

Historical Presentation

Part One—Early Leaders of First Presbyterian Church

One of our church publications in the past characterized the 1854 charter members of this congregation as “homesick” pioneers. It seems to me that such a characterization has to be inaccurate. The ten folk who came together to form our congregation 151 years ago now were hardy, adventuresome, risk-taking people. They were committed to making new lives for themselves in this yet untamed land so full of promise.

At least three of the ten, perhaps more were members of First Congregational Church and are identified as “Old School Presbyterians.” That relationship between a group of Old School Presbyterians and the Congregational Church in Portland shows how life in the distant West and in a land where neighbor truly was dependent upon neighbor sometimes for sheer survival helped to ameliorate differences that otherwise would have divided them.

In 1801 the Congregationalist and Presbyterians had entered into a Plan of Union. The two denominations remained separate, but they shared pastors and were represented in governing bodies of both churches. The Plan, put together in large part to help address the challenges before the church of seeking to provide religious care for a growing nation, served both denominations quite well for more than three decades. In 1837, however, at the time of the Second Great Awakening in American life (a revival of religious interest and practice) the relationship began to come apart at the seams. Presbyterians found themselves split once again over issues such as the proper education of clergy, preaching, music in worship, and slavery. New School Presbyterians endorsed the establishment of the so-called “log colleges” on the frontier (Pennsylvania); engaged in preaching that focused more on conversion than the mere exposition of the biblical text; were in favor of the new music being introduced into churches (gospel hymnody); and were abolitionists. Old School Presbyterians were more resistance to these changes facing the church and were either non-committal on the question of slavery or in favor. (It should be pointed out that some of the Old School Presbyterians who were noncommittal on the question of slavery were not proponents of that institution or even morally neutral but felt that by not pushing the matter too aggressively the unity of the church might be maintained.) In 1837 Old School Presbyterians were in a majority at the General

Assembly and succeeded in abrogating the 1801 Plan of Union with the Congregationalists and kicking the New School Presbyterians out the door.

In Portland, Oregon, however the two were close enough that the Congregationalist could and did show hospitality to a group of Old Schoolers. This group of folk, waiting for the opportunity to begin a Presbyterian Church, petitioned the Presbytery of Oregon in October 1853 to organize them as a congregation. The group met at the home of William and Sarah Abrams in the afternoon of October 3 to prepare their petition. Rev. J. A. Hannah wrote: "In answer to a request from interested persons in Portland for church services, Rev. J.L. Yantis, DD, was appointed to preach in Portland as often as convenient and to organize a church as soon as the way appeared clear. And he, with the assistance of Rev. George F. Whitworth, did organize the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, January 1, 1854." Yantis lived in Calapooia (Albany) and commuted to Portland, at first alternating Sundays with Rev. Whitworth.

John Lapsley Yantis was born September 14, 1804 in Lancaster, Kentucky, and received his early education under the tutoring of Rev. Samuel Finley. At the age of 20 he embarked on the study of medicine and was about to begin his practice when he was converted during a revival and subsequently joined the Presbyterian Church. He felt called to ministry and began to study under the tutelage of Rev. Robert Lapsley. He had wanted to complete his theological education at Princeton, but poor health prevented him from doing so. He married Eliza Ann Montgomery in 1828 and in 1852 moved his family to Oregon. In a letter he wrote to a friend, Yantis gave his account of his new home:

We reached this place, the largest town in the Territory, during the first week of October, after a travel of five months and a few days. At least one month of this time was consumed by harassing delays. We have reason to be profoundly thankful, that our families came safely through, having had no disaster, and no case of alarming illness. . . . I have not been able to see much of the country, but I have seen enough to feel profoundly thankful to God that He has directed my footsteps to this lovely land. The only objections that I can see to the country are, first, that it rains too much in winter, and the second, that it is so hard to get to it. The last of these objections does not effect me now, only as it will be in the way of many friends coming. It has been about a month since the rainy season set in, and I declare to you, I think I have seen more rain in twenty-four hours in Missouri, than I have seen here

during the month. The rain descends so gently that unless you are watching you would not know it frequently—no thunder, no lightning, no wind. Then remarkable evenness of the temperature; it is cooler now than when we arrived, but when it got to, or how, I do not know. I am confident that the mercury has not passed over five degrees up or down the scale during any twenty-four hours since we have been in this Valley. The old settlers say that thus gradually the cold will increase until about Feb. 1, and then it will as gradually decline, till spring comes in all her clemency and glory. I am delighted with the climate. I am pleased also to the clear evidence born to the healthfulness of the country by every man's appearance whom I have seen in this country. They are most vigorous and healthy looking men I ever saw, no dull, languid eye; no pale, tallow face; no heavy dull motion to be seen. I have not seen a sickly, feeble looking man in the Territory who has been here twelve months.

