

“The Vision of Allen C. Mason – Tacoma’s Super Salesman”

Remarks by Jim Hoard
Dedication of Mason Plaza – December 6, 2008

Allen C. Mason’s spirit and vision led to the construction of the Mason Plaza we’re dedicating today. Mason Plaza honors our heritage and reminds us of what Allen Mason meant to Tacoma and to its development. So, who was Allen C. Mason?

In 1855, he was born in Polo, Illinois, a farming community approximately 75 miles west of Chicago. From an early age Mason was both a good student and a hard worker, raising chickens on his own chicken farm when he was just 13. He went to college in Bloomington, Illinois, and graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1875. He married Libbie Lawrence, who also graduated from Illinois Wesleyan, in 1878. As a high school principal and educator, he wrote a school textbook and a book on pedagogy, both of which sold well. He read the law and was admitted to the Illinois bar.

Mason was determined to move west and after reading a number of articles, he settled on Tacoma. He and his family arrived in Tacoma in 1883 with plans for him to practice law and seek his fortune. After renting a house and an office, he had just \$2.85 in his pocket. He began to practice law and was one of the founders of the bar association. He also became successfully involved in real estate and made \$10,000 his first year. Thus began a remarkable business career. In 1884, he built gas and electric plants in Olympia and sold them at a good profit. In 1886, he established the Shore Line Railroad and laid tracks northward from Old Tacoma toward Pt. Defiance. In time, Northern Pacific bought him out. He joined forces with Nelson Bennett (who built the Stampede Pass Tunnel among a host of other accomplishments) to build street car lines in Tacoma. He eventually sold his interest, but later founded other street car companies and built the line through the Proctor District to Pt. Defiance. He also invested in irrigation works near Yakima and in farming in Palouse. In addition, he became a director of several Northwest banks. He became the largest stockholder in the Tacoma Theater building, a stockholder in the Tacoma Hotel, and an investor in the Tacoma smelter. He built downtown real estate blocks in Tacoma (the Mason Block is at 10th and A St.), Fairhaven (now part of Bellingham), and Yakima.

He put much of his development efforts into residential growth, and advertised heavily throughout the country to attract newcomers. He not only sold lots, he built scores of the houses that were constructed on them. He was responsible for platting and selling 13 additions in Tacoma’s north end. To open his properties for development, he built both streets and bridges. The viaducts across both Buckley gulch on N. 21st St. and Puget gulch on North Proctor were built by Mason. He donated both to the city. He improved the land just west of the Proctor Street viaduct and donated it to the city as a park. (It’s today’s Puget Park.) In 1888 he was elected to the board that launched today’s University of Puget Sound. Also in 1888, Mason’s Commencement Bay Land & Improvement Co. undertook building wharfs and warehouse operations along 1 ¼ miles of waterfront. In 1889, he organized the first boatload of bread and meat that went from

Tacoma to Seattle when news of the great Seattle fire was received. Within a decade of arriving in Tacoma, Allen C. Mason was a multimillionaire.

In 1892 he built a magnificent mansion at 4301 North Stevens. It cost \$86,000, the equivalent of several million dollars today. It had thirty-six rooms, and used local woods and stone extensively. In the Panic of 1893, when Mason lost most of his fortune, he sold his mansion to Whitworth College, which used it as its main building from 1899 to 1913, when the college moved to Spokane. John P. Weyerhaeuser bought the property and demolished Mason's mansion in 1920 when he built "Haddaway Hall". The sandstone columns from the mansion's portico were used in the landscaping. The Northwest Baptist Seminary, which now occupies the site, generously donated the six sandstone columns — nearly all that remains of Mason's mansion — for this plaza.

It's notable that in the Panic of 1893, Mason personally bought back houses from anyone who asked, losing all his money in the process. He truly was a person of rare integrity.

No one foresaw Tacoma's destiny more clearly than Allen C. Mason. Where others saw woods and wilderness, he saw a metropolis. Mason coined the phrase, *The City of Destiny*, over 100 years ago and promoted our community as a wonderful place to live. Along the way, he — more than any other person — promoted Tacoma, advertising our city's strengths in east coast papers through a dazzling illustration he called Tacoma's *Star of Destiny*. At its height, his advertising budget was over \$5,000 a month — at a time when that was real money. The bronze rendition of his *Star of Destiny* that is part of this Mason Plaza dates from 1910. Mason's slogans on the Star name all railroads and shipping lines that serve Tacoma, point to its many manufacturing and job opportunities, and its favorable geography. And he sprinkles in some reasons that you will love living in Tacoma. My personal favorites are: "The grass stays green all winter", "Ideal for Retired Capitalists", and "No poisonous bugs or reptiles".

The statue of Mason depicts him extending a hand of welcome. If you buy a building site from him, he will, we can suppose, be pleased to give you a cigar from the breast pocket of his vest.

In closing, let me add that it's most appropriate that Mason Plaza be located adjacent to the Wheelock Library, due to the fact that Allen C. Mason gave the city its first public library, along with 6,000 volumes to put inside it. Mr. Mason was a person of uncommon integrity and a unique combination of visionary, promoter, salesman, builder, businessman, and philanthropist.

Tacoma Historical Society has been pleased to team with the Proctor District Association to construct Mason Plaza. We trust you will enjoy it.