Methodist Pioneers,
Founding Fathers of Seattle
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Perhaps no major city in the United States owes quite as much to Methodist pioneers as Seattle, Washington. Most of its founders were Methodists, as were those who played a dominant role in the early and decisive years of its development. Most, if not all, of the first settlers were Methodists. The first church established was a Methodist Church. The first school was conducted by the wife of a Methodist minister in the Methodist parsonage. The first university, now the University of Washington, was founded through the initiative of a Methodist minister supported by a loyal Methodist laity. And this is but a sample.

Let us reverse the calendar a century. It is September 25, 1851. A party of three men paddle up to the shore of what is now West Seattle. It is the end of a long journey. Since early April they have traveled, first by wagon train from their homes in Illinois to the Willamette Valley, and from there by foot and Indian canoe to the "Puget Sound country." They have been sent ahead by other members of their party to explore this region and determine its promise. The oldest of the group is John Low, 31. The other two are David Denny, 19, and Lee Terry, also a teen-ager.

A tribe of Indians nearby is busily engaged, fishing for salmon. Their chief, a noble man of regal bearing, strides down the beach to bid them welcome. His name, Seattle!

That night they make camp under a tall cedar on the bluff overlooking Elliott Bay and what is now downtown Seattle—then a forest of towering fir trees extending to the water’s edge.

They decide, this is the place. It can become the site for a great city, they say, a New York for the West Coast. Near what is now Alki Point they begin work to erect a cabin. John Low sets off for Oregon to bring the rest of the party; Lee Terry heads for the Hudson Bay trading post at Nisqually to get some tools; and David Denny stays behind to hold the fort and work on the cabin.

Six weeks later at dawn on November 13, in a pouring winter rain, the schooner "Exact" drops anchor off Alki Point. A small, bedraggled group of people are hastily put ashore on the muddy flats, and the ship sails off. Nothing is in sight but the mud and rocks of the shoreline, towering trees, and the rain. Then out of tangled under-
growth David Denny emerges to bid them welcome. He is sopping wet, sick with malaria, hobbling from a bad cut by his axe, and nearly starved.

The cabin is up, but it lacks a roof. While men of the party carry their meager possessions from the beach, the women stand with their small children in the cold rain viewing what they have traveled across a continent to find. It is more than the stoutest of hearts can endure. Beside a fallen tree that offers some shelter, they gather their drenched, shivering and crying children about them and they themselves weep.

But soon they dry their tears. With their husbands they fashion out of that wilderness, Seattle! All told they numbered 12 adults and 12 children. The children ranged in age from 9 years to two months. The oldest man in the party was 34. Most, if not all of them, were Methodists. From them Seattle was born.

II

Now look more closely at David Denny, the lad of 19 who welcomed the party to Alki Point. Since he and his associates believed this could become "the New York of the West Coast," they named it New York, adding the word "Alki," Chinook for "by-and-by." Soon the name Seattle was substituted for New York, but we still have "Alki Point."

David Denny spent the next 52 years in the making of Seattle, investing his life in dreams and hopes which now stand in steel and stone. Arriving with but 25 cents he became one of Seattle's first multi-millionaires. But he was not a money grubber. He was a leader in civic enterprise, holding such offices as membership in the Board of Regents of Washington University, King County Treasurer, and Probate Judge. What is more, he was a man of principle, a Christian. A life-long Methodist, he led in the development of the First Methodist Church of Seattle, and later Queen Anne Methodist Church. Twice he was elected a lay delegate, representing this Conference in the General Conference in 1888 and 1892.

Denny acted like a Methodist in the best sense of the word. He was known as a man of integrity. He was willing to stand up and be counted for unpopular causes. He was a forthright advocate of woman's suffrage when that cause prompted riots. He was a champion of the oppressed and persecuted. He opposed slavery. The Indians quickly found him a friend. During the anti-Chinese riots in Seattle he was among those who stood against the mob. He was described by a contemporary as "Friend of the Chinese, Injun, and Nigger." He was a life-long advocate to total abstinence and an opponent of the liquor traffic.

When Denny became an old man, disaster overtook him. The panic of 1893 swept away his fortune and left him penniless. But
he did not yield to despair or bitterness. He kept his faith in God and in Seattle. Quietly and without complaint he went to work with his hands at humble toil, still giving his love and support to the causes he always had cherished. So he continued until death overtook him 60 years ago. He ended more nobly than he began. David Denny: pioneer Methodist, Christian gentleman, a father of Seattle.

