



The Echo

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Where the Past is Present

Spring/Summer 2024

Altadena's Churches: A History of Faith

by Cynthia Pearson

From its historic churches to its contemporary spiritual organizations, Altadena is a community rich in spiritual heritage and religious diversity. While the "big three" monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have dedicated congregations in the area, Altadena's spiritual traditions span a wide range, embracing various denominations and faiths.

Early residents of Altadena looked toward neighboring Pasadena for official worship opportunities; branches of major denominations were established in Pasadena in the late 1800s. However, as Altadena's population grew, its residents began forming their own congregations. Early services were held in homes and in small gatherings.

By the mid-1920s, Altadena had grown in size, and churches followed, signifying the emergence of a distinct religious identity within the community. In 1925 the Los Angeles Times noted that Altadena, with a population of over 10,000, was a community with "several churches," in addition to "three modern public schools...and a number of civic organizations."



St. Elizabeth Catholic Church Grotto

congregations.

One of the notable early remaining church buildings in Altadena is St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic Church, at the northwest corner of Lake and Woodbury. Designed by famed architect Wallace Neff – his only church design and a gift to his community – the construction of the building was completed in 1926 and described as "an ideal blending of old-world art and new-world comfort."

Throughout the post-war period, church organizations flourished. Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, founded in 1906 as an outreach of All Saints Church in Pasadena, consecrated as its own parish in 1914. It moved into its current home in the late 1940s, as did Altadena Community Church, itself founded in 1940, nearly across the

Some churches have been serving Altadena for over a century, while others have emerged more recently. Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, non-denominational, and other Christian churches have served past generations of Altadenans as well as contemporary

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President's Message *by Veronica Jones*



Supporting Local History

Dear AHS Members,

Spring has sprung at the Altadena Historical Society, and I hope this message finds you all in good spirits.

AHS is experiencing challenges this year, as our President, Jane Brackman, resigned due to family illness, and our secretary and treasurer will be finishing their terms at the

end of the year. So we are actively seeking new board members to join us in preserving and celebrating the rich tapestry of our shared history. If you would like to join our board, please send an email before April 30 to altadenahistoricalsociety@yahoo.com. Tell us about your experience and which position interests you.

Jane has been a stalwart presence within our society, dedicating countless years as a member, board member, and president. Her contributions have been instrumental in the growth and success of AHS, including the publication of a book about Altadena, the development of a robust volunteer base, and the incorporation of an ethnic history component. Jane's impact on AHS is immeasurable, and we wish the best for her.

I am honored that the Altadena Historical Society Board has appointed me as its Interim President, and I am committed to keeping us faithful to our mission. I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to connect with each of you.

In this quarter's newsletter, we explore the fascinating topic of "Faith in Altadena." We take a look at the broad spectrum of ways Altadena worships, then focus on three distinctly different church families. Our history of faith is as diverse as our citizens. And the Archives Update will keep you informed about what we've done and what we're doing this year.

As we journey through 2024, I am continually inspired by the dedication and passion of our members. Thank you for your unwavering support.

Warm regards,
Veronica Jones

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...Altadena's Churches continued from page 1

street. These churches were joined on the stretch of Altadena Drive just east of Lake by the First Church of Christ, Scientist, Altadena, which constructed its church building and Reading Room by 1950.

Black churches have played and continue to play a significant role in the community. One example is Metropolitan Baptist Church on Fair Oaks, which has been a center of worship and community for over a century. Founded as an organization in 1906 in Pasadena, Metropolitan Baptist Church relocated in Altadena in 1970. Designed by legendary architect Paul R. Williams, the new church building brought the congregants of Metropolitan Baptist Church – at that point, spanning generations – to Altadena.

In addition to conventional faith traditions, Altadena has a long history of embracing alternative spiritual practices and philosophies. Theosophy, Waldorf education, and New Thought movements have found a place within the community, reflecting its manifold approach to spirituality. The Theosophical Society, which blends religion, philosophy, and metaphysics, occupies a large estate at Santa Rosa Avenue and Mariposa Street and a library on Lake Avenue.

