

Fair Oaks Founders

A presentation to the Fair Oaks Woman's Thursday Club
February 9, 2017

By Jim Pearce, Fair Oaks Historical Society

I was asked to serve on the committee developing the Fair Oaks Founder's Monument in the small triangle at the north end of the village. Part of the monument was to be about four plaques showing the stages of Fair Oaks development. When the proposed first of the plaques was shown, it was obvious that there were problems. Most obvious was the title of the plaque, "Founding Fathers." Less obvious was the fact that all of the individuals in the pictures on the plaque were men. We're in the process of fixing those issues.



So, when I was asked to give a talk to the Woman's Thursday Club on a historical subject of my choice, I decided to talk about one of the many women who contributed to the development of Fair Oaks. I had a half hour to speak, so I decided to concentrate



on only one. There were some obvious choices; Emma "Madam" Buffum, who was a leader in development of social, community development and educational activities; Mrs. Francis Murphy, wife of the famous temperance lecturer who built the Murphy Building; and Rebecca Johnston, who brought her family to Fair Oaks and built the Johnston House (now labeled the California



House). I decided not to go with Madam Buffum since most everyone knows about her contributions. That made the choice pretty easy, since (bet you don't know this) Rebecca Johnston and Mrs. Francis Murphy were one and the same person.

To appreciate Rebecca, you need to know something about her husband Francis Murphy.

He emigrated to America from Ireland at age 16 with no trade and worked as a common laborer. It was the time of famine and disease in Ireland and many young men left

home for America in pursuit of a better life. After several years in his adopted home of Portland, Maine, He met and married his first wife, Elizabeth, and they proceeded to start their family. In ten years they produced seven offspring and were living in poverty. He, along with his brother and friends were heavy drinkers, which didn't contribute to the family's condition.



Francis Murphy.

Main was a “dry” state, but Francis and his brother hatched a scheme to improve their situation. Maine’s liquor laws made it a crime to sell or purchase hard liquor, but it was ok to consume liquor with dinner at home or at a hotel. So the brothers opened a hotel and served dinner (including booze) to their hard-drinking friends from late afternoon until midnight. The hotel also gave Francis’ family a place to live.

Unfortunately, the hotel’s activities came to the attention of the local magistrate who shut the operation down, threw Francis in prison (his brother took off earlier) and put his wife and kids on the street with no means of support. We assume they were cared for by the church or other charitable organization.

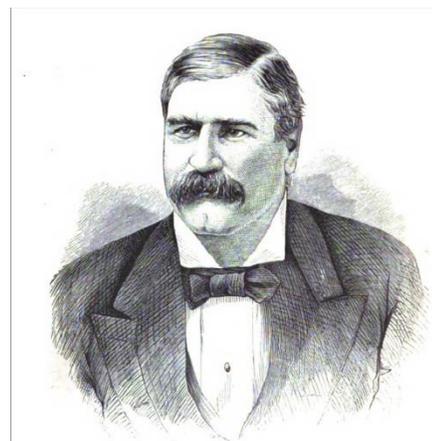
Francis sobered up in prison, realized what a sorrowful life his family was living, and decided to clean up his act. He started preaching abstinence to his fellow inmates and eventually convinced the magistrate to free him to support his family. He went to a local temperance meeting, told his story, and was so convincing that the Portland, Maine city temperance society asked him to speak at their upcoming meeting. He excelled there as well as an orator in the cause of temperance and soon came to the notice of the National Christian Temperance League in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who offered him a contract to preach temperance around the country.



Francis invented the “Murphy Pledge” and adopted the motto “With malice towards none, and charity for all.” We’ll

assume the people of that time knew that he lifted the phrase from Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address.

Francis’s early life is subject to some interpretation as the only source of facts is Francis, and he had some reason to embellish his past suffering to contribute to his orating. The books on



Francis Murphy.

him are written by his followers and contain such unenlightened descriptions as, "Francis Murphy, the temperance evangelist, the hero of the Blue Ribbon, the advocate

THE TRUE PATH;
OR, THE
MURPHY MOVEMENT

AND
GOSPEL TEMPERANCE
A COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE RISE, PROGRESS AND WONDERFUL
EFFECTS OF THE GREAT REFORMATORY WAVE
NOW DELUGING OUR LAND;

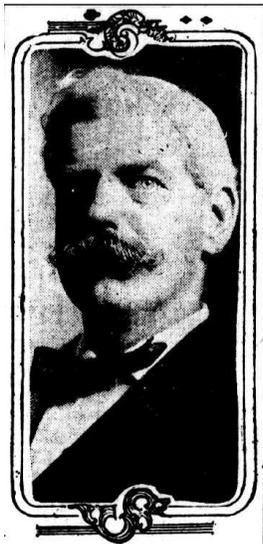
TOGETHER WITH THE
BIOGRAPHY, ADDRESSES, INCIDENTS AND ANECDOTES OF
FRANCIS MURPHY,
THE GREAT TEMPERANCE APOSTLE.

