

History of Blakely First United Methodist Church

The first minister who settled in Early County was Samuel Johnson, a Methodist of fair preaching ability and of a genial and pleasant disposition. He arrived in January, 1821, and made his home a few miles south of Fort Gaines.

The South Carolina Conference sent Rev. John H. Triggs as a circuit rider in 1822, and his Appointment read missionary to Early County and adjoining settlements. Later, the South Carolina conference had circuit riders on both sides of the Chattahoochee: The Early County Mission on our side of the river and the Chattahoochee Mission on the Alabama side.

The Fort Gaines Methodist Church was formed in 1822, and the first Methodist Church in what is now Early County was Pleasant Grove, northwest of Blakely, on the River Road, formed before 1830.

In 1830, Early County became part of the Georgia conference, Tallahassee District. Ira L. Cook was the circuit rider when our church was formed, probably in 1853. An existing building on the southwest corner of the square was converted into a church for the use of the Methodists and Presbyterians. Simon Peter Richardson was the Presiding Elder for the Tallahassee District, and he wrote that Blakely was a Baptist town. He opened the church with a 10 day meeting, and he attacked the selling of whiskey.

After the Civil War, the South Georgia Conference was formed and Blakely was placed in the Bainbridge District through 1872, then to the Dawson District for two years, then to the Thomasville District.

The church building on the square was abandoned in 1869 as it became the court house and also unsafe (it collapsed in 1871). Services were held in the court house and also in the academy. Rev. William M. Hayes came to Blakely in 1871. He was a veteran of the Confederate army, and had lost his right arm in battle. Under his leadership, the church bought lumber and shingles, but nothing happened for about a year. A lot was purchased from Colonel B. H. Robinson for \$100, and white frame church was built in 1873 on Fort Gaines Street. This lot is our present lot, and this part of Fort Gaines Street was renamed College Street later in honor of "The College," or "Blakely Institute." The Trustees at this time were: Hardy C. Fryer, John W. Dozier, Thomas Williams, Robert Freeman, and George B. Swann. This new church building had aisles on the sides, and

pews in the middle. A partition in the middle divided the men from the woman.

The bell from the church on the square was moved to this new church, and Judge Arthur G. Powell talked about this bell in his book, "I Can Go Home Again." There was a wild clangor in the bell in its steeple, and the front door of the church was left open, so that if a fire broke out at night, someone could run to the church and ring the bell to rouse the people. When the Baptist Church bell was tolled for a funeral, it gave out a solemn tone that emphasized death itself; the Methodist church bell spoke a more earthly language. That same bell continues to ring for us each Sunday.

The September 26, 1873, issue of The Early County News printed this item: "Our Methodist friends, through the labor of love of Mrs. W.O. Butler, have had their new church furnished with a nice chandelier, also with pulpit, and side lamps.

The separation of the sexes was not a good idea. One of the local papers printed "this on May 7, 1875: "Thoughtless boys and men who don't know to behave in church should read a section or two in the revised code of Georgia. We are lead to give advice from having heard of some disorderly conduct in the Methodist Church on Sunday night last."

This building had a problem that sounds familiar to us now as you will recognize from this item in the paper on December 10, 1875: "...we trust the leak in the roof may be stopped." The Trustees got the message, and the paper printed on January 28, 1876: "The leak in the roof of the Methodist Church has been stopped."

Blakely was then part of the ABCD Circuit; the same pastor served Arlington, Blakely, Colquitt, and Damascus one Sunday each month. The paper reported in the May 6, 1881, issue: "The ladies of the Methodist Church were raising funds to buy a new organ." At this time, the pastor's wife was a music teacher at the institute. The fund drive succeeded as the January 11, 1882 issue of the paper reported that our church had purchased a new organ. The October 4, 1883, issue of the paper poked a little fun at another problem in the church: "Our Methodist friends don't profess to allow dancing in their church, but the way they allow a pile of rumped carpet to set the nimble sisters to waltzing up the aisle on Sunday is a sight to behold!"

The Blakely Observer printed in the February 7, 1895, issue: "The Methodist church has a leak in the roof causing feet to freeze and icicles to form

on coat tails." The church quickly put new shingles on the roof.

Our first Parsonage was at 412 College Street, and this house still stands. The paper on March 4, 1897, reported that the parsonage had been accepted from the builders. This home served us until 1963.

Blakely was growing as the 19th Century was winding down, and the Methodist Church was also growing. It was building time again as the Early County News reported on May 31, 1899: "The Methodists are agitating the question of building a new Church."

By this time, the Blakely Circuit was organized between Blakely, Arlington, and Damascus. Blakely had preaching on first and third Sundays; Arlington on 2nd Sunday (and on the Saturday before), and Damascus had services on the 4th Sunday and Saturday before.

Rev. Robert Kerry a native of Ireland, was appointed to the Blakely Circuit in 1900. The Bishop told him to go and build a new church as the congregation was ready. Things moved quickly, and the paper reported on March 1900, that the old Methodist Church building was being torn down in preparation for a modern brick structure. Services were to be held in the Institute building during construction.

Oscar H. Sheffield, a native of Cedar Springs, was a faculty member at the University of Georgia, and he agreed to serve as the architect. He even waived his fee! His plans were accepted in April, and construction began a few months later.

