

## **THE FOUNDING OF THE FRANKLIN STREET CHURCHES**

A Presentation for the Chapel Hill Historical Society

January 25, 2009

In the original Chapel of the Cross

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It is an honor to address you this afternoon in this historic place on such a significant topic as the founding of the Franklin Street Churches. By that phrase I mean the four historic churches whose property literally lies on our town's main street. There are other congregations as old, for example St. Paul AME, the first black church in Chapel Hill, founded in 1864 under a grape arbor just off the end of Franklin Street. But a presentation next fall is to cover the founding of local African-American churches; so I will focus on the four Franklin Street churches.

I want to confess to you a certain Episcopal slant in this presentation! By that I do not mean that I will try to present the Episcopal contribution to our common history as being more important than that of the early Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists – which indeed it is not. But having served in this parish for over 26 years, I realize that I have absorbed in my bones much more of the history and DNA, if you will, of this Episcopal congregation than I have of our sister churches. Practically speaking, I have had much easier access to the records and various historical accounts housed here in the rector's office. Much of that is actually available on our web site, but I found that not to be true for the other three congregations. In fact, I wonder if Episcopalians by nature just put more focus on history and record keeping. At least I know we have a lot of librarians and history professors in our congregation! At any rate, the other pastors did find some material to share with me or a history-minded member to refer me to, for which I am very grateful. But my knowledge of the history of University Presbyterian, University United Methodist, and University Baptist Churches is still woefully inadequate; and I hope as questions arise, some of you might be able to fill the lacunae.

As a context for our subject, we should first spend a little time understanding the role of the organized church here from before there was a Franklin Street. As most of you know, from sometime before the Revolutionary War, there was an Anglican (Church of England) chapel of ease located near here, about where the Carolina Inn is now. A small, presumably log structure at a cross roads (and hence the name of the Inn's dining room), it served mostly as a spiritual rest stop for travelers on the north/south road from Petersburg by Oxford and on to Pittsboro and beyond or on the east/west road from New Bern through Raleigh and on to the Guilford Court House. It was called New Hope Chapel, and there were periodic services there, but it was not a parish church in the same sense as was its parent church, St. Matthew's in Hillsborough, built in the 1760's. This church and other outlying posts were served by an interesting character, the Rev. George Micklejohn,

who came from Scotland by way of Cambridge and London to do missionary work in North Carolina at the age of 50.

It is too hard to pass him by without telling you several interesting stories that have come down to us about him! He was eager in his missionary task and would go to great lengths – geographically and tactically – to grow the Church. According to a history compiled by Dr. Kemp Plummer Battle, who served as President of the University after Reconstruction,

Parson Micklejohn met a countryman, and in the course of a friendly chat, asked: “Why don’t you come to hear me preach?” “Well, sir,” replied the countryman, “to tell you the truth I have to work so hard all week I want to stay at home or hunt rabbits or fish a little on Sunday.” [Things haven’t changed that much in two and a half centuries!] “You ought to come to church,” urged the Parson. “I’ll give you a drink if you’ll come tomorrow,” to which the countryman eagerly assented. Whereupon the hearty old Scotch parson, himself habituated to heady beverages, produced a flask from his saddle bag and poured out for the countryman a generous dose of whiskey – thereby adding one to his meager congregation with this ready exercise of spiritual influence. [That’s a tactic I have never tried!]

Micklejohn was a Loyalist, basing his stance on Romans 13:1: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” The governor, William Tryon, even requested Micklejohn to preach a sermon on that text during the Regulator troubles to the Granville and Orange brigades in Hillsborough; and the governor liked it so much he used public money to pay for 100 printed copies for distribution to the representatives in the North Carolina House of Assembly. (Not the first time the state has used the church for its own purposes, and it won’t be the last!) But Micklejohn’s stronger loyalty was to his parishioners. When one of them, Thomas Person, later a general in the Revolution and for whom a county was subsequently named, was arrested in 1771 after the Regulators were defeated in the Battle of Alamance, the Parson interceded on his behalf and got him out of jail on the condition he keep Person at his own home. When Person found out that Governor Tryon planned to send troops to Person’s home to seek incriminating evidence among his personal papers, he told Micklejohn, “Why, sir, there is enough evidence against me among my papers to hang me a dozen times.” He then borrowed the Parson’s fine-blooded English mare and secretly rode to his home and back that night, a total of sixty miles, and hid his incriminating papers so that Tryon’s soldiers did not find them the next day. When asked if Thomas Person had not left his property the night before, the crafty pastor simply replied, “I supped and breakfasted with him”!

