

First African-American *Diplomat*

By Horace G. Dawson Jr.

A man with the improbable name of William Alexander Leidesdorff was appointed United States vice consul in Yerba Buena, Mexico—better known today as San Francisco—on October 29, 1845. This area of California did not become officially part of the United States until well after the “Bear Flag” incident, an event that gave Leidesdorff his finest moment.

Many publications identify Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, minister to Haiti from 1869-1877, as “America’s first black diplomat.” However, Leidesdorff preceded Bassett by almost a quarter of a century. That Leidesdorff’s role has not been previously recognized, nor definitively established, is perhaps due to the man himself. From his arrival on the west coast in 1840 until his death in 1848, he seems to have concealed the fact of his ancestry or at least to have made no reference to it. Colleagues recognized him as “dark in appearance” but made nothing of it.

Furthermore, Leidesdorff’s diplomatic appointment came as a result of his success in business, not the other way around. One of the true pioneers in California history, he was a prosperous businessman and civic leader. He built the first hotel in San Francisco and was one of three prominent citizens who established that city’s first public school.

Past experience also may have taught the young adventurer not to reveal the fact that he was of mixed racial background, born in St. Croix, Danish West Indies, in 1812 to Alexander Leidesdorff, a planter from Denmark, and Anna Maria Sparks, a native of the island. She also was of mixed blood. He was sent to Flensburg, Denmark, for his early education, and at age 12, he migrated to the United States, settling in New Orleans.

He achieved success as a merchant seaman, sailing to New York, the West

Indies, and Europe, and became in his mid-30s a captain in charge of vessels for major companies. Granted American citizenship on February 25, 1834 in Louisiana, Leidesdorff appears also to



William Leidesdorff

have been prominent in New Orleans society.

Flight to California

His flight to California, according to press accounts, was the result of his confiding in his bride-to-be the facts of his ancestry. A member of a proud old French family, she passed the story on to her parents, who investigated, discovered the truth of it, and promptly broke off the engagement.

As Louisiana was a slave state, it was necessary for Leidesdorff, not only broken-hearted but also in danger of enslavement, to leave the state hurriedly. He did so, setting sail for New York and later the west coast on the schooner, *Julia Ann* or *Juliean* in 1840, arriving on the west coast in June 1841, seven months after his departure from New York. For three years, Leidesdorff continued as master of the ship, sailing up

and down the California coast with a cargo of hides and tallow to be traded at each port. These products were normally exchanged for knives, thread, and meat, as well as produce such as beans, wheat, and vegetables.

Mexico was governing authority of the territory. However, France, Great Britain, and Russia, in addition to the United States, were very active in the area—the fur trade attracted widespread interest.

In 1842, Leidesdorff purchased his first property in Yerba Buena. He built a warehouse in the town the following year and soon became prominent in commerce and civic affairs, operating a provisions store, arranging shipping for other merchants, and opening a hotel, which catered to sailors. In 1847, he was elected to the City Council.

Leidesdorff was appointed vice consul by Thomas O. Larkin, United States consul at Monterey, and one of the great and controversial figures in California history. Beyond representing U. S. diplomatic and commercial interests in the territory, Larkin’s larger mission was to win California for the United States and, in the words of historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, “to defeat the schemes, real or imaginary, of European nations supposed to be intriguing for the same prize.”

“In addition to your consular function,” read Larkin’s instructions from the secretary of state, “the president has thought proper to appoint you a confidential agent in California; you may consider the present dispatch as your authority for acting in this character. The confidence which he reposes in your patriotism and discretion is evinced by conferring upon you this delicate and important trust. You will take care not to awaken the jealousy of the French and English agents there by assuming any other than your consular character.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Field appointment

It was against this background as the most powerful U.S. representative in the area that Thomas Larkin reached out to one of the most prominent citizens in Yerba Buena. In his letter of October 28, 1845, Larkin wrote, "Believing it of sufficient importance to the American commercial interest to have an Agent for the Government of the United States, I wish to appoint you as my Vice Consul for this post." He asked that Leidesdorff "inform me if you are willing to accept this appointment and enter up its duties immediately."

