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

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The work went on for what seemed an eternity, almost three hours. Originally, plans called for the church to be completed in three days, but unforeseen circumstances delayed the project. After a hurried conference outside the church, church members decided that after 100 years, no one had taken a bell out of the church if the suspense was prolonged for three more days.

By Sunday, they will all find out together what their church forbears left behind.

"The black box that went into the ocean couldn't have been any tighter than this," said Northside 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. "It was one of the oddest experiences.

The church in 1905 before several additions

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The woodwork in the sanctuary ceiling has retained its beauty

Large enough... to praise God!

Methodism has been in Washington since the American Revolution, and Methodists have kept the faith through both triumphs and troubled times. They have worshipped in impressive churches, even some of which are still standing — 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 preacher John Wesley until the New World in the 1700s. According to a 1905 book, "History of Methodism in North Carolina," the Hintons "became at once very zealous in spreading their new-found faith.

But the British, waging off rebellious colonists, apparently weren't in a mood to listen — and to get away from them, the Hintons 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, indifferent 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 Parks and Thomas Robeson, two Englishmen who came to Washington from Portsmouth, Va. In 1798 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 its followers in which to praise God." The building, situated midway between 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 Market 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 1864 and got a "stall and gentled pine pointing to the clouds" around that same time.

The Civil War destroyed that church, and it took a while for Methodist's local adherents to regroup. Though serious efforts to build a new church in Washington began two years after Appomattox (helped by $4,000 from the U.S. government as compensation for burning the old building), the new church wasn't finished until 1876 — and the finished product apparently was less than pleasing to some observers. The "Historical Sketch of First Methodist Church, Washington, North Carolina" refers to the church as "a rather ungainly building with a very sharp butt." But one reminder of 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 century, the church building was too small to accommodate all the local Methodists. 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 the skills to use it.

Photos by R. Walker

Mrs. Frances Larkin, Fritz Tanner, Mrs. Northside 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.

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

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See CHURCH, Page 4C