

PHINEAS BANNING & THE ALEXANDERS & OTHER PARTNERSHIPS

Phineas Banning launched his own business empire at the start of 1853, and as time passed he would manage it with a succession of partners. Through his many ventures, he accumulated assets, satisfied his customers with the “accustomed promptness” he advertised, and won government supply contracts. But if his successes were great, so were his losses, including a major business failure in 1856. The erratic path of his young career echoed the uncertain if busy days of early Los Angeles, a sparsely settled and socially turbulent region where local citizens labored to establish order and economic stability.

By then a large, sturdy, and smart young man, Phineas Banning turned twenty-three in August 1853. His striking physical presence was much remarked on by acquaintances and friends. In October of that year, he met Harris Newmark, a young Prussian merchant who had just arrived by steamer to settle in Los Angeles and join his brother’s mercantile business. Newmark later recalled his shock on first seeing Banning. “In European cities where I had heretofore lived,” Newmark explained, “commission and forwarding merchants were a dignified and, to my way of thinking, an aristocratic class.” Newmark continued:

At any rate, upon arriving in San Pedro I had expected to find a man dressed either in a uniform or a Prince Albert, with a high hat and other appropriate appurtenances, and it is impossible to describe my astonishment when Banning was pointed out to me; for I knew absolutely nothing of the rough methods in vogue on the Pacific Coast. There stood before me a very large, powerful man, coatless and vestless, without necktie or collar, and wearing pantaloons at least six inches too

short, a pair of brogans and socks with large holes; while bright-colored suspenders added to the picturesque effect of his costume.¹

Other observers of the early 1850s commented with similar awe on Banning's physical stamina, tremendous drive, and commanding manner. Horace Bell, never one to bestow praise or criticism lightly, remembered that Banning "could ride farther with less fatigue than any man I ever knew, notwithstanding he was never a lightweight." When "the whole country declared the impossibility" of driving a six-horse stagecoach over "an old Mexican pack trail" in 1854, "Banning willed the thing to be done." He seemed to inspire deference, even when he was not formally in charge. By the end of the 1850s Banning controlled the transportation contract to supply Fort Tejon, about seventy miles north of Los Angeles, but Bell opined that "the gallant General Phineas Banning ran the post" rather than just supplying it. He concluded (with at least a bit of exaggeration): "Whatever Banning suggested at the fort was done, and nothing was done unless he was consulted."²

Maj. Edward D. Townsend, an officer in the service of the army's Adjutant General's Office, met Banning in October 1855 while on an inspection tour in Southern California. He was more objective than Bell, but nevertheless effusive in describing Banning's energetic manner: "Mr B. is a rapid man, forever in a hurry and doing the business of a half dozen of men." Banning's stage-driving technique particularly impressed Townsend: "if he isn't a Yankee improvement over Jehu I don't know anything about stage driving." Anna Ogier, spouse of U.S. District Court Judge Isaac Ogier, echoed Townsend's view of Banning's energy when she reminded a friend in early 1856 that "you know what a flurry he is always in—can't wait a second if he were to make millions by it."³

These observations were borne out by Banning's early career and life in Southern California, which would take all his ambition, energy, and smarts. Banning seemed a perfect match for the region where he chose to live in the early 1850s, which needed people with both vision and drive to shape it into a center of transportation and commerce.

The Forwarding and Commission Business in 1850s Los Angeles

In February 1853 Phineas Banning's first partnership, Alexander & Banning, began both its forwarding and commission business and a stagecoach service for travelers between Los Angeles and the harbor at San Pedro, where freight and passenger steamships regularly docked. Since



Phineas Banning about 1855. Courtesy of the Banning Residence Museum.

Banning had been living on a clerk's wages for much of his working life, and his partner, George Alexander, was not wealthy, the two had to borrow a considerable amount of money from their associates to purchase the Douglass & Sanford firm, whose assets included wagons and lighters, draft animals, and a modest inventory of goods. George's brother David, who, with his partner Francis Mellus, was in the same business and had just returned from a trip to Europe a few months before, was probably one of those lenders. After selling out his half of Douglass & Sanford, William Sanford worked with and invested in Alexander & Banning, while also starting partnerships with several other local businessmen.⁴



The Los Angeles Plaza area in 1853, a frontier town of whitewashed adobes (from the U.S. Pacific Railroad Survey of 1853–54). Courtesy of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

