



# County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors

## SUPERVISOR ABEL STEARNS

Term: 1860  
District: Not Applicable  
Date of Birth: Feb. 9, 1798  
Death: Aug. 23, 1871

Abel Stearns served as county supervisor for one term. He was elected in 1860.

Stearns was born Feb. 9, 1798 near Boston, Mass. He was raised on the family farm with his seven brothers and sisters. In 1810 tragedy struck the Stearns household as both parents died within three months of each other. Young Stearns and his seven siblings were left as orphans. He went to Boston to become a sailor. He sailed on several trading vessels and traveled to ports in China, the East Indies, West Indies and Spanish America.

In 1826 Stearns moved to Mexico and lived there for three years. During that time he became a naturalized citizen. In 1829 he moved to Northern California, and settled in Los Angeles in 1831. Stearns opened a trading/mercantile store. He gained invaluable experience as a trader during his time as a sailor and made his business quite successful. In the early 1830s, Stearns was requested by several Los Angeles area ranchers to conduct surveys of their ranches to help settle boundary disputes. Little did he know that he would later acquire the majority of the land he surveyed.

On Dec. 22, 1834 Stearns purchased land which is today the southeast corner of Main Street and Arcadia Street in downtown Los Angeles. On this site he built his home, which was the largest, most magnificent house in the pueblo at the time and became known as "El Palacio" or "The Palace".

Stearns understood the importance of a port to Los Angeles. He built a warehouse in San Pedro, and established a lucrative business selling goods to ships anchoring in the harbor. In 1835 Stearns was elected as "sindico" of the ayuntamiento (government) of Los Angeles. As sindico he acted as an attorney or legal counsel for the town council and to protect the interests of the pueblo.

In 1841 Stearns married into the wealthy Bandini family. He was 43 and his bride, Acadia, was 14. A year later he bought the huge 20,000-acre Rancho Los Alamitos as a summer home for his wife. Stearns became one of the largest landowners and cattle ranchers in the area. In 1849 he was chosen to represent his district at the Constitutional Convention. The following year he became alcalde of Los Angeles and was the last alcalde of the pueblo as the title of the position changed to mayor. He went on to be a state assemblyman in 1851, a supervisor for Los Angeles County in 1860, and in later years a justice of the peace and a member of the Los Angeles City Council.

He obtained large land grants throughout the territory, and accumulated much wealth.

Between the late 1850s and the early 1860s, Stearns had acquired several more ranchos, mostly through foreclosure of defaulted loans, and built a land empire consisting of a surplus of 200,000 acres.

The drought of 1863-64 killed more than 50,000 of Stearns' cattle and nearly bankrupted him. He was unable to meet his tax obligations on his properties and faced a lawsuit from the County of Los Angeles. He was forced to sell Rancho Los Alamitos.

In 1868 Stearns mortgaged all his remaining ranchos to obtain a \$43,000 loan from a San Francisco loan company to consolidate his debts. By 1870 more than 22,000 acres of his ranchos were sold and Stearns had recovered from his financial woes. He was on his way to not only regaining his former wealth, but surpassing it. He was to never experience the full success of this major real estate venture.

Stearns died on Aug. 23, 1871. He was 73, and was survived by his wife. When she died in 1912, her worth was estimated at \$15 million.

Sources: Abel Stearns in *Transitional California, 1848-1871*, A Yankee in Mexican California: Abel Stearns, 1798-1848. *History of Los Angeles*; *Pioneers of Los Angeles*.