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A London Jew in the California gold rush

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The history of the Jews in Britain is a history of successive waves of immigration, beginning with the descendants of *conversos* in the seventeenth century and concluding, it would seem, with refugees from Arab and Soviet hostility in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as South African Jews escaping the apartheid system. The settlement, acculturation, and eventual integration of these successive waves is one way to organize or signpost the telling of Anglo-Jewish history. An economic corollary to this scheme is the gradual *embourgeoisement* of most descendants of these immigrants, for Britain was not only a safe haven but also a land of opportunity, by virtue of its economic dynamism and (relative) openness to talent. While historians in recent decades also emphasize the hostility and resistance of many Britons to these influxes, they seem to accept the characterization of Anglo-Jewish history as a story of slow but persistent *embourgeoisement*, although they rarely address this point directly. Certainly, in view of the disappearance of the Jewish working class in the second half of the twentieth century, it would be difficult to argue otherwise. Poverty today is found, by and large, only among the Haredim, for whom strict observance of the *mitzvot* (commandments) takes precedence over measures that accelerate economic mobility, such as secular education and birth control.

Alongside the flow of Jews into Britain, there was, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a less noticeable movement of Jews out of Britain that was tied to the growth of the British Empire and, to a lesser degree, the westward expansion of the United States. Those who departed included a small number of ideological migrants (primarily those who settled in the Land of Israel but also some who cast their lot with the Soviet experiment) and a much larger number of economic migrants, the focus of this paper. The latter left to pursue professional advancement and commercial success in Britain's overseas possessions (Australia and South Africa, in the main) and in the United States. Some left intending to making their fortune abroad and then return to Britain as wealthy men; others saw their departure as permanent. While the motives for emigration can be

complex, with both emotional and material dimensions, what is common to the outlook of almost all these voluntary emigrants is the conviction that they would fare better there rather than here. Most Anglo-Jewish emigrants believed that their chances for worldly success were more limited in the land of their birth, that they had a brighter future elsewhere. Seen from this perspective, the story of Jewish emigration tempers the story of gradual economic mobility, even if it does not subvert it.

On the whole, the story of Jewish emigration from Britain is unexplored. The thousand or so Jewish criminals who were transported to Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have merited the attention of historians, but they were involuntary, not voluntary, emigrants.¹ Most accounts of voluntary Jewish settlement in Australia, South Africa, and other corners of the British Empire say little about the conditions that pushed their subjects to try their luck elsewhere. Even historians who are associated with the so-called Imperial Turn in modern European historiography, and explore the ways in which Anglo-Jewish history was imbricated in the history of the British Empire, fail to interrogate the motives and background of Jews who settled there.² Instead, they tend to focus on the enthusiasm of rabbis and notables in the metropole for imperial adventures, on the profitable investments of Jewish banking firms in colonial enterprises, and to a lesser extent on the careers of Jews who served as consuls, soldiers, and civil servants in the colonies. While indebted to the Imperial Turn, this essay moves in a different direction. It follows the commercial career of an otherwise obscure English Jew in Australia and California in the mid-nineteenth century, a very ordinary Jew in many ways, whose successes and failures abroad are a small link in the history of Western imperialism.

In August 1848, Abraham Salaman, twenty-one years old at the time, sailed

1 John S. Levi and George F. J. Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers, 1788–1850* (London: Robert Hale & Co., 1974); J. J. Tobias, *Prince of Fences: The Life and Crimes of Ikey Solomons* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1974); John S. Levi, *These are the Names: Jewish Lives in Australia, 1788–1850* (Carlton, Australia: Miegunyah Press, 2006); Rob Wills, *Alias Blind Larry: The Mostly True Memoir of James Laurence, the Singing Convict* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015).

2 See e.g. David Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire c. 1900”, *History Workshop Journal* 63, no. 1 (spring 2007): 70–89; Abigail Green, “The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?” *Past & Present* 191 (2011): 175–205. On the Imperial Turn in modern Jewish history more generally see Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

from London to Sydney, Australia.³ Abraham came from a modest but not impoverished background. His father, Isaac, whose ancestors migrated to England from Central Europe in the early or mid-eighteenth century, was an ostrich-feather merchant.⁴ He imported the feathers from Livorno and cleaned, dyed, and curled them in his home workshop in Lamb's Conduit Street, London, with the help of his wife and unmarried daughters. While ostrich feathers are no longer a valuable commodity, they clearly were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Britain and elsewhere, they adorned the military uniforms of men and the hats, gowns, wraps, and fans of stylish women. Isaac's business allowed him, his wife, and their seven children (four boys and three girls) to live a comfortable but not upper-middle-class existence. However, he did not envision that his business would be able to support his four sons (and their families) as adults. So he apprenticed Aaron and Abraham to watchmakers, while Nathan trained as a law stationer, a clerk who made handwritten copies of legal documents. The youngest son, Myer, eventually entered and took over his father's business, turning it into a flourishing international concern, with offices in London, Paris, New York, and Cape Town.⁵

Abraham's motive for leaving England is no mystery: as he repeatedly told his family, his aim was to make his fortune. Writing from Sydney in March 1849, he insisted, after complaining of the town's shortcomings, that he would, nevertheless, not return to live in London even with £300 in his pocket. He would only return once he had made "a large fortune", which he saw no chance of doing at present.⁶ He was also on the lookout for opportunities for his brothers. He reported to Nathan that he would let him know if there were many solicitors and barristers in Sydney (potential customers for a law stationer). He assured him that he would not allow any opportunity for Nathan to improve his condition to slip by. "You may believe me that I shall feel it a duty and pleasure to look after the welfare of

3 Among the letters he wrote to his family between 1848 and 1856, about thirty-five have survived. They constitute a unique source for understanding Anglo-Jewish emigration in the Victorian period. I am grateful to Helen C. Causton, a great-great-granddaughter of Salaman, for giving me access to the letters.

4 A wide-ranging account of the trade is Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

5 Todd M. Endelman, *The Last Anglo-Jewish Gentleman: The Life and Times of Redcliffe Nathan Salaman* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), ch. 1.