In its first year of existence Alexander & Banning ambitiously built its business and added to its transportation services. In May the company commenced construction of a “Half Way House” for travelers along the road from the harbor to Los Angeles, a structure that a local newspaper hoped might be the start of a new farming community. According to Harris Newmark, Alexander & Banning purchased fifteen additional wagons and some seventy-five mules for nearly \$30,000 that summer so the company could handle more freight. Also that year, Phineas Banning began driving stagecoaches as part of the company’s passenger service between San Pedro and Los Angeles on the days the coastal steamers arrived and departed. As noted above, he soon became known as an expert driver; he must have learned quickly, since he had spent his working life as a clerk and was not noted for his driving skills before arriving in Southern California. He almost certainly learned from his mentor and former boss William Sanford, who was a master driver. In future years Banning would acquire an outstanding reputation for driving stagecoaches, although he took an occasional fall, as he did on a day in February 1856, when driving from San Pedro to Los Angeles. In that incident, his team “became unmanageable” and “he was thrown forward and fell behind the horses, and becoming entangled in the gearing [*sic*] and was dragged some hundred yards before he succeeded in extricating himself from his perilous situation.” A year earlier, commercial agent Alfred Robinson accompanied Banning as he was driving a wagon. When it went out of control and tipped over, Robinson recalled, “a powerful hand prevented

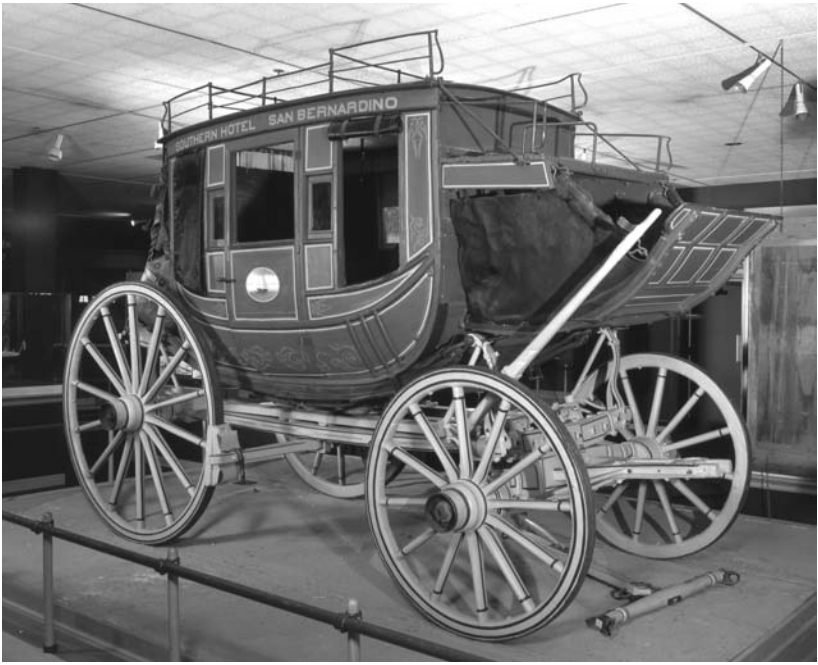


San Pedro in 1855 with the facilities of Alexander & Banning, by James Madison Alden. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

my being pitched over the side.” Then “Banning was thrown forward between the horses and how he stopped God only knows.” The business of stage driving, especially along unimproved roads, was not one for the timid or physically fragile; Banning’s confidence and strength no doubt contributed to his skill and growing reputation as a driver. They were certainly necessary in the fiercely competitive business into which he had entered.⁵

The year 1853 was a bustling one at the harbor for Alexander & Banning, as trading increased—and with it, competition. The previous year, Augustus W. Timms, a German seaman who had come to California in the 1840s, had purchased the only wharf in San Pedro from Diego Sepulveda, and he began competing with Douglass & Sanford and Alexander & Mellus. B. A. Townsend, who eventually sold his business to Alexander & Banning, and several others also vied for the same customers. But Alexander & Banning and Timms were the major contenders in these early days at the port, and their stagecoach drivers raced one another at breakneck speed to and from the harbor on steamer days. By 1855 there would be six major competitors for this business, including Lanfranco & Sepulveda and J. J. Tomlinson, who would eventually take over from Timms as Banning’s chief nemesis.⁷

Amid this competition Alexander & Banning expanded its operations significantly in 1854 and 1855. According to a sketch of the company’s complex at San Pedro and Major Townsend’s notes, the site encompassed a large adobe structure, outbuildings, and associated equipment. They



Concord stagecoach once owned by the Bannings. Courtesy of the History Collections, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

acquired additional lighters to load and unload ships anchored far from the shallow depths near the wharves. With this added capacity, they accumulated new customers, for example persuading John Keys of Santa Barbara that it was faster to ship his goods to the Kern River area (north-east of Santa Barbara) by sending them south via San Pedro and Los Angeles rather than directly overland. The company also added semiweekly stage service from the harbor to San Bernardino. Although winter rains occasionally made the crude roads impassable, the nearly year-round sunshine in the region kept shippers almost constantly busy. By September 1854 the *Southern Californian* claimed that the owners of Alexander & Banning “have upwards of 500 mules and 30 or 40 horses, 40 wagons and 15 stages running between San Pedro and this city, which are constantly employed for the accommodation of the public.”⁸

