

Sacred Places of San Francisco

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frontispiece:

The simple vertical Victorian Gothic thrust of Old St. Hilary's, built of wood in 1888, forms a prelude to the soaring shapes of twentieth century skyscrapers.

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Hamilton Square Baptist Church and Theological Seminary

1212 Geary Street, at Franklin Street

Founded February 7, 1881

Swedish Baptists, like the Pilgrims of the American colonial period, fled from their homeland to escape persecution for their religious beliefs. In the mid-nineteenth century a revival of personal religion in Germany influenced some ministers and laymen of the Swedish state church to study and interpret the Bible in a new way, and they came to the conclusion that to be true to those teachings they must be baptized by their own choice, rather than as infants, and in the same manner as the New Testament Christians, by immersion. A lay minister, F. O. Nilsson, after being so baptized by a German minister, returned to baptize five converts and establish the first Baptist church at Vällersvik, Sweden, on September 21, 1848. The state church, until that time inattentive to the revival movement, charged the Baptists with heresy. Nilsson was first imprisoned, then convicted of heresy and banished for life from his homeland; he fled first to Denmark and later to the United States.

Another pioneer of the Swedish Baptist Church was Captain Gustavus W. Schroeder, the founder of Hamilton Square Baptist Church. In November 1880 he placed an appeal in a Boston paper, *The Watchman*, for a Baptist minister "willing to trust God and His people for his support, without waiting for a call from any particular church for any specified salary." The Reverend Joseph S. Bromley answered the call, and Schroeder invited five friends to his San Francisco home on February 7, 1881, to establish the Zion Baptist Church. The group held services first in the Hamilton Hall, later building on property across the square at the corner of Steiner and Post streets, and taking the name Hamilton Square Baptist Church. This sparsely settled area lay beyond the burned main city when disaster struck in 1906. Open space surrounding the church became a haven for homeless victims, to whom the Baptists ministered. In 1912 the congregation erected a new church on the same site.

By the 1940s Hamilton Square was looking for a more central location, and after selling their church to a Methodist group in July of 1944, they bought new property at the corner of Geary and Franklin streets. Ground was broken for the present church on January 7, 1945. The congregation worshiped for several years in the lower level while the building was completed. In 1958, when the Conservative Baptist Ministers' Fellowship of the San Francisco Bay Area was planning to establish a seminary, Hamilton Square offered the use of their Franklin Street wing. The location at the crossroads of the city was considered ideal, and on September 16, 1958, the first class sessions were convened with twelve students.

Architect Donald Powers Smith designed the Gothic-inspired modern building of low interrelated forms with a tower that has a piquant, spired side turret. It is constructed around a hedged garden. Within the sanctuary, the communion table, which antedates the pulpit, is the center of worship. The choir is seated behind the chancel railing, with the baptistry above and behind the choir. Seating capacity of the sanctuary can be expanded to accommodate one thousand worshippers.