

Presentation by Will Lewis

First Presbyterian Church Oxford, Mississippi

June 14, 1981

100th Anniversary of the sanctuary

I have here, to begin with this morning, volume number 2 of the minutes of this church. Under the date of July 5, 1880, this historical note appears after the minutes of that particular day, inscribed by the Clerk of the Session: "Work of demolishing the old church building began. New edifice is to be erected by the first of November next, on the site of the old." This was just a historical note, not a part of the official minutes at all. Then we turn over to the date of June 13, 1881, and we find another historical note here in the handwriting of the Clerk of the Session, not a part of the official minutes of the church, just a historical note: "Reverend D. K. McFarland moved to Oxford in June 1881 and began holding services in the new church."

You know it's strange, isn't it, that the only records concerning the building of this sanctuary that we find in the old minutes of the Session of this church are those two historical notes appended to the minutes of particular dates, not part of the official minutes of the church. How strange, indeed, that such an important event as building this sanctuary should not have been recorded in detail in the minutes of the church. The handwriting here is that of my great-uncle Robert. (1) He was Clerk of the Session for thirty-two years in this church. And why didn't my Uncle Robert see fit to go into a little more detail and tell something about the interesting features of the building of this church, the planning, the construction, the financing of how much it cost? Not a word - not a word.

Actually, it was the style in this particular time to say very little in the minutes of the church, I find in reading here. The minutes are mainly taken up with just two or three things. One is to be sure that the meeting of the Session are opened and closed with prayer, constitutionally. They record the names of the new members who have been received, the names of those who have been demitted to other congregations. They record the names of the Elders who have been appointed duly by the Session to attend Presbytery or Synod. And they go to some detail, to some length, to describe certain disciplinary proceedings that have been heard before the Session because some member, and sometimes an Elder himself, has been found guilty of un-Christian conduct and brought before the Session for a hearing. And we find some interesting things here, but they are not appropriate for this occasion. We find such things as swearing, as excessive intoxication in public, such things as dancing or teaching your children to dance. On one occasion a hearing was for a member of the church who had two wives - both at the same time! All very interesting - they recorded those things in the minutes of the church, but about the building of this sanctuary - nothing. You know, when you think about it, there must have been a reason for that. It could very well be that the elders of the church at this particular time were not overly enthusiastic about the building of this sanctuary. We see about that in a minute.

But whoever the builders were, whoever the planners were, whoever furnished the money to build this building, all praise to them! Actually, when you think about it, it was quite an undertaking - Oxford a little town, 1500 people, 1880, 15 years after the war, 150 members of the church. It was a marvelous undertaking that they could have gotten together and built this substantial, dignified, functional building. It's not very pretty; I don't think I've ever heard anyone call it pretty, but they have called it substantial, impressive. And I think that after the passage of all these many years, it has taken on that charm, that appeal which only old churches that have been used for a long time and loved well can attain.

You know, this isn't the first church. We just mentioned here about the tearing down of the old church. It was right here on this very spot. It was built sometime in the 1840's. The church bought the little plot of land on which the church stood, right here, for \$10 from the city of Oxford in the 1840's. At some time, along about, that period, there was a little

school house that existed just to the left over here, not on church property at that time. It was call, though, the Presbyterian Parochial School – nicknamed the Gilt-Edged School. I suppose Presbyterians were gilt-edged; it would have been better if they were gold-edged, wouldn't it? At any rate, there was a school there run by a Mrs. Smither who was a member of this church. Later, as some of us can remember, a manse had been built there. The church acquired that property in 1852. I want to tell you this story, even if it takes too much time. They bought 80 feet of land right over here from a lady who was getting ready to take a trip. She was going by boat to visit some relatives in Cincinnati. She sold this 80 feet of property to the church for sixty dollars and at the same time made a will, leaving all the front premises out here, which now constitutes our lawn, to the church at her death. Do you know the lady died in route to Cincinnati! The boat caught fire, burned, and the lady perished. And we came into possession of all of this property in the year 1852.

Just exactly when the manse was built, I'm not sure. Possibly, it may not have been built until in the 1870s. I have a picture of it here, along with a picture of the old church. They will be on display afterwards if anybody wants to look at them. This old photograph was taken more than a hundred years ago, and it shows the little white frame "dear little church", as somebody describes it, sitting right here and the manse by the side of it and a picket fence all around the property, paid for by the Women of the Church, so the records of the Women of the Church say. If you examine it closely you will notice there is a roadway, an extension of this little street to our right over here, running in front of the church. In that day and time, that road was on the city map, and you see it right here on this picture. It's going to be on display if you want to see it, afterwards. Incidentally, this minute book will be on display also. And to add a little sweetener, here is the first minute book of the church as well. You might want to, take a look at them. All will be on display later.