Some of Alexander & Banning’s stagecoaches were Concords, a model manufactured in the New Hampshire town of that name by the Abbot, Downing Company. Concords were built to swing on leather straps, which made the coach rock and roll as it passed over bumps rather

than jerking like more rigid coaches. They began to appear in California in the very early 1850s. Purchasing these improved models gave the partnership a competitive advantage over companies that used more primitive vehicles. The Concord would become a favorite of Banning and his oldest son, William, who followed in his father's footsteps as an expert driver.⁹

With the expansion of its business, Alexander & Banning added another Alexander to its cast of directors. David W. Alexander, George's brother, officially joined the company as a full partner as of September 1, 1854, when the change was advertised in local papers. Another brother, Henry N. Alexander, replaced Dr. Henry R. Myles as the Los Angeles agent for the firm. W. J. Willis was listed as their agent in Lexington, a growing community east of Los Angeles that would soon be renamed El Monte. Lyman, Rich, Hopkins & Company was their agent in the Mormon colony of San Bernardino. Rankin & Company in San Francisco served as the firm's agent in that city. From then on the company name was officially Alexanders & Banning, although the old spelling would still be used in reference to the firm over the next two years, even in some court documents.¹⁰

The expansion of Alexanders & Banning in the late summer of 1854 was likely driven by the prospect of a new and extremely lucrative client: the U.S. Army. At about this time, the army announced plans to build a fort at the steep Tejon Pass close to the Sebastian Indian Reservation, about 70 miles north of Los Angeles. The news spurred a number of business and civic leaders in Los Angeles to demand the improvement of the primitive San Fernando Road, which led to the new fort and continued further north. Phineas Banning and his partners, who would profit from better roads when transporting supplies and passengers to the fort and surrounding community, helped to convince the county Board of Supervisors (which happened then to include David Alexander) to commit \$1,000 to the endeavor if private citizens would match that amount through a subscription. Banning and friends then joined the campaign to persuade wealthy residents to contribute to the project, and \$2,900 was subscribed. Banning's partner William Sanford and Sanford's hardware business partner, George Carson, were awarded the contract to grade this road over the mountains. They hired Gabriel Allen, a colorful character and jack-of-all-trades, to supervise the work, which necessitated cutting through solid rock in many places. By January 1855 the road was ready for use, and Sanford and Abel Stearns collected the subscriptions to pay for it.¹¹



Phineas Banning's American Southwest, ca. 1860. Map by David L. Fuller.

The San Fernando Road project was the first of Phineas Banning's profitable ventures to be financed through a partnership of government funding and private enterprise. There would be many such in the years to come as he mastered the art of obtaining public financing to underwrite his business enterprises. In something of a celebration of this maiden voyage into the public/private entrepreneurial realm, he was allowed to test the new road in December 1854 before its official opening. As Horace Bell described the scene, before beginning the climb Banning sat ready in his stage "to which were harnessed a half dozen well-fed, panting and foaming mustangs." When he reached the summit of the San Fernando Pass, the nine observers present wondered "how that stage could ever descend, all declaring it an act of madness to attempt it. Banning laughingly assured them that it 'was all right; that a man who couldn't drive a stage safely down that hill was no driver at all, and should confine himself to ox-teaming in the valley.'" Down the hill they flew, with assorted clatters—and then a crash. Following the noise, the observers discovered "the conglomeration of chains, harness, coach, mustangs and Banning . . . in an inextricable mass of confusion—contusions, scratches, bruises, batter, cracks and breaks, forming a gen-

eral smash and pile up in a thicket of chaparral at the foot of the mountain." "‘Didn’t I tell you so,’ said Banning, ‘a beautiful descent, far less difficult than I imagined.’" With that he immediately sent word to David Alexander to bring a work team to repair the parts of the road he had just destroyed.¹²

With the San Fernando Road improved and open, Alexanders & Banning began transporting military supplies and goods for civilians at Fort Tejon. George Alexander opened a retail store there to sell the goods. The company then extended their transportation route past Fort Tejon to the newly discovered gold mines on the Kern River. While they continued to deliver freight there, their stage line to the mines proved either too successful or not successful enough, because in February they sold this portion of their business to the California Stage Company. Headquartered in Sacramento, this firm bought up many other stage lines at that time in an attempt to coordinate and monopolize the industry. The acquisition of Alexanders & Banning’s route to the Kern River allowed California Stage to consolidate the transportation network of the Central Valley.¹³