There were ten charter members, but more than ten people were a part of the church's life. The choir included Dr. J. G. Glenn, John C. Carson, D. R. Carson, Captain W.S. Power, and Caroline E. Corbett. We have the names of but eight of the original charter members of the congregation.

Archibald Bell was a Kentuckian who came to the Oregon Territory in 1852. He was later in the drug business in Oregon City and in Albany. He died on the Mollala River in 1889 at the ripe age of 76.

James McKeown was an Irishman who moved with his Presbyterian parents to the United States when he was yet a child. We know that he was in business in Garrisville, Alabama and was a member of the Presbyterian Church there. He moved to Portland in 1852 and lived here until his death in 1882.

William Penn Abrams and his wife Sarah L. were natives of New Hampshire who moved to Garrisville, Alabama in 1842 where William was in the milling business. He first visited Portland in 1847 to see if it might be a place of promise for himself and his family. While in town he helped raise money with which to buy books in New York City for a private library. He brought these along with his family; machinery for a steam saw mill, and a consignment of goods for Henry Corbett. They departed New York City in November 1850 and arrived in Portland April 1851. Edward Geary described Abrams as "a man of

strong faith, devotion and liberality. A tower of strength to the Christian cause in various parts of the country, ever steadfast and active through many vicissitudes, he was in the midst of his usefulness, as a member of the present church in Portland, called to the reward of the just in November 1873. His diligence in secular pursuits, seldom surpassed, was equaled by his prayerful devotion to the duties of beneficence and piety."

Forty percent of the charter members of the church were members of Rev. George Whitworth's family. They included his wife Mary Eliza, her mother Sarah H. Thompson, and two nieces Sarah Jane and Mary Joanna Thomson. Mary Joanna Thomson Beatty later recalled the family's journey across the Great Plains in the fall of 1853:

With my uncle, Rev. Geo. F. Whitworth and my Aunt Eliza Whitworth, and her mother Mrs. Sarah Thomson, my sister Sarah and the 4 Whitworth children I crossed the plains from Cannelton, Indiana. Grandmother was 78 years old and I was 16. The way I happened to make this trip was, when the Presbyterian Board of Missionaries sent Uncle Whitworth out to preach the Gospel in the wilderness, he begged father to let my sister Sarah and myself come along as company for Aunt Eliza and to help take care of grandmother. Of course I was to go back in a year or two, but it has been over 60 years since I made that journey and I have never been back yet.

We had no special hardships on the trip, other than was to be expected from camping out so long a time and the fatigue of constant but slow traveling, for we had ox teams. There were 40 wagons in our train, and so owing to our considerable numbers, we were not molested by the Indians, although once we were followed 150 miles by a band of warriors, who told us they intended killing every one of our party in revenge for the death of one of their number which had occurred shortly before. An emigrant in a train ahead of ours had shot and killed the Indian. The brave who came into our camp to tell us of their intentions amused himself by marking off with stakes in the ground the length of the graves he informed us we would soon occupy when they had finished us. But they never seemed to find the weak spot in our defenses and finally gave over following us. When we reached the Snake River

we waited for other teams along the road to join us for protection. Two wagons came along the trail with their beds completely riddled from the Indian bullets. They had been attacked by a roving band, one of the children killed and an attempt to stampede their stock. They were a sorry-looking outfit.

Not long after the organization of the church, (February 1854) Rev. Whitworth and family moved on to other fields of interest. Whitworth established the Presbyterian Church in Olympia, WA, the first Presbyterian Church north of the Columbia River and also First Church Seattle. He established Sumner Academy, which later became Whitworth College.

In October 1855 Rev. Yantis was dismissed to the Presbytery of Upper Missouri in order to assume the presidency of newly founded College of Richmond. Unfortunately for him, the college failed. He returned to parish ministry and died in 1882 in Kentucky. Without regular pastoral leadership, the church languished, but it continued to be carried on the rolls of the Presbytery.

A SECOND GENERATION OF LEADERS

The Presbytery of Oregon sent the Rev. H. R. Avery to preach for Portland's First Church on the fourth Sunday of May 1859 and to report back on the viability of the congregation. In September he reported his findings to the Presbytery. That same fall some of the original members of the church along with others decided that the time had arrived to rejuvenate the church. Together they pledged \$800 towards the support of a missionary to work among them and asked the Board of Domestic Missions of the Old School Presbyterian Church to provide someone. Rev. P.S. Caffrey, a recent graduate of Princeton Seminary, was sent. He arrived with his wife and 2 children on June 4, 1860 and preaches his first sermon on June 15 in the courthouse. The church later moved to a store at the corner of Third and Morrison Streets.

