

# HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

What's in a name? Plenty it seems



Henry Tefft, the county's first assemblyman Nov. 13, 1849

One aspect of local history which has always fascinated me is place names. Why do we use this name or that, who was the person, what was the incident which caused the name to be used? In many cases, tracking down the whos, whats, and whys behind these names can help us to understand our past.

One of the names I have been asked about many times is Tefft Street in Nipomo. This name has even elicited letters to the County Museum.

Henry Amos Tefft was a newcomer to our county in 1849. He was born in Union Village, New York in 1824 and had come to California by way of Racine, Wisconsin. He was a lawyer by profession. After staying with William G. Dana at the Rancho Nipomo for four months, he was elected to California's first Constitutional Convention held Aug. 1, 1849. The total number of votes cast in this election in San Luis Obispo was 29.

Tefft was one of the first 10 delegates seated at Colton Hall. He was appointed secretary pro tem of the convention and served on the committee which decided how many delegates from each area would be seated at the convention.

Because of a disagreement Tefft had with James M. Jones over a committee action - a disagreement which threatened to escalate into a duel - William Guin, another convention participant, introduced an amendment to the constitution which barred duelists from voting or holding office. The duel did not occur, and the amendment failed.

Tefft was elected San Luis Obispo's first assemblyman Nov. 13, 1849. During its first legislative session in 1850, Tefft was appointed to the post of district judge of the newly-formed Second Judicial District. This district covered San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties.

In July 1850, Tefft married Maria Josepha Dana, the eldest daughter of William G. Dana. His was a well-attended wedding, according to descriptions by William Rich Hutton, his best man and San Luis Obispo's first surveyor. Hutton, a civil engineer, later became the chief engineer on the Hudson River Tunnel in New York.

Hutton later described Mrs. Tefft as being an avid reader. "Although she has had few books, she knows them by heart - among others, Moratin's Comedies and 'Poesias sueltas (Loose Poetry)'."

Tefft was quite successful in San Luis Obispo. In 1850, his assessed property taxes were \$14.33, and one year later, in 1851, they were \$4,080. His holdings included a small ranch three miles from San Luis Obispo, lots in the town of San Luis Obispo, and improvements.

Part of this success undoubtedly came from his state salary of \$500 per month. Tefft did not collect his salary for six months, as it had to be collected in San Francisco. San Luis Obispo merchant and de facto banker Sam Pollard, who regularly visited San Francisco, volunteered to collect Tefft's salary if he could have use of the funds for six months without interest. A bargain was struck; Pollard was able to loan this money and use the interest to stock his store, and Tefft, albeit six months late, got his pay.

In late 1852, Tefft spoke of returning to Racine to visit his parents. William Streeter, in his "recollections" published in the California Historical Society Quarterly of September 1939, tells the story of Tefft's tragic drowning at the age of 28.

"In the latter part of 1852, he held his last session in Santa Barbara, and came up to Port Harford on the steamer. When the steamer arrived in Port Harford a heavy southeaster was blowing and, attempting to get ashore, the boat containing Judge Tefft, the purser and four or five sailors overturned. Judge Tefft and two of the sailors were drowned. The Purser was saved by an Indian who, seeing him in the surf and from the color of his hair supposing him to be Judge Tefft, rushed in and hauled him out by the hair. The body of one of the sailors was found, but those of the Judge and the other sailor never were seen again."

We thought you may be getting tired of Louisiana Clayton Dart, so this story is by fellow History



Maria Josepha Dana Tefft



The Dallidet Family enjoy their garden with some, ahem, minor alterations

## Dallidet Gardens Open

Have you ever seen a Mongolian Sunflower? Or a 130-year old Avocado tree? Are you looking for some outdoor tranquility? Then you should visit the Dallidet Gardens.

Every Sunday throughout July, the gardens will be open from 11 am to 3 pm. The State's [guidelines for Outdoor Museums](#) will be strictly followed, so please bring your mask.

1185 Pacific Street, San Luis Obispo

## Tour the Dallidet Adobe

Even as we open the Gardens, the house is still closed for now. That doesn't mean you can't tour the Adobe: we're giving virtual tours every Thursday at 1:00 pm.

The Dallidet family lived in San Luis Obispo from the 1850s through the 1950s. Hear their stories while visiting the family home.

Please register by noon on Thursday, and we will email you a Zoom invitation to join that week's tour.

[Click here for more information or to register](#)



## Tour with an expert

Have you ever wanted to walk through the Musée d'Orsay with Degas, or Fallingwater with Wright? You can get a taste of that experience with our latest video of Professor Dave Hannings walking through the Dallidet Gardens.

[Check it out here.](#)

## Opportunities for local service

Do you live in the City of San Luis Obispo? Like us, do you value our community's past? If so, there are vacancies on several city committees, including the Architectural Review Commission and the Cultural Heritage Committee, and your perspective would be a valuable addition. More information [here](#).

## Did you miss our workshop on historical research?

You can watch the video on [our website](#).

## Looking for more to do?

- Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#). With posts like Mystery Monday and Throwback Thursday, we'll be sharing photos from our collection.
- Take a [virtual walking tour](#) of historic San Luis Obispo. These video series feature short vignettes about significant local landmarks.

If you have any ideas of content you'd like to see, share it with us! And if you enjoy what we share with you, and if you are able to, would you please consider [supporting us](#)?

Thank you for being a part of our community. Everybody stay healthy and safe.

Sincerely,



Thomas Kessler  
Executive Director

**History Center of San Luis Obispo County**  
696 Monterey Street, SLO | (805) 543-0638 | [historycenterslo.org](http://historycenterslo.org)  
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