

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Pioneer Protestant Preacher

Samuel Hopkins Willey, a young graduate of Dartmouth, reached Monterey in February 1849, just as the gold fever was mounting to its dizzy height, bearing a commission from the Home Missionary Society of the Congregational church. In the autumn of that year he was made a chaplain of the historic Constitutional Convention, meeting in Colton Hall, Monterey.

Willey served also as chaplain at the Presidio, and for six months he conducted a pioneer school, here.

Rockwell D. Hunt, director of the California History Foundation at the College of the Pacific at Stockton (his Alma Mater), has written an article called "Pioneer Protestant Preachers of Early California," in which he states that Samuel Willey is best known and gratefully remembered for his fruitful endeavors in the field of education. He had been planning for a college or university even before the end of 1849. Adverse conditions at that time brought delay but not defeat.

In 1855 the charter for the College of California, a Christian Institution, was granted. It was dedicated in 1860, and later became the University of California. While never the president of this great college, Willey served as actual head administrator of the College of California for eight years.

At the Golden Jubilee, April 16, 1910, President Benjamin Ide Wheeler conferred upon venerable Samuel Willey, in the presence of ten thousand persons an honorary degree, citing him as "founder, prophet, seer, beholder," and announced, "Upon You, the foremost benefactor of California, first citizen of the State, I confer the degree of Doctor of Laws."

In appearance, Willey was "handsome, dark-eyed, ruddy, tall, and of athletic build." He had not been long in California before he met Martha Jeffers, a charming maiden of adventurous spirit who had accompanied her sister, the wife of Captain Westcott, to Monterey. Their marriage on September 19, 1849, was indeed a social event. During the years that followed six children were born to them.

Aside from officiating alternately with Rev. Padre Antonio Ramirez during the six weeks of the labors of the Convention, he carried on his school for six months in Colton Hall, did his regular church work, served as

Presidio chaplain and made time to found the first library in Monterey for the English-speaking population.

It was three years after the charter for the College of California had been granted in 1855, that Berkeley was formally chosen to be the future site for the college.

In 1935 a plaque was placed, with fitting ceremony, on one of the oldest oak trees of the University campus. It bears this inscription:

In grateful dedication to the

Memory of

SAMUEL HOPLINS WILLEY

1821-1914

One of the founders of the

College of California, from

which this university sprang.

The product of Dr. Willey's pen constitutes an important contribution to California Literature. In the field of higher education is his "History of the College of California," published in 1887. His "Thirty Years in California (1849-79), and "The Transition Period of California" (1846-50) published in 1901. He passed away in January of 1914.

In 1903 Hon. J.R. Knowland, chairman of the California State Parks Commission and a prominent Native Son of the Golden West, brought the Rev. S.H. Willey, then a resident of Berkeley, to Monterey, to view again the scene of the State's Constitutional Convention. As he was then the only survivor of the historic assemblage, he gave reminiscences that have since been recognized as a valuable contribution to the story of California's most important early convention.

According to a letter received from Mr. Knowland, Mr. Willey pointed out to him that the delegates entered the hall on the second floor and that the only access to the upper floor was the rear stairway, the front entrance not existing at that time.

Three-quarters of this convention hall was utilized by delegates and the remaining space occupied by the spectators. A raised platform was constructed at the end of the hall for the presiding officer, and in front of this the tables for the secretaries and clerks. The half dozen native Californians were seated together with an interpreter.