

Local Presbyterians Were Organized 129 Years Ago

First Church Has Had Hard Struggle For Existence During Long History

But It Has Witnessed Continuous Growth Until It Is One Of Foremost

Since it was organized 129 years ago, the First Presbyterian church of Washington has had a hard struggle for existence, but it has continued to grow until it is now among the outstanding churches of eastern North Carolina.

Back in 1823, a group of Washingtonians met on August 7 in the Potts Chapel Methodist church, which stood where the post office parking lot is now located, and organized a Presbyterian church. At this meeting, William R. Swift, Abner Burbank, and Seth Thayer were elected ruling elders.

On November 4 of that same year, the Orange Presbytery met at Raleigh, North Carolina, and accepted the First Presbyterian church of Washington as a regularly organized church of the Presbytery.

First Church

Local Presbyterians set about to build a place where they could meet and worship. On August 7, 1824, after a year of hard work they laid the corner stone of their church which was being built at the present site of the church at 121 Gladden street. It took four years to complete the construction of this building.

During the Civil war, Federal troops occupied the town for two

years. When they left here April 30, 1864, they set the town on fire, and the Presbyterian church was burned along with most of the other buildings.

With no meeting place of their own, the Presbyterians met in a small wooden Baptist church which was located at 212 North Market street where Swain Buick company now stands.

In the Spring of 1866, the Rev. P. H. Dalton came to Washington to lead the work of the Presbyterians. Under his direction, money was raised and construction was started on a new church building, the present church.

Amid the devastation of the town after the war, tradition says small boys and girls made hods and carried bricks from charred ruins to their church site where they were laid by the workmen.

Cornerstone Laid

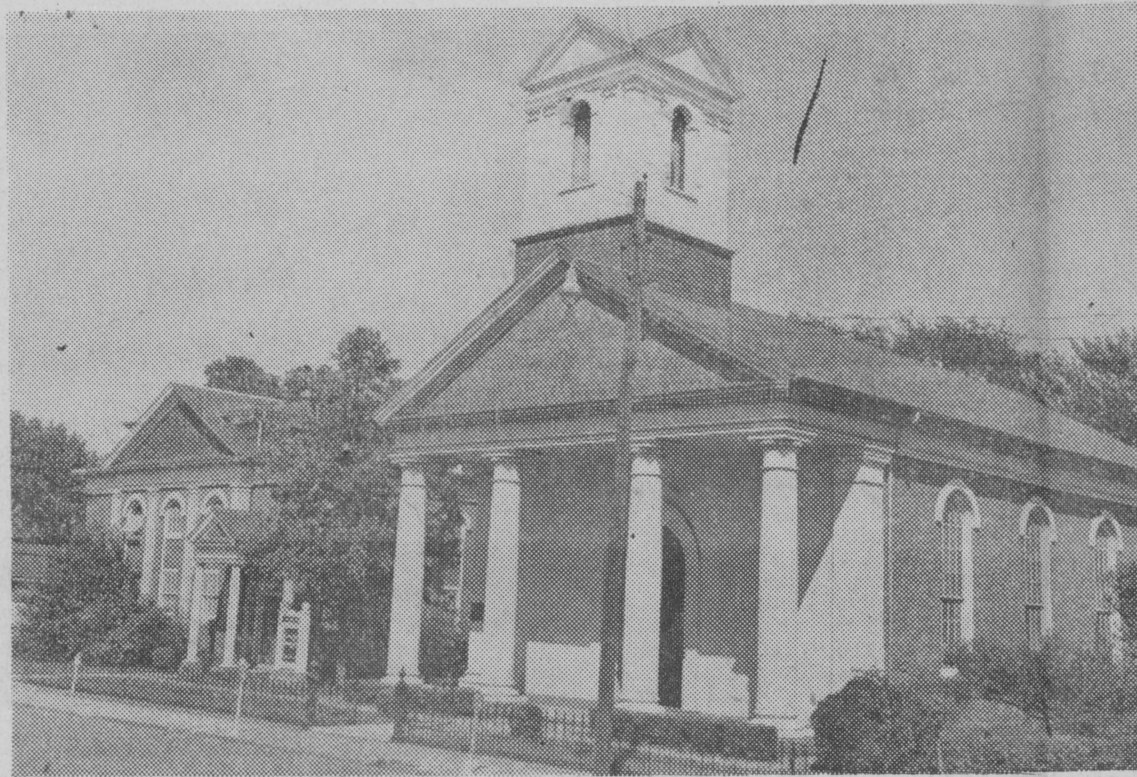
The corner stone of this building was laid May 28, 1867, and the church was dedicated February 24, 1871.

In about 1896, the Presbyterians remodeled their church by removing the high pulpit, cutting an arch behind the pulpit for the new Moller pipe organ which was installed, exchanging the straight-pews for circular ones, installing gas lights in place of the oil lamps and the chandelier, and removing the fluted columns.

