

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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THE NIANTIC HOTEL

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THE NIAN TIC HOTEL

"There she blows!" That cry often resounded from from the crow's-nest of the good old whaler Niantic, as it nosed into the heavy combers of the North Atlantic in search of the leviathans of the deep. Each year the vessel put out of Liverpool, the home port, and after cruising about for months returned at the end of the season laden with a full cargo of sperm oil which yielded a rich golden harvest to its owners.

The early months of the year 1848 saw the Niantic sail out of Liverpool, bound for the South Atlantic where whales were plentiful. After a successful catch, it rounded the Horn, proceeding north along the Chilean coast to the port of Valparaiso where it put in. There for some reason the owners decided to dispose of the ship and its valuable cargo. The ship was purchased by the Chilean firm of Moorhead, Whitehead and Waddington for service in the Panama trade. This was in the last months of 1848. Before being ready for that run, the Niantic had to be cleaned and refitted. After several months of work, it was ready. In February 1849, Captain Cleveland was placed in command and once more it sailed away, this time bound for Panama.

It nosed into old Panama about the fifth of April 1849, only to find that sleepy Spanish port in an uproar.

In fact it was a madhouse. Its population had more than doubled. Hundreds of people were arriving at the Atlantic side of the Isthmus every week and plunging into the hot, tropical forest on their trek across the low continental divide, fifty miles to Panama City. There they waited by the thousands, taxing the resources of that old town to the limit, dying by the dozens of tropical fevers, and all looking and waiting for a boat, a ship, in fact anything that would float, it mattered not how unseaworthy it might be. Gold! That magic word that makes men sacrifice everything they hold most dear, that turns them into beasts ready to tear one another to pieces, was on every lip, in every mind. Gold had been discovered in California and gold-lust had seized the world in its feverish grip. The race to San Francisco was on. Ships were needed, ships to speed these new argonauts in quest of the golden fleece. Any price asked for a ticket was gladly paid. What mattered expense if they could only get away from that hell hole and reach the promised land where nuggets were picked up by the panful on every hand?

No sooner did the Niantic drop anchor in Panama than Captain Cleveland was besieged by requests for passage to San Francisco. This seemed a gilt-edge proposition. The risks were nil and the profits large and sure. One trip would pay for the ship and leave a fine surplus. Captain

Cleveland, as a business man, at once decided to take a load of passengers to San Francisco. The Niantic was a fine, sturdy ship of a thousand tons, so it could carry several hundred passengers. It was at once billed for San Francisco, loaded with a cargo of tropical produce. A few days later, with 248 passengers aboard, it weighed anchor and stood out to sea. Its blunt nose was pointed to the northwest. The old whaler was sailing its last course. The fare for each person being \$150 cash, the Niantic had taken in \$37,500 before it started.¹

All went well on the voyage, except that the vessel was overcrowded, the food was poor, and sleeping accommodations were worse. After a slow trip against constant headwinds, the Niantic rounded Clark's Point and dropped anchor in Yerba Buena cove on July 5, 1849, sixty-eight days from the time it left Panama.²

If the Isthmus was a madhouse, San Francisco was the quintessence of insanity afflicted by a gold fever as virulent as it was deadly. No sooner did a vessel enter the Golden Gate than all those aboard, passengers and crew alike, were smitten, and by the time the ship dropped anchor in the cove they were in the last stages of the disease.

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1. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, VI, Fn. 21, 135.
 2. T. A. Barry, San Francisco in the spring of '50. 133-136.
(From the Alta California of 1873).

To this rule the Niantic was no exception. Hardly had it landed its passengers at Yerba Buena when its crew deserted to a man, taking its life-boats. The deserters rushed away to the gold diggings, not even waiting for their pay. Captain Cleveland, finding himself unable to get a new crew, also decided to go and seek his fortune in the mines. Thus the Niantic, deserted, stood in the stream, one more old hull among the hundreds of others that crowded the anchorage. It had joined the rest of the motionless, painted ships upon a painted ocean, a "white elephant" on the hands of its consignees, Cook, Baker and Company.

As the tide of migration to the mines turned with the winter's rains, there was a rush back to San Francisco. Lodging and store spaces being at a premium, some of the ships were pressed into service for those purposes. The Niantic was one of them. In November 1849, it was bought at a reduced price by a firm who hauled it close to the shore alongside the Clay Street wharf, to a spot that later became the northwest corner of Clay and Sansome streets. Its ballast was removed, its lofty masts and spars with their rigging were dismantled, and piles were driven along its beam on either side to hold it on an even keel. A new story was built upon its upper deck, with a veranda all around it. A shingle roof was placed over it; doors and windows were cut in the hull; the interior was subdivided

into stores and offices, and the exterior was painted over with signs and showboards of the various occupants. The upper floors were used as a hotel that soon became the most notable of the cheap hostelries in the city. The hold was rented to different firms as a storehouse and all sorts of goods were kept there, including wine.

