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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
IN HUNTSVILLE

The first officially recorded item which indicated any interest in an Episcopal Church in Huntsville is found in the journal of the journal of the Convention of the Diocese of Alabama, held in Tuscaloosa on January 3, 1831. The item reads as follows:

"William Acklin and James Penn, Esqs., of Huntsville appeared and produced satisfactory credentials of their appointment to this convention as lay delegates. They took their seats accordingly."

One year later at the Diocesan Convention, held also in Tuscaloosa, these same gentlemen appeared and submitted a communication from the "Vestry and Wardens of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Huntsville" pointing out the fact that "the present is the most auspicious time for the commencement of a church in our town" and "that each day of delay detracts from the number of citizens who might become members of our congregation". The communication was signed by B. S. Pope, Sam Brech, R. Lee Fearn, W. Clarke and John Brahan.

These records indicate that a group of Huntsville citizens considered themselves to be an Episcopal congregation. But one wonders about the credentials of these gentlemen as official delegates. Huntsville was not at that time an officially recognized mission station. There was no church building. As far as can be ascertained, there were no services conducted by a clergyman. Although there was an interested group in Huntsville, and some members of that group were called the Vestry and Wardens of the Church, the congregation had no official status in the Diocese and no legal organization.
The First Serious Effort

However, two years later, Huntsville was made an object of missionary endeavor by the Board of Domestic Missions of the National Church. The Rev. John Murray Robertson, a priest from the Diocese of North Carolina, was sent to Huntsville, on March 7, 1834, to begin missionary work in this territory.

Trouble with the Law and the Stage

The Rev. Mr. Robertson and the congregation had a hard time finding a place to worship. For a short time the services were held in the Court House, but legal authorities objected to the use of the Court House for religious purposes. Next, a theatre on East Clinton Street was borrowed. But the congregation was dispos­sessed by a company of actors. Finally, the Masonic Lodge Room was procured, and services were continued in that building until the end of the year 1835. It was during the Lodge Room period that the first bishop made a visitation in Huntsville. The Rt. Rev. James H. Otey made the trip from the neighboring Diocese of Tennessee and confirmed Miss Henrietta Brown, who was a teacher in the Huntsville Seminary.

Discouraging Times

Mr. Robertson had a most disheartening experience with his congregation. It is recorded that "the missionary experienced little sympathy; and finding that nothing was done toward erecting a church or pro­viding for a minister, he retired at the close of 1835 to his plantation in Jackson County," For seven years no further effort was made to organize a parish. One wonders what became of those gentlemen who had expressed themselves as so keenly interested in the establishment of a church. It is not recorded that any delegates attended the Diocesan Conventions during those years. Episcopal Church life in Huntsville went to sleep.
Another Start

Finally two clergymen visited Huntsville in December, 1942, and through their efforts a meeting of the Episcopalians was held and an organization of a parish effected on December 17th. Mr. George P. Beirne presided at the meeting, and, in addition to himself, there were elected on the Vestry the following men: Henry M. Robertson, John Ogden, James Penn, and J. Withers Clay. The Parish was named the "Church of the Nativity" because of the approaching Christmas season.

Beginning of Official Life

A Church is not an Episcopal Church until it is received into a Diocese under the authority of the Bishop. So the official life of the Parish began when a delegation from the newly elected Vestry attended the Diocesan convention in May, 1843, and asked that the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville be received into the Diocese. Of course the request was acceded to, and shortly thereafter the Vestry elected as the first Rector of the Church, the Rev. F. H. Laird, who arrived to take up his duties in November. The Parish was not self-supporting at this time. The Board of Domestic Missions of the National Church assisted in the maintenance of Mr. Laird. This Rector also found difficulty in the matter of securing a place for worship. The Presbyterians lent their church building for the first services. Then the congregation worshipped for a while in the schoolroom of Mrs. Jane L. Childs. And then, the Church seeming to be on some better terms with the Law, the U.S. District Court Room in the basement of the Court House was secured as a place to worship. During Mr. Laird's rectorship in 1845, the lot at the corner of Eustic and Green Streets was bought from John Y. Bassett for $500.00, and the construction of a church building was begun. But Mr. Laird resigned in 1846. He never conducted a service in the new church for which he planned.
New Rector -- Days of Progress

In 1847 the Rev. Henry C. Lay, of the Diocese of Virginia, was elected Rector. After a few more months of services in the Court House, the church building being completed, the congregation first worshipped there in August of 1847. Within the same month the Vestry declared the Church to be self-supporting and thereafter no missionary funds were used for the support of a minister in Huntsville.