During this period of expansion, the company did not limit its sights to California. By early 1855 Alexanders & Banning was looking much further afield. The year before, Mormon leaders in San Bernardino headed by Assemblyman Jefferson Hunt had begun seeking federal and state funds to improve the "Southern Route" through the Cajon Pass and on to Salt Lake City in Utah Territory. With a coordinated effort by many interests, they secured funding from the California legislature for improving the road from San Bernardino to the state line. At the same time Los Angeles County supervisors underwrote work on the road from San Pedro harbor to San Bernardino, and the federal government appropriated funds for the Utah portion "for military and mail purposes." William Sanford and Phineas Banning then joined the campaign and began to undertake their own improvements in early 1855. Sanford had already pioneered a new, less steep section for the route back in 1850, and now he worked with Banning to grade a portion of the road, significantly reducing its angle of descent. With these modifications the lucrative Salt Lake City market and its increasing population of Mormons could be reached from San Pedro harbor with far less effort.¹⁴

In April 1855, Alexanders & Banning purchased about \$20,000 in goods for their first freight trip to Salt Lake City. The firm assumed one-third of the debt, while William Sanford, Benjamin D. Wilson, and John Temple covered the rest. Banning and David Alexander, who had once

lived in Utah, conferred with Mormon leaders in San Bernardino and were assured that their associates would be well received by the Saints in Salt Lake City. Sanford departed at the end of April with fifteen wagons, each pulled by ten mules. Together they carried a total of “60,000 pounds of assorted merchandise”; it was the largest load that any trader had yet taken to Salt Lake City. The wagon train encountered many obstacles along the way, including mountainous terrain, hostile Indians, and one broken axle. But Sanford reached his destination, sold all of the goods he had, and returned to Los Angeles in September. The trip was hailed as a financial success.¹⁵

Sanford’s triumphant venture inaugurated a succession of similar trips to Salt Lake City by other merchants. Alexanders & Banning themselves attempted another journey in 1856, but this one would prove to be a financial disaster. On his previous trip Sanford had encountered some, apparently ineffective, opposition to his arrival by Mormon leader Brigham Young, who hoped to start his own freight hauling company and keep the merchandising profits within the Mormon community. (There were even reports that Mormon religious leaders would “preach from the pulpit cautioning the people against trading with the company,” obviously to no avail.) The rejection of Sanford’s venture was much more pronounced in 1856, because along with his usual merchandise, he carried a large supply of liquor to the city. This was ill advised, and not only because strict abstinence from liquor was among the religious tenets of the Mormons, who dominated the city’s population and its government. As Byron Grant Pugh has concluded, Sanford’s arrival also coincided with Young’s increasing opposition to interlopers. When Sanford petitioned for a license to sell liquor, which was prohibited within the city limits, the city council refused to repeal the prohibition ordinance and asked Sanford to withdraw his petition, which he did.¹⁶

Turned away from the city, Sanford returned to Los Angeles, probably with most of the goods he had brought on the long journey to Salt Lake City. Far from yielding a profit like the previous venture, this trip cost the firm of Alexanders & Banning a small fortune. According to Phineas Banning, it permanently ended his bid to tap the lucrative market in Salt Lake City. He blamed Brigham Young, who “used his despotic power to crush out any attempt to create a business,” and his “Avenging Angels” for forcing Banning and his associates “at a considerable loss to abandon the Mormon trade.”¹⁷

Sanford’s disastrous 1856 trip might not have been the determining factor in the demise of Alexanders & Banning, but it certainly con-

tributed to the partnership's troubles. After several years of apparent success, the firm had stretched its credit to such an extent that in July 1856 six creditors launched lawsuits demanding that the company's assets be seized to repay their loans. John Temple and the executor for the estate of Charles Burrows claimed they were owed almost \$6,000 each, while Banning's good friend Benjamin D. Wilson sued for almost \$10,000. Several mercantile firms also sued, for smaller amounts. Wilson wrote to his wife just before the lawsuits were filed, telling her that the firm had failed and that David Alexander would "lose his intire [*sic*] fortune" and more; "everyone here seems to be fated to be broke," he complained. A week later he informed her that Alexanders & Banning had conducted "a careless business" and owed over \$45,000. David Alexander, who two years earlier "had \$60,000 and owed no one," was destitute and working on John Temple's ranch "because of his brother and Banning."¹⁸

