



The sanctuary's vaulted ceiling and beam system, stained glass windows, woodwork, sloping floor and curved pews made the church very stylish at the time. Wood was abundant in the area as were the skills to use it.

Photos by R. Walker



First Methodist marks milestone

By Russell Woolard
News Editor

"I now remind you to stir into flame the gift of God which is in you."

— II Timothy 1:6

They built things to last in 1899 — something the members of First Methodist Church's historic committee surely must have appreciated as they labored to reach a battered but sturdy artifact of the past they are about to celebrate.

The people who dedicated this house of worship 102 years ago left a birthday present of sorts in the cornerstone of the church — a black metal box, to be opened on the 100th anniversary of the building's opening, featuring various and sundry reminders of the late 19th century. On a bitterly cold Thursday morning, some of the church's stalwarts gathered to crack open the cornerstone, retrieve the box, open it, and examine the contents — a kind of dry run for Sunday's official centennial service, where the time capsule will be opened again in front of the congregation.

The work went on for what seemed an eternity — almost three hours. Originally, plans called for them to open the box, to find out what would be involved in doing it, and then resealing it for Sunday's service. But after a hurried conference outside the pastor's office, church members decided that after 100 years, no harm would be done if the suspense was prolonged for three more days.

So on Sunday, they will all find out together what their church forbearers left behind.

"The black box that went into the ocean couldn't have been any tighter than that was," said Norfleet Hodges, the church's historian, referring to the voice recorder from the doomed EgyptAir flight. "They even cemented around every opening."

But the symbolism of the time capsule — indeed, of the building itself — is powerful. And once the black box was finally retrieved, a flood of memories started coming back.

"(When) I touched it, I felt cold chills go all over my body," said Ms. Hodges. "To me, it was history coming alive."

Not that it ever really died. Eighty-seven years may have taken a toll on Ms. Hodges' hearing and eyesight, but her memory is still sharp — and time can't take away the memories of First Methodist

Church and its central role in shaping her view of the world. She can remember it all as if it happened yesterday. The church leaders who mentored her in the Methodist faith. The parishioner who said, "One real friend is worth a dozen relatives." The minister, ordinarily in firm control of his emotions, who had to fight back tears while presiding over the funeral that followed the untimely death of one of Ms. Hodges' grandchildren.

"It makes a difference," Ms. Hodges said. "I don't see how people can live without faith... When you realize that all these people through the years caught the flame, I think the stability of our nation is built on that foundation. The church has always been in my life."

It's that idea of a living, vibrant and forward-looking faith, as well as the endurance of the building, that members of the Methodist Church plan to celebrate. The Victorian Gothic building is indeed a historic landmark — one of Washington's most recognizable symbols — and, for the church's approximately 1300 members, a familiar and comforting house of worship in which they have marked dozens of personal milestones.

"It's been such a source of comfort over the years," said Mildred Buckman, a member of First Methodist since 1951. "I think about the stability it has provided in our lives, through good and bad times. It's easier to worship just for sitting there."

But any milestone such as this offers a chance to look ahead, not just forward — especially with a new millennium waiting in the wings. And so believers are using the centennial of the building to look ahead to what the next 100 years will bring — and to shape how their faith will figure in shaping that future.

"This church has a vision of trying to revitalize her ministry in the new century," said the Rev. Milton Mann, First Methodist Church's current pastor.

'Large enough ... to praise God'

Methodism has been in Washington since the American Revolution, and Methodists have kept the faith through both tranquil and troubled times. They have worshiped in impressive churches, basements of unfinished buildings — and even in a private home.

At least that's how Dempsey and Sarah Hinton brought their faith to Washington. Living in Deep River, they heard the message brought by the itinerant preachers John Wesley sent to the New World in the 1700s. According to a 1905 book, "History of Methodism in North Carolina," the Hinton family "became at once very zealous in spreading their new-found faith."

