



1845-1849

“A Martyr to Duty”

Alexander Van Court

T

he opening pages of the Session minutes record the establishment of the young church: the election of three trustees, the first collection of \$6.38 for the Board of Domestic Missions and the receiving of new members. Rev. Joseph Templeton served as temporary pastor.

The congregation first met for the purpose of choosing a permanent pastor in August, 1844, but action was indefinitely postponed for lack of a quorum. When Rev. Templeton announced his intention to resign in December, 1844, the search for a pastor began in earnest. The following May, an election was held between Rev. Alexander Van Court and Rev. William McCalla. Van Court won by a vote of 17 to 1. When it was determined that a sufficient subscription could be raised (\$1,000 a year to be paid quarterly and a comfortable dwelling), the call was issued to Rev. Van Court. He first appears in the records in August, 1845.

Little is known of Alexander Van Court’s early life. He was born in Virginia in 1817, received his theological training at Princeton Seminary and came to St. Louis from Florence, Alabama.

Soon after Rev. Van Court’s arrival, plans began for a permanent church building. In the spring of 1846, the newly renamed Central Presbyterian Church purchased a lot on the northwest corner of 8th and Locust Streets. An early history of St. Louis notes that the “building was erected in the midst of many hindrances and discouragements.” Nevertheless, by the winter of 1848, work had sufficiently progressed for the congregation to begin worshipping in the basement. The two story building, completed in 1849, contained a pastor’s study, a room for prayer meetings and the ladies’ sewing group and an auditorium that seated 600.



Alex Van Court

Alexander Van Court, Central's first minister.



Central's first building, located at 8th and Locust. This rendering was also featured on the cover of the St. Louis Business Directory in 1859.

Revival was a continuing motif during those early years. Within months of its beginning, Central was holding protracted meetings. An entry in the minutes dated December 21st, 1847 records:

In view of the contemplated visit to St. Louis of the Rev. Dr. Hale and his labors here, the Session held a free conversation upon the importance of our seconding his efforts to promote the revival of religion.

They did, indeed, second those efforts. On January 29, 1848, the Session voted to begin a series of services at Central "commencing when Dr. Hall closes his labors." These would include a sunrise prayer meeting and preaching every night by Rev. Van Court. The February 11th minutes noted that "In view of the seriousness which still prevails among many and the interest which continues among us, it was deemed best still to continue the series next week as far as the health of the pastor - who is somewhat impaired - will allow."

On one notable Sabbath afternoon, sixteen members were added to the church by profession of faith. They were, concluded Rev. Van Court, "the fruit in part of the labors of Rev. Dr. Hale among us."

Central was also concerned with the personal lives of its members. Elders were expected to make bi-monthly visits to parishioners. Like other Protestant churches, Central sought to present itself and its members as models of piety to the community. Entered into the minutes for October 21, 1848:

It is deemed by the pastor and Session of this church utterly inconsistent with a profession of religion, and at variance with the command to "Abstain from all appearance of evil", to attend even occasionally upon Theatrical performances; or to be present in companies gathered for the expressed purpose of indulging in the amusement of dancing; or to permit our youth to be exposed to the same temptations.

Central joined with other Protestant churches "to take into consideration the proper observance of the Sabbath, and what means shall be devised to arrest its increasing desecration in this city."

The increasing desecration of the Sabbath was no doubt affected by the increasing numbers of people moving into St. Louis. In 1835, the population stood at 8,316. By 1840, it had increased to 16,436. It doubled

to 35,390 in the next five years and doubled again to 77,860 by 1850. The city was hard pressed to keep up with the demands made on its infrastructure. Housing was at a premium. Sewage ran down the gutters. The water supply was untreated and unreliable.

Many of those streaming into the city were German immigrants, coming up river from the Port of New Orleans. Some were carriers of contagious diseases. The deadly combination of poor sanitary conditions and infected travelers would prove disastrous for St. Louis and Central.

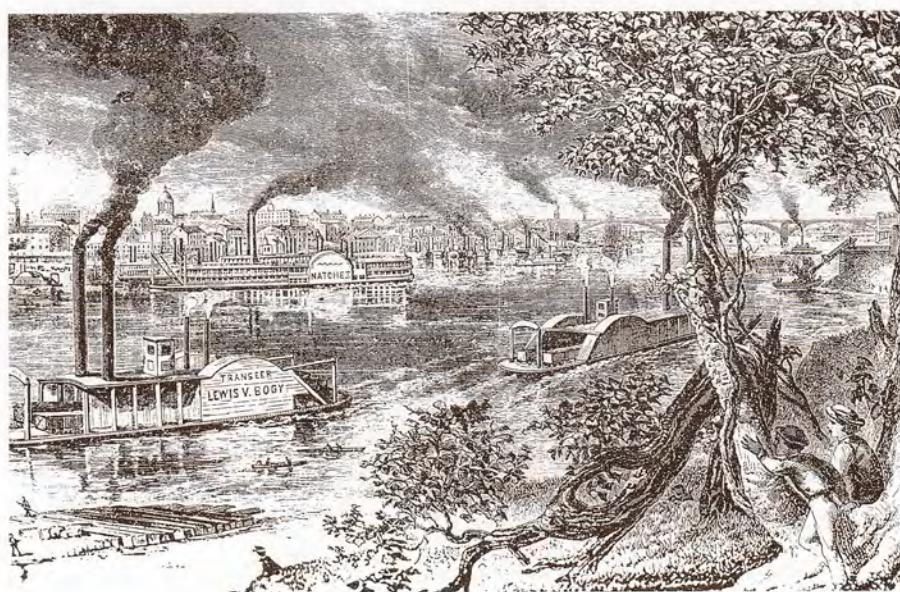
Reports of cholera first began filtering into St. Louis in early 1849. A few people died in January and the disease seemed to wane until May. St. Louis had sustained previous outbreaks of the disease, and not until July would officials examine and quarantine those suspected of illness. By then it was too late. The epidemic had exploded. An estimated 7% to 10% of the city's population died. So many people died that churches were asked to refrain from tolling their bells at funerals so as not to have an "injurious effect on the imagination of those touched by the disease, as well as of those in sound health."

