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FAITH & MISSION

1871-2020



A SESQUICENTENNIAL HISTORY OF
ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

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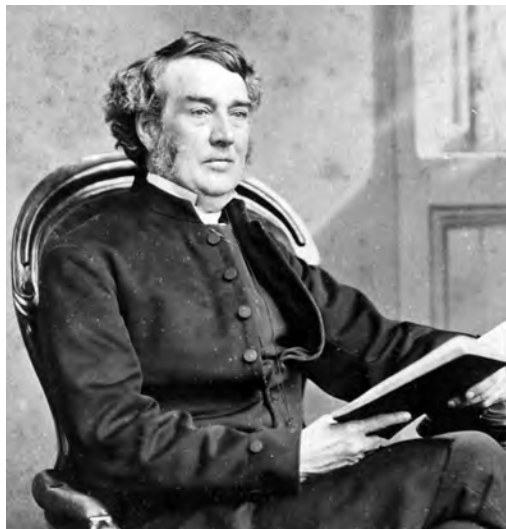
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CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING...

Shortly after gold was discovered in California, there were less than a dozen houses in a small hamlet across the bay from brawling San Francisco. This community was officially incorporated as the Town of Oakland on May 4, 1852. Two of the scattered resident families united in Episcopal worship through the summer. By August, the hamlet had grown rapidly, and a small Episcopal community was stirred to organize as a parish. It is related that on a Sunday in August, an Episcopal priest appeared from San Francisco, read the service and preached to a small attentive group of twelve under the shade of the oak trees. The group assured the clergyman that if he returned the following Sunday, they would prepare a proper place for a service. That week a tent measuring twenty-five by seventy feet was erected and fitted with an altar and benches. A cross was affixed to the front tent pole. On Sunday the congregation waited in the tent and vestrymen waited at the ferry terminal to greet the rector. But they waited in vain, as the ferry was stuck on a sand bar in the bay. History records that a Presbyterian minister who happened to be visiting Oakland that day took over the services. This may have been a fateful occurrence as the Episcopalians made their first property transaction, selling their tent to the Presbyterians the next day!

Meanwhile, on October 28, 1853, the Rt. Rev. William I. Kip was consecrated as the first Bishop of California. Within weeks he was on his way west, making the forty-day boat trip to Panama, overland to the Pacific Ocean, then up the coast and arriving by ship in San Francisco on January 9, 1854. He visited Oakland several times and set in motion the formation of an established parish in the city. In 1855, the first Episcopal parish, St. John's, was born and played a vital role in the life of the church and the downtown community. This congregation was small at first and met in rented rooms, but in less



*The First Bishop
of California,
the Rt. Rev.
William I. Kip,
1874.*

than four years, they found a site at Eighth and Grove Streets in Oakland, and held their first service there on Christmas Day, 1859.

It was in St. John's Church that St. Paul's Parish began in the fall of 1861, when the founding group met officially to lay the



Founding meetings for St. Paul's began in 1861 at Oakland's first Episcopal church, St. John's ("Old St. John's"), located at Eighth and Grove. Photo: Bancroft Library.

groundwork for the establishment of their church in the heart of downtown Oakland.

Projecting back 150 years into the thinking and planning of the founders reveals their insight and wisdom. In the first meetings in which St. Paul's came into existence, two events of far-reaching significance may have dominated the thinking of the organizers, events that could not but influence the life of the hoped-for parish. The first was the outbreak of the Civil War. The second was the College of California's long-range plan to move from Oakland to a site "four miles north to the suburbs."

The Founding of St. Paul's

As just noted, St. Paul's Parish was organized as an offshoot from Oakland's first Episcopal Church, St. John's. "Old St. John's" became a parish in 1855 and held its first services in its own building in 1859. In 1858, the parish hired a popular and energetic priest, the Rev. Benjamin Ackerly, as rector; he would remain rector for the next forty years. Oakland was growing, and Fr. Ackerly realized that the Episcopal Church needed to expand downtown and east of Broadway. The first planning meeting for a new parish was held at St. John's in 1861.

"Its inception was begun in a desultory way by a few small gatherings of persons uncomprehending the magnitude that the enterprise thus born was (eventually going) to attain." It is said that before they were a parish, they had organized a Sunday school in rented rooms. In the 1860s, fifty percent of Oakland's children did not attend school and child labor was an accepted fact. Families volunteered to teach the children, and by 1870 the Sunday school was well established and thriving. The dedicated parishioners organized their final plans at St. John's on January 19, 1871. They elected their wardens and nine vestrymen. St. Paul's was a parish!