Dr. Battle characterized Parson Micklejohn as “an eccentric man of probity and many virtues, personally so popular that the Revolutionary leaders of North Carolina were afraid of his influence over the people of Orange and forced him to

remove his residence to a county in the Albemarle country.” A few months later in November of 1776, he went before the Provincial Congress in Halifax and subscribed an oath to the State of North Carolina, and his loyalty was never questioned again. Regarded as a man of importance, his name was even suggested for the first president of the University of North Carolina. Constantly on the road, he kept up his strenuous missionary work well into his eighties (no doubt strengthened by his bracing libations!) and eventually died in Virginia in 1818 at the age of 101.

Back then to New Hope Chapel, Dr. Battle wrote, “It is interesting to note that the word Hope in South Scotland means Haven; and most of the settlers in the neighborhood were Scotch-Irish.” Many of them, of course, were Presbyterian, as were many of the founding members of the University. When they chose this area for the campus, “New Hope Chapel Hill” quickly became “Chapel Hill,” much easier for conversational purposes. No one knows what happened exactly to the little chapel for which the area was named, whether it rotted or burned. Dr. Battle wrote that as late as the 1820’s, “remains of the rough little edifice were still to be seen at a spot in the garden of the Graves place.”

We may have a clue to the chapel’s demise in a local history written by Archibald Henderson, over seventy years ago:

Patriotism, expressing itself as religious intolerance, took the form of persecution of the Episcopal Church, then a part of the Church of England. “The effect, indeed, of these prejudices,” says William Mercer Green [later the founding priest of the Chapel of the Cross], “seems to have been more remarkable in North Carolina than anywhere else. The cry of ‘Down with it, down with it even to the ground,’ accomplished the wishes of the enemies of the Church, and long after Zion had arisen from the dust, and put on her beautiful garments, in other portions of her borders, her children here had still to weep when they remembered her.” At one time, it is said [Henderson added, referring to the post-Revolutionary War period], there was not a single minister of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina.

Cornelia Phillips Spencer, the woman who lobbied for the reopening of the University after Reconstruction and who announced the good news by ringing the bell in South Building, in an article in *The North Carolina Presbyterian* of January 21, 1897, put it another way: The Presbyterians had everything in their own hands for the first forty years of Chapel Hill.” She was right. Pastor Micklejohn did not become the President of the University, and the first three to serve in that capacity were Presbyterian, covering nearly 65 years, from 1804 to 1868. To let you know that religion was not considered incidental to the qualities needed at the fledgling University, consider that the very first and only professor in 1795, David Ker, who by default was designated Presiding Professor, the very next year was forced to resign after renouncing his Presbyterian faith. Joseph Caldwell replaced him as Presiding Professor and became the first University President in 1804. After he

resigned in 1812, Robert Hett Chapman, served from 1813-1816. President Caldwell then took office again from 1816 until 1835. Finally former Governor David L. Swain presided from 1835 until the closing of the University by Reconstruction in 1868.

