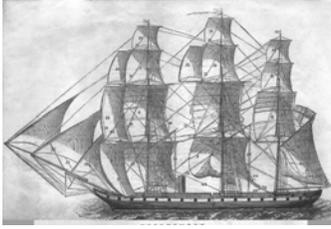


YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

Thomas Sullivan – Founder of the 1st YMCA in the United States

Captain Thomas Valentine Sullivan (1800-1859)



"He was shipwrecked in the Antarctic, fell from a yard and nearly killed; was attacked by pirates off the coast of Brazil; by the time he was thirty-three he had made a fortune and lost it.

Nonetheless, Thomas Valentine Sullivan's most long-lasting accomplishment was ... he founded the YMCA in the United States."

— From Seaman Extraordinary by Leonard M. Snyder

As we know, the YMCA was founded by Sir George Williams. Williams was born in a farmhouse in southern England in 1821. He was brought up in the Church of England. However, when young George arrived in the city to become an assistant drapers apprentice, he found his faith lacking. He managed to find a few young workers who, by their example, encouraged him to give his own life more completely to Jesus Christ. On June 4, 1844, twelve men, led by George Williams, founded the Young Men's Christian Association, and thus the YMCA was born.

The original Mission Statement

"The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) seeks to unite those young men, who regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Savior, according to the Holy Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their faith and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom amongst young men.

It was also decreed at this time that differences of opinion on other matters, however important, should not interfere.

How the YMCA came to the United States

Around 1850, Thomas Sullivan of Boston was organizing groups to pass out pamphlets that explained the message of God's love in Jesus Christ. Sullivan, a retired Canadian sea-whaling captain and lay missionary for the Baptist Church, also worried about the temptations facing young men in large cities. He sought to provide a "home away from home" for young sailors on shore leave. From his journal in 1851 we read this,

"In October of 1851, I read this newspaper account of this new organization in London that had been formed for young men who had pledged their lives to Jesus Christ and needed a wholesome alternative to life on the street. I thought this would fit my young men just fine. So I traveled to London to visit the YMCA, and upon my return summoned together other concerned Christian leaders to consider establishing a YMCA in order that these young men be nurtured in

their Christian faith. We agreed to start the first YMCA in the United States."

On December 15, Sullivan and six others drafted a constitution that was reviewed at a second

meeting a week later. On December 29, in the chapel of the Old South Church in Spring Lane, they approved the constitution and began their work to improve "the spiritual and mental condition of young men." Thus, the YMCA in America began at the Old South Church in Boston.



Guiding Principles

The fundamental principles behind the Boston YMCA were to work among young Christian men, to have leaders in the association that emphasized knowing Christ personally and to "recognize the power of environment in influencing the lives of men." The chapter intended to keep young, Christian men away from the vices of the city and on a Christian path and to promote personal faith in Christ. Its mission was accomplished by offering numerous services to their members. The chapter provided a reading room, a library, a popular lectures series, evening classes, social gatherings, excursions, a gymnasium, an employment department, and a register of respectable boarding houses. In addition, numerous religious activities, including bible classes and prayer meetings, were offered for young men and boys.

Explosive Growth

By 1853, the Boston YMCA had 1,500 members, most of whom were merchants and artisans. Members paid an annual membership fee to use the facilities and services of the association.

By 1855, there were 24 YMCAs across the United States from New York to San Francisco and from New Orleans to Detroit and Washington DC. The first national meeting was held in New York, forming a voluntary association of YMCA's in the U.S. and Canada. Ironically, Sullivan was a Canadian!

None of these YMCAs had buildings at the time- they were simply organized groups that reached out and disciplined young men. It was not until 1859 that the first YMCA building was built in Baltimore, Maryland.

*Rev. Tom Welch
Central Florida YMCA
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