The College of California was granted a charter by the state in 1855. It had struggled along, on property in downtown Oakland. In 1866, the state passed an act to

College Hall, of the College of California, looking toward Lake Merritt, down Twelfth from Franklin. The college's chapel, not shown, was located across from College Hall on Twelfth.



establish the Agricultural, Mining, and Mechanical Arts College. This new college combined with the College of California and in 1868 became the University of California. The new university planned to build their new campus in Berkeley, on 160

acres of vacant land near Strawberry Creek. Thus, the College of California property in downtown Oakland became available.

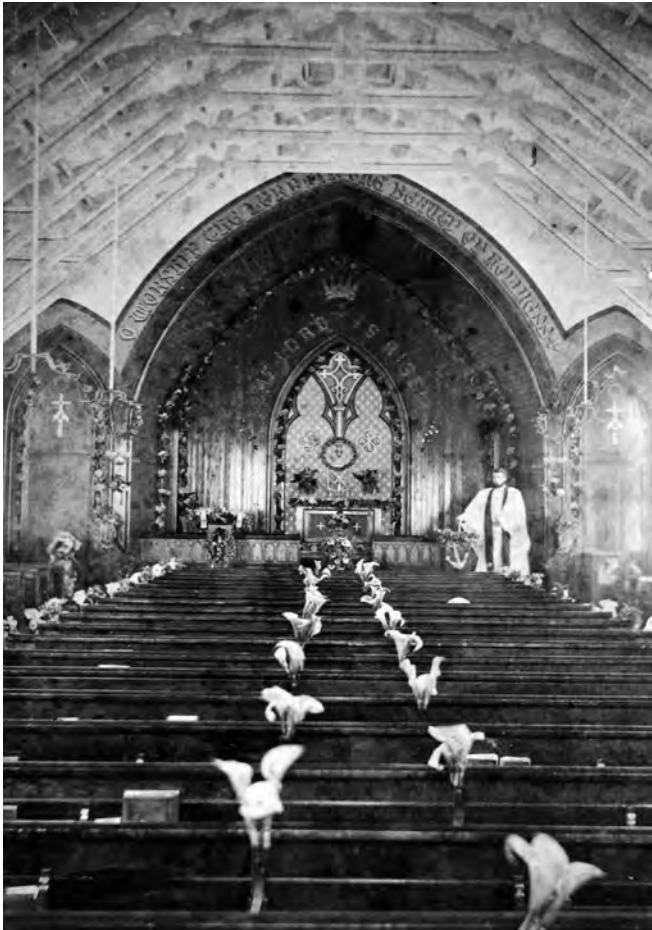
“The organizers of St. Paul’s were particularly happy in the purchase of this church property,” which they acquired on February 15, 1871. It consisted of a chapel with a rectory plus a lot 100 feet square situated on Twelfth near Franklin. The purchase price was \$10,000 payable in ten years and was secured by an individual note of four vestrymen with mortgage on the property. The chapel’s interior was arranged to make it fit for church purposes at an extreme cost of \$2,000, obtained on loan by individual members of the vestry. Sixty pews, tastefully upholstered, were put in, capable of comfortably seating 200 persons. Carpets were laid, an organ was purchased, and the

St. Paul’s Church’s first building, the former chapel of the College of California, purchased in 1871. Located on Twelfth near Franklin. The rectory is seen on the right.



real work was then begun. Pew rates were fixed at \$220 monthly, allowing free seats for 40 persons. \$50 a month was charged for rental of the basement for school purposes, and for the rectory as a residence.

St. Paul’s first rector was the Rev. Charles W. Taylor. He performed the first service in the new church on May 28, 1871. The choir was called the



Above: The wooden altar, now in St. Paul's Chapel of the Pacific, is said to have come from the College of California Chapel that St. Paul's purchased in 1871.

Left: St. Paul's church interior, Easter 1874. St. Paul's first rector, the Rev. Charles Taylor, stands at the upper right.

College Chapel Choir. Along with the early organization of a Sunday school, the women had established the Ladies Sewing Circle. National news coverage of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 included President U. S. Grant's call for support from across the country. The Ladies Sewing Circle of St. Paul's Episcopal Church assembled, renamed themselves the Ladies Relief Society, and determined to help the fire victims, and then turn their efforts to Oakland.

Early Projects at St. Paul's

As we of St. Paul's Church in the 21st Century look back, let me tell you the story of a few very early projects of our parish in the 1870s.

In our last section, we left the women of the Ladies Relief Society responding to President Grant's call to help the survivors of the Great Chicago Fire of October, 1871. The fire's victims faced a harsh winter. Twelve ladies from St. Paul's led the way, knocking on their neighbors' doors and collecting clothing as well as other supplies to send to Chicago. The effort grew, and soon civic-minded women from all social strata

and religious denominations together sewed and sent boxes and boxes of warm clothing and other useful items.

