Charlotteans Great Builders Of Churches

Steady Growth Experienced Since Dozen Churches Existed Here 50 Years Ago

By HARRIET DOAR
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The history of the church in Charlotte unfolds in much the same fashion as the history of the city itself.

To the first Scotch and German settlers, faith was not a separate part of the life but the very fibre of their diurnal fabric. Their religious heritage was handed down to their children and their children's children, long past the fourth generation.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Presbyterian Church had more strength in the county than other denominations combined.

By 1858 the denominations had grown as the city had, and twelve churches and chapels of seven faiths served a combined congregation of more than 3,000 white residents.

THE CHURCHES

Listed by a contemporary, they are: First Presbyterian, the Rev. A. W. Miller, pastor; Second Presbyterian, the Rev. James Y. Fair; Graham Street Presbyterian Chapel; Associate Reformed Presbyterian, the Rev. Charles E. Todd; St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran, the Rev. T. S. Brown; Tryon Street Baptist, the Rev. A. G. McManaway; Trade Street Baptist; St. Peter's Catholic, the Very Rev. Mark S. Gross; St. Peter's Episcopal, the Rev. Joseph Blount Cheshire; St. Martin's Episcopal Chapel; Tryon Street Methodist, the Rev. Solomon Pool; Church Street Methodist, the Rev. T. L. Triplett.

Women had overcome the ancient prejudice against active church work and had organized thriving societies. The First and Second Presbyterian Churches each boasted a "Gentleman's Foreign Missionary Society." Young People at the Methodist Church were "Bright Jewels"; children were "Busy Bees" at St. Peter's Episcopal, and "Little Violets" at Tryon Street Baptist.

Parent church of all the denominations was what is now the First Presbyterian Church. And it in turn was derived from the religious early settlers of the county, who laid the spiritual foundation for the city churches.

By 1755, the Scotch-Irish had banded together in families in order to have teachers and preachers of their own choosing. It is known that the Rev. John Thompson preached in Mecklenburg as early as 1752, and in 1755 the Rev. Hugh McAden made a missionary journey through the county. But long before the actual organization of congregations, there must have been many a quiet Sunday observance, with such simple rites as could be held in the log homes or under the forest trees.

FIRST MINISTER IN COUNTY

When the Rev. Alexander Craighead accepted, in 1759, a call from Rocky River and Sugaw Creek Churches, he was the first minister to settle in the county. At the time of his death, in March, 1766, he was still the solitary minister between the Yadkin and the Catawba.

Steel Creek, Providence, Hopewell, Sugaw Creek, Center, Rocky River and Poplar Tent Churches were all organized before 1770, and in the same year there is a record of Philadelphia Church having called a pastor.

Churchgoers rode horseback for miles to attend services in log buildings, built in the shade of trees so that the weary mothers of young children could find a cool place to rest. Indians were hostile, and there was a continual struggle for a bare living. The church must have been the center of political and social life for the scattered farmers of the time.

Dancing, horse-racing, gambling, card playing, drunkenness and neglect of public worship were the sins castigated from early pulpits. There is a record of the time that a preacher was "soon dismissed for indulging too freely in the intoxicating bowl."

In the graveyards of these old churches lie the pioneers and warriors of Mecklenburg. John McKnitt Alexander is buried at Hopewell, and the grave of Abraham Alexander, chairman of the Mecklenburg Convention of 1775, is in the cemetery at Providence Church. The oldest marked grave in Mecklenburg is in Sugaw Creek church yard and is dated 1763.

It was in 1771 that agitation over Presbyterian equality with the Church of England resulted in Presbyterian ministers being allowed to solemnize marriages.

After the Indian uprisings and the struggle for existence were somewhat lessened, dissensions arose in the Presbyterian churches over the singing of Watts hymns. In 1794, Lower Steel Creek and Sardis Churches were formed by the dissenters, and the first Associate Reformed Presbyterian Churches were begun. In the same year the Rev. Robert Archibald was suspended from the ministry because he preached the doctrine of universal salvation.

