

William Kissane Rogers – A Forgotten Anti-Hero from Another Time

Joseph A. Kissane



A remarkable man's life ended 100 years ago. William F. Kissane was known for more than half of his 89 years as Colonel William K. Rogers, and he died in his home in Berkeley, California on May 3, 1913. He was born in Tipperary, Ireland in June of 1824, the middle child of a family that included his father of the same name, his mother Aphra Hely Kissane, 3 sisters and 5 brothers. His beginnings might sound like a typical Irish American family's tale - that of an oversized struggling Irish Catholic family coming to America in hopes of a better life. But it is not anything like that. His family was not Catholic, and his family was in the class of landed gentry in Ireland.

The Kissane family of this story were Protestant "Marano" or "Crypto-Jewish" whose ancestry is traceable to group that is rooted in the Middle East, and whose generations migrated through Spain, France, Syria and eventually Ireland. The Kissanes were connected by marriage and common heritage to many of the wealthier families of Ireland at the time, including the Lloyd, Hely and Rogers families. They had land holdings both in Tipperary and on the Isle of Man. The Kissane family was not held in the same regard as other gentry lines in part because of their unusual roots and some cultural peculiarities that went with that. There was, as well more than normal incidence of scandal among them. In his youth, William seemed to be the most successful of the children in school, but had also been something of a problem child. He is believed to have been involved in two suspicious fires; one at his school and one at a family home. In spite of all this he was regarded as a very talented and intelligent young man.

By the middle 1830s an affair between William Kissane's father and the wife of a relative led to the family's having to leave Ireland altogether. A period of several months was required to liquidate their assets and do what could be done to plan a new life in a new world. They traveled from Ireland via England to New York in 1838 – both parents and their 9 offspring.

While in New York the Kissane family, particularly Aphra, began a relationship with Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was one of the most wealthy and powerful men in America. It may be that relationship inspired

her husband to move the family to the wilderness of southern Ontario. They traveled from the urban bustle of New York City to the wilds of southern Ontario in 1839 to begin a new life building a country estate near St. Thomas. The land was part of the development of that region by the peculiarly eccentric Lord Talbot who was also a member of the Irish gentry in North America. Harsh winters and tough living conditions took their toll on the family and in 1842 the eldest son, John and then the father died from illnesses. Shortly thereafter, having heard from other Irish immigrants about a new city on the Ohio River that was a promising cultural Mecca, they moved to Cincinnati. There young William and his younger brother Reuben enrolled in school while their mother established herself in social circles and their older brother Henry worked as a Teamster in the transport business. One of his sisters and her new husband also moved to Cincinnati, where they established a homeopathic medicine practice.



St. Thomas, Ontario in the mid 19th Century, as William Kissane would have seen it

After graduating from school William struck out into the business world, soon making a name for himself as a rising and energetic deal-maker in the wax, soap and leather related industries. In spite of a recession in the late 1840s William was prospering, and mingling with a crowd of people who were often more driven by financial aspirations than they were contained by any ethical or even legal constraints. As the 1840s came to a close, a business he was involved with burned to the ground, taking with it a neighboring business, causing questions about possible arson. Attempts to tie the fire to William went only as far as rumor for the time being. But this incident again linked William with calamitous fires. Although some of his business connections were less than model citizens, he was seen as a member of accepted society, and was involved in local activities including elite horse racing and the Masonic Lodge. A dashing athletic figure of a young man, William Kissane was also known to some as a sporting man – the term used to describe what might today be thought of as affluent playboys. A charismatic figure, he

caught the eye of the daughter of a prominent politician, Kentucky Congressman Charles Morehead and the two became “an item” in social circles.

As the 1850s began, William’s ambitions grew beyond Cincinnati, and he schemed with a group of his contemporaries to buy a steamboat. They wanted to begin a mercantile transportation operation sending goods that were relatively cheap in Cincinnati and selling them at huge profits to the exploding California gold mining towns. The associates accumulated a large cargo of mixed goods and as they prepared for their first shipment. The idea occurred to William that they could over-insure the cargo with multiple companies, and then either scuttle the steamer on any of the more treacherous hazards present between Cincinnati and New Orleans, or set the boat afire and profit from the insurance. They kept the scheme secret from the captain as they suspected he would not approve of the idea of destroying the boat. Unfortunately it seemed that even the captain was trying to figure ways to maximize the profit of the adventure. The men plotting the destruction of the steamer didn’t take into account that the captain had also figured a way to make extra money on the trip. He sold passage from Cincinnati to New Orleans to travelers who were anxious to leave Cincinnati, the winter of 1851-52 having a later than usual ice-out on the Ohio River. William added one last aspect of the scheme – he had the cargo unloaded under cover of darkness and reloaded the boat with bales of straw, paper and replaced the barrels of salt pork, oil and whisky with barrels of water. It would be a shame to waste good cargo, after all, insured or not.



A Cincinnati Fire Department wagon responding to a call circa 1850

William Kissane was in high spirits as things were coming together for him. He celebrated the launching of the Steamboat Martha Washington by announcing his engagement to the Congressman's daughter the same day in January, 1852. The boarding of passengers by the captain went unnoticed by him, and his henchman was inserted among the crew with instructions. The steamer was crowded and its operation seemed a little disorganized to the passengers but it was moving on schedule down from Cincinnati toward the Mississippi. Three days into the voyage, on an exceedingly cold night, fire broke out aboard the boat as it headed out beyond the mouth of the Ohio River on the Mississippi. Tragically 15 passengers perished, including two small children as the boat sank. Kissane's henchman, believed to have been drunk at the time, also died, taking with him the exact details of what had happened. The captain was emotionally ruined, the newspapers were filled with horrible accounts of the disaster. Kissane was implicated this time along with his cohorts.

