Although Anthony Chabot was never a resident of San Leandro, the impact of this man upon San Leandro has been great. It is, therefore, a surprise to learn that so little is really known of him. This article tells part of the story.

In the January 10, 1888 issue of the Oakland Tribune, somewhere between an ad for Perry’s Pain Killer, a positive cure for Cholera Morbis, and another ad for royal Baking Powder, there appeared an editorial on the death of Anthony Chabot four days earlier.

“When it came time for this simple old fellow to die there was a general expression of regret for he was a wealthy man, generous and able to understand the poor . . . Mothers will teach the prattlers at their knees to follow in his footsteps.”

But time has dealt him the blow which it deals to most of us, although there is a Chabot Lake, a Chabot school, a Chabot Ranch school, a Chabot Junior College, a Chabot Observatory, a Chabot Branch of Sons in Retirement, a Chabot Beauty Shop and even a Chabot Liquor store still in our midst, Chabot has become a name, a method of designation only. My search revealed very little material on his life, and showed that practically no one knows the man, Chabot. An inquiry at the Junior College named Chabot brought this response: “The college is named Chabot because the students chose that name. It was simply the name of a lake and an observatory to them. It was short, and the sound was pleasing.” So in that sense the college is not name after the man at all.

Mothers no longer teach the prattlers at their knees about Anthony Chabot for two obvious reasons. Mothers no longer know his virtues, and prattlers no longer gather at their mothers’ knees. The editor called him a simple old fellow. I have found him to have been quite otherwise. In fact, he was complex man, and he wasn’t old either, viewed from my vantage point of years. He was only simple in the sense of being of humble origin, a man without guile, a friendly man, a man ready with a helping hand.

Chabot, it is told, was once approached by a man who asked for help. “What can you do?” asked Chabot. “I know all about cranberries,” said he. So Chabot suggested that if the man could produce a suitable site he would help him. Thus was born the cranberry industry in the state of Washington, at a point between Long Beach and Oysterville, north of Ilwaco.

He was a wealthy man, and in spite of his many benefactions, died leaving an estate of over $1,300,000.

In his compassion for abandoned infants he built and maintained a Shelter Home for children. Concerned for the widowed or abandoned woman, he established and endowed a home in Oakland where they might have temporary housing until they had learned some skill which might enable them to make their own way. When he heard of a shortage of living quarters for veterans at Yountville, he built a building known as Chabot Cottage, housing 40 veterans.
Deeply interested in education, he gave to the Oakland Board of Education in 1883, an observatory with an 8-inch refracting telescope which cost him over $15,000. It was originally located in Lafayette Square and later moved to its present location near Mills College. In 1888, he gave an additional $10,000 to this observatory which he hoped might be called the Oakland Observatory but which continues to this day to honor the name Chabot. This bequest made possible the purchase and installation of a 20-inch refracting telescope, one of the largest of that type in America and still in use by the public and researchers alike. In 1960 there were only 17 visual refractors in the world and only 8 in the United States, which were larger than the Chabot 20 inch, and still used in research.

To his family he was equally generous. To a sister who still lived in Canada, he offered the Vallejo Water Works; but she, with apparently little faith in such a far-off land, refused. In its place he gave her an equivalent in cash.

But here we are far ahead of the story. Let us return to August 27, 1813 when Anthony (baptized Antoine) Chabot was born on a farm near St. Hyacinthe, some 30 miles north of Montreal, Canada. He was a direct descendent of Admiral Phillippe de Chabot, an original colonizer of Canada. Anthony was one of 16 children and was raised in a home where life was rigorous. The poor farm in the short growing season had to supply the family with both food and clothing. Food for the winter was stored in the deep underground root cellars where frost could not reach it. The wool of the few sheep was carded and spun, the fabric woven and then sewn into pants and coats. All the children had to do their share, and thus Anthony early learned the lesson of doing his share of the work and sharing with his brothers and sisters, as later he worked and shared with his fellow man.