6 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 25 March 1849.

all my brothers and sisters.”⁷ He also proposed that Aaron and Nathan join him in Australia. The three of them would then set up as watch and clock jobbers in New Zealand or in one of the small towns in New South Wales and “make a fortune”. Wherever they opened their shop, they would also buy “some small allotments of land”, which they could get very cheap, and wait for them to appreciate. Those who had bought land in Sydney four years earlier, when it was selling for £2 an acre, were now “rich people”. He told them to lose no time in emigrating.⁸ After moving on to California, he continued to assert his intention to make his fortune. In a letter to his brother Nathan from Monterey in June 1850, he wrote that he was “making a comfortable living and saving a little money”, and hoping to see Nathan and the rest of the family – “but never till I make a little fortune”.⁹

It is no exaggeration to say that Abraham was obsessed with making his fortune and returning to London a rich man. But how was he to accomplish this? When he landed in Sydney, he found employment as a watchmaker with W. R. Lamb, a jeweller in George Street, in whose house he lived. But watchmaking, especially in the employ of someone else, was no road to riches. Fiercely ambitious, Abraham was, by virtue of his upbringing, endowed with an entrepreneur’s outlook. He was alert to and remarked on the expansion of commercial life in Australia’s frontier economy and the opportunities it furnished, especially in supplying the colonists with consumer goods and in speculating in land. Within a few months of his arrival, he wrote to Nathan that Sydney supplied the entire territory of New South Wales with merchandise of all descriptions. Every half hour wagons drawn by eight oxen drew up in George Street to unload their cargoes of wood, tallow, hides, and the like. The auction houses there sold them to merchants, who in turn shipped them to England. The farmers, stockmen, bullock-drivers, shepherds, and farm servants who accompanied the teams then loaded them with provisions, staples, and fancy goods to sell in the scattered settlements of the interior. Abraham was confident that there was money to be made in Sydney for himself and Nathan, and urged his brother to ship him a consignment of goods that were scarce there, which he then listed. The list included magnifying glasses, toothbrushes, combs, imitation pearl beads (for trading with the indigenes), inkstands, silver watch guards, brooches, locketts, shirt studs, rings, earrings, eye-glasses, preserves, meerschaum pipes, thimbles, and

7 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 4 Oct. 1849.

8 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 25 March 1849.

9 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 1 June 1850.

watch-glasses. The striking diversity of the goods was typical of Jewish merchants who did business in frontier societies. Abraham's instructions to Nathan reveal that he was familiar with the wholesale merchants where Nathan would make his purchases. He also instructed Nathan to prepare two invoices, one with the correct cost of the goods and one with the prices marked ten to fifteen per cent more than the original price. He would use the latter list when selling wholesale to the trade, thus inflating the price by fifteen per cent.¹⁰

Whether the goods arrived from London and whether Abraham made a profit when he sold them is not known. But seven weeks later he again sent Nathan another list of goods, remarkably different from the previous one, that he intended to sell to a distilling firm. This list included cream of tartar, essence of lemons, peppermint oil, oil of cloves, oil of bitter almonds, cardamon seeds, quassia, galls, and logwood.¹¹ A few months later, during Passover 1849, he asked Nathan to send him goods for a country jobbing shop: watch dials, watches, watch chains, watch hands, watch springs, common jewellery, and cheap, showy French clocks. All of these he expected to sell "at a wonderful profit".¹² And then a few weeks after that he asked his parents to ship him drapery and apparel: calicos, flannel shirts, woollen stockings, boots, shoes, French flowers (which they should relabel as English flowers to avoid the tariff), and slops of all description.¹³

On the face of it, Abraham was a likely candidate to succeed in business. He had access to modest amounts of capital and a network of suppliers in London. Indeed, family members – his brother Nathan and Henry Naphtali Solomon, the brother-in-law of two sisters of his mother and proprietor of a Jewish school for boys in Edmonton, north London – had bankrolled his initial voyage to Australia. Abraham seemingly knew the ins and outs of the business world. Consumer demand was explosive, as it was in most frontier colonial societies. Above all, he was driven to succeed, and looked at the world through the eyes of a businessman, seeing opportunities where others did not. However, for reasons that are not clear, he did not prosper in Sydney. He thought the reason was the narrowing of opportunities. In a letter to his parents on 25 March 1849, he complained that Sydney was every day becoming more like London.

10 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 4 Jan. 1849.

11 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 20 Feb. 1849.

12 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, Passover, 1849.

13 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 22 April 1849.

There was “far too much competition now in all businesses”, on top of which land had become “too expensive”.¹⁴ Perhaps he was correct. It is also possible that he was restless and unable to focus on and persevere with one line of goods – even though it was typical of Jewish merchants in similar circumstance elsewhere to trade in diverse lines, switching back and forth as demand rose and fell. In any case, when news of the discovery of gold in California reached Sydney in spring 1849, he thought immediately of leaving Australia to dig gold there. What prevented him, he told his parents, was that he was in debt and had already ordered goods from London.¹⁵

Among the 300,000 or so men and women who flocked to California after the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma in January 1848 were several thousand Jews, largely from Germany and north-eastern France (Alsace and Lorraine). Few came from Britain, its colonies, and other parts of the United States. Whatever their intention when they embarked, most of the Jewish Forty-Niners soon became shopkeepers and merchants, outfitting the miners, supplying them with food and drink, and setting up as wholesalers and importers. The most famous of them was the pioneer manufacturer of blue jeans Levi Strauss, an immigrant from Franconia, who was sent in 1853 by his family in New York to expand its business (wholesale dry goods) in California.¹⁶ That he and others chose business over mining is not surprising. Whether residents of villages or towns in their countries of birth, they were accustomed to buying and selling. Moreover, it soon became clear that shopkeeping and wholesaling were surer paths to prosperity than mining for gold. To be sure, fortunes were made in the gold fields, but this was exceptional. The Romanian-Jewish traveller Israel Joseph Benjamin, who toured the Gold Rush country in 1860, wrote that shrewd merchants discovered that “the city offered [them] a more lucrative field for heaping up treasure” than gold digging:

The high prices and the great increase of various goods and foods and other indispensable things opened up for those who preferred to be merchants rather than hunters for gold the most glorious of prospects. . . . So many prudently selected the gold mines in the city to coin wealth for themselves there, in preference to the mountain gorges and the

14 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 25 March 1849.

15 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 22 April 1849.

16 A good account is Lynn Downy, *Levi Strauss: The Man who gave Blue Jeans to the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

beds of streams in which they would have to dig for the raw material. . . . [T]he gains of these merchants were enormous and in the course of a year their trade yielded great wealth.¹⁷

Jewish traders settled in San Francisco, the point of disembarkation for most Forty-Niners, and in Stockton and Sacramento in the Central Valley, the towns from which miners set out for the foothills of the Sierra Nevada range. They also opened small shops, often no more than a tent with a bench in front of it, in the dozens of mining camps that sprang up around new diggings. Within a few years of the discovery of gold, “the clothing trade was almost entirely in the hands of the Jew”, noted the Scottish traveller John David Borthwick: “scarcely did twenty or thirty miners collect in any out-of-the-way place upon newly discovered diggings, before the inevitable Jew slop-seller also made his appearance, to play his allotted part in the newly formed community.”¹⁸ Borthwick may not have liked “Jew slop-sellers” but he was not alone in noting the high proportion of Jews in the clothing and fabrics trade. The Alsatian-born Daniel Lévy wrote to the *Archives Israélites* in Paris from San Francisco in 1856, making the same point: “They have cornered it, made it a specialty and almost a monopoly of it, and they exploit it at every level, wholesale, retail, and commission and peddling.” Jews were so closely identified with the dry goods trade, he added, that these kinds of stores “have ended up by being called Jewshops, even when run by Christians.”¹⁹

When news of the discovery of gold in California reached Sydney in late December 1848, Jewish merchants quickly saw the commercial opportunities it offered, and, as early as winter 1849, they began shipping goods to San Francisco.²⁰ Young men, mostly single, having figured out where California was, set sail to try their luck there. Despite having told his parents in spring 1849 that he was obliged to remain in Sydney, Abraham was in California within a year. We do not know when he sailed from Sydney, but by spring 1850 he was doing business in the sleepy port

17 Israel Joseph Benjamin, *Three Years in America, 1859–1862*, trans. Charles Reznikoff, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), I: 133.