The wreck was investigated by the authorities and salvage operators, trying to find anything of value they could. Authorities checking passengers' stories received reports of fake cargo and the frighteningly rapid spread of the fire and its circumstances led to an almost immediate suspicion of arson. Kissane and his associates became the subject of scrutiny and charges were brought in Ohio and also in Arkansas where the fire occurred. Through his social and political connections Kissane and his co-conspirators assembled a highly acclaimed team of legal support. Kissane's engagement was broken off unceremoniously. In an era when public speeches and lectures supplemented plays and musical performances as cultural entertainment, lawyers were celebrities of the day, and Kissane's team had some of the best. They included current and future politicians, a Supreme Court justice and the man who would later defend President Andrew Johnson in his impeachment.

A Cleveland businessman named Sidney Burton was one of many who were owed large sums by Kissane, for lost cargo in the disaster. Seeing himself as something of a crusader for justice in this tragedy, he volunteered to assist with the prosecution. He provided testimony and personal investigations of the criminal activities of the conspirators. He interrogated witnesses and confronted Kissane and his associates with challenges that often broke into strong arguments and threats. The trials dragged on throughout the course of a year and a half, with preliminary investigations, changes in venue and addition and subtraction of charges for fraud, arson and murder. From 1852 through 1854 he spent as much time behind bars as he did outside of jail. Trials and re-trials for offenses related to the Martha Washington disaster and charges of kidnapping, murder and forgery kept his name in the newspapers so much that he became a "usual suspect" whenever something sinister was reported in the region. Kissane had rapidly gone from a socialite to a notorious villain.

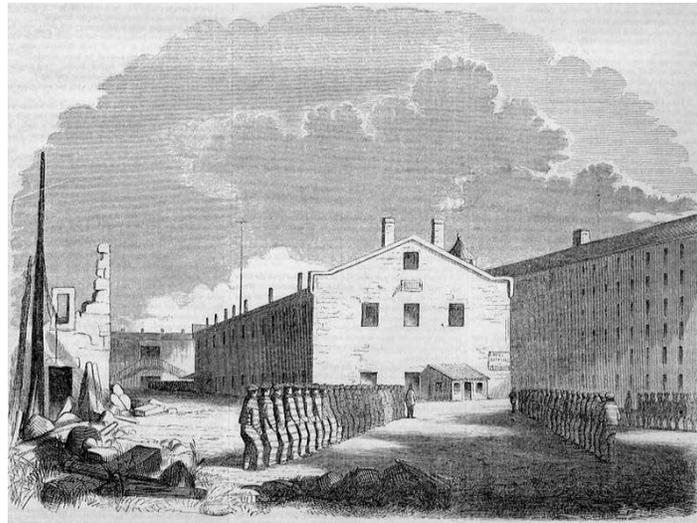
In spite of publicity and outcry, Kissane and his accomplices were ultimately acquitted and or charges were dismissed for virtually all but the most trivial offenses. But there were indications that Kissane and his associates were far from innocent. Brilliant legal technicalities were employed by Kissane's law team that cut prosecution arguments short and made it difficult to convict, and the defense used the protection against double jeopardy to avoid further prosecution.

The cases against Kissane were also hampered by strange periodic illnesses and disappearances of key witnesses. Within a few months of the trials, several of the prosecution witnesses who had testified against Kissane and his gang died inexplicably or disappeared. Sidney Burton made accusations that his life was in danger and that several attempts had been made to poison him. Key documents were destroyed in an explosion at the prosecutor's home and the homes of several others involved in the case burned as well.

The extensive legal fees incurred in the court fights were eventually covered by family, friends and to a large extent by another of William Kissane's developing talents - counterfeiting bank notes and letters of credit. Throughout this timeframe, William Kissane's forgery skills became something he realized could bring him great fortune. The scale of his forgery and counterfeiting efforts soon went beyond financing his legal expenses and became a profitable career that brought him to New York, where the stakes rose. His gentlemanly manners and social contacts enabled him to masquerade as a livestock magnate and a member of the financial elite. But a slip up by a member of his gang and the re-appearance of Sidney Burton soon led to his arrest while on a trip home to Ohio. During his transportation under guard back to New York for trial he made a spectacular escape, leaping from the window of a moving train. He grew a beard, colored his hair and assumed another identity for a time, taking up work as a farm hand. He was finally recaptured passing fake currency in upstate New York. A well-publicized trial followed in New York in the winter of 1854.

In February of 1855, the legal system finally caught up with him, and William Kissane stood before the court in New York, a convicted man, awaiting sentence. When asked by the judge if he had anything to say, he rose and delivered a dramatic speech that left the judge rubbing tears from his eyes and some spectators openly weeping. Kissane's address spoke of his having destroyed the opportunities life, family and society had gifted him and how he had so shamed his family that they abandoned their surname to escape association with his blackened reputation. At the close of his plea for the court's mercy, the judge literally sent him "up the river" to Sing Sing, with the minimum sentence he could justify and his best wishes and hopes for repentance.

While he spent his time in Sing Sing trying to survive and avoid the hazards of that infamous place, a strange combination of efforts by Kissane's friends and enemies was working for his release. His family and friends were soliciting letters from members of society asking for parole. In the meantime, Sidney Burton was making the rounds trying to put together a case against a massive conspiracy organization of which he believed Kissane was a leading part. This organized gang had conducted arson and steamboat sabotage over a 10-year period. Burton had written a manuscript documenting Kissane's criminal activities, and was waiting to release it for publication until he had the chance for a last interview. He believed Kissane's knowledge of the organization would break open this evil empire and that William would cooperate in return for his release from prison. Convinced of Kissane's value to the investigation, and upon consideration of a collection of letters from people including two governors of neighboring states, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and newspaper writers Horace Greely and Thomas Meagher, Governor Clark of New York granted Kissane's parole in December, 1855.