Mrs. Spencer asserts in her article that the first denominational congregation in Chapel Hill was Presbyterian “under the auspices of either President Chapman or President Caldwell.” That could make it as early as 1813. “A Brief History” published by University Presbyterian Church in 1999 and written by William W. McLendon says “The Presbyterian church was organized in 1829 with meetings initially being held in various homes and university buildings.” Dr. Caldwell, according to Spencer, was “stated supply” and remained so until his death in 1835, when Dr. Elisha Mitchell, a faculty member and explorer for whom Mount Mitchell is named, replaced him for many years. “Early in the thirties,” Mrs. Spencer wrote, “a small wooden church building was erected, chiefly at the expense of the faculty, on the spot where the Presbyterian church now stands [at that time on University property]. This was for use at Sunday evening service, Sunday school, and weekly prayer meeting, and no sectarian doctrine being broached, the religious life of Chapel Hill was conducted on a strictly union basis. The Rev. Dr. Hooper (Baptist), Rev. Dr. Green (Episcopal), Rev. Dr. Deems (Methodist) and the Rev. Drs. Caldwell, Mitchell and Phillips, ministered here by turns to the small congregations assembled.”

The Centennial History of the Chapel Hill Methodist Church, published in 1954, confirmed this ecumenical arrangement on Sunday nights “in the village chapel, or Union Church as it was called [apparently also called the Union Meeting Hall], where villagers joined the students and faculty in religious worship.” The reason for these services being on Sunday evening, of course, was the determination of the trustees and faculty to continue required chapel for all students in Person Hall. Ironically, President Swain’s effort to establish the office of University Chaplain in 1837 led to the unraveling of this customary requirement. He offered the chaplaincy to his wife’s brother-in-law, a Methodist minister named Edward Wadsworth. The presiding elder of the Raleigh District approved the appointment, but the Presiding Methodist Bishop, the Reverend Thomas A. Morris, did not, saying that there were not enough Methodists in the area and among the students to justify this appointment.

The position then went to the aforementioned Dr. William Mercer Green, an 1818 University graduate and Episcopal minister, who resigned his position as Rector of St. Matthew’s, Hillsborough, to accept the chaplaincy and the rank of Professor of Belles Lettres, teaching rhetoric and logic. Green invited Mitchell and Deems to alternate Sunday mornings with him (apparently at Mitchell’s insistence!), but he became more and more concerned that there ought to be an Episcopal congregation in Chapel Hill, particularly for the closer religious formation of Episcopal students. One example of the frustration he felt was the opposition voiced by both Dr. Phillips and Dr. Mitchell when he included the Lord’s Prayer in the

required chapel service, which they criticized as introducing “sectarianism” into the University! (In contrast, just this week Pastor Rick Warren, an evangelical minister, introduced the Lord’s Prayer into the invocation at the presidential inauguration! Devotional Ecumenism has come a long way...) Green told the Episcopal diocesan convention of 1841, “Under the present state of things, little can be done towards the profitable instruction of the sons of the Church during their collegiate course. For four of the most important years of their life they are cut off from the stated and peculiar lessons in which they were early trained. As an almost necessary consequence, they become indifferent to the high and holy claims of the Church, and too often lose all their religious impressions.” He began to hold Sunday night services in his own parlor with students given permission to attend.

A year later on May 13, 1842, twelve men fulfilled the national Episcopal canons for starting a new congregation by signing the articles of incorporation, still preserved. Besides fulfilling the requirement for male signatures, they also added twelve women’s signatures, expressing their vision of the comprehensiveness of the Church. (Way before Jesse Helms, Chapel Hill was progressive!) They called themselves “The Church of the Atonement” and the next year (1843, the date on the post outside the chapel front door) began work on this Gothic building. Work proceeded slowly for lack of money. After a year the church was three-fourths completed, but \$1,200 was still needed for the roof and the floor to be added. Two years after that in 1846 (with still no progress made), Bishop Levi Ives officiated in the University Chapel in the morning and at a private house in the evening. “When I observed around me,” he wrote, “a large congregation crowded together in a most inconvenient manner in a private home, numbers for want of room having been forced away, and recollected that within two or three hundred yards there stood a beautiful Gothic edifice, which a few hundred dollars would open to the wants of the people, I felt mortified and humbled for our spiritual indifference.” Finally, probably using Green’s own money and certainly his slaves, the church was finished and consecrated by the Bishop on October 19, 1848. Legend has it that Ives said, “We’ll name it for the deed not the doctrine,” and called it, not “the Church of the Atonement” but the “Chapel of the Holy Cross”. Inexplicably, the “holy” never stuck, and whether of reasons of brevity or humility, it has been “Chapel of the Cross” ever since! (“There is no holy at the Chapel of the Cross...”)