18 John David Borthwick, *Three Years in California* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1857), 116–17.

19 Daniel Lévy, letter to the editor, *Archives Israélites*, 20 Dec. 1856, in *Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush: A Documentary History, 1849–1880*, ed. Ava F. Kahn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 87–8.

20 Suzanne D. Rutland, “Creating Transnational Connections: Australia and California”, in *Transnational Traditions*, ed. Ava F. Kahn and Adam Mendelsohn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 68–70.

of Monterey,²¹ eighty-six miles south-east of San Francisco. Under the Spanish and then the Mexicans, Monterey had been the capital of Alta California. When Abraham arrived in 1850, the United States Congress had not yet admitted California to statehood, but, once admitted, in September 1850 the capital was transferred to San Jose. Why Abraham chose to settle in Monterey is a mystery. In 1850, its population was 1,092 (excluding indigenous residents). A few years earlier its population had been significantly higher but by 1850 about 1,000 people had left the town for the gold fields. Unlike Stockton and Sacramento, it was not a gateway to the mining areas, nor, like San Francisco, was it a rapidly expanding commercial hub. It was about 185 miles south-west of the mines, which could be reached only on horseback – a hard journey of three to four days that required crossing the coastal range and the parched San Joaquin Valley. Abraham described the latter as “one vast sandy desert”, crossing which was like crossing the ocean, with nothing to see but the horizon.²²

In Monterey, Abraham lived comfortably. He seems to have adjusted quickly to a way of life very different from that he had known in London and Sydney. The climate was mild; the air was healthy; the coastal scenery was alluring. He bathed in the Pacific Ocean in the morning, and rode his horse on the beach or in the woods after closing his shop. He visited the nearby ranches to see “the pretty Spanish señoritas” who, he told his brother, were “certainly fond of Englishmen or white people” – to the extent that he was certain that he had “every chance of being happy without being married.”²³ Shopkeeping was at first profitable but never lucrative. He sold dry goods, groceries, and liquor, the mark-up on the latter being especially high. In summer 1850, for example, he was selling liquor, purchased in San Francisco for five shillings a gallon, for a shilling a glass in his store, allowing him to clear £250 in less than five weeks. Later, at a government sale of contraband goods in San Francisco, he put all his money into brandy and the next day resold the brandy to another merchant, reserving some for his own shop. So in less than two months, he made £400 (equivalent to £57,375 in 2022) in trading in liquor.²⁴ That summer he was upbeat about his prospects in Monterey. He compared doing business there favourably with earning a living in London, and

21 The first surviving letter from California bears the date 1 June 1850. From its content, it is clear that he had been in Monterey for at least four or five months and perhaps longer.

22 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 1 June 1850.

23 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 29 Sept. 1850.

24 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 30 Aug. 1850.

boasted to Nathan that General Bennet Riley, the military governor of California, stopped by his store at eleven every morning for a glass of wine and a biscuit. In a letter encouraging Nathan to join him in Monterey, he reported that he had been clearing £2 a day on average for the past three months. He characterized this as “making money slowly and safely”. For him, this, along with being his own master and having his own house, was “better than working in England for £2.0.0 a week.” (The goal of achieving financial independence and, in particular, of escaping wage labour was a frequent theme in Gold Rush correspondence.) If Nathan were to join him, they would “make a very handsome thing of it”, for Nathan would be able to mind the store while Abraham travelled to San Francisco to attend the sales. In a few years they would make a fortune, he assured him.²⁵

Abraham’s confidence that trade was the preferred path to success in California came, in part, from personal experience. Not long after arriving in Monterey, he had spent seven weeks in the mountains mining gold. He had never worked so hard in his life, he later told his brother. From sunrise to sunset, he had stood under a scorching sun panning for gold in water from 12 to 30 inches deep (c. 30 to 76 centimetres), while mosquitoes devoured him alive. He had slept in the open air, and subsisted on flour and salt beef. The experience had convinced him that he could make more money as a shopkeeper in Monterey. He had returned to town with about fifteen ounces of gold dust, clear of all expenses, but he had been keenly aware that he had been one of the fortunate few, and that “gold-digging is not what it is represented to be.”²⁶ The money he had made in mining and trade that summer allowed him to purchase a plot of land, 99 feet deep and 30 feet wide (c. 32 by 9 metres), on which he had built a house, whose front room served as his store. It was within a hundred metres of the wharf and thus well located for business.²⁷

By autumn 1850, Abraham was less upbeat in his assessment of his prospects in Monterey. He informed his brother that business had fallen one hundred per cent (I assume this was hyperbole). People were “flocking from the mines with little or no gold dust.” Day after day, changes for the worse mounted. He was selling very little. His house and land, as well as setting up the kitchen, installing a well, and walling in the yard, had cost him £650 and left him broke. Still, his situation did not look entirely bleak to him: he had a place of his own and thought he would always be able

25 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 30 June 1850.

26 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 3 June 1850.

27 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 30 Aug. 1850.

to make a good living. But the time for making a fortune, he confessed to Nathan, was gone.²⁸ Two months later, the situation looked bleaker. Abraham and the other inhabitants of Monterey were all disappointed: winter had set in, but the influx of people they had expected never materialized. The population was less than it was the previous summer.²⁹ This change in outlook was not, however, attributable to any slowing of Gold Rush fever. Throughout the 1850s, California was attracting an annual average of 54,200 persons per year. In 1851, its gold mines yielded \$75 million of ore; in 1852, \$81 million. At the end of the decade, the total came to \$594 million – more than twenty billion in today’s dollars.³⁰ Abraham’s problem was that he had set up shop in the wrong place, in a small town whose population was decreasing, not increasing.

Business in Monterey remained stagnant, or worse, through the winter of 1850–51. When Abraham wrote to his parents in February 1851, he apologized for not writing sooner. He had been hoping, in vain, for business to improve so he could write them a glowing letter. For the past three months, he wrote, “we hardly know the name of business.” However, hope springs eternal. He reported that a rumour was circulating in Monterey about the discovery of gold in a mountain chain about fifty miles from town. If true (which it was not), he boasted that he would “make plenty of money in Monterey” and Monterey would become “a second San Francisco.”³¹ In the months to come, with no upturn, Abraham found himself in debt and was forced to let the house he had built and move to a house at the other end of town. Eventually, he was able to pay off his debts and increase his stock of goods. Moreover, he remained optimistic, assuring his parents that his youth and perseverance would in time pay off, and he would return to London “with an independency”, or fortune. He also reported that he did not see a future for himself in San Francisco, from which he had just returned. After describing the energy and dynamism of the city, which was again rebuilding after another devastating fire, he explained that it was “a poor place of business for a man with small capital”, like himself. He was confident that there were many other places in California that were far superior.³² He was not alone

28 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 29 Sept. 1850.

