



The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin Reflections on Our First 125 Years

PRELUDE

In April 1891, St. Mary the Virgin became the ninth parish of the Episcopal Church in San Francisco, the first new Parish to be established in 15 years. But our story began a few years earlier, when, in August 1888, Miss Florence Gay opened a Sunday School for five children in a home on Greenwich Street, near Baker, in the Cow Hollow district. Previously known as Spring Valley, with a plentiful supply of fresh water and open land, the area had been home to 30 dairies and farms. Within months, the number of students had increased significantly and the Sunday School moved to a union hall at Greenwich and Fillmore Streets. As the school continued to grow, a few Episcopal clergy within the diocese took notice and began to visit to instruct and baptize the children.



The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Undated; photographer unknown. Courtesy, San Francisco History Center. San Francisco Public Library. AAB-1355.

Since Cow Hollow fell within the boundaries of St. Luke's Parish, their clergy was eventually asked to take charge, with the possibility of establishing a mission. The Rev. William Bolton, recently hired as an Assistant at St. Luke's, was appointed Priest in Charge of the growing community. Bolton had come from England to Western Canada, and then on to San Francisco, where in February 1890 he was received by Bishop William Ingraham Kip into the Diocese of California.

By December 1890, the congregation of 54 families and 75 children took up temporary quarters in a vacant grocery store. When that became too crowded, they moved again, this time to a meeting hall nearby on Union Street. With \$1,500 raised toward the construction of a new church, on

March 3, 1891 the Diocese approved the organization of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Bolton persuaded Frank Pixley, publisher of *The Argonaut*, and owner of considerable property within Cow Hollow, to give the church use of a corner lot for the church. A new home of St. Mary the Virgin on Union and Steiner Streets opened with services on Sunday, October 4, 1891.



Interior of the church, 1891. SMVSF Archives. SMV125.047

In accordance with the wishes of Pixley's wife, Amelia, a devout member, Bolton ran a "firmly high-church," Anglo-Catholic parish. Frank Pixley died in 1895, followed by Amelia in 1898. Although she had deeded the property to St. Mary the Virgin soon after his death, Amelia imposed several conditions. She stipulated provision for the interment of their ashes in the crypt beneath the church, the hours the chapel was to be open and accessible to the public, and a requirement for full ceremonial services of the Anglican Communion of the Catholic Church.



The view circa 1893 from Vallejo and Scott Streets toward Fort Mason. The long roof of the church of St. Mary the Virgin can be seen in the center of the photograph. The Pixley estate occupied the entire wooded block bounded by Green, Steiner, Union and Fillmore Streets. Courtesy, California Historical Society. CHS 2010.326

Bolton departed in 1898 and while the parish continued to grow for a few years, during most of the two decades that followed, rector after rector stayed less than a year. Membership dwindled while the neighborhood continued to grow, and in 1918, St. Mary's lost parish status and became a mission of the diocese. Soon after, Pixley's heirs claimed that St. Mary's had not complied with the original terms of the deed as required to acquire title to the land.

Negotiations ensued between Pixley's heirs and the diocese, and on March 22, 1921 a new deed of trust was signed by Bishops William Ford Nichols and Edward Lambe Parsons on behalf of the Diocese of California. Just five days later, a congregation of over 100 participated in the 11 o'clock Easter Sunday Service, at which Bishop Parsons explained the changed conditions by which the neighborhood was to be reached and a self-supporting parish established.

With the change in the style of worship to the "broad church" traditions of the Protestant Episcopal Church, St. Mary's finally began to attract neighbors who started to attend. On January 7, 1940, the Rev. Russell Staines (1939-1944) petitioned the diocese to be reinstated to full parochial standing, and two days later proclaimed, "After being asleep for so many months, St. Mary's has come back to life."

In the decades that followed, the parish expanded and an ambitious building plan was initiated under the leadership of the Rev. Keppel Hill (1948-1966). The Rev. Richard Fowler (1966-1999) and his successors inspired further development, and St. Mary's flourished, with significant growth in membership and laity participation, worship services, music ministries, and outreach programs.

Today St. Mary's is a community full of life. In this year of celebration, we offer this glimpse as the first in a series of reflections looking back over our first 125 years.



Union Street, St. Mary's property visible at left. Undated. Photographer, Roy D. Graves. SMVSF Archives. SMV125.044