

**THE FOUNDING AND EARLY HISTORY
OF COLLEGE HILL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ***

by Will Lewis

One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1835, about this time in January, a group of earnest and faithful Presbyterians met in the home of Alexander Shaw in what is now Yalobusha County, Mississippi, for the purpose of establishing a church. These folks were a small part of a vast movement in the early 1830's of brave and sturdy and resourceful people who wanted to carve out for themselves new homes in the developing frontier then being opened-up to the west. North Mississippi was West in those days. Presbyterian settlers in a new land, their first thought after providing shelter for themselves, was to establish a church where they could meet and worship and praise their god and pray for His continued guidance and protection.

A church was established that day, in true Presbyterian fashion, in the home of Alexander Shaw. For us, it was an historic and important occasion. It is to recognize and honor and celebrate what happened that day that we are here today. Let us look at the record that was kept of that meeting.

In pursuance of previous appointment by the Reverend Thomas Archibald, a Presbyterian "Minister and missionary of Alabama & Mississippi Synod, the citizens of Long Branch convened at the Alexander Shaw House on Saturday, January 10, 1835. Mr. Archibald preached a warm, affectionate sermon from first Epistle of John, third chapter and third verse.

This paper was presented by Mr. Lewis at the morning worship of College Hill Presbyterian Church on January 13, 1985, to begin the celebration of the sesquicentennial anniversary of the establishment of the Church.

On the sabbath day following, the congregation met at the same place and after divine service, at the unanimous request of the following persons, Mr. Archibald proceeded to organize a Presbyterian Church known by the name of Neriah Church under care of Clinton Presbytry.

Alexander Shaw, Philemon Buford and Robert H. Buford were chosen Elders and the following members by certificates from church sessions from which they had removed: Alexander and Susan, his wife, their children, Robert J. Shaw, Elvira E. Shaw, and Sarah Ann Shaw; Miss Margarete Shaw; Mrs. Mary E. Shaw; William Shaw Senior; Philemon Buford and Sarah Buford, his wife, and their children, Abram C. Buford, John A.G. Buford, Goodloe w. Buford, and Selina G. Buford, his wife; Robert H. Buford and Cynthia M. Buford, his wife; and Mrs. Jane Byers (1). Eight Shaws, eight Bufords, one Byers, and seven servants, a total of twenty-four, were received in full Christian communion at this first meeting of the Neriah Church (2).

All of North Mississippi long had been the home of the sovereign Chickasaw Indian Nation. However, under intense and continuing pressure from several directions, the Chickasaws were persuaded to cede their territory to the United States Government in exchange for a new home in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, for a certain cash bounty and for the right to retain the proceeds of the sale of their lands to new settlers coming in. A treaty with the Government was signed at Pontotoc in 1832, and revised in 1834, in which the Chickasaws ceded 6.4 million acres to the Government. From this acreage was formed 12 counties, later re- formed into 24. Actual land sales began in January 1836, with Pontotoc serving as trading center. The average price of land was \$1,382 a section, about \$2.16 an acre, the Government having

1. Session Book of Records for College Church, I (January 11, 1835 - April 4, 1861. [Quoted from copy made by Karl and Gladys Morrison in June 1955].

2. Op. Cit.

set a minimum purchase price of \$1.25 an acre. It is interesting to note how many Chickasaw names remain with us: Tallahatchie, Toby Tubby, Toccopola, Pontotoc, Yalobusha, Tupelo, and many others.

After the treaty signing in 1832, settlers were free to come and examine the Chickasaw holdings ceded to the Government. Old Zion Presbyterian Church in Maury County, Tennessee, sent a team of scouts to look the country over and find a suitable location for the founding of a Presbyterian colony from Zion Church. The leader of the expedition was Philemon Buford, about 60 years old. He was accompanied by his son, Goodloe Warren Buford, who related to his grandchildren many years later that he was camped on the bank of Toby Tubby Creek, in northwestern Lafayette County, the night the stars fell. The date is documented as November 14, 1833. The stars of course did not fall; we were passing through the tail of a comet.

Goodloe, at the time 33 years old, remembered well the natural beauty of the vicinity, rolling hills covered by tall grasses and forests of great trees, oaks, pines, gums, apples, chestnuts, poplars, hickories, walnuts. He saw that the region abounded in game, turkeys, ducks, pigeons, quail. He saw the clear streams full of fish--the creek and river bottoms, rich and promising. The Indian women had tilled only small areas; there was no erosion, no gullies. It seemed a veritable paradise. He couldn't forget it.

