

# **The Alfords, Barbours and Rockville stone chapel**

**By Nancy Dingler**

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With adventure in their hearts, Landy and Sarah Alford, along with their daughters, Virginia and Nancy, left behind family, church and friends to join a wagon train headed for California, three years before the lure of gold would prompt the great western migration.

They met brothers, Roswell and Nathan Barbour, who had been born in the back woods around Auburn, N.Y., land of the Onondaga and harsh winters. The brothers struck out for Kentucky before finding their calling at St. Joseph, Mo., and the wagon trains west.

The young frontiersmen quickly made friends with the Alfords, Nathan particularly with young Nancy. It was a whirlwind courtship, with a wedding on the 9th of May, 1846, before striking out for California.

The wagon train consisted of several notable figures, perhaps none more famous, or infamous, than the Donner family.

After an arduous trek, some good advice from a seasoned mountain man, James Clyman, and steady persistence, they arrived safely at Sutter's Fort a good month before the early snows in the Sierra Nevada trapped the Donner party.

No sooner had they arrived and rested up after their terrific journey, then the Alfords and Barbours became entangled in California politics. The Bear Flag revolt was barely 60 days old when Nathan joined Company B of the California Battalion. Nathan also participated in the rescue of the stranded Donners.

The Alfords went on to Sonoma to establish farms. Nathan re-joined the family in the spring of 1847. He and Landy framed two houses.

While in the process of construction, they were approached by Thomas O. Larkin, who made a deal with the families to relocate to Benicia. With Larkin's assistance, they moved families and houses to lots in the bustling new city.

In 1848, gold was discovered. The Alfords and Barbours packed up their wagons and went off to the gold fields to find their fortunes. The families left after obtaining about \$5,000 of the precious metal because Nancy had become ill.

On their way back to Benicia, they passed through the Suisun Valley.

Enthralled by the richness of the soil and the abundance of tall grasses, Nathan and Nancy decided to settle on 240 acres. Landry and Sarah settled nearby. The families grew and prospered, growing many varieties of fruit trees.

The little town of Rockville grew as well. The Alfords were raised in the Southern Methodist tradition. In the warm Suisun Valley summers, camp meetings became popular along Suisun Creek, where baptism by total immersion could be performed.

Settlers came from afar, with their wagons piled high with bedding, beds, lanterns and cook stoves to stay for at least two weeks. Some even brought the family milk cow for the children. Nearby farmers supplied meat.

In 1852, discussions that had been held for a long time came to a head when 160 males voted to erect a permanent place of worship. During several camp meetings, \$5,000 was raised.

Local stone masons, Joel Price and George Whitley, volunteered their labor to build a stone chapel and Landy and Sarah Alford donated 5 acres. The cornerstone for the chapel was laid Oct. 3, 1856.

Diligent volunteers, regardless of domination, quarried the stone from adjacent hills. Peculiar properties of the stone made the excavating and cutting go quickly. The material was soft when buried below ground, but hardened upon exposure to the air.

So quickly were the volunteers able to construct the chapel, that Christmas services were held that year.

Adjoining the chapel was the "new" cemetery. Of course, neither Landy or Sarah could foresee that their little 3-year-old Sarah would be the first occupant. The cemetery grew in size, such that in 1879 Lewis Pierce donated an additional 3 acres.

Then again in 1897, J. M. Baldwin Sr. gave 2.6 more acres.

As early as 1846, slavery had become an issue. This contentious subject had split the Methodist Episcopal Church. Many of the early pioneers came from south of the Mason-Dixon line and were dominant in the chapel congregation. To make their point as to where they stood on the issue, a plaque was placed over the chapel's entrance proclaiming, "M.D. Church South - 1858."

Locally, the Civil War was fanned by zealous believers on both sides. So ardent were

the beliefs and arguments, that it split the chapel's congregation.

It has long been believed that the wooden church at 928 Empire St. was constructed by the "Northern" faction. The upshot of the Civil War was to slowly cause the little chapel in Rockville to be abandoned and left to rot.

As the original founders died and the last resident pastor, Rev. B.J. Waugh, in 1895, left, it became clear that the chapel was in trouble. Visiting ministers would come on occasion to conduct weddings and funerals.

Reed Wolfskill recalled that during a funeral held in 1906 for Charles Campbell, right after the San Francisco earthquake, that the services were held outside for fear that the chapel would not survive a quake.

Finally in 1929, without a sufficient congregation to support the chapel, the remaining church officials donated the building and cemetery to the county with three provisos: that the chapel be restored as a pioneer monument, that the building would not be used for secular purposes and that the plaque not be removed. If any of these provisos were violated, then the church would revert back to the officials.

They could not have picked a worse year to call it quits. The Great Depression struck and for 10 long years the chapel sat deteriorating. The ceiling with kerosene lamps fell, the floor rotted and the stained glass windows were broken, allowing the elements to take over completely.

It was not until 1940 that the county was able to fulfill its promise to restore the chapel to its present condition. Using WPA labor, the chapel was rededicated on Decoration Day of that year. Once a year, the pioneers are remembered by the Solano Historical Society, which holds its annual celebration at the site.

For more information about the Alford's, Barbours and Rockville, the story by Wood Young of the Daily Republic, Sept. 13, 1958, is available at your local library. Other information can be found at the Vacaville Heritage Council, which is open on Thursdays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m.

I would like to make special note of the burning of the Green Valley School in Cordelia. It is listed with the California Historical Places. This does not entitle it to any money for preservation or restoration. Stan Gollinger is leading the charge to repair the burned roof so that this building does not fail due to the elements. If you would like to help in any way, donations, labor, etc., I will be happy to put you in contact with Stan Gollinger or Daphne Nixon.

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