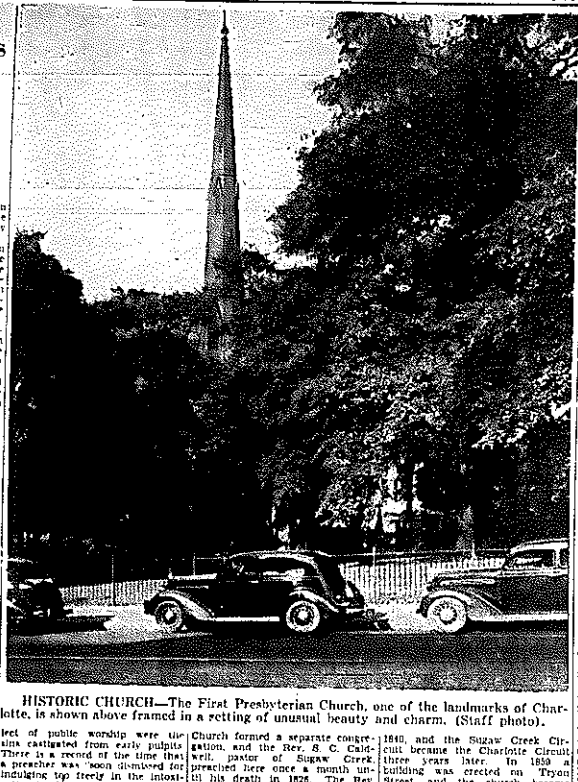
USED BY ALL

Residents of the village at Charlotte worshipped at the county churches or at services held in such places as "the grove by the Presbyterian Blacksmith Shop," until in 1815 a lot was set apart by the commissioners to be used for religious purposes and for a cemetery. According to Mrs. J. A. Fore's history of the First Presbyterian Church, several of the early preachers gave a part of their time to "Charlottetown," and the Presbytery of Concord met in Charlotte in the year 1811. A comfortable building was erected on the town lot and was used by all denominations for a number of years.

In 1821, the Charlotte members of the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church formed a separate congregation, and the Rev. S. C. Caldwell, pastor of Sugaw Creek, preached here once a month until his death in 1826. The Rev. R. H. Morrison was installed as pastor of the two congregations in 1827, serving until 1833, when the Charlotte relation was dissolved. Davidson College was established by Mr. Morrison.

A note on the original union building came due in 1832, and John Irwin raised the money necessary to pay it, on condition that the property be turned over to the Presbyterians. The Rev. Mr. Morrison organized the church in August, 1832, with 36 members, and a larger building was erected in the following year.

The present building, considered the most beautiful of the Charlotte churches, was completed in 1892. Dr. A. W. Miller had the longest pastorate, serving from 1865-1892.



HISTORIC CHURCH—The First Presbyterian Church, one of the landmarks of Charlotte, is shown above framed in a setting of unusual beauty and charm. (Staff photo).

1840, and the Sugaw Creek Circuit became the Charlotte Circuit three years later. In 1859 a building was erected on Tryon Street, and the church became known as Tryon Street Methodist.

In 1853 a Methodist revival and a quarterly conference were held in Charlotte, and a Rev. Mr. Jenkins, missionary to China, caused quite a sensation because he had with him a Chinaman and some Chinese dishes. This was a nine day wonder to provincial Charlotte, and 50 persons were converted at the revival.

Tryon Street and Trinity, established in 1898, united in 1927 to build the First Methodist Church, largest Methodist Church in the city. Dr. C. C. Weaver is the present pastor. There are thirteen Methodist churches in the city.

At the close of the eighteenth century, there were scattered Baptists throughout Mecklenburg. The Rev. Mr. Barnes of the Baptist denomination was preaching here in 1833. In 1850 the first building was erected, and a few years later a new one was built. In 1884 the church was again improved, and the present First Baptist Church building was erected in 1906.

In 1884 records show nine white members and 30 Negro members in the Baptist Church here. The First Church now has the largest congregation in the city, 3,000. Dr. Luther Little has been pastor for 21 years. Dr. T. H. Pritchard and Dr. L. R. Pruette were influential in the growth of the Baptist denomination in the city, aided by such prominent laymen as J. A. Durham, W. H. Laxton, and Mrs. Sarah Kelly. There are eleven Baptist churches in the city.

CATHOLIC CHURCHES

"On St. Patrick's Day, 1851, I laid the cornerstone of the church in Charlotte. N. C. At its dedication several hundred persons had assembled, and were seated around on the building materials or on the greensward. The evening was mild and a stillness was in the air. Attired in suitable robes, I stood on the smooth side of the foundation-stone and preached two hours on the infallibility of the church, now yet the seventh day."—Father J. J. O'Connell, 1870.

Thus Father O'Connell built on the foundations begun by the Rev. Joseph Stokes, who began to visit the Catholic missions in the Carolinas and Georgia in 1824.

