

# John Nichols' Adventures in History

## St. Francis Dam Disaster through Samuel J. Alexander's eyes

By John Nichols

Special to the Santa Paula Times  
I recently received an email from Bob Orlando. We share an interest in history. He told me that many years ago his wife, Becci, was shown an original handwritten letter addressing some experiences the author had during the St. Francis Dam Disaster in 1928.



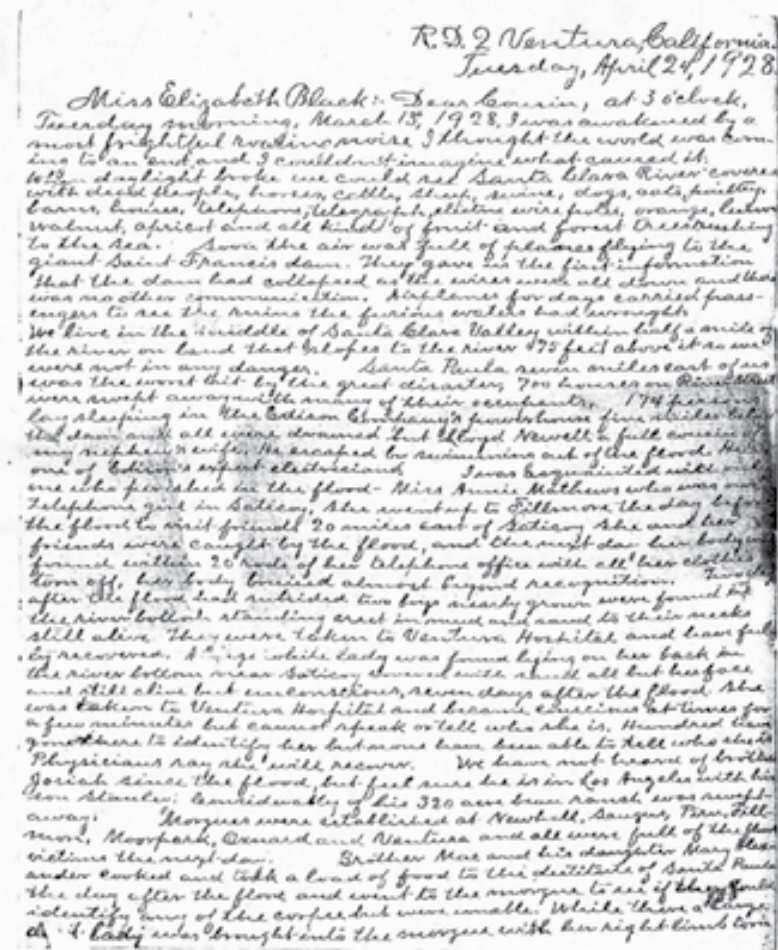
John Nichols

Becci asked the owner if she could make a copy and she did.

She rediscovered it a few weeks ago while going through old files and I received a copy.

I printed out the eight pages and started reading the letter as if it were a letter written to me in flow ink. The writer of the letter had very beautiful handwriting.

I pinned the letter up above my computer and started typing the script I was reading. On the very last page, the letter was signed Samuel J. Alexander. His home was in Saticoy.



Samuel J. Alexander's letter to his cousin, Elizabeth Black, on April 24, 1928.



Photo by John Nichols

A tombstone, marking the deaths of four members of the Savala family killed in the St. Francis Dam Disaster in March 1928. The tombstone is one of many marking the deaths of hundreds of people due to the dam break. John and Leslie Nicols of Santa Paula happened upon this tombstone on a recent Sunday afternoon drive to the Piru Cemetery.

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Here's what the first section of the letter said:

### The letter

Miss Elizabeth Black: Dear Cousin, at 3 o'clock, Tuesday morning, March 13, 1928, I was awakened by a most frightful roaring noise. I thought the world was coming to an end and I couldn't imagine what caused it. When daylight broke, we

could see Santa Clara River covered with dead people, horses, cattle, sheep, swine, dogs, cats, poultry, barns, houses, telephone, telegraph, electric wire poles, orange, lemon, walnut, apricot and all kinds of fruit and forest trees rushing to the sea.

Soon the air was full of planes to the giant Saint Francis dam. They gave us the first information that the dam had collapsed as the wires were all down and there was no other communication.

Airplanes for days carried passengers to see the ruins the furious waters had wrought. We live in the middle of Santa Clara Valley within half a mile of the river on land that slopes to the river 75 feet above it, so we were not in any danger.

Santa Paula, seven miles east of us, was the worst hit by the great disaster. 700 houses on River Street were swept away with their occupants.

