

**STORIES OF
THE FIRST PROTESTANT CHURCHES
IN LOS ANGELES
1850-1880**

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INTRODUCTION

The following vignettes of early Protestant History in Los Angeles were originally published in the California Pacific's Annual Conference **CIRCUIT WEST** and **CITY LIGHTS** from United University Church. The Methodist Church played an important part in that history. The stories are from the years of 1850 to 1880

The vignettes highlight the early Protestant Clergy and the struggle that the Protestant Churches along with all the Methodist Church had in establishing congregations in the Southland.

Enjoy

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....and no one came

The first Protestant Sermon was preached by Rev. James W. Brier in the tiny Pueblo of Los Angeles in June , 1850. The Rev. Brier was a Methodist probationer from the Iowa Conference. The service was held at the home of John G. Nichols. In 1851 Nichols son John Jr would be the first child of American parentage on both sides to be born in Los Angeles. In 1852 Nichols would become Mayor of Los Angeles. The Nichols home was next door to the County Court House. The 1850 census showed that there were 274 persons in Los Angeles City. .

The Briers had traveled over land in an Ox Cart and were part of the ill fated group who discovered when they reached Salt Lake City it was too late to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains before the snowfall. So the group took an untried southern route and then because of disagreement with the leader branched out from this route and came to California by way of Death Valley. Some of their number died in the desert from the cold and lack of food. But the Briers made it to Los Angeles.

While they were recovering from their ordeal Rev Brier, as would any self respecting Methodist preacher, advertised that he was holding a service and preaching a sermon. The records say that the only people in attendance at the service were the Nichols' family and Mrs. Brier and three Brier children. Rev. Brier continued the services at the Court House for the next three weeks.. These times only his wife and family were in attendance.

The Briers stayed a month or two more before moving on to Northern California. Rev. Briers' parting words as the Brier Family left Los Angeles were not complementary. It seems that Los Angeles was not Iowa. (313 words)

Sources: James Miller Guinn: **A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AND EXTENDED HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES AND ENVIORNS.** 1915

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTORY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

Edward Drewry Jervey: **THE HISTORY OF METHODISM IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND ARIZONIA.** 1960

The Saloon was Baptized as a Church

In 1853 Rev. Adam Bland was appointed as Missionary to Southern California and established the Methodist Church in Los Angeles. Rev. Bland was a successful Missionary for the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) in Northern California and so anticipated success as he was appointed to Southern California.

When Rev. Bland arrived he made a very unMethodist move by leasing the El Dorado Saloon located on Main Street. At the time there was only one two Methodist Families in the whole Country of Los Angeles. Dr. M. Whisler and his family lived in El Monte and occasionally came to services. The other Methodist, J. Wesley Potts lived in the City of Los Angeles. It is reported that the first Quarterly Conference was held with Rev. Bland and J. Wesley Potts were attendance.

Rev. Bland turned the first floor of the Saloon into a Chapel and the second floor became a school called The Methodist Chapel School for girls, run by Mrs. Bland. Rev. Bland had been appointed as Missionary to Southern California, so in addition to preaching in Los Angeles he also preached in El Monte, Wilmington and Santa Barbara. He wrote to his good friend Issac Owen. "... I suppose this part of California is destined...to be the big-end of California. It is a fine country—good lands, fine stock country, etc. But of all society I ever saw here is the worst."

Adam Bland supplemented his salary by horse trading as he had done in Virginia. Harold Black in First Church's history tells the story of Rev. Bland in his later years. Some Conference member, thinking horse-trading to be a questionable practice, introduced a resolution condemning it and asking that preachers be required to abstain from it. In the midst of the discussion which the resolution precipitated, Adam Bland rose to his feet in the rear of the room and, coming to the front, said. "Bishop, I know that resolution is aimed at me. Now I will make a bargain with you. When you send me to a charge where the salary will provide a living for my family and money to educate them, I will quit trading horses, but not until then!"

Adam Bland was named Presiding Elder (District Superintendent) in 1854 in Northern California. He served for 51 years in the Methodist Ministry. (397 words)

SOURCES

James Miller Guinn: **A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AND EXTENDED HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES AND ENVIRONS.** 1915

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTOY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

Edward Drewry Jervey: **THE HISTORY OF METHODISM IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND ARIZONIA.** 1960

A Vile Little Dump

Los Angeles society was anything but conducive to Church going. It is reported by one newspaper editor in 1853, "As an instance of the diversity of entertainment afforded to the public...take the following: On Tuesday of last week we had four weddings, two funerals, one street fight with knives, a lynch court, two men flogged, a serenade by a band, a fist fight and one man tossed in a blanket."

