

HISTORY OF CENTRAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Methodism came to Mississippi from South Carolina in 1799. Tobias Gibson, appointed by Bishop Asbury, coming by boats on various rivers, organized the first Methodist Church in the Mississippi Territory of Methodism at Washington, six miles east of Natchez. The Mississippi Territory of Methodism embraced the present limits of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas. Moses Floyd came in 1803 as Tobias Gibson's helper, and the same year Lorenzo Dow came on the first of his various visits to Mississippi. The Mississippi Annual Conference was organized in 1813 in the home of Newit Vick for whom Vicksburg is named. He was a local preacher who had come from Virginia.

The next twenty years were a time of expansion and development, and by 1832 there were six districts in three states with seven pastoral charges in Louisiana, twenty in Mississippi, and sixteen in Alabama, with sixty-four preachers receiving appointments. The territory in Alabama, with some small portions along the Mississippi border, was set off into a separate Annual Conference in 1832.

Lauderdale County was in the portion of the Mississippi border in the Alabama Conference from 1832 to 1870. In 1839 the Gainesville District was mentioned for the first time in the Alabama Conference Journal, and among the charges it contained the name of the Lauderdale Mission. It is thought Meridian was part of this mission or circuit. (See attached lists of Pastors and Presiding Elders furnished by the Mississippi Conference Historian, Rev. J. B. Cain, to Dr. Ivy; or one given to Dr. Tyson in 1947 by Rev. Swepson F. Harkey, Recording Secretary of the Mississippi Annual Conference; also list from Alabama Conference Journal compiled by Rev. M. E. Lazenby, Historian of the Alabama Conference for Dr. Ivy.)

In 1856 the Gainesville district connection disappears, and the Macon District appears. Meridian is mentioned in 1859 in the Conference Journal and alternated with Lauderdale for several years. Hence, we believe it was possibly a Circuit.

In 1864 Alabama was divided into two Annual Conferences, and the Mississippi Churches were put into the Mobile Conference where

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Dr. Brunner M. Hunt, Pastor

Dr. H. Lowry Rush, Sr., Chairman of the Official Board

Historical Committee

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J. D. Tillman

Circa 1958

they remained until 1870 when all the Mississippi churches were placed either in the Mississippi or North Mississippi Conferences. The Meridian District has had a continuous history in the Mississippi Conference since 1870. (*History of Methodism in the Mississippi Conference, 1846-1870* written by Rev. J. B. Jones; a paper by Mr. "Link" Brown written for the Annual Conference of 1919, articles in the New Orleans Christian Advocate, and other papers have furnished the basis of the remainder of this paper, and are filed with it. Quarterly Conference reports, etc., are with the Central Methodist Church offices, August 1955.) A complete list of districts, presiding elders, charges, and pastors is filed also, from 1839 to 1958 taken from Alabama and Mississippi Conference Journals by M. E. Lazenby (Ala.) And Swepson F. Harkey (Conference Secretary).

The deed to the first Methodist Church building, called Dearman Chapel, lot, and graveyard (Deed Book F, Page 776, filed October 23, 1852) shows that "for one dollar paid in hand to William Dearman" by Levi Barton, Ferdinand Snow, and James Arrington who were Trustees of the church on the Lauderdale Circuit of the Alabama Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church south, he deeded a parcel of land including a church house and graveyard. According to the description in the deed, an old map shows they were located on Ninth Street between Ninth and Eleventh Avenues.

"In every thought of Methodism in Meridian with hands uplifted in gratitude, we recall the name of old Brother Dearman, kind in heart, generous in spirit. He gave us a frame church and cemetery ground in the northeastern part of town. The old building seemed to have served its day and generation, and when the high-tide of commercialism struck Meridian, the Trustees sold the old church-site and the grounds. More than a thousand bodies were interred there, including many Confederate soldiers." The graves were leveled and the bodies not moved, including that of the donor, according to all statements found. (From the Brown Paper)

In 1860 a lot on the Northwest corner of Eleventh Street and 27th Avenue (Deed Book M, Page 548) was bought from John T. Ball (in January 1860 deed was given, contracted for in 1859) for \$200 by Church Trustees John H. Gibbs, I. S. O. G. Greer, R. Y. Rew, L. Gould and James Watts. On it was erected a frame and log church building, Alexander McBryde, Pastor. During the war this house was used for Barracks, quartermaster, and Commissary Department purposes. It

was set on fire by Sherman's soldiers, but the fire was extinguished. When not occupied by the military, services were kept up by Confederate Army Chaplains and Circuit riders. "Occasional services of the Protestant Episcopal Church were held in this building by Rector George Stewart." (See 1884 Meridian City Directory.)

