

## PIONEER PREACHER

**Mike Hayes**

Assigned to the Pacific Coast by the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Sylvester Woodbridge Jr. arrived in San Francisco by way of the Isthmus of Panama in February 1849. Almost immediately, a few San Francisco capitalists convinced the preacher of the promises of a new harbor city, some twenty miles east, and pledged both financial aid and land for a university and church. He accepted their proposals and came to Benicia shortly thereafter.

Sylvester Woodbridge was born June 15, 1813 in Sharon, Connecticut. He was the thirteenth in a direct line of ministers named Woodbridge, all from New England and descended from Mayflower ancestors. He was graduated from Union College, Schenectady, New York in 1830. Six years later, at Quogue, Long Island, the young minister took for his wife, Mary Foster. He moved his wife and four children here from their eastern home in 1851. His family eventually consisted of eleven children, the first six born in Quogue, and the last five in Benicia.

On the arrival of Dr. Woodbridge in Benicia, he started his work without hesitation, and organized, on April 15, 1849, the First Presbyterian Church. Besides being the preacher for the only church in town, the energetic man was also one of the first teachers. So loyal to Benicia was he that he heartily urged all travelers who visited here to become permanent residents.

He was a staunch supporter of learning for the young, and he helped to create the educational facilities which a few years later inspired writers to name Benicia the "Athens of the West". He superintended, jointly with Robert Semple, the building of Benicia's first schoolhouse; he was a trustee of the proposed Benicia University, in February 1851; he served on the Board of Trustees of the Young Ladies Seminary in 1852, and also performed the duties of chaplain to the school.

He was elected Solano County's first Commissioner of Common Schools in 1852. He also was appointed chaplain to the Senate when the Legislature met in Vallejo. A true Christian, he was incensed by American cruelty to the California Indians. He sent President Zachary Taylor a strong plea in the form of a petition in their behalf, and included simple, practical solutions to the problem, but to no avail.

For over eighteen years, he administered to the spiritual wants of his adopted community. Then, in 1869, because of the decline of membership in the pioneer church, Dr. Woodbridge moved to San Francisco to edit the "Occident", the official Presbyterian church paper on the Pacific Coast. There, he filled the vacant Calvary Church pulpit for a short time, was pastor of the Howard Street Presbyterian Church, and finally organized, at 20th and Capp Streets, a new congregation, known as "Woodbridge Presbyterian".

This remarkable man left this world on April 1, 1883 in his seventieth year. He was one of the most distinguished ministers of the Presbyterian church in the West and one of its "brightest ornaments".

Dr. Sylvester Woodbridge had fervently devoted thirty-four years of his life to the spiritual needs of the cities he served in California. Indeed, Benicia was blessed to have a man of his caliber help to formulate, for almost two decades, the history of her early years.