



The Individual in the Community: American Entrepreneurs in the Australian Colonies, 1850-1890

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Following the discovery of gold in the Australian colonies in the 1850s, commercial adventurers from around the world made their way to the antipodes. I examine the American entrepreneurs who made their mark in the Australian colonies in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and consider how individuals achieved success within intersecting communities. Individual entrepreneurs found support in communities based on family connections, associations through friendship and experience, and shared nationality. They also found support through informational networks created in the commercial world, including consular reports, trade magazines, and international exhibitions. Primary sources of the era, including family letters, newspaper and magazine accounts, and consular records, reveal the complex communities within which entrepreneurs in Australia operated to achieve their commercial goals.

In May 1851, the American consul in Sydney wrote to the Department of State announcing the discovery of gold in the British colony of Victoria, “. . . this event,” he reflected, “will exercise a vast and accumulating influence upon the destinies of this Colony.” He went on to suggest, “The ever ready and active enterprise of our countrymen will eagerly seize . . . this new field of profitable adventure.”¹ Consul James Hartwell Williams showed remarkable prescience in his speculations; in the initial period of the ensuing gold rush, an estimated 19,000 adventurers made their way across the Pacific.² Of this number, many

¹ James Hartwell Williams, U.S. Consul, to Daniel Webster, Secretary of State, *Consular Dispatches from Sydney*, no. 42, 31 May 1851.

² Werner Levi, *American-Australian Relations* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1947), 43. Note that this figure is based on the numbers leaving American ports, not all of whom were natives or citizens of the United States. An estimated 5,000 native-born Americans were in Australia by the mid-1850s; see E. Daniel and Annette Potts, eds.,

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