However, not all organizations have endured. A robust Bahai community flourished in the early 20th century, but seems to have faded away by the mid-20th century. The Church of Religious Science (which later split from that organization and became the Altadena Church of Truth) – part of the New Thought tradition – brought guided meditation workshops and dream analysis classes to members in the 1960s and 1970s but moved out of Altadena in the mid-1980s.

There have long been efforts in Altadena to foster inclusivity and diversity and bring

together members of different churches. In the 1950s, churches collaborated on a joint Altadena Yule Pageant and supported the creation of a senior center in Altadena. A youth coalition from different churches went door-to-door in the 1960s to bring awareness of social security benefits, in a program called "Reach to Remote." More recent interfaith and inter-congregational initiatives have included Altadena Congregations Together Serving (ACTS) to promote collaboration and mutual understanding among different faith communities, as well as to serve members of the greater Altadena community.

Altadena continues to offer its citizens many ways to worship with its vibrant tapestry woven from diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices. New churches have been formed, and, in some cases, replaced others in the same locations; for example, Refuge Christian Center now occupies the space on Woodbury where New Heart Four Square Church once held its services. In



addition to the longstanding congregations of such organizations as Altadena Fountain of Life Church of the Nazarene (founded in 1927) and the Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center (in its current home since 1945), Altadenans can explore other faiths and traditions at places

such as Sukyo Mahikari Spiritual Center, which offers "universal principals of light energy."

Many Altadena churches now offer online services and have expanded their outreach through recording, broadcasting, study groups and social media, so that those looking for religious or spiritual life in Altadena can experience it much as the early spiritual gatherers in Altadena did: in small groups in private homes -- an opportunity to come full-circle.

Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center (PJTC)

by Pam Wright

When Maurice and Mina Rosenbaum moved into this area in 1874 and built a home on what is now Orange Grove Avenue, they were the first Jewish residents of Pasadena. The next year, they opened a store at Orange Grove and Colorado. Business boomed, and other Jewish merchants soon helped to establish that area as the center of town.

In 1907 and 1915, the growing Jewish community tried to establish a synagogue, but it wasn't until 1921 that Temple B'nai Israel was incorporated. Its original building still stands on the southwest corner of Walnut and Hudson Streets in Pasadena. Longtime synagogue member and late historian Eugene Fingerhut credits the Temple Sisterhood with "leading the way to the formation of the congregation." (You might notice a similarity to AHS, also founded by women.) Two years before the original building was built, the Sisterhood had founded a religious school for the children of the community, and the synagogue grew from those beginnings.

Despite economic challenges brought by the 1929 depression, the synagogue maintained an active congregation and outgrew its original building. In 1941 it purchased a Spanish-style building on Altadena Drive north of Washington Boulevard, not far from the old St. Luke's Hospital. The original building, constructed in 1931, had been known as the "Artists' Guild Building," including shops for Winfield Pottery, John Cowles Metal Laboratories, and the El Padre Inn restaurant. (Note: old maps and

documents reveal that not only does the street name vary—it was "Foothill" for a while—but the location/city name varies, too. Different maps show different boundaries, depending on the decade. PJTC is considered to be located in "historic" Altadena.)

During World War II, more than fifty men and women from the synagogue served in all branches of the armed forces, and the congregation held USO-style dances welcoming and entertaining large numbers of service members from the military base at Santa Anita race track. Several long-time member families intermarried as a result of romances that bloomed at these dances.