The chapel, built as a “salt box”, was changed in 1891 (under the influence of the Oxford Movement) by removing the back wall and converting the vesting room into the recessed chancel and by changing the pew configuration from two aisles to a center and two side aisles. Eventually in 1925, what is now called the church was constructed, with a cloister connecting it to the chapel. A wooden steeple first adorned this new church, but apparently due to an infestation of wasps, which constantly disrupted the worshippers, did not last even two decades. The nucleus of the rest of our building was also constructed then and named after Dr. & Mrs. Kemp Plummer Battle; he was Sr. Warden and on the vestry here for many years. The intention at that time was to make this chapel an auditorium, but thankfully they could not bring themselves to do it, because it still serves as the soul of the parish. It

remains the oldest existing religious building in Chapel Hill or Durham, and it is still used for two Sunday and several weekday services, as well as for frequent weddings and funerals.

Dr. Green may have been the first, but he was not the only one to want a denominational service on Sunday morning. According to Cornelia Phillips Spencer, Methodists who didn't want to travel the two miles towards Hillsborough to attend Orange Methodist "began to thirst for ministrations less staid and formal than those afforded by college professors [no offense to any present company!], and took steps for holding meetings of their own." Charles Force Deems, a native of Baltimore, became a faculty member in 1842, and the next year the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church assigned him to the pastorate of the Chapel Hill congregation. They began in the private home of Miles Davis on Rosemary Street, but soon moved to the upper room in Jesse Hargrove's store, which later became the assembly hall of the Masonic Lodge and by the writing of the previously mentioned Methodist centennial history in 1953 was occupied by Danzinger's Candy Kitchen and Old World Restaurant. They worshipped in this place Deems named "Bethesda" until the first building erected in Chapel Hill as a Methodist church was dedicated on July 3, 1853. Built for about \$5,000 using money collected around the state by Samuel Milton Frost, an older University student who became pastor in 1850 before his graduation, it stood at the corner of Rosemary and Henderson. It later served as a Congregational Church, then a garage, and by 1953 contained the offices of Webb and Webb Architects.

By 1878 (25 years later), the trustees began to anticipate the need for a larger building and purchased a lot on Franklin Street, adjoining the campus, for \$500. By 1885 they began to raise additional funds and in June of 1889, the second Methodist church building was ready for services. They then sold for \$800 the Rosemary lot and first church building with all appurtenances, "the Organ, Clock, and Bible alone excepted."

With the growth of the University and the town, these facilities started to become inadequate in about 1915, when the Pastor, Walter Patten, asked for a new Sunday School building. By February of 1917 a building committee was appointed, but the entry of the United States into World War I put the project on hold. Three years later a new pastor, Euclid McWhorter, began to make the case for a grander idea: a new church with an enlarged auditorium and larger spaces for Sunday School. In order to accomplish this, more land had to be acquired, requiring some complicated transactions, but ground was finally broken on January 6, 1925 (during the time the Episcopal church was also being built – the children of the town must have loved all the activity!). This third Methodist church was completed in April of 1926 and began to be used, but by rule it could not be dedicated until the debt was retired. The subsequent Great Depression postponed that date even further until finally it was dedicated 11 years later on April 7, 1935.

Sometime in the next decade, with the establishment of other local Methodist churches, the congregation changed its name from “The Chapel Hill Methodist Church” to “University Methodist Church” to distinguish itself from the others and to lay claim for itself to its student ministry.