29 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 30 Nov. 1850.

30 J. S. Holliday, *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 152–3.

31 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 1 Feb. 1851.

32 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 16 Aug. 1851.

in this assessment. Many potential Jewish shopkeepers found that renting shop space in San Francisco was prohibitively high, and settled instead in the mining towns.³³

In late summer and early autumn 1851, Abraham was still struggling. Business was “worse than ever”. The town was deserted. He was able to let his house for only £25 a year, while in the previous year he had received twice that amount. While he was no longer in debt and had even managed to save £350, he had come to the decision to try his luck elsewhere in California. Fearing his mother would accuse him of not persevering, he assured her that it was not a love of change that was driving him but his conviction that remaining in Monterey, of which he was truly fond, would be to throw away the best years of his life, while he was in good health, without enriching himself. In November or December 1851, he gave up shopkeeping in Monterey and left for southern California, in search of new opportunities, visiting San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles (then known as Pueblo de Los Angeles), and San Diego. All these places, he told his mother, were “dull as they possibly can be.” San Luis Obispo, “a pretty little village”, was the only place where he saw an opening for someone like himself. Meanwhile, he turned his hand to cattle-dealing, a time-honoured Jewish economic niche in Central Europe. He bought a hundred head of cattle in San Luis Obispo, hired cowhands to help him, and drove the herd to San Francisco. He did well when he sold them, clearing almost £200, because the herd was the first to reach San Francisco that year. But he saw no future for himself in the business, which he described as “well done” – that is, there was too much competition.³⁴ In addition, driving cattle from southern to northern California was harsh work – the long hours on horseback, the sleeping outdoors under the night sky, the anxious guarding of the cattle at night, the sudden change in temperature “from the warm delicious climate of the south to the cold bleak winds of San Francisco.”³⁵

Unenthusiastic about doing business in southern California, Abraham looked northward, specifically to the Gold Rush country. In summer 1852, he travelled by stage coach from San Francisco to Nevada City in the Sierra Nevada foothills. He was “perfectly astonished at its great

33 Don W. Wilson, “Pioneer Jews in California and Arizona, 1849–1875”, *Journal of the West* 6, no. 2 (April 1987): 228.

34 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 20 Feb. 1852; 11 July 1852.

35 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 11 July 1852.

commercial appearance” and much regretted not having visited the region before. In a letter to his mother, he enthused about the scenery (“the stately gigantic pine trees”) and “the beautiful clear atmosphere”. In a burst of enthusiasm, he declared the nearby town of Grass Valley the most romantic and picturesque village anywhere between California and London. A first cousin from London, Henry Silvester (né Solomon), who had sailed to California in 1851 in the company of Abraham’s brother Aaron and had opened a shop in San Francisco, was now doing business in Grass Valley, four miles from Nevada City. Having recently dissolved his partnership with a Mr. Cohen, who had treated him “very badly indeed”, he and Abraham went into business together. Abraham travelled to San Francisco and purchased goods equal in value to his cousin’s stock.³⁶ Henry probably became the senior partner, however, since the store did business as Silvester and Co. In an advertisement for the store in the local newspaper in November 1853, they called themselves wholesale and retail dealers in groceries, provisions, dry goods, hardware, boots, shoes, saddlery, and general merchandise. Versions of the advertisement that appeared repeatedly in 1854 reveal that they also sold liquor, miners’ tools, window glass, and crockery.³⁷ They were sufficiently successful that in 1854 they erected the first brick and stone building in Grass Valley, on Main Street, where it still stands today, its history commemorated on a Native Sons of the Golden West plaque. In August the following year, to protect the investment, Abraham petitioned the city council to remove the house of ill repute next to the building.³⁸ In 1861, for reasons unknown (perhaps they quarrelled, as business partners do, or perhaps each thought he would prosper more on his own), the cousins dissolved the partnership and each continued in business on his own.

Unlike Monterey, Grass Valley was expanding. The first party of prospectors had come to the area in autumn 1849 and perhaps a thousand men had mined through the severe winter of 1849–50. In spring and summer 1850, there was a new influx of men. Now, however, they could no longer depend on placer (or surface) mining, that is, washing the gold from stream gravel. Instead, they had to sink shafts underground to reach the gold and dig ditches, build sluices, and even redirect rivers

36 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 11 July 1852.

37 *Grass Valley Telegraph*, 24 Nov. 1853. For 1854, see the advertisements on 19 Jan., 2 March, 6 April, 11 May, and 1 June.

38 Michel Janicot, “The Jewish Cemetery of Grass Valley, California”, *Western States Jewish History* 20, no. 4 (July 1988): 329.

to divert water for washing. Then, in June 1850, a group of miners discovered gold embedded in quartz veins in the hillsides. At first no one knew how to extract the gold from the rock, but through trial and error ways were found. By autumn 1851, more than twenty ore-crushing mills were operating in Grass Valley and nearby Nevada City. Gold mining in Grass Valley had moved quickly from small-scale, individualized placer operations to highly capitalized quartz mills, which employed previously independent prospectors. Meanwhile, early in 1851, as news of the quartz discoveries spread in California, merchants flocked to Grass Valley to set up shop.³⁹ When Abraham wrote to his brother Nathan in October 1852, he noted that the town was five times as large as when he had first arrived.⁴⁰

In his first year in Grass Valley, Abraham was buoyant about his prospects. He remained convinced that California was “one of the first countries in which there is a scope for a smart man to make a fortune in.” Its flourishing economy, he thought, was largely due to the great influx of new arrivals, including those who now travelled by the overland route, and, in the case of Grass Valley specifically, to the introduction of deep diggings and steam-driven quartz-crushing operations, large enterprises that employed several thousand workers in all. However, competition for their custom was stiff. Silvester and Salaman were not the only Jewish shopkeepers in Grass Valley. He and his cousin were doing well, but not making a fortune. The largest challenge facing them, he thought, was mobilizing the capital to purchase goods. He wrote to his mother in autumn 1852 that he could safely invest thousands of dollars more in his business if he had it. While trade was flourishing, wholesale prices in San Francisco were higher than ever, maybe fifty per cent higher. Still, he was secure enough to imagine travelling to London to find a wife and then returning to California immediately, for, as he told his brother, the area was “much too good yet to leave.”⁴¹ Yet, at the same time, he could not shake the feeling, which he had articulated before, that he was a failure. After praising San Francisco’s cafes, theatres, restaurants, casinos, and hotels to his mother, he confessed: “It is pleasing to me to have been here from the beginning, as it were, of California and to look now on the magic attraction, but at the same time distressing to my mind when I think that I have not advanced in fortune as the great city of San Francisco

39 Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California, 1849–1870* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 1, 10–14, 24–6.