THE MOST TELLING SPEECHES AND APPEALS OF PROMINENT
LEADERS AND HELPERS IN VARIOUS PARTS, WITH THE
INTENSELY INTERESTING EXPERIENCES OF THE MOST
REMARKABLE OF THE REFORMED MEN.

By REV. J. SAM'L. VANDERSLOOT,
AUTHOR OF "COMPREHENSIVE BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA," "EXPLANATORY BIBLE
DICTIONARY," "BIBLE HISTORY AND ANALYSIS," "BOOK OF BIB-
LICAL ANTIQUITIES," "NEW AND IMPROVED DICTIONARY OF
BIBLE NAMES," ETC., ETC., ETC.

"O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me."—Ps. xliii. 3.
"I have chosen the way of truth."—Ps. cxix. 30.

PUBLISHED BY
L. T. PALMER & CO.,
CHICAGO, ILLS.
1877.



WILLIAM MURPHY

of "Malice toward none and charity for all," the powerful, warm-hearted Irish man, the brilliant genius without education, the orator without art, is one of the miracles of our times. That this man, with ruined fortune, ruined reputation, ruined home, and ruined hope, should have come forth from the prison-house where his body was caged with bars of iron and his soul with bars of fire, to stand before the world, a free man, beckoning his lost brethren to liberty in the name of the Lord, is one of the greatest evidences in our times that nothing is too hard for God's almighty love and grace."

Not exactly a reference that would stand much scrutiny.

His wife Elizabeth died three years after his release from prison, but by that time he had risen in prominence and was able to raise his seven children by himself. When we see him in the 1880 census, his two

younger sons are in law school and his daughters are married. His eldest son, William, is in the university and destined to follow in his father's footsteps as a temperance preacher.

Francis's fame continues to grow over the next twenty years and his appearance in major cities around the country is front page news. He also travelled to Europe and preached there. Several books were written about him, claiming that he gave over 3,500 speeches and converted over 15 million individuals.

Then, about 1890, he met and married Rebecca Johnston, a widow and temperance worker in Illinois. He was 45 years old, she was 27. They notified the family and predictably got a very cold reaction, especially from son William. He was in Minnesota at the time preaching, and when he got the news he was really upset. After 20 years of a stable relationship, he must have said, "father, what are you doing? We don't need this woman in our family. We don't want a step mother."

And then the family got more bad news. Francis and Rebecca were moving west to California to a small temperance colony outside Sacramento. "Father!", William must

have pleaded, “What are you thinking!” “The people in Fair Oaks are all sober! There’s no one there to convert! You’ll ruin the family business.”



Francis and Rebecca moved to Fair Oaks in spite of William’s objections. While Francis was preaching around California, Rebecca started



involving herself in Fair Oaks affairs. First, in 1900, she built the Murphy Building, a commercial building with a meeting hall upstairs (San Juan Hall) and businesses downstairs.

At that time, the Fair Oaks business district was along Main Street, a quarter mile away from the site of the Murphy Building. The Fair Oaks Hotel was at the southern end of Main Street at Capitola, and the businesses; Levi’s plumbing, the blacksmith shop, the shoe repair and haircutting parlor, a boarding house and other businesses stretched to the top of Main Street where Shelton’s General Store and Post Office was located.

Rebecca knew what she was doing. In two years or so, the Fair Oaks Bridge was built along with a train station across the river. The Fair Oaks Fruit Company was built on the corner of Pennsylvania Ave. and Winding Way. The Murphy Building was right in the middle of the action. In a short period of time, the business district moved from Main Street to the “Murphy Block”, the Slocum – Gore Store was built along with the Fair Oaks Bank, the Fair Oaks School, and a garage and gas station at each end of town.



In about 1903, Rebecca called on her family to come to Fair Oaks from Illinois. Her father, 70 years old, was suffering from bad health and she hoped he would improve with a better climate. She (probably) built the home across the street from the Murphy Building which is now called the California House. Her intuition was really good as her father’s health improved and he lived to be 92 years old. Her brother James Waverly Johnston also moved out to Fair Oaks with his family.

It should be noted that there is no evidence that Francis Murphy had anything to do with Rebecca’s business dealings. In fact, it was only two years later that Francis decided to relocate the business to Los Angeles. Probably William was successful in convincing

his father that they would do much better in a large city, and Los Angeles welcomed the temperance preacher with front page headlines.

William was probably ecstatic. He'd finally separated his father from his evil step mother. But, it didn't last long. Rebecca rejoined her husband in Los Angeles in 1903, just after getting her father and brother settled in Fair Oaks. It must have been a really cold and hostile family life for Francis and Rebecca. As will become apparent, William had decided to devote his life to destroying Rebecca.

In 1907 Francis died at age 71 with his family by his side (by reliable accounts, Rebecca and William) while his two younger sons and a daughter were trying to get to



his bedside before he died. After he died, the Los Angeles Post ran a front page tribute to the temperance preacher, three full columns on the front page and two columns on page two. It talked about his first wife Elizabeth and their children, all of his early troubles, his recovery and elevation to world wide fame, his accomplishments and his latter days in Los Angeles.....with absolutely no mention of Rebecca. William had obviously written the story and wiped the slate clean of Rebecca.

