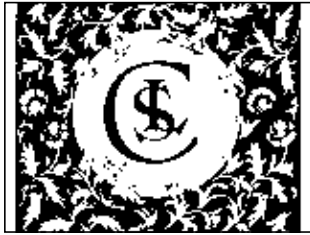


CALIFORNIA
STATE
LIBRARY
FOUNDATION

Number 124
2019

Bulletin





Bulletin

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The *Bulletin* is included as a membership benefit to Foundation members and those individuals contributing \$40.00 or more annually to Foundation Programs. Membership rates are:

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Front Cover: "Crystal Chapel, one of the chambers in Alabaster Cave, El Dorado County." This dramatic lithograph reproduces a drawing by Maud Needham (Latimer). See article by John Allen, pages 2-7.

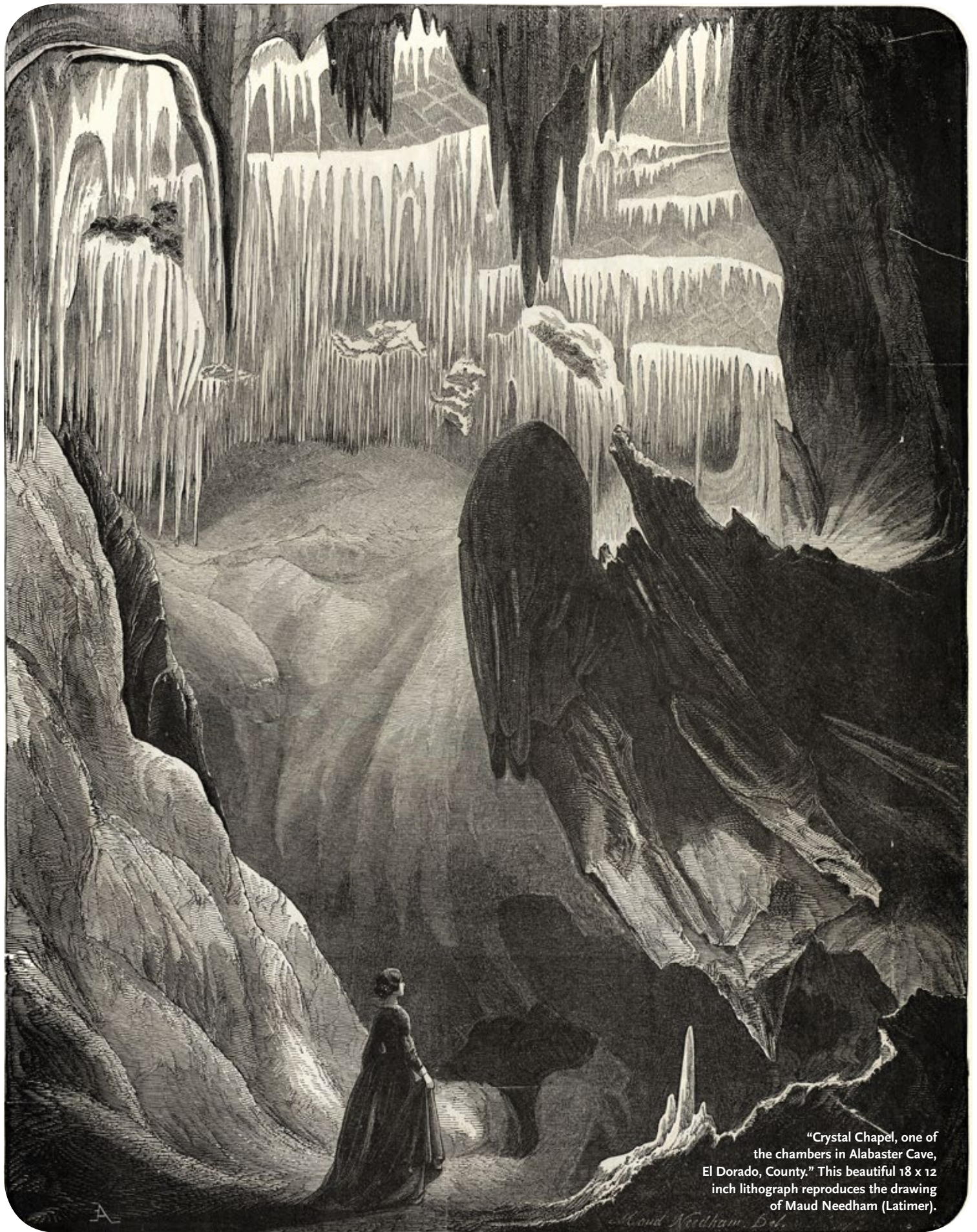
Back Cover: Gary Kurutz gratefully accepts the prestigious Hubert Howe Bancroft Award from Bancroft Library Director, Elaine C. Tennant.