40 Abraham Salaman to Nathan Salaman, 28 Oct. 1852.

41 *Ibid.*; Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 28 Oct. 1852.

has in beauty and riches.” He acknowledged that he was better off than thousands of other newcomers to California and even reproached himself for complaining, but he could not escape the grip of his obsessive need to make himself a wealthy man.⁴²

Six months later Abraham still felt that fortune disliked him, and wrote that some “stupid speculation” (bad investments) was always checking his progress. In March 1853, he visited a mining village – Red Dog – about eighteen miles from Grass Valley to explore the possibility of opening a branch store there. The town was new, but already had a hundred houses and twenty stores. He did not think the prospects were good, and he and Henry abandoned the idea.⁴³ They continued, however, to engage in unspecified “speculations in the vicinity”. If they turned out well, Abraham told his mother, he would come to London to visit her and to find a wife in spring 1855.⁴⁴ While Abraham never named the “speculations” in which he engaged, it is likely that he was referring to taking shares in local mining projects. Shopkeepers in the Gold Rush were known to accept stakes in mines from cash-strapped miners, and, in addition, as early as 1851 Grass Valley businessmen were serious investors in mining operations.⁴⁵ Evidence of his investments survives only for the 1860s, that is, after his marriage. In 1865, he was one of four shareholders of the Wide Awake Company and one of nine shareholders of the Union Jack Company, both of which were profitable.⁴⁶ In 1866, he and Martin Ford sold their shares in the latter company for \$50,000 (almost \$950,000 in today’s dollars) to Lewis Gerstle, a native of Bavaria who had arrived in California at the same time as Abraham, and had done well in San Francisco buying and selling mining shares, hides, fur, wool, and deerskin.⁴⁷ (Gerstle later became very wealthy as one of the founding partners of the Alaska Commercial Company, which held a twenty-year government concession for hunting fur-bearing seals on the Aleutian Islands and the Pribilof Islands.)

In summer or autumn 1854, earlier than he originally expected, Abraham sailed to England to find a wife, journeying by way of Panama and New York City. That he travelled this far to find a mate – let alone

42 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 28 Oct. 1852.

43 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 20 March 1853.

44 Abraham Salaman to Jane Salaman, 30 May 1854.

45 Mann, *After the Gold Rush*, 25–6.

46 William S. Byrne, *Directory of Grass Valley Township for 1865* (San Francisco, 1865), 74, 75.

47 Janicot, “Jewish Cemetery”, 329.

someone Jewish – is not surprising. Eligible men in California vastly outnumbered eligible women, whose percentage of the total population was in the single digits in the early 1850s.⁴⁸ Of course, he could have found a Jewish bride in New York or elsewhere in the United States and avoided crossing the Atlantic once again, but he no doubt wanted as well to see his parents and siblings and to impress them with his success, even if it was less spectacular than he had hoped it would be. In London, his search did not take him far from his childhood home. After a short courtship, he married, on 18 October 1854, Bloom Phillips, the daughter of Israel and Maria Phillips, tailors, who lived at 68 Lamb’s Conduit Street, next door to the Salaman home at number 69. It was, more or less, an arranged marriage. The groom was twenty-seven; the bride three or four years younger.⁴⁹

At the beginning of November they left for California by the same route Abraham had taken several months earlier. On the way they spent four nights in New York City, staying at the newly opened, six-hundred-bed, luxury St. Nicholas Hotel on Broadway in the area now known as SoHo. It was the first building in the city to cost more than a million dollars, and set a new standard of lavish appointments for a premier hotel, with, as Abraham wrote to his parents, “hot and cold water through silver cocks in every washstand” and “chandeliers, fires, and Turkey carpets in every bedroom.” He also told them about a Friday evening at the Academy of Music (at the corner of West 14th Street and Irving Place), the world’s largest opera venue at the time, where they heard Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. Its opulent decoration and the diamonds, silks, and “fine faces” of those who filled it had impressed them greatly. He also boasted that he had bought “the best reserved seats in the house”.⁵⁰ These details suggest that Abraham had left Grass Valley as a man of some substance, an achievement that he undoubtedly wanted to share with his parents and siblings.

After his marriage, Abraham wrote to his family less frequently. Or, alternatively, fewer of the letters he did write survived. Whatever the case, the broad parameters of his life are recoverable. Soon after he and Bloom settled in Grass Valley, they started a family. In all, they had ten

48 Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 280.

49 Ann Causton, “The Solomon/Salaman Family”, mimeograph (London, 2004), 6. Ann Causton was a great-great-granddaughter of Salaman; she gave me a copy when I was writing my biography of Redcliffe Nathan Salaman.

50 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 19 Nov. 1854.

children, two of whom, Isadore and Maria, died in infancy and were buried in local Jewish cemeteries, Isadore in Nevada City and Maria in Grass Valley.⁵¹ As a married man, Abraham seems to have been more successful in business than before. In 1861, as noted earlier, he and his cousin dissolved their partnership and in August that year Abraham opened his own grocery and mining supplies store, first on Main Street, two doors from Loutzenheimer's Drug Store, whose building still stands, and then on Mill Street. The tax assessment rolls for Nevada County in the mid-1860s give some sense of how he was faring. In 1862, the first year for which they are available, he owned the house on Milk Street in which he and his family lived (assessed value \$1,000), his business premises on Mill Street (\$2,500), a barn on Auburn Street (\$200), a horse and wagon (\$275), and the merchandise in his shop (\$7,000). The value of these assets did not change significantly in the years before his return to London. However, in 1867, the last year that his name appears in the county assessment books, a new class of asset appeared: solvent debt (\$1,000). Clearly, he had expanded his activities to include money-lending. The 1867 tax assessment roll also includes an additional property, assessed at \$7,000, behind his store on Mill Street.⁵² A federal tax assessment in 1863 (authorized by the Internal Revenue Act of 1 July 1862) offers another view of his position vis-à-vis that of his cousin. The assessor valued his stock at \$500; that of his cousin at \$1,000.⁵³ (Both were obvious undervaluations.) In May 1868 he announced a going-out-of-business sale, and in August he put his house on School Street up for sale. He and his family left for London soon after.⁵⁴ When selling off his inventory in spring 1868, the local newspaper assured its readers that when he said he was selling his goods at cost they could believe him: "His reputation as a merchant, and therefore as a gentleman, is second to none in the town, and as a matter of

51 Causton, "Solomon/Salaman Family", 6. Causton missed one child: Maria Bloom Salaman, who died at 5 months, 28 days, on 9 June 1865; *Sacramento Daily Union*, 14 June 1865. There is a photograph of her tombstone in Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Jewish Gold Country* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2020), 45.