The failure of Alexanders & Banning inspired a panic among creditors and a frenzy of lawsuits against various firms. An agent for the erstwhile firm's primary competitor, Augustus W. Timms, placed a large notice in the *Star* informing the public that Timms remained solvent, despite the "panic in this community, arising from the failure of a prominent business firm." He acknowledged that some lawsuits demanding the attachment of assets had been filed against his client, but "A. W. Timms is still in the field," the agent emphatically stated, "and ready to take charge of all goods with which he may be entrusted for forwarding."¹⁹

The assets of Alexanders & Banning spent August and September of 1856 in limbo as the lawsuits against the firm moved through the court system. A settlement was reached in October "with losses for everyone," according to one participant. Some of the creditors were awarded a combination of cash and hauling credit at Banning's new firm. Banning was able to retain some of the equipment of the failed company. Benjamin D. Wilson received personal property and equipment that had been used on the San Pedro–Los Angeles route. Dr. John S. Griffin, an investor in the business, ended up with the house William Sanford had recently bought from David Alexander, and decided to live there with his new bride. As mentioned above, David Alexander was financially ruined and resigned as Los Angeles County sheriff in order to herd cattle for his former partner, John Temple, in Tulare. Like many entrepreneurial Angelenos, Alexander would rise again, in his case in about ten years as the business partner of Phineas Banning.²⁰

Banning escaped this fiasco relatively unscathed, although his reputation as a businessman was surely tarnished, to judge by Benjamin D.

Wilson's comment to his spouse about the company's carelessness. By late July 1856, before the lawsuits even reached court, Alexanders & Banning had split up and Phineas had formed a new partnership with Spencer H. Wilson, a Canadian trader in Los Angeles in the 1850s. Banning & Wilson performed the same functions in the same places as Alexanders & Banning, probably with some of the same backers and equipment and certainly with William Sanford's active participation. In late 1856 Banning & Wilson submitted bids and won a contract to deliver U.S. mail along the Los Angeles to San Pedro route. The company also arranged huge shipments by coastal steamer of local grapes, an increasingly important crop in Southern California, and other products.²¹

Banning's new company at the harbor occupied the same buildings as its predecessor. The complex included

an extensive blacksmith shop, also a carriage manufactory, a saddlery and harness-making establishment, where the wagons, etc., required in their extensive transportation business are manufactured and repaired. There are also extensive warehouses, stables, corrals, etc. Also a grocery, provision and liquor store and hotel.

The San Pedro customhouse was at Banning & Wilson's landing, a short distance from Timms Landing and the pier there. At that time the buildings of these two firms comprised all the major structures at the harbor, still in its infancy as a Pacific port.²²

Banning & Wilson continued in business until May 1857, when they amicably dissolved their firm. By 1863, Wilson had moved to Santa Catalina Island, where he managed trade at Wilson's Harbor with the use of his sloop, the *Ned Beal*. Meanwhile Banning's old investor and colleague William Sanford, who had been raising and selling sheep in Northern California for a firm called Sanford & Wilson (with Benjamin D. Wilson and Dr. Henry R. Myles) before and after the Alexanders & Banning failure, returned to San Pedro and Los Angeles to work again with Phineas Banning.²³

By late 1857, Banning was finally advertising his commission and forwarding business without any partners. He had financial backers and the help of William Sanford, but he was now officially on his own. He had weathered several business highs and lows over the previous five years, but he always seemed to land on his feet. His resilience testifies to his tenacity and drive to succeed. While he did not yet own much property, his impending success would change that.²⁴

City of Demons: Phineas Banning's Early Public Service

Southern California of the 1850s was a frontier, a large expanse of land with few police and an increasing influx of lawbreakers. The region attracted a number of disappointed gold seekers from Northern California and other opportunists who preyed on miners in the outlying areas of the county and also targeted wealthy ranchers, urban merchants, and Indians. A few young *Californios*—descendants of the early Spanish and Mexican settlers—rebelled against the American newcomers by forming bands that terrorized communities throughout the state, while independent groups of Indians defied “domestication” (as forced labor was called), raiding the ranches for horses and other goods. At times murders occurred daily, and local government could not curb the violence. The sum of such lawlessness made the Los Angeles area notorious as a center of civil disorder. The *Los Angeles Star* went so far as to declare that the county was “in a state of insurrection” in 1853, while Amasa Lyman of San Bernardino complained that same year of the “almost daily assassinations of our citizens.” A year later Reverend James Woods wrote in his diary that conditions in the county seat of Los Angeles were so bad that although its name “is Spanish for the city of angels,” it would be more accurate if “it be called at present the city of Demons.” Three years later, John Forster informed a neighbor that, because of outlaw activity in the area surrounding San Juan Capistrano, “we are under a compleat state of siege and dare not go out.”²⁵

