



BETWEEN THE COVERS RARE BOOKS

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Allen Bonney; Royal Bird Bradford

[Archive:] Letters of Allen Bonney, Pioneer Farmer in California

(Sacramento and Placerville, California; Turner, Maine): (1849 - circa 1857; 1910)

\$4800



A small archive consisting of seven autograph letters: included are three detailed letters written by Allen Bonney soon after his arrival to California in 1854, in which he describes his experiences as an early pioneer farmer in Sacramento and Placerville, and a particularly harrowing “hunting excursion” that culminated in his killing of a large Grizzly Bear. The collection also includes one pair of accompanying contemporary letters (from 1849 and 1854), written by a colleague and family member from Bonney’s home town of Turner, Maine; and another pair of letters from 1910, written by Rear Admiral Royal Bird Bradford, also from Turner, Maine, to Bonney’s son, inquiring about biographical information and Bonney’s death in California in 1881. A few scattered stains, the bottom two-inches of a final page to one of Bonney’s letters has been neatly removed underneath his signature, very good.

Born in “Old Maine” in 1817, Allen Bonney attended North Yarmouth Academy, owned a small business in Turner, and married one Alma Bailey in 1846. Her early death in 1853 appears to have prompted Bonney’s departure to California in 1854. Bonney’s first letter from Sacramento (September 9, 1854), written to Sumner Bailey (Alma’s brother), indicates that Bonney left his two children (Charles and Harriett) in the care of his wife’s family. The following two letters, written from Placerville (circa 1857) to his wife’s mother and again to Sumner, indicate that Bonney was sending money to them and his children, including a “gold ring” and the occasional “gold dollar”. Little else is known about Bonney, except that “he went to the far West and never returned,” and died at Sacramento in 1881.

Bonney writes in his first letter from 1854 that his health is not very good, having come down with Typhoid fever that ran 28 days. But he is on the mend and expects to be able to go to work soon, and speculates about various potential crops and farming techniques open to him in California. He also gives a brief description of the mining districts: “there [are] thousands of men at work in the mines. They have cut down hills and cut into the sides of mountains from five to seven hundred feet ... the miners as a general thing are a drinking, gambling set of men ... I stood upon the side walk yesterday and saw a man fire two bull[ets] at another man ... there are but a few people that regard the Sabbath. The Stages and Steamboats run on Sundays ... and it is a great day for Horse racing. They are making great efforts to improve society here ...”

In his second letter written from Placerville to his Mother-in-law in 1857, he notes that “we have every thing here ... green peas & beans the year round, vegetables of all kinds grow here ... we have gardens with fifty acres in them filled with peaches & grapes.” He also writes, with approval, that she “would not like the [customs?] of the people very well but I do. No one cares what another one does, we do not talk about others here. It is no matter whether one belongs to a church or not, ones belief is not the question ... there is strong efforts made to build up churches but it is like pulling teeth ...”

In his third letter to his brother-in-law, likely written later in 1857 from Placerville, Bonney provides a long description of “a hunting excursion,” and his killing of a 900 lb. Grizzly Bear. A few extracts from this letter follows:

“... two weeks ago four of us put out after the Grizzly ... I have a rifle carrying nine balls and two nine inch long pistols carrying six balls each making in all twenty one balls ... at last I resolved to make an attack upon him | our company took a position to get side shots at him and I marched up within twenty rods of him | he sat facing me | I laid my pistols by my side | put my rifle to my shoulder and fired. As soon as I fired [he] rushed for me | I gave him eight shots from my rifle and then took my pistols reserving one rifle shot thinking I might need it | the Grizzly rushing for me with great fury | crack went my pistols faster than thought | the Grizzly is now within three rods of me | I took my rifle to my shoulder and fired upon him breaking one of his legs ... he laid down and died | on examining him we found fifteen balls that entered his body | not one of them of our company fired at him | we dressed him and he weighed 900 lbs | I shall not hunt any more Grizzlies ...”

In all three letters Bonney asks after his children, for whom he displays evident pride and affection, and he also addresses them both directly: “Harriet I suppose you & Charley are going to school this winter ... there is a little girl about your age where I live, about as pretty as you are, her eyes are black and she dances very pretty. She has given me a gold ring for you worth three dollars, she says you must come out here ... I send you a gold dollar to buy something ... tell Charley I shall send him one next time ...” It is not known if he ever did in fact return home to Maine to see them, or if they visited him in California.

