

HISTORY OF GREENVILLE'S FIRST CHURCHES

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In thirty minutes, I am supposed to tell
of Greenville churches and history as well,
It can't be done, but I will make a start,
And in fragments give you only a part.

In eighteen-twenty t'would not be hard
To stroll the length of Church Boulevard
From North to McBee was three blocks long¹
Where any could hear the church bell gong.

Three churches built there, then named the street
where Baptist and the Methodists then did meet.
The Episcopalian Church was there too;
Could be see from any point of view.

Christ Church

It was in eighteen twenty-one, Christ Church
Organized and became Greenville's first.
A group then met in the Old Court House²
And they lit a light no man could douse.

As St. James Mission it was known then
But communicants there were only ten.³
Rodolphus Dickerson was the first Rector⁴
He had three small Missions in this sector.

Vardry McBee who was then alive
Gave land in eighteen twenty-five.⁵
And in the next year they did build a church⁶
Which also became Greenville's first.

¹*Insurance Maps of Greenville, South Carolina* (Pelham, N. Y.: Sanborn Map Company, 1920, 1928).

²Stephen Stanley Crittenden, *The Greenville Century Book* (Greenville, South Carolina: The Greenville News, 1903), p. 37.

³Stephen Stanley Crittenden, *History of Christ Church, Greenville, South Carolina, 1826-1901* (Greenville: Christ Church Guild, 1967 - originally published, 1901), p. 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7.

This church stood where the Parish House stands,⁷
(In later years they increased their lands)
It was built of brick and constructed well
With a wooden belfry and a bell.⁸

A gallery was also built for slave,
They worshipped and their labor gave.
For twenty-six years the old church stood
It's members worked and did much good.

In the year eighteen fifty-two,⁹
Some members then were well to do.
The first building soon became too small,
And could not hold the crowd at all.

Joel Poinsett was then a vestryman.
He gave an estimate and made the plan.
Placed there within the corner stone,
Were names of all the members known.¹⁰

Also a Bible and a Prayer-book
That future generations could look
And find the names of Greenville men,
And women too, who worshipped then.

The present church was then erected
Later additions, as expected.
A steeple built for a bell to hold,
A hundred and twenty years it has toiled.

This bell cost then, three hundred dollars,¹¹
And now rings for worshippers and scholars.
Seldom then do old records tell,
Of a church being built without a bell.

Later handsome memorials graced
And exquisite windows there were placed.

⁷Ibid., p. 8.

⁸Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁹Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹Ibid., p. 34.

A font and altar were also given,
Grace and beauty there were striven.
Greenville then had no place for sick,
Until Christ Church did turn the trick.
And in year eighteen eighty-eight
A hospital they did operate.

Being nine to one at the start,
The women more than did their part.
In sewing, in gifts, in labor too,
Women were there, though men were few.

Church member names hereto be found
Are historic if you look around.
Crittenden, Lowndes, Thompson, Croft,
Poinsett, Markley occur quite oft,

Perry, Irvine, and Cleveland too,
Butler and Powell to mention a few.
Rectors: Capers, Pinckney, Dehon,
Dowman, Holley, Mitchell, Jackson.

This church of Christ produced heaven
Showing many the way to heaven.
The test of time it has withstood
And for Greenville has meant much good.

Baptist Church

The first Baptist Church, when erected,
Stood where now 'tis least expected.
A shadow from Church Street Boulevard
Would cast itself in the old church yard.¹²

Near where McBee now goes under Church Street,
The Baptist of Greenville used to meet.
Vardry McBee gave a small lot,
And a church was built to mark the spot.
A lot one hundred and twenty feet square,¹³

¹²Robert Norman Daniel, *History of the First Baptist Church* (privately printed, 1957), p. 5.

¹³Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 38.

Sufficient then for the Baptists here,
Was given in eighteen twenty-two
Five years passed and then a few.

The Baptist Meeting House then
Built in eighteen twenty-seven, when¹⁴
Although of Baptist denomination
Welcomed all who preached salvation.

William Johnson was first called to preach
To all Greenville Baptists in his reach,
The principal then of a girls' school,¹⁵
Where in both he taught the golden rule.

When organized the membership was ten
Nine were women and one man then.¹⁶
Much we owe to those women of old
Who started the church and enlarged the fold.

The Meeting House cost fifteen hundred,¹⁷
But the Baptists of Greenville hadn't blundered
The foundation they laid was very good
For Christian living they always stood.

Most churches have steeples and a belfry,
But this church's bell was hung in a tree.¹⁸
On Coffee Street was held the Sunday School¹⁹
A stove in a church was against the rule.