One interesting paragraph from the centennial history reads as follows:

Whether the [new] church [building] should have a steeple or not was a question that was hotly debated. Dr. J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton gives this version of the controversy. He says the decision finally had to be made by Walter Patten, Clyde Eubanks, and L.R. Wilson. Patten was for a steeple for architectural, idealistic, and inspirational considerations. [Of course – he was the minister!] Eubanks was against it because it would cost \$10,000 to build it and \$500 every time it had to be painted. [No doubt the Treasurer!] Wilson thought for a moment, picturing in his mind’s eye the steeples of the then-recently erected Presbyterian and Episcopal churches and the steeple-less Baptist. And out of a spirit of sheer denominational rivalry cast the deciding vote for a steeple that would lay the other steeples in the shade!

Meanwhile (back to a century earlier), the Presbyterians were feeling left out! According to Mrs. Spencer:

The Presbyterians had not looked on with indifference at seeing themselves gradually outnumbered by other sects – the Methodists and Baptists especially having taken possession of a large portion of Orange County and outgrowing all others with great rapidity. They drew up together and blew upon the Presbyterian coal. [Great graphic imagery!] In 1845, they reformed their session – electing President Swain and Charles Phillips elders, -- Dr. Mitchell being moderator and resolved that the time had come when they too must light their own camp-fires [extended metaphor!] and display their own especial church banner.

The importance of Chapel Hill as the seat of the State University was growing with the growth of the Institution. The sons of Presbyterian families must not be allowed to spend the four years of college life with no opportunity afforded them of hearing defended, explained and enforced the grand tenets of that masculine form of Christian faith first delivered to the saints by Paul of Tarsus and handed down the centuries by the Carthaginian saint and John of Geneva [referring to Augustine and John Calvin].

Money was raised around the state, and by 1848 a lot of one acre was purchased from the trustees of the University (where the Union Church was), with the explicit understanding that the service of the church should never conflict with the Sunday morning University chapel service. Mrs. Spencer elaborates:

Attendance upon chapel worship was obligatory in those days upon all connected with the University, and the absence of a student was marked to his discredit as much as if from a recitation. The trustees of the early days of the University were men of various religious beliefs, but they were united on one point – that the young should be trained in the way they should go, and that one way was the hearing of at least one good sermon a week. They were persuaded that the average college boy, if left to the freedom of his own will, would prefer a very late breakfast on Sunday morning and a subsequent lounge among his fellows, or the reading of a novel, to any pulpit delivery whatever in his mother's church or his father's. The resolve was fixed to continue divine service in the college chapel at all hazards. The heads of the Presbyterian church, being all officially connected with the University, readily assented and gave the required pledge.

The church building was finished and dedicated on September 23, 1849. But for about ten years, the congregation had to hold its services at night to conform to the agreement with the University. Finally, dissatisfied that other denominations were not bound by this limitation, they successfully appealed to the Trustees to void the original agreement.

After some ups and downs in membership, the Rev. William D. Moss, a Canadian and a man with great charm and particular appeal to the young, helped swell the membership rolls. A new sanctuary was built with a fine parish house and dedicated in 1920. Unfortunately the Ash Wednesday fire of 1958 burned the sanctuary to the ground, and it took almost five years for the present church to replace it, being dedicated in November of 1962. Sometime in that decade, when it founded a new Presbyterian church, the Church of Reconciliation, the congregation changed its name from "The Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church" to "University Presbyterian Church," affectionately known as "U Pres".

Getting back to the growing number of Baptists mentioned earlier by Mrs. Spencer, the mother church in the area was Mt. Carmel Baptist, founded near University Lake in 1804, just down from the dam on Morgan Creek. One of those who made that regular journey to worship, William H. Merritt, died in 1850 and left money and land to build the Baptist Church at Chapel Hill. It was constructed in 1854 on the corner of Franklin Street and Church Street. (The cross street was named for the building and not vice-versa!) It was only in 1923 that the congregation moved to its present location to be able to minister more closely to the students. The first church became the Mason's Lodge and was eventually torn down to make way for Belk's. In the late 1950's, the church changed its name from the Chapel Hill Baptist Church to University Baptist Church, principally it seems, to avoid confusion with First Baptist Church in Chapel Hill.