Inmates marching with leg irons in lock step at Sing Sing Prison circa 1855

A series of events followed the governor's decision to parole Kissane that was reminiscent of the occurrences following his acquittal in the Martha Washington case. The night before his release, a fire in Sing Sing prison broke out. All of the records of Kissane's incarceration, as well as the supporting documentation of his parole were destroyed. Regardless, his parole went forward. Two days later Sidney Burton died in a hotel room and his last communication with his friends claimed several attempts at poisoning him had been made by Kissane's agents. Kissane's sister and brother-in-law had moved to New York and were operating a homeopathic clinic and pharmacy – and were suspected of providing poisons that would be difficult to detect. Burton's manuscript and research files were believed lost. The couple with whom Kissane had stayed following his escape from the train (the wife had led authorities to re-arrest him) vanished. With all of this, a week before Christmas, 1855 thirty-one year old William Kissane was a free man in New York, determined he would never again see the inside of a jail cell.

After William's conviction and sentencing to Sing Sing, Reuben Kissane had to re-invent himself in light of his brother's scandals. He moved to San Francisco with their older brother Henry and their mother. Henry took up work as a longshoreman on the docks and retained the surname Kissane, believing that association with a notorious criminal might actually be an advantage in that line of work in a tough place like San Francisco. Reuben, on the other hand had finished law school and he and his mother assumed the surname of his maternal grandmother. They would now be known as Aphra and her son Reuben Lloyd. They began to settle into San Francisco's developing social circles, where Reuben became a prominent young lawyer and investor in gold mining properties (Lloyd Lake in Golden Gate Park is named in his honor). Among his closest friends was George Hearst, whom he met in the California gold fields and who later developed a financial empire with his son, William Randolph Hearst. Upon learning of his brother's parole, Reuben decided the best way to avoid association with William was to find a way to get him as far away from the family as possible. Their mother, Aphra was also persuaded by her old friend Vanderbilt that her son William needed to disappear for the sake of the family's status.

At that time an enigmatic southern doctor turned newspaperman named William Walker had also taken up in San Francisco. Having exhausted his interest in either of his first two professions, the slim, short man of few words, somehow collected a band of adventurers and set out in an independent attempt to take over Baja California. They were terribly unsuccessful and nearly all killed, but Walker returned to San Francisco, and began to rethink his options. He soon set his sights further south in Central America.

This was the era when colonial empires were collapsing resulting in potential for what were called “filibusters” – independent “free-booters,” and self-appointed conquerors to swoop in and fill the void left when fledgling new countries experienced unstable regimes. Nicaragua was in the midst of a series of revolutions and civil wars that were seen as disruptive to business and could invite European colonial powers to re-enter the picture if they continued. Walker gathered those who survived his Mexican debacle and was building a group of American soldiers of fortune adding from the ranks of failed ruffian gold miners, criminal desperados, throwing in a few veterans of the Mexican-American War to add a sense of legitimacy and professionalism to the outfit. His plan was to eventually set up a state he would rule and would then arrange an American-friendly transportation system between the Atlantic and Pacific, and eventually develop a Central American empire. In a rapid succession of heroic victories in a war that is almost non-existent in modern American historical texts, William Walker rose to the supreme commander of the Army of the Nicaraguan Republic, a position with more power than the presidency – an office which he also shortly thereafter acquired.

Cornelius Vanderbilt was also at this time in the process of expanding his transportation corridor across the isthmus of Nicaragua. He had established a steamer route from the Gulf of Mexico up a large river to Lake Nicaragua that connected to a wagon route down the short 15-mile road to the Pacific. Vanderbilt developed his commercial enterprise, buying the necessary politicians to achieve his goals. The government made a lease agreement predicated upon the promise that Vanderbilt would eventually build a canal there, and that he would pay the Nicaraguan government a royalty for passages. Both Vanderbilt and Walker coincidentally saw that the relatively unstable regime in Nicaragua could easily be either toppled or manipulated and a permanent American operation of this corridor could be arranged one way or another. The two men were not previously acquainted with each other but were intelligent strategists and both possessed tremendous egos. Vanderbilt was a large loud boisterous and occasionally vulgar personality, and in contrast Walker was a small diminutive man with refined southern manners and a voice that squeaked when he spoke. Their goals were neither identical nor completely independent, but they both shared a sense of their ambitions being more important than any set of laws.

William’s brother, Reuben learned of Walker’s Nicaraguan venture and after communications with Walker, he arranged for his brother William to depart from New York’s temptations and head to Nicaragua as soon as possible. He was assigned by Walker to the administration as a sort of quartermaster and treasurer in charge of acquisitions. This would serve to remove William Kissane from the family picture, avoiding the scandals that followed him wherever he went for the time being. So in February, 1856 William Kissane arrived in Nicaragua, and met William Walker at the headquarters where

Walker now commanded the entire Nicaraguan army and was preparing to take over the entire government.



William Walker

As a part of the arrangement William Kissane became William K. Rogers, by decree of Walker, in his capacity as head of the government of Nicaragua. The new name was chosen with a purpose. William had used aliases throughout his criminal exploits, but the name William Kissane Rogers was coincident with that of a cousin in Ireland. The legal change of his name would allow him to acquire inheritances due his cousin at a later date. Walker explained that he needed immediate and total access to the resources of the country, and Kissane was given complete authority to take whatever steps were necessary to make this happen. The role he would assume not only had some degree of autonomy; it also overlapped with the military and he was involved in some very significant battles. There were times when William believed his fate had been sealed and he threw himself into situations with reckless abandon in an almost suicidal fashion. He was determined to take risks that would either end in his demise or propel him on to greater things.