James McKeown, S.M. Hensill and Israel Mitchell were elected elders. Alexander Bell was the lone Deacon. Little is known of these men. I mentioned McKeown a few moments ago. Mitchell established a regular ferry service across the Willamette in 1848. On the west side he landed at the foot of present day Taylor Street, then known as Ferry Street.

It's a different matter with the churches Board of Trustees. Their names are a veritable list of early "Who's Who" among Portlanders. They were W.S.

Ladd, J. C. Ainsworth, H. A. Hogue, J. M. Blossom, and B.F. Smith. Ainsworth was elected president and Ladd secretary. Others to serve over the next decade included P.C. Schuyler, J. H. Couch, Jacob Kamm, and H. W. Corbett. Ainsworth and Kamm were business partners. Ainsworth, an Iowan, was born in 1822. Shortly after his young wife's death, he put aside his store clerk's apron and boldly took command of a small Mississippi River steamboat learning to captain the vessel through on the job training. In 1850 he moved to Sacramento where he got a job as the assistance county clerk. There he met Lot Whitcomb, a business man from Milwaukie, Oregon. Whitcomb had built a steamboat and needed someone to captain it. Ainsworth landed the job and found himself working with Swiss born Jacob Kamm who was the engineer on the vessel. Kamm's wife, Caroline Augusta Gray Kamm, was born on the Lapwai Mission on October 16, 1840. Her father, William H. Gray, had arrived in the Oregon Territory in 1838 with Dr. Marcus Whitman and Dr. Henry Spalding. The Kamms joined First Church in 1867. Whitcomb's inability to pay Kamm and Ainsworth resulted in their becoming part owners of the vessel. In time with the assistance of WS Ladd they parlayed that into what was known at the Oregon Steam Navigation Company which became hugely profitable.

William Sargeant Ladd was born in Vermont and came to Oregon by way of San Francisco where he thought he had sealed a business partnership with Charles E. Tilton. Tilton, however, changed his mind about investing in Ladd's vision, and sent the young man on to Portland by himself. He arrived in the town in April 1851 with a small consignment of liquor, opened a store on Front Street, and within the first four months of his business grossed over \$2,000. He was first elected to city council in 1853; was mayor in 1854. In 1859 he opened Portland's first bank, Ladd and Tilton. His business interests were wide and numerous. He was also an incredibly frugal man who was known to reply to a letter by writing between its lines. He would also use the inner side of envelopes for letter paper. When he died in 1893 he left an estate estimated in excess of five million dollars. He and his wife Caroline were generous supporters of the life and ministry of First Church and the worldwide mission of the church. Their contributions included the endowment of a chair at San Francisco Theological Seminary and money to build and to support the Caroline A. Ladd Hospital in China.

Henry Winslow Corbett joined FPC by baptism and profession of faith on July 11, 1867 along with Jacob Kamm. Corbett was born in 1827 in Massachusetts and worked in the wholesale dry goods business. At the age of 24 he moved west with a consignment of merchandise from wholesale houses in New York City and opened the HW Corbett Company at Font and Oak Streets. In 1852 he

married Carolyn Jigger of Albany, NY, Corbett succeeded on Front Street in spite of his being on the only store to close on Sundays. In the 1860s he branched out into transportation. In 1858 he was elected to the Portland City Council and in 1866 was elected to the United States Senate. Kimbark MacColl wrote of him: "Henry Winslow Corbett emerges as the most significant—and most complex—of the frontier merchants who laid the business-political foundations of the late 19th century PortlandHenry Corbett's life provides a fascinating study in the use of economic and political power, as well as in the exercise of human discipline. Moments of deep sadness cut through his personal life. His first wife died after 13 years of marriage. One son died before reaching manhood and his other son, Henry J., husband of Helen Ladd, the one on whom the father placed so much hope for the future and continuance of the family fame and fortune, died of tuberculosis at 35. Upon Henry Corbett's death in 1903, at the age of 76, his estate was valued in excess of \$5 million. His oldest grandson, Henry Ladd Corbett (1881-1957) was called to take up the family reins at the age of 22, just prior to graduation from Harvard." The Session and Trustees of First Presbyterian honored Corbett with this Memorial Resolution:

Henry Winslow Corbett, who was born at Westboro, Massachusetts, February 18th, 1827, and who died at Portland, Oregon, March 31st, 1905, was closely associated with the First Presbyterian Church at Portland, Oregon, for nearly forty-three years. Always willing to take his part in church work, his services in various official capacities were freely given. On August 20th, 1861, he was elected a member of the Board of Trustees and for many years he acted as Secretary of the Board, and for the fifteen years immediately prior to his death he acted as President. He also acted as Church Treasurer for a time. Mr. Corbett gave to the Church at all times the same judgment and energy which characterized the administration of his own affairs. He had its interests very much at heart and to a large extent the prominent position which the Church now occupies in the Northwest is due to his liberality and support. Therefore the Church desires to place on record its appreciation of his high character and its sincere sorrow for the loss which it has suffered through his death, and in token of his many services be it RESOLVED that the foregoing statement be spread upon the minutes of the Board of Trustees and the Session and that a copy of the same be transmitted to his widow.