**Pasadena Temple B'nei Israel
Hebrew School — ca. 1934**

There was an increase in synagogue membership in the 1950s and 1960s, as new Jewish residents moved into the area for science and technology careers at JPL and CalTech. In this era, Jews were still largely barred from many social organizations such as country clubs and fraternal groups; therefore many families depended heavily on the synagogue for their social life. In 1956, the community renamed itself Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, and gradually added a new sanctuary building, new classrooms, swimming pool, a stage, and a large kitchen to facilitate weekly communal dinners and fundraisers. The Sisterhood held many of these events and were able to generate funds through auctions, donations, and dinners (often so successful that nothing was left for the cooks to eat!)

Following in the footsteps of the early Sisterhood, by the end of the 1980s women had become congregational leaders with full

participation in religious services. In 1987, Marcia Alper made PJTC history by being the first woman to read the Torah during Shabbat services, and in 1990, she became the first woman elected congregation president.

The Men's Club (once part of B'nai B'rith) has a long history of service to the community. Its mission is to support programs for children and youth, and it raises funds for the religious school, the youth group, the B'nai Simcha preschool, and scholarships for summer camp. Historically, Men's Club sponsored athletic activities for younger members, with basketball, softball and basketball leagues that played all over the L.A. area.

PJTC guards and reveres treasures and relics of the Holocaust and other historical periods. A series of beautiful embroidery work was done by member Trudie Strobel, who survived concentration camp enslavement by working as a child with her seamstress mother, who made uniforms for Nazis.

Another treasure, known as "The Persian Torah," has a dramatic and heartwarming history. Beautifully crafted in Iraq with a cover of hammered silver, this Torah had been commissioned and then donated to an Iranian synagogue by Ray Nehdar, who later became a member of PJTC. During the time of the Iranian Revolution, news came that this synagogue had been destroyed; so Nehdar wrote a ten-page personal letter to Ayatollah Khomeini, asking about the Torah scroll. He reminded the Ayatollah that this Torah was a holy book, written in an ancient language in which he must have been taught, and he asked for its return. Amazingly, in two weeks, Nehdar received a large box — the Torah scroll had been found and rescued, obviously from a burned synagogue, blackened silver on the outside, even some ashes inside. With

significant difficulty, the case was cleaned, and the Torah is still used on special occasions, a symbol of resilience and hope.

PJTC merged with several synagogues in the late 1990s and early 2000s, groups from Sunland-Tujunga, Arcadia, Sierra Madre, El Monte, and Alhambra.

Today the synagogue's values give strength and fellowship to about 420 families. Its Interfaith Study Group meets with All Saints Episcopal Church and the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles. The Welcome Circle recently sponsored an Afghan refugee family, helping them connect with housing, ESL classes, jobs, and medical care, in short, all the necessities.

As a celebration of PJTC's centennial, retired librarian and synagogue member Betsy Kahn, and Samuel Svonkin (a high school student) participated in an effort to collect data about the past. Samuel said,



Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center

"After being beaten down by the pandemic and everything that has happened over the past two years, it opened my eyes to see how, even if the world looks horrible, there are people everywhere who are kind, loving, and dedicated to helping others."

"There is room for everyone at PJTC, regardless of age, level of participation, Jewish knowledge or practice," said Ms. Kahn.

Masjid al-Taqwa: A Jewel in Our Midst

by Betsy Kahn

Most Altadenans routinely drive by a modest storefront building on Lake Avenue, and may occasionally ponder the green sign stating *Masjid al-Taqwa*. Founding members of the mosque were mostly African-Americans attracted to the Nation of Islam, which was led by The Honorable Elijah Muhammad from its beginnings in the early 1930s, blossoming over the decades as a source of Black pride and self-determination.

Members first met in living rooms, then rented space in various locations on Lincoln Avenue and in Hen's Teeth Square; Masjid al-Taqwa has been at its current location for decades. Warith Dean Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, became the leader of the Nation of Islam after his father's death in 1975, and led a unification with mainstream Sunni Islam. In the decades that followed, Masjid al-Taqwa broadened its membership to include Muslims from many different backgrounds and countries of origin.