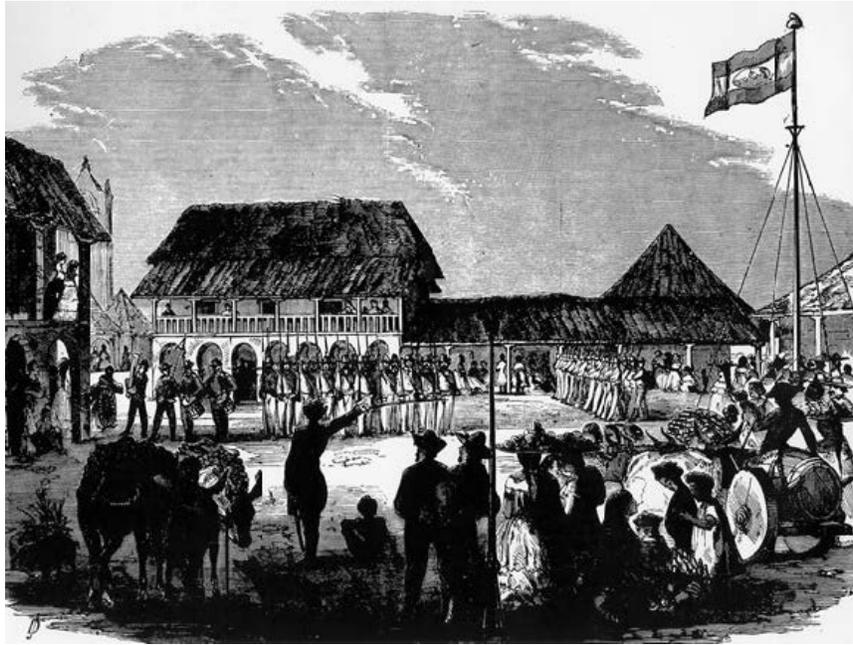
In Walker's Nicaragua, William K. Rogers soon became a socially prominent figure, possessing a charisma and polish that made him stand out in the rugged land and among the strange assortment of characters Walker had put together. He was a trusted member of Walker's regime. But while he established himself as an officer and a gentleman among some of the American officers and upper crust there, he was becoming a feared presence among the native population, earning the title of "Confiscator General" for his ruthless raids on the haciendas, farms and estancias. He was rumored to have been responsible

for kidnapping the wives and daughters of hacienda owners in the course of his notorious raids. In contrast to being considered a desperado, in the capital of Granada he was seen in the company of ladies of society – the prominent and famously beautiful young widow Dona Yrena Ohorin and the teen-aged step daughter of a fellow officer, Elizabeth Hathaway among them. Dona Yrena Ohorin was a young half-Irish widow whose husband had been a casualty of an earlier battle and she was left with a handsome estate and properties. Her appeal to William was both physical and financial. Elizabeth Hathaway was an energetic girl who moved to Nicaragua with her mother and step-father and was socially active beyond her years. In the more traumatic events of the wars to come, Elizabeth would also serve Walker's army as a nurse. Both of these women would later play roles in Rogers' life.

Vanderbilt's transit company continued to operate their route across Nicaragua and among their freight was a large amount of gold that was transported from California to the East Coast of the U.S. The company's charter included royalties to be paid to Nicaragua, and Kissane-Rogers immediately took liberties with the collections as a way of funding Walker's exploits and maintaining a lifestyle of affluence for himself. Owing to the rough conditions and the haste of transactions, records of these "payments" were scarce. Vanderbilt did not know that it was the rogue son of his friend Aphra Kissane (whom he had advised her to disown) who was now skimming from his transit business.

Walker also applied his journalistic prowess to a newspaper that he filled with propaganda in English and Spanish, and Rogers assisted him in this and in promoting civic and social functions including horse races, dances and band performances in the capitol city of Granada trying to attract wealthy, particularly southern investors from the U.S.

Walker abruptly seized the assets of the transit company when it was reported that they had been delinquent in paying their royalties - in an audit performed (not surprisingly) under the direction of Kissane-Rogers. The reaction was predictable, the magnitude was not. The combined forces of England, the American government, Cornelius Vanderbilt and the surrounding countries of Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica all took extreme exception to Walker's rapid rise to power. The surrounding countries overcame their previous differences and had allied themselves together - and now gained arms and monetary support from the irate Vanderbilt to squash Walker's regime. The capitol was put under siege and the government of Walker was in crisis. Walker's army was starving and dying from wounds and cholera at an alarming rate. Young Elizabeth Hathaway was performing heroically as a nurse, even as her mother perished from the cholera. Her efforts and her appeal did not go unnoticed by William Kissane Rogers.



William Walker's army on parade in Granada, Nicaragua 1856

Rather than allow the capitol to fall into rebel hands, Walker insisted it be destroyed. Coincidentally or not, once again, the hand of William Kissane Rogers was connected to the torch. Granada was looted ahead of its destruction, and among the things Kissane-Rogers found was a cache of brandy that he used to inspire the men under his direction in their pillage. "Collections for the cause" were made from the seven churches in Granada – all the gold and silver and whatever else was worth anything in the churches and any of the homes was taken as the men ran through the city running its occupants out ahead of its destruction. Then the old city was set ablaze, as a drunken mob in procession led by Rogers, clad in a bishop's robes, followed by a coffin full of loot in a funeral wagon made its way toward the edge of town to escape.

Kissane-Rogers managed to flee ahead of the counter revolutionaries and make it to the port of Greytown on the Caribbean. There he befriended a British correspondent who was in the region covering the war for the British press, and as the route back to Walker's troops was cut off, the two of them headed toward Panama aboard an English ship. Rogers was nearly delirious with malaria, and told the correspondent of Walker's campaign as they made their way south, dropping in and out of consciousness. Rogers recovered to some extent, but a comrade who was accompanying him did not fare as well and his companion's body was cast overboard, as was the custom in such cases. When they arrived in Panama Rogers had recovered sufficiently to consider rejoining Walker. With the help of his new friend, the English journalist, and some acquaintances there he hired a boat with a couple of men on the Pacific side of the isthmus under the deceptive premise of taking him to an island off the coast. Once out of the harbor Kissane-Rogers pulled two revolvers from his belongings and hijacked the boat to take him to San Juan del Sur, on the Nicaraguan coast below the encampment of Walker's troops. Their

trip took them nearly a week, yet Kissane-Rogers kept the crew from turning back, and they were finally spotted and rescued by the last remaining boat held by Walker's men.

