

Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, And The 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee

John Mack Faragher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Faragher, John Mack (2017) "Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, And The 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.2.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss2/10>

Review

Faragher, John Mack

Spring 2017

Taniguchi, Nancy J. *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9780806153988

Public Lands, Coercion, and the Revival of San Francisco Vigilance Committee

This book originated in a fortuitous discovery. In 2006, while researching another project in the papers of nineteenth-century journalist and historian Theodore S. Hittell (archived at the Sutro Library, a branch of the California State Library), historian Nancy J. Taniguchi stumbled across a previously unknown transcript of the minutes of the Executive Committee (known to contemporaries as "the Executives") of the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee (the "VC"). Nineteenth-century historians had cited this source, which was closely guarded by former vigilantes, but the original went missing years ago. It turns out, however, that journalist and historian Theodore S. Hittell made a working copy, which remained entombed among his papers for more than a century until Taniguchi recognized it for what it was. She is the first modern historian to utilize this important source, which provides inside view of the operations of the VC.

Vigilantism was central to the history of Gold Rush San Francisco. In 1851, responding to what many San Franciscans perceived as a wave of arson, robbery, and murder, prominent citizens organized a Committee of Vigilance (the "COV"), which eventually counted several hundred members. The COV detained and interrogated dozens of suspects, many of them Australian migrants, refusing them the protections of legal due process. The committee hanged four men and forced another twenty-eight into exile before disbanding three months later. Although its members were guilty of kidnap and murder, no charge or indictment was ever brought against any of them.

San Francisco continued to be a turbulent place, and over the next few years there were frequent calls for the revival of the committee. By 1856, a year characterized by market panics and bank failures, the perception of social chaos was palpable. The city was "shingled over" with competing land claims, and there were violent conflicts between purported owners and militant squatters. Nativists, including members of the ascendant American Party (the so-called "Know Nothings") challenged Irish and Catholic residents who supported the city's Democratic political machine. James King, flamboyant editor of a local newspaper, railed against political corruption and condemned the failure of police and the courts to effectively respond to what he asserted was a tidal wave of criminality. When an outraged county supervisor named James Casey shot and killed editor King on the street, the powder keg ignited. Casey was immediately arrested and the authorities promised a speedy trial, but a large and angry mob demanded his immediate execution. A group of powerful merchants and bankers reorganized the old committee as the VC, this time with several thousand members. Acting under orders from the Executives, armed vigilantes forced their way into the jail and seized Casey along with another accused murderer. Following a secret trail the two men were hanged before a crowd of several thousand.

The VC controlled San Francisco for eleven weeks during the summer of 1856. The committee was considerably more ambitious than its predecessor, systematically employing blacklisting, kidnapping, secret trials, close confinement, banishment, and execution to achieve their goal of remaking the city's political culture. Two more men were hanged and twenty-three others—most of them political associates of David Broderick, leader of the city's Democrats—were forcibly transported out of the state and warned not to return under pain of death. A large but unknown number voluntarily fled the city to avoid arrest. The California governor condemned the movement as an "insurrection," but faction and division prevented any effective response. Acting under orders from the Executives, vigilantes seized an official shipment of arms intended for the city's "Law and Order" militia. The VC became the nucleus of a new political organization, the "Peoples' Party," which triumphed in the subsequent municipal election and continued to run the city for another decade.

During its reign the VC received mostly positive coverage from the press. The first historians of the movement—Hubert Howe Bancroft and Theodore S. Hittell—told the story largely as the vigilantes wanted it told: that politicians in league with criminals had so misgoverned San Francisco that nothing but

vigilantism could cure the city of its ills. But modern historians—Richard Maxwell Brown, Peter Decker, Robert Senkewicz, and Philip J. Ethington among them—have systematically dismantled that interpretation. They find that crime was not the problem the vigilantes claimed it to be, that the courts were operating effectively, that municipal politics were not especially corrupt, and that charges of electoral fraud and political violence were greatly exaggerated. Senkewicz, in what remains the best history of the San Francisco vigilantes, effectively argues that the appeal of the movement can be best explained by the boom and bust economy of the city that smashed the hopes of thousands. The VC gave them a cause to fight for, something to feel proud about, something to fill their idle days.

Taniguchi largely agrees with this interpretation. Using the minutes of the Executives, she provides a great deal of detail—sometimes tedious detail—about the operations of the VC, its arbitrary and capricious rules, its favoritism, and its cruelties. The Executives were constantly running short of money, with mounting costs and relatively little cash on hand. They frequently had to go to wealthy supporters for contributions, even turning to what Taniguchi calls "the always vulnerable Chinese" (pp. 125, 185)—perhaps the Six Companies, she doesn't specify.

But as the title of her book indicates, Taniguchi also has a new thesis. The minutes, she asserts, reveals that the Executives were not simply attempting to reform the city but were acting in their own "economic self-interest" (p. xv). Their fortunes depended on control of the San Francisco waterfront with its warves and warehouses, and they felt directly threatened by the ongoing struggle between contesting claimants for those properties. The struggle the VC waged against the Democrats, she argues, was largely motivated by the land claims of David Broderick and his political operatives. "Destroy Broderick's political power and get the waterfront land" (p. xvi). This was the secret goal of the Executives, she argues, a fact they "carefully hid . . . from their own Committee members, who would not have profited as their leaders did" (p. 11).

Taniguchi's best evidence is the effort the Executives made to acquire the "Pueblo Papers, " a cache of documents from the Mexican period that supposedly established the corporate rights of the city to issue grants of property. Title to the Executives' waterfront properties traced back to city grants, so this right, taken at face value, invalidated all other claims. In fact, San Francisco (or rather Yerba Buena, its successor) had never been an official "pueblo, " and had

no such corporate right. Nevertheless, the Executives went after the papers with a vengeance, arresting the man who had acquired them and holding him incommunicado until he finally agreed to a sale for several thousand dollars. Taniguchi argues that the Executives deliberately extended the life of the VC—with two more men hanged as a result—in order to obtain these papers. The payment—done without consulting the membership—drained the organization's coffers and sapped its energy. No previous historian has tied the VC to the contentious issue of land claims, and Taniguchi's contribution here is important.

This evidence, however, will not support Taniguchi's contention that the struggle over "dirty deeds" was the founding motivation of the Vigilance Committee. The property question comes up in the Executive minutes, but no more than other issues. The collection of miscellaneous VC materials at the Huntington Library, which I have examined, document all the effort that went into compiling blacklists and investigating those who were listed, as well as the attention given to voter fraud and ballot stuffing. Yet there is almost nothing in that collection that concerns the question of land. "The full story is revealed," Taniguchi asserts. "Perhaps now the complete story of America's largest vigilance committee and its objectives will be remembered for what it was" (p. xviii). Despite the considerable contributions of the book, that is a step too far.

John Mack Faragher

Yale University