Professor Sheffield chose the Romanesque Revival style of architecture which at that time was more popular in the United States and Germany than the Gothic style which was predominant in France and England. The Romanesque Revival was highlighted by semi-circular arches, and the facades were flanked by square or polygonal towers of different heights and various roof styles.

During construction, the ladies of the church were busy with fund raisers, including: an oyster supper and entertainment held at the court house; lunches were served at the court house during court week; a bazaar was held in the Knights of Pythias Hall; a famous orator delivered a humorous lecture—admission was 15 cents and 25 cents; a graphophone entertainment was held in the auditorium.

Construction was swift and by April, 1901, the new building was ready. First, however, just what was Blakely and Early County like at that time?

The Early County News advertised "Cascarets Candy Cathartic," guaranteed to end constipation forever. The paper also had two health tips: "If you catch a cold, lose your quinine and eat an onion's." The other was: "No pies or cakes; no pains or aches."

J.J. Smith had seed Irish potatoes from Maine available at 50 cents a peck.

Ivey & Perryman advertised a keg of Heinz sweet mixed pickles. Flowers Lumber Company at Jakin needed 6 or 8 good experienced ox drivers at \$1.15 per day and board. George E. Chipstead had buggies for sale, cheap. The Early County Grand Jury reported on the two convict camps, one having 105 convicts and the other having 65.

There was a 6 room house on Arlington Avenue for sale. It was painted, fine condition with barns and outhouses. A real bargain at only \$950.00. A 700 acre, horse farm nine miles south of Blakely was for sale at \$3,000.

The Thursday, April 11, 1901, issue of the Early County News printed two items about our church. On April 10, our church had a conference and expressed sympathy to our Baptist brethren as their pastor, Bro. W. H. Patterson, had died. The second item was as follows: "Services were held in Blakely's handsome and commodious new brick Methodist Church for the first time last Sunday (which was April 1901), and the edifice was filled almost to capacity although the occasion had been unheralded. Besides his intense zeal for the Master's cause, the pastor, Rev. Robert Kerr, with the inspiration of Easter and the elegant temple of worship to fire his eloquence, delivered a masterful discourse on "The Chief Points Concerning the True Church," taking as his text the passage of Scripture found in Ephesians 1: 22,23, "And He hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all things to the church which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all."

The large stained glass windows were given as memorials at the cost of \$25.00 each, and the smaller windows were \$10.00 each.

Improvements continued that first year. In July, 1901, the new pews arrived and you are sitting on these same pews, so they are nearly 97 years old.

They were manufactured in Thomasville, Georgia, and the same type pews are in First Methodist Church in Thomasville. We do not know if the same company also made the pulpit. In December, 1901, a new crystal chandelier was installed. In 1902, a new furnace and heating system was added. The pews and the remaining debt of some \$8,000 on the building was paid off

and Bishop Candler dedicated the debt-free building on Easter Sunday, 1903. However, a serious problem developed that had to be corrected. You can look up at the ceiling and see how the problem was solved. During construction of the church two years before, the architect's plan for cypress shingles on the roof was changed to slate shingles. Why? We are told for kinesthetic reasons."

The work of bracing the building was completed in November, 1903, and it was announced that the building "...was now considered perfectly safe." Some members believed that the iron bars improved the acoustics.

By 1904, our church was supporting Margaret Cook, at a cost of \$600 per year. A foreign missionary to Japan, In 1907, the church raised Church expenses that year \$1,200 to support "our missionaries to Japan." totaled about six thousand dollars.

Our Baptist friends dedicated their new \$12,000 sanctuary in 1912, and our church raised the money to give them a new pulpit Bible.

The church had a new heating system installed and the building was reconditioned in 1938. The choir loft was moved from the left corner to the rear of the pulpit. The pews were re-worked, repainted, and varnished. New lights were put in, the interior was re-painted, and new carpet was put down.

An electric organ was added in November, 1942. The young men of the congregation built a classroom for themselves in 1946, and two years later, ground was broken for the new Sunday School annex. The Parsonage was moved to 619 Cherry Street in 1963. Those young men build the chapel in 1973. The church was renovated again in 1978. The new Parsonage was built in 1984. And we remember the new organ, the new roof, the purchase of the Youth House, and yet another leak was repaired.

What will future church historians have to say about us today? --that we continued to work on leaking roofs? --that we were a loving, caring, and generous people of whom the next generation will be proud of ?

By 1904, our church was supporting Margaret Cook, at a cost of \$600 per year. a foreign missionary to Japan, In 1907, the church raised Church expenses that year \$1,200 to support "our missionaries to Japan." totaled about six thousand dollars.

Our Baptist friends dedicated their new \$12,000 sanctuary in 1912, and our church raised the money to give them a new pulpit Bible. The church had a new heating system installed and the building was reconditioned in 1938. The choir loft was moved from the left corner to the rear of the pulpit. The pews were re-worked, repainted, and varnished. New lights were put in, the interior was re-painted, and new carpet was put down.

An electric organ was added in November, 1942. The young men of the congregation built a classroom for themselves in 1946, and two years later, ground was broken for the new Sunday School annex.

The Parsonage was moved to 619 Cherry Street in 1963. Those young men build the chapel in 1973. The church was renovated again in 1978. The new Parsonage was built in 1984. And we remember the new organ, the new roof, the purchase of the Youth House, and yet another leak was repaired.

What will future church historians have to say about us today? --that we continued to work on leaking roofs? --that we were a loving, caring, and generous people of whom the next generation will be proud of ?