Surprised to see Kissane-Rogers, Walker's men rushed him to their last safe haven in Rivas. Only days earlier, even in the throes of chaos, Kissane-Rogers inquiries as to the fate of Elizabeth Hathaway were answered with the announcement that she had only days earlier wed one of Kissane-Rogers fellow officers – a crusty old artilleryman named Saunders. His life must have seemed to be spinning out of control more than ever after surviving the siege of Granada, malaria, the harrowing trip through Panama and back up to the Pacific port, and now this. Word of Kissane-Rogers remarkable voyage was going through the camp and a young private from Ohio started telling people he knew this man as William Kissane – a famous criminal.

As the crisis and collapse of Walker's grip on Nicaragua reached a climax the English and American governments played a delicate diplomatic game. They allowed Walker to become weakened to the point of his finally agreeing to accept their offer of safe passage out of the country. But as the parties were negotiating a cease fire, the same private who was spreading stories of Kissane's past was caught talking to a fellow mercenary he knew who had switched sides and was now aligned with the Costa Rican insurgents. Walker was furious and immediately ordered the traitor's execution and assembled a firing squad and stormed into his headquarters after ordering them to shoot the young man. Rumors of the end of hostilities were everywhere, and the boy pleaded with his comrades now on the firing squad for his life, arguing it would be murder to shoot him hours before the cease fire. The men shot over his head and quietly told him to run for his life. He did, but his path took him straight toward William Kissane Rogers. Knowing Walker's orders, and coincidentally having heard that this was the same person revealing his past, Kissane-Rogers drew his revolver and shot the boy through the forehead. The act must have been one of combined fear of the revelation of his past and the culminated frustrations of the events in recent weeks – his voyage, his dashed romantic hopes for Nicaragua and even Elizabeth had gone up in proverbial flames. After executing the boy he calmly reported to Walker that his order had been carried out. Noted California lawman and writer Horace C. Bell was with Walker's army at the time, and he later recounted the incident as one of the darkest incidents of that conflict. Days later, in May of 1857 the brief reign of William Walker ended, and he returned the U.S.

Once back in the U.S. Walker and his officers were beset with threats of violation of America's Neutrality Act. While they were an embarrassment to the government in the international community, they were heroes to the common population, having taken up where the heroes of the Mexican American War left off – after all many of them went almost directly from one war to the other. Walker was able to get the courts to delay or dismiss actions against him, and through the intervention of various politicians and lawyers including Thomas F. Meagher – the Irish revolutionary hero (later the leader of the Irish Brigade in the U.S. Civil War) and now New York newspaperman/lawyer, he and his men avoided prosecution. Walker then tried valiantly to gain recruits for further attempts to return to Nicaragua. Among those he and his officers had received at least verbal commitments from were George McClellan, later Lincoln's first Commanding General, and P.G.T. Beauregard, later to be one of the Confederacy's most flamboyant

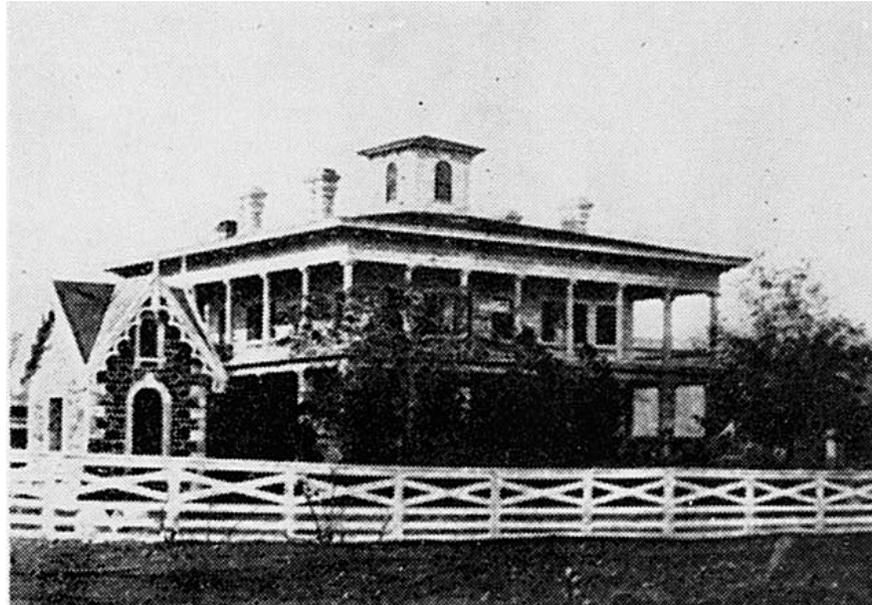
characters. Walker made several subsequent attempts to return to power in Nicaragua in 1858 and 1859, but was eventually killed for his efforts. The American army officers were waiting to make solid commitments to Walker pending the success of his attempts to return to power, and when Walker failed, their interest stopped abruptly.