But there were other ambitions burning in young Anthony which a rocky farm could not satisfy. And so, at the age of 14, after only four years of schooling, young Anthony left home for southern Canada where he worked for a time with an engineer. This was obviously the real turning point in his life. Roman history became something of a hobby for him. It was here, no doubt, as he read of Roman aqueducts that he first learned of the mining of gold by the use of water in Croesus’ land, in Lydia, in Asia Minor, in Eastern Europe, and even in the more western countries of Spain and Ireland.

Little is known of Chabot’s life between the years of 1827 and 1849. We have reason to believe, however, that he was fairly successful although it is thought that he wandered through the East and South trying a variety of pursuits. However, 1849 was the year Sam Brannon appeared on the streets of San Francisco with a vial of glittering gold shouting, “Gold, gold from the American River,” and Horace Greely, in his most oracular manner, pontificated “We are on the bring of an Age of Gold.”
We do not know how Anthony made his way to California. We do know that late in 1849 Anthony Chabot had reached Nevada City. It was considered that most of the good gold country had been staked by that time. Nevertheless, Anthony set out for the Yuba River and filed a claim on a small tributary creek which he called the Buckeye claim. He set to work with shovel and cradle and pan, but finding the work arduous, he soon devised a new method. If the Romans could do it, he could do it better. Water from the creek was diverted through a flume, and a length of sewn canvas hose which could easily be moved was used to wash the gravel into the sluice box. Soon young Chabot was taking $100 a day out of his claim. It was a simple matter from this to fitting the hose, as later miners did, with a wooden nozzle, and directing it against a gravel bank, and Anthony’s “take” rose to $1,000 a day. Thus Chabot received the dubious title – “The father of hydraulic mining.”

Now the mines needed water, and Chabot was ready to supply it. He built many miles of ditches and flumes to carry water to his and many other mines of the Mother Lode.

The quartz mines needed lumber. Chabot was ready to supply it. Two sawmills were built in Sierra County in 1854, and the flumes were used to float the cut lumber down.

Chabot prospered. He purchased interests in the larger mines, such as the Rockland and Mokelumne Hill mines, which were developing, and soon he looked for new challenges.

Water, however, was still a major interest of Anthony Chabot. When he came to San Francisco in 1856 he, A.W. Van Schmidt and John Bensley organized the first water company in San Francisco. By a system of flumes, pumping plants and reservoirs at different elevations, Chabot and company diverted the water of Lobos Creek, and by 1858 were supplying 644 people in the city with water. The flow of this system was a success but was soon inadequate. Chabot got out of the company, and in 1865 it was absorbed by the Spring Valley Water Company.

Sometime in 1862 or 1863 Chabot returned to New England, where he completed the Portland, Maine water system. On March 10, 1864 he married Ellen Hasty of Standish, Maine. It was a brief marriage, for Ellen died in childbirth October 18, 1865, leaving Anthony with a new Ellen, his only child.

Later in 1865 or early or early in 1866 Chabot came to Oakland, and water again engaged his attention. With his brother Remi Chabot and Henry Pierce, he began work on Oakland’s first water system. The waters of Temescal Creek were diverted and passed through a seven-mile pipe system to Oakland. This soon proved inadequate, and in 1868 Temescal Creek was dammed, which formed Lake Temescal and provided storage for year round reliability.
In 1869 Chabot developed the water system for San Jose by utilizing the waters of the Los Gatos Creek near Alma. The next year he built the Vallejo Water Works.

By 1875 the water storage at Lake Temescal was inadequate and so Chabot built the first dirt-filled dam on San Leandro Creek. This was a revolutionary undertaking. Although it was later increased in height, it used, for the first time, an engineering principle which to this day is used in the construction of all earth-filled dams, including the enormous Feather River Dam at Oroville. This is the principle of the well-tamped clay core, covered with rock surface. Chabot had no modern sheeps-foot roller to compact his clay. He therefore hired a herd of horses which were driven back and forth across the clay as it was put in place. Thus was born the Contra Costa Water Works which Chabot owned until his death, and which later became the East Bay Water Company and now is the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

All of these projects demanded an engineering skill for which Chabot had no formal training. What skill he had, he had achieved by hard work and reading in the encyclopedia.