"I first visited Charlotte in the Spring of 1850," writes Father O'Connell. "It was then a straggling inland town, having no railroad communication. The houses were strung along one or two streets, and were wooden, wilted and bald with age. There were only three brick houses; one was the old Episcopal Church.... The usual mode of traveling at that time was by stage, which was extremely wearisome, especially in mid-Summer, on account of the excessive heat and the crowded condition of the republican vehicle, lumbering under its living weight of panting humanity. It frequently took 48 hours to accomplish the journey from Columbia in mid-Winter, when the roads were almost impassible and the weather bitter cold." Columbia was the nearest railroad terminus at the time.

The building of 1851 was still standing in 1888. Now in the heart of Charlotte, the lot stood then at the extreme northern limit of the town. An appealing note is that "Four mechanics in masonry, the early pioneers of the faith in this region, built each one wall over and above his subscription in money. These were Patrick Forty, Edward and James Lonergan, brothers, and their nephews conjointly, William and James, one wall." The church was dedicated in 1852 and named after the first Pope. Father O'Connell said the first mass, and Bishop Reynolds preached the first sermon.

The Rev. J. P. O'Connell was pastor of the growing parish in the dark days of Civil War. His also was the charge of "the stockade at Salisbury, where many thousand unfortunate prisoners were confined And dying daily by hundreds."

In 1888 the pastor was the Rev. Mark S. Gross, who established St. Peter's Parochial School. At that time a boarding school for young ladies was also operated, but this was discontinued in 1890; and in 1892 the Sacred Heart Academy was opened in Belmont. The parochial school was renamed O'Donoghue School in 1905, honoring one of Charlotte's outstanding Catholic laymen, the late Dennis O'Donoghue.

The Rev. Francis Meyer, under whose pastorate the present building was erected, had the distinction of being the first novice in the Southern Abbey of Maryhelp—now Belmont Abbey. He was one of the group of Benedictines who came South with the Rt. Rev. Bishop Leo Haid, first Abbot of Belmont and Vicar Apostolic of North Carolina. The church, injured in a Civil War explosion, had been declared unsafe. In 1893 the cornerstone of the new building was laid by Bishop Haid.

Mercy Hospital was started by the Sisters of Mercy, under the leadership of Mother Mary Bride, the superior, in 1906.

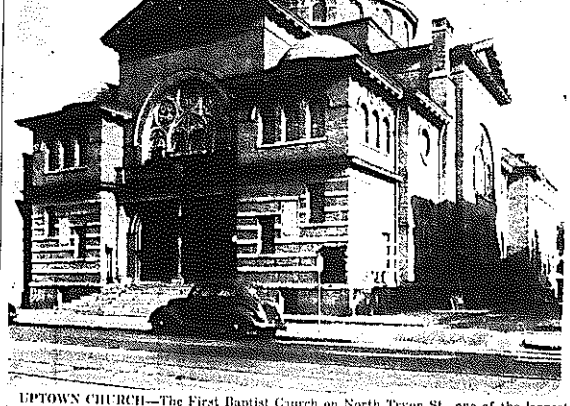
One of the outstanding pastors of the Charlotte church was Father Ambrose Gallagher, the only native of Charlotte ever to have served as priest here. Father Ambrose was born Aug. 4, 1881, and received his early education in St. Peter's School, graduating from Belmont Abbey, where he entered the Benedictine order. He was ordained by Bishop Haid in 1906. While he was here the congregation bought a wooded block in Dilworth, and a new school building was erected.

Father Ambrose, who is now at Belmont Abbey, was succeeded by Father Maurice McDonnell, the present pastor, who is assisted by Father Philip Tierney. Present membership of the church is around 1,500.

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church was not established until 1859, although the early German settlers of the region were Lutherans. James Carson became interested in the forming of a congregation of Lutherans, who until that time had worshipped mainly at the First Presbyterian Church. That church was used as a meeting place for the organization.

The old Mt. Church at Seventh and College Streets was used at first and the Rev. Alexander Philippi was the first pastor. In 1870 a second building was built, and in 1885 the present building was begun. The Rev. T. Shannon Brown was pastor at that time.

The Rev. J. P. Crigler, present pastor, was called in 1915, and his pastorate has been a period of expansion in building and membership. There are now three Lutheran churches in the city.



UPTOWN CHURCH—The First Baptist Church on North Tryon St., one of the largest churches in point of membership in the Carolinas. (Staff photo).

Dr. A. S. Johnson, the present pastor, has been with the church twenty years.

