

A Brief History of Emmanuel Episcopal Church

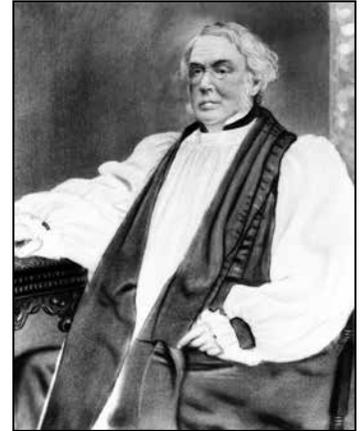
Whether you are visiting, recently moved here or have lived in the Sierra foothills for years, we invite you to make history at Emmanuel Episcopal Church. All of us at Emmanuel, whether young or old, are children of the ages

seeking to know Christ and to make Christ known. Against a background of continuing change, we are engaged in the Christian mission of reconciling all people to God and one another in Christ.

In the Beginning: A Missionary Bishop

Bishop William Ingraham Kip, the son of an old New York family, abandoned the comforts of Albany to face the hardships of the unsettled West. He came to find the faithful from distant churches scattered among the variety of people who had joined the Gold Rush and to bring them together for common prayer. In April 1854 he traveled by riverboat and stage to Grass Valley with his wife and 14-year-old son and found “one of the most beautiful places among the mountains and surrounded by some of the richest mining spots.”

Bishop Kip led the first Episcopal services in Nevada City on April 21 and in Grass Valley on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 23, 1854. About 150 people heard him preach that day, including those who pledged themselves to forming an Episcopal parish. He also established a nodding acquaintance with the town’s celebrity, Lola Montez, an Irish dancer and Bavarian countess, who settled temporarily in the foothills to escape her fame.



Rt. Rev. Kip,
Missionary Bishop

First Rector: Rev. William H. Hill



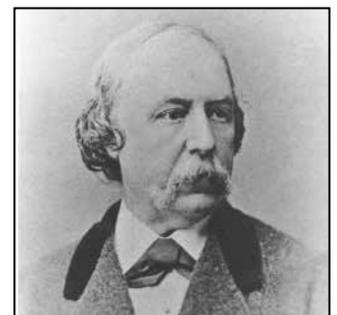
Rev. William Hill

Having responsibility for all of California, Bishop Kip traveled widely in the following year. He felt overwhelmed by “the feeling of all there is to do with so little help.” Yet he didn’t forget Grass Valley, and when help appeared, he put it to use. In 1855 the Rev. William Hill, a former Albany newspaper editor who had become a priest, arrived in California in 1855 and Kip sent him to Nevada County.

Hill organized twin parishes, Holy Trinity in Nevada City and Emmanuel in Grass Valley. The Grass Valley congregation first met near the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1855, and took its name from Isaiah 7:14: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall call him Emmanuel.” Hill walked back and forth between the towns to hold services in rented halls. In June 1855 Bishop Kip returned to encourage Rev. Hill and his congregations and to conduct the first confirmations in the California Gold Country.

Early Lay Leaders

Early lay leaders of Emmanuel Church included miners, merchants, doctors and attorneys, and street names, like Walsh, Conaway and Richardson, memorialize them. First among them was Melville Attwood, who with his wife Jane had entertained the Kips on their first visit. He was an English-trained metallurgist who had prospected in South America and operated mines on the Isle of Mann. He came to Grass Valley for his wife’s health and became superintendent of the most successful early mine, the Gold Quartz Mining Company. In January 1857 the Emmanuel vestry accepted a gift from the Gold Hill mine, a plot of land bound by



Melville Attwood

Church, Walsh and Mill streets “on condition that the Corporation [that is, the parish] should

erect thereon a church edifice within eighteen months of acceptance of the gift.”

Building a Church



Isabell Attwood

While men of the day served on the vestry and building committee at Emmanuel Church, women energized the building of a sanctuary. Two young women especially showed the spirit of gospel heroines. Isabell Attwood, the teenage daughter of Melville and Jane, and her friend Jennie Jenkins, the daughter of a Cornish miner, mounted horses and visited all the local placer mines. From the open hands of miners, the young women received contributions of gold flakes and nuggets to build the church.

When accepting the gift of land, the Emmanuel vestry decided to build a church “in the Gothic style.” In America, the style became associated with a movement to restore catholic doctrine, ritual and beauty to Episcopal churches. The result in Grass Valley was a modest building with a simply gabled mass, relieved by a high cross and a gabled porch. Buttressed walls, sculpted spirals, pointed windows and a rose window completed the design. Emmanuel Church arose in contrast to a primitive, utilitarian mining camp around it. It suggested a different time and place and a timeless order of reality. A new rector at Emmanuel, the Rev. Henry O. G.