A small but very intriguing collection of letters, providing a first-hand account of early pioneer life at Sacramento, California. A detailed list of all seven letters, with quoted extracts, follows:

1. Testimonial by George Turner, September 3, 1849

Autograph Note, Signed. Half sheet.

“To whom it may concern / This certifies that Allen Bonney of this Town is a Gentleman of sober life ... / Turner, Sept. 3rd 1849 / George Turner, Selectmen of the town of Turner.”

2. Olive S. Bonney to her brother Ebenezer S. Bonney

ALS. Quarto. 2pp. Turner, March 26, 1854.

“Brother Ebenezer ... Allen [Bonney] ... will be back tomorrow night. He says he shall start for New York this week Friday & next week on Wednesday the 5 of April will sail for California if he can get passage | if not will stop till the 20th of April. We shall all advise you to keep away from California ...”

3. Allen Bonney to his in-laws (Sumner Bailey and “Miss Bailey”)

ALS. Quarto. 3pp. Sacramento, September 9, 1854.

“Dear Sir ... I will first inform you of my health which is not very good. I was taken seven weeks ago with the Typhoid fever | my fever ran 28 days ... I have had a hard time of it | think I shall be able to go work soon. I suppose you would like a little history of California ... it produces great crops | they farm it on a great scale | some farmers have a thousand acres of grain | keep ten thousand sheep and a thousand head of cattle, their principal productions are wheat and barley | their principal productions are wheat and barley | it is a great county for vegetables | they commence ploughing and putting in seed in Dec. and finish in April. Corn does not do much here ... hay is almost worthless here. I can not give you much of a history of the mining districts | there [are] thousands of men at work in the mines | they have cut down hills and cut into the sides of mountains from five to seven hundred feet ... the miners as a general thing are a drinking gambling set of men but a few of them ... the society of California is generally bad. I stood upon the side walk yesterday and saw a man fire two bull[ets] at another man but did not hit him, there are but a few people that regard the Sabbath | the Stages and Steamboats run on Sundays as other days | the stores are open and it is a great day for Horse racing | they are making great efforts to improve society here and I think it is improving some; we held our full election on the 6th and it is generally thought the Whigs have carried the state ...

Miss Bailey it made my heart glad to hear from my children for the first time since I left home to here | that they were all well was more than I expected | it made me feel proud also to hear that I have two such remarkable children | mother writes me that Charles is a good boy and goes to school ... tell Harriet I think of her every day and to be a good girl and I will bring her home a ring ...”

4. Allen Bonney to his mother-in-law ("Mrs. Bailey")

ALS. Quarto. 2pp. Placerville, August 3, 1857

"Mrs. Bailey / I received your letter ... I was glad to hear from home once more | my health is first rate ... I have not seen a unwell day since I got my health in August '55 | perhaps you think I suffer here but it is not so | we have every thing here | we have green peas & beans the year round | vegetables of all kinds grow here ... we have gardens with fifty acres in them filled with peaches & grapes | it is a great country and a good one | you would not like the [customs?] of the people very well but I do | no one cares what another one does | we do not talk about others here | it is no matter whether one belongs to a church or not | ones belief is not the question ... there is strong efforts made to build up churches but it is like pulling teeth ... /

Harriet I send the dollar to Charley this time | in the next letter I will send you two dollars and a half | I send the little piece of gold to you | tell me if you keep the gold I have sent you | tell what books you study and how you get along | you must be a good girl and help grandmother ..."

5. Allen Bonney to Sumner Bailey

ALS. Folio. 3pp. Placerville, December 3 [1857?]

(Condition note: there are about three tiny holes, the bottom two-inches of the final page has been removed underneath Allen Bonney's signature).

"Sumner / I am living in the mountains with better health than I have enjoyed for years ... I will write a few lines to Hatty, I expect she is too large to call Hatty | then I will tell you a Cal. story.

