

Thomas Starr King at 200

(Born Dec. 17, 1824, NYC – Died Mar. 4, 1864, SF)

A Lecture for Starr King School for the Ministry
First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco
Sunday, December 1, 2024; 1 pm
Rev. Dr. John A. Buehrens

A Little Known Portrait of TSK at about age 25

(As Minister of the Hollis St. Unitarian Church, Boston; property of the First Church in Boston; used by permission.)



What Most People Know about Thomas Starr King

He served the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco,
April 1860 to March 1864.

His greatest accomplishment in that brief period is framed as political:

He is widely credited with having
“saved California for the Union.”

Also noted for having raised more money for humanitarian relief
during Civil War than any other American,
one-fourth of all funds raised by the U.S. Sanitary Commission.
(Chaired by Rev. H.W. Bellows, led by Frederick Law Olmsted, Unitarians)

“Best Streetside Sarcophagus in San Francisco”



Sarcophagus of Thomas Starr King

California Registered Historical Landmark No. 691

“Apostle of liberty, humanitarian, Unitarian, minister, who in the Civil War bound California to the Union and led her to excel all other states in support of the United States Sanitary Commission, predecessor to the American Red Cross. His statue, together with that of Father Junipero Serra, represents California in the national capitol. His name is borne by a Yosemite peak. ‘A man to match our mountains.’”

Plaque placed by the California State Park Commission

in cooperation with the California Historical Society and the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco.

April 24, 1960

The Golden State in the Civil War:

Thomas Starr King, the Republican Party, and the Birth of Modern California
Glenna Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Not a complete biography. Publisher wanted focus on political impact.

In 2006, on the last day of the legislative session, the CA legislature passed a joint resolution to replace King's statue in Statuary Hall with a statue of Ronald Reagan. State Sen. Dennis Hollingsworth (R-Hemet) explained, "To be honest with you, I wasn't sure who Thomas Starr King was, and I think there's probably a lot of Californians like me."

That statue of TSK was then placed to the Civil War Memorial Grove behind the State Capitol in Sacramento.



When TSK arrived in April 1860 “Free” California run by Pro-Slavery Politicians

John C. Fremont, 1856 presidential candidate of Republican Party, failed to carry California, won by Democrat James Buchanan.

(Fremont no anti-racist; Mariposa Battalion and Native American genocide)

CA Chief Justice Terry kills U.S. Senator David Broderick in a duel, Sept. 1859:

Why? Terry completely pro-slavery; Broderick a “Douglas Democrat.”

Eulogy by Edward Dickson Baker, friend of Lincoln, later US Senator from Oregon.

African Americans not allowed to testify in court; 800+ leave California in 1858,

Hiring a ship to take them to British ruled Victoria on Vancouver Island,
where the Governor, born in Jamaica, was of mixed race and slavery was outlawed.

CA Gov. John Weller (1858-1860) wanted a “Pacific Republic” allied with the Confederacy.



THOMAS STARR KING

Statue by Daniel Chester French
Golden Gate Park, 8th Ave. Entrance

IN HIM ELOQUENCE, STRENGTH
AND VIRTUE WERE DEVOTED
WITH FEARLESS COURAGE TO TRUTH
COUNTRY AND HIS FELLOW-MEN
1824–1864

In fact, Starr King stood only a bit over 5 feet tall
and weighed about 110 lbs.

“But when I’m mad, I weigh a ton!” he said.

Thomas Starr King: The Rarely Told Back Story

- Born Dec. 17, 1824, eldest of five children born to Rev. Thomas Farrington King and Susan Starr King. Always called “Starr.”
- His father was a New York cobbler who had given a stirring July 4th address, becoming a popular Universalist minister in NY, NH, & Charlestown, Mass, where the Cornerstone of Bunker Hill Monument was laid by Lafayette, June 17, 1825, dedicated June 17, 1842.
- Father died of TB in Sept. 1839, at the age of 42. “Starr” became the sole support of his widowed mother and five younger sibs. Not yet 15. Went to work as a clerk.
- Self-educated striver. Between the ages of 15 and 18, gave himself the equivalent of a Harvard education. Mastered Latin, Greek, math, rhetoric, and began to learn French and German. Read metaphysics. Explained Transcendentalism in 1841 letter to life-long friend, New Yorker Randolph Ryer (likely of mixed race).