The Rev. Mr. Lay served as Rector for twelve years. Those twelve years prove themselves to have been the period of greatest progress that the Church of the Nativity ever experienced in so short a time. It is stated in the records that at the time Mr. Lay came to Huntsville as the Rector, there were but twelve communicants actually resident or available, and of that twelve there was only one male member. No doubt there were a number of interested members of the congregation who had not been confirmed and were not listed officially as communicants. At that time, apparently, it was not required that a vestryman be a communicant of the Church.

Missionary Activity

During Mr. Lay's rectorship, the Church, realizing that for many years it had been an object of the missionary interest of others, set out to repay that debt in some measure by engaging upon missionary activities. In 1851 the congregation began to furnish half the support of the Rev. T. A. Morris who was a missionary in this section of the Tennessee valley. Mr. Lay came to Huntsville as a deacon, and he left twelve years later as a bishop, having been elected Missionary Bishop of the Southwest by the General Convention of the Church held at Richmond in 1859.

During Mr. Lay's rectorship the membership grew so fast that it was necessary to plan for a new building. When Bishop Lay severed his connection with
this Parish in 1859 he left the present church building as an inspiring memorial to his labors.

The Church purchased a Rectory on Green Street, opposite the present church building, during that time. A parish school was established. All debts were paid with the exception of $2,606, which was still owed on the new church structure. As is so often the fate of ministers, he was not privileged long to enjoy the fruits of his labors. The first service was conducted in the present building on Easter-Even, 1859. Present the Rt. Rev. Bs. Cobbs, the Rector, the Rev. M. Robertson and the Rev. R. Hooker Cobbs, Deacon assisting in this parish since the 1st May 1858.2 It was the following November that Bishop Lay moved away to administer his new jurisdiction—"The Southwest". He wrote humbly of himself: "The Rector has ministered regularly to this people, with less success than he could desire, with infinitely more than he has deserved."

The Church Building

It is a matter of amazement to many of us that a building of such size and great beauty could have been built by the members so soon after the founding of the Parish. The record is quite clear as to how it was done. The money was raised by subscription among the members. Sixty-three members made cash contributions amounting to $29,291.93. The individual amounts noted range from $0.00 to $10.00. Trinity Church, Wilmington, Delaware, sent a contribution of $25.00. Other money was obtained from the sale of some property. The total cost of the church building and furnishings amounted to $37,565.13. Every cent of this was paid with the exception of $2,606.00 by 1861. It seems that the balance of $2,606 was the chief topic of discussion at the Vestry meetings for many years thereafter. A glance around the church at the names inscribed on the windows tells of many families prominent in the congregation in those early days.
The Patriarch

It was in July, 1860, that the Rev. John Munro Banister of Greensboro, Alabama, was called to be the Rector. It is understood that when Mr. Banister came to Huntsville from Greensboro, The Rev. Richard Hooker Cobbs, who had been Mr. Lay's assistant, and who was in temporary charge of the Parish, moved to Greensboro to be the Rector there. Dr. Banister is thought of by the members of the Parish as the Patriarch. He was rector for forty-six years, and rector-emeritus for nearly two years. All through the trying days of the War between the States, he administered the affairs of the Parish. Many lived and died and knew no other minister but Dr. Banister. During the War, in Dr. Bannister's time, it is related that when Huntsville was occupied by Union soldiers, a non-commissioned officer of the Union forces was instructed to seize the church and use it for a stable. When the force arrived to take possession it was brought to an abrupt halt before the door. Above the door were inscribed on the marble slab the words: "Reverence My Sanctuary." When that inscription was reported to the commanding officer, he ordered that the church be not molested. For a period in 1864 the church was closed by order of he commanding general, and the Rector was ordered to cross the river and remain within the Confederate lines.

