Santa Clara UMC Historic Marker Proposal.

“The first Protestant Church West of the Mississippi”

Hence follows a consideration for a possible plaque or marker to better memorialize the history of the Santa Clara Methodist Mission. The Methodist Mission in Santa Clara was the first Protestant church in Alta California. According to the journal of Adna Hecox (their first lay minister), the methodists arrived in Santa Clara on October 16th, 1846. Their wagon train followed the Donner Party, having split from the larger group before the infamous ‘cut-off’ at Ft. Bridger prior to Salt Lake. Chief Truckee guided their company over the Sierra, and the methodists arrived at Sutter’s Fort during the American Mexican War only to be recruited into John C. Fremont’s California Battalion and directed to reinforce the San Jose Pueblo. Once there, Captain Joseph Aram, fortified the Spanish Mission, and the methodists persevered for the winter against a terrible typhoid epidemic. Tragically, it was during the funeral of Hitchcock’s daughter, Dec. 15th 1846, that some recognize as the first Protestant sermon in California, given by brother Hecox, “Remember How Short my Time is”. By early January hostilities in the Northern Department finally ceased after the sole battle in upper California was won by the companies of Cpts. Aram, Weber, Maddox, and Marsdon against the irregular Mexican calvary of Com. Sanchez. Few were injured, and a generous armistice was signed January 8th, 1847.

Many firsts were accomplished by this methodist emigrant party. The Santa Clara church was an early conference Mission Station, and from it came several daughter churches, including the MEC at Coloma (the site of Marshall’s discovery) as well as the first church in Portersville. Founding methodists like Adna Hecox spread out across both Santa Clara Valley and into Santa Cruz: building docks, wells, bridges, roads, parks, mills, schools, and planting the earliest farms and nurseries. Captain Joseph Aram attended both the first Constitutional Convention in Monterey as well as the state legislature convening in San Jose following statehood the next year later, 1849-50. William Campbell platted the towns of both San Jose and Santa Clara, deriving many of our current day & patriotic street names. Likewise, the methodists laid out the neighborhood of College Park. Of course, the town of Campbell was founded by William and his son. These emigrants were Temperance people, inaugurating the first Temperance Society in California, so it's not surprising both College Park and Campbell began as dry towns! Finally, the first University, or Institute of higher learning, chartered in 1851 and initially called Wesleyan College but later Pacific University, began in California as a methodist school until the late 1960’s when it finally became non-denominational.

The original church building collapsed by earthquakes in 1868 and 1906. It was located near Santa Clara's town center. In 1965 the church relocated to the other side of El Camino Real, on Lincoln Street. Stain Glass windows and cornerstone have been preserved. Otherwise, it has continuously meet for religious purposes since the arrival of the Aram Party 1846. Very few people know about the significance of the Aram wagon train nor the importance of the Methodist church in Santa Clara with respects to the early history of this State.

The picture below is at the Bell Wall Memorial Garden on 1700 Lincoln Street, Santa Clara CA behind the United Methodist Church**.** The Bell Wall was dedicated in 1980. The Bell itself was forged in Troy NY 1875 and given to the congregation while it met on Main and Lincoln Streets in downtown Santa Clara (aka. The Old Quad). Below the extant plaques are legible, **but there is no marker which adequately summarizes the significance or importance of this pre-Gold Rush emigrant Party.**



The bottom of the plaque dates the work of the Santa Clara Methodists to an early date, i.e., 1846. This significant pre-Gold Rush date would make the Methodists in Santa Clara the first organized Protestant work in Alta

California. The above photo won HPF's second place, after the Benecia State Building, (see July 2025 issue *Native Son*)



This portion of the train was led by Captain Joseph Aram. Among their number was William and Benjamin Campbell (the former platted both Washington Square & the Old Quad), Judge Adna Hecox and his wife, Margaret, James Reed (of the Donner Party proper), and Samuel Young. There are many 'firsts' with this congregation regarding the early settlement and development of the Valley, including plantings further afield in California localities like Santa Cruz and Porterville. Even the Coloma methodist episcopal church (near the Mill race on the American River) can attribute its making from their first labors. Within two years of their landing, the Aram party established both Temperance clubs and schools. Notable was the foundation of the University of the Pacific (the first college in California) in 1851. There are several other plaques in the city of Santa Clara today which tell portions the larger story, including the role of the Methodists defending 'Fort Santa Clara' during the 1846-1848 Mexican War. However, the Aram party was chiefly a Christian missionary and, secondly, an agriculturalist Interest. This congregation is undoubtedly the oldest Protestant society since pioneer days, yet little is publicly known. We feel this history is currently at risk, so are examining ways to better secure it for public benefit.



About the Actors:

Above are most of the Bartlett children whose parents are involved in both the NS & ND Golden West. Depicted (in character) from Left to Right: Judge Hecox (Nathaniel Bartlett), Sarah Aram (Judith B.), Margaret Hecox (Abigail B.), James Reed (Harold B), Agnes Hancock (Edith B), and Benjamin Campbell (Benjamin B). We included several fraternal signs: Judge Hecox holds the gavel alongside the grace of the New Testament. Sarah Aram has a mattock by her side (unfortunately cut off in pix). Margaret Hecox, with the American colors as a shawl, has the HPF logo inside her Methodist hymnal (the notes of which suggest 'harmony'). Beneath are the joined hands of Sarah A. and James Reed in the grasp of friendship and mutual aid. James Reed leans upon a woodsman axe, depicting Progress. Benjamin the same. Agnes Hancock is holding a basket, suggesting Fruitfulness, Plenty, or Bread. On either side are the standards of California—the state (Bear) Flag as well as the earlier 1836 Alvarado Flag. Of course, the Bell behind us suggests Liberty gained by the Love of Christ, which knows no Law, upon our hearts. Unfortunately, we forgot to add our Tin Cup, leaving it in the car. The Tin Cup would have represented 'cold water' Temperance, of which the early Methodists were strong proponents and the Cogswell statue at the old San Jose City Hall testified.

Regardless of outcome, our hope is this site is better documented as the landing of the '46ers ties together many elements of our state. Thus, we hope to establish a historic marker which better explains such. My wife is on the church council and I am a member of the Santa Clara UMC facilities committee. -- CJB