TSK as a Young Striver and Orator

- Clerk in the Charlestown Navy Yard; assistant teacher, Bunker Hill Grammar School.
- July 4, 1842, gives a Fourth of July address in Medford, MA, heard by Universalist leader Hosea Ballou II (later the founder of Tufts University).
- Made Principal of Medford Grammar School at 18. Meets Theodore Parker at 19.
- Installed as the Minister to the Universalists of Charlestown at 20, his father's old post.
- HW Bellows wants him as colleague in NYC, but TSK has no Harvard degree.
- Sick with TB; takes an ocean voyage to Fayal, in the Portuguese Azores.
- Called to the pulpit of the very troubled Hollis Street Unitarian Church in Boston at 22; saves the institution. Parker calls him "the best preacher in Boston." Lectures widely.
- Awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree by Harvard, 1852.
- Offered ministry of historic First Church in Boston, 1853; stays at Hollis Street.
- Becomes part of the second generation of Transcendentalists; recommended by RWE.

Thomas Starr King, A.M. (*honoris causa*)



Julia Wiggin King

Seasick and ill on the voyage from Panama; had to be carried off the ship when it arrived, Saturday April 1860.

TSK and daughter Julia, 8, thought the ocean too Pacific!

Initially hated “Sand Francisco,” yearned to return to Boston. TSK only “on leave” from his congregation to try to save the Unitarian church in San Francisco, which had had five ministers in the ten years since its founding in 1850 and was in debt, with many of the pews in its 1000-seat building on Stockton St unoccupied.

Starr King preached the next day to an overflow congregation.



Jessie Benton Fremont

Daughter of US Sen. Thos. Hart Benton (MO)

Wife of John C. Fremont, Western explorer;
US Senator from CA (1850-52); Republican
candidate for President, 1856; owner of the
Mariposa Ranch and its mines.

Attended TSK's 2nd sermon in San Francisco;
joining the congregation by renting a pew;
invited TSK to her cottage at "Black Rock"
(Upper Fort Mason).

Began a salon including writer Brett Harte,
who also joined the Unitarian congregation;
plus photographer Carleton Watkins, lawyer
Frederick Billings, naturalist Wm H Brewer,
and other intellectuals and notables.



Starr King as Lecturer on the Lyceum circuit

“I will go anywhere for F.A.M.E. – fifty dollars and my expenses.”

Unpretentious, self-deprecating, never condescending; popular themes

“Substance and Show”

“Socrates”

“The Laws of Disorder”

“Sight and Insight”

“Existence and Life”

“Music”

“The Privileges and Duties of Patriotism”

The White Hills of New Hampshire and Saving Yosemite Valley

- Thomas Starr King, *The White Hills: Their Legends, Landscape, and Poetry* (1859)
- Visits “Yo-Semite” and the Mariposa Grove three months after arriving, July 1860. Not easy!
- “Letters from California” by TSK to *The Boston Evening Transcript*; picked up by other papers.
- Persuades Carleton Watkins, who had photographed Mariposa mines for the Fremonts, to go to Yosemite in the summer of 1861, taking the first photos of its landscape.
- Tyler Green, author of *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American*, U Cal 2018, is writing a work to be called *Claiming Yosemite: The Civil War, the California Genocide, and the Invention of National Parks* acknowledging TSK’s key role in saving Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove.
- 19th c. racialism and myth of progress. Indigenous peoples widely seen as predestined to vanish. One exception: Brett Harte’s reporting on the Wyot Massacre of Feb. 1860 in Humboldt County.
- Yosemite Act, June 1864 passed in tribute to Starr King. Influence of JBF, Billings, Hamlin, Lincoln. (N.B. John Muir didn’t arrive in California until 1868; showed Yosemite to RWE in 1872).