At recent Friday prayer services (known as *Jummah*), Masjid al-Taqwa welcomed dozens of worshippers. Local religious leaders and scholars rotate attendance to provide the Friday sermon, usually based on a theme from the Quran, or sometimes from the news of the day. Some congregants try to fulfill the obligation of praying five times a day at the mosque.

During the holy month of Ramadan, which began March 10 this year, congregants fasted during daylight hours, and over the course of the month recited the entire Quran. The fast was broken at the end of Ramadan when the

crescent moon first appeared to announce the new Islamic month of Shawwal, ushering in the holiday of *Eid al-Fitr*. The Islamic calendar is based on the phases of the moon, so

holiday dates fall differently on the secular calendar each year; this year the Eid holiday fell during the second week of April. After the concluding prayer services, congregants gathered for parties and festive meals, locally and also with members of the greater Muslim community in the Los Angeles area.

Children especially look

forward to Eid, not only for the celebratory foods but because of the custom of receiving gifts from the adults in the community.

Thinking about the mosque's origins in the Nation of Islam, member Aaron Abdus-Shakoor recounts, "African-Americans had just about had enough of it. We had enough of oppression, we had enough of discrimination. But we kind of evolved, and we have become more involved in the human family." He has fond memories of his early years as a Muslim in Altadena and Pasadena, where the custom was for the young men to attend "Fruit of Islam" (a men's religious organization) on Saturday, and then head out to go door to door selling the newspaper of the Nation of Islam, *Muhammad Speaks*. "That experience of selling papers, knocking on people's doors, really for me was so educational and so fulfilling because you put your foot in people's homes," he said. "The African-American experience was really warm, they would call me Brother Aaron, and they still use that term. You got to know people and the neighborhood, and they were regular



From left, members Delores, Daarina, Shahada and Saleemah

customers. They were so inviting.” He described how they also sold food products, and their customers would watch for them every week to buy bean pies and whiting fish.

Founding member Joan Maryam Abu-Bakir also recalls discouraging experiences of racism from her childhood and youth in Michigan and in California. The daughter of a medical doctor, she grew up in a largely white community but was never fully accepted. Teachers and even college professors discouraged her academic ambitions, and she ended up abandoning her dream of medical school and instead became a public school teacher. Her first introduction to the Nation of Islam was a youthful encounter with the boxer Muhammad Ali, who visited her childhood home in Michigan. Her family later moved to California, and she converted while a student at UCSD. In 1975, because of her father’s professional connections, she had the



Shazia holding baby Kamal

opportunity to meet Elijah Muhammad right before he died. “My goal was to see this man that made a big transformation in my life. And I sort of subconsciously wanted him to know that I would carry on this Islam,” she said. She had joined because of her experience with

racism, but it ended up giving her a lifetime of spirituality.

Kameelah Waheed Wilkerson is a second generation member who remembers when the congregation was called the Altadena Pasadena Dawah (“preaching of Islam”) Center, and remembers the day when all the



Masjid al-Taqwa

members gathered to decide on a new name. A number of families had volunteered to research different names and what they signified, and then each family pitched their idea to the whole community. The final choice was Masjid al-Taqwa; *Masjid* is Arabic for mosque (literally, “place of prostration”), and *Taqwa* has a number of meanings, including “God-consciousness.” Kameelah is proud that her mosque is a welcoming place for traveling Muslims, and for people who have come to town on temporary work assignments. “It’s a part of the history of the city, and it would be good to be known, to be represented, to be counted,” she said.

Neighbors are welcome to visit weekly *Jumma* services, which happen on Fridays at 1:00 p.m. and last about an hour. The address is 2183 North Lake Avenue, just south of Calaveras Street. It is best to email ahead to masjidaltaqwa@gmail.com, so they can be prepared to welcome you. Visitors are asked to dress respectfully and to be prepared to remove their shoes inside the mosque. Men enter through the north door, and women through the south door; women should also be prepared to cover their heads inside. Congregants pray while kneeling on the floor, but visiting observers will be ushered to seating on chairs.