The health, vitality, and future promise of the church were not merely dependent upon these men, but also the leadership and personal investment of the women of the church. The Ladies Sewing Society was established in 1862 not only to provide for the opportunity for fellowship, but also to raise money for a permanent home for the congregation. The society met at the home of Mrs. Eliza Ainsworth at the corner of Third and Pine Streets.

The little one story building at Third and Morrison where the church services were held, not being a particularly attractive place for such a meeting. . . .At first the ladies met at each other's houses in the afternoon, the gentlemen joining them at supper. Together they spent a merry evening. Afterwards Sociables were given every two weeks in the basement or SS room in the new church; two ladies in alphabetical order taking charge of each entertainment. Articles made by the ladies were on sale, also ice cream and cake. And such cake! Delicious Presbyterian cake! Admission of 25 cents was charged. Two other ladies who were able to do so gave \$10.00 apiece instead of taking charge of the sociable. Sometimes it was not necessary to use any of their \$20.00, so much being contributed, the whole amount in that case going into the treasury. Of course, it goes without saying that some of the younger ladies assisted in these entertainments. . . .A lady of much worth and long to be remembered in the early church history, was Mrs. E. M. Burton whose home was just one block from the church. In the giving of these socials she was constantly importuned to lend some of her household goods, from table linens and cutlery, to dining room table and chairs. She met all demands with cheerful acquiescence and a smiling face.

The most delightful harmony existed among the members of this society. Even during the Civil War, when feeling was so intense, although far away from the seat of war, never was the subject brought up by any member. Once, a visitor alluded to the war, but the subject was soon dropped

By 1863 the congregation was self-supporting; land for a sanctuary had been purchased; plans for the building had been approved and a contract awarded. Only \$9,500 had been appropriated by the Trustees for the work, so the contractor who did the work accepted the price with the provision that the basement would be left unfinished. The contract was to be paid in "United States gold and silver coin." The building was completed and dedicated in May 1864.

The bell, which was presented by Carolyn Corbett, still rings in our spire today. The organ that graced the sanctuary was built in New York by Henry Erben in 1851 and brought around the Cape to a church in San Francisco and brought to us in 1863 or 1864. It is most likely the oldest organ in the Pacific Northwest.

P.S. Caffrey served the church until June of 1867 when he resigned due to poor health. His ministry had extended for six and one-half years. During his pastorate (and Caffrey was never officially installed as pastor, but labored as an "evangelist") he had led the congregation in the move from temporary quarters in rented space to a new, spacious, and by the standards of the day, exquisite sanctuary. Eighty-six new members had been received into the church, and the financial situation of the congregation had significantly improved. Mr. Caffrey was never to resume active ministry. In 1904 his widow, Sarah, wrote a brief synopsis of his life for R. H. Blossom, who had inquired about the pastor's life and work:

Mr. Caffrey was born in Newark, New Jersey, and there spent his boyhood preparing for college. He then came to Princeton, New Jersey, and spent three years in College under Doctor MacClain's teaching as Professor. He finished his course honorably. He then entered the Theological Seminary to study for the ministry. After five years of close study he graduated, being a Master of five different languages. Professor MacGill of Biblical Theology pronounced him the best Hebrew scholar he ever knew. He then married and taught school for two years, spent two years attending lectures under Professor Hodge, Professor Alexander having died during his Theological course. Before he came to Portland, Oregon he was offered a professorship in the Theological seminary by Doctor MacGill, but declined, preferring to go West, spending seven years in ministerial work in Portland. He returned to Princeton where he stayed a year in trying to find a farm to suit him, but it was an old worn-out farm in the pines of old Virginia (to which he went). Being a student for twenty years he was no judge of land. He made a sad mistake for he could not sell, (and) consequently was obliged to submit to a bad bargain. He was the father of eight children and a most unfortunate farmer. It seemed everything he did turned out disadvantageously, not knowing how to carry on farm work. His health was good until about six months before his death, suffering from heart trouble. His life went out

without a struggle. He lived to see his seventieth year. He died
October the twelfth 1901.

J. Dudley Weaver, Jr.
First Presbyterian Church
Portland, Oregon