Educational Building

Early in this century, the need was seen for a new educational

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AMONG FINEST



WASHINGTON'S FIRST PRESBYTERIAN church founded in 1823, 129 years ago, is one of the finest in Eastern North Carolina. It is rich in history, including a long struggle for existence. (Staff Photo)

building, and Beverly G. Moss, Sr., Sunday school superintendent at that time, led the movement to have such a building constructed on the north side of the church in the years 1917 and 1918. It was dedicated April 21, 1918.

For more than 60 years, pastors of the church lived in the Manse which was located on the northwest corner of Second and Respass streets. On July 31, 1944, the Manse was sold, and the church's ministers lived in rented houses until a new brick Manse on the northwest corner of Isabella avenue and Walnut street in Washington Park was dedicated in October, 1948.

Many odd and interesting circumstances have surrounded the First Presbyterian church here, and its members take great pride in telling stories of them.

Church Bell

After the present church building was dedicated, many people still did not consider it complete until a bell hung in the steeple. For this reason, the women of the church inaugurated a bell campaign, and every church member began to collect scrap metal which was shipped in 1872 to New York on one of S. R. Fowle's vessels, the "Catherine Johnson." The bell makers were instructed to cast a bell weighing not less than 1000 pounds, and plans were made to

have the bell brought back to North Carolina when the "Catherine Johnson" made her next trip north.

The next voyage was a memorable one, for the ship carrying the newly-cast bell was wrecked off the coast of Hatteras. Amazingly enough the 100 pound bell was salvaged while more valuable cargo was lost at sea, and that bell hangs in the steeple of the church now.

For many years it has been traditional custom in the local church to toll three strokes just as the pastor enters the pulpit for the church service, and no living person knows when this custom started or what prompted it.

When the present church building was constructed, the pews were rented instead of being sold outright as they had been in the original church. Pews in the center aisle rented for \$10 per year and those on the side aisles rented for eight dollars. In choosing pews, seats were numbered and slips put in a hat. Then according to the Session minutes, those who deserved the rent pews "were given first choice." A few were reserved for strangers.

The pews in the gallery of the church were used at one time for the colored people, usually household servants of church members.

At least three members of the local church entered full-time

the Wayside Presbyterian church came into being on the site of the old Bear Creek Free Will Baptist Church.

The most recent branch of the local Presbyterian church to be organized is the Wanoca chapel which began April 13, 1947, as a Sunday school under a tent, and was organized as the Wanoca Presbyterian church on August 9, 1948—exactly 125 years after the First Presbyterian church was organized.

Boy Scouting was begun in Washington by the Presbyterian church when Troop 3 of the Tidewater Boy Scout council was organized here in 1924 with H. H. McLean as scoutmaster. This later

the Wayside Presbyterian church became Troop 24 of the East Carolina Boy Scout council.

The present pastor of the First Presbyterian church is the Rev. William Parker Burns, a native of Macon, Ga., who came here May 1, 1951.

H. H. McLean is clerk of the Session which is composed of Flavius Alligood, R. P. Fowle, John A. Mayo, B. B. Ross, Henry Rumley, R. Lee Stewart, M. G. Waters and Edwin A. West.

A. T. Jennette, D. D. S., is chairman of the board of deacons, Sam H. Perdue is superintendent of the Sunday school, Mrs. Stuart Thomson is president of the women, Colon W. McLean is president of the men, and Dhuart Jen-

nette is president of the Youth fellowship.

The organist and choir director is Zoph Potts, son of a former choir member and great grandson of one of the Founding Fathers.

Active members of the church now total 303, according to the church records. Sunday school is held at 9:45 o'clock each Sunday morning, and is followed by the morning worship service at 11:00 o'clock. The Youth fellowship meets at 6:00 o'clock each Sunday night.

(Reporter's Note: Much of the information in the above article was taken from a brochure prepared in 1948 by H. H. McLean, clerk of the Session.)

Christian service. The Rev. George Watkins Crabtree was ordained April 15, 1915, the Rev. James L. Fowle, D. D., was ordained October 14, 1923, and the Rev. John Ralph Potts was ordained in 1924. Vernon B. McGehee, a member of the church, is now studying for the ministry.

One former pastor of the church, the Rev. E. C. Bittenger who served from 1943 until 1946, went to Japan with Commodore Biddle in 1846 on the first official attempt to open diplomatic and trade relations with the Flowery Kingdom.

Fostered Other Churches

The First Presbyterian church is the mother of two active churches in this county, and one church which was active during the first quarter of this century.

The Payne Memorial Presbyterian church, which grew out of a Sunday school, was organized in 1903. This church was located at 114 East Seventh street, and at one time had an enrollment of 116 in its Sunday school. Modern conveniences soon made it easy to "go to town" to church, and this organization was dissolved in 1929.

In the summer of 1938, a Sunday school was started by local Presbyterians in the Bear Creek community two miles west of Washington. On September 10, 1938, the church was organized and