

**HISTORY QUESTION RE: NEED FOR THREE CHURCHES IN SAME AREA:
BENICIA/VALLEJO/FAIRFIELD (Solano County)**

BENICIA

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| Services since: | September 24, 1854 (U. S. Army Major Edward Townsend-Lay Reader) |
| Bishop Kip's first service: | October 21, 1854 |
| Organized as parish | February 13, 1855 |
| Present church constructed: | November-December 1859 |
| Consecrated by Bishop Kip: | January 11, 1860 |
| Expansion thru several stages | |
| Completed as it now stands generally: | 1886 |
| Renovations to undercroft | 1992-1993 |

In his *Early Days of My Episcopate*, Bishop Kip speaks of Benicia's proximity to San Francisco; of the convenience of it being a port for the Stockton and Sacramento steamboats (the usual way of travel for the early Bishops of Northern California); of the early efforts to make it the State Capitol, or as Kip says, "*the emporium of the Pacific*", but of how "*San Francisco took the lead, owing to its superior situation, and Benicia settled down into an inconsiderable place...*"; of it being a "*scattered town, with 'magnificent distances' between the houses...*"; of "*another settlement which has gathered around the works of the Pacific Steamship Company...*"; of "*A mile beyond this, and behind the hills...the United States' Reservation, occupied as a military post...*"; and finally Kip mentions "*a large seminary for girls and another for boys...*"

He then says, perceptively: "*If the townspeople, the steamer employees and the army people could be gathered into one place, they would together make quite a town. As it is, they present materials for missionary work, and a strong reason for establishing a parish at that point...*"

VALLEJO

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| Services since: | July 6, 1855 |
| Organized as parish | July 21, 1867 |
| Construction of first church: | 1869 |
| Consecrated by Bishop Kip: | March 13, 1870 |
| Original church destroyed by fire: | 1969 |
| Construction/dedication of present church by Bishop Haden: | 1971 |

Bishop Kip continued to visit Benicia, in February 1855 and again in July 1855. On Friday, July 6, 1855, Major Townsend took him the 7 miles from Benicia to Vallejo, and, says Kip, “*in the evening held the first service of our Church in that place.*” The Bishop estimated the population then a c. 1000, many of whom were employed at the Navy Yard at Mare Island. “*A Methodist chapel had been erected there, which was offered for our use, and notwithstanding the notice of but a few hours before, there was a good attendance, consisting of the officers and their families from Mare Island and the people at Vallejo...*” Regrettably, Major Townsend, who had served a real pillar of the church in both Benicia and Vallejo, was transferred to Washington in January 1856. “*Providentially,*” says Bishop Kip, “*at the time of Major Townsend’s departure I was able to supply the church by sending as Missionary, the Rev. David F. Macdonald*” who had come from Scotland and became a candidate for Holy Orders. He would hold a service at Benicia on Sunday mornings, then at Martinez in the afternoon, “*and also held occasional services at Vallejo.*”

FAIRFIELD

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| Services since: | April 28, 1867 |
| Organized as a mission | July 28, 1867 |
| 1st church built in Suisun | 1888 ?? |
| (still exists as First Church of Christ Scientist) | |
| Consecrated by Bishop Wingfield: | July 30, 1893 |
| Present facility built in Fairfield : | 1953-57 (JOC lists Fairfield in 1955) |
| (Note: it is not clear whether a church was built in Fairfield separate from the parish hall, etc. I could find no information re: a church consecration in Fairfield. A dedication for a new parish hall was done by Bishop Haden: December 18, 1957) | |

Bishop John Henry Ducachet Wingfield served the Missionary District/Diocese from 1874-1898. Of his travels in 1878, he says: “*Seventeen miles north lies the little village of Bridgeport, and five miles east of it, the two towns of Fairfield and Suisun. On the first and third Sundays the Bishop’s Chaplain, the Rev. G. A. Easton, holds a Service at these points. There are church buildings, and the congregations are excellent; the results, however, are small, compared to what they ought to be...*” (*Spirit of the Missions*, Vol. 43, p. 82)

In 1879 Bishop Wingfield writes: “*Suisun, where we have a small church and rectory attached. During the past year my Chaplain has held semi-monthly Services, which have been well attended. Four persons were confirmed in May, and in anticipation of the happy event, the ladies had the building put in thorough repair. I found a church without debt or incumbrance—a rare state of affairs in California...*” (*Spirit of the Missions*, Vol. 44, p. 21)