III

Meet another pioneer Methodist of Seattle, Thomas Mercer. A street bears his name, an island, too.

Mercer also came by wagon train via the Oregon Trail, departing Illinois in April, 1852. Being a man known for competence, courage, and honesty, Mercer was elected captain of the train. He brought them all safely through, but once in Oregon his wife became ill and died, leaving him with four small daughters.

In the spring of 1853 Mercer brought his little girls and the first team of horses to Seattle. He made his living with that team. He was a kind and gentle man whom everyone came to love and to trust.

Mercer, with David Denny, made a special effort to understand and befriend the Indians. Later, during the Indian War of 1856, his home and that of David Denny, it is said, were the only two not looted and burned.

Mercer was a quiet man, but he had vision, too. It was he who in a speech at the community Fourth of July picnic in 1855 proposed that Seattle's largest lake should be named for the father of our nation, and that the smaller lake which stands between it and the Sound should be named Lake Union; for, said he, this lake must serve as a means of uniting by canal Lake Washington with Puget Sound. The names he proposed were adopted and the canal he envisioned was completed in 1916.

Like David Denny, Mercer was active in every enterprise for the common good, and he walked forthrightly as a Christian. In later years he, too, served as Probate Judge. He aided in the establishment of churches, orphanages, and the Young Men's Christian Association.

IV

In that 20-wagon train of which Tom Mercer was captain, there traveled a close friend and fellow-townsmen named Dexter Horton. Horton and his wife came with Tom Mercer to Seattle in the spring of 1853. Horton was penniless. Both Horton and his wife were ill.

However, Horton took a job in Yesler's sawmill and his wife ran a boarding house. Hard work improved their health. And they saved money. Within a year Horton and David Denny established a general store and the first semblance of a bank. Horton went to San Francisco in a lumber brig and returned with a stock of
merchandise and a safe. It was the only safe in Seattle. Prior to that time they had made do with a coffee barrel.

Rejoicing that at last Seattle had a safe in charge of an honest man, grateful Seattleites went to their cabins and back yards and brought forth buried savings, depositing them in the safe. Dexter Horton properly tagged each deposit and provided a receipt. He always closed the iron door and turned the knob with proper solemnity. That was enough to insure safety. No depositor suffered a loss. That safe had one defect which only Dexter Horton knew. It had no back!

That was the beginning, so goes the story, of Dexter Horton, banker and financier extraordinary. Since he, too, was a stalwart Methodist, it is appropriate that the Dexter Horton Building should occupy precisely the land where the First Methodist Church was first located, and that this should be headquarters for the giant banking enterprise he established.

Now it is proper to introduce a Methodist preacher and his wife, David and Catherine Blaine. They came from Seneca Falls, New York. Seneca Street is named after their home town. They arrived as bride and groom in the late fall of 1853, having traveled by way of Panama. David was a graduate of Hamilton College and Auburn Theological School and had served one year on the faculty at Hamilton College. Catherine was the well-educated and sedately reared daughter of a genteel New York State family.

A high wind, rough water and approaching darkness forced them ashore at Alki Point on Saturday night, November 26. The next day everyone in the settlement there turned out for services, afternoon and evening, about 30 all told. At the close of the evening service Charles Terry “of his own accord,” David later wrote his parents, took his hat and “passed it around among the auditors.” “He turned the contents out on a table,” continued David, “and I scraped them into my pocket. When we counted the collection it amounted to $12.50.” Charles Terry later said, “Don’t know much about Methodism, but I know that much.” That offering stood as a record in David Blaine’s ministry for some time to come: All told the next 12 months he was to receive only $150 from his Puget Sound “auditors,” as he called them.

The following Monday morning they put out by Indian canoe for their destination, the settlement across the bay known as Seattle. They paddled the five miles in pouring rain to what is now downtown Seattle, then a little hamlet of 30 cabins and shacks rising amidst stumps, surrounded by forest. The next Sunday, David Blaine conducted services in a boarding house at the corner of First and Cherry, and that day, December 4, 1853 established the First Methodist Church of Seattle with four charter members, of whom his wife Catherine was one. They rented the only quarters
available, a one-room shack, 13 by 14 feet, with cracks between the rough boards so wide that no windows were needed. They moved in and went to work.

During the three years of the Blaines’ pastorate, Seattle was never more than a cluster of 30 cabins and a sawmill. All of King County had less than 300 inhabitants. But they laid foundations.