For a time the Niantic was connected to the wharf and the shore by a number of gangplanks. As the cove was rapidly being filled in by the sand and rock graded from the streets, early in 1850 the Niantic found itself left high and dry upon the land, its hull half buried in the mud. Then Sansome Street was laid out between it and the water. The ship was approached by a broad walk and entered by a handsome stairway. It became a popular place. Both stores and offices there found tenants at higher rents because it was convenient to the shipping center. It returned a steadier income than it would have earned afloat.³ It continued to do a flourishing business until May 4, 1851, when it was burned in the great fire which left only the part of the hull that was buried in the ground.

No sooner were the ashes cold than the owners started to rebuild on the old site. As the wreckage was

3. Z. S. Eldredge, The beginnings of San Francisco, II, 579-580.

cleared away, it was found that the unburned part of the hull was still sound. In the hold had been stored many articles, some of which were burned but many were not. Nevertheless no investigation of them was made. The hull was timbered over and used as the foundation for the new building, which was a three-story frame and brick building. This was made into a hotel named Niantic Hotel.⁴

As soon as it was finished it was leased by L. H. Roby, under whose management it secured the reputation of being the best hotel in the city at that time. At the end of 1851, Roby sold his lease to a man named Johnson, and went into other business in which he prospered until 1871. He then suffered serious reverses, due to which he committed suicide. Johnson kept the hotel for a short time, made considerable money, then sold out to Daniel Parrish in 1852.⁵

While Parrish was running the hotel, one of his boarders was arrested on a charge of stealing a large sum of money. He was tried and convicted and sent to the state prison for a term of years. The money, however, was not recovered although it was supposed at the time that it was secreted somewhere about the hotel. A diligent search was

4. Barry, San Francisco in the spring of '50. 133-134.
(from the Alta California 1873.)

5. Ibid., 134.

made for it, but without results.

Some months after this event, P. J. Woods, who had been clerking for Parrish, bought his employer's lease. He did a thriving business and made considerable money. Suddenly he settled his business and departed for parts unknown without explanation. Those who claimed to be in the know said that he carried with him more money than he had acquired from the business of the Niantic Hotel. At once the story got about that he had found the hidden hoard of stolen money.⁶

The next person to lease the Niantic Hotel was N. H. Parkell, who held it for a long time. One day, several years after he had taken over the place, a man entered the hotel office. He said that he had buried a large sum of money beneath the doorstep, and wished permission to dig for it. On being questioned, the man admitted being the person convicted of stealing some years before. By this time four or five feet of sand had been thrown over the place where, the thief said, he had buried the money. Digging started, and the earth was removed, but the money could not be found. Years later, when the building was being demolished, the laborers employed on the job searched diligently but found nothing.

6. Barry, San Francisco in the spring of '50. 135.
(from The Alta California, 1873.)

Parkell continued the lease, and prospered in the Niantic Hotel until 1864. He then transferred it to Miss Mooney, a sister of Assistant City Engineer Con. Mooney. She continued as landlady of the house, which by that time had lost its leading place among the city's hotels, down to the last moment of its career.

In 1872, Charles L. Low, the owner of the lot, decided to tear down the old hotel and erect a more modern building in its place. Work was started at once, and soon the old Niantic Hotel was only a memory. When the workmen had cleared off the lot down to the foundations, they found the old hull of the Niantic serving as a cellar for the hotel, still in good condition. As they dug and cleared away the remains of the ship to make room for the new cellar, many relics of the fire of '51 were unearthed. Since after the conflagration, when the debris was cleared and the hotel was built, the hull had been covered over and all goods stored there had been left undisturbed.⁷ As the workers started to dig them out, among the various articles were discovered thirty-five baskets of champagne and wine, much to the men's surprise and joy. The bottles and straw wrappings were in perfect condition. Wine that had been in

7. J. S. Hittell, A history of the city of San Francisco, 165-166.

storage for twenty-one years! What a treat it was to thirsty workmen! It seems the wine had been placed in storage there by the firm of Van Brunt and Verplanck, whose store was on Sansome Street adjoining the Niantic. After the fire, they had either forgotten or thought it destroyed. At any rate, when it was uncovered years later they made no effort to claim it. It was divided among those working on the new buildings.⁸

The new building was a handsome and substantial four-story brick structure known as the Niantic Block. The lower floor was occupied by fruit and produce markets; the second story was given over to printing offices, and the third and fourth stories to various purposes. That building then carried on the traditions of the old ship and hotel, its predecessors, returning a handsome income to its owners until April 18, 1906, when it was destroyed in the earthquake and fire.⁹

This old landmark remained unmarked and unsung and almost forgotten, until September 8, 1919, when the Native Sons of the Golden West placed a marker on the building now standing on the site of the Niantic. The marker reads as follows:

8. Barry, San Francisco in the spring of '50, 136.

9. Ibid., 137.

The emigrant ship Niantic stood on this spot in the early days, 'when the water came up to Montgomery Street.' Converted to other uses, it was covered with a shingle roof, with offices and stores on deck, at the level of which was constructed a wide balcony surmounted by a veranda. The hull was divided into warehouses, entered by doorways on the side.

The wheels of progress turn and grind the old institutions into the dust. Now only a bronze plaque remains as a reminder of the Niantic.

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