

PETER H. BURNETT

Peter Hardeman Burnett, who was the first Governor of California from 1849 to 1851, was born of Virginia parentage in Nashville, Tennessee, on November 15, 1807. He was the oldest of George and Dorothy (Hardeman) Burnett.

With his father, California's first Governor moved to Howard County, Mo., when at the age of ten. He returned to Tennessee nine years later and found employment as hotel clerk for \$100 a year, and later his salary was doubled as clerk in a store. Burnett married Harriet W. Rogers on August 20, 1828. He entered storekeeping independently but was unsuccessful in this enterprise. After three years Burnett set out again for the West and settled in Liberty, Mo., which at that time was a frontier town. Here debts again haunted him and finally he turned to the legal profession. Burnett had managed to secure an ordinary education and with this began his study of law in earnest. His first legal cases consisted of the prosecution of a number of Mormons for debts. In 1840 Burnett was appointed to the office of prosecuting Attorney in the District of Liberty. Overwhelming indebtedness and his wife's illness caused Burnett to go to Oregon. He and his family were members of the historic covered wagon train consisting of 875 men, women and children that set out on May 22, 1843 from the Region of Independence, Mo., and travelled over the famous Oregon Trail. For a time Burnett served as Captain of the expedition. They reached Whitman's Mission on October 14, 1843. Burnett continued the journey to Fort Vancouver and settled on a farm near the mouth of the Willamette. Later he removed with his family to another farm near where Hillsboro, Oregon now stands. Burnett was one of the leaders of the new settlement. The pioneer settlers chose Burnett as a member of the Oregon Legislative Committee in 1844. The following year he was appointed Judge of the Oregon Supreme Court. When the Oregon territorial Government was formed in 1848 Judge Burnett was elected to the legislature. Later in this same year he was appointed one of the Justices of the Oregon Territorial Supreme Court by President Polk. Due to the slow means of communication those days Justice Burnett did not learn of his appointment for many months. In the next month, September, Supreme Court Justice Burnett led 150 men to the California gold fields reaching Yuba in early November 1848. A few weeks later he became General Agent and Attorney for John A. Sutter, Jr. In the following year on August 13, General Bennet Riley appointed Burnett Judge of the California Superior Tribunal. The same year he became one of the leading champions for California Statehood. The California State Constitution was ratified in the election of November 13, 1849. Also on that day Burnett was elected the first Governor of California receiving as many votes alone as all four of his opponents. Governor Burnett was at one time the editor of "The Far West" at Liberty, Missouri and California's first Governor was the author of several books, among them: "The Path Which Led A Protestant Lawyer to the Catholic Church" and "Recollections of an Old Pioneer".

He was engaged in the banking business in San Francisco at the time of his death May 17, 1895.