The first Quarterly Conference for Central Church was held January 15, 1866, Rev. O. P. Thomas, P. C.; Rev. S. M. Cox, P. E.; and I. S. O. G. Greer, Dr. Lyman Gould, and R. M. Herbert, Stewards. "Upon the old records many years ago when the church rolls were being perfected, a name would be called and the answer would be 'That brother went to Heaven from the Shiloh Battle Field.' Another name, 'He went to Heaven from Chattanooga.' Another, 'He was burned in the Battle of the Wilderness,' etc. Over and over there was to be found in the records the urging of fasting and prayer before the meeting of the Quarterly Conference. All over the present Meridian District and in Meridian are to be found, and thanks be to God, are still living, children and their children's children whose lives reflect the power of such faithful lives and Gospel seed-sowers of the God-sent pioneers with their holy zeal of those early days." (From the Brown paper)

In Deed Book L, Page 261, there appears a deed from Lewis A. Ragsdale to J. H. Gibbs, I. S. O. G. Greer, r. Y. Rew, L. Gould, and James Watts, Trustees; O. P. Thomas, Pastor, filed for record on April 1, 1867 for lots 9 and 10 in Block 84, Ragsdale Survey, and in Deed Book F, page 160, lots 11 and 12 in Block 84 were filed for record on November 3, 1873. These can best be identified now by saying Niolon's Corner at the intersection of Eighth Street and 23rd Avenue (Southeast corner). The frame and log church on the corner of Eleventh Street and 27th Avenue had become too small and the lots too restricted, so these four downtown lots had been purchased, and the frame and log house was hauled by ox-teams to the new location by Brother W. P. Montgomery on credit. It is said that the receipt for \$110, that being partial payment for the expense of hauling, paid him by R. Y. Rew, is in existence, but it has not been found by this committee.

At the Second Quarterly Conference, 1867, under "What has been raised for the support of the ministry, and how has it been applied?", we have the answer, "Paid Presiding Elder \$46, paid Preacher in Charge \$56.", and under the "Spiritual state of the church" this answer, "We are greatly in need of a revival." In 1870 the Meridian Station had 205 members. (From Brown Paper) In 1862 145 white, 50

colored.

“The old frame-log church building, like the Ark of the Covenant, had to move again and give place for a new stately edifice of brick and stone. Other oxen were yoked up, the first ones having long since gone from old age to the butcher. It was hauled by the twelve yoke of oxen through town out Fifth Street, this time to west end to be used as a worshipping place by Fifth Street Methodist Episcopal Church South. (From Brown Paper)

In 1885 a Building Committee was appointed, \$17,000 promptly raised, and with other sums that came in, the building was completed, cleared of all debt, and at that time was considered the best in the Mississippi Conference. (See picture in Pastor’s Study.)

There is on file in Book 10, Page 320 a deed of trust from J. M. Ramsey, C. R. McQueen, R. M. Bourdeaux, G. C. Hall, W. C. Dobbs, W. G. Casteel, Trustees, dated November 3, 1873 in favor of Sam B. Watts, and Ben F. Ormond securing an indebtedness of \$1,000 “for money advanced and loaned to aid in the construction of the church edifice on Lots 8 and 9, Block 84, Ragsdale Survey” and conveys Lots 11 and 12 which were recited in the deed of 1873 to be bought for parsonage property. Dr. W. C. Black was the Pastor, 1885-1888.

This church building burned the latter part of 1913 during the pastorate of the Rev. John R. Jones, and the work was carried on in the Court House, City Hall, and other available places. There are many Meridian citizens who remember this fire and the next few years until the present building was erected under the dedicated guidance of Rev. Herbert B. Watkins, Pastor 1916-1921 when he died. Rev. John Lloyd Decell, later Bishop Decell, was pastor 1921-1924 and had the joy of completing the church with the magnificent pipe organ so it could be dedicated on April 1, 1923. The pipe organ was dedicated September 21, 1924.

