

Who was Anson Burlingame?

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In 1870, Mark Twain wrote a eulogy on behalf of his friend and mentor, Anson Burlingame: "It is not easy to comprehend at an instant's warning the exceeding magnitude of the loss to which mankind sustains in this death . . . he was a very, very great man."

Twain went on to list Burlingame's successes in his tribute, and however effusive, they are by all accounts accurate. Burlingame's legacy has been largely forgotten now, eclipsed primarily by the overwhelming circumstances and people of his time, namely, the Civil War and Lincoln. But during his own era, he was greatly respected and admired.

"He was a large, handsome man," Twain recalled, "with such a face as children instinctively trust in, and homeless and friendless creatures appeal to without fear. He was courteous at all times and to all people, and he had the rare and winning faculty of being always interested in whatever a man had to say - a faculty which he possessed simply because nothing was trivial to him for which any man or woman or child had a heart."



Anson Burlingame

Graduating with honors from Harvard in 1846, he became a Boston lawyer, a state senator, and from 1855 to 1861, a Massachusetts representative to the House of Representatives.

In that position, Burlingame accomplished a great many things, but most prominently, he was an outspoken abolitionist at a time when it was neither very credible nor safe to hold such a creed.

In 1861, Lincoln chose Burlingame to be envoy to Austria, but Burlingame's egalitarian leanings got in the way of the closed European mindset, and Austria refused to receive him. The President, recognizing Burlingame's abilities, reassigned him to China, ". . . to represent the youngest in the court of the oldest of nations."

As ambassador, Burlingame was determined to counter the show of arrogance, dismissiveness, and lack of respect that all the European consuls displayed toward their Chinese host.

There was an incident once in which an American killed three Chinese citizens. Usually in such circumstances, the perpetrator would have been given embassy immunity and received little or no punishment. Burlingame refused to play favorites. In a wholly unprecedented move, he made sure that there would not only be a trial, but one in which Chinese citizens would have the right to testify. The criminal was found guilty, sentenced and hanged.

The Burlingame treaty, as it was so named, was unmatched in fairness and equanimity, even down to our time. The Chinese had such a high regard for him that they granted this new envoy full authority to work on China's behalf with all the other European nations. In this, as with all his endeavors, he was highly successful.

"It was this trait of generosity that moved him in framing treaties, to frame them in the broad sense of the world, instead of selfishly seeking to acquire advantages for his own country alone and at the expense of the other party to the treaty, as had always before been the recognized 'diplomacy.' " This sense of fairness is what set Burlingame, again in Twain's words: ". . . head and shoulders above all the Americans of today . . ."

Burlingame died in 1870, at the age of 50, in St. Petersburg while closing a deal with Tsar Alexander II for a similar "Burlingame treaty" between Russia and China. For that effort, China posthumously awarded Burlingame its highest honor, along with a substantial pension for his family.

What does Anson Burlingame have to do with Burlingame, CA?

Anson Burlingame has an important legacy, but what does he have to do with Burlingame, California? Why is he the city's namesake? After all, he was a Massachusetts lawyer and a Massachusetts Congressman. As far as we know, Burlingame only passed through this area twice on his way to and from China in the mid-1860s. *So how did a city develop that bears his name?*

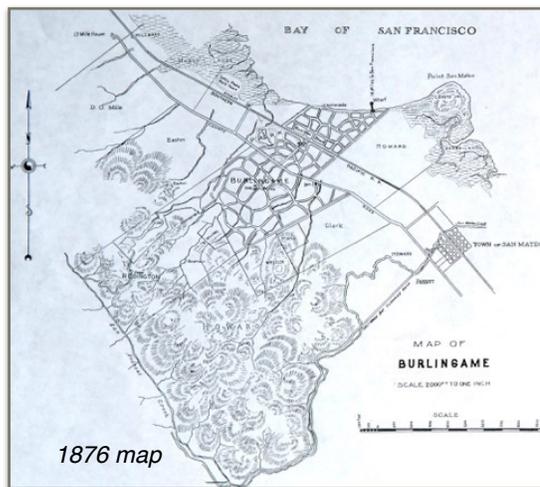
Part of the answer is found in the person of **William Chapman Ralston**.



William C. Ralston

Ralston was an early California pioneer and businessman. He was the consummate California booster and as such seemed to at times function as a one-man Chamber of Commerce. (For example, when Ralston married in 1858, he took along the entire wedding party on his honeymoon to Yosemite. Travel to Yosemite at that time required horses and mules and was anything but "luxe." It may come as no surprise that with such a beginning, the marriage was not a happy one.) When Burlingame's ship stopped in San Francisco in 1866, Ralston invited the diplomat to his home in Belmont and wined and dined him. Apparently, due to Ralston's salesmanship, Burlingame purchased 1,000

acres from Dr. Joseph Henry Poett, father of Agnes Poett. Agnes, together with her first husband William Davis Merry Howard, had purchased Rancho San Mateo (of which Burlingame's 1,000 acres was a part) in 1850. Burlingame



1876 map

apparently thought the property was a good investment and planned to develop it; however, his life and plans were cut short by a premature death in 1870. Maps filed with the county in the mid-1870s, however, confirm these plans as they bear the markings "Town of Burlingame."

Little development occurred on the mid-Peninsula from the mid-1870s through the early 1890s, due to, among other reasons, a poor economic climate. However, in the early 1890s, a lawyer named Francis Newlands had the responsibility of managing the William Sharon estate. The estate at that time was the owner of Burlingame's 1,000 acres. The estate also owned the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, and was using the Burlingame property as a dairy farm to supply the hotel with cheese and milk. Newlands thought the time was ripe for developing the property. He engaged society architect A. Page Brown to build five country cottages with a communal horse stable in the middle. Well-known landscape architect John McLaren was hired to landscape the property. However, just as the homes were put up for sale another recession loomed. So Newlands discussed his development ideas with other prominent San Franciscans who owned mid-Peninsula property, including William Howard, the son of Agnes and William Davis Merry Howard. According to legend, several men sat under the oak trees near one of the cottages, "drinks were liberally served," and they decided to form a country club. The men decided to call their club the "Burlingame Country Club." No one knows why. Perhaps, they saw Anson's name on the map, perhaps they recalled their fathers speaking favorably of Anson, perhaps they thought the name had a nice ring to it. The club was formed in 1893. In its early years, the main "games" played at the Burlingame Country Club were polo playing and fox hunts.

For the next fifteen years, the area would be known as Burlingame — the "playground of the rich" — after the country club. In 1908, following a five-fold increase in population after the Great Earthquake of 1906, the residents of the area would vote to incorporate, formalizing the name of the area, as the "Town of Burlingame."