The Rev. James Lloyd Breck, who was based at St. Paul’s, Benicia for a good bit of his ministry was serving Grace, Suisun in 1888 and submitted plans for a new church to the Vestry. That year, the first large loss fire occurred in Suisun when a 2-year-old boy playing with matches started a fire that eventually burned 45 businesses, 28 homes, 8 bars and the fire house. This fire was the first time that

Suisun City saw mutual aid when the Benicia and Vallejo fire departments sent crews and engines by rail to help fight the fire. (<https://www.suisun.com/departments/fire-department/department-history/>) The new Grace Church in Suisun city was probably completed in 1888, but I could not find the exact date. Bishop Wingfield, however, gives a detailed account of the consecration service which he celebrated on July 30, 1893: “*Went to Suisun and consecrated Grace Church; also preached the sermon and celebrated the Lord’s death, being assisted in the services by the Rev. W. L. Clark and the Rev. Mr. Breck, the former reading the Instrument of Donation and the latter the Sentence of Consecration. The music was excellent and the occasion full of interest. After service I met several persons of the congregation.*” (*Journal of Convention*, 1894, p. 23)

COMMENTS

Why the need for three missions/parishes in the same area, around the same time?? I can’t find much in the records of either Bishop Kip or of Bishop Wingfield which explicitly address this question. But I think looking at some of what was written about that time, both from the perspective of the national Episcopal Church and from that of the bishops, will give a sense of why they felt compelled to make decisions which they did. I feel certain, too, that all the Bishops of Northern California, given the geographical extent of the diocese, were all too conscious of the full legal name of the national Episcopal Church corporate body: the ***“Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America”***, incorporated by the legislature of New York and established in **1821**. The membership of the corporation “*shall be considered as comprehending all persons who are members of the Church*”.

That William Ingraham Kip became both a bishop and the first Missionary Bishop of California (1853-1874) was completely serendipitous, which often is another name for Providence! He had been Rector of St. Paul’s Church, Albany, NY, for 15 years. He happened to talk with his family physician who had a brother-in-law who was a warden at Trinity Church, San Francisco. The current Rector there had just died, and the Vestry put out feelers to people back East for a possible successor. As they were talking about California, the wife of Kip’s physician asked “*Why would you not go?*”

This set Kip to thinking. There wasn’t anything holding him back. Around the same time, however, he also received an invitation to fill the rectorship of St. Peter’s, Baltimore. A week later, during a visit to Baltimore, he called on an old friend, Bishop William Whittingham, bishop of Maryland, who greeted him with: “*Well, I hope you have not come here to tell me you are not going to St. Peter’s!*” They talked and Kip told him that he was going to decline the call. He mentioned that, if The Rev. Christopher Wyatt, assistant at Church of the Holy Apostles in New York City declined Trinity Church’s call in San Francisco, which had also been offered to several other people, that the call would then be offered to him. (Subsequently, Wyatt did accept the call.) Bishop Whittingham thought awhile, then suddenly said: “*I’ve new light! I’ve new light! You must go to California, but not as a Presbyter. You must go in another capacity...*” Bishop Kip writes in his *Early Days of My Episcopate* (Completed March 6, 1860; published in 1892; reissued by Biobooks, Oakland, CA, 1954): “***This was the germ of the California Episcopate. Here was the first suggestion of what afterwards developed into a plan***

which has changed my whole life. From this conversation grew up the idea of sending out a Missionary Bishop, and with this, my name, through Bishop Whittingham's suggestion..."

Some time before the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, October 1853, in New York, the Convocation of California had formed itself into a Diocese. The Church canons of 1844 held that Missionary Bishops were “*to exercise Episcopal functions in States or Territories not organized into Dioceses...*” The House of Bishops debated long and hard about whether they had the authority to elect a Missionary Bishop there, but since they hadn’t yet received California into union with the Convention or recognized it as a Diocese, they felt they could proceed by treating it as “Missionary ground”.

Bishop Jonathan Wainwright, Provisional Bishop of New York, nominated Kip. After some misgivings about “*my Churchmanship [which] was rather too elevated in its character*” among the 26 Bishops, they unanimously nominated him as Missionary Bishop of California, along with The Rev. F. T. Scott as Missionary Bishop of Oregon and Washington Territories. Both nominations were approved by the House of Clerical and Lay Deputies, again, after a bit of discussion. The reality of the decision, naturally, weighed on Kip, but Bishop Whittingham reassured him: “*You must go. They should have had a Bishop of California three years ago [just after the Gold Rush], and if you do not go now, they will not have one for three years to come...*”

We get a sense of how Kip was feeling about this new ministry and the challenges he now faced from his account of his consecration as bishop.:

“*When I look back to the election and consecration, everything seems to me like a dream. The consecration was over before I had recovered from the first effects of the surprise produced by the election.*

When I reached New York, I found the House of Bishops on the point of adjourning. They had been in session about three weeks...They insisted, therefore, on the consecration at once taking place. In fact, so hurried was this matter, that I never received any official notice of my election nor did I in any way send an acceptance...

