

SOHO Lesson Plan

History of a Pioneer Family: The Whaleys



Thomas Whaley was a young entrepreneur born on October 5, 1823, in Brooklyn, New York. Whaley came from a Scots-Irish family, which immigrated from the United Kingdom to Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1722. His grandfather, Alexander Whaley was a gunsmith who participated in the Boston Tea Party and the Revolutionary War, where he provided flintlock muskets to soldiers and the use of his house on Long Island to General George Washington.

Thomas' father, Thomas Alexander Whaley, carried on the family gunsmith business, and served in the New York Militia during the War of 1812. On Valentines Day, 1814 he married Rachel Pye, whose father, William, manufactured locks in Brooklyn, and joined the family business, establishing the firm of Pye & Whaley where they continued to manufacture locks as well as hardware, window sashes, etc.

Thomas Whaley's father died when Thomas was only 7 years old. His older brothers John and Henry assisted their mother Rachel with the family business. Young Thomas was chosen to receive a formal education and attended the Washington Institute; upon graduating

he sailed to Europe and traveled alone through France, Italy, and England. Having studied Latin and French in school, he was able to learn enough Italian to benefit his journey through Italy.

Upon returning home to Brooklyn, Thomas no longer wished to reside with his mother; answering an ad for a room to rent, he found himself upon the doorstep of Madame Victoria Lannay, a French teacher whose daughter Anna instantly charmed him. Anna attended the prestigious Misses Green School for Young Ladies on 5th Avenue, and was an accomplished musician who played the piano, guitar and melodeon. Of pure French heritage, Anna did not speak a word of English until she was 8 years old; the first letter she wrote in English was to her new sweetheart, Thomas Whaley.

When the cry of "Gold!" was heard in 1848, Whaley made the decision to come to California to take part in the Gold Rush and seek his fortune. He left New York City on January 1, 1849, aboard the ship Sutton and arrived 204 days later in San Francisco. He set up a mercantile store with business partner George Wardle where he sold locks and hardware from his family's New York business, Whaley & Pye. They also offered mining equipment and utensils on consignment.

Above photo, clockwise from top: Thomas Whaley pictured with his granddaughter Mabel and "Chubby," San Diego, October 5, 1890; Thomas Whaley's mother, Rachel Pye Whaley (1793-1881); Thomas Whaley's brother John T. Whaley (born 1816); Thomas Whaley, aged 25, 1849; Thomas Whaley's sister Rachel Harriet Heiss (1825-1898). Center: Thomas Whaley's brother, Henry Hurst Whaley (1820-1894), described by Lillian Whaley as "an awfully homely man" [December 8, 1891]; Thomas Whaley was the seventh of nine children born to Thomas Alexander Whaley and Rachel Pye, five of whom died young.

Whaley's business acumen, acquired in part from his education at the Washington Institute, proved beneficial in San Francisco. He was so successful that at age 26 he was able to establish his own store on Montgomery Street, erect a two-story residence near the bay, and operate a boarding house.

In May of 1851, an arson-set fire at an upholstery shop on Montgomery Street nearly destroyed the entire business district, including Whaley's buildings. Upon the advice of fellow merchant Lewis Franklin, Whaley relocated to Old Town San Diego, renting a room in the Exchange Hotel. Partnering with Franklin, Whaley established the Tienda California, and learned to speak Spanish so that he could effectively do business with the local population.

Eventually Whaley earned enough money to return to New York to marry his sweetheart, Anna Eloise Lannay, on August 14, 1853. Upon the couple's return to San Diego, Whaley and his bride first resided at a hotel called the Gila House. Whaley entered various general store business partnerships, most of which lasted less than a year, including one with his own brother Henry Whaley, called Whaley & Whaley.

Whaley purchased the property he selected to build his own store and home in September 1855. The property was formerly used by Old Town as execution grounds. A gallows constructed from two heavy wood beams and a crossbar stood upon the barren lot, which was conveniently located near El Campo Santo, the Catholic cemetery.

Three men are known to have been hanged from the gallows between 1851 and 1852: Juan Verdugo, William Marshall, and "Yankee Jim" Robinson. Whaley was a witness to all three executions. The hangings did not dissuade him from purchasing the property, which was a desirable large corner lot with a natural well; however, due to the original use of the property (which was considered *undesirable* by most of Old Town's citizenry) Whaley was able to negotiate the purchase of the 9 ½ acre parcel for under \$20.