Sometime in the late 70s, the "dear little white framed church" began to need a lot of repairs. It was only thirty-five years' old, but it was falling into disrepair. The records indicate that several times rather substantial sums had been paid to repair the church. We have to depend much on the records of the women's work of the church, because they do exist – we have them. We don't have anything in the minutes of the Session, but we do have it in the minutes of the women's work in many cases. The women report that on several occasions they had subscribed rather heavily to a fund necessary for the repair of this old church. And they were getting tired of it. They said, "It's time to talk about a new church, a new building, a new sanctuary." There was some opposition to it, particularly among some of the men. It was the women who were agitating for the new church. I wonder myself if it might have been a matter of pride – because the Episcopalians had built this wonderful church building they've got over here, and the Cumberland Presbyterians, just a block up the street, had also built a very substantial building. Both of these were built in the 50s, before the war – very substantial buildings. The Cumberland Church, as we know now, has been demolished. I have a picture of it here and you ought to see it. I wonder if it wasn't a matter of pride with these good women of the church, that they wanted something better than this little, white-framed church building here on this spot. At any rate, they went to work. The men may have opposed it, but the women went to work. And their records indicate that for several years in advance of the actual building of the church, they had sold cakes and pies to raise money. In fact, Mrs. Brown (2) in her books says, "This church is laid upon the foundation of cakes and pies." But they did a lot of other things, too. They did a lot of sewing; they had sewing circles. They had a lot of groups of women who met regularly to make things for sale. And they made money in other ways – they collected dues. At every meeting that the women had, they had a 5 cent dues fee. Everybody had to pay a nickel every time they attended one of these women's meetings. And if you failed to come, they fined you 10 cents.

I wanted to tell you about two elders who were in the earlier history of this church. Their names were Ephraim E. Davidson and Zebina Conkey. I mention them particularly for two very good reasons, as you shall see. In the case of Ephraim E. Davidson, he has living descendants who are members of this church right now. And there is one I see present this morning who I want to pay tribute to, because she is Ephraim E. Davidson's great-granddaughter. I refer, of course, to Jean Davidson Crowe. Mrs. Crowe joined this church in 1902. At this time, she is the oldest, active member of this church, and a very spry member, too, - frisky, in fact. She does not have a continuous

membership, though. It was interrupted for a lengthy period when she lived in Chicago. But she's here this morning. The other elder that I mentioned, Zebina Conkey, had a daughter, a daughter, now, not a great-granddaughter, but a daughter, by the name of Jennie Rascoe who played a very important and historical role in the building of this sanctuary. She was the leader of the women, - I think had been for some time, and continued to be until she died - the leader of the women of this church. And she was an intrepid leader - she fought for what she wanted. She organized the women to fight with her. But she had an opponent, and it was a man. His name was Hugh Alexander Barr (there's his window right over there). He didn't want a new church. He thought the old one would do very well. He opposed Mrs. Rascoe in nearly everything she wanted to do.

I have here Mrs. Brown's history and I'd like to turn to it and read to you what she says about these two very strong personalities. She has the advantage of having had her grandmother, Mrs. Howell (3), to know these people personally. Her information is based upon things that her grandmother told her, I'm sure.

"Col. Barr," she writes, "had become an elder in this church in 1852." I might say right here, that he is the 2nd oldest elder in terms of continuous service in the church. He was an elder for forty-seven years. Dr. T. D. Isom, who some people called the first citizen of Oxford, was next. He was third in the list. He served this church as an elder for forty-four years. But the one who served the longest was Dr. Alfred Hume. Many of us remember Dr. Hume. He served for fifty-three years as elder of this church, from 1897 until his death in 1950, a great and a good man. Well, Col. Barr became an elder in this church in 1852. "From that date on," Mrs. Brown writes, "his name is recorded as a faithful and regular member of the session. He loved the kingdom of God as the apple of his eye, and Dr. Hedleston said of him that he thought' the Presbyterian Church just about comprised the vineyard of the Lord; that the Southern Presbyterian Church was the favorite corner of the vineyard; and that in that corner God delighted most of all in the special vine that was the Oxford church! A man of brilliant mentality, excellent training, and strong personality, Col. Barr was naturally looked to for leadership in the church. Naturally too, as he loved the church and gave himself unsparingly in her service year after year, he grew to rely on his own judgment as to what was for her good - a situation not to be escaped by a man of his self-reliant, independent, logical mode of thought.