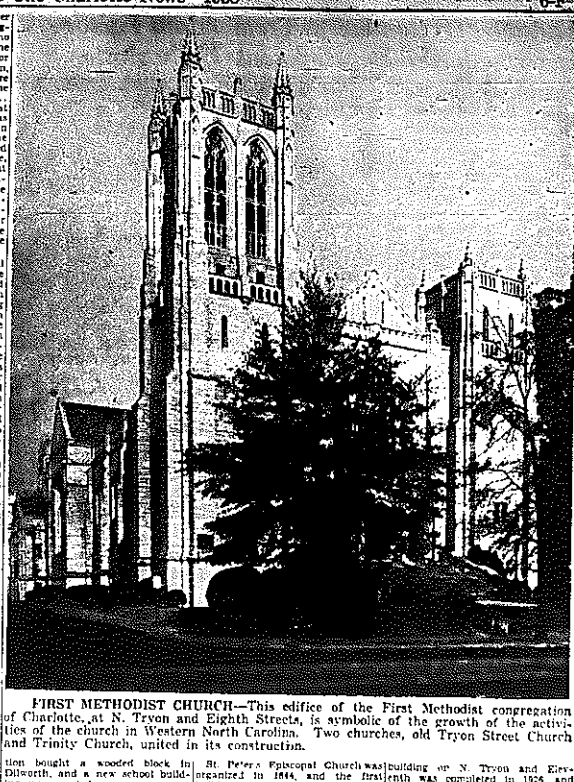
The second Presbyterian Church was organized in 1873 in the old Courthouse, with seventeen members. Dr. W. S. Plumer was stated supply for eighteen months. A building was erected, in 1875, and the present building was built in 1892. The Second Church, with Dr. John A. Redhead Jr. as pastor, has the largest Presbyterian congregation in the city. Presbyterian churches here number twelve.

Before the War Between the States, camp meetings and revivals were being held and were events of importance in the city and county. The churches were flourishing, and the pastors, who served for little remuneration in earlier days, were becoming increasingly well equipped with the goods of this world. The Rev. S. C. Caldwell is reported by Tompkins to have owned 904 acres of land and eight slaves. Divisions in Northern and Southern churches came about, of course, because of the disruption over slave-holding.

METHODISTS

Methodists invaded the Presbyterian strongholds in 1845. Clay Buck's Hill Church was organized on the Beatty's Ford Road, about seven miles from Charlotte. A little later a congregation was formed within the village, as part of the Sugaw Creek Circuit with D. H. Dunlap and Bradley Gates as leader. They held their services in the union church until 1858, when they erected their first building on Stonewall Street.

Charlotte was made a station in



FIRST METHODIST CHURCH—This edifice of the First Methodist congregation of Charlotte, at N. Tryon and Eighth Streets, is symbolic of the growth of the activities of the church in Western North Carolina. Two churches, old Tryon Street Church and Trinity Church, united in its construction.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church was organized in 1844, and the first building was erected the same year. The present church was built in 1857, rebuilt in 1892. St. Mark's in Long Creek Township was established in 1865, and the chapel that was to be St. Martin's Episcopal Church was organized by 1888.

The women of St. Peter's Church have maintained a record of interest in welfare and charity work. St. Peter's Hospital was founded in 1876, and the Good Samaritan, only all-Negro hospital in the country, was begun in 1888, under the leadership of Mrs. John Wilkes. Girls of the parish were also interested in welfare work of all kinds.

In 1888 the Rev. Mr. Cheshire, later to become Bishop, was the beloved rector of St. Peter's. Dr. Willis G. Clark is the present rector. There are four churches and a chapel in the city now.

ARP CHURCHES

A number of ARP churches were scattered through the county before 1800, but the First ARP Church of Charlotte was not organized until 1873. A new building at Tryon and Third was completed in 1890. The present building on N. Tryon and Eleventh was completed in 1926, and Dr. W. W. Boyte has been pastor of the church since 1920. There are six ARP churches in the city.

In the last 50 years the churches of the city have kept pace with the growth along other lines. There are now about 30,000 white church members in Charlotte and Mecklenburg.

Added to the larger denominations have been the Reformed Church, the Moravian Church, the Christian Church, the Hebrew Temple, the Methodist Protestant, and various other denominational and interdenominational groups.

Most of the churches in Charlotte have made the Queen City "The City of Churches."

The following Negro churches have been established by 1938: First Baptist, the Rev. A. A. Powell, pastor; Gethsemane Baptist, the Rev. Zedekiah Hawkins; St. Michael's Episcopal, the Rev. P. P. Alston; Clinton AME Chapel, James M. Hill; Grace AME, J. A. Tyler; Little Rock AME, the Rev. M. Collins; Wesley AME Chapel, the Rev. F. M. Collett; Presbyterian, the Rev. R. P. Wache.

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