Smeathman, presided at the first worship service on August 1, 1858. The church, not entirely completed, opened in time to comply with the gift of land.

Bonanza & Borrascas, Boom & Bust

Emmanuel Church opened at an inauspicious time. Confidence in the local mines had faded and miners and families had left for the silver boom near Virginia City. But devout Episcopalian William Bourn, Jr., owner of the Empire mine, foresaw “ere long we may have a little boom of our own.” Indeed, Grass Valley’s principle industry rebounded by harnessing waterpower and deploying technologies developed in Virginia City, Australia and South Africa. The 1880s saw a new bonanza and even better times arrived by the late-1890s.

One result of a mining boom was construction in 1901 of the Emmanuel rectory, the home of rectors and their families ever since. A legacy donation from a mining man, John Polglase, initiated the project and the design came from the pages of National Builder magazine. The rector at the time, the Rev. W. H. Fenton-Smith, drove the project to its completion at a cost of \$2,438. A smaller parsonage, which had been built previously, was converted to a parish hall.



Emmanuel Church opened 1855.

The Beauty of Holiness

In the first two decades of the 20th century Grass Valley enjoyed her “halcyon days,” as one long-time parishioner said. World War I ended those days and then the parish suffered through the influenza pandemic of 1918–19. The rector then, the Rev. Bert Foster, D.D., buried 15 Christians in 15 weeks. He was arrested for conducting one funeral without wearing a mask.

Throughout the decades Emmanuel parishioners worshiped in the beauty of holiness, especially on the holiest days.



Rosetta & Oakley Johns.

For more than a century Emmanuel Church has invited everyone to its Shrove Tuesday Waffle Sale. The parish’s guild fairs, represented in the twenty-first century by its Victorian Christmas Fair, have welcomed the wider community for over 120 years. These events have raised thousands of dollars for charitable organizations in Nevada County.



Sanctuary at Christmas.

Christmas saw the sanctuary, rood screen and altar decked with red berries and greens boughs, and Easter called for springtime flowers. Music has always been central to the worship. This was especially true when Rosette Johns, who studied at London’s Royal School of Music, directed the parish choir in the mid-20th century. She attracted the finest voices in the county to the Emmanuel choir, including her husband, Oakley Johns, a miner and memorable tenor.



Harriet Nettell remembered the first waffle sale in 1916.

The Rev. Frank Buck

The parish was energized following World War II by the arrival of a new rector, the Rev. Frank Buck, a Canadian who had been a missionary, high school principal and chaplain to Commonwealth forces in both world wars. Under Father Buck’s leadership church attendance tripled, people young and old were baptized and confirmed, debt was eliminated, and the church purchased a new organ. Father Buck introduced a \$5,700 plan to update the parish hall by expanding the kitchen and adding classrooms. The parish and town were shocked when Father Buck, 59, died of a heart attack in October 1951. With a standing vote at the next annual meeting, the parish unanimously adopted the name Frank Buck Memorial Hall.



Rev. Colonel Buck.

Historic Preservation

In the 1970s Emmanuel Church was one of the local treasures crying out for preservation. Initial repairs to the 120-year-old-church revealed rotten timbers and a crumbling foundation. As city inspector considered condemning the building,

parishioners rallied to save one of the county’s iconic structures. Led by Rector Francis O’Reilly, a Restoration Committee and women’s guilds, the parish raised money from members and the community. Tours of the church

encouraged support because, as Father O'Reilly said: "You really feel that it is God's house." The church was restored by November 1978. Maintenance of its historic wooden church, and updates to the rectory and parish hall, present a continuing challenge.

2005 Sesquicentennial

In 2005 the parish celebrated its sesquicentennial under the leadership of the Rev. James Sigler, Emmanuel's longest serving rector to that time. After Father James retired, the parish called the Rev. Seth Kellermann, who had been raised in Nevada County and served as a U. S. Army Ranger in Afghanistan. In 2009, he moved into the rectory with wife, Tara, and four daughters, Lena, Sarah, Clara and Ella, and the parish began a new chapter. With Father Seth's leadership the parish purchased the Lola Montez House and an industrial building at 240 Mill Street, for use as classrooms, meeting rooms and facilities for service organizations.



Renovated church in 1976.



Text: Gage McKinney / Design: David A. Comstock

At Emmanuel Church we are pilgrims on the journey between the cross and the kingdom to come. We are Christians witnessing for Christ in a particular time and place. One blessing of the journey is the people who joins us on the way. Won't you come along with us?

For a more complete account, see *Crosses In A Gold Field: A 150-Year History of Emmanuel Episcopal Church and Grass Valley* (148 pages, 89 images, 5 appendices), by Gage McKinney, with a foreword by Orlo K. Steele. Available in local libraries and from The Book Seller, 107 Mill Street, Grass Valley, telephone 530-272-2131, e-mail: booksgv@biz.net.

