

William Henry Workman

Partner of Francis Pliny Fisk Temple



William Workman (right) and friend
David W. Alexander, ca. 1851. From
the Los Angeles Public Library.

William “Don Juan” Workman was born on November 17, 1799, in what is now Cumbria, England. Using money from an inheritance, his older brother David migrated to America in 1817, settling in Franklin, Missouri. David returned to England in 1819 and convinced William to return to America with him. William worked for 3 years before joining a group traveling west on the Santa Fe Trail. He settled in Taos where he trapped furs, opened a store and manufactured liquor with his partner John A Rowland.

Although they were successful, they ran into troubles during the time the territory changed hands from Nuevo Mexico to Texas. They decided to travel to Alta California in 1841. The Workman-Rowland Party was considered the “first wagon train of Americans to travel overland to Los Angeles” on the Santa Fe Trail, despite the facts not all the travelers were Americans and wagons could not travel the difficult Trail. In 1842, Workman obtained a Mexican land grant of 18,000 acres to the Rancho La Puente. It was not officially his (he was not a naturalized Mexican citizen) until 1845 when Governor Pio Pico amended the grant expanding the acreage to 49,000 acres.

During the time Workman was aligned with Governor Pio Pico, he was building his cattle business. When gold was discovered in 1848, his hide and tallow business flourished due to the need for fresh meat in the gold fields. He used this new wealth to expand his cattle business plus acquiring real estate.

By 1870, Workman had joined his son-in-law, FPF Temple, in real estate, early railroads, and eventually banking. They first partnered with Isaias Hellman, then, when Temple and Hellman split their business, Temple and Workman created their own bank. Due to bad lending policies and poor management, their bank eventually filed for bankruptcy and closed for good on January 13, 1876. Facing the collapse of all his businesses, Workman committed suicide on May 17, 1876 at the age of 76.