Illustrations and Photo Credits: Pages 2-7, California Section, California State Library and John Allen; pp. 8-15, California Section, California State Library; pp. 16-22, Bancroft Library, California State Library Foundation and Thomas E. Vinson; pp. 24-25, Gene Kennedy and Stephen McGough; and pp. 27-32, California State Library Foundation.

Design: Angela Tannehill | www.angelatannehill.com

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"Crystal Chapel, one of the chambers in Alabaster Cave, El Dorado, County." This beautiful 18 x 12 inch lithograph reproduces the drawing of Maud Needham (Latimer).

“This New California Wonder”

The Alabaster Cave, El Dorado County

By John E. Allen

“This natural curiosity is situated in Eldorado county, nine miles north [sic] of Auburn . . . This cave was discovered on the 18th of April, 1860, by some workmen who were excavating in the side of a mountain for a lime kiln At first it was called Coral cave, but . . . it is generally known as Alabaster cave.”

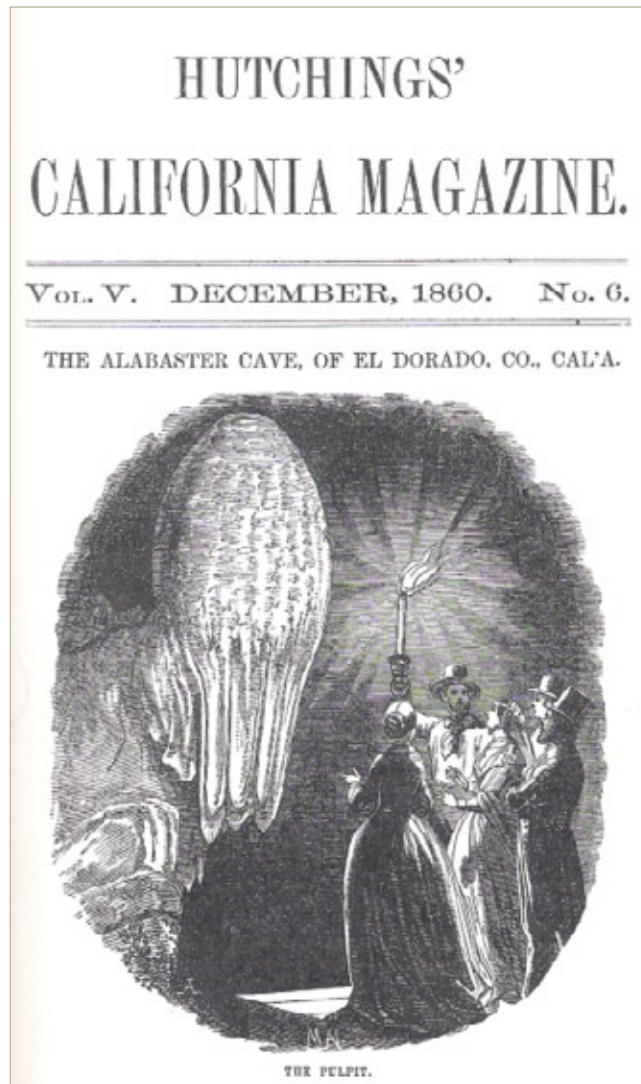
CAROLINE M. CHURCHILL. OVER THE PURPLE HILLS OR SKETCHES OF TRAVEL IN CALIFORNIA, 1882

As a teenager my friends and I were always trying to find out-of-the-way places at Folsom Lake to hang out. One of them proved to be a particular favorite. It was not only quite isolated, located on a winding country road northwest of Pilot Hill, but also very mysterious with old ruined buildings and an operating quarry. Better yet, it had an entrance to a cave which we would crawl into and explore. Little did we know at the time that it was the location of one of the Golden State’s largest limestone quarries and home to a famous nineteenth century resort and hotel.

Some years later, I returned to find the quarry was closed down and the opening to the cave covered up. I started to research the site to learn more about its lost story. My visits to the California Room at the California State Library helped me greatly in filling out the story of Alabaster Cave. I was amazed to find out how popular this now forlorn and lonely site had been at one time. My research led me to

EDITOR’S NOTE

John E. Allen is an instructor in history at American River College and a research associate at the California State Capitol Museum. He is the author of Sacramento’s Capitol Park, Arcadia Publishing, 2013.