During Dr. Banister's rectorship we note some interesting changes. Another Rectory was purchased on Adams Avenue and the old one sold. At the time of the building of the new church the source of all the income for the support of the Parish was the renting of the pews. On the Monday after Easter every year the members would bid for the pews. No offerings were taken during the services until 1864 when the Rector was requested by the Vestry to announce that an offering would be taken on every Sunday. That system lasted until 1903. It was at that time the Vestry considered it wise to abolish pew rents as a method of Church support, and instead, to raise the budget by annual subscription.
The original church building was sold to the colored Methodist Church in 1878 for $700.00. The structure was razed at that time and the materials used to construct the Colored Methodist Church building which still stands on North Jefferson Street.

In 1886 the present chapel was complete—a gift from Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb as a memorial to her husband, Wilson Cary Bibb.

In 1883, the Vestry of the Church of the Nativity gratefully accepted the offer of Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb to provide a suitable chapel for the church which had been completed in 1859. On 27 April, 1883 there was a called meeting at the office of L. P. Walker. Present were Peter M. Dox and Joseph Martin, Wardens: C. P. Walker, Jas. P. Matthews, Chas. J. McCalley and Alfred Moore. The following resolutions were unanimously approved:

A proposal having been received from Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb, to erect and complete upon the church lot at her own expense a suitable chapel for the use of the Parish provided the consent of the Vestry shall be granted thereto. On motion it was resolved that the Vestry gratefully appreciating the offer of Mrs. Bibb cordially accept the same, and consent to the erection and completion by her of the proposed chapel—it being understood that such chapel shall be erected upon the rear of the church lot and fronting on Green Street and near as may be, contiguous to the Vestry Room of the Church. Provided that in the erection of such chapel due regard shall be had to the preservation of congruity and of the architectural symmetry of the present church building; and that when completed, such chapel shall be be delivered to and received by the Vestry for the use of the Parish at whose expense it shall thereafter be kept and preserved. Resolved that a copy of the foregoing resolution be sent to Mrs. Bibb at her present address.
It was to be a memorial to Mrs. Bibb's husband and her daughter, Fannie Marsh. Three years later, on July 17, 1886, the building was consecrated. The Vestry minutes carried this testimonial:

The Rector, Wardens and Vestrymen of the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville Alabama recognizing in the recent consecration of our beautiful Chapel the completion of a Holy Temple whose preservation as an enduring Memorial of Love has been entrusted to us and to our successors would here express their appreciation of her pious motives, noble generosity and devoted affection which inspired its erection; as a gift to the Church of the Nativity by Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb it has entitled that excellent lady to the thanks of every member of the parish of which she was so long an earnest and beloved member who constantly illustrated her love for our Church and people and her interest in their prosperity. With sincere gratitude we accept this munificent gift as a crowning illustration of the virtues which adorn the life, and have impressed the character of a faithful Christian woman; and in humble reliance on Almighty God for His support, we therefore pledge ourselves and our successors to perpetuate with loving care that appropriate and admirable memorial not only of affection for dear ones departed but of love of Christ and His church which has been entrusted to our keeping.

The Huntsville Weekly Democrat, in a lengthy article, states:

The Consecration of the Memorial Chapel of the Church of the Nativity took place last Saturday at 11 a.m. This beautiful house of worship was erected by that noble Christian church woman Mrs. Wilson Bibb to the memory of her beloved husband and only daughter...
Fannie Marsh. The Bishop, aided by Drs. Beard and Banister, officiated and Dr. Beard preached an impressive sermon. The Bishop referred in touching and affectionate words to the ordination of Mr. Percy Gordon which was to take place on Sunday.

He paid a deserving tribute to the faithful missionary work of the Rev. Charles Cabaniss who had left a sweet memory of a holy life, devoted to charity and good works in this same missionary field of labor. May he long live and grow in grace and receive the crown of the faithful servant when called to his final account. The choristers sung the chants and hymns and all by their devout behavior and earnestness. May they ever remember that "Music means harmony, harmony means love, love means God.