Carleton Watkins

pioneering landscape photographer

Huge camera apparatus, nearly 3' by 3'

Delicate emulsion on glass plates

Pack mules and assistants required

Career helped by his boyhood friend from upstate New York, Collin Huntington, who was one of the "Big Four" railroad tycoons.

Also did portrait photography, maintained a gallery in downtown San Francisco.

Early photos of Yosemite show signs of the indigenous Awaneechee band of Miwok: shelters, controlled burns, etc.



Anti-anti-slavery Sentiment in California

“The Wide Awakes,” young males to protect anti-slavery speakers
Rev. Wm. Anderson Scott, Calvary Presbyterian; Southern sympathizer

TSK’s Lecture on Washington’s Birthday, Feb. 1861

“Webster and the Constitution” March 1861

Facing hostile rural audiences armed with guns and bowie knives

Election of 1862: Choosing Jesus or Barabbas

Opposing a premature peace

Trip to Oregon and Victoria in 1863

“The only true white anti-racist in California in those years”

TSK addresses Black population of San Francisco

August 1, 1860 – Emancipation Day

“Wherever we find many races brought together, there God has his greatest work to do. There is room for the noblest labor of Christianity. The greatest work that was ever wrought by the early Christians was when the disciples went beyond the borders of Judea, & controverted the current doctrine that the Gentiles had no rights that a Jew was bound to respect, and taught that Christianity had no respect for rank, color, or sect. The Almighty had a great mission for this nation. Here the Church was to proclaim the equality of the races. Wherever the oppressed were congregated, there Christ was present, and not on the side of power. Into such a presence I always come with reverence.”

-- Rev. Thomas Starr King

A Leader in Cultural Transformation (with Bret Harte)

With congregant Bret Harte, succeeded Jessie Fremont as leader of the San Francisco intellectual and artistic community.

Set out to tie CA to New England culturally,
@ letter to James Fields, ed. *The Atlantic*.

Series of lectures on Great American poets,
with original poems by Bryant, Whittier,
Holmes, Longfellow, Emerson, et al.

Discovered and promoter CA's first openly
gay writer, Charles Warren Stoddard.

Inspiration to California's first Poet Laureate,
Ina Coolbrith (niece of the Mormon prophet
Joseph Smith)

Hosted RWE's son Edward; sent him home
with Watkins photos of Yosemite.



“Starr King needs a larger church for his growing congregation”

Located on Geary near Stockton, at the corner of Union Square (named by TSK).

Site now occupied by Nieman Marcus store.

“Flamboyant Gothic” designed to seat 1600.

Former church building on Stockton Street sold cheaply to a Black AME Zion congregation – probably financed by Mary Ellen Pleasant.

Congregation in includes Stanford brothers, Gov. Frederick Low; Robt. Swain, Director of US Mint; leading merchants, lawyers, etc. Andrew Smith Hallidie, cable car inventor.

