

Landmark church's anniversary

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FROM THE COLLECTION OF ROSS ERIC GIBSON

In 1914, the Methodists moved their Church Street church to the back of their lot and built a Mission-style church, above. The Spanish Catholic-style facility was demolished in 1965, however, to make room for a parking lot.

The county's first Protestant church

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

This year marks the 145th anniversary of the Santa Cruz Methodist Church, the oldest Protestant church in the county. It was founded by Adna Hecox, who later became the area's first lighthouse keeper.

Hecox was a carpenter and Methodist minister when he arrived in California with his family in 1846. While staying at Mission Santa Clara, he conducted the first Protestant service in California. When he moved to Santa Cruz the following year, he conducted the first Protestant service in Santa Cruz County at the Golden Eagle Hotel. It was a funeral for a logger who died when hit by a falling tree in Soquel.



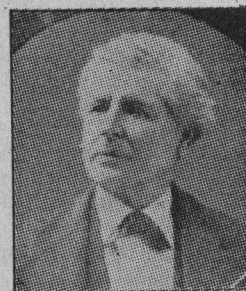
SANTA CRUZ

Historic Perspective

Hecox was hired by Soquel land grant owners Martina and Michael Lodge to repair their sawmill. They became good friends, and Michael Lodge helped Hecox establish the pioneer equivalent of Alcoholics Anonymous chapters in Soquel and Santa Cruz, making the area the birthplace of the temperance movement in California.

Hecox organized Methodist meetings in August 1847, first at the home of J.D. Green (on Green street), and then at the home of J.G. Dunleavy (now the parking lot of World Savings on Pacific Avenue). But having finished repairing the Soquel Mill, he was now running it for the Lodges, and had little time to organize services.

In December 1847, a blacksmith and Methodist minister named Elihu Anthony arrived in Santa Cruz, and built a blacksmith shop and foundry where the clock tower now stands. It was the first business in the downtown. Hecox asked Anthony to take over his duties as Methodist minister.



Hecox

Adna Hecox was a carpenter and Methodist minister when he arrived in California in 1846.

So in January 1848, Anthony helped officially organize regular Methodist services, held in Green's home.

Throughout the west, a Methodist church was often the first established in pioneer towns. This was mostly because Methodist services could be conducted by laymen,

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Methodist meetings started in 1847

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while many denominations were forced to wait for ordained clergy to be sent from back east.

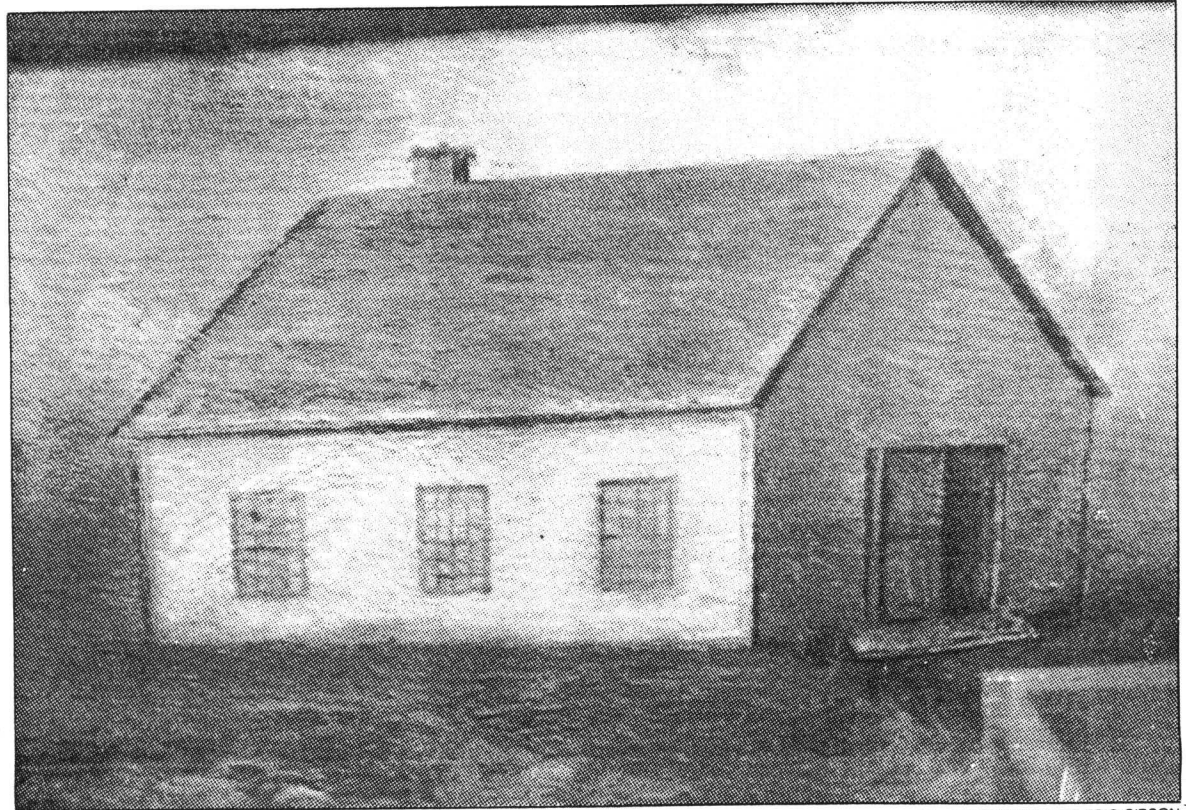
For many pioneers, the Bible was the only church they had known in the six to eight months it took to cross the prairie; and literacy was the key to that sanctuary. Methodist Bible-study discussion groups brought a demand for church-sponsored literacy classes, and numerous public schools evolved out of Methodist literacy programs.

