned designers that he has commissioned, and whatever else you want to have made for you in particular.

An archivist at heart, the E.R. Butler & Co. contain the industry's most comprehensive research library, with more than 30,000 trade catalogs, design, blueprints and molds dating back to the 1600's, for use in restoration and preservation. His interest lies in the ability to reconstruct, classify and organize the history of hardware in general, and in particular, American hardware. Historians interested in all kinds and types of hardware visit the library on a regular basis. Over the years, many articles have been written on Rhett, his collections, and the firm of E.R. Butler.

A giant in his industry, to ADCA, he is a rare find. An acknowledged leader, quietly generous and a true gentleman of the South (even if he lives in Brooklyn), Rhett encompasses all of these qualities. Unlike Margaret Mitchell's hero, our Rhett Butler really does give a damn!, and for that we are grateful.

He also has an outrageous sense of humor. But for that, you have to meet him.

The Harlem Rattlers – An Update

In TDC 143, we surveyed the history of the 369th Regiment, the "Harlem Rattlers" in the First World War, and quite a story it was. It has now been retold, in greater length and detail, in a new book, Sammons and Morrow, Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality (University of Kansas Press, 2014).



In Memoriam

Barbara Liesman (#32) of Cedar Rapids, IA passed away on October 15, 2013, at the age of 96. Survivors include her daughters, Julia Robinson and Gay Holstine and husband Wayne, and granddaughter, Audrey Robinson. She was a charter member of the ADCA, attending the first meeting in Waverly, IA in 1981 with her husband, Max, and also helped with the 1987 convention in Des Moines, IA. Barbara also attended four conventions, with her daughter and son-in-law: 1992 in Elgin, IL, 1994 in Milwaukee, 1998 in Winnipeg, and 2003 in San Antonio, TX.

Those who knew her well were aware that she was a great seamstress, making most of her own clothes, and enjoyed making quilts. She was also a member of the Iowa Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks.



GETTING HITCHED IN 1900 AND 2010

By Paul Woodfin

With all of the recent headlines about Marriage in the news, I got to thinking about all of the door-knobs that those newlyweds have touched (and in some cases still do) as they got their marriage licenses, got married, and celebrated their marriages with friends and family afterwards.

Traditionally weddings usually occurred in the churches and tabernacles across this country that represented the faiths of the couple getting married. However, most churches were not built with custom hardware as the cost of such was beyond the means and not of importance for the congregation who usually were paying to construct their new house of worship.

Chicago In 1900 you would have gotten your marriage license at the Cook County Courthouse (top right), completed in the 1880s after the Chicago Fire destroyed their 1853 courthouse. This courthouse served un-



til 1907 when the current Courthouse/City Hall was completed. Receptions likely would have occurred at hotels (above, left to right) such as the Blackstone Hotel (1908, now the Renaissance Blackstone Hotel) on South Michigan Avenue or the Hotel LaSalle (1907, razed) on North LaSalle Street, or at private clubs such as the Daughters of Isabella Building (1892, razed), a women's private club noted in TDC #17.



Today weddings and receptions are just as likely to occur in historic venues such as the Rookery (1888)(left) with its glass ceiling lobby redesigned by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1905, and the Chicago Stock Exchange (1893, razed) Trading Room recreated at the Art Institute from salvaged materials in 1977 (right).



New York City In New York State marriage licenses are obtained from the City Clerk's offices. In Manhattan, from 1912 to 2009 that

meant a trip to the Municipal Building at 1 Centre Street. (pg. 6 bottom right). After the ceremony you likely would have your reception at such landmarks as (1st row, left to right below) the Murray Hill Hotel (1884, razed), the Plaza Hotel (1909), the Vanderbilt Hotel (1913, now condos), (second row, left to right) the Thomas Edison Hotel (1931) in the Theater district, or the Level Club (1926, a Masonic clubhouse that is now condos). And adaptive reuse is bringing new life to historic buildings such as the Williamsburg Savings Bank (1875) in Brooklyn, a bank for 140 years and now an event space (second row, right).



Toronto In Canada's largest city marriage licenses are obtained at City Hall, which from 1898-1965 was a striking Romanesque building with a soaring clock tower that serves today as a courthouse (Left to right). Receptions might be held at the King Edward Hotel (1903, extant), or if you were politically connected, at the Ontario Government House in Chorley Park (1915, razed).



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