"Through the days of trial and struggle during the war and reconstruction, he was as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, a tower of strength, to the poor, disorganized little church, but it was perhaps to be expected that as the church grew in strength there arose those who resented that Col. Barr, as they said, thought the church was his personal property. The stalwart and influential Dr. Zebina Conkey, one of the first and most earnest elders of the church, had left a daughter, Jennie, who married Mr. H. E. Rascoe, later an elder in the church. She had inherited her father's force of character and clearness of vision; she had struggled to keep the women's societies going, she had taught in the Sunday School during the war when the Sunday School was almost the only endeavor of the church. That two people of such strength of mind and character and such love for the church would clash seems as inevitable as it was sad. Mrs. Rascoe wanted a new church building; Col. Barr thought the old one should be repaired. It was repaired but the women of the church, under Mrs. Rascoe's leadership, immediately set to work to save their money for a new one and when it was built soon after, it was said that it was laid on a foundation of pies and cakes! Mrs. Rascoe wanted an organ for the church; Col. Barr did not approve of organs in churches. The women 'gave liberally to buy an organ and Col. Barr, who had hitherto led the singing, never sang a note in church again except when the organist was absent."

Well, who won out - Mrs. Rascoe or Col. Barr? Let's let the building speak for itself!

The building, as I remember it in my day and time - let me tell you about it. There have been some changes, of course, minor changes. The construction is the same - except for a wall that was here, the back wall. Later, during Dr. Johnson's time (4), the wall was removed, and the chancel built. That was in 1950. But, in the beginning there was just the wall here. The pulpit came out a little piece from this wall in a semicircle. There was a little fancy thing over it, just exactly like what is in the front of the church, over the front door right now. This pulpit furniture is the original, and the women of the church said they paid for it. Here are three pulpit chairs, here is

the pulpit, and here is the communion table - all original, and the women said they paid for it all and some other things, too. They said they paid for the carpet, for the light fixtures. There was a carbide gas system at the time. Electricity came into our church in 1901. There was no running water, of course, when the church was built. As a matter of fact, I can't remember that there was ever any running water in the church until the annex was built back of us here in 1908.

The women said they contributed to the organ. Let me tell you about it. It sat right here in the corner to my right. It was a handsome thing, pipes extended about ten feet up. It was a pump organ. There was a bench up against the wall where the sexton of the church could slide in, coming from the outside door. There was just a cow pasture out there, dotted with bitterweed. There was sort of a velvety cushion for him to sit on and pump the organ. Sometimes he would let some of the bigger boys help him, if they seemed to be strong enough. And sometimes they weren't strong enough and the organ would die - a mournful sound much to the delight of the other young boys in the church and the dismay of everybody else. But this was a beautiful organ. I just wonder what ever became of it. It was a real treasure. It was in this church from 1880 until 1920, when the new organ was bought that we used here for sixty years, moving it around to various places. The choir sat right here on the floor in sort of a little square place in front of the organ with a curtained railing around it 2 1/2 or 3 feet high. And as I said, the pulpit was right up against this wall here.

These windows were, of course, not as you see them now. The two earliest memorial windows are those two right over there - the one that I pointed to earlier, the Barr window, and the Ben Price window just beyond it. They were put in about 1900. All of these other windows were put in during the 1920's. These transoms that you see here over the doors were put in in the 40s. During the years, of course, this church has become noted for its beautiful windows. What did the original windows look like? Well, you can see them, if you want to in the little anterooms on either side of the front door. There's one of the original windows in each room, not facing the front, but facing the side. Sometimes look at them. Those are the original windows; all of them looked like that at one time. Now, you see these beautiful windows all dedicated to various members of the church. It's a pity we don't have more windows because there are so many other members who deserve a window. I'm sure that everybody sitting here who is a member of this church can think of somebody who deserves a window. I think if I were going to nominate anybody, I would nominate Jennie Rascoe, the little intrepid woman (I don't know how little she was, she may not have been little) -- Jennie Rascoe, the forceful leader of the women, who I suspect more than any one person in the history of this church was responsible for this room in which we sit today.

The unfortunate fact is that this competition between Mrs. Rascoe and Col. Barr carried over for some years. Mr. McFarland, the first minister who served the new church, as reported earlier, was able to hold the two factions pretty well in hand. It was only after he left that it really got out of hand. Incidentally, I want to say right now, that Mr. McFarlands' first service in this church in June 1881, a hundred years ago, right now, was not the first service held in this church. Just the month before, there had been a big wedding here before the church was finished. In fact, there were no seats. They brought in seats from a funeral home, the story goes. At any rate, there, was a big wedding - one of the Wohlleben girls - there were six of them. There's the Wohlleben window right over there. Six Wohlleben girls - the oldest was Emma - this was her wedding. Oh, by the way, if you want to read all about it after the service, here it is reported in the Oxford Falcon on Thursday, May 19, 1881 - you'll have to look at it.