Many who could left the city. Others, such as Central member Edward Bates, stayed on to do what they could. Bates was a prominent St. Louis attorney and one of its leading citizens. In his diary he wrote:

I dare not go. I am one of the oldest of the American inhabitants, have a good share of public respect and confidence, and consequently,



Central Elder Edward Bates, who reportedly sold his last slave upon moving from St. Charles to St. Louis in 1846. Two years later, he joined Central. (Missouri Historical Society)



Scene from the Mighty Mississippi.

A portion of Rev. Van Court's final entry in the Session minutes. He died 7 days later.

Thomas Barbour an elder of this church, and one of its earliest as well as most esteemed members; therefore the Session fully sensible of their own loss as well as that of the church feel that the occasion is one that calls for sincere sorrow, and deep humiliation before God.

While however they deplore the stroke which the bereavement, yet they have cause for devout thankfulness in the additional testimony that was given by our brother to the power sustaining grace. And the Session hope that the example of his consistent life as well as triumphant death may not be lost either upon themselves or upon he was one an honored part, or the church which he had been so useful a member and spiced.

D. D. Wheeler } Comm.
A. Van Court }

some influence with the people. I hold it to be a sacred duty, that admits of no compromise, to stand my ground the ready to do and take my part in whatever exigencies of the time may be required.

Although they could do nothing to arrest the epidemic or treat the sick, many doctors stayed. One was an elder at Central, Thomas Barbour. Rev. Van Court also refused to leave.

In May, the Session decided to limit weekly meetings "during the present sickly season." At the July meeting, it postponed action regarding the church's struggling parochial school due to the death of teacher Mary Calkins. At the same meeting, elder David Wheeler and Rev. Van Court were appointed a committee to express the Session's sorrow at the death of Dr. Barbour who had succumbed to cholera in mid-June.

Page 29 of the Session minutes records in Van Court's precise handwriting:

Whereas a most holy, wise, and just God, according to the counsel of his own will, has seen good to take from us, in the midst of his years Dr. Thomas Barbour...;

Therefore the Session fully sensible of their own loss as well as that of the church feel that the occasion is one that calls for sincere sorrow, and deep humiliation before God.

The very next page of the minutes records the instruction to David Wheeler to prepare another expression of sorrow. Seven days after his final entry, Alexander Van Court died of cholera at the age of 32. Wheeler wrote eloquently of "an all wise God, 'who giveth not account of any of his matters', having in his inscrutable wisdom seen good to take from the field of his labours, and usefulness amongst us, by sudden death, and in the meridian of his days, our lamented Pastor..."

In the words of his grandson, Alexander Van Court died "a martyr to duty." He was buried at the Wesleyan Cemetery. His body was later removed and reburied at Bellefontaine Cemetery - which had been established in 1849-50 on the site of Stephen Hempstead's farm.

The church records indicate that at least 20 Central members died during the epidemic, roughly 7% of the congregation. Official death records were not kept in St. Louis at the time, but where information can be found, it appears that many who died were in their twenties and thirties. Five members of one family were lost.

How was the church to make sense of such tragedy? Wheeler continued:

To the Session God has been speaking in the language of solemn warning, and ... the admonition comes with increased fervor, 'be faithful, as well as ready, - while those who remain feel their increased responsibilities; and that of themselves they can do nothing', yet looking to the great head of the Church for aid, they hope to be able to meet their increased duties, and to which end, they confidently rely upon the prayers and cooperation of every member of the communion,

To the other office bearers and members of the church, God has also spoken, in the chasm that the pestilence has made in our midst, we have had fearful evidence of the power of the destroyer. But 'although troubled on every side, yet we are not in despair, cast down, but not destroyed.'

The epidemic of 1849 left the church wounded and mourning the loss of many of its members. Central would be without a pastor for the next eighteen months and it would prove to be a trying time.



Rev. VanCourt's grave stone, Bellefontaine Cemetery. Church members paid for the marker after VanCourt's body was moved from Wesleyan Cemetery and reburied at Bellefontaine.