Current members want their Altadena neighbors to know about Masjid al-Taqwa. “There is a vibrant, thriving Muslim community in Altadena, California. We’re here, and it’s a beautiful community.”

A Multi-Generational, Multi-Cultural Church

by Jean Phillips

First Presbyterian Church of Altadena traces its beginnings to 1913, when six Pasadena churches formed the Federated Missions to provide a church for the area's small number of Japanese immigrants, mostly young men workers and students. The newly formed Pasadena Japanese Union Church provided temporary housing, an employment bureau, English classes, and an introduction to Christianity.

Miki Kumamoto:
"We were not denominational at that time. As a mission church there were different churches supporting us."

Beginning with 23 charter members, the congregation added classes for women, Sunday school for nine children, and reached out to a combined Japanese population of over 100 in Pasadena, Sierra Madre, South Pasadena, and Lamanda Park. By 1920, with help from the Federated Missions, they purchased a house at 293 Kensington Place which, along with a house on the lot next door, remained their home for 45 years.

Ted Tajima: *"I came to the Kensington church in 1928 when I was 6 years old, and my father was called to be the minister. There were about 40 Issei and lots of children. The church had a good Sunday School and social activities for kids."*

Harry Tsushima:
Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, English, sewing, and cooking classes organized by Pasadena's Board of Education for the Issei women, the Women's Christian Association, Boy Scout Troup 41, and the Young People's Association were among the many opportunities the congregation's first-generation Issei and second-generation Nisei members offered to Christian and non-

Christian Japanese during the 20s and 30s.

Their weekly newsletter, *The Clarion*, first published in 1935, provided spiritual and community support and is still an important link for Asian-American awareness in the Pasadena/San Gabriel Valley area.

The War Years

World War II halted all progress when the congregation's families were forced to leave their homes and businesses and were transported to remote camps where they lived in crudely built

barracks. In 1942 the church closed.

The Missions Board and congregation had planned for ways to protect the church and members' property and re-build Japanese-American relations during and after the war. A newly formed organization, Friends of the American Way, stayed connected with the families, sending clothing and gifts, and honored the 117 Pasadena Nisei who served in the American forces.

Sophie Toriumi: *"There was a storage space in our church for people to store their things during the war."*

Henry Hayashi: *"I served overseas in France, then Italy. We made the last push in Florence, where our troops were stalemated. What the other units couldn't do in six months, our [all Japanese] 442nd Regimental Combat Unit did in two days but there were a lot of casualties."*

Years of Growth

After the war the Pasadena-area Japanese population grew to over 600 families and 2,000 individuals by the mid-1950s. It was time to reopen the church. They hired the Reverend Donald Toriumi as pastor, became



Kensington Place Church

the Pasadena Presbyterian Union Church, and became self-supporting. The Federated Mission Board dissolved itself after 40 years of dedicated service to the Japanese in Pasadena.

When Los Angeles County took the Kensington property to build the 210 freeway, reimbursement money funded the purchase of a site for a new church on Lincoln Avenue and Harriet Street. In 1963 they changed the name of the church to First Presbyterian Church, Altadena.

Groundbreaking on the new facility took place on a rainy day in March 1967, and the new church was dedicated on March 17, 1968. Over 500 donations to the building fund and funds raised through annual bazaars and other activities made that momentous day possible.

Elsie Hayashi: *“When the church moved to Altadena, I was so happy to see the big, beautiful church. We were amazed at how big a group of Japanese was going to that church.”*

The next decades were active, and events like the annual bazaar (now called the “Fall Festival”) generated community involvement and support. The church prioritized supporting seniors. Reverend Toriumi, who was active in the United Presbyterian Churches’ resettlement program for Southeast Asian refugees, led the church to adopt a Vietnamese family and help them become self-sufficient.