The earliest known photograph of the Whaley House, c. 1874. Thomas Whaley called it the "handsomest and the most convenient house within 150 miles." An adobe wall about 7 feet high surrounded the entire lot; a gate within a high wooden frame divided the front wall in the middle, and a similar gate formed the entrance to the back corral. An outhouse built of brick stood close to the dividing wall between the yard and the corral.

He first built a single-story granary on the site in May 1856, with kiln-fired bricks manufactured in his own brickyard on nearby Conde Street. The granary had bare brick walls without windows, a dirt floor and a loading platform. Construction on the attached two-story Greek Revival style brick building designed by Whaley, was begun in September 1856 and was finished in the summer of 1857. Whaley hired Native Americans to do the brickwork, paying them in groceries from his store, which was still located on the plaza.

By 1857, Thomas and Anna Whaley had two children: Francis Hinton (Frank), named for a business partner and Thomas Jr. (Tommy). Frank and Tommy were born while the Whaleys were renting rooms in the Burkhardt house near the plaza.

That summer the Whaleys moved into their new brick home, acclaimed as the “finest brick block in Southern California” by the *San Diego Herald*. It cost \$10,000 to build, an impressive sum in the 1850s. It was considered a great mansion, and was the first in the dusty pueblo originally consisting mainly of small homes made from adobe brick; emigrants built small wood-frame homes or had kit houses shipped from New England.

In August 1857, Whaley established his general store on the first floor of the Whaley House; the family living quarters were on the second floor. Though his prices were lower than his competitors, the location proved too far from the center of the small community, so he relocated his business to a wood-frame building on the plaza.

Upon moving into the brick house, Thomas and Anna began to wonder if their home might be haunted. Strange sounds and disembodied footsteps heard during the wee hours of the morning were first reported by Anna shortly after moving into the house. In a letter to Thomas on June 22, 1857 when he was away on business, Anna wrote: “I am often startled out of my sleep in the night, thinking you have come home.” (Roll 9/ Binder 18) Later, Thomas Whaley attributed these unearthly footfalls to Yankee Jim Robinson, one of the three criminals executed on the gallows located on the property before the house was built.



Whaley & Crosthwaite General Store

In January 1858, the Whaley’s son Tommy died from scarlet fever at the age of 18 months. The following June, their first daughter, Anna Amelia (Annie) was born in the Whaley House. Two months later, an arson-set fire destroyed Whaley’s business at the plaza.

The loss of their son Tommy combined with the loss of their store and income, greatly affected Thomas and Anna; at the invitation of close friends, Whaley moved his family to San Francisco, starting their lives over. Unable to sell their new brick house, Squire Ensworth, a friend and colleague of Whaley, moved in as a caretaker, renting some of the rooms in the large house to other tenants.

Three more children, George Hay Ringgold (named for a close family friend), Violet Eloise (Vi), and Corinne Lillian (Lillie), were born in San Francisco, where Whaley worked as a U.S. Army Commissary Storekeeper for a short while.

During this time, Whaley took charge of three government transports with stores at Sitka, Alaska Territory, before the American takeover on October 18, 1867. He assisted in raising the American flag on the island of Japonski opposite Sitka. He was then elected councilman of Sitka by unanimous vote.

During this time, Anna and the children remained in San Francisco. When Whaley returned from Alaska in early 1868, he took Anna and eldest children Frank and Annie to New York to meet their Grandma Whaley. They returned that summer and after renting a new home on Hampton Place, Whaley left his family, and sailed for San Diego aboard the steamship Orizaba, to do needed repairs to the brick house in Old Town.

While in San Diego he attempted to convince Anna that they ought to try their luck in Old Town once again; Anna refused, preferring to remain in San Francisco where her mother, siblings, and cousins had settled.

Whaley, now anxious for a buyer or renter for the brick house, met a traveling showman named Thomas Tanner, leader of the Tanner Troupe, well known circus and vaudeville performers in northern California, Nevada, and Oregon. Tanner's daughter Soledad performed with the renowned Gold Rush child star Lotta Crabtree.

