

History - The First Voyage

In January 1848, two seemingly unrelated events took place on opposite coasts of the United States. The first event was the laying down at New York on January 4, 1848, of the keel of a wooden paddle wheeler to be named California at her launching four months later. The other event, on January 24, marked the discovery of gold at a remote California trading post named Sutter's Mill. California was the first American steamer to reach the western seaboard after this momentous discovery, and her early history was to be forever linked to the great California Gold Rush.



The California

California came out of the yards of William H. Webb, builder of some of the finest clipper ships of that era. Not surprisingly, her beautiful lines closely resembled those of Webb's magnificent sailing ships. For her size — 203 feet in length, 33 1/2 feet in beam, 20 feet in depth, and 1,057 gross tons — she was an expensive ship, costing over \$200,000. But with a gleaming black hull (copper-sheathed below the waterline), white upper works, red paddle wheels, and plenty of polished brass, she was a delight to behold.



Early San Francisco Post Office

Yet, despite her elegant lines, California had been designed with utility in mind. Built of choice oak and cedar, her hull was reinforced with diagonal iron straps to better withstand the pounding of her paddle wheels. Rigged with three masts and a full suit of sails, she was classed as a brigantine. But wind was meant to be only an auxiliary source of power and she was expected to carry a full head of steam at all times while underway.

Her one-cylinder side-lever engine, built by a firm with the unusual name of Novelty Iron Works, was driven by steam generated by two return-flue boilers that used salt water. Her paddle wheels were 26 feet in diameter, and she generally cruised at eight knots to conserve coal.

Launched in May of 1848, California passed the government inspections required by the mail contract in the fall. The steamer departed New York on October 6 under the command of Captain Cleveland Forbes. She and her crew of 36 left with 500 tons of coal, which was all she could carry. Also on board were provisions to last a year, a complete set of spare machinery, and only a handful of passengers destined for Rio de Janeiro and Valparaiso.

California crossed the equator without ceremony, although Captain Forbes tried an old trick on the ship's doctor. "On October 24, the Captain endeavored to make me see the line by fixing a small stick across the spy glass, but I eluded the hoax," the doctor reported in his journal.



A Mailbag from California's maiden voyage.

When the steamer arrived in Rio de Janeiro after just 26 days, she set a new record for that run. On December 12th, after successfully transiting the Strait of Magellan, California and her crew began the journey northward amid the long Pacific swells. These would be the last few days of calm for all concerned. Unfortunately, Captain Forbes had taken ill during the course of the voyage, and by the time the ship reached Valparaiso he could no longer carry out his duties. He took on an assistant, a Captain Marshall, from one of the sailing ships in the harbor, and the California departed for Callao, Peru, where she arrived on December 27.



The California



In Peru, word had spread about the Gold Rush, and the ship's agent persuaded Captain Forbes to take on 17 cabin and 80 steerage passengers, eager for a try at the California goldfields. But problems were only beginning for the California. When she reached Panama on January 17, 1849, there were at least 700 gold seekers eagerly awaiting the arrival of the northbound steamer. When they learned that the steamer had taken on passengers at Callao, a near riot erupted.

Armed with revolvers and knives, the mob demanded that the foreigners be removed and native-born Americans take their place. To placate the Americans, the Pacific Mail agent ordered the Peruvians to sleep on the deck and all available beds were furnished to the new

passengers. The California departed on January 31 with 365 passengers — almost twice the number she had been designed to accommodate — and all the coal she could carry. Most bunks were occupied by two gold seekers, and every inch of deck space was taken.

On February 9 the steamer entered Acapulco to replenish its supply of fresh water. All hands welcomed the chance to go ashore, stretch their legs, and take on private stocks of food, practically stripping the town of fruit, bread, and sugar.

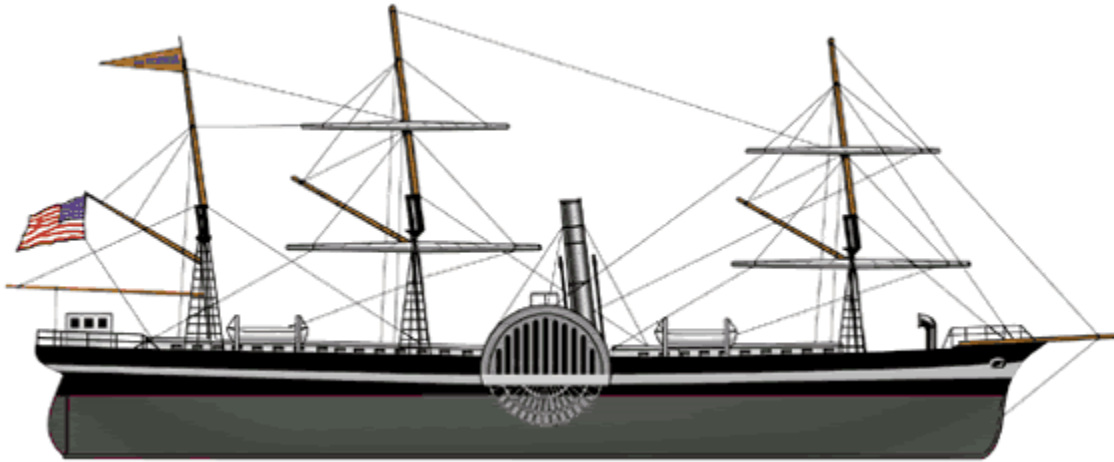
Continuing forward, the captain had to deal with insubordinate crew, a stowaway, and a dangerously low supply of coal. Orders were given to cut up all available wood on board. Almost everything flammable went to feed the furnace — spars, bunks, and bulkheads. Then, in a lucky discovery, 100 sacks of coal were found, which got the California as far as Monterey. There she took on 30 cords of wood, and on February 28 entered the Golden Gate, 145 days from New York, and the first steamer to be seen at San Francisco.



Early San Francisco

But the California's story did not end there. All but one of the crew deserted for the goldfields. Captain Forbes, back on duty after his illness, kept watch over the ship. In April,

he received a fresh supply of coal and had to assemble a new crew at inflated wages averaging \$150 monthly for the journey south. On May 1, the California left for Panama with 54 passengers and \$346,653 in gold specie aboard.



Wooden side-wheel steamer built in 1848 by William H. Webb, New York, NY; machinery by Novelty Iron Works, New York, NY.

LOA =203'0"	LBP =N/A	B =33'6"	D =20'0"	Draft =14'0"
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Displacement =Unknown	Deadweight =Unknown	Gross tonnage =1,057
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Cargo capacity =400 LT	Passengers =200	Speed =8 knots
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Machinery: Single cylinder, side-lever engine with two 26' paddlewheels, powered by two return-flue boilers.

Built for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. The first U.S. steamer to transit the Strait of Magellan, and the first steamer to reach San Francisco, California, after news of the discovery of gold reached the U.S. East Coast. Wrecked near Pacasmayo, Peru, winter, 1894

Viewed on the history section of the website of [APL](#), a transportation company. APL adapted this history with permission from the article by Bill Kooiman, a retired maritime purser who works at the [San Francisco National Maritime Museum Library](#).