One such school was the Methodist Academy, which was open to children of all faiths. It was founded by Mary Case, who held the school in her home.

The need for reading material for a library led Margaret Hecox and Mrs. Green to go throughout the community asking for donations of books. This was no small request, as the scarcity of books made them treasured items, and the restrictions of space in covered wagons left room for only the most cherished volumes. Nonetheless, the women collected 150 books in 1848, and the collection — housed in the Anthonys' home — was the county's first lending library.

That year, Adna Hecox and Silas Bennett donated seven acres for a church at Mission and Green streets. Green provided the lumber and shakes for building the church, but the structure was not erected until the summer of 1850 because of a shortage of labor during the gold rush. The men of the congregation finally built the church themselves.

For several years it was "the little brown church on the hill," remaining unpainted inside and out. The pews had built-in desks so the church could be used as a school during the week. Lacking accompaniment, a tuning fork was used to begin a hymn, which the congregation sang *a cappella*, with more than a few adding a four-part harmony. A



FROM THE COLLECTION OF ROSS ERIC GIBSON

This is a painting of the Methodist church in 1848 donated seven acres for the church at Mission and Green streets. erected in 1850. Adna Hecox and Silas Bennett



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melodeon was later purchased and became the first keyboard played in a county church.

Most of the Protestant denominations worshiped at the Methodist Church, either in ecumenical services or meeting at different times of day. Yet even meeting in shifts, the 100-seat hall was becoming crowded, both as

a church and school. In 1857 Mission Hill School was built, the desks were removed from the pews, and the building was thoroughly whitewashed.

That same year the congregation decided it was time to establish a church for another denomination. A vote was taken, and it was a tie between building a Presbyterian or a Congregational church. Elihu's brother, William Anthony, suggested they compromise and make it a Congregational Church with a Presbyterian Confession of Faith. This was agreed to, and William Anthony became a part of this new Congregational Church whose location gave Church street its name.

In 1863, the Methodist Church was replaced with an elegant Green Revival-style building. The 1850 structure was moved

to another lot on Green Street and remodeled into the Italianate William Reynolds House. In 1890, the Methodists bought and moved into the Church Street Congregational Church. Catholics bought the old Methodist Church and moved it to High Street to become their school's Montgomery Hall. In 1914, the Methodists moved their church to the back of their lot and built a handsome Mission-style church. This gave the town a Spanish Catholic-style Protestant church and a New England Protestant-style Catholic church. It's the sort of thing that makes Santa Cruz so special.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a history column twice a month for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.