In October 1868, Whaley rented the second floor of his brick building to the Tanners; the western portion of the house was transformed from the Whaley's former parlor and dining rooms into San Diego's first commercial theater. The Tanner family utilized the remaining second floor rooms as their personal living quarters. A staircase was erected on the south side of the front balcony in order for theater patrons to enter the theater by way of the French doors leading from the balcony into the large room, rather than entering through the main building downstairs, which Whaley was in the process of remodeling.

NEW ADVERTISEMENTS.

THEATER.

THE RENOWNED

TANNER TROUPE!

Proprietor, - - - T. W. TANNER

THE MANAGER has the honor to inform the citizens of San Diego, and Public generally, that, having Leased the upper part of the BRICK HOUSE, he has fitted up the Hall for the purpose of offering to the generous Public a short season, of his Moral, Chaste and Versatile Entertainments, consisting of Drama, Farce, Comedy, Singing and Dancing, Laughable Burlesques, Negro Delineations, &c., and hopes his untiring efforts to please, will meet with a Liberal Share of Patronage. He will offer his

FIRST EXHIBITION

On Wednesday, December 2nd.

For Particulars see Programmes.

ADMISSION.....	50 Cents
Children Half Price.	
Reserved seats.....	75 Cents

Doors open at 7, Performance to commence at 8 o'clock, precisely.

Original advertisement for the December 2, 1868, opening of the Tanner Troupe Theater in "the Brick House."

After a major earthquake on October 21, 1868, Anna Whaley changed her mind about remaining in San Francisco and in December that year, she and the children returned to San Diego aboard the steamship Orizaba.

For a short period of time, with the Tanner Troupe Theater and the Tanner family occupying the second floor, the Whaleys lived downstairs in the former granary, which Whaley converted to a large, comfortable living space complete with a wood floor, front and back doors, windows and a fireplace.

Just three months after the Tanner Troupe's October 1868 opening, and a week after Anna and the children arrived, 56-year-old Thomas Tanner died unexpectedly in his sleep after a performance, and the troupe disbanded in early 1869, vacating the brick house.

At this time, Whaley partnered with Philip Crosthwaite, establishing the Whaley & Crosthwaite General Store on the first floor of the brick building. A San Diego pioneer known for his rollicking, jovial manner (the reverse of the quiet, reserved Whaley), Crosthwaite was the sheriff and executioner of Yankee Jim Robinson, served as the Deputy County Clerk and later as San Diego's Chief of Police.

Later in 1869, after the Whaley family had moved back into the main two-story building, the County of San Diego rented the former theater space for use as meeting rooms for the Board of Supervisors, and the former granary (now a spacious, sunlit finished room), became San Diego's second courthouse.



Restored as the theater of 1868-1869, with woodwork faux grained, raked stage installed, and authentic painted backdrop, curtains, and period lighting.

Whaley & Crosthwaite did not prosper, and their merchandise was soon liquidated; Whaley found it more enterprising to operate a saloon in his old store space than a general store. In order to sell "spiritous liquors" adjacent to a government building, Whaley was required to purchase an expensive liquor license and renew it quarterly. In a letter to Anna, dated October 18, 1870, Thomas writes, "I am writing this in my Saloon and as the Court is in session, I am very busy, therefore you will excuse the shortness of this. I shall do very well keeping bar when the Court sits at other times, it will not pay to keep open, and as it now is I am open only from 9 to 5. I can take in from \$20 to \$30 per day, half of which is profit. Better than storekeeping."

After the establishment of New Town San Diego by Alonzo Horton in 1868, a movement was begun to relocate the seat of government there in 1871. Residents of Old Town resisted the change, even refusing to hand over the court records.

Before a final decision had been made on the matter, on the evening of March 31, 1871, County Clerk Chalmers Scott gathered a group of New Towners and rode out to the Whaley House in express wagons. They entered the rented county rooms on the second floor via the exterior staircase on the south end of the balcony, broke a pane of glass in one of the French doors to gain entry to the rooms, and removed the records. Although Whaley wrote a series of letters to the Board of Supervisors noting that their lease had not expired and demanding rent and repairs to the building, his demands were ultimately ignored.

When the court was relocated to New Town, Whaley closed his saloon and opened a real estate office in his old general store space. Shortly afterward, he donated the design and materials for a new two-story school to replace the one-room schoolhouse his five children attended on nearby Mason Street.