The L. A. Post article was repeated in major newspapers across the country and in Europe. Rebecca never existed.

The only newspaper that got the story right was the Sacramento Bee. I'm sure they didn't have William as their source.

Rebecca continued to live in the Los Angeles area after Francis died. William died in 1912, Rebecca in 1914. Rebecca received an unusual obituary in the Long Beach newspaper with the headline "Widow of Francis Murphy dies alone, as she predicted." Several days before she died, she confided in a friend her expectation that she would die alone. The inference was that not only would her Murphy family not attend to her, but her Fair Oaks Johnston family wasn't in contact. A Los Angeles Herald article reported that "Internment will be made in Rosedale Cemetery beside Mr. Murphy."

Unfortunately, William had been one step ahead of her. She probably hadn't noticed that before he died, he made arrangements for his real mother, Elizabeth, to be disinterred from her cemetery in Portland, Maine, and her remains buried in Rebecca's spot next to Francis. He also shipped Elizabeth's headstone to Los Angeles.

Birth: 1838
 Death: Dec. 6, 1870
 Maine, USA

Los Angeles Times - September 25, 1910:

BY THE APOSTLE'S SIDE

Remains of First Wife of Francis Murphy, Who Died Forty Years Ago, Brought From Maine.

In the presence of the children and grandchildren of the late Francis Murphy, the remains of his first wife, who died in Maine more than forty years ago, was interred by the side of her husband in Rosedale Cemetery on Thursday morning last. The remains had been brought here from Maine in a small casket, and the ceremonies were very simple, consisting of a brief address and prayer by Dr. Charles Edward-Locke, of the First Methodist Church. Among other things, Dr. Locke said: "What Susanna Wesley was to her husband, the founder of Methodism; what Catherine Booth was to her husband, the founder of the Salvation Army, so was Elizabeth Murphy to her husband, Francis Murphy, America's greatest apostle of temperance."



Added by: [Don Lynch](#)



The irony of this story is that Francis and his son William quickly faded to the obscurity of history – you'd be challenged to find them in any history book, much less the memory of any student of history. Rebecca, on the other hand, has her monument in the Fair Oaks Village with the Murphy Building, much redecorated but still standing, and the California House, converted to business offices.



Rebecca left one more legacy in Fair Oaks:

In Spring of 1902, she and her friend Fannie Robinson got in their buggy and went visiting. Of course, they didn't have Facebook, or e-mail, or telephones, or even electricity, so they did what people of that day did – went knocking on doors and if someone was home they'd be invited in for a cup of tea and a chat. Rebecca and Fanny had an additional purpose, to invite the ladies of Fair Oaks to a meeting in Rebecca's parlor to talk about forming the Fair Oaks Woman's Thursday Club. Often, Madam Buffum gets credit for forming the Thursday Club, and she deserves a lot of credit. She was the first president and nurtured the Club through its first year of

existence. But the founder of the Thursday Club was clearly Rebecca Murphy. And so, we meet here today, over a hundred years later, still doing the good deeds and having fun at the social events.

As Paul Harvey would say, “Now you know the rest of the story.”

Addendum to the program:

Several people asked me after the presentation, if Rebecca wasn't buried next to Francis, did I know where she was buried. At that time I didn't have any idea. I knew that she wasn't in the same cemetery as Francis Murphy, and she wasn't listed in any cemetery in the Los Angeles area. She is not in the Fair Oaks Cemetery.

The only clue is in the Johnston family history. James Johnston had a brother William who was a 49er, mining for gold in the early days of the gold rush. He made enough money to retire from mining and buy farmland south of Sacramento near Courtland. He became wealthy, involved himself in politics, and became a State Senator. He created the Johnston family plot in the Old City Cemetery in Sacramento where he, his wife and children are buried. Records of the cemetery show that Fair Oaksian James Johnston and his wife, correct dates of death, are buried in the Johnston plot, but a visit to the cemetery shows that there are no gravestones for either of them. This isn't unusual since over the hundred years since they died there have been periods of vandalism, neglect and lost records and probably their stones were stolen or destroyed.

Rebecca's brother, James Waverly Johnston, is also missing from the cemetery records. He lived and died in Sacramento, so I took a chance and requested his death certificate from the County. In an unusual stroke of good luck, his death certificate, in the space “Place of Burial or Removal”, reads “City Cemetery.” So we can conclude with some certainty that both Waverly and Rebecca are buried in the Johnston plot in the Old Sacramento City Cemetery.

Another addendum that might shed light on the story. While I was looking through some books on the temperance movement, I came across an entry in a reference section to a book written by Rebecca Johnston Murphy titled “Memories of Francis Murphy, the Great Apostle of Gospel Temperance, Graves & Hershey, 1909, 225 pages” Unfortunately there are only three copies in California Libraries, and only U.C. Berkeley Library in Northern California has a copy. It is listed as “Out for repair” and a check by staff couldn't find it. So, Rebecca wrote a book and we don't know if it was a tell-all, a detailed review of her life with Francis, or simply a tribute book. I'm waiting to find out if it can be found.