Ruth Issei: *“I was church secretary for many years. Working with Reverend Toriumi was a pleasure. He really had a lot of respect for his members.”*

Changes and Challenges

Demographic and societal changes, however, brought challenges. Differences between the needs of the diminishing Issei membership, the much larger Nisei membership, and the

growing third (Sansei) and fourth (Yonsei) generations became apparent. By the beginning of the 21st Century, membership had fallen to around 200.

So, the church reached out to the local community in ways remarkably like the support the Mission Board offered to early immigrants. They focused on youth programs, student scholarships, and the Keiro Otomodachi Outreach program for seniors and inactive former members.

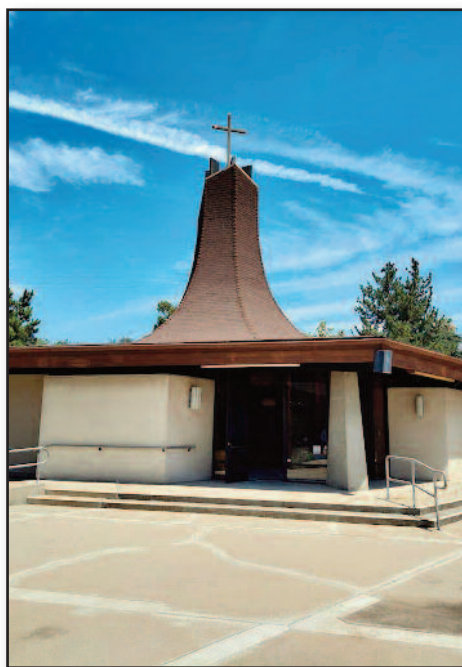
Over the last twenty years, newcomers to the church include people who are bicultural, biracial, culturally blended, or from other cultures. Some have come from the neighborhood surrounding the church. Others are extended family members of those already active at the church. Many share varying degrees of Asian ancestry, not necessarily Japanese.

Ruth Tanaka: *“I like our church now the way it is changing. It is not just a Japanese church anymore. I like that we are becoming multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. We are all God’s children.”*

As **Ted Tajima**, former *Clarion* editor, wrote in the late 1980s, “Our church’s

[history] is a fascinating story of devotion on the part of turn-of-the-century Caucasians who founded missions and of young Issei who accepted this outreach and developed the missions into a church. It is our story of how we were uprooted from our homes and our church by World War II. It is a story of our return to carry on our lives, continue our traditions, raise our families, and endeavor to maintain this mission, this ministry in our community.... It is a story that must and will continue.”

Information in this article came from First Presbyterian Church of Altadena’s Oral History Project.



**First Presbyterian Church,
Altadena**

Archives Update

We are very pleased to welcome seven new volunteers to the Archives this year. They are busy learning Past Perfect software, helping with research, and organizing files. And two – Betsy Kahn and Cynthia Pearson – wrote articles for this issue of The Echo. They're a talented group. Please stop by on Mondays and Fridays from 10am to 1pm and say hello.

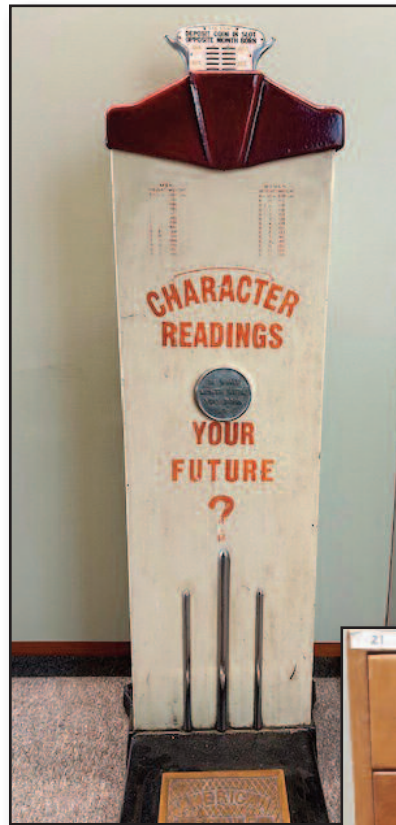
New at the Archives

We're fortunate to have a number of interesting new donations to our collection; among them thirteen valuation maps prepared by Pacific Electric covering the portion of its

