

# USC Med School founder was doctor, mystic

(This is the sixth in a series of articles on prominent individuals and landmarks in the history of the northeast area, as Los Angeles nears the celebration of its 200th birthday this September).

By Charles Cooper

Joseph Pomeroy Widney was the third of five brothers to journey to California to live, leaving his native Ohio in 1862 to join the stream of health seekers looking for renewal of their lives in the west.

All of the Widneys achieved prominence in their new home state, but few individuals anywhere led as varied a life as Joseph Widney before dying at his Marmion Way home at the age of 97, in 1938.

Widney first trained as a physician, receiving his MD degree with honors from Toland Medical College in San Francisco, at the time (1866) the only medical school in the state. According to a biographer, Widney's total course of instruction "could not have exceeded ten months," and consisted largely of lectures on the practice of medicine.

### PRACTICE

The new Dr. Widney set up practice in Los Angeles in October of 1868, joining first with Dr. John S. Griffin, an older community leader.

Widney's practice soon included some prominent individuals, including General William T. Sherman and the bandit Tiburcio Vasquez, then in custody before his final execution in San Jose in 1875.

In 1871, Widney called a meeting of seven doctors, probably the entire medical contingent in the Los Angeles of that day with its 6600 residents, and proposed the formation of a county medical association. His partner Dr. Griffin was the association's first president, but Widney is recognized as the founder of the LACMA, which now has a roster of some 10,000 members.

Widney's talents for organization came to the fore again in 1885, when he proposed the founding of a medical college as a part of the young University of Southern California.

Dr. Widney established the college on Aliso Street, served as its dean for the first 11 years, and recruited a faculty which served without salary and which, in fact, paid for the privilege of being a member of the College of Medicine.

His practice of medicine took a secondary role to his



JOSEPH P. WIDNEY

administrative work and his land investments, which soon made him independently wealthy; and he was to be called on to use his skills as an organizer once again in 1892.

### USC

The death of the University of Southern California's first president, when colleges all through Southern California were facing financial difficulties, threatened to wipe out the college entirely.

Dr. Widney's brother, Judge Robert Widney, was a leading spirit in the founding of USC, and Dr. Widney, already a member of the organization's board of directors, was given the presidency. He brought the college out of debt and into safe harbor before retiring in 1895.

He fought hard for a harbor of another sort, beating one of the leaders in the battle by LA interests to establish a major harbor at San Pedro. Widney also fought for the establishment of a city Board of Health, and served as one of the first three members.

### CHAPEL

Widney gradually turned from public life to writing and meditation, developing a unique brand of sociological mysticism which was reflected in the establishment of a chapel near his home.

He called it Beth-El, dedicated to the "all

(Continued on Page A2)

# Med School

(Continued from Page 1)

Father," and conducted Sunday services for 36 years. Holding an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity, he paid for all the costs of upkeep for the church himself, while his brother Rev. Samuel A. Widney led the Sunday School services.

Widney married twice, but no children survived him. Toward the end of his life, he lost his sight, but continued to publish books into his 90's.

His service as president of the Los Angeles Board of Education, as well as his services to the medical community, are noted in the existence of Joseph Pomeroy Widney High School for handicapped students.

He lies buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights. A replica of his Marmion Way bedroom is one of the displays at the Banning Museum, in Wilmington.