Unfortunately, this rift in the church persisted for a long time. The church had difficulties getting ministers - one would come and not stay for very long. At one time there were five, according to the records, who came one right after the other, and looked the situation over and departed. They didn't want any part of it. There was unrest, there was unhappiness, there was division in the church. You may be sure that there were a great many prayers going up from this congregation to the good Lord to send them a man to lead them out of the wilderness they were in. And I want to tell you that God sent a man. He sent the right man. His name was Winn David Hedleston.

Let me take a few minutes to tell you about him. He was born in 1862 in Alabama. He came to the university here, possibly because he had an uncle on the faculty at the time, graduating when he was twenty-one years old. He decided to go into the ministry and went to a seminary in Kentucky. When he was ordained, he came back to Oxford to claim a bride, a member of this church, Lillie Andrus. He went back to Kentucky, where he served several pulpits. In 1894, he and his bride were back here on a visit to relatives. The church approached him about taking the pulpit here. Now this man was well-known in the community, he had been to the university here, he had married into the church here, he knew the situation of the church and the people knew him. It looked like he would be the man. He said, "I will take it on trial. I will be a stated supply for six months and then we can decide what to do." Well right then and there began the longest ministry that this church had ever known up to that time - sixteen years. It was a time of harmony, of growth, not only numerical growth, but spiritual growth, too.

Dr. Hedleston was an unusual person. I remember him well. He was the pastor of the church when I first saw the light of day. He was a modest man in appearance and manner. He was a sane, logical person. He was a tactful, understanding, courageous person. Very soon indeed, he had the church united again. Harmony prevailed for the first time in a long time, and it is such a happy thing to say that there has never been such a division in this church again.

In 1898, there was a very serious epidemic of yellow fever in Oxford -the first and the only time it ever hit Oxford. It was a very severe epidemic - the town was in a panic. Dr. Hedleston assumed the leadership of the forces to combat this dread thing. He organized committees, he taught people, white and black, what might be done. Mosquitoes were just beginning to be suspected, but they had not been identified. He visited the sick, he consoled the sorrowful, he buried the dead. After it was all over, he held the heart of the whole town in his hand. And I'm sorry to tell you that there were many deaths in the church during that time. - One of the--ones who died was Jennie Rascoe - she died of yellow fever. The next year, Col. Barr died, but not of yellow fever.

In 1900, under Dr. Hedleston, the church undertook to establish a mission church in Oxford for blacks. The hope was that it would serve as a nucleus for a true Black Presbyterian Church in Oxford. It flourished for a time. At one point it had seventy-five attendants and seven teachers from this church. But sad to say, it never did seem to take hold as hoped for, and ultimately, in 1920 the project was abandoned, and the property sold.

In 1908, there had been talk for some time of the need of a Sunday School annex. So the work was undertaken and finished in the year 1908 -- this annex back of us, before the chancel was put in. I have a picture of it here taken very soon after it was built. You might want to look at that. It was in the old style of building Sunday School rooms in that particular time. It had a high vaulted ceiling with a balcony around, divided into classrooms. And on the lower floor, the same. There was a central assembly hall where everybody gathered before Sunday School and afterwards, too. In 1950, under Dr. Johnson, this very handsome chancel was built, extending back into the old assembly area.

Dr. Hedleston requested twice during his ministry that the church dismiss him, allowing him to accept other calls. Twice they were denied, and he continued his service to this congregation. The third time he asked to be relieved was because the university had invited him to take the chair of Philosophy and Logic. The year was 1910. And the church, at that time, agreed to let him go. From 1910 until 1930, for twenty years, he occupied the chair of Philosophy and Logic at the University of Mississippi. In the meantime, he was serving other churches around as supply, particularly the College Hill Church, where he served long and faithfully for many years. In fact, he moved from his home on the campus, where he was living in a brick duplex where the university library is now, to College Hill and lived there in the house where the Fred Taylors live now with the 640 acres all around him. He was a real farmer at heart. In 1930, he received the dubious distinction of getting fired from the university in the Bilbo shake-up. He was then sixty- eight years old and so he just retired to his home in College Hill and lived there until he died in 1936.

When Marjorie and I married, we had two ministers - Dr. Wallace (5) who had just come to this church, and Dr. Hedleston, whom we had known all our lives. After the ceremony was over, in grateful appreciation of services rendered, I pressed a ten-dollar gold piece into the hand of each of the two ministers. Well, some little bit after that, Dr. Hedleston returned his gold piece - to the bride! And I'm sure she still has it, somewhere among her souvenirs.

1 - Robert F. Fulton, Clerk of the Session 1874-1906.

2- Maud Morrow Brown, The History of the first Presbyterian Church of Oxford, Mississippi,
July 15, 1837 - March 31, 1950.

3- Nancy K. Howell, joined the church in 1860.

4- John K. Johnson, pastor from 1948 until 1955.

5- J. E. Wallace, pastor from 1924 until 1947.