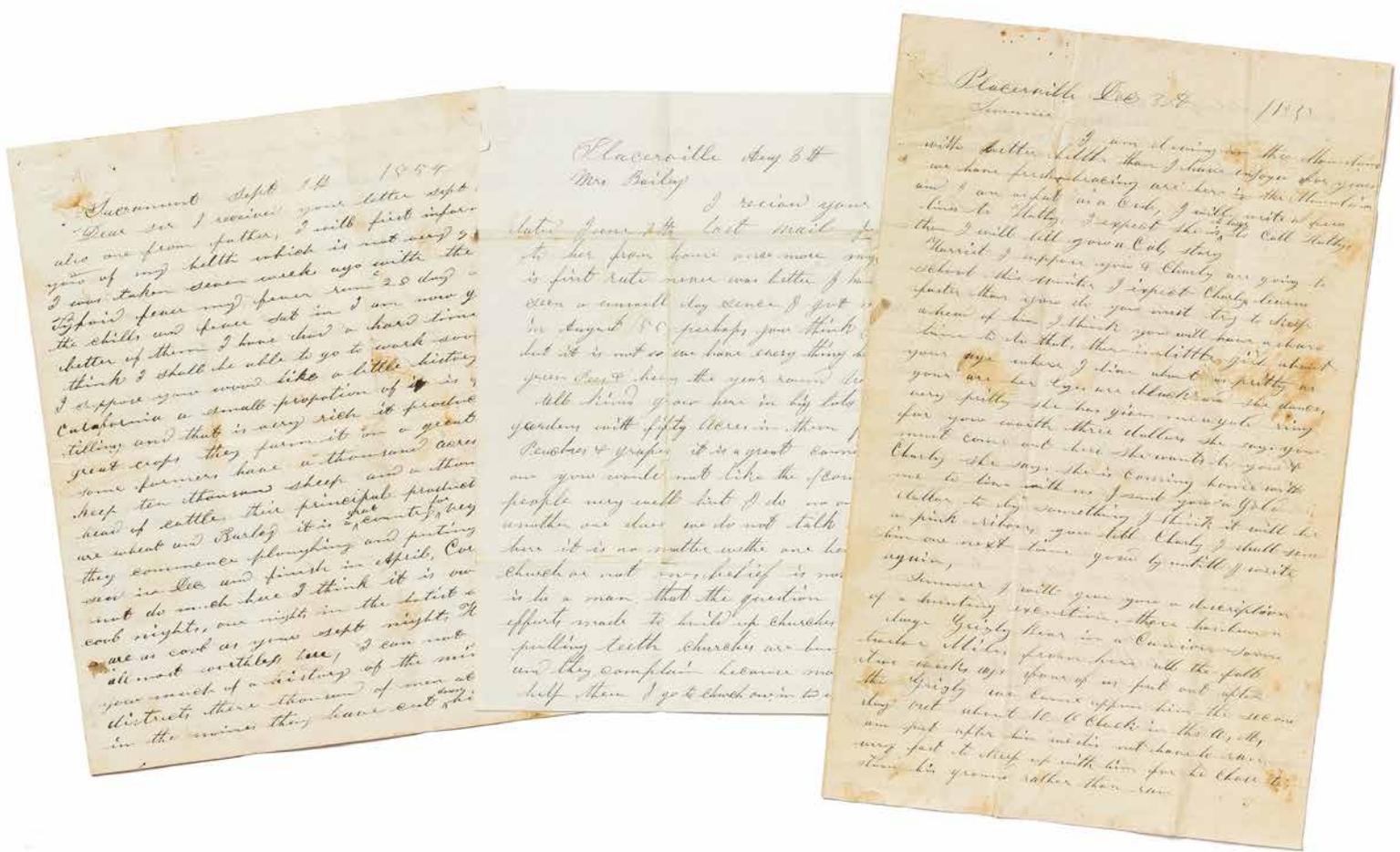
Harriet I suppose you & Charley are going to school this winter ... there is a little girl about your age where I live | about as pretty as you are | her eyes are black and she dances very pretty | she has given me a gold ring for you worth three dollars | she says you must come out here ... I send you a gold dollar to buy something ... tell Charley I shall send him one next time ...

