

Presbyterians Prove Persistence Pays

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A bell in a stable near the original First Presbyterian Church of Mount Airy on South Main Street was first used to call the faithful to worship.

The early Presbyterians hereabouts had to be faithful to their beliefs. After all, it took three tries before the Presbytery would approve a church for Mount Airy.

The second Presbyterian church built here — Edward Webb Presbyterian Church — began as the Colored Presbyterian Church and was located outside Mount Airy in the Catus Hill section.

This church owes its existence to a persistent schoolteacher and a young Builders Society started by one of his successors.

Both of the Presbyterian churches in Mount Airy flourished and are now well into their second century of serving their parishioners.

First Presbyterian Church of Mount Airy on South Main Street celebrated its centennial 34 years ago — in 1958 — while Edward Webb Presbyterian Church on Worth Street entered its second century a decade ago — in 1982.

According to the history of First Presbyterian Church, attempts to organize that denomination into a church began in 1848. There were several Presbyterians in Mount Airy by then and the Rev. W.N. Mebane spent eight months here as the spiritual leader of the group. However, on Dec. 9, 1848, he reported that there wasn't enough support to organize the church at that time.

The Presbyterians continued to meet in school buildings and were led by the Rev. Monroe T. Allen from December 1849 until June 1852.

Mebane continued his strong interest in the local Presbyterians, supplying the pulpit on several occasions. In 1852 he and the Rev. John A. Gretter made a further study but again reached the same conclusion as before — not to form a church here at that time.

In the fall of 1857, a third attempt was made to organize the Presbyterian church here — by the Rev. John W. Montgomery. The organization was postponed until early 1858, when he returned with the Rev. Cyrus K. Caldwell.

The church was organized June 6, 1858 and was the second organized church within Mount Airy's corporate limits. The first was Lebanon Methodist Church.

Charter members of the church were Robert S. Gilmer and his wife Susan; Allen Denny and wife Mildred; Martha J. Gilmer; Lizzie A. Gilmer; and Mary Dicks. The latter three were received on profession of faith.

The group met for years without a building and without a stated pastor. In 1872, the Rev. Charles M. Payne arrived to begin his duties as leader of the congregation.

In addition to the schools, the congregation met in the Methodist Church until sufficient funds were



Early First Presbyterian Church women included (l-r) bottom row — Mrs. T.N. Brock and her son, Joe, Mrs. W.F. Carter Sr., Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Clara R. Sobotta and Mrs. Bitting; center — Mrs. Kochtitzky, Mrs. Sue Carter, Mrs. Gilmer and Mrs. J.D. Smith; top — Mrs. Matt Moore, Mrs. W.W. Burke, Mrs. Trotter, Mrs. Mebane and Mrs. Jim Banner.

obtained to erect a church building. The structure, started in the winter of 1872, was completed in the spring of 1873 on a lot given by R.S. Gilmer at the present site of the church.

Earlier financial help had been forthcoming, but the Civil War and Reconstruction delayed the start of work on the church building.

The first church, a plain frame building, was built largely by the R.S. Gilmer family, with the help of John M. Brown. Pews were straight, uncomfortable and unattractive.

The church bell was first hung in Gilmer's stable near the church in 1876, so that people could be called to worship. After a couple of years it was hung in a corner of the church, and in 1887 when the building was repaired from lightning damage, a bell tower was added to the front of the building.

The present granite building was begun in 1907 and completed in 1914. The pastor in 1907 was the Rev. J.A. Gilmer, a nephew of the church's founder. The Rev. T.C. Bales was the

pastor in 1914.

The Women of the Church greatly assisted in the new building by holding suppers to raise money for the foundation and the roof. The present Sunday School pulpit was bought by the women as part of the original furniture for the auditorium and the communion service was given by Miss Lizzie A. Gilmer, daughter of the founder.

The present pews were donated by Mrs. R.J. Reynolds Sr., wife of the tobacco multimillionaire and a native of Mount Airy. The communion table was supplied by Mrs. W.E. Merritt Sr., matriarch of one of Mount Airy's prominent pioneer families.

In 1851 the Educational Building was dedicated, and in 1958, alterations to the auditorium were completed. The new Education Building was dedicated Aug. 25, 1991.

First Presbyterian Church of Mount Airy maintained a keen interest in the Presbyterians living in the Flat Rock community. A mission was

organized there in 1902 which later became Flat Rock Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. William Gaston Catus was the moving force in establishing the church that became Edward Webb Presbyterian Church. An educator and businessman, Catus came to Mount Airy from Winston-Salem.

In 1882, he was instrumental in organizing the Colored Presbyterian Church. He also owned and operated a store near his home here and taught in the first parochial school organized in Mount Airy.

Sunday School was taught at first in the old Sandy Level School.

The new Colored Presbyterian Church was built near the parsonage in the Catus Hill section. The lot was purchased and deeded to Anthony H. Gabriel Penn and James Sparger.

The next pastor was the Rev. A.B. Lawrence, who served for four years

and was succeeded by the Rev. T.B. Hargrave of Laurinburg. The minister and his family arrived here in 1893.

Hargrave envisioned a new church in the area of the depot, and with this in mind, organized a young group called the Builders Society. He asked the society to gather bricks and pile them up at the church front. The idea progressed and W.E. Merritt, who owned a brick yard and hardware store, gave his permission for the children to pick up scattered bricks for the proposed church building.

In addition to other donors, Edward Webb of Oxford, Pa., heard a report from Hargrave and gave what was described as a goodly sum of money for the cause.

In 1904 or 1905, the new Edward Webb Presbyterian Church was dedicated free of debt.

The centennial celebration of the church was held Aug. 29 — a Sunday — at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.