The young businessman wasted no time. His favorable response is dated October 29: "In answer to your official note which I had the honour to receive this morning," he wrote, "I have to say that I accept the appointment and hope that I shall be able to fulfill the duties of the office to the satisfaction of my government."

What amounts to a "field appointment" for Leidesdorff was not unusual for the times and circumstance. Especially in distant posts, consuls often appointed deputies on their own authority and sought concurrence from Washington after the fact. Larkin was, however, careful to cite his authority for the action, basing it on his own presidential appointment and on the power granted him in section seven of his Book of Instructions.

In dispatch 33 dated January 6, 1846, the consul reported his action to the secretary of State and provided justification:

The undersigned, from the increase of whale ships arriving at the Port of San Francisco, has appointed William Leidesdorff, Merchant of that place, Vice Consul for the Port of San Francisco. . . . The undersigned has the further object in this appointment in having an Agent at San Francisco to advise and attend to our many countrymen continually entering California, Via, the Rocky Mountains, and to grant them passports.

Evidence of specific Washington approval of Leidesdorff's appointment has not been found, but it is well known that he acted as vice consul and that he

was recognized as such in the territory. Various symbols of office, including a flag, the official seal, passports, and a uniform were sent to him by Larkin, who assured Leidesdorff of full support.

Larkin requested that California authorities grant temporary recognition of the appointment pending Washington and Mexican government approval. Commander General Jose Castro acknowledged Leidesdorff immediately. However, Governor Pio Pico insisted upon first receiving authority from his superiors in the Government of Mexico. There is no evidence that it arrived.

Among colleagues in the resident diplomatic corps, the British consul, as Leidesdorff predicted, had trouble acknowledging his official status. The French one did not. To Larkin, these were secondary, if not minor, concerns. Leidesdorff had his full confidence, and he instructed him to conduct himself as the fully accredited and competent American vice consul.

Indeed, in a letter written in April, 1846, Larkin is very specific in his advice to his appointee:

You must use every care as an officer to guard your words and passions. Make it your business, for the name of the honor of the country in whose employ you are, not to enlist yourself in any petty affairs of the town you reside in, but do your utmost to pacify and keep in good faith and humor the natives around you. Keep on the best possible terms with those of the country in office.

In response, Leidesdorff assured his mentor:

About my being on good terms with persons in office, you may depend I shall do so, and hope that I shall always have it in my power to fill my office in such a manner as to be an honour and not a dishonour to the country of which I have the honour of representing.

Leidesdorff established an office to house his consular operation in Yerba Buena. As maritime affairs were his chief interest, he boarded and did necessary processing for practically all U.S. ships docking there, and the captains of these vessels called in at his office. In addition, members of the rapidly growing American community sought his

assistance as the official U.S. representative in Yerba Buena.

Trade issues, in which he himself was frequently involved, arose often. Problems of disabled seamen were numerous also. Any sailor who was sick on arrival could apply for assistance to the U.S. consular officer, who would take charge of the sailor at the expense of the ship's captain. Upon recovery, the sailor would be sent to Monterey to await the return of his ship, once again at the captain's expense. Assistance and moral support, but no money, were also available to American civilians.

The extensive correspondence between Leidesdorff and Larkin reveals two men working in close harmony. If, as is well known, Larkin was advancing the United States interest in California as a secret agent, Leidesdorff was working in tandem with him. His reports on the local scene, especially his evaluations, suspicions, and recommendations regarding residents and visitors, clearly

were helpful to his mentor. So also were his services rendered under instructions to visitors, including such known agents as Lt. Archibald Gillespie. Activities such as these, minor client services, and commercial transactions constituted the bulk of the vice consul's official duties.

A flag of independence

Most noteworthy in Leidesdorff's career in diplomatic service was his role in connection with the Bear Flag incident of June 14, 1846. Among several "provocations" leading up to the war with Mexico, which resulted ultimately in California's annexation by the United States, the Yankee takeover of Sonoma and the hoisting there of a flag of independence stand out as defining moments.