In 1873, Whaley returned to New York to settle his father's estate. He and his siblings were forced to sue their mother for their inheritance, which was to have been given to them when the youngest was of age, and that time had long since passed. The Dickensian lawsuit dragged on, and the ensuing financial difficulties left Whaley stranded in New York and separated from his family for six years.

Anna and the children remained in their brick house Old Town, known as the Whaley homestead, keeping themselves amused by organizing parties and dances in the former courtroom, which were attended by the entire Old Town community. They attended picnics at Rose Canyon, the lighthouse at Point Loma, and the old Mission, and enjoyed beach outings at La Jolla. Under Anna's supervision the children planted the California pepper trees still shading the vast yard, in addition to a large flower, fruit and vegetable garden, tended primarily by son George.

By the time Whaley arrived back in San Diego, he did not recognize his children, who were ages 8 through 18 when he left, and 14 through 24 when he returned. Most businesses and residents had moved to New Town, many even moving their houses there, leaving Old Town a quiet, desolate place. In 1885, following the death of their 22-year-old daughter Violet, the decision was made to move to New Town, where Whaley built a lovely single-story home at 933 State Street. A second-floor room, which youngest daughter Lillian called a sky parlor, was added a short time later.

The brick house in Old Town remained vacant for the most part, though it was occasionally rented to folks who were not generally inclined to remain for long.

Hoping to capitalize on the San Diego real estate boom, Whaley opened a real estate office at 5th and G in the First National Bank Building with various partners. He retired in 1888 after a long career of entrepreneurial enterprises and accomplishments, among them being San Diego's unofficial mayor in the early days, working tirelessly on the railroad committee to bring the much-needed railroad terminus to San Diego, and acting as County Clerk. Suffering from heart related issues for many years, Thomas Whaley passed away in the arms of his youngest child Lillian at their State Street home on December 14, 1890 at the age of 67.



By 1912, Frank Whaley was operating the former courtroom as a history museum and tourist attraction. Note the error in the date; construction did not actually commence until 1856.

Eldest daughter Annie, who had moved to Modesto with her husband, first cousin John Thomas Whaley, with their children Mabel and Bruce, passed away at the age of 45 in 1905.

The Whaley House in Old Town was rented out for many years and eventually fell into disrepair until 1909, when the Whaley's oldest son Frank returned to the old brick house and undertook the restoration of the building. He did so at the same time as the establishment of the Los Angeles & San Diego Beach Railway (running down San Diego Avenue directly in front of the Whaley House), which coincided with the great turn-of-the-century tourist movement. Frank utilized the building as both a residence and a tourist attraction, converting the old courtroom into one of San Diego's earliest museums, posting signs outside promoting its historicity, giving tours, and entertaining visitors with his guitar.

In 1912, Anna and her children George and Lillian moved from the State Street house, back into the Whaley homestead in Old Town, renting out the State Street house for extra income.

On February 24, 1913, Anna Whaley died in the house at the age of 81, followed by her eldest son Frank a year later on November 19, 1914. Her son George died December 25, 1928.

Lillian Whaley continued residency in her family home, writing her memoirs, and passed away at the age of 89 September 14, 1953. Both Lillian and her brother Frank were very aware of the historical significance of their childhood home, the oldest two-story brick structure south of Monterey, California. The Whaley homestead was a social



Lillian Whaley, December 16, 1945

and community center used for many purposes, including a school, boarding house, Sunday school, billiards parlor, general store, polling place, church, saloon, theater, courthouse, and even a toy store. It was Frank and Lillian Whaley's desire that the Whaley House would someday be preserved as a museum.

In 1956, the house was put up for sale and plans to demolish it to make way for a gas station were curtailed by June and Jim Reading who, with a concerned group of citizens, convinced the County of San Diego to buy, restore, and open the home once again to the public.

The Whaley House Museum was opened in May 1960. Operated by Save Our Heritage Organisation since 2000 and undergoing continued restoration with a focus on the heyday of the Whaleys residency (1857-1885), the Whaley House has served as a window to the past for 60 years; a reminder of a by-gone era of dusty streets, horse-drawn carriages, bullfights in the plaza, fiestas and fandangos, and the effervescent notes of the Jenny Lind Polka floating beyond the lace curtains of an old brick mansion.