

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. MARKS UMC

PART I

A Place to Worship

The Pearl River Valley Water Supply Authority was created by the Mississippi Legislature in 1958 for the purpose of constructing and operating what became known as the Ross Barnett Reservoir. This area northeast of Jackson on the Pearl River was at that time sparsely inhabited. The dedication was held in 1965 and the first subdivision on Reservoir property was opened in 1966. By 1972 there were several subdivisions being developed on Reservoir property and private developers were beginning construction of subdivisions nearby. In the spring of that year several attempts were made to determine if there was enough interest to form a new Methodist Church for this area. These efforts bore fruit the next year when a church congregation was formed.

Rev. John Higginbotham, at that time a part-time minister, became pastor and regular meetings were held in member's homes. On October 14, 1973, the formal organizational service was held, with 34 persons joining this new church. Permission had been obtained from Lakeside Presbyterian Church to use their facilities early on Sunday mornings prior to their regular services. The Methodist Conference had advised that it held title to 3 acres of land near the Old Grants Ferry Road which had been originally deeded to the Union Methodist Church South in 1857. This church had ceased functioning at some point which was undetermined and there was no longer a building on the property. The title to the property was transferred to St. Marks, but because of the relocation and widening of Grants Ferry Road and the connection to the new Lakeland Drive, only 1 1/2 acres remained.

Church membership grew rapidly, and the land was prepared for a building and a parking lot. A double wide portable chapel and a used house trailer were acquired and placed on the land. On December 1, 1974, the first "building" of St. Marks was formally dedicated.

A used upright piano was donated to St. Marks from an organization in Jackson with the church being responsible for the transportation. Several men of the church went with a member's pick-up, and with great effort loaded the piano on the truck. The ride to the Church was uneventful until the driver made the left turn from Lakeland Drive to Old Fannin Road. The piano decided to depart the premises. The members in the back had a choice to hold on to the piano or hold on to the truck. They chose the truck, and the piano left the truck. When the driver backed up the truck to retrieve the piano, the largest piece left of the piano was about a 4 inch square!

When you pass that intersection today and hear strange sounds or vibrations, it is probably the old piano strings buried under the new road vibrating their complaints! The church pianist was informed of the demise of the piano and called the pick-up driver on the phone. He quite naturally feared the worst from the conversation. She told him that this piano was very difficult to tune and to keep in tune for very long, and it would have been difficult for St. Marks to have utilized it properly had it survived.

Shortly after occupying the premises on Grants' Ferry, St. Marks was notified that the adjacent landowners claimed title to the 1 1/2 acres because of "adverse possession." These owners claimed that they had used this land for many years, fenced their land including these 1 1/2 acres, and had paid taxes on this property up to the present time. The trustees of St. Marks were advised that in Mississippi church property could not be adversely possessed.

The Trustees rejected the land owner's claim, and the landowners filed suit against St. Marks to establish legal title to this property. The Trustees hired an attorney to defend St. Marks' claim, but the Trustees also recognized that no one can predict the outcome of a law suit. They therefore decided that during the pendency of the lawsuit an alternate site for St. Marks would be sought.

Each trustee was assigned a section of land around the Reservoir area to research and locate possible sites. The trustee who was assigned Grant's Ferry Road located 5 potential sites of at least 5 acres each. With directions from the trustees, this member commenced negotiations with all owners, none of whom currently had their land for sale. After lengthy negotiations, one of the owners was interested in selling, but she wanted to sell all 14 acres she owned. St. Marks could not afford to commit that much money for the entire tract. The Church finally agreed to buy the southern 6 acres and she would develop the remaining 8 acres at a later date.

When the basic terms of the sale were agreed upon, the owner came to Jackson to finalize the transaction. She attempted to renegotiate the price after seeing the new Grant's Ferry Road, but after several hours and several St. Mark's members assisting the original negotiator, she relented and the purchase was finalized.

There arose one small problem St. Marks did not have the \$30,000. The chairman of the Administrative Board used projections of new subdivisions by the Reservoir and private developers of 2500 more homes to be constructed in the near future to convince the Methodist Conference to lend their support. The Conference responded with a grant of \$25,000!

The membership of St Marks was doubling each year, and even if St. Marks was successful in the law-suit for the 1 1/2 acres, the membership decided on a long range plan for the newly-acquired 6 acres. The first phase would be a multi-purpose building to be located in the south east corner of the property, facing Grants' Ferry road. The building is now the Wesley Center.

