

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

Photos courtesy Pacific Security Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, Carolyn Cole, Photo Archive Director

L.A.'s 19th Century Power Couple

■ Abel Stearns and Arcadia Bandini were movers and shakers in early Los Angeles.

When thinking about pioneer Los Angeles, there is not much thought given to movers and shakers in the community other than politicians or possibly religious leaders. But every now and then sparks ignite, and a living, breathing, charismatic person or two arrives on the scene to bring a new character to the community.

Such is the case with Abel Stearns. He was born Feb. 9, 1798 in Salem, Mass. He and his seven brothers and sisters were orphaned when both parents died within three months of each other. Abel became a sailor and traveled to China, the East Indies and Spanish America. In 1826, he moved to Mexico, and at 29 he became a Mexican citizen when he converted from Judaism to Catholicism (this original document can be found in the City Archives). He migrated to the Los Angeles area in 1831 and opened a trading/mercantile store, which he learned during his years as a sailor. He was very successful at it, too. In the early 1830s, several local ranchers hired Stearns to settle land disputes over boundaries. Little did he know that in time he, himself, would own much of the disputed land in most of Southern California. He became the wealthiest American in the pueblo.

On Dec. 22, 1834, Abel Stearns purchased land on what today is the southeast corner of Main and Arcadia Streets. On this property he built the largest, most magnificent home in the pueblo. It became known as *El Palacio* or The Palace. This home was often the scene for lavish entertainment for visiting celebrities and political and social events. By this time Abel Stearns was known as *Don Abel*, an honorary Spanish/Mexican title.

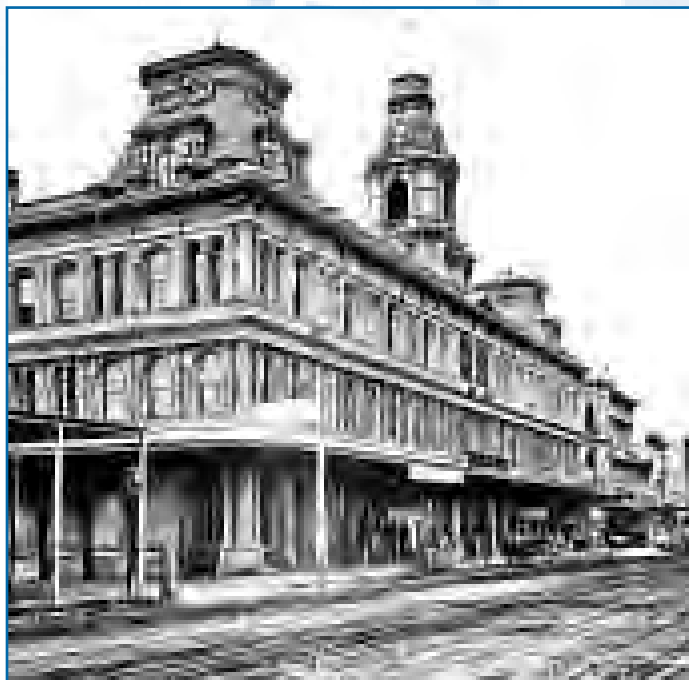
Don Abel Stearns was a very interesting man. He played both sides of the law beautifully. Stearns knew how important a port would be for Los Angeles. He opened a warehouse in San Pedro and established a prosperous business selling goods to ships docking at the harbor. But, in the early 1840s he was arraigned for smuggling operations at the port. In a warehouse, silks and liquors was found and condemned. *Don Abel* replied verbally, wrote violent letters and appealed for justice. He even falsified information to put his records in order, according to documents. As of this article it is difficult to determine what the legal outcome was, but later Stearns was found guilty again of housing new hides after another search in his warehouse. Physically, Abel Stearns was not considered a handsome man. One of the reasons was because he had been stabbed in the face by a dissatisfied customer. From that time on he was referred to as "Cara de Caballo" or "Horse Face."

(There are many Abel Stearns records found in the City Archives in non-translated Spanish, relating to his life in the Los Angeles area. Possibly, these documents can explain more of his life and lifestyle. I would appreciate if any of the readers know of qualified translators from the period

Spanish into English to contact me at hyndarudd@yahoo.com)

Prior to Stearns' awkward involvement with the law, in 1835, he was elected *sindico*, where he acted as attorney or legal counsel for the *Ayuntamiento*, or government of the pueblo. His responsibilities as part of the town council included protecting the interests of the pueblo. By 1849 he was chosen to represent his district at the California Constitutional Convention. He was also chosen in late 1849 to be the last *alcalde* or mayor of the *Ayuntamiento*. The following year, 1850, the State of California mandated Los Angeles to become a city through the Act of Incorporation. Abel Stearns was then elected one of the first Common Councilmen of the new City of Los Angeles. Later, in 1860, he became a Supervisor for the County of Los Angeles.