Our Presiding Bishop — [Thomas Church] Brownell of Connecticut — from his age and growing infirmities was too much exhausted...to officiate at the consecration. As I was to be the first Missionary Bishop sent to the Pacific, he appointed to act as consecrator in his place, Bishop [Jackson] Kemper, the first Missionary Bishop [to the Northwest, 1835] ever elected in our Church...Bishop Kemper had always been a strong friend of mine...

The consecration was appointed to take place in Trinity Church, New York, the next week, on October 28th, the Feast of St. Simon and St. Jude...Bishop Brownell appointed, to deliver the sermon, my brother-in-law, Bishop [George] Burgess of Maine..." Bishop Kip goes on to quote remarks from the sermon, including the conclusion — the address or charge to the candidate. It summarizes the difficulties and challenges facing the new Missionary Bishop of California:

“...And now, my dear brother, now, more than ever before, this work is to be made yours, with **the highest responsibilities, the largest sphere, the most various tasks, and I will not refrain from adding, the most peculiar perils**. It is not the Episcopate alone, nor the Missionary Episcopate, alone. **It is an Episcopate to be exercised where fellow laborers are still to be gathered**; where seminaries are yet to be founded; where congregations are mostly to be begun. **There is no past on which you can lean; and it is more than possible that around you will be little of that support which we need** and find among incitements and encouragements of well-established Christian communities. **The minister of Christ whose charge is remote and lonely, must walk with God, or sink into spiritual slumber**; for no mortal aid will fan continually the flame upon his inward altar. **You go where thirst for gold, impatience of restraint, the vices of adventurers, and all the ills of unavoidable lawlessness, have been before you**; where the softening and instructive influences of old age and of childhood, can, as yet, be little known, and where female piety throws but a small measure of its familiar light over the surface and the heart of society. **A lover of the world, a pleaser of men, a reed shaken by the wind, has nowhere his place among the standard bearers of Christ; but least of all, on such an outpost, beleaguered by such temptations...**”

Throughout the issues of *Spirit of the Missions* of the early days which I’ve read there seems to be a constant concern by the still relatively young Episcopal Church over 1) difficulties in recruiting suitable Missionaries; and 2) lack of sufficient money with which to help fund Missionary Districts. Interestingly, the latter point has been a mantra of almost every Bishop of Northern California. Bishop Wingfield, particularly, mentions this a lot in his yearly diaries. There is also the hint, at least, that the West, which was still in the process of populating, growing and establishing communities, let alone churches, was the “poor child” of the Church and less supported than ministry in the East. That was probably somewhat true, but it was also very frustrating to accept because of the outstanding service record of Missionary Bishops, clergy and lay persons generally, and particularly in the Missionary District of Northern California. The rigors and barriers to their growth which these dedicated people faced, fought, and most times conquered is quite astounding. That they did as well as they did is remarkable. **I believe that would be a key consideration in determining why Bishop Kip and Bishop Wingfield particularly would establish these three churches mentioned above: they were utterly eager and motivated for the spread of the Gospel, and they recognized in the people of these particular communities tremendous potential for becoming truly the people of God for this particular area.** History has proven them to be right, because St. Paul’s, Benicia, Ascension, Vallejo, and Grace, Fairfield have blossomed over the years into vibrant communities of faith, carrying out creative and important ministry, both to people within and outside the parishes in Solano County.

Bishop Kip, 14 years before he was succeeded by Bishop Wingfield, wrote this at the conclusion of his *Early Days of My Episcopate*, p. 105:

“I know lay down my pen. During the past year I have at leisure moments...noted down my early experience in this Diocese. When our successors read this volume, I trust it will furnish them with some interesting facts with regard to the early Church on the Pacific.

How will this narrative seem to them? When they are worshipping in splendid buildings and members of powerful parishes, how will they regard our early struggles? With us the contest is a hard one, as we strive in an unsettled state of society to inculcate a regard for the things which are 'unseen and eternal' on a people given up to the greed of gold.

Children of the next generation! to you we bequeath this contest. Living over our dust and inheriting the fruit of our labors, we pray you worthily to wage this warfare till you resign your weapons to others and join us in the land of spirits."