The use of the Chapel occasioned the donation in 1888 of the east gate into the churchyard. On 13 March 1888 there was a called meeting of the Vestry. On motion of Judge Dox (?) parties applying to place a gate on the East side of the Church yard be authorized to do so, provided the same be placed near the Northeast corner of the Chapel and a graveled walk therefore to the Chapel door be made all at the expense of the parties applying therefore and not at the cost of the Parish.

In 1919, four years after Mrs. Bibb's death, her son William Garrett Bibb, gave $5,000 for the maintenance of the Chapel.

In 1951, when Ridley Hall replaced the Mary Ann Cruse Parish House, the Chapel was redesigned in an effort to make it match and balance the new structure. The doorway facing north at the west corner was made at the center of the north side. At the same time the interior, which had been a single room, was partitioned for multiple use.
Dedication services for the new primary Sunday school department classrooms, located in the recently renovated Bibb Memorial Chapel was held on June 10, 1951. The ceremony consisted of a short procession of the primary students from their old classrooms in the parish house to the chapel, where the dedication service took place.

In its long lifetime the Chapel has been a place for worship and for instruction. Services for small congregations, held here, have complemented those in the spacious church; generations of young Episcopalians have graduated to classes in the Chapel from the children's church school in the old parish house; and at present the reverse procedure sends graduates of the chapel classrooms to advanced classes in Ridley Hall. As it approaches its centennial, the gift of Mrs. Bibb continues to honor her memory and that of her family in its lasting dedication to the Word of God.

In 1974 the Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

At the time of Dr. Banister's resignation in 1905, he became Rector-Emeritus. With his death in 1907 a long and dearly remembered chapter in the life of the Parish was brought to a close.

Two Short Term Rectors

The next Rector was the Rev. Willoughby N. Claybrook. Mr. Claybrook came to Huntsville from Tyler, Texas, to be the assistant to Dr. Banister in 1904. When Dr. Banister resigned "because of continued age infirmities" in 1905, Mr. Claybrook was elected Rector in his place. Mr. Claybrook was a young man of great energy and initiative, but he did not remain long as Rector. He resigned in 1907 to assume the duties of missionary in the Diocese.
Succeeding Mr. Claybrook as Rector there came to Huntsville the Rev. Alexander C. McCabe, Ph.D., who assumed his duties in July 1907. Dr. McCabe resigned in 1909.

Mr. Gamble

After Dr. McCabe's resignation the Vestry called the Rev. Cary Gamble from the Diocese of Virginia to be the Rector of the Parish. Mr. Gamble took up his residence in Huntsville on July 1, 1909. One thing that attracted Mr. Gamble to Alabama was the fact that his twin brother was at that time Rector of St. Paul's Church, Selma. Both clergymen continued their faithful ministries in Huntsville and in Selma, respectively, until the time of their retirement from the active ministry. During Mr. Gamble's rectorship, a rector on Franklin Street was purchased. During this period it was increasingly apparent that there was not sufficient space on the church properties for the Sunday School and other activities of the Parish. And so, in 1912, the store building which adjoined the church lot on Eustis Street was bought and converted into a Parish House. Mr. Gamble retired in 1938.

The Rev. Randolph R. Claiborne, of Macon, Georgia, was next called to be the Rector. Mr. Claiborne began his ministry in Huntsville on September 1, 1938. During this rectorship a new rectory was built on McClung Street, on a beautiful lot which was a gift of Mrs. Richard Walker to the church. This is the fourth rectory which has housed the Rectors of the Parish in the last one hundred years.

It is seen from this brief sketch that there are a great many things in the history of the past one hundred years of which the Church of the Nativity may be justly proud. The Church has taken its place as a spiritual force in the community. It has assumed its responsibilities in the affairs of the Diocese. It
is generously supporting the missionary work of the Church at home and abroad. There are many factors that make us feel that the future holds great progress in store for the Church of the Nativity.

Footnotes

1 The main source of this compilation of the history of the Episcopal Church in Huntsville is from a pamphlet published in 1943 located in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library. Unless otherwise cited all material is from this pamphlet.

2 Episcopal Church file, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library. Also the Huntsville Times, June 28, 1925.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Huntsville Times, June 10, 1951.


7 Huntsville Weekly Democrat, July 21, 1886.

8 Huntsville Times, November 22, 1974.