

Nathan Scarritt

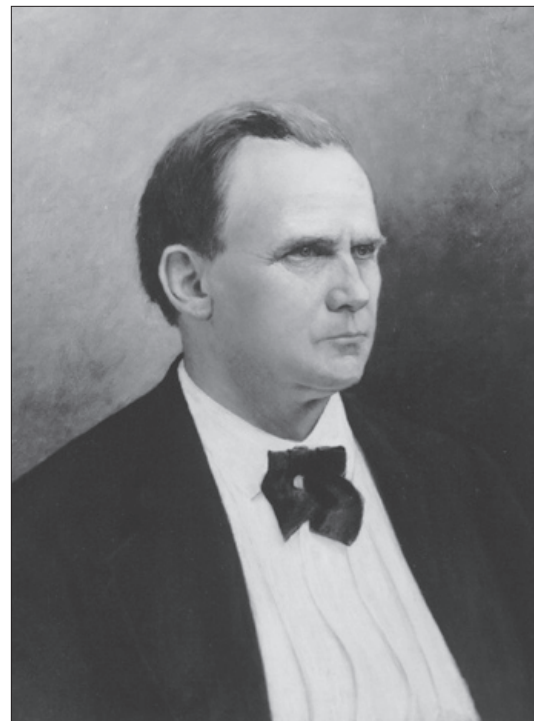
Methodist Minister and Teacher
1821-1890

by Daniel Coleman

The Rev. Nathan Scarritt's reminiscences of the years he traveled throughout the Territory of Kansas read more like a description of an obstacle course than the work of a scholar and minister. "I would have to swim swollen streams," he writes, "lie all night on the ground, even in stormy and cold weather . . . and go fasting from 24 to 30 hours at a time." Even when things may have seemed safe, Scarritt encountered unexpected dangers, as in the day he recalls crossing open prairie and suddenly "a rabid ox which was running at large took after me with utmost fury." These and other details of Scarritt's life show us how many difficulties our predecessors faced in simply getting about their business on the frontier.

Nathan Scarritt was born in Edwardsville, Illinois, in 1821, the seventh of Nathan and Latty Allds Scarritt's 12 children. His parents had come from New Hampshire just a year earlier, settling in Illinois after a 10-week journey via covered wagon. The family later established a farm just north of Alton, where Nathan worked until he reached age 16. That year, he began his studies at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois; without financial assistance from his parents, Nathan worked off his tuition by clearing trees and brush from the campus of the young college. A pioneer prototype and more literal version of today's "starving college student," he and his roommates lived in a log cabin and ate mainly potatoes and other vegetables they grew in their own garden.

After his graduation as valedictorian, Scarritt taught for several years in Illinois, then moved to Fayette, Missouri, to help his brother-in-law establish a new high school. In 1848, two factors brought Scarritt to Westport, an area that he—and most Americans of that time—knew only as "the very border of civilization." First, he became a Methodist minister, heeding a lifelong call. Second, the Rev. Thomas Johnson, Superintendent of the Shawnee Methodist Mission, located just a few miles southwest of Westport, needed a scholar accomplished enough to teach classics at his Indian school, yet hardy enough to endure the extreme conditions of life there. Scarritt's tenure at the Mission lasted several years, during



which he married Martha Matilda Chick, the youngest daughter of William Chick.

During this period of his life, Scarritt helped found Westport's first high school, also serving as its principal. And while an early student would later remark on the rigorousness of his teaching style ("Scarritt ruled with a rod of iron"), Scarritt, who received one of the earliest advanced degrees ever granted by the University of Missouri, probably possessed as much knowledge as any scholar in the growing frontier community.

However, believing that his true mission was to preach to the region's Indians, Scarritt spent most of the second half of the 1850s ministering via interpreter to the Kickapoo, Shawnee, Wyandot, and Delaware tribes living in the Territory of Kansas. He preached as well to the small, newly established communities of white settlers he encountered and helped them establish churches. In his later years he served as pastor to various Methodist congregations in Westport and Kansas City. Of his work with other denominations, historian Carrie Westlake Whitney would write that "scarcely a church in Kansas City was unaided by him."

In 1861, with danger mounting in "Bleeding Kansas" from border strife and Civil War tensions, Scarritt settled with his family in a log cabin on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River several miles northeast of Kansas City. Eventually the larger home and farm they built at Scarritt's Point would give way to the mansions and boulevards of the historic Northeast Neighborhood. In the final decades of his life, Nathan Scarritt also wisely invested in property made valuable by the city's rapid growth, and when he died at age 69 in 1890, he left a fortune of several million dollars. Of his and Martha's nine children, the six who grew to adulthood and their many descendants populated Kansas City with influential Scarritts throughout the next century. In 1907 his children completed the landmark Scarritt Building and Arcade at 818 Grand, and in later years a granddaughter, Frances Royster Williams, created the nationally syndicated "Cuddles and Tuckie" cartoon series, which ran in the *Kansas City Star* from 1932-60.

Sources

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