The church was substantially built of brick,
Not very large but the walls were thick.
After thirty years service in this place,
The Baptist grew and they needed more space.

The old church building then became a school,
where future ministers were taught to rule

¹⁴*Daniel, First Baptist Church*, p. 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 1. This was William Bellein Johnson, principal to the Female Academy.

¹⁶*Crittenden, Century Book*, p. 38.

¹⁷*Daniel, First Baptist Church*, p. 3.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 19.

The Theological Seminary
For Southern Baptist and Missionary.

The present church with its steeple tall
Was then built when the old became too small,
In year eighteen hundred and fifty-seven
The present site was dedicated to heaven.²⁰

The Baptist then called their members to halt.²¹
If any were "found overtaken with fault."
The church's sanction they did refuse
And each member watched his P's and Q's.

White and black did to this church belong,²²
And once a Negro did lead in song.
Always Baptists sought to help the race,
And Negro attendance was common place.

The church a balcony did erect,
The Negro sat there with self respect.
Neither race then thought it odd
To join together to serve their God.

In Baptist history the family name
Found in this church are the same.
Leading churchmen made history then,
Their sons are now our leading men.

Furman, Judson, Elford, Boyce,
Townes, Goodlett, Manly, Choice.
Thurston, Mays, Toy and Sloan,
Hoyt, Cleveland are some that we own.

This church brought education and Furman,
Both taught the ways of the Galilean
The path they took and things they began,
Can be safely followed by any man.

²⁰Ibid., p. 32. The building on East McBee Avenue was purchased by the Downtown Baptist Church when the First Baptist Church moved to its new building on Cleveland Street in the 1970's.

²¹Ibid., p. 14.

²²Ibid., p. 12

Methodist Church

Six members formed the first Methodist Church,²³
Names are recorded, when record we search.
Five women, one man pledged against sin
Named Darby, Service, Self, Hoke, and Turpin.

At the southeast corner of North and Main²⁴
Methodist sought there a home to obtain.
In the Turpin home the church was formed,
And by their fireside it was warmed.

On Church Street the Methodist was third,
To erect a building and to preach the word.
From Vardry McBee a lot was deeded,
As he gave to all churches then, when needed.

One hundred twenty by a hundred feet,²⁵
On the corner of Church and Coffee Street.
October, in year eighteen thirty-two,
Plans were made, though Methodist were few.

Four years later in eighteen thirty-six,
A church was built with a crucifix.
Regularly then the Circuit Rider preached
Methodists in town and country reached.

They organized in eighteen thirty-four,²⁶
In eighteen forty-one added more,
From sixty-nine to one hundred it grew,
Young men and women from schools it drew.

During war, no service was held at night
For no church in town then could afford light.
Historian Crittenden tells us this
Then the popular church was Methodist.²⁷

There was a balcony where all could see,

²³Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 41.

²⁴A. M. Moseley, *The Buncombe Street Methodist Story* (Greenville: n.p., 1965), p. 2.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁷Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 41.

In the old building at Church and Coffee.¹⁷
The Negroes built in eighteen sixty-six,
It was they who chose not to intermix.

It is of interest to note the names of men,
Members of the Methodist Church way back then:
Ashmore, Rowley, Williams, Mooney, and Byers,
Butler, Atwood, Beacham, Cain, and Dyer.

Several Greenville streets bear their name,
A place in history was not their aim.
Bates, Bell, Perry, Brunson, and Park too,
Cauble, Westfield, David, to name a few.¹⁸

Buncombe Street Church was built in seventy-two.
One hundred years ago it was quite new.
The original plan had a tall spire,
Such as the Baptists have that we admire.

Funds ran short, but it was half erected,
A belfry was built but some objected.¹⁹
Later remodeled and belfry removed,
Columns were changed and its looks improved.

From this church Methodism has spread,
From one to perhaps ten here instead.
We can see today that this church has grown,
For well over a thousand members they own.

Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Church organized next
Ministers came and they chose a text.
Of the first four churches, they were the last
Though now a hundred twenty-four years have passed.
The church itself was organized and then started
By a group of women who would not be down-hearted.

¹⁷Mosely, *Buncombe Street Methodist Story*, p. 3.

¹⁸Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 41.

¹⁹Mosely, *Buncombe Street Methodist Church*, p. 4.

Sarah Stone was the one who thought out a plan,³¹
Set a date for a meeting and gathered her clan.
Not an easy thing to do, it was not easy then,
To start a church in a town even with the aid of men.
In answer to their first request a minister came,
He was the first this church had, Gaillard by name.
These women organized a church of only sixteen,³²
Five were of men and the rest plainly seen
Were women, who had sponsored and always stood
For that which was right and much that was good.
They gathered in Greenville in eighteen forty-eight,³³
That is one hundred twenty-four years to this date.
And a woman was then the first member to come
And join this church and add to its sum.