174 persons lay sleeping in the Edison Company's worker house five miles below the dam and all were drowned but Lloyd Newell, a full cousin of my nephew's wife. He escaped by swimming out of the flood. He is one of Edison's expert electricians.

I was acquainted with only one who perished in the flood — Miss Annie Mathews who was our telephone girl in Saticoy. She went up to Fillmore the day before the flood to visit friends 20 miles east of Saticoy. She and her friends were caught by the flood, and the next day her body was found within 20 rods of her telephone office with all her clothes torn off, her body buried almost beyond recognition.

Two days after the flood had subsided, two boys nearly grown were found on the river bottom standing erect in mud and sand to their necks, still alive. They were taken to Ventura Hospital and have fully recovered.

A large white lady was found lying on her back on the river bottom near Saticoy covered with

sand, all but her face, and still alive but unconscious, seven days after the flood. She was taken to Ventura Hospital and became conscious at times for a few minutes but could not speak or tell who she is. Hundreds have gone there to identify her, but none have been able to tell who she is. Physicians say she will recover.

We have not heard of brother Josiah since the flood, but feel sure he is in Los Angeles with his son Stanley. Considerably of his 320-acre bean ranch was swept away.

Morgues were established at Newhall, Saugus, Piru, Fillmore, Moorpark, Oxnard and Ventura and all were full of the flood victims the next day. Brother Mac and his daughter Mary Alexander cooked and took a load of food to the destitute of Santa Paula the day after the flood and went to the morgue to see if they could identify any of the corpses but were unable.

While there, a large dead lady was brought into the morgue with her right limb torn off at its hip joint. Mary told me it was the most shocking sight that she ever witnessed and it haunts her in her sleep at night. She wishes she hadn't gone to the morgue.

Brother Mac's son Hugh has been running a large tractor to which large hooks are attached to pull piles of debris apart in search of dead people all along the river for over a month and has found quite a number.

487 dead bodies victims of the flood have been rescued to date and it will never be known how many perished in the flood. It reminds me of the Johnstown flood that occurred on the afternoon of May 31st, 1889, in Pennsylvania.

### Research

Then I stopped typing out the letter because Samuel J. Alexander started writing to his cousin all about the genealogy of their family and who had died and when and where they were buried. There was more about the St. Francis Dam deeper into the letter, but I decided to wait to type out those parts.

I wanted to do some historical research on Armstrong himself instead. Armstrong was writing so many details about all the crops being grown and how much they brought and how much rain there was that I assumed he was a rancher somewhere in the Saticoy area.

Do you know what happens when you assume? You make an Ass out of U and Me. I broke a cardinal rule of historical research. I assumed that he was a rancher.

For my question about a historic rancher in Saticoy, I asked a rancher in Saticoy. I emailed Chris Sayer to see if he knew anything about a rancher named Armstrong. While digging into Saticoy history, I came across a research project on the web called "Historic Resources Survey & Context for the Town of Saticoy." It had been prepared for the county of Ventura Planning Division in 2014 by Mitch Stone and Judy Triem of the San Buenaventura Research Associates right here in Santa Paula.

I didn't find a listing for any Alexander, but I did send that report on to Chris. He wrote back to say that the name Alexander was not familiar to him, but John Madison, owner of Madison Hardware, circa 1920, was his great-great-grandfather. Madison's daughter, Lizzie, married Harry Pardee. Their daughter, Iola, married Don Petty Sr.

Chris still grows a lot of avocados on that same ranch.

I went back to transcribing the rest of the letter, but found a new trick. I looked into "speech to text" technology.

That is where you read aloud into your computer's microphone and words get typed onto your computer screen. I had been learning about Google Drive recently for working in groups and storing information.

The Universalist Church in Santa Paula is digitizing all its his-

toric records going back to 1890 and that involves photographing the pages of the minutes books, converting them into multi-page PDFs and then transcribing those into text files that can be cut and pasted and searched.

Some of our members are typing out each page of the minutes books and I am experimenting with using the "Text to Speech" feature in the Google Docs app. I just hit the microphone icon with my mouse arrow and start reading, and then hit it again to stop.

After that, I proofread my text and make a few corrections as needed. It takes a lot of time, but is rewarding in the end.

Here is an example of "Speech to Text" I used for this part of Armstrong's letter that contains more writing on the disaster:

### Alexander continues

I have received several letters from eastern friend inquiring if I was in the flood or sustained any damage by it in any way. I have. My taxes are doubled, assessed at \$7,316.82 that I have to pay for the refurbishing County Bridges and concrete roads that were washed away in the flood.

If the flood had fallen gradually in rain over our valley, it would have been a godsend which is greatly needed and our rainy season is past and we do not expect any more rain until next November when our spring begins.