The lawlessness of this era was fed by the easy opportunities for theft in a sparsely settled region, by the poverty that induced some to commit crimes, by racial bigotry and violence in a time of population shifts and social change, and by the sheer size of the frontier, which was difficult to patrol and protect, given the small population. Gangs of outlaws scoffed at and frequently assaulted lawmen, who grew reluctant to extend their authority when outnumbered. In an incident made notable by the status of its victims, Sheriff James Barton and two deputies were ambushed and killed while pursuing outlaws in 1857. A posse led by Andrés Pico captured and immediately hanged most of the outlaws. The leaders of the gang, Juan Flores and Pancho Daniel, were arrested and eventually executed by vigilantes.²⁶

Some citizens saw the county court system, which also struggled to find enough competent jurists, as part of the problem. Judges were few, and district attorneys and lawyers had to meet scant professional requirements to serve in the courts. Court sessions were often quite boisterous: judges and lawyers were known to carry concealed firearms

during trials. A few judges, such as Augustín Olvera, were well respected and helped maintain order in the proceedings.²⁷

Justice was not always as swift or sure, however, as many citizens—including Phineas Banning—demanded in an era of a seeming breakdown in law and order. Particularly in the 1850s, vigilante activity was rife when courts failed to act quickly. Over two-thirds of “popular justice” lynchings in Los Angeles County and California in the nineteenth century occurred in this decade; this surge in vigilantism was part of a nationwide trend. When it appeared that murderers might go free on technicalities, mobs often formed to raid jails and execute the accused, sometimes after impromptu trials. The most infamous vigilante hanging was that of gambler Dave Brown, who had been convicted of killing his own partner. During a tense moment after the trial, Los Angeles Mayor Stephen C. Foster tried to head off mob action by promising that he would resign from his office and personally help punish Brown if justice was not served through legal channels. When news came that Brown had received a stay of execution in 1855, Foster made good on his pledge and helped to seize Brown from Sheriff Barton and hang him. Lynchings placed a severe burden on county sheriffs who, with few deputies to assist them, had to stop the mobs.²⁸

Phineas Banning was one of the first members of the Los Angeles volunteer citizen police force, founded in the 1850s. When lawlessness seemed to peak in the summer of 1853, a group of city leaders called for a public meeting in which a mounted police force of almost one hundred citizens was formed to supplement city and county officers. The Los Angeles Common Council authorized the formation of the group, called the Los Angeles Rangers, and the county supervisors appropriated \$1,000 for its uniforms and equipment. Under the command of Alexander W. Hope, the Rangers began public drills to announce their presence.²⁹

Banning was one of the organizers of the Rangers and, according to Horace Bell, was its most generous financial supporter. His participation in the organization’s activities over the next several years has not been documented, and the actual effectiveness of the Rangers as a force for maintaining order from 1853 to about 1855 is undetermined. Its publicized arrests probably deterred some violence during this era. We do know that the group executed, mostly by hanging, about twenty-two accused felons, and launched a decade-long vigilante movement in Los Angeles.³⁰

The Rangers apparently declined by 1855, because in that year Banning helped William W. Twist organize the City Guard, another mounted volunteer military unit, to aid local police. The City Guard was recog-

nized and supplied by the state adjutant general's office, which denied a request by its captain for a field piece. The activities of this unit were reported in local newspapers during its short life, but Banning's involvement appears to have been minimal.³¹

Two years later, Banning would play a more prominent role in forming yet another volunteer military unit, this one created in response to a perceived threat from local Mormons. In 1857 relations between Mormons in Utah Territory and the U.S. government had become strained when Brigham Young refused to abide by those U.S. laws he deemed detrimental to the Mormon religion and community. President James Buchanan declared them to be in open rebellion for defying federal authority. In retaliation a group of Mormons and Indians attacked a wagon train of immigrants as it passed through Mountain Meadows in southern Utah that September on its way to California, slaughtering 140 civilians. With the U.S. Army on its way to invade Utah, further warfare seemed imminent, and the large Mormon settlement at nearby San Bernardino loomed as a major threat to citizens in Los Angeles, who were isolated and whose fears were consistently stoked by city newspapers, which often warned of the Mormon threat.³²

When news of the massacre reached Los Angeles in October, Angelenos began agitating for a defense. Seventeen civic leaders called for a public meeting in December, which produced a pledge by forty leading citizens to prevent any sale of firearms and ammunition to Mormons. The same forty called for another public meeting on December 17 to form a new military company to meet the threat, and Phineas Banning was unanimously elected as captain of the Los Angeles Union Guards. His active leadership in this unit would be short-lived, however, because Brigham Young called for the return of the California Saints to Utah. With their departure the local crisis subsided and additional volunteer units were not needed. "Captain" Banning—as he was now known to the entire community—continued to act in the name of the unit over the next year as the "Mormon War" continued in Utah, but without a serious local threat he was unable to obtain weapons and keep the unit together. Banning's participation in military and extralegal organizations then ceased until after the Civil War.³³

