



James Lick Cigar advertisement, circa 1890

California's First Philanthropist The Legacy of James Lick

February 1 – August 31, 2017
Pioneer Hall at The Presidio

Key propositions: California's first multimillionaire, Lick's philanthropy was informed by both empathy and foresight; many continue to benefit from his generosity and largesse.

The exhibition is done in partnership with other organizations that benefited from/continue to benefit from his largesse: The Lick Observatory, San Francisco's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, The Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park, The California Academy of Sciences, and others.

This exhibition will be open and free to the public.

Defining James Lick's Legacy

After an adventurous and prosperous early life, James Lick arrived in California just before the Gold Rush. Fortuitous timing and shrewd real estate investments made him the state's first multimillionaire. In addition to purchasing significant tracts of land in and around San Francisco, he opened the opulent Lick House. Its grand dining hall, modeled after The Palace of Versailles, catered to San Francisco's status-conscious nouveau riche. Ironically, Lick held a strong personal disdain for high society. He preferred a simple, solitary life that his contemporaries considered eccentric and antisocial. He rarely attended public functions, never married, and his relationship with a son from an early, failed love affair in his youth was distant and inconsistent.

Near the end of his life, James Lick used his considerable wealth to establish charitable "protection and relief" organizations to address the basic needs of the many who are less fortunate in a boom and bust economy. After his death, a trust carried out the directives Lick had outlined in his will; his entire fortune was to benefit the people of California in one way or another. In addition to endowing existing service organizations (including homes for the elderly, schools for orphans, and The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), Lick allocated significant sums to ambitious projects benefitting future generations. He stipulated that \$700,000 be used to build "a telescope superior to and more powerful than any telescope yet made" on Mount Hamilton; Lick Observatory remains one of the great scientific institutions of the world. Other beneficiaries included The California Academy of Sciences, The Mechanics Library, landmarks in Golden Gate Park, as well as The California School for Mechanical Arts, the first to enroll young women interested in studying design and manufacturing. This

exhibition considers the largesse and legacy of James Lick, California's first millionaire philanthropist.

Defining Philanthropy

Philanthropy as we know it today ~ concern for humanity manifested in good deeds and generosity ~ began during the Age of Enlightenment in Europe when empathy for the disadvantaged became a tenet of the major religions and their secular alternative, humanism. With the rise of a wealthy upper class, the definition of *philanthropy* expanded to include the funding of social service organizations and projects.

In early America, the title *philanthropist* was reserved for those who made and gave away huge fortunes, such as the extremely wealthy and generous James Lick and Andrew Carnegie. Their benevolence was informed by their belief in what Carnegie called "the responsibilities of great wealth" coupled with a sense of responsibility to future generations. Then as now, *philanthropy* implies a direct connection to the vision of a single benefactor; this distinguishes it from *charity*, which addresses the immediate, basic needs of the less fortunate by collecting from the larger community.

James Lick was California's first self-made multimillionaire. Near the end of his life, he established nonsectarian "protection and relief" organizations to address the needs of elderly women and orphans. After his death, a trust carried out the directives outlined in his will; his entire fortune went to benefit the people of California in one way or another. By definition, his generosity was *philanthropic*, but Lick himself presents an interesting conundrum. *Philanthropy* combines the ancient Greek word *philos* (loving) with *anthropos* (human being). James Lick is described in contemporaneous accounts ~ and, in turn, by historians ~ as curmudgeonly, anti-social, eccentric, difficult and even miserly. Lick was a private, frugal man with a deeply rooted disdain for high society. Perhaps some assumed he disliked mankind because he disliked them.

Charity addresses a clearly defined need; its effectiveness can be measured and strategies adjusted to ensure a successful outcome. *Philanthropy*, on the other hand, invests in projects designed to improve the quality of life for generations to come; its impact is difficult to fully understand and often impossible to judge. Lick's Observatory was ~ and continues to be ~ a success by any measure. Carnegie's choice to invest in public libraries and universities is as impressive today as it ever was. In contrast, some of the projects bankrolled by The Lick Trust have not fared well; his neoclassic public monuments, as well as the narrative they enshrine, have fallen out of favor. *Philanthropy* is speculation fueled by a desire to move humanity forward.

James Lick and The Society of California Pioneers

Despite his reputation for reclusiveness and thrift, James Lick joined *The Society of California Pioneers* when it was primarily a social club and was our most generous benefactor. Lick gave *The Society* their first headquarters, a charming building that the organization quickly outgrew. Lick then built the grand, four-story *Pioneer Hall* on the prime tract of centrally located real estate he donated to *The Society*. The beautifully appointed Victorian building included a library, a ballroom, a lecture hall, rooms where members played cards and billiards, business offices, as well as several members-only clubrooms where libations were served. Sadly, this landmark and nearly all of its contents were lost in the earthquake and fire of 1906.

Both during his lifetime and after, *The Society* honored Lick's generosity in a variety of ways: *The Lick Lectures* featured prominent writers and world travelers; social events in Pioneer Hall opened with a toast to James Lick followed by a rousing rendition of *The Lick March*; and his contemporaries commissioned the gold, silver and diamond *Lick Pin*, worn by every president of *The Society* since 1873 (seen below). Lick's contribution to *The Society's* past and future has never been surpassed nor forgotten. This exhibition pays tribute to his legacy.



The Lick Pin by Tucker and Co., 1871