But the British, warding off rebellious colonists, apparently weren't in a mood to listen — and to get away from them, the Hinton family moved from Deep River to Washington. They built an altar in their house, located where the southeast corner of Market and Third streets are now — and, quoting from the history, "the cold, irreligious social life of the town began to give way under the influence of the spiritual life and earnest exhortations of the Hinton family."

The founding of the town's first Methodist Society in 1784 and a 1791 religious revival swelled the ranks of Methodists in Washington and paved the way for Ralph Potts and Thomas Robason, two Englishmen who came to Washington from Portsmouth, Va. In 1798 bought a lot and built the town's first Methodist church on it.

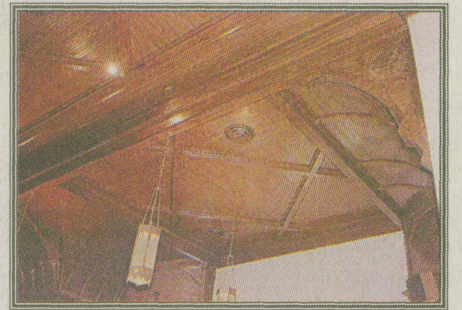
A 1932 history of Methodism in Washington noted the general sentiment of the time: "It is said that the building was quite small but large enough for our fathers in which to praise God." The building, situated midway between

ket Street."

But the seats didn't have backs on them; the church was surrounded by graves that weren't removed until the early 20th century, and in time, the building proved too small to accommodate all the local Methodists.

So a second church was built in 1831 on West Second Street, where the present church stands. It was the centerpiece of a revival in 1840, hosted a Methodist conference in 1844 and got "a tall and genteel spire pointing to the clouds" around that same time.

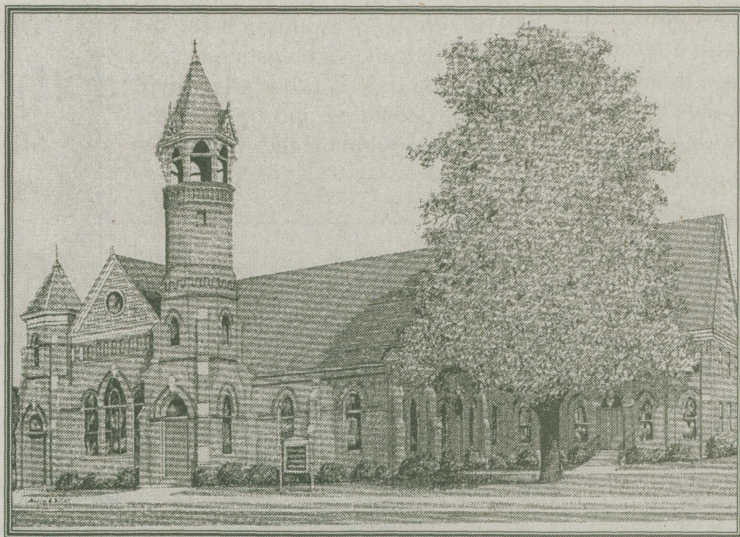
The Civil War destroyed that church, and it took a while for Methodism's local adherents to regroup. Though serious efforts to build a new church in Washington began two years after Appamattox (helped by \$4,000 from the U.S. government as compensation for burning the old building), the new church wasn't finished until 1878 — and the finished product apparently was less than pleasing to some observers. The "Historical Sketch: First Methodist Church, Washington, North Carolina" refers to the church as "a rather unsightly building with a very sharp roof." But one reminder of



The woodwork in the sanctuary ceiling has retained its beauty



The church in 1905 before several additions



Drawing of church with from same view as above in modern times



Mrs. Frances Larkin, Fritz Tanner, Mrs. Norfleet Hodges, Mrs. Mary Catherine Williams, and Rev. Milton Mann hold the box containing material from 100 years ago. It will be opened today during church services.

that church has been preserved: the Silver Communion used in the church, with the inscription: "Elizabeth L. Gregory, to her beloved Church, Washington, N.C., 23 December 1873."

Membership kept growing, so much so that by the close of the 19th

Second and Third streets on the southeast side of North Market Street, was 30 square feet and became known as "The Old Red Church on Mar-