In addition to his service in these varied volunteer forces, Banning was elected one of two justices of the peace for San Pedro Township in November 1856. He served for one year, and was not too busy in this capacity since the population at the harbor was still very small and there were two justices for this township.³⁴

The Banning Families

While Phineas was building his business in the 1850s, members of his family on the East Coast were also reinventing their lives. William Lowber Banning, the brother with whom Phineas had lived in Philadelphia, decided to move with his wife Mary (née Sweeny) to Minnesota Territory. They followed Mary's brother, Robert Ormsby Sweeny (1830–1902), who had relocated to the young city of St. Paul in 1852 and established himself as a druggist. Also an artist, his drawings of early St. Paul documented its rise. His depictions of local Indians and his later drawings of Civil War scenes illustrated books on these subjects. He also became a conservationist, helped found the St. Paul Academy of Natural Sciences, and served on the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society for over three decades.³⁵ The civic boosterism evident in these commitments was long-standing, and among the earliest targets of his promotions was his family.

At the very beginning of his stay Robert convinced his two sisters and their husbands that St. Paul was a center of unlimited economic and social opportunity far different from the increasingly urbanized and crowded Philadelphia where they lived. In the summer of 1854 William and Mary visited Robert and were persuaded to move. The fact that William's former law partner, William Hollinshead, had already relocated to St. Paul would make the transition even easier.³⁶

Before their first visit to St. Paul, William and Mary hosted the wedding of his sister Mary Lowber Banning to William Armstrong at their Philadelphia home in March. In the following month word came that John Alford Banning, father of William Lowber, Phineas, Mary (Banning) Armstrong, and their eight siblings, had passed away at the Delaware farm of Oak Hill on April 12. Then in his sixties, he signed his will only a few days before his death. In it he left half of his modest estate to his wife, Elizabeth, and the other half to "my eldest son John Banning (who has always remained with me)." He instructed Elizabeth to provide for the rest of their children in her will. When she died seven years later, the meager estate left a few hundred dollars to only some of the children. Like her husband, John, Elizabeth would be buried in Old Swede's Cemetery in Wilmington, Delaware.³⁷

William wrote to inform Phineas of their father's death and to ask if he could come back home to help out the family for a while. But Phineas declined, saying that he was much too busy with his expanding business enterprise at the moment and that he therefore "must stay here a few years longer." This was a sensible explanation: given his newly established com-

pany and complex assortment of activities, his business would have been materially damaged by a long trip to the East. But the statement might also suggest that he was still not planning to make California his permanent home. In any case he did not visit his mother or his siblings living in Delaware or nearby Philadelphia upon hearing of his father's death.³⁸

In the following year, 1855, William Lowber and Mary Sweeny Banning made their move to St. Paul. Like his brother Phineas, William would play a leading role in his chosen city's development. The mid-1850s was a prosperous time in this newly incorporated city of almost 5,000, although rapid population increases also brought a rise in crime and other urban problems. William had practiced law for well over a decade in Philadelphia, but decided to change professions in his new hometown. He established a bank in St. Paul in 1856 and later joined the city's Chamber of Commerce. He also served as Ramsey County auditor in 1860. Late that year he was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, where he took a strong interest in state finance and railroads. At the end of his term in 1861 he temporarily retired from state politics and permanently quit banking in order to join the Union army at the start of the Civil War.³⁹

In 1855 William and Mary built a grand two-story brick residence with a high and "spacious portico in front, supported by Ionic columns." The house stood on the corner of Wilkin and McBoal Streets, not far from that of Governor Alexander Ramsey. In that fashionable neighborhood the Bannings were well known and respected as one of the more affluent families of the city. Their household included William Lowber Jr. (who would drown in the Mississippi River at the age of ten in 1862) and Ellen, both born in Philadelphia in the early 1850s; Evans, who was born in the later 1850s but died at the age of two; and then May (sometimes spelled Mary) Alice, Frederick, Katharine Stewart, and another William Lowber Jr., all of whom were born in St. Paul in the late 1850s and the 1860s.⁴⁰

Most of Phineas Banning's other siblings also moved around in the 1850s as they pursued opportunities in other regions or moved back to the Delaware county of their birth. Elizabeth Alice married Isaac Elliot in 1843 and the two moved to Minnesota shortly after William did. Sallie, coincidentally, married another Isaac Elliot in Delaware in 1852, and the two stayed on a farm in the Wilmington area. Francenia Alice moved to Philadelphia and then to St. Paul, where she married Henry J. Horn, a city official and prominent lawyer, in 1859. Mary Lowber and her husband, William Armstrong, eventually moved back to New Castle County from Philadelphia. Richard, Henry, and Cole Lowber moved to Missouri, where they would remain. John Alford Jr., the eldest son, stayed in