52 Assessment Roll, Nevada County, 1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, 1867, Searls Historical Library, Nevada City, CA.

53 National Archives Microfilm Publication, bound volumes of tax assessment lists for the 5 collection districts established for the State of California by Executive Order 30 July 1862, microfilm no. 756, roll 23, Doris Foley Library for Historical Research, Nevada City, CA.

54 *Grass Valley Morning Union*, 26 March 1868, 2 Aug. 1868.

course his goods are all that he recommends them to be.”⁵⁵

Abraham’s business career in Grass Valley was a modest, but not spectacular, success. His nephew Redcliffe Salaman, a son of his brother Myer, described him in an unpublished memoir as a “failed shopkeeper”, a characterization that may owe more to his nephew’s distaste for shopkeepers than to his knowledge of Abraham’s business affairs. He also mentioned that Abraham had owned some land in California that he had sold to “one Mackay”, who thereupon discovered the richest silver mine in California.⁵⁶ His mention of this incident, even if not altogether correct, seems to confirm that in Myer’s branch of the Salaman family Abraham’s reputation was that of someone plagued with bad luck. The details of the story are not clear. The Mackay whose name Redcliffe remembered was John William Mackay, an Irish-American mining magnate and industrialist, who grew wealthy on the silver mines of the Comstock Lode in the Virginia mountain range in Nevada, the greatest ore body ever found in North America.⁵⁷ A similar story was passed down in Abraham’s branch of the Salaman family as well. In this version, Mackay purchased the land for \$100 and a donkey, and later discovered gold on the site.⁵⁸ The problem with the story is that Abraham lived in Grass Valley while the Comstock Lode ran beneath Virginia City, Nevada, 113 miles to the east. Moreover, the only extensive silver mining in California was the Cerro Gordo operation in Inyo County, more than three hundred miles to the south of Grass Valley. There may be some kernel of truth, however, in the family legend. Residents of Grass Valley and Nevada City, according to Israel Joseph Benjamin writing in 1860, were among those initially attracted to the silver deposits in Washoe, Nevada (what later became known as the Comstock Lode). When samples of the new deposits were brought to Nevada City and Grass Valley to be assayed, they were found to be rich in gold but even richer in silver. Hundreds of men quickly left the two towns for Washoe. Some bought options on land there, and these, Benjamin wrote, became “a good article of commerce”, from which both

55 *Grass Valley Morning Union*, 16 March 1868.

56 Redcliffe Nathan Salaman, “Boyhood and the Family Background”, Redcliffe Salaman Papers, Cambridge University Library, CUL Add. Ms. 8171/27.

57 Gregory Crouch, *The Bonanza King: John Mackay and the Battle over the Greatest Riches in the American West* (New York: Scribner, 2018).

58 Helen Causton to Todd Endelman, email, 14 June 2021; Ann Causton, typed two-page biography of Abraham Salaman.

miners and speculators “gained large sums”.⁵⁹ If Abraham was among the speculators, he apparently sold at the wrong time.

Abraham miscalculated in another way as well. He left Grass Valley just as its gold economy began to boom. In the 1850s and early 1860s, mining in Grass Valley was an expensive, high-risk, two-part operation. Extracting gold-bearing quartz from increasingly deep mines was the first step in the process; separating the gold from the quartz in steam-driven mills the second. A lack of capital, ineffective crushing equipment, continual experimentation to find better ways to capture the gold, and poor management hobbled the industry. After much experimentation, solutions to these problems emerged, and in the mid- and late 1860s the long-predicted quartz boom took off, bringing economic stability to the town. In 1865, when its population numbered about six thousand, there were nineteen quartz mills and thirty-five dividend-paying mines.⁶⁰ A Pacific Coast business directory for 1867 characterized Grass Valley as “one of the most flourishing towns in the interior of the State.” It predicted that “it must continue to advance in all the elementals of permanent prosperity and great wealth” because it was “situated in the immediate vicinity of the richest quartz vein.”⁶¹ An early history of Nevada County made the same point. After three years of lacklustre business activity (1861–63), when the Comstock Lode attracted hundreds of miners from Grass Valley and drained the town’s economy of thousands of dollars, mining revived there and “business became lively”. The town “once more became the busy, bustling mining town she was before and that she is today” (1880).⁶²

Unlike Abraham, his one-time partner and cousin Henry Silvester remained in Grass Valley and in time became a prominent fixture in the town. Only in 1894, when he retired from business, did he return to London. Silvester, who had never married, then sold his business to his long-time clerk Henry Fuchs. At the time of his retirement, the town newspaper described him as “an honored citizen and merchant” since “the early days of Grass Valley”. He was also, as we saw, an investor in gold mining and extracting companies. A mark of his standing in the town was his repeated and uncontested re-election as town treasurer in the 1880s and early 1890s.

59 Benjamin, *Three Years in America*, 2: 37, 45–6.

60 Mann, *After the Gold Rush*, 129–33.

61 Henry G. Langley, *Pacific Coast Business Directory* (San Francisco, 1867), 143.

62 Harry Laurenz Wells, *History of Nevada County, California* (Oakland, CA: Thompson & West, 1880), 65.

There was little hostility to Jews in either Monterey or Grass Valley at this time. The only evidence I have found is of John W. Davis, a prosperous butcher, whose ex-wife Silvester was seeing, calling him “a dirty Jew” in a stream of shouted abuse. And even in this case there is no reason to believe that it was ideological antipathy to Jews that was fuelling anger. “Dirty Jew” was a ready-to-hand, multipurpose slur, part of a swamp of insults in contemporary life that could be tapped as needed. In any case, the men of the Gold Rush were not obsessed with Jews. “Jew-consciousness” was not in the air in the way it was in many European societies. Those who were forging the new society did not need to invoke Jews when they came to define what it meant to be white, male, and Christian. Other “others” – Chinese, Mexicans, Chileans, free and enslaved Blacks, and indigenous peoples – served that function.⁶³ Abraham Salaman’s letters reflect this: he never mentioned that his Jewishness was an obstacle to forging social ties or making a living. In his social history of Grass Valley and Nevada City in the 1850s and 1860s, Ralph Mann noted that even though German Jews and Germans in the two towns remained apart socially, “anti-semitism rarely became public.” Even Susan Lee Johnson, in her social and cultural history of the southern gold-mining towns, which foregrounds ethnic and racial conflict in the formation of California, notes only one instance of anti-Jewish sentiment.⁶⁴

Indeed, what is striking in Abraham’s correspondence is the relative absence of his Jewishness. References to his origins appear infrequently. For example, on his journey to Australia in 1848, he mentioned that he became friendly with a “very frumm” Polish Jew travelling in steerage. The other passengers made fun of his limited understanding of English, but Abraham took his side, hating to see “such unmanly tricks”. Abraham taught him to read English, and the Polish Jew, in turn, taught him to read Hebrew.⁶⁵ After four months in Sydney, while telling his parents how lonely he was feeling, he mentioned that there was no society he cared for there. The Jews in Sydney, he wrote, were “not much account” – rough and brusque, talking of little but the weather and clothes. Part of the problem, he complained, was that there were “no pretty girls among them”.⁶⁶ Religious observance clearly was not important to him. In

63 This is one of the central themes in Johnson, *Roaring Camp*.

64 Mann, *After the Gold Rush*, 50, 174; Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 168.

65 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 4 Oct. 1848.

