

Presbyterian Church efforts didn't end after attack in 1847

By Keni Sturgeon

Special to the Statesman Journal

September 19, 2010

A "little vine is planted in this desert:" Oregon's Presbyterian Missionary Efforts and The Pleasant Grove Church

While Rev. Jason Lee was working to keep the Willamette Station of the Methodist's Oregon Mission growing, Dr. Marcus Whitman was investigating the possibility of establishing a Presbyterian mission.

Early in 1835, he succeeded in getting an appointment from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to establish a mission in the Oregon Country.

In 1835 Whitman, along with Samuel Parker, made a preliminary trip to talk to the Indians. After returning from Green River in 1835, Whitman spent the winter of 1835-36 raising funds, buying supplies and recruiting a party. This party included Whitman, his bride Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, the Rev. Henry Spalding and his wife Eliza, as well as several hired hands and Indian boys. William Gray, a bachelor, served as scout and general manager for the expedition.

On Sept. 12, 1836, the party reached Fort Vancouver and from there scouted the region for an appropriate site for the mission. In the end they decided to establish two missions: Whitman near the Cayuse at Waiilatpu, and Spalding near the Nez Perce at Lapwai. The Presbyterian Mission to the Oregon Country was discontinued after the attack at Waiilatpu in 1847. The closing of the mission was not, however, the end of the Presbyterian Church in Oregon.

Among the earliest of Oregon's Presbyterian churches is the Pleasant Grove Church, also known as Condit Church, established in 1856. Originally located near Aumsville, the church was moved to the grounds of Mission Mill Museum in 1984. The building is the oldest surviving church in the Pacific Northwest associated with the Presbyterian Church. It is on the National Register of Historic Places and in 1984 was given to the Museum by the Presbytery of the Cascades.

The Rev. Phillip Condit was born in Mercer County, Pa., in 1801. In 1836, he graduated from Jefferson College and was licensed in 1839. He preached in Ohio until 1854 when he moved to Oregon. Sylvanus had lived in the Willamette Valley for three years prior to improve his



Photo courtesy of Salem Public Library
Pleasant Grove Church original site, 1956.

The Willamette Heritage Center is a unification of Mission Mill Museum and Marion County Historical Society. The center is dedicated to telling stories of the people of who have lived and worked in the Willamette Valley. For information about hours and events, go to www.missionmill.org.

health, and it was he who convinced his family to take the trip west. The family included Condit, his wife Nancy (1806-1861), their two other sons, Cyrenius (born 1827) and Alva (born 1831) and their wives, Rebecca and Mary, their minor children (Samuel, Mary Ann and William), their adopted daughter and three unmarried hired men.

The group was well prepared for their journey West, with supplies and trade items. Still, they lost one of their party along the way, their adopted daughter Nancy who died of camp fever.

The first action upon the part of Condit and his two sons was to organize a church of nine charter members. The names on this first register are: Mrs. Nancy Condit, Cyrenius Condit and his wife Rebecca, Sylvanus Condit and his wife Sarah, Samuel Condit, Mrs. Pira Rudolph, Mrs. Alcy Neal and Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas.

The organization of the Pleasant Grove Presbyterian Church was completed on Sept. 26, 1856, at the house of Condit, assisted by the Rev. J.A. Hanna, and Condit is reported to have said "...thus another little vine is planted in this desert. We trust it is a vine of God's own planting. May His richest blessing rest upon it and it bring forth fruit that His name may be glorified." Sadly, Condit would not live to see his church built. He died Nov. 21, 1856 and is buried in Pleasant Grove Cemetery.

His sons Sylvanus and Cyrenius were responsible for securing the donations of labor, materials and cash needed to make its completion possible. Timber was provided by D. R. McMillan, milling by Alexander Neal. The doors, window sashes, pews and pulpit were hand made by volunteers. All totaled, pledges raised for the project totaled \$1,378 (and 25 cents). Construction of the church was completed in April 1858.

Rev J.A. Hanna, who assisted with the organization of Pleasant Grove Church, was inspired by Dr. Whitman. Hanna was an 1849 graduate of Jefferson College, and in 1854 he led a "Presbyterian Colony for Oregon" as a Home Missionary of the Church (Old School). He went on to help to found seven churches and dedicate six houses of worship. Corvallis was his first church, and Pleasant Grove his second. He assisted Condit at the organizational meeting and contributed his first year's salary to the erection of the church.

Keni Sturgeon is the museum director at the Willamette Heritage Center