Wilmington until his death in 1885; Alice Ponder probably stayed in the general vicinity, too.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Phineas Banning started his own family. His biographer Maymie Krythe claims that he met Rebecca Sanford, the younger sister of his business associate William Sanford, during the spring of 1854 while she was visiting her brother on his property at the Rancho San Jose de Buenos Aires. But it seems more likely that they met when she and her mother were living with William in Los Angeles, where he brought them sometime in 1853 (they did not appear in the 1852 special state census). As the story goes, Phineas fell in love with Rebecca immediately and courted her every weekend for months until he finally asked for her hand and she consented. According to the newspapers, they were married in Los Angeles at the home of her brother William on November 16, 1854.⁴²

Rebecca, born in 1834 or 1835 in Randolph County, Missouri, was about nineteen years old at the time. Her parents, John Dozier Sanford and Hannah Barnes, were both from Madison County, Kentucky, where they had owned a farm and several slaves. John died in 1835 and Hannah became head of the household with eight children. The siblings' travels as adults attest to the powerful lure of California during the 1840s and 1850s. The oldest was Phineas Banning's first employer in Los Angeles and later business partner, William Sanford, who was born in 1814, when the family lived in Kentucky. William came to Los Angeles in 1849, and two other brothers, John and Cyrus, also moved to Southern California, followed by Rebecca and her mother in 1853. One of Rebecca's sisters, Marilda, married William F. Prather and moved to Linden, California, about 1853. Only Rebecca's sisters Amanda and Frances married in Missouri and stayed there.⁴³

After their wedding, Phineas and Rebecca moved into an adobe home near the Alexanders & Banning wharf in San Pedro. In time Rebecca's mother, Hannah, moved in with them and stayed until after Rebecca's death in 1868. Hannah was certainly living there by August 1857, when Judge Benjamin Hayes recorded in his diary a visit to the Banning home, where he and his wife were greeted by "Mrs. Banning and her mother, Mrs. Sanford, who had just arrived from San Francisco, and their kindness enabled Mrs. H. to pass the afternoon agreeably." Phineas and Rebecca Banning's hospitality would become legend. For Rebecca this reputation was particularly important, since the small port of San Pedro in frontier Southern California was still a sparsely inhabited, isolated community, and Rebecca's social circle was limited to Los Angeles friends and passengers arriving on steamer days.⁴⁴

Rebecca would give birth to eight infants during her marriage to Phineas, but only three would survive through their fifth year. Rebecca's fragile health and the limited medical care on the frontier were deadly hazards for her and her children, as they were for many women at the time. In August 1855 she gave birth to her first child, Fanny, who was named after Phineas's sister Francenia. In the following year John Griffin Banning was born and named for Dr. John S. Griffin, a friend and investment partner of Phineas who had settled in Los Angeles in 1854. Another son, whose name is unknown, may have been stillborn in April of 1857; there is no further mention of him. Tragedy would strike the family again that year, when Fanny died on September 22, the first of six of Rebecca's children to die at a very young age.⁴⁵

Living on the Frontier

Family life at San Pedro harbor was quiet in the mid-1850s because of the minuscule population and the distance from Los Angeles. But Phineas and Rebecca Banning did their best to establish a reputation as social leaders and philanthropists in this community. They began to entertain friends and guests, some of whom would become business contacts for Phineas. These included reporters and others visiting San Pedro on "steamer day" in 1857, whom Banning treated to a dinner "which was served in excellent style and consisted of the luxuries of the season." In July 1857 Phineas and Rebecca held an impromptu "grand dance" for a group that had missed its steamer to San Francisco and was stranded in San Pedro, and he also made arrangements for their overnight accommodations. Another reporter in the same year observed that San Pedro was "dreary" and the "only agreeable thing about the place is the cordial hospitality of Messers Banning and Sanford." Phineas was also thanked the same year for offering his coaches to transport Los Angeles schoolchildren to and from a picnic arranged for them.⁴⁶ In 1854 Banning hosted a barbeque celebration for the Fourth of July; he would become notorious for his annual Independence Day orations. The enthusiastic speech of this "go-ahead 'forwarding merchant' of San Pedro, fast stage driver and earnest man of the times" on July 4, 1857, "tickled and edified the crowd hugely."⁴⁷

These modest early contributions to local society would become the foundation for the Bannings' civic engagements in the next three decades. Over these years, the family would emerge as one of the major social, civic, and economic forces in the growing community that Phineas Banning played a crucial role in developing.