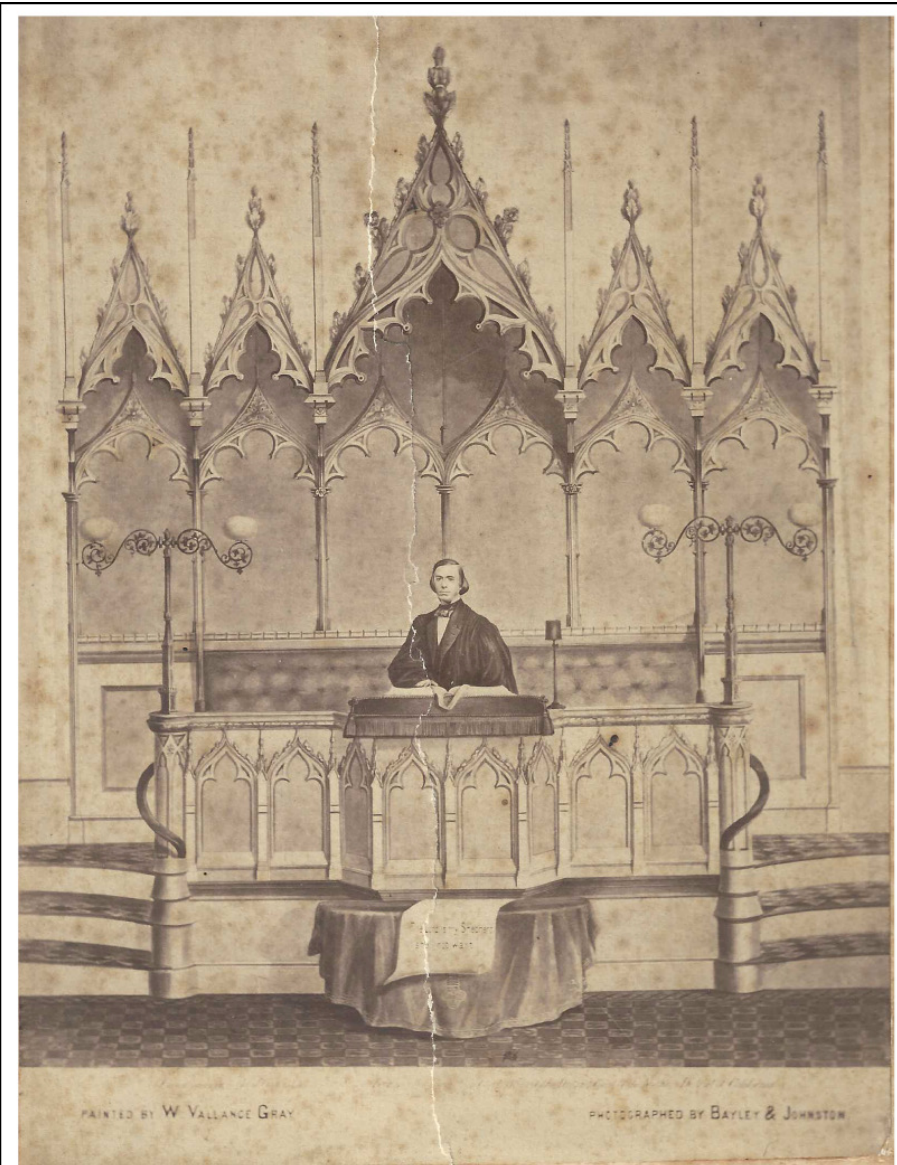
Dedicated in January 1864. TSK preached in it only 7 times before dying. 20,000 attended his funeral. Earthquake damaged and torn down in 1887. Chancel moved to building on Franklin.



A Leader in Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations

- July 4, 1860: addresses picnic by Episcopal Sunday School Society. Diocese objects.
- Lectures to support Methodist ministry to sailors and seamen. Methodist clergy object.
- Joins Congregationalists and Presbyterians in College of CA
- Exchanges pulpits with Rabbi Elkan Cohn of Temple Emanu-El





Thomas Starr King in the Pulpit of the 1864 Church
Painting by W. Vallance Gray, Photo by Bayley & Johnston
UUSF Archives Collection



The Full Impact of Rev. Thomas Starr King

- Religiously: Brings Transcendentalist theology to the West Coast, including reverence for nature and non-sectarian inclusivity.
- Culturally: Ties the West Coast culturally to the Northeast even before the coming of the Transcontinental Railroad.
- Racially: perhaps the only true CA white anti-racist of his time – deliberately joined a local Masonic lodge that was primarily Chinese; AME Zion church called “The Starr King Church” down to 1906.
- Environmentally: Plays a crucial role in saving Yosemite Valley.
- Educationally: Lays the groundwork for higher education in the state.

A Neglected Legacy: Unitarians in California Higher Education

TSK a trustee of the College of California, small men's liberal arts college in Oakland. Gave commencement address, 1863.

Gov. Leland Stanford was a congregant of TSK.

His successor was the first four year Governor of California, Frederick Low (1863-67). The legislature wanted a College of Agriculture and the Mechanical Arts.

TSK's successor, Rev. Horatio Stebbins, served as chair of the College of CA trustees. Gave Low the college charter and land in what became Berkeley in return for including liberal arts.

Stebbins and Low: effective founders (with Henry Durant) of the University of California.

Stebbins also advisor on founding Stanford University. Served as both a longtime regent of UCal and a founding trustee of Stanford.