Another account said the conditions became so bad around 1850 that crimes ceased to be news. Here are a few brief items from the papers of that time. "Last Sunday night was as brisk night for killings. Four men were shot and killed and several wounded in shooting affrays. A part of the Salt Lake and Montana teamsters had a lively row in the Monte on Monday night; several shorts were fired, from the effect of which one man died. Finally the corner's jury sat on the body of a dead Indian. The verdict was 'Death from intoxication or by a visitation from God.'"

Into this society Methodist preachers were appointed, a different one each year for the next four years. In 1854 it was Rev. J. M. McCaldwell, followed by N. R. Peck in 1855 and Elijah Merchant and David Tuthill in 1856 and 1857.

Other denominations tried to establish churches. In 1853 a Baptist Pastor Mr. Freeman held occasional services. Rev. James Woods came in 1854 and held services for the Presbyterians for two years. Dr. Matthew Carter came in 1857 to begin an Episcopal Protestant Service.

Between 1858 and 1859 all the Protestant clergy left for greener pastures. The town was just too much for them. However there was also one other reason and that was the coming of the Civil War. Most of the Ministers were Northerners and many were supporters of the abolition movement. The question of slavery was agitating the whole nation and since many of the Citizens of Los Angeles were Southerners or sympathizers of slavery the debate was pronounced in Los Angeles. So the Methodist Conference decided not to appoint any more ministers to Los Angeles until the end of the Civil War. It was a gloomy time in the history of Protestantism in Los Angeles (383 words)

SOURCES

Equitable Branch Security Trust and Saving Bank: **EL PUBELO; LOS ANGELES BEFORE THE RAILROADS** 1928

Remi Nadeau; **LOS ANGELES FROM MISSION TO MODERN CITY.** 1960

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTOY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

James Miller Guinn: **A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AND EXTENDED HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES AND ENVIORNNS.** 1915

Empty Benches and No Pastors

From 1858 to 1860 there were no Protestant Services in Los Angeles. An editorial in the Star commented, "To preach week after week to empty benches is certainly not encouraging but if, in addition to that a minister has to contend with a torrent of vice and immorality which obliterates all traces of the Christian Sabbath to be compelled to endure blasphemous denunciations of his divine Master, to live where society is disorganized, religion scoffed at, where violence runs riot, and even life itself is unsafe—such a condition of affairs may suit some men, but it is not calculated for the peaceful labors of one who follows unobtrusively the footsteps of the meek and lowly Savior."

Los Angeles was not paradise. All the non-Catholic funerals were conducted by the Masonic Lodge. During 1859 a Presbyterian minister, Rev. William E. Boardman, and his wife arrived in the city. Looking over the situation he determined that there were not enough church going people for one Protestant denomination and so he proposed the First Protestant Society of the City of Los Angeles. It received some enthusiastic support. A lot was bought and a church was begun. However Rev. Boardman left in 1862. The church was half finished but not fit for occupancy. Again for two more years there were no Protestant Services.

During the Civil War Southern California remained loyal to the Union. But many families were divided, having sons who fought on either side. There were two Confederate Generals from California. The Union Army did have a body of soldiers at Drum Barracks in Wilmington. It was also a time of disasters. During these years two disastrous floods followed by a drought which wiped out the Cattle industry.

Los Angeles was looking for better times. (304 words)

SOURCES:

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTOY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

James Miller Guinn: **A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AND EXTENDED HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES AND ENVIORNS.** 1915

Msgr. Francis J. Weber: **THE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: A BICENTENNIAL SURVEY** 1976

Equitable Branch Security Trust and Saving Bank: **EL PUBELO; LOS ANGELES BEFORE THE RAILROADS** 1928

The Churches try again

The Protestant Churches had a hard time getting a start in Los Angeles. There were a number of reasons. First, the citizens of Los Angeles in 1850 and 1860 were not responsive to Protestant preaching and Sunday church. Second, most of the Preachers were Northerners and many of the Citizens of Los Angeles were from the South. So the time during the Civil War was a particularly difficult time. The Presbyterian's came and went, the Episcopal's came and went, and the Methodist Bishop decided not to appoint anyone for Los Angeles from 1858 to 1866.

When the last Methodist Pastor left in 1858, there were only a half a dozen Methodists in Los Angeles County and Los Angeles city. However when Adam Bland now the Presiding Elder (District Superintendent) of Southern California came back through Los Angeles in 1866, he found 30 Methodists in LA County. All thirty of them were invited to a Quarterly Conference and the Methodist Church was once again a viable institution. The Conference records indicate that there was not a formal church from 1858 to 1866. However there is some thought that this group came together irregularly for worship and the Wesley Love Feast (lay communion) during the time they had no appointed Pastor.

In less than two years the Methodist Church had bought lots on the west side of Fort Street (now Broadway) between Third and Fourth Street, and built a brick church to hold 200 worshippers. In a few years the Methodist Episcopal Church South would have a church around the corner on Spring Street, the Congregational Church would be further north on New High Street, The Episcopal Protestant Church would have purchased the half finished Protestant Society Church also on New High Street and the Jewish Synagogue would be just a block way on Fort Street between First and Second street.