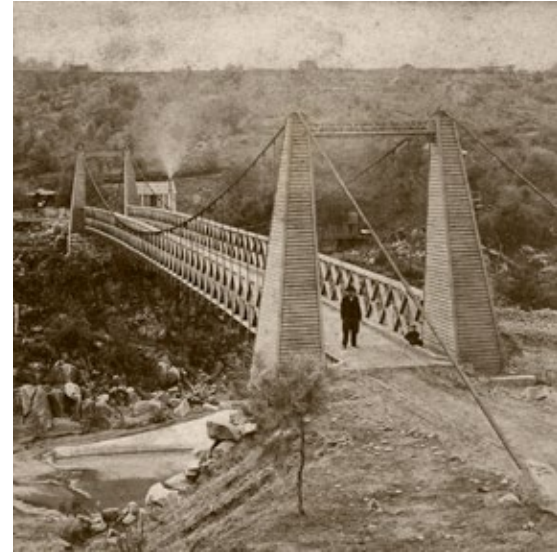


“The Pulpit” in the Crystal Chapel. *Hutchings' California Illustrated Magazine*, December 1860.



A group of early Sacramento auto enthusiasts, c. 1910, on a visit to the Alabaster mines, standing by the original stone kiln used for burning lime.

The cable suspension bridge over the American River at Rattlesnake Bar. The Alabaster quarry and kiln supplied San Francisco with tons of processed lime that was carried over this bridge.



The same party of Sacramento visitors stand on part of the later limekiln furnaces used for processing the limestone quarried at the Alabaster mine.

a particular lithographic poster in the collection that especially caught my attention and imagination. It has always remained in my memory over the years and has continued to inspire me in doing further research into one of the Gold Country's least known historic places.

El Dorado County was home to numerous limestone quarries and kilns. The Alabaster limestone quarry and kiln was a major producer of lime, the burnt limestone used for making mortar and plaster. It was quarried on a site located on Kidd Ravine near the north fork of the American River. William Gwynn and H. T. Holmes operated the Alabaster limestone mine for many years after its discovery in 1860. Holmes would also operate the nearby Alabaster Hotel.

The Alabaster quarry and kiln supplied San Francisco and Sacramento with large volumes of processed lime. The kiln produced forty barrels a day, requiring more than three cords of wood. The burnt lime was loaded into wagons to be shipped across Rattlesnake Bar cable suspension bridge to then be freighted down to Sacramento for further shipment across

California. Alabaster lime was used in the construction of numerous brick and stone buildings throughout the state — including the California State Capitol. The quarry was in operation for over a century.

Along with the discovery of the Alabaster limestone quarry itself, came the opening up of a series of underground caves and caverns. As word spread about subterranean marvels, interest developed among the public in the “Alabaster Caves.” As newspaper reports and then magazines and books spread the news about its wonders, demand to visit the caves grew. This soon led to the rerouting of stage lines from Folsom so visitors could make the round trip in a day to visit the site. Two promoters, George S. Halterman and a man named Smith, who were the lessees of the property, began providing tours of the Alabaster Cave after its opening in April 1860. Well over 600 visitors toured the caves in just the first month.

There were two separate chambers in the caves. Visitors were greeted as they entered the first by the “Coral Cave” register which contained the names of 2,714 visitors for the first four months. Various remarkable features were quickly assigned imaginative names on account of their varied shapes: “Agate Hall,” “Mystic Gallery,” “Sea-shell Pass,” “Lot’s Wife,” “Hercules’ Club,” and “Mrs. Lincoln’s Handkerchief.” One area, the “Crystal Chapel,” with its very own “Pulpit,” was even used for religious services and choral performances.

One of the many visitors was Maude Needham (Latimer), a California woman artist and the wife of Judge Lorenzo Dow Latimer. The Yreka resident entered drawings in the 1860 State Fair. These later became the basis for illustrations in the 1860 *Hutchings’ California Magazine* article about the cave’s many underground wonders. These were copied in later publications such as *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California*.



The Alabaster quarry and kiln, as documented by this billhead, supplied San Francisco and Sacramento with large volumes of processed lime. Courtesy, John E. Allen.



“The Alabaster Lime Kiln by Midnight.” Reproduced from *Hutchings’ California Illustrated Magazine*. Vol. V, No. 6, December, 1860.