The prospect for a good crop of anything don't look very rosy or promising. The newspapers were filled with pictures and descriptions of the flood, but they gave only a faint knowledge of how it devastated our valley. The ruin had to be seen to comprehend its awful vastness.

After quarantine was lifted in Santa Paula, a party and I drove up River Street to see the ruin. It is indescribable.

Mr. Isaac Bustel refused \$185,000 for his crop of oranges the day before the flood struck his orange grove, and the next day he didn't have an orange on tree left. It left his land covered 10 feet deep with gravel and rocks, rendering it utterly unfit for

Dam break: Page 5

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## John Nichols' Adventures in History: Continued from Page 4



THIS MEMORIAL IS DEDICATED TO  
COMMEMORATE THE 90TH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE ST. FRANCIS DAM DISASTER

JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT ON MARCH 12, 1928  
THE DAM COLLAPSED AND SENT BILLIONS OF  
GALLONS OF WATER DOWN THE SAN FRANCISQUITO  
CANYON EVENTUALLY MEETING THE SANTA CLARA  
RIVER ON ITS WAY TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN.

MANY LOCAL FAMILIES WHO WORKED AND LIVED  
NEAR THE RIVER ON THE RANCHES OF  
NEWHALL & CAMULOS, ALONG WITH RESIDENTS  
FROM PIRU & BUCKHORN WERE SWEEPED AWAY.

SOME SURVIVED, MOST PERISHED AND SOME  
WERE NEVER FOUND, LEFT FOREVER,  
ENTOMBED IN THE MUD OF THE RIVER

MAY THEY ALL BE AT PEACE  
GOD BLESS

Photo by John Nichols

Memorial plaque at Piru Cemetery.



Photo courtesy of JohnNicholsGallery.com

St. Francis Dam after the break in 1928.

agricultural purposes. His loss is assessed by the committee at 2 million dollars, but he wouldn't have taken that much for his ranches before the flood. Other groves adjoining his were left in a similar condition. Some men committed suicide when they realized their loss.

A little farther into the letter, Armstrong returned to talking about the flood:

*Brother Mac and his daughter Mary Alexander called on us today. I gave her your letter to read. She said if you had seen the Santa Clara River break over its south bank and rush through the beautiful apricot, lemon and walnut groves and wipe them out of existence below Saticoy, you would not think the flood had spent its fury before it reached Saticoy. She had been to see the ruined section shortly after the flood.*

### Sunday drive to Piru

I took a break from transcribing and Leslie and I decided to take a Sunday afternoon drive to explore local areas we had not visited in a long time. I drove down to the gas station to fill up, and on the way home, I stopped at a garage sale.

Craig Held was there just ahead of me asking if the sellers had any local history stuff. Craig is responsible for the great history archive at the California Room at the Blanchard Community Library. He is a great resource on local history. I told him about the letter I had and the St. Francis Dam comments and the Saticoy connection and told him I would email it soon.

Leslie and I took a little-known route from the McKeveitt Heights to Lake Piru. We went out over the 12th Street Bridge and out South Mountain Road past Grimes Canyon and to Balcom Canyon and then over to Guiberson Road and east to the road that crosses the Santa Clara River and goes into Piru.

Hundreds of people were playing on off-road vehicles along the river's edge and the wind was blowing up lots of dust. We poked around the new developments off Main Street and eventually hit the road up to Santa Felicia Dam and Lake Piru. It must have been 20 years since we last saw the lake.

On our way back into downtown Piru, I took a side road past the elementary school and library to a dead end at the Piru Cemetery. We could park in the middle of the road and open the gate and walk around the graves that overlook the Santa Clara River Valley.

Most of the tombstones were old, but off to the west was a new

memorial with some plastic flowers and a plaque. The plaque was in honor of the victims of the St. Francis Dam Disaster. The Santa Paula Cemetery has a similar one and plans are in place to build a new memorial by the St. Francis Dam National Memorial Foundation at the site of the dam near Santa Clarita.

As we looked at the graves, Leslie noticed that a whole row of tombstones was for people who had all died on the same day. Headstone after headstone had the date of death as March 13, 1928. That was the day the floodwaters flowed down the valley and killed more than 450 people. A similar row of headstones can be found in Santa Paula and Ventura.

### Alexander's story

When we got home, there was an email from Craig Held about what he had found about the St. Francis Dam Disaster letter writer Samuel James Alexander.

"He was born July 30, 1843 in Pennsylvania. By 1876, he was living in Saticoy, and in 1879 living in Santa Paula, and finally moved back to Saticoy in 1880. He died on Dec. 21, 1928, at age 85."