So as the town grew so did the Congregations.. (329 words)

SOURCES

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTOY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

James Miller Guinn: **A HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AND EXTENDED HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES AND ENVIORNS.** 1915

The Characters who were the First Pastors of the Fort Street Methodist Church.

Harold Garnet Black, in his history of Fort Street (First) Methodist Church tells the colorful stories of the First Ministers appointed to the Methodist Church.

You have already heard about James W. Brier who was in independent soul in his own right and came to California at great risk by the way of Death Valley. He risked his life and the life of his family only to find out that no one wanted to hear him preach. He left and went to Northern California and became a Congregationalist.

You have also have heard about the Virginia Horse Trader, Adam Bland who was the first Missionary to Southern California and leased a saloon and created a Methodist Chapel and School out of the building..

Each of the Ministers succeeding Rev. Bland served only one year. The appointment was too difficult and too discouraging.

But the Ministers appointed to Fort Street Church after the Civil War were characters in their own right. Now it was still a tough field and the results here not spectacular. Even after two years, Dr. J. P Widney reported that there were seven in the congregation. It was a difficult place to be appointed.

After the new building was completed a Rev. A. Coplin came and only served six months. He has preached all the sermons he knew and left to work on a Dairy ranch. He was followed by Rev. A. M. Hough who would later become Presiding Elder (District Superintendent) of the area. He drove out from Salt Lake City in a buggy with his wife. He came armed with a heavy revolver which indicated that he meant business. The Hough's built the parsonage next to the Church. The next pastor, Rev. P Y. Cool, was lame which meant that he used crutches constantly However because of the crutches he developed great strength in his hands and to shake hands with him was actually painful, so hearty was his grip. He was well liked.

But the next pastor, Rev. S. G. Stump, had such a quarrelsome nature that he provoked great discord in the church. A letter was written by the Official Board to the Bishop asking the Bishop not to return him. When the Bishop finally received the letter he cancelled the appointment, but Rev. Stump still preached the following Sunday. The next night Rev. Stump was summoned before the Official Board and was told he was *persona non grata*. He resigned and opened up a law office.

It took Pastors of all kinds to build a viable Methodist presence in the Southland. (448)

SOURCES:

Harold Garnet Black: **THE CHURCH OF THE LIGHTED CROSS: A HISTOY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES.** 1938

Biddy Mason

The 1850's and 1860's were very difficult lawless times in the Pueblo of Los Angeles. Hangings, murders, drunkenness were common place. All the Protestant Churches, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian, had a difficult time establishing parishes. The Preachers came and went regularly. In the 1860's Los Angeles was visited with floods and droughts. The tensions of the Civil War were also real with residents divided between Southern Sympathizers and Northern Union people. In the midst of all of was an Angel: Biddy Mason.

Biddy was a freed slave who came to Los Angeles in 1856 after being declared freed from her master Robert Young by Judge Hayes. By law she could not testify in Court against her master (California law did not allow Blacks to testify in Court) but the Judge heard her story in his chambers. Since California was a Free State Mr. Young was advised that he could not take his slaves with him to Texas. They were no longer his property. The irony of the story is that had the court case been one year later The Dred Scott Decision would have been applied and Biddy and her sister and their children would not have been freed.

During her younger years Biddy had become an expert of herbal medicine and had much experience as a Midwife and Nurse. So when she came to Los Angeles she was immediately hired by Dr. John Griffin as midwife and nurse. Biddy's black bag was known all over the Los Angeles area as she provided medical services to both rich and poor families of all ethnic groups.

Ten years after she arrived in Los Angeles Biddy had saved up enough money to buy 10 acres of land way out of center of Los Angeles on Spring Street near the corner of 4th Avenue. She built a home for herself and family and then developed the rest of the property with rental units and a commercial building along with a garden for medicinal plants and herbs.

During the floods and drought of the 1860's Biddy provided bags of groceries to people who needed them. It was reported that she also set up an account at one of the grocery stores for anyone who did not money to pay for the food they bought. Her home was always a center for various social services and help. Biddy never turned any one away empty handed.

In 1872 she and a small group of people founded First African Methodist Episcopal Church (FAME) in a community meeting in her home. She initially paid for all the expenses and taxes for the church property. She also worked for a school for black children.

Fort Street Methodist Church was right round the corner (Fort became Broadway and the name was changed to First Methodist) from Biddy's house on Spring Street. It is reported that she was often in attendance at the Fort Street Methodist Church. However there was another California law which said that Blacks could only attend churches founded by blacks. Some saw Biddy's attendance at the Four Street Methodist Church as a political protest. Her funeral was conducted at the Fort Street Methodist Church.

SOURCE: Deidre Robinson, OPEN HANDS, OPEN HEART – THE STORY OF BIDDY MASON: Gardena CA Sly Fox Publishing Company 1998