Even before the Chicago effort was completed, the Society decided to meet the local needs of aged women, abandoned babies, and orphaned children living in Oakland. St. Paul's ladies filed incorporation papers, adopted a constitution, and in 1872 began operating a Home for Aged Women that also provided accommodations for over 100 children. It was later renamed the Ladies Home Society.

“To support the home, society ladies walked down rutted dirt streets knocking on every door collecting dimes, clothing, furniture, fruit, chickens, three cows, a pig,



Ladies Home Society, on Forty-Second in Oakland, founded by ladies from St. Paul's.

cemetery plots and land along the Berkeley railroad line for a building.” A permanent residence was completed in 1882 at 360 Forty-Second. “The Society met the constant challenge of funding with fortitude and by conceiving ingenious methods of raising money, planning special events and con-

vincing the police to turn over half their fines to support the facility.”

Eventually, the Ladies Home Society became an independent organization known as the Matilda Brown Home. All through the years until it closed in 2007, St. Paul's women served as directors and volunteers of the Home, and the Society is credited with being the oldest nonprofit organization in California.

A second St. Paul's ministry began in 1874, the idea of parishioner Elizabeth Van Winkle. She wanted to start a Sunday school for the Chinese children of Oakland who, at that time, were not allowed to attend public schools. The Chapel of the Good Samaritan was established at Ninth and Oak, and was “within the and under the jurisdiction of St. Paul's.” Members of the parish were the first volunteer teachers at the school. More research needs to be done on this ministry, but it seems to have grown successfully and to have been a vital center for the Chinese community, with records of baptisms, marriages, burials, confirmations, morning prayer, and communion well into the mid-1920s. Miss Van Winkle's sister, Sarah Michler, endowed the chapel in 1901 in Elizabeth's memory, and there is a plaque in the narthex of our Chapel of the Pacific honoring Miss Van Winkle.

St Paul's Grows

Our intrepid founders began planning for St. Paul's Parish in 1861, but it was not until 1871 that the vacated chapel and rectory of the College of California became available and was purchased for \$10,000. The buildings stood on Twelfth near Franklin and were remodeled, but soon were inadequate for the growing congregation. So, in 1880 the building was moved bodily to Harrison and Fourteenth where it remained until 1907.

At this time, the life of St. Paul's paralleled the rapid expansion of Oakland. The trans-continental railroad was completed to Oakland in 1869, bringing



St. Paul's Church on Harrison Street, after a steeple was added.



Remodeled nave and chancel of St. Paul's, after its move to Harrison and Fourteenth.



*The Rev. Charles
T. Walkley,
St. Paul's rector
1890-1905.
Photo: Oakland
Tribune.*

new settlers. Downtown development was becoming competitive. In 1882, for example, parish records show 200 families, grown in ten years from a total of 67 individual communicants in 1872.

Of course, the 1906 earthquake and fire of San Francisco would have a permanent effect. Thousands of refugees fled to Oakland. The ground floor rooms of St. Paul's sheltered many families while parishioners speedily amassed blankets, clothing, and food for their stricken visitors. In fact, all of Oakland's churches were on the front lines in this effort. The flood of homeless refugees developed into a steady stream of settlers, bringing a population and construction boom to the area.

In the background, developers became interested in building the Oakland Hotel on the church's site on Harrison at Fourteenth Street. So, in 1907, the parishioners decided to sell the land at a profit and move to a new site at West Grand Avenue near Webster Street, extending through to Twenty-Third. St. Paul's early historian Theo Dredge recounted why and how the church moved again:

As a consequence of the earthquake and fire of 1906, real estate values in the East Bay region became active and the vestry took advantage of the opportunity to dispose



*St. Paul's,
as moved to
W. Grand
and Webster,
Oakland, 1907.
Photo: Oakland
Tribune.*

of the old property and purchase what was then outlying land at the corner of Grand and Webster; to which location in one of the wettest winters in California history, the old church building was moved in three sections. In those winter months, St. Paul's was thoroughly advertised as a church comprising the High, the Low and the Broad; and it was only prompt action on the part of the house movers that the "low" section did not slide into Lake Merritt.

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The sections of the church were put on huge rollers and pulled through the streets of Oakland by teams of horses. It must have been quite a sight. Execution of this move was unusual and brought on much heated debate within the parish. The old church, considerably refurbished and expanded since its days as a college chapel 50 years before, was looking tired and tacky with age. There was even a newspaper article saying that while the other denominations had put up beautiful structures, the Episcopalians seemed to be content with their old wooden church. Ouch! So, planning began for construction of a “cathedral-type” church at Montecito and Bay Place, opposite Merritt Park (now Lakeside Park).

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