Most of Walker's loyal officers and men held up in New Orleans awaiting their next mission after their first return to the states. There they took over parts of the French Quarter as rowdy hard-drinking and gambling men with no fear of bloodshed. Among Walker's men was a Mexican War veteran Thomas "Colt" Henry who was reported to have been successful on the "field of honor" in no fewer than 20 duels. Such contests were illegal in the New Orleans city limits, though. So, on an occasion when Henry called Rogers's loyalty to Walker into question, and Rogers in turn questioned Henry's ability to stand up after having consumed too much rum, a mutual friend insisted that they take their contest out of town, to St. Louis Bay, Mississippi. It was hoped the long ride would sober them up and bring the two to their senses. Men on both sides continued to drink during the long ride, but in spite of their condition the two men insisted on resolving their differences. When the appointed time came, Henry fired first, widely missing Rogers. The onlookers grew silent, some having seen Rogers coldly shoot a young man on his knees begging for his life in Nicaragua. Rogers laughed, told Henry he was lower than a worm, and shot his round into the sand, saying it was as close as he could come to shooting him. The two men toasted each other's friendship and left arm in arm to a waiting carriage.

Rogers, as he was now exclusively known, was in the advance company of one of the later missions to retake Nicaragua in the winter of 1857. As that mission failed and he headed into the jungles to rescue stranded fellow insurgents, he was grazed in the neck by a musket ball – his only known battle wound. After achieving the rescue he assumed the identity of an Irish-English traveler and appeared in a hotel bar in Greytown. He was immediately taken in by Dona Yrena who had moved to the coast following the destruction of the capitol. She hid him in her home, tended his wound and arranged for his escape back to the States following that failed venture. After another failed attempt in 1858, Rogers decided not to accompany Walker or his people on their last and fatal trip. In spite of that, there were reports that Kissane had been among the dead in that venture, and it is suspected that Kissane-Rogers had used some influence in New Orleans to arrange those reports.

Going by the name Colonel William K. Rogers, our subject took what profits he had stashed in New Orleans from his time in Nicaragua, borrowed some cash from his brother Rueben, and moved to California. There he began a new life, first in the mercantile business, then as a gold mine speculator. He had gone to Nicaragua a shamed and convicted criminal whose family wanted nothing to do with him. He was re-invigorated and purified by adventure and fire with a new name, the title of Colonel William K. Rogers now bearing a reputation as an officer, fame, stories and fortune to match. Somewhat reconciled and reunited with his family in San Francisco, William K. Rogers became known as a gentleman entrepreneur. He added to his wealth by an inheritance from an aunt in Ireland, and a subsequent land scheme.

In San Francisco he reacquainted himself with the young girl Elizabeth Hathaway whom he met in Nicaragua. Her husband had become a drunken and abusive braggart, and when the Civil War broke out, he enlisted with the Confederates and abandoned her and their children. He would ultimately die from a combination of wounds, disease and a failing liver. Elizabeth divorced her alcoholic husband and now with two small children, married William K. Rogers in a private ceremony at the country estate of Lord Fairfax in Marin County, California.



Temelec circa 1862 before William Kissane Rogers improvements

Although he had seen enough blood and destruction in the Nicaraguan war not to seek a commission when the Civil War broke out, Rogers was a Confederate sympathizer. On one occasion he bought supplies and sent them by wagon train to the frontier of New Mexico. They were received in support of a skirmish between Confederate and Union troops. The supplies notwithstanding, the battle resulted in the death of one of his former comrades from the war in Nicaragua. In contrast, Rogers' sisters now living in San Francisco were strong Union supporters, and performed fundraising and charitable work for the support of Union families. Reuben diplomatically maintained neutrality, and Henry, their brother the teamster, maintained that his occupation was dangerous enough and politics and such things were unhealthy topics for discussion in his circles.

William and Elizabeth soon found their place near those at the top of the social ladder and became pillars of the community in Sonoma County. After a honeymoon and a short period of residence in San Francisco, William employed the services of a third party to purchase a suitable place for him to settle down and raise a family. He had grown tired of the life of a desperado, and envied his brother's status as a respectable citizen. In the fall of 1865 he purchased the Temelec Estate from his agent, Reis, and began to expand it to a massive vineyard and winery. He added to the buildings, expanded the lands, and had a team of laborers landscape the property in grand fashion. Orchards and exotic plantings were

placed around the grand mansion. Inside the mansion there were additions as well – the greatest of which was a library that was Rogers pride and joy.



Landscaping improvements at Temelec made by William Kissane Rogers

At Temelec, residing on a vast vineyard estate the family grew and all seemed well. William and Elizabeth had seven children in addition to Elizabeth's two other children and they all grew up in the splendor of Temelec at its grandest. Rogers was vested in gold mines and vineyards, and his home was the talk of the country, with its library and lavish gardens. It was also believed to be one of the first estates in California to have indoor plumbing. Their prosperity was exemplary, and William joined his brother Reuben as a prominent member of the local Masonic Lodge, but their relationship to each other was still not widely known beyond their closest friends. Colonel Rogers was elected to the Sonoma Board of County Supervisors, and served there through much of the 1870s. Then things began to change.

Following his presidency, friends of Ulysses Grant arranged a world tour that ended with a tour of California. Grant was promoting American railroad technology, and among his ventures, Rogers was also involved in small private railroads in California. During a series of social visits, an aid to Grant - Francis Darr was tasked with finding appropriate lodging for the former president. Temelec Hall, the mansion on the Rogers estate was renowned in the region, and Darr learned of it, as well as the gentleman who resided there. By coincidence, Darr had been employed as a boy by an uncle in Cincinnati when the family business burned to the ground in a fire - believed by them to have been set by William Kissane – the same William Kissane now known as Rogers. Darr had also been employed briefly by Sidney Burton during his investigations to take notes on the movements of Kissane and his men in Cincinnati during Burton's investigations.

Francis Darr approached the house and met Rogers, now a man in his 60s with the tall bearing of a senior country gentleman. Rogers flatly refused to welcome the entourage, claiming his estate was undergoing construction, even though there was no evidence to support such a claim. It seemed to Darr that a man with a military background, especially with interests in railroads, as Rogers was believed by everyone to have, would welcome the hero of the Civil War, and a former President. He was curious about the rejection, and proceeded to investigate the history of this man further. Something seemed out of place. Rogers caught wind of Darr's investigations, and abruptly resigned his position on the Board of Supervisors, sensing a brewing tempest. He had recently purchased another mining property and used the need to oversee its development as an excuse for his departure.