That all means his letter to his cousin was written about seven months before his death.

Craig also sent along an obituary that appeared in the Santa Paula Chronicle:

*"Samuel J. Alexander, 85 years of age, died yesterday at his home in West Saticoy. He was one of the first schoolteachers in this section. Years ago, he was a trustee for the Briggs school. He was born in Pennsylvania and came to California in 1872. He was unmarried."*

Now I knew that he was not a rancher, despite a lot of mentions of agriculture topics in that letter. He was a scholar and a teacher and a very good writer. I could see how he must have had a lot of connections with Santa Paula, as Saticoy is sort of between Ventura and Santa Paula.

In 1920, Ventura had a population of 4,156 and Santa Paula had 3,967. Santa Paula had as much or more to offer than Ventura in those days.

I also found out from a book on Saticoy history that Craig mentioned, "Tumbleweeds," by Marion Catlin Maxon, that Armstrong lived on the corner of Saticoy Avenue and Henderson Road, not on a ranch. It now makes sense that a teacher would live in town to be near his school.

Craig also mentioned two more long letters by Armstrong that appeared in the Winter 1974

**Samuel J. Alexander, 85 years of age, died yesterday at his home in West Saticoy. He was one of the first school teachers in this section. Years ago he was a trustee for the Briggs school. He was born in Pennsylvania and came to California in 1872. He was unmarried.**

Samuel J. Alexander's obituary in the Santa Paula Chronicle.

**On March 19th Santa Paula honored with one of the most impressive memorial services in the history of Ventura County 64 of its dead of the Saint Francis dam disaster. We brought 30,000 persons to the cemetery two miles west of Santa Paula.**

— Samuel J. Alexander

edition of the "Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly." I had that issue in my research library and found it and scanned the letters. There were two letters written to his niece, Jennie Alexander, back in Pennsylvania. He wrote about family matters and agriculture, but since they were written in 1890, nothing about the dam disaster.

In the introduction to that Quarterly, it said: "Jennie Alexander did come to California to attend Los Angeles Normal School and teach; she married George Willett, and they lived for many years in Wheeler Canyon."

The manuscripts were collated by Linda Jordan who had previously done the "Rodaway diary." Since Samuel Alexander was a teacher, he was encouraging his niece to become one also, and she came to California and did just that. She married a Willet, so that might be the mysterious source of the handwritten Alexander letter.

Since I now knew that Alexander lived in town and was 85 years old and had connections with friends and family in Wheeler Canyon and Santa Paula, his perspective on the aftermath of the dam disaster has more validity. He personally lived it; he did not just read about it in the newspapers.

Here's what he had to say about the memorial service for the victims at the Santa Paula Cemetery:

### Flood victims' burial

*On March 19th Santa Paula honored with one of the most*

*years. Brother John and I drove from the lower to the upper end of San Francisquito Canyon a distance of 30 miles. It is a dark, rugged narrow canyon.*

*We passed through it on Saturday, May 23rd 1896. We never dreamed a dam would be built there 32 years after that would be the means of destroying our beautiful valley.*

After a few more paragraphs on family and agriculture, the next part of his letter had to do with Tony Harnischfeger. This is obviously information he culled from the newspapers:

### If only

*Tony the watchman at Saint Francis Dam telephoned to Will Mulholland, chief engineer of the water department of Los Angeles City, that the dam was leaking badly and he feared it would go out.*

*Mulholland went up immediately and inspected the dam and pronounced it safe, then laughed at Tony for his fears.*

*Less than 10 hours after Mulholland left the dam for his home, the dam broke and Tony was the first person drowned.*

*Mulholland was brought before court for investigation. He wept and said he wished he was dead and with Tony now. If he had taken Tony's advice and informed the people living below the dam in time for them*

*to escape to higher ground, there wouldn't have been any of them drowned. Many say Mulholland ought to be hanged. It was he who managed the construction of the dam on a poor foundation. The dreadful catastrophe was the fault of one man.*

### Precautions taken

A couple of pages later was another comment on the disaster that was also obviously culled from newspaper articles or local gossip:

*Since the St. Francis Dam Disaster, people living below dams in California have become greatly excited fearing they will break, too, and drown them. They have asked Governor Young to have the authorities to draw off half the water to half their depth and thus relieve the pressure on the dams, which is being done.*

He wrote another page on family, deaths, burials, and marriages and then:

*I'll close this letter with my fondest wishes for your future welfare.*

*Most sincerely, your aged cousin, Samuel J. Alexander.*

— John Nichols of Santa Paula is a gallery owner, photographer and author. He wrote "The St. Francis Dam Disaster," which was published in 2002 by Arcadia Publishing.

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