Reverend David Price was assigned to St. Marks in 1977, and a house was purchased as a parsonage for him and his family. After much discussion and prayer, the Church committed to the construction of the multi-purpose building and the purchase of the parsonage. Some members worried about the large debt undertaken, but the church members plus several Methodist Churches and the Methodist Conference respond generously. The dedication of the first permanent sanctuary in 1978 encouraged additional membership.

The Easter Flood of 1979 impacted many people whose houses were flooded. St Mark's members responded immediately by donating their time and money, both during the time of the flood waters and the subsequent clean up after the flood waters receded.

In 1980 the 8 acres to the north of St. Marks were sold to a new church congregation, this group paved a road from Grants' Ferry to a building site and parking lot, and installed a temporary building. A subdivision was being built on the south side of St. Mark's property, thus limiting expansion possibilities. A tract of land to the west of the church property was purchased after a heated discussion about debt and allocation of limited resources.

The Church was utilizing several temporary buildings to accommodate continued growth, and in 1985 the congregation authorized the construction of an education building, Asbury Hall. St. Marks was only able to borrow enough money to erect the frame of the building. The foundation was dug with generous assistance of a member, only to discover underground water flows that filled the foundation like a swimming pool. Another member devised a French drain system and a concrete wall to assist in holding the multi-purpose building. A third member assisted with the materials and labor to finish the interior of the building.

A group of unemployed geologists and other members volunteered to construct the sidewalk from the parking lot alongside the building. One only has to look at the curves in the sidewalk to wonder if the members could walk a straight line, much less pour a straight sidewalk!

Over the years there have been many church work days and Men's Club work days. Shortly after the multi-purpose building was completed, a church-wide work day was held among the retaining wall next to the driveway on the south side of the property was completed. This is but one example of the many volunteer hours that have been spent on not only physical projects, but also church programs and activities,

Shortly after the completion of Asbury Hall the Church congregation on the 8 acres to the north of St. Mark's disbanded and the property was for sale. St. Mark's did not have the money to purchase the land from the bank that foreclosed on the property. The purchaser immediately commenced a long series of sometimes acrimonious negotiations with a number of church members and pastors.

Church attendance continued to expand, and the refurbished sanctuary in the present Wesley Center was quickly outgrown. The present sanctuary building was constructed and dedicated in 1991. Because of a lack of funds only one stained glass window was planned. One member felt that was insufficient, and personally raised the additional money from church members to pay for the additional stained glass windows presently installed in the sanctuary.

The Church purchased a larger parsonage, and after much difficulty sold the original parsonage. The house on the Corner of Shenandoah road next to the Church became available, and was purchased and used as a house for the staff and at times for Sunday school classrooms.

Shortly thereafter the fifth house on Shenandoah was for sale. The trustees proposed to purchase this house and use the land for an additional entry and exit road to the Church. The Administrative Board approved the purchase by one vote. It was later determined that the presence of underground utilities made the construction of a road uneconomical, and this house has since been utilized for staff housing.

St Mark's then decided to undertake a large building project, and utilize a professional group to assist in raising the necessary funds. This campaign was successful and The Christian Life Center and Youth Building were constructed and dedicated. Growth continued at St Mark's, and parking on Sundays became a real problem. One proposed solution was to make parking lots where the 2 houses the Church owned on Shenandoah.

The trustees consulted several real estate experts to determine availability of adequate land or suitable facilities in the general vicinity and the possibility of selling the existing facility. While all the avenues were being investigated, the prayers of the Church were answered. Circumstances required the owner of the 8 acres to the north of the church to make a quick sale, and after several last minute glitches St. Marks finally acquired title to this much sought-after expansion land in 2004. It is hoped that the acquisition will allow St Mark's adequate space for growth for years to come.

Throughout the 32 years of St Mark's existence buildings were proposed or land was to be acquired, the Lord has provided the means even though it seemed to the members that the resources were not adequate. Only God knows the future, but with His help St. Mark's should continue to grow and serve Him through programs and activities and services which will properly utilize the physical facilities the Church has been so fortunate to accumulate.

To be continued...

By Fred Price

July 6, 2005

The author wishes to acknowledge the efforts of the late Mrs. Eula Mae Scott Carmichael, and all the members of St. Marks who provided their recollections of their history with the Church.

The following named members provided written recollections from their days at St. Mark's. This collection of our history is in a bound volume in the Church office. There is plenty of room for every member to add his or her memories to the living history:

Duke Humphries
Henry & Edith Laird
Adrian & Ann Sturdivant
Dale & Doris Anderson
Sarah Anderson Jordan
Sara & Rodney Meeks
Mike & Mary Blackwell
Mike & DeAnn McCain
Hazel & Devon Townsend