
Guide to the John T. Doyle Papers, 1855-1905

Collection number: MS 760

California Historical Society

North Baker Research Library
San Francisco, California

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Biography

John T. Doyle was born in New York City on November 26, 1819, the son of John Doyle and Frances Glinden Doyle. In 1838, he graduated as valedictorian from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Obtaining an A.M. in 1840, he began practicing law in New York two years later and continued until 1851. Then, on a vacation in Nicaragua, he met "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt, the shipping and railroad magnate, who was trying to fulfill his dream of a canal linking the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. Inspired by the tycoon's vision, Doyle rushed back to New York, resigned his position, and returned to Nicaragua as general agent for Vanderbilt's American Atlantic and Pacific Ship Canal Company. He spent a year making plans, none of which came to fruition because the "Commodore" could not raise the money needed for construction costs. Doyle finally gave up and headed for San Francisco. In 1853, he was admitted to the San Francisco bar, where he remained until 1888 as an active attorney. It was not until 1889 that he received his L.L.D.

Doyle sought no public office, though he was appointed to two during his career. In 1868, he became one of the first members of the board of regents of the University of California. A few years later, Governor Irwin made him a member of the Board of Commissioners of Transportation. This was more to his liking, for he felt keenly the general resentment of the discriminatory and onerous rates that the railroads charged. He became a crusader for thorough reform in railroad legislation. The Commissioners agreed with his recommendations, but the corporations were less tractable. As he later recalled, "The railroads scented the danger afar, and rallied their lobby to the defense of their prerogative of plunder." The House amended a reform bill so that it legislated the Commissioners out of their jobs. A single Commissioner replaced them, but he too was superseded when the Constitution of 1879 created a Board of Railroad Commissioners. This change did not please Doyle; he claimed that the state was so apportioned that two of the three members of the board would remain under company control.

It was, however, as a legal advocate that Doyle was famed. He went through a succession of partnerships: Janes, Doyle, Barber & Boyd; Doyle & Barber; Doyle, Barber & Scripture; Doyle, Galpin, Barber & Scripture; Doyle, Galpin & Scripture; Doyle, Galpin & Ziegler; and after his retirement around 1890 (sources disagree as to the exact date) set up a practice on his own. It was then that he won his greatest victory. In 1876, he had recovered from the Mexican government a judgment of \$904,000 for interest and capital held by Mexico for the Catholic Church in California. The case dragged on until 1902, when Doyle pleaded it before the International Tribunal in the Hague -- the first case argued before it. The Court awarded the Church \$1,426,000 which included accruing interest. It decreed that henceforth Mexico must pay the church \$43,000 a year forever.

In May, 1863, Doyle married Miss Antonia Pons, the daughter of a silk manufacturer in Lyons, France. They had eight children: five sons and three daughters. Doyle himself was able to read Latin, French, Spanish and Italian -- an advantage in his profession -- and in his spare time wrote a treatise explaining how consistent was the trial in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice with legal customs of the time. He was a founder of the Ethno-Historical Society in 1866, a precursor of California Historical Society and he served two terms as first president of the latter, in 1887 and 1888.

At home "among his books and vines and fruit trees" in Menlo Park, a contemporary account commented, he spent a happy old age. "Though impatient and irascible," it added, "he is good-natured at heart, and has materially aided many young members of the profession, who have been indebted to him for encouragement, opportunity and guidance."

Doyle died at age 86 in 1906.

Scope and Content

The John T. Doyle papers touch on law cases in which Doyle or his partner -- or partners they successively adopted -- concerned themselves. Most of the documents touch on civil disputes in the San Francisco Bay Area, though some are connected to other places in California, notably Placerville, and other documents discuss mining claims and companies in Nevada.

Scholars curious about legal practice in the late nineteenth century would find the material especially interesting. Here may be found documents and official forms of every kind: papers on the process of probate, guardianship, damage suits, legal arguments. Researchers fascinated with official forms used in the courts would find a study of the collection rewarding. Those interested in politics, social and cultural history, economics, or stirring events, would not. Those curious about Doyle's adventures in Nicaragua, his personal life, or his lawsuits in support of the Catholic church of California would also be disappointed, for none of these are covered in the documents--though a few papers relate to William Walker, the filibuster who tried to establish a personal empire in Nicaragua. None of the papers, however, discuss his ambitions or intentions.

The personal correspondence includes discussions of domestic finance and the difficulties in arguing certain law cases. There are occasional remarks on family matters and comments on farming conditions. J.L. Moffett, for example, notes of the Wabash River counties in Indiana, "Those who live on the 'bottoms' along that stream look like ripe pumpkins after a time...." Others discuss premonitory dreams, crop failures, and the Presidential election of 1884 in Illinois. "The Germans are out for Cleveland," W.G. Griffith comments, "and the Irish he loses can be put in the eye of that needle which the Camel could nearly pass through."

Most papers touch on legal cases, which is how the collection is assembled. One may find estates and probate cases, suits for freight costs, actions to prevent the extension of Montgomery Street, account books, death certificates, explanations of express rates, spare leaves from old ledgers, subpoenas, judgments, legal arguments, promissory notes, discussions of mine speculations, writs of attachment, and legal forms. One such case is the Friedlander estate case. It has terms of indenture, insurance premiums, IOU's, balance sheets, contracts, letters to the Bank of California negotiating a loan, sales receipts, probate court orders, official charges, letters of guardianship, an inventory of cattle sold, with prices attached, announcements of land sales, and summonses.

Other indexes included with this study will afford an explanation of both the chronology and characteristics of each case.

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