Catherine Blaine established and taught the first school in Seattle. Within two months after their arrival, she was conducting a school for the 14 children of the settlement in their one-room cabin five days a week. David Blaine was the first minister of any denomination to live in Seattle. He established the first congregation in Seattle and largely by his own efforts cleared the land and built the first parsonage and church in Seattle. A small incident reveals his character. Paint was expensive and hard to get. No building in Seattle was painted. But he believed that whatever carried the name of the Methodist Church should be representative of the best. So he painted the church white. For years it was known as the “white church.” He painted his house to match, too. They were the only painted buildings in Seattle.

David and Catherine Blaine brought to their ministry in Seattle a quality of dedication and competence that lives on after them.

VI

Now consider another Methodist preacher, Daniel Bagley. He was a close friend of Dexter Horton and Thomas Mercer, making the journey West with them in 1852. While they had come almost directly to Seattle, he had remained in the Willamette Valley serving as a missionary of the Methodist Protestant denomination. In 1860 the Reverend Daniel Bagley with his wife and family drove into town with Seattle’s first buggy.

Following the Indian War of 1856 Seattle had declined, people had moved away. Only 20 families remained. But Daniel Bagley was not dismayed. He resurrected the dreams and hopes of the first settlers and imbued the community with a new spirit of confidence and courage.

Arthur Denny had been petitioning the Territorial Legislature in Olympia for the establishment of a university at Seattle. The legislators wearied under his appeals and decided they would render him silent. They voted for the establishment of a territorial university in Seattle if the following conditions were met:

1. They required that a suitable site of ten acres within Seattle be contributed for the campus.

2. They provided two townships of land from the public domain for the building and financing of the university, but with the proviso that the land should not be sold for less than $1.50 per acre. Since the standard price was $1.25 an acre, with land everywhere and
few buyers, they were sure this of itself would constitute an im-
possible barrier.

3. They stipulated that the university be opened for instruction
within one year. If all else failed to quiet the noise from Seattle,
they were sure this would.

Arthur Denny came home from Olympia with the proposition in
the spring of 1861. Denny was crushed, but not Daniel Bagley.
Bagley believed the territory should have a university and that it
should be in Seattle; and, said he, what should be, could be! He
was made one of the three University Commissioners. They elected
him president and told him to go ahead and do what he could.

First, Bagley persuaded Arthur Denny to give eight acres “on
the knoll.” The remainder he secured from Charles Terry, the lad
who had passed his hat for the first Methodist collection ten years
before on Alki Point, and from John Lander. So Bagley had the
ten acres comprising a suitable site.

Next, Bagley hired men to clear the land by paying them two
acres a day at $1.50 per acre from the government land. The giant
trees they cut down he persuaded Herman Yesler to saw into
lumber at his mill, taking as his pay government land at the rate
of $1.50 per acre. The remainder of the land he was able to sell for
the required $1.50 an acre.

The sale of the remaining land provided enough cash for the
purchase of various building materials, including hardware and
paint which could not be turned out at Yesler’s Mill. When all was
done Bagley still had $23,000 with which to start the school. Nine
months after the Territorial Legislature had sent Arthur Denny
home the butt of their joke, a surprising advertisement began to
appear in papers and handbills. It announced the opening of the
Territorial University in Seattle, Monday, November 4, 1861.

The Legislature traveled en masse to Seattle. Here they found
campus and buildings ready, and surmounting all, a tall fir tree,
skinned of its bark serving as a flag pole.

Of course, all was not perfection. There was a tangle of legal
difficulty in getting proper deeds from the government for the
various acres earned by the various men in lieu of wages. At first
they had to offer elementary courses since there were no students
prepared for university work. Fifteen years passed before the first
university degree could be granted. Also, they started with but one
teacher who was also president.

But, thanks to a Methodist preacher named Bagley, the school got
under way. That ten acres of land is still owned by the University of
Washington, including the site of the Olympic Hotel, and it earns a
tidy sum of several million in rent each year for the university
budget. The Olympic Hotel occupies almost precisely the site of the
first major building erected that summer in 1861.
Next, knowing Seattle's need for coal, Bagley became a leader in the development of the Newcastle coal field near the southern tip of Lake Washington. This became a most profitable venture and of great importance to the economic development of Seattle.