By the mid-1840s, tensions ran high in the California territory with different factions among the native population favoring continued Mexican rule or United States annexation. The almost

daily arrival of more and more "overlanders" from the United States, pointedly including military personnel headed by such figures as Captain John C. Fremont, Commodore John D. Sloat, Lt. Archibald Gillespie, Commander William B. Ide, and Captain John Montgomery, gave the Americans an upper hand. The weak and overly committed government in Mexico City was clearly in no position to protect its interest militarily.

President Polk's policy, faithfully advocated by Consul Larkin at Monterey and as eagerly by Vice Consul Leidesdorff at Yerba Buena, was annexation by peaceful means, if possible, or by force if necessary. Assured of the outcome, many Americans felt that matters could be accelerated by provoking Mexican authorities—hence, the June 14 takeover of the town of Sonoma by 40 American troops led by Commander Ide. After arresting the three local officials, the invaders raised a homemade

flag featuring a grizzly bear and declared Sonoma an “independent” republic.

Leidesdorff’s accounts of these events were the first to reach Larkin and, therefore, the first official American accounts of the Bear Flag incident. The dispatch of June 17 delayed by the vice consul’s inability to engage a courier,

The vice consul reported the takeover of Sonoma, and the arrest and humane incarceration of town leaders...

was largely tentative, referring to “about forty men, said to be Americans.”

Two days later, however, Leidesdorff fills in all the gaps with definitive information from the only authentic sources.” He later talked with several people, including eyewitnesses and other visitors. The vice consul reported the takeover of Sonoma, the arrest and humane incarceration of town leaders, and the assurance given them and the townspeople by Commander Ide of protection and good treatment. According to Leidesdorff, the Mexican lieutenant invited to inspect the scene “found all quiet, the place in the most perfect order; under strict Military discipline.” The men in charge of Sonoma were described as of a “Chivalric spirit,” which was to prevent their committing “any acts of violence, or injury upon any one.” Perhaps for security reasons, Leidesdorff seemed reluctant to relate the actual size of the garrison; however, he did cite the number of weapons “and plenty of ammunition.”

The vice consul then gave his mentor the first description of the banner raised by Americans at Sonoma—“a white field, with a red border, a large Star and a Grizzly Bear!” With obvious enthusiasm, the diplomat adds, “Such is the flag of Young California.” With his dispatch, he enclosed a copy of Ide’s historic proclamation, which was designed to calm the populace and to assure them of a better future under an American oriented “independent” republic. All the

information supplied by Leidesdorff, including the proclamation, was promptly sent by Larkin to Secretary of State Buchanan in Washington.

Patriotism and profits

The precise date of Leidesdorff’s separation from diplomatic service is not known. What is known is that at some point prior to California’s actually becoming a state, he had returned to full-time business and was somewhat estranged from his erstwhile mentor and friend, Thomas Larkin. In all probability, the issue between them was money. Business transactions appear to have brought them together in the first place; and neither appeared to draw a line between official and personal dealings. Indeed, a biographic evaluation of Larkin may apply equally to Leidesdorff; “He saw no inconsistency in patriotism and profits.”

In order to obtain land (some 35,000 acres in the Sacramento Valley), Leidesdorff in 1844 took out Mexican citizenship without, of course, giving up his American citizenship. This was common practice among many of the pioneers who, nonetheless, kept quiet about it. In Leidesdorff’s case, the matter came to light following his death of “brain fever” (probably typhus) on May 18, 1848. Although his estate at this point was encumbered by debt, his vast land holdings became extremely valuable after the 1849 Gold Rush and the subject of some of the most intricate and protracted litigation in California history.

It is this accumulation of wealth and property and involvement in business, all unusual for an African American of his time, that have attracted past scholarly attention. Too long overlooked, however, is yet another distinction achieved by William Alexander Leidesdorff—that of having been the first diplomat of African descent in the history of the United States. ■

Horace G. Dawson Jr. is the director of the Patricia Roberts Harris Public Affairs Program and adjunct professor of communications at Howard University.