66 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 25 March 1849.

April 1849, he paid two pounds for a seat in the Sydney synagogue for six months, largely as a matter of propriety, but he seldom attended because of the demands of business.⁶⁷ He was aware of the arrival of Passover that year but confessed to his parents that he would “not keep it well”.⁶⁸ In his letters from California, he never once mentioned his observance of any Jewish holidays or rituals. In part, this may have been due to the absence of organized Jewish life in Grass Valley or nearby Nevada City when he arrived there. The first California Jewish almanac (1851) named only two places in the Gold Rush country – Marysville and Sonora – where high holiday services were held (the other places in California were San Francisco, Stockton, and Sacramento).⁶⁹ When Israel Joseph Benjamin visited Grass Valley in 1855, there were thirty Jews living there, the majority of them men. In September 1856, they formed a mutual aid society (Shaar Zedek [Gate of Righteousness]), which cared for the Jewish cemetery that was established about the same time, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur they met for services in a rented venue.⁷⁰ Abraham makes no mention of them, however. A B’nai B’rith lodge, which met weekly, was organized in October 1860, and counted forty-five members in 1867.⁷¹ Abraham may have been a member – it catered to social rather than religious needs – but no records survive.

Although distant from the centres of Jewish life in the United States, Grass Valley was not altogether isolated from broader Jewish currents. The Palestinian messenger Nathan Neta Notkin, who travelled throughout the United States in 1867–69 raising funds for the poor of Jerusalem, visited Grass Valley in February 1868 (that is, before Abraham and Bloom returned to London) and collected \$18.50 from an unnamed society, probably the Shaar Zedek society.⁷² The religious loyalties of the Jews of Grass Valley, however, were always weaker than their ethnic bonds. When David A.

67 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 22 April 1849.

68 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, Passover, 1849.

69 *The California Hebrew & English Almanac for the Year 5612, Corresponding with the Years 1851–2* (San Francisco, 1851).

70 Benjamin, *Three Years in America*, 2: 47; Janicot, “Jewish Cemetery”, 325.

71 Edwin F. Bean, *Bean’s History and Directory of Nevada County, California* (Nevada City, 1867), 196. In 1876, the lodge was the only Jewish organization that remained in Grass Valley; Janicot, “Jewish Cemetery”, 325.

72 Salo Wittmayer Baron and Jeanette Meisel Baron, “Palestinian Messengers in America, 1849–79: A Record of Four Journeys”, in Salo Wittmayer Baron, *Steeled in Adversity: Essays and Addresses on American Jewish Life*, ed. Jeanette Meisel Baron (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 217.

D'Ancona, who, like Abraham, had left London to make his fortune in the New World, visited Grass Valley in summer 1876, not more than a dozen Jewish families lived in the town. There was no synagogue or mutual aid society; the only Jewish institution was the B'nai B'rith lodge. D'Ancona, who attended a meeting of the lodge, wrote that all the Jews present were "well-to-do and prosperous."⁷³

While conscious of being a Jew and in no sense desirous of leaving the Jewish fold, Abraham was clearly lukewarm about or indifferent to Jewish worship and ritual. He was not an ideological secularist, in open rebellion against the world of religious tradition. His "break" with tradition was not so much a dramatic break as an unremarkable, apparently angst-free drift. His Jewishness was more ethnic and familial (the two categories overlap) in character than anything else. Recall that family in London bankrolled his first commercial ventures. When he was ready to marry, as noted, he chose a Jewish woman almost as a matter of course. And when two of his children died when he was living in Grass Valley, he buried them in Jewish cemeteries. Then, when he and Bloom returned to London in 1868, they settled among other middle-class, English-born Jews in Maida Vale, first in Warwick Road and then in Warrington Crescent.⁷⁴

The absence of references to his Jewishness in Abraham's correspondence is matched by his apparently equal lack of interest in or curiosity about the various ethnic, national, and racial groups who were conspicuously present in the mining towns. These included Sonorans, Chileans, French, Germans, Chinese, Blacks (free and enslaved), and indigenous people. Susan Lee Johnson's well known account of the Gold Rush era emphasizes the role of "the bewildering array of humanity" that confounded middle-class newcomers from Western Europe and the East Coast of the United States, and worked to crystallize their sense of identity as white men. In particular, she writes, "curiosity about the habits of native peoples took on a special urgency." Immigrant men "who had assumed, often for the first time, responsibility for much of their own domestic and personal service work now seemed preoccupied with how differently Indian women maintained themselves and their communities."⁷⁵ Abraham, however, does not seem to have shared this preoccupation. He

73 David A. D'Ancona, *A California-Nevada Travel Diary of 1876*, ed. William M. Kramer (Santa Monica, CA: Norton B. Stern, 1975), 66.

74 United Kingdom, censuses of 1871, 1881, and 1891, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13335>.

75 Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 132, 135.

never commented on the presence of indigenous Californians, male or female. The only remark he made about stereotypical women's work in Grass Valley concerned Irish washerwomen, whose services were in great demand and who were well compensated. He told his parents that the townsmen regarded him as a second Beau Brummel for always wearing clean, white linen. His secret, he explained, was that he obtained silk cloth and costume jewellery for the washerwomen and they, in return, took good care of him.⁷⁶ Abraham's apparent lack of interest in "the bewildering array of humanity" around him suggests either that he was atypical or that the diversity and multiculturalism of the diggings did not play the critical role in the formation of white, male identity that some historians have thought it did.

Similarly, Abraham showed no awareness that he was occupying land that had belonged to the indigenous people of California before the incursion of white Europeans and Americans. For him, the transformative development of the Gold Rush country and the rapid rise of San Francisco were miraculous and awe-inspiring, and he took great pride in having been present from the very start. Thus, he never commented on the dispossession of the indigenes and the environmental degradation wreaked by unfettered mining, logging, and river diversion. In this sense, he was very much of his time. The growth of the British Empire and the westward expansion of the United States were simply the background to the events of his own life, if he even gave that much thought to them.