Since that time the Education Building just to the north of the main edifice has been added. It was planned by Dr. W. A. Tyson, and erected and completed in 1951 during he pastorate of Rev. M. L. McCormick. Now the sanctuary is being air conditioned and renovated by the gifts of the congregation under the guidance of Dr. Brunner M. Hunt, Pastor, and Dr. H. Lowry Rush, Sr., Chairman of the Official Board.

There is much material filed in the offices as to the selection of the lots, the plans, etc., of this church. (See the Quarterly Conference Minute Book of 1917 and 1918 which contains a statement read to the congregation as to the reasons for buying the three lots known as the Simmons and Berry lots on the corner of Tenth Street and 23rd Avenue.) It seems unnecessary to lengthen this paper by giving details to be found. Suffice it to say that this church building was build by hard work through and after World War I days, as the Educational Building is considered a Memorial to the brave men of World War II

The Central Methodist Church owns Lots 101 and 102 in Rosehill Cemetery to the left as one enters the gates at the end of Seventh Street. They were bought by the “first Methodist Church” (later Central) in 1891 “for the use of indigent preachers.” A Miss Alice Woodward pays the yearly upkeep on the spaces where her father and Mother, Rev. Robert Southern Woodward (pastor of Central 1894-97) and Mrs. Woodward are buried. Others buried on the lots are ruth Black, a daughter of Rev. M. M. Black, Pastor of East End 1904; Rev. and Mrs. Warren C. Black, Pastor of Central 1885-88; dr. and Mrs. Charles Green Andrews and their son, Oscar Kearney Andrews. Dr. Andrews was Pastor of Central 1889-92, Presiding Elder of the Meridian District 1897-1900, and Secretary of the Mississippi Conference from 1865 to 1899, except one session in 1880 when he was the President of the Conference. Miss Cora E. Black, daughter of Dr. W. C. Black, was buried there March 14, 1888, the first one of the nine people buried on the Rosehill Cemetery lots.

Magnolia Cemetery Association in 1902 donated the south half of Lot 1, Section 21, to the Epworth League of Central Methodist Church, J. M. Weems, Pastor, though the Deed was not given until August 16, 1942, Dr. T. M. Brownlee, Pastor. On this six-space lot are buried Rev. J. D. Newsome, 1919; Mrs. Joe D. Newsome, 1942; and infant Mary Wilkins, 1923. Rev. Joe D. Newsome was a superannuated preacher thought to have been a member of the North Mississippi conference, though we do not have authentic information. (Information given by Miss Madge Stuart and verified by books of Magnolia Cemetery Association.)

There has been an active Woman’s Missionary Organization in Central since the first Society was organized in December 1879 by four women, Rev. E. H. Mounger, Pastor. (See the account of the society history, 1879-1927 written by Mrs. S. E. Wilson, Historian.) Miss

Elizabeth (Betty) Hughes was sent out from Central to China in 1887. With the reorganization of the Woman's Missionary Society into the Woman's Society of Christian Service by the United Methodist Church, our work has continued very enthusiastically. (There is a cabinet with a lock which contains many historical papers concerning the W. M. S. and the W. S. C. S. in the church. Data could be obtained from it for a historical paper, when wanted. The key to the cabinet which was bought by the W. S. C. S., Mrs. M. C. B. Lipscomb Historian, is in the possession of the Church Secretary, Miss Martha Wright.) Mrs. Erna Gilmore, Director of Christian Education, and Mr. A. C. Gossard, Church School Superintendent, could furnish material for a history of this part of the church work.

“Turn back in the pages of your Annual Conference Minutes (1896) and you will find perhaps the genesis of the entire Epworth League System.”

“Again, the chairman of the State Sunday School Executive Committee says the first organized Adult Bible Class in the Mississippi Conference, if not in the entire South, was at Central Church, Meridian with an enrollment of sixty members.” (From the Brown Paper)

ADDENDA: Official Church Deeds indicate named streets. In 1902 the Dial Code shows it was ordered that the streets and avenues should be numbered and most of the names dropped. Streets run East and West, and the avenues North and south. The later designations were used in locating the various locations after verification (by number usually).`