Sumner I will give you a description of a hunting excursion | there has been a large Grizzly Bear in a canyon some twelve miles from here ... two weeks ago four of us put out after the Grizzly | we came upon him the second day out about 10 o'clock in the AM and put after him | we did not have to run very fast to keep up with him for he chose to stand his ground rather than run | and we watching to get a favorable opportunity to fire upon him ... here I will tell you my weapons | I have a rifle carrying nine balls and two nine inch long pistols carrying six balls each making in all twenty one balls | we [played?] around him until about sunset with out getting any advantage of him | at last I resolved to make an attack upon him | our company took a position to get side shots at him and I marched up within twenty rods of him | he sat facing me | I laid my pistols by my side | put my rife to my shoulder and fired. As soon as I fired [he] rushed for me | I gave him eight shots from my rifle and then took my pistols reserving one rifle shot thinking I might need it | the Grizzly rushing for me with great fury | crack went my pistols faster than thought | the Grizzly is now within three rods of me | I took my rifle to my shoulder and fired upon him breaking one of his legs ... he laid down and died | on examining him we found fifteen balls that entered his body | not one of them of our company fired at him | we dressed him and he weighed 900 lbs | I shall not hunt any more Grizzlies ...

... the rainy season has set in and the farmers have commenced preparing their ground for the seed ... we have snow here in the mountains ... the miners labour hard for small pay | you must not believe all the Papers about rich diggings ... there is not one miner in forty that makes expenses | there is great excitement here now about quartz mining | many will spend fortunes in operations | there are a great many people coming here now ... tell my mother to dress Charley warm this winter for he can not stand the cold | tell Hatty I think she had better go bare foot this winter, what does she say at that, I wrote your mother some six weeks ago and sent Hatty a dollar ..."

6-7. Rear Admiral R.B. Bradford to Charles Bonney (1910)

Two ALS. Quartos. Each one page: Nezinscot Farm: Turner, Maine (October 1, 1910); and Washington, D.C. (December 6, 1910). On behalf of his cousin, who is writing a history of North Yarmouth Academy, Bradford requests biographical information about "Ebenezer & Allen Bonney," who were "among the students many years ago," and the date of "your father's death, which I believe took place at Sacramento, California." [BTC#425564]



Sacramento Sept 14 1854
Dear Sir I received your letter Sept 10
also one from father, I will first inform
you of my health which is not very good
I was taken down week ago with the
Typhoid fever my fever ran 28 days
the chills and fever set in I am now
better of them I have had a hard time
think I shall be able to go to work soon
I suppose you would like a little history
California a small proportion of it is
telling and that is very rich it produces
great crops they furnish in a great
some farmers have a thousand acres
sheep ten thousand sheep and a thousand
head of cattle their principal product
we want and Barlog it is a very
they commence ploughing and putting
seed in the soil and finish in April, Cal
can do much here I think it is our
best night, one night in the best a
we as cold as your Sept night, I can not
all about without here I can not
you consist of a district of the mine
districts there thousand of men at
in the mines they have cut the

Placerville May 3rd
Mrs Barlog
I received your
letter from the last mail
to her from home was more
is first rate never was better I have
seen a small dog since I got
in August 50 perhaps you think
but it is not so we have every thing
you have been the year round
all kind grow here in big lots
yards with fifty trees in them
Cauldies & grapes it is a great
are you would not like the
people very well but I do not
remember one else we do not talk
here it is no matter with the
church or not we speak of
is to a man that the question
effort made to write up churches
pulling teeth churches are
and they complete houses
half them I go to church on

Placerville Dec 29 1854
Dear Sir
I was driving in the afternoon
with better health than I have enjoyed for years
and I am in a Cab, I will write you
line to Hatty I expect she will call Hatty
then I will tell you Cab story
Hurry I suppose you & Charly are going to
about the winter I expect Charly
faster than you do you must try to keep
when of time I think you will have a share
line to do that, then I will be glad to
your eye unless I like about as pretty as
you are her legs are beautiful she dances
very pretty she has given me my
for your worth three dollars she says you
must come out here she wants to go
Charly she says she is coming home with
me to live with us I send you a
dollar to try something I think it will do
a pink ribbon, you tell Charly I shall see
him our next time you by with all I write
again
I will give you a description
of a hunting reservation, there has been a
long Great Bear in a Quiver some
hundred miles from here with the fall
deer season 1854 you are out after
the Grizzly we have often seen the
dog but about 100 black in the West
one just after the winter had to
very fast to sleep up with him for to chase
them he grows rather than