Abraham Salaman never made a great fortune in California, but he was sufficiently successful to take his place in the middling ranks of London Jewry when he returned. In 1870, within two years of his return to London, he moved to New York, leaving his family behind, to set up an agency to sell the family firm's ostrich feathers. In May, he travelled to Grass Valley – this time by way of the new transcontinental railroad – to transact property business, the details of which are not clear.⁷⁷ All we know is that in May 1870 he filed a deed giving his wife Bloom ownership of properties on Mill Street and Church Street.⁷⁸ His ostrich-feather venture in New

76 Abraham Salaman to Isaac and Jane Salaman, 15 Dec. 1853.

77 *Grass Valley Morning Union*, 13 May 1870. The town newspaper, in a fit of local boosterism, welcomed Abraham back and noted that while "London is a large place and a good one", Grass Valley "lays over it in so many respects that old Grass Valleyans will not remain in London and away from Grass Valley."

78 Janicot, "Jewish Cemetery", 329.

York did not work out and he returned to London.⁷⁹ The 1871 census listed his occupation as “house property California”. The next census listed no occupation, while the 1891 census described him as a “Cape merchant”, presumably a reference to the ostrich-feather trade. By then, he had joined the family firm, looking after the manufacturing side of the business – the cleaning, dyeing, and curling of the ostrich feathers. At the time of the 1881 and 1891 censuses, when he was living in Warrington Crescent, he employed three servants: a cook, a parlourmaid, and a housemaid. His name could also be found among subscribers to various communal charities, including the Jews Hospital and Orphan Asylum, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the South London Jewish Schools, and the Westminster Jews Free School.⁸⁰ The amounts he subscribed were modest (two guineas to the Board of Guardians in 1889, for example), particularly in the light of the contributions from other family members (fifteen guineas from Myer and his wife, ten guineas from Nathan).⁸¹ In 1885 and 1890, he was listed as well as a seatholder at the Bayswater Synagogue, although I doubt he attended regularly.⁸² In short, after his return he lived comfortably and respectably.

Ironically, Abraham’s brothers Nathan and Myer, who never sought their fortunes abroad, became fabulously wealthy. These two assumed control of their father’s ostrich-feather business in 1864. Myer, the youngest and the most entrepreneurial of the four brothers, expanded the firm in new directions, while Nathan was content to remain Myer’s loyal sidekick (although he shared equally in the firm’s profits.) Myer closed the retail side of the business and moved it from the family home in Lamb’s Conduit Street to Monkwell House in Falcon Square in the City. The reorganization and move predated the ostrich-feather boom that began in the 1880s, but they positioned the firm to profit from it. Ostrich feathers had adorned the dress of well-to-do women from the mid-eighteenth century, but it was the fashion for large, elaborately trimmed hats (as well as beplumed fans and boas) from the 1880s until the end of the First World War that caused the trade to flourish. In addition, the demand for plumes crossed class lines and was no longer confined to the wealthy.

79 Causton, biography of Salaman.

80 *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 1889, 27 Sept. 1889, 26 April 1895, 7 June 1895, and 10 March 1897.

81 *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 Sept. 1889.

82 United Synagogue, *List of Seatholders of the Bayswater Synagogue*, Nissan 5650–April 1890 (London: Wertheimer, Lea, and Co., 1890).

Journalists and retailers targeted middle- and lower-middle-class women, who increasingly possessed the means to adorn themselves with ostrich feathers. While the demand for plumes was worldwide, London became the centre for their marketing and distribution in Europe and America, replacing Livorno and other southern European ports. Undergirding the shift to London was the burgeoning of South African ostrich-feather farms in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the tightening of imperial and commercial links between the Cape and London. As a consequence, most South African plumes were exported to London, to which feather merchants from the United States and the Continent travelled to obtain their stock. The trade thrived and the number of Jewish feather merchants in London multiplied. The veteran Salaman firm, with decades of experience and expertise and an established network of suppliers and customers, was well positioned to take advantage of the ostrich-feather boom. By the end of the century, they had offices in London, New York, Paris, and Cape Town.⁸³

The source of Myer's wealth was not ostrich feathers, however, but property. Bursting with entrepreneurial drive and extraordinary foresight, Myer also began to invest in London real estate in the late-1850s, an unusual investment strategy for London Jews at the time. In 1877, when he created a trust to provide for his wife and children after his death, he owned seven properties in the City and another six, also in the City, jointly with Nathan. In addition, they leased another ten properties in the City.⁸⁴ In the next twenty years, they acquired properties in Islington, the Strand, Haymarket, Bloomsbury, Oxford Street, and Hammersmith. When Myer died in 1896, his estate was probated at £288,674 (worth £38,656,619 in 2020), and that of his brother and business partner Nathan at his death in 1905 at £374,299 (worth £45,811,113 in 2020).⁸⁵ By contrast, when Abraham died in 1898, his estate was probated at £25,720, less than a tenth of his brothers' estates.⁸⁶

The contrasting fates of the brothers Salaman are suggestive. Abraham's decision as a young man to make his fortune abroad grew from

83 Endelman, *Last Anglo-Jewish Gentleman*, ch. 1; Stein, *Plumes*.

84 Trust document, 18 Sept. 1877, Salaman Family Papers, Ms. 14, 734, London Metropolitan Archives.

85 William Rubinstein, "Jewish Top Wealth-Holders in Britain, 1809–1909", *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 37 (2002): 151, 158.

86 National Archives of England and Wales, Index of Wills and Probates, 1853–1943, probate, 11 May 1898, to David Lionel Salaman, mercantile clerk, and Richard Sonnenthal, merchant.

his conviction that London was not fertile ground for a young man, with few resources, to make his mark commercially. His experiences, first in Australia, then in California, and the experiences of Myer, who remained at home, indicate, however, that the crowded commercial scene in London was not the obstacle that he imagined it to be. He failed to strike it rich in booming frontier societies, as well, where consumer demand was rocketing. On the whole, Sydney and the gold mining towns of the Sierras offered abundant opportunities for those with commercial background, entrepreneurial foresight, and endless drive. Moreover, at the very time that Abraham left London to make his fortune abroad, thousands of Jewish merchants and clerks from the German states were settling in the metropolis precisely because of its emergence as the largest domestic market in the world for consumer goods of all kinds – its population at mid-century was over 2.5 million – and as a major international trading centre. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, German Jews who traded in cigars, pipes, toys, picture frames, antiques, leather goods, porcelain, Asian curios, jewellery, precision instruments, and luxury goods more generally saw London as fertile ground for their energies.⁸⁷

If Abraham failed to see opportunities where others did, he was still “blessed” with a powerful compulsion to succeed that compensated in part for his entrepreneurial shortcomings. His conviction that mobility was possible and that stasis was not his fate drove him to seek success as a young man. It was this outlook on life that in time helped underwrite the wholesale economic transformation of British Jews in the modern period, fuelling their embourgeoisement. In Abraham’s case, it sustained him even when what he achieved fell short of what he aspired to. By comparison with his brother Myer, he was a failure, but by comparison with the mass of Londoners, he was a success, ending his days in middle-class comfort and ease in Maida Vale.

87 Todd M. Endelman, *Broadening Jewish History: Towards a Social History of Ordinary Jews* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), ch. 7, “German Jews in Victorian England”.