Chabot also turned his talents to gas, where he became the first president of the new Oakland Gas Works in 1865. Incorporated for $150,000, the company built a coal gas plant on Washington Street between First and Second. This first gas franchise, granted in that year by the City of Oakland, is still the primary franchise under which PG&E operates in Oakland, and was not even amended until 1951.

Fifty street lamps on Broadway between 2nd and 20th Streets, on Eighth Street between Market Street and Broadway, and on 12th Street between Adeline and Oak Streets, were the outlet for its production. The city paid 30 cents per lamp per night. By 1890 Oakland had 960 gas street lamps, and the last one was not removed until around 1940. This is not, however, what distinguished this company. Rather it was several “firsts” for the industry. It was an innovating company, and here the mind and hand of Chabot was involved. The Oakland Gas Company was the first gas company to introduce the gas cooking stove on the Pacific Coast. It was the first company to resort to the use of high pressure in the transmission of gas.

By 1877, the plan was made to bring gas to Alameda. The ordinary gas main pressures would not move sufficient gas and so pumps were installed. The pressure used is not recorded but whatever it was, it was the pioneer step which has been expanded until now thousands of miles of high pressure gas lines cover the United States. Another “first” for this company was the installation of electric generating equipment in 1885; thus it became the first gas-electric integrated public utility in the United States.
Chabot was a major initial investor in almost every major industry in the Bay Area, and to an extent in Northern California. His interests included the Pioneer Pulp Mills in Placer County, a paper company in Stockton, the California Cotton Mills in Oakland, the Puget Sound Iron Company in Port Townsend, Washington, and the Judson Manufacturing Company. He also operated a grain farm of some 1800 acres near Livermore.

The first minutes of the Board of Directors of Judson Manufacturing Company, dated July 11, 1882, show that Anthony Chabot was elected vice president. In the same minutes an appropriation of $125,000 was made to buy the Judson Horse Nail Company of Marin County, located there to use the prison labor available. For the last six years of his life, Chabot served on this board, most of the time as vice president. On occasion he served as secretary pro-tem, and his minutes, written in his fine Spencerian hand, makes on wonder how four youthful school years could have produced so fine a hand.

His naturalization paper, appearing in the same Judson file, is dated San Francisco 1856. His home is described as on the Northeast corner of 2nd Avenue and E. 15th Street, Oakland, where today an old remodeled apartment or rooming house stands. It bears no evidence of once having been Chabot’s residence. These papers, together with his will, are in the possession of Theodore Maas, vice president of the present Judson Pacific Murphy Company. He served as the administrator of the estate of Anthony Chabot’s only child, Mrs. Ellen Bothine, who dies (a widow) in 1965. This will indicates, again, the widespread interests of Chabot and corroborates the generosity of his life. Various amounts were given to such charities as the Ladies Relief Society and Oakland Board of Education.

His will concluded by requesting a Masonic burial (he was a member of Live oak Lodge, F. & A.M.) in Mountain View Cemetery in a plot he had provided. His funeral was one of the largest ever held in Oakland. Today there stands a simple marble column in which is chiseled the simple designation, “A. CHABOT.”
The minutes of Judson Manufacturing Company, dated January 14, 1888 includes a resolution which ends:

“a wise counselor and steadfast supporter and a friend whose unfailing Courtesy has endeared him to us all - - a citizen of large views and universal benevolence.”

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**NOTES FROM THE PAST**

On October 2, 1882, the tax rate was set at .10 per $100.00 valuation for 1882-83.

On April 2, 1888, Town Assessor’s salary raised to $100.00 per annum. An ordinance was passed at this meeting legalizing “stone and artificial stone sidewalks.”

On September 11, 1888, a resolution of intention was adopted at this meeting, “to have all fences, buildings, trees or other obstacles removed from the public streets of said town. . .”

On October 15, 1888, in the minutes of practically every meeting during this period there appears at least one bill from various citizens for 50 cents for burying a dog.

On December 10, 1888, Ordinance numbers 174 and 175 were adopted at this meeting to provide the city with gas street lamps. The gas and pipe [was] to be furnished by Mr. Wm. J. Landers.