Mount Lowe line running from Villa Street in Pasadena to the Alpine Tavern in the 1930s plus maps and memorabilia relating to Altadena and the Angeles National Forest, donated by

Paul Ayers. Paul also included an insulator (at right) found in an oak tree near the Mount Lowe Line Pavilion train shed.

Scott and Lori Webster donated the Western Electric PBX/switchboard phone system used in Webster's Pharmacy from 1956 through the 1980s which may have



been originally used at the post office located in the Mariposa Hotel. They also gave us a "Wate and Fate" penny scale which sat in front of McIntyre Mariposa Drug Store. Both of these artifacts are now on display in our archives.

Betsy Kahn donated the book *"The Bungalow, America's Arts and Crafts Home"* which includes the Keyes bungalow in Altadena, and **Solange Russek** from the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum sent us two vintage matchbook



covers from Fox's dining room found in their collection.

Two small cabinets of realtors' cards with information on local homes were transferred to us by **Altadena Heritage**, expanding our home history collection, and **Leslie Heald** gave us a loving cup presented at the 1934 Altadena Yard and Garden Contest.

In the Community

On February 3rd Veronica Jones and Steven McNall presented a talk about Ellen Garrison Clark to the Martin Severance Chapter of the



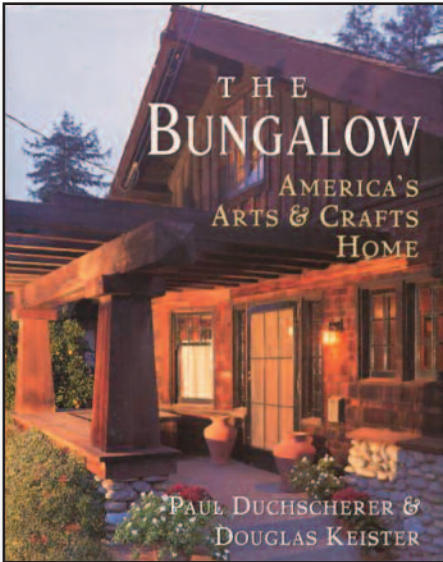
Daughters of the American Revolution. At the event AHS was honored with a Community Service Award for the work we have done since 1935 to preserve and

share Altadena's history.

On February 10th we were pleased to partner with Altadena Libraries and All Saints Church in an inspiring Black History Month presentation featuring

Gerald Rivers and his Peace Players including young drummers and performances channeling Dr. Martin Luther King and Sojourner Truth.

On April 4th Veronica and Steven



AHS volunteer luncheon held at the Altadena Country Club

brought their Hidden Histories presentation focusing on Black Altadenans to the Altadena Senior Center.

Coming Up:

We are partnering with the Altadena Libraries on two programs during National Library week:

- *Mid-Century Modern Architecture and the Future of the Altadena Main Library* will feature ASH Board Member and Building Biographer Tim Gregory leading a tour of the library building's architectural features on Friday, April 12 from 10 – 11:30.
- *Millionaires's Row Historical Tour*, Saturday, April 13 from 9:30 to 10:30 led by AHS docents will feature Colonel G.G. Green's Home and Carriage House, the McNally House, Camp Mariposa, and the Theosophical Society.

Reservations and liability releases are required for both events.

Our annual Ellen Garrison Clark scholarship luncheon will be held on June 19, the Juneteenth National Holiday. Details will follow closer to the event.



Gerald Rivers' Peace Players

—Courtesy of Deb Squared Photos



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Altadena Historical Society (AHS), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization was founded to gather, preserve, and make available information about the people, places and events that have shaped Altadena's past.

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