So there you have some idea of how these four congregations came to be and how they got to be at their present locations. Before I close, I just want to share with you a few stories about this historic place in which we meet. It is part of the

Episcopal slant to which I confessed at the beginning, but I think these stories can help personalize the buildings and will give some flavor of the ministry of all four downtown historic churches.

The first involves the slave loft above and behind you. Dr. Green insisted on the participation of slaves in the worship, in part because it was illegal to educate them and this was one way to strengthen their minds and souls. One of the slaves who sat up there, Cornelia, was baptized here in 1854 at age ten; we still have the original record. After she was emancipated, Cornelia moved to Durham and ended up helping to raise her granddaughter, Pauline Murray, know as Pauli.

Pauli was a diligent student, the first woman to graduate at the top of her law school class at Howard University. She was a fighter for justice, leading some of the first sit-ins for civil rights in the early 1940s and going to jail for refusing to move to the back of the bus a decade before Rosa Parks. A founding member of the National Organization of Women and a board member of the American Civil Liberties Union, she was a leader in the struggle for women's rights. She was an accomplished poet and author, and all her life activities were aimed at healing and reconciliation for all people. Climatically in her late sixties, Pauli entered seminary and became the first African-American woman ordained an Episcopal priest.

A month later, on February 13, 1977, she returned to this same chapel where her grandmother had been baptized over a century earlier and celebrated her first Holy Eucharist. In doing so, she became the first female priest of any race to celebrate communion in the state of North Carolina. In this sacred space where Cornelia had to sit in the slave loft, Pauli now presided at the altar. She told the overflowing congregation, "There is no black Christ, no white Christ, or red Christ. There is only one Christ, the spirit of love and reconciliation."

Thirty years later (in February 2007) another packed congregation in this chapel celebrated the anniversary of that momentous occasion. This time the celebrant and preacher was the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, the first female Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and still the only female primate in the whole Anglican Communion. "You and I stand here today in proud shoes [the title of Pauli's book about her family history] because of her dream," Bishop Katharine said. "I know that I stand here today only because she stood here before me. Her proud shoes have carried many others down the road to freedom."

Pauli Murray's sense of being beloved, of standing in proud shoes, began with the baptism of her grandmother in 1854. This cherished memory, Bishop Katharine declared, "said that yes, even that girl owned by another was God's beloved and worthy of God's own gift and adoption. That ancient dream planted in her family and history shaped Dr. Murray's life, and her ministry both lay and ordained." What a seed was planted in that service of baptism in this place over 150 years ago! How God has touched and transformed lives in many generations because of it. Multiply

that by the thousands of baptisms performed in these four churches over the many decades so far.

Another story involves opening the chapel doors even to the dreaded Yankee occupiers immediately following the Civil War! When Brigadier General Smith Atkins of Freeport, Illinois, called on the President of the University, former Governor David Swain, to pay his respects, the General and Eleanor Swain, one of the daughters, were dramatically smitten with each other. Although their father was a Presbyterian (as we have heard), Eleanor and Annie, her sister, were involved here. After a whirlwind courtship, which included the Union military band setting up on the Swain's front lawn to serenade Eleanor, she and General Atkins were married in this chapel on August 23, 1865, much to the chagrin of most of the townspeople. This has been a House of Prayer for all people!

A final story: in late 1992, Dr. Francis Collins, a UNC Medical School grad, was offered the daunting task of chairing the mapping of the human genome. Feeling intimidated by the challenge, he came one afternoon to this chapel to pray. (He was visiting his daughter in Chapel Hill at the time.) He prayed all afternoon and was delighted to find Evening Prayer offered at 5:15. He wrote in his recent book, "The Language of God" (which I highly recommend) that, as he left the chapel that evening, he felt a deep sense of peace that God was indeed calling him to this momentous endeavor. A few years later his group had successfully mapped all ten million parts of the human genome, the ramifications of which we have not yet even begun to realize. And it was the availability of a place to pray on Franklin Street that allowed God's grace to begin to work and to be so productive.