In 1841, *Don Abel Stearns* married the daughter of one of the wealthiest San Diego families, that of *Don Juan Bandini*. Her name was Arcadia, and her reported age has varied from 14 to 16. *Don Abel's* age was given as 40 or 43. One can't help but wonder if the marriage occurred because Governor Alvarado issued a drastic proclamation that all foreigners in California who could not show naturalization papers, show an honorable occupation



The Baker Block in 1880, built by Col. Robert Baker on land once owned by Abel Stearns.

or be married to a native Californian, would be exiled.

A year later, Abel Stearns purchased the enormous 20,000 acre *Rancho Los Alamitos* as a summer home for his wife. They spent the remainder of the year at *El Palacio*. This started Abel Stearns' becoming one of the largest landowners and cattle ranchers in Southern California. He obtained large land grants and wealth throughout the territory. Between the 1850s and 1860s, Abel acquired more ranchos through foreclosures and defaulted loans. His empire encompassed

more than 200,000 acres.

During the latter part of his life, Abel suffered great financial losses due to extreme weather conditions. In 1863 and 1864, a drought killed off more than 50,000 head of cattle; this nearly bankrupted him. He was unable to make tax payments on property, faced a lawsuit from the County and had to sell *Rancho Los Alamitos*. By 1868, he had mortgaged his remaining ranchos to obtain a \$43,000 loan from a San Francisco loan company to consolidate all his debts. Stearns made great attempts to recover from his financial woes. He did it to a certain degree, where he and his wife lived very comfortably and continued to have great wealth. *Don Abel Stearns* died Aug. 23, 1871. He was 73, and was survived by his wife, *Doña Arcadia*, 46.

Arcadia Bandini was one of three daughters and one living son by Juan Bandini and Dolores Estudillo. The daughters were considered the most beautiful in California. The name Bandini was not of Spanish heritage but of Italian descent. Arcadia was born in 1825 in San Diego. She lived an incredibly wealthy life and died the richest woman in California at her time. Both her parents came from prominence and privilege.

As stated above, Arcadia married *Don Abel Stearns* when she was what we would think of as a teenager. But she had been thought of as charming, and an older man's prized possession. Stearns was actually two years older than her father. She married *Don Abel* in June 1841 at the San Gabriel Mission. Arcadia had no involvement in her husband's business, but either her background or shrewd understanding had to be responsible for her having managed her finances in later life.

After 30 years of mar-

riage to *Don Abel*, he died suddenly on a business trip to San Francisco in 1871. Arcadia, at 46, was left a wealthy widow, including money from the passing of her father in 1859. She was considered to be the catch of the day. Four years later she married Col. Robert Symington Baker in Los Angeles. This marriage brought her further wealth and prestige. In time she was known as the "Godmother" of Brentwood and Santa Monica.

Baker, originally from Rhode Island from an eminent family, arrived in California during the gold rush of 1849, to make money selling supplies to miners. He moved to Los Angeles in 1872 and purchased the *Rancho San Vicente y Santa Monica* from the heirs of Francisco Sepulveda for approximately \$ 54,000 for 32,000 acres. He later sold three quarters share for \$150,000 to a new partner, John P. Jones. On July 15, 1875, they held their first auction, selling land in the new city of Santa Monica.

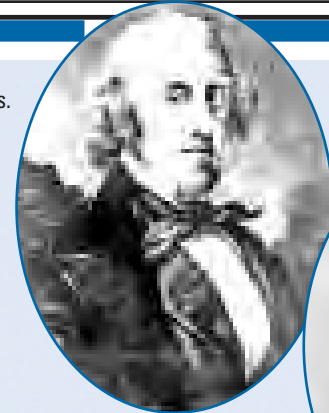
In time, Col. Baker tore down Abel Stearns' *Palacio*, and in its place he built what was then known as the Baker Block, with elaborate towers and mullioned windows. This building served a number of purposes. On the third floor they lived in a beautiful, formal apartment, before they moved to a new location in Santa Monica. In 1887, Baker, having financial problems of his own, sold his holdings to Arcadia. She then, with Mr. Jones, formed the Santa Monica Land and Water Company. The following year, she and owners of the Wolfskill tract (present-day Westwood) deeded land to the federal government for what would eventually become today's Veterans Administration facility.

Col. Baker died in March 1894. She then married John T. Gaffey of San Pedro. His birth date cannot be found, but he must have been younger than Arcadia because he was cited as a Democratic Delegate at a National Convention in 1932.

Doña Arcadia Bandini Stearns Baker Gaffey died Sept. 15, 1912, at 87. She had no children but many nieces and nephews, and was always dedicated to general needs of children in the community. It is estimated that her estate at that time was valued between \$8 million and \$15 million. Most definitely she was the wealthiest woman in California at that time. She never spoke English; she understood it, but always used a translator.



El Palacio in 1860, the home of *Don Abel Stearns* and *Doña Arcadia Bandini Stearns*.



Abel Stearns.



Arcadia Bandini Stearns Baker Gaffey.