But all the while Bagley was first and last a minister of the Gospel. In 1865 he led in building the "Brown Church" at the corner of what is now Second and Madison, the very site of the office building where our Methodist Headquarters are located. This, a Methodist Protestant Church, was the second church built in Seattle and its spiritual descendant is the Capitol Hill Methodist Church.

All told Daniel Bagley gave nearly 45 years of enterprise and dedicated life for the Methodist Church, and for his Lord in Seattle. There is reason for a hall being named for him at the University.

VII

And how dare we close this brief introduction to pioneer Methodism in early Seattle without mentioning Asa Mercer and those wondrous "Mercer Girls"!

In 1861 Asa Mercer, younger brother of Thomas Mercer, graduated from college in Illinois and decided to cast in his lot with the pioneers of Seattle. He was 23 years old. Upon arrival, men were at work clearing land for the university. Since he was young and strong and needed a job, he went to work cutting down trees and digging out the stumps. Soon they needed a surveyor. Since he was qualified and at hand, he was given the job. When the buildings were up and the university ready for students, they needed a president. Since he had a college education and was at hand, they gave him the job. What is more, he served as the faculty. The school opened, we are told, with one president and one teacher, two in one.

But Asa Mercer's chief distinction was not his contribution to the primitive beginnings of what is now the University of Washington. He is best remembered for the "Mercer Girls."

In those years Seattle had a practical problem, men outnumbered the women ten to one. If this were to become a place of respectability, a city with a future, women were needed, good women, and in quantity.

Asa Mercer, being a thoughtful man with some imagination and foresight, began to think. On the other side of the continent the Civil War was grinding toward its bloody end. In grim and tragic consequence, thousands of young women would be denied husbands and a normal life as wives and mothers. Here were young men in abundance in need of wives. Soon Asa Mercer was on his way East. In Boston he told the story of Puget Sound and the Pacific Northwest and of the opportunities for employment in a land where women were scarce and highly prized. Soon he had scores of appli-
cants. His standards were high as to family background, education, health, appearance, religion and morals. For those who offered themselves it was like volunteering for a trip to Mars with little or no hope of return. He selected eleven and escorted them to Seattle, arriving in the Spring of 1864. What a welcome they received! Seattle was never so washed, scrubbed, combed, and cleaned.

Asa Mercer made good his bargain. He found teaching positions for them all in adjacent communities about the Sound. And within a year human nature had taken its proper course and all were married but two who were betrothed.

The grand success of that venture encouraged Asa Mercer to go again, this time for 500 young women who would come to the Pacific Northwest to, as he put it, “make a life.”

He arrived in New York April 17, 1865. The next day he would go to Washington and ask the help of President Lincoln in securing free transport for the girls in a surplus government ship, of which there then were many.

Abraham Lincoln had been an intimate friend of Asa Mercer’s family in Illinois. As a child he had been one of Lincoln’s favorites, often sitting on his lap and listening to his stories. Mercer was sure Lincoln would provide the needed help, especially in view of his success in bringing the first group of young women to Seattle.

The next morning he read of Lincoln’s death. Finally, General Grant used influence to provide the ship, but a crusty quartermaster general denounced the whole idea as ridiculous and denied permission. To make matters worse, an enterprising editor decided to build circulation by declaring the Mercer expedition a hoax, that the pious sounding young gentleman from Seattle really was seeking recruits for the brothels there. So the sky fell in on Asa Mercer. In the end, nearly a year later, he finally set out with 100 young women who met his high standards and were willing to stake all in coming to Seattle. It was a long journey of nearly 100 days around the Cape at the end of the world. At last when the ship docked in San Francisco it would go no farther. There was Mercer in boom town San Francisco with a hundred hungry young women to feed and house and transport to Seattle. He was down to $3.00. He managed to sell some wagons and farm machinery he was shipping, netting $2,300. With this he got the girls to Seattle.

The whole venture, for all its ill fortune in the beginning, proved to be of decisive significance for Seattle. The girls did themselves and Asa Mercer credit. They quickly found employment as dressmakers, milliners, and schoolteachers, some becoming teachers at the University. Within a year most of them were married. Not one of them proved to be a mistake. They became the mothers of Seattle. They brought to this entire region a sensitivity to cultural values, a concern for religion and morality, a courage and zest for life that
served to save this place from the debasement of Skid Road. They
joined hands with religion and education, church and school to lift
Seattle out of the muck and face it toward the future that is today.
Who can trace Seattle's transition from its rough and sometimes
sordid beginnings to the city it is today without bowing in deference
and gratitude to the "Mercer Girls?"

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