Vista from balcony at Temelec during the William Kissane Rogers years

The 1880s were becoming troubling times for Rogers. His children were teenagers and young adults, raised in lavish surroundings and had developed expensive tastes. His younger sister Emma and his mother both died after long periods of declining health. His mining properties began to play out or turn unproductive. Darr soon discovered that Rogers was in fact Kissane, and that there was possibly still an outstanding indictment against him in New York stemming from the bank fraud case in 1855 that had sent him to prison. Darr was able to locate Sidney Burton's daughter, who claimed to have the files and manuscript Burton had written about Kissane. She provided him with the notes from Kissane's trials in Ohio and New York when Darr was only a teenager. Taking up the cause Burton left with his death, Darr became fixated on exacting revenge against this dark shadow from his past.

The Chemical Bank of New York listened intently to Darr's presentation of his findings, and offered to sell him their claim to restitution from Kissane. He accepted on the assumption that they would assist in his pursuit and execution of the claims, and to some extent they did. There was the obvious lapse of time – thirty years of unblemished participation as a productive member of California's society to consider, along with the statute of limitations. Nevertheless, Darr was determined to gain satisfaction. With the files from Burton's daughter, he pieced together his case, and set the wheels in motion to bring Rogers to justice.

In the early summer of 1887 Darr was able to get himself deputized as an officer of the Sonoma County Sheriff's office, and he got a local warrant for the arrest of William K. Rogers. Another deputy quietly approached the drive leading to Temelec Hall, and there was some apprehension. Wondering whether he ought to have had someone with him in the event the subject of his pursuit chose to turn violent, he paused, then proceeded to the front door. He was apprehensive – this was a man who many believed had been a cold-blooded killer and a devious criminal in his past. He was surprised when the man he knew both as Rogers and now Kissane met him at the door, and although he had publicly denied to Darr previously that he was William Kissane, he then calmly directed him to the side of the house where he said he would send Kissane. The older man slowly went into the house to answer the obvious question from the family members inside: "who was that at the door?" and then, in a grove of trees across the drive from the house, he admitted his identity and accepted the warrant for his appearance in court.

Reuben Lloyd was by this time quite a prominent lawyer in San Francisco with some of the city's leading businessmen among his clients, including the Hearst family. He could not be involved in anything as potentially scandalous as a family member being tried for bank fraud. He directed his brother to a lawyer they had known from Ohio named Jesse Hart. But in spite of the sensitive nature of the case Hart was less than discreet. The story leaked out in pieces, building in its excitement and intrigue. The quiet gentleman of Sonoma County was in fact a murderous arsonist, counterfeiter, a desperado soldier of fortune who burned a Central American capital to the ground, and he had lived in their midst unbeknownst to anyone. Then the few survivors of the earlier times in William's life came to the surface, and the story burst into the headlines across the country.

Soon William Kissane's name became the stuff of legend. There were people across the country who claimed to know him, know his exploits and would tell their story – for a price, to anyone. A woman in Kentucky claimed to be his ex wife, abandoned when he started his life of crime. Another woman claimed to have had a daughter by him. A man named Edward Forrester sold his story to more than one periodical as having been Kissane. Forrester, who bore a strong resemblance to Kissane, and whose past included coincidentally a brief period as a young man in southern Ontario, said he served not only in Central America during Walker's war, but also had a romantic role leading a Chinese Imperial Army in the 1860s putting down a fanatic rebellion. His Asian ward, brought from his exploits in the Far East as a boy had been named Usa Forrester (Forrester having given the boy the name "Usa" standing for U.S.A.) supported this story of Forrester being Kissane-Rogers. Usa Forrester did this even though he was less than 10 years old when Forrester took him from China to New York. Few people recalled first-hand the

incidents in William's youth, and myth and fantasy embellished what was already a fairly famous story. Darr's continuation of Burton's pursuit added a sense of something out of a Victor Hugo novel and it soon became hard to separate fact from fiction where William Kissane-Rogers's story was concerned.

Francis Darr's role quickly became indistinguishable from the earlier part of Sidney Burton, and he reveled in it. Darr had been a failure in business, and an underperformer as an officer in the Civil War, his major accomplishment being in charge of maintaining order during the New York City draft riots. He primarily gained the support of General Grant for his ability to set up social contacts that would facilitate logistics and supply contracts. Now he became something of a celebrity by association with the Kissane case. He began to tell the press the stories that Burton had written about 30-years earlier with himself playing large parts in them in spite of the age difference.

THE GUILTY PARTY.

*WHO struck Billy Patterson?
To know it you'd fain;*

Draw hither thine ear,
It was William Kissane.

Who wrote the "Breadwinners?"

You'd guess it in vain;
But it's very safe betting
'Twas William Kissane.

*And who sunk the Oregon,
Deep in the main?*

Her side was knocked out
By William Kissane.

And "Beautiful Snow"

Will always remain
A shaft monumental
To William Kissane.

*Well, who is Kissane,
This sinner and saint?*

Oh, some say he's Rogers,
And some say he ain't.

* * *

A poem mocking the William Kissane Rogers scandals that appeared in Life Magazine in 1887

The California courts denied Darr's claims against Rogers – sending the case to New York, where the crimes actually took place. In New York the case dragged on for most of a year in spite of its having no legal merit. The judge and the Chemical Bank of New York were determined to punish this scofflaw Kissane and his lawyer even though there was no legal way to do so. So they insisted on continuances to research the old cases, look for long-dead or missing witnesses and old records that didn't exist

anymore. The papers across the country were filled with curious stories about this high-society scalawag or gentleman-criminal's life story.

