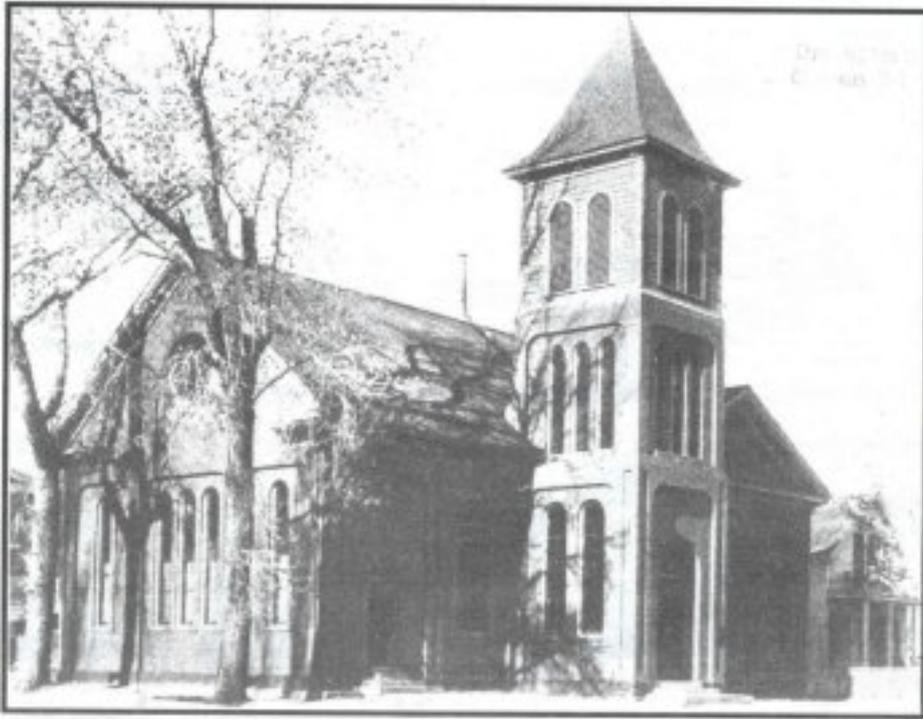


by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



Carson City's historic First Presbyterian Church.
Photo courtesy of the Nevada State Museum.

On Sunday, September 9, 2001, some 300 faithful packed Carson City's historic First Presbyterian Church, apparently worshipping there for the last time. Church officials, prompted by four unfavorable engineering reports over three decades, closed the building. One estimate of the cost to repair and stabilize the church completed in 1864 is \$3.5 million. The congregation does not have that kind of money and as long as the church maintains title to the building government funds are unavailable.

"Legend has it that Mark Twain once performed [in the church at 110 N. Nevada St.] to raise money to replace the roof," observed newspaper accounts. "The fund-raiser was a favor to his brother, Orion Clemens, who was a church member and Nevada's secretary of the state at the time."

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, a legend is "a story coming down from the past, especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable." The Mark Twain story may have

come down from the past, or maybe someone just assumed it to be true and told the reporter. However, it is verifiable. Relying on *Mark Twain's Letters, Volume 1, 1853-1866*, we know that while there was a church fund-raiser, it was not held in the church because it was unfinished and there was no roof to replace. At the same time, the formal request to speak came from two church trustees and not brother Orion, who was Secretary of Nevada Territory and not Secretary of State.

Construction on the First Presbyterian Church began in the summer of 1862. By January 1864, the building was still not complete and more money was needed. Church trustees Seymour Pixley and Gregory A. Sears wrote Mark Twain, whose brother Orion was a practicing Presbyterian, and asked the reporter for Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise* if he would consider charging a fee to hear him deliver his Third Annual Message to the Third House. The Third House was a mock legislative body held in saloons, public buildings, and legislative chambers-legislators and others were frequently among those participating in burlesque deliberations and law making.

On January 23, Twain, writing from Carson City, responded to Pixley and Sears:
Gentleman:--Certainly. If the public can find anything in a grave state paper worth paying a dollar for, I am willing they should pay that amount or any other. And although I am not a very dusty Christian myself, I take an absorbing interest in religious affairs, and would willingly inflict my annual message upon the church itself if it might derive benefit thereby. You can charge what you please; I promise the public no amusement, but I do promise a reasonable amount of instruction. I am responsible to the Third House only, and I hope to be permitted to make it exceedingly warm for that body, without caring what the sympathies of the public and the Church be enlisted in their favor and against myself or not.

"Governor Twain" delivered his message to the Third House, January 27, 1864, on the second floor of the Ormsby County Courthouse "before the first paying audience of his speaking career," according to R. Kent Rasmussen in *Mark Twain A to Z* (1995). Clement T. Rice, reporter for the Virginia City *Daily Union* and a friend of Twain whom Twain playfully called "The Unreliable," commented on the fund-raiser on January 29:

Mark Twain's message only helped to keep up the effervescing spirit of the good work in behalf of that same, ever-present, gaping skeleton of a church. The benefit on this occasion was large-perhaps \$200-which will take the institution in out of the weather and hasten its completion

very materially.

Thanks to Twain's generosity the Presbyterian Church was completed in May, about the time he was hightailing it out of Nevada Territory for greener pastures in San Francisco.

Today the vintage structure, a fixture in Carson City's historic district, is in need of another benefactor or else the wrecker's ball will again play havoc with a remnant of Nevada's frontier past.

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