Mrs. Service was the very first woman who came,³⁴
And she brought with her not only her name
But "Siberia" too, a servant and slave
Whose soul she thought was worthy to save.³⁵

Among the first infants to be baptized³⁶
The daughter of this Negro slave was recognized.
It was well after the Confederate War had abated
That the First Presbyterian Church segregated.
The property upon which this church was erected
Came through a woman, as might be expected.
Vardry McBee gave the land late in his life,
But Jane was a Presbyterian and also his wife.³⁷

³¹Henry Bacon McKoy, editor, *Original Session Minutes of the First Presbyterian Church and History* (privately printed, 1962), p. 7.

³²*Ibid.* p. 9.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

Jane McBee served her church long you will remember
Being one of sixteen, a charter member.

Some of her descendants we are most happy to say,
Are members of the Presbyterian Church even today.

In the Female Academy was the first Sacramental,³⁸
And the choice of the place was not accidental.
The Baptists, the Methodists, the Episcopalians too,
Helped to organize our church with only Christ in view.

Greenville Court House, our church was called of old,³⁹
With Presbyterian Church as a prefix, I am told.
By Washington Street it was later known,⁴⁰
Until First Presbyterian became the name we own.⁴¹

For seventy-two years we have been called the First,
We were sometimes the best, but never the worst.
We started the other Presbyterians here
And we all work together and feel very near.

After four years of worship with other people,⁴²
This church began to build its own steeple.
A building for our church was then erected
Near the edge of the street and no one objected.

Washington Street then came to an end,⁴³
At a place where our present lot would extend.
It was of brick, large enough, substantial and neat,
And here for thirty years did Presbyterians meet.

Greenville City then grew, and wanted the street,
And the old church came too small to meet,
The needs of that time, and I've been told,
They planned a new church and some property sold.

³⁸Ibid., p. 19.

³⁹Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., P. 19.

⁴³*Handbook of History*. See the old maps of Greenville.

In the year eighteen hundred and eighty-two,"
The congregation met in the old church to renew,
The work and the worship begun long ago,
By a group of women, who had gathered to sew.
The Baptismal Font that now stands in our hall"
Was given by a woman and that is not all.
She was Mary C. Speer, being one of the first
Who helped to organize and start our church.
Most windows in our church, for men are named,"
Given to us by the wives that they claimed.
In the McKay Chapel a window is placed,
To the kind hand of a woman can be traced.
Miss Lilly McKay, she gave a large sum
To help us construct an auditorium,
In honor of her father and mother she said,
Where they often took wine and often broke bread.
And who recently furnished our Chapel anew
With fine cushion and carpet and curtain too.
A woman as usual had given money and time,
To help make our chapel a thing sublime.
I have studied women all of my life,
You see my mother was one, and so is my wife.
You can readily see why I always plan
To favor a woman instead of a man.
This remember though you forget the rest,
God formed His church to bring out our best.
Four churches, now increased a hundred fold,
Are futile, unless they your heart enfold.
Red Cross, Y.M.C.A., United Fund,
Salvation Army for which we are dunned,
Support them fully, but only after your church,
For without IT, these vanish in the lurch.

"Henry Bacon McKay, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina* (Greenville: Keys Printing Company, 1962), p. 2421.

"See the Memorial Hall of the First Presbyterian Church.

"McKay, *First Presbyterian Church*, p. 312.

You will remember the rhyme that we used to say
When we talked to the young in a childish way,
That "Here is a church, and here is a steeple,
Open the doors, and there are the people."

Greenville, history, and things of the past
Are and will be tied together fast.
Look to the future, and think it not odd
That history and churches are things of God.

Today, the things we believed in are doubted,
God is denied and often flouted,
The country we fought for and its flag,
Is belittled and soiled and made of a rag.

There is pollution in our air, our water, our church,
With filth it's contaminated and then besmirched,
Our lives are enveloped with so much abuse,
We are tempted to quit, with "What's the use?"

And then because we feel, we believe, and we know
That what we were taught to believe, is so,
And all that is good and fine in life and true,
Makes all more comfortable, easy, and new.

And always when we have been evil and bad
We have suffered and been hurt and sad,
Suddenly we ask, "Why think this we must?"
And find it's because, there is a God we can trust.

And see it's our privilege, duty and right,^{*}
To uphold HIM to others, and place in their sight
A God, a Religion, a Church that can
That does, that will, that wants to help Man.

^{*}Matthew, 16:18: " . . . upon this rock will I build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. "