The newly-resurrected scandal had all exacted a heavy toll on Kissane-Rogers's resolve and resources before finally the courts in New York decided in his favor, citing the Statute of Limitations. Coincident with the end of the case, Darr faded from view. Burton's manuscript of a book he supposedly wrote about his pursuit of Kissane, promised for publication earlier in the summer of 1887, completely disappeared from the face of the earth. Darr and Horace Bell, a famous California lawman had also promised to produce manuscripts covering Kissane's exploits, but nothing came forth from either of them. All of this bad publicity wore on the Kissane-Rogers family as well. The court victory had been a hollow one. They were now exhausted and socially exposed – not the country elite gentry they were thought to be, but a fugitive with a checkered past and his once near child bride depicted as the step-daughter of a mercenary.

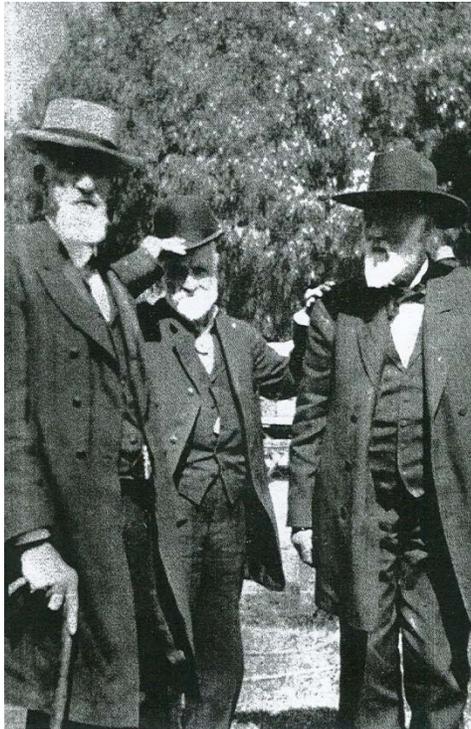
As if this were not enough, Kissane-Rogers's mining interests fell completely apart in the late 1880s. What he had hoped to be a productive gold mine became a worthless pile of gravel. Kissane-Rogers had stubbornly insisted the mine was going to produce, and rather than give up, he mortgaged Temelec Hall to try to make it productive. But it failed. And to top things off, blight struck his vineyards, ruining a year's crop and killing most of the vines. The bank foreclosed on Temelec Hall in 1892, and William, Elizabeth, and their non-adult children moved into a town home in San Francisco owned by Reuben. Rogers' wife furiously complained that she had not cooked a meal as an adult woman, and was not about to start, and Reuben begrudgingly hired a Chinese cook and a housekeeper to keep their status from being an embarrassment.

A couple of magazine articles and pulp fiction romance stories centered around William's story - taking liberties with the truth from time to time, and made their way into print in the years following. From them, and from the very trying circumstances of his early and later life, many assumed that the old man would simply fade away – some implying that he was even near death. Edward Forrester was living as a bankrupt and abandoned old man and when he committed suicide in the mid 1890s, and stories of that made people wonder if this had been the end of Kissane. But he lived on quietly assuming the role of a grandfather to the children of his daughters and writing to the few remaining veterans of Walker's army with whom he kept in contact.

When the Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fires ravaged the city, there were curious pieces in the news about the three old brothers, Henry Kissane, William K. Rogers and Reuben Lloyd digging through the rubble of Henry's foundation to recover cans of gold coins he had buried there. The bank failures of the 1890s led to a lack of trust in them by the eccentric old timer. Reuben's home and the townhouse where Reuben had William and his wife staying were spared by the fires.

One by one his aging siblings passed away after the calamity of the earthquake and fires – Reuben, then Henry and finally his sister, Mary. At the passing of each of them there were stories in the papers of how they had specified in their wills that none of their inheritance was to pass to William. Fire had

always seemed to have a hand in William Kissane’s life, and it very nearly had a hand in his end. In 1913, as an 87-year old man living with his daughter, he fell asleep in an upstairs bedroom when a stove caught fire in the basement. A teenaged Irish housekeeper half-carried his nearly unconscious 6-foot 2-inch frame down two flights of stairs and resuscitated him as the house burned to the ground. Much of the records of a remarkable life were burned when the house and its contents were lost. In the end, he had outlived all his rivals. He outlived Francis Darr by almost 20-years. He outlived all 8 of his siblings, none of whom lived through the things he had. He outlived all but two veterans of Walker’s war in Nicaragua. He died quietly in his daughter’s home in May, 1913.



GENERAL JAMISON, MAJOR BALDWIN, COLONEL ROGERS

Officers of Walker’s Nicaraguan War at a 1911 reunion including William K. Rogers (R)

William Kissane, or William K. Rogers came from a relatively quiet life in rural Ireland in the first part of the Victorian era. And while somewhat parallel to many other Irish immigrant paths years later, his life’s journey took him not from a poverty-stricken existence, but from a life of gentility to one of crime and violence - and a war few people 100 years later would even know happened. His was a dramatic and remarkable life that went from the country estates of Ireland to war-ravaged jungles in Central America, with stops in the wintry frontier of Ontario and one of the most notorious prisons in America. His story contained romantic and tragic peaks and valleys, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions – physical and metaphorical. There had been multiple falls from grace and a mid-life redemption brought on by a

fairly-tale-like model family life – only to have the past rise and strip his veil of wholesomeness. He interacted in various events with some of 19th Century’s giants and was the topic of headlines and rumors across America both as a young adventurous villain and a mature and respected member of society with a mysterious past. It seems that even though his steps traveled in such company through such experiences and over such vast distances, he left almost no permanent mark in history. William Kissane Rogers was a big part of Sonoma’s 19th Century history, and although not Temelec’s originator, his time there contributed greatly to its legacy.