But it was decided that the place to settle was in Yalobusha County, in the western part on Long Creek near present-day Oakland,

where Alexander Shaw, an old friend, had settled about a year before. Both the Shaws and the Bufords had lived about ten years earlier, as neighbors, in Greene County, Alabama. And so, in 1834, the entire Buford family left their homes back in Maury County, Tennessee, and set out in ox wagons with their servants and goods for their new home site in the newly opened Indian land in Yalobusha County. And by the following January these two pioneer Presbyterian families were sufficiently settled to organize for themselves a church which they called Neriah.

And then there was an unexpected development. Goodloe Warren Buford, son of Philemon, could not forget the natural beauties and advantages in Lafayette County he had observed two years before. So, late that year, 1835, he moved his family from Yalobusha County to the present College Hill area in Lafayette County, buying in 1836 four sections of land. Where we are gathered today is a part of that land. And thus, he became the founder and earliest citizen of this community.

Then, back to Yalobusha County he went to try to persuade the others to come, too. That he was successful is evidenced by the fact that by the summer of 1840 all of them had come, every one, not all at once, settling in the College Hill area, buying land for themselves.

Now, it was time to think more about their church. Again, let us look at the record. Let me read to you the very first entry in the College Congregational Church Book. Please note the name of the church was changed from Neriah to Ebenezer. Why Ebenezer? Perhaps because the visiting minister who came from

the Presbytery to re-organize the church was the Reverend Ebenezer McEwen. What's in a name? Soon the church would change its name again.

By a mutual arrangement, the members of Neriah Church (Yalobusha County), a majority of whom are intending to move to this county the ensuing winter, and Andrew Herron & Family and Philemon Buford & family being here already. The House of Ralph L. Waller Esquire was designated as the place to organize the Church. On this day, November the 1st 1836, agreeable to appointment previously made, a number of citizens met with the Reverend Ebenezer McEwen of Shiloh Presbytry, Fayetteville, Tennessee, who proceeded to organize the church, which was named Ebenezer, under the care of Tombeekby Presbytry, composed of the following members (**viz.**) Philemon Buford & Sarah Buford, his wife; Andrew Herron Sr. and his wife; Alexander Shaw & Susan Shaw; Goodloe W. Buford & Selina, his wife; Robert H. Buford & Cynthia M. Buford, his wife; William Shaw Sr.; Margaret Shaw; A. C. Buford; A.G. Buford; Robert J. Shaw; Mrs. M.E. Shaw; L.A. Shaw; Mrs. E. E. Trigg; Mrs. Jane Byers.³

A temporary church building soon was erected, made of logs, situated about 20 yards from the present building, on the old Chickasaw Indian Trail, which ran from the Chickasaw Council House in Pontotoc County to the Chickasaw Bluffs on the Mississippi River near Memphis. And schools were built for the young people, two of them--segregated of course, one for boys and one for girls. And so, College Hill as a community was established, the oldest in the county, the church the oldest Presbyterian Church in North Mississippi.

Remember now, if you will, old Zion Church in Maury County, Tennessee, established in 1805 by a Presbyterian migration from North Carolina and Virginia, of which many were Revolutionary soldiers. Some of us have been there, have visited the historic

3. College Church Congregation Church Book: Book of Records for Ebenezer Congregation, Book IA, February 5, 1839. [Quoted from copy made by Karl and Gladys Morrison in June 1955].

old building, wandered through the burying ground, and noted perhaps that the oldest gravestone bears the name Frierson. Zion is one of the most famous and prestigious churches in the South.

It is notable for many things, not the least of which is the sending out of colonies to establish other Presbyterian churches further to the west. The most famous of these colonies is the one that settled, after wandering about a bit, at College Hill in Lafayette County, Mississippi, an interesting, successful, and enduring example of a second-generation migration.

It is not to be thought that everybody who came here arrived at once. Rather it was over a ten-year period, maybe fifteen years, that the old families, whose names we remember, established themselves. Here are a few of the pioneer family names: Shaw, Buford, Hope, Wiley, Pettis, Waller, Tankersley, Isom, Hurt, Anderson, Barry, McCorkle, Dunlap, Davidson, Frierson, Dooley, Moss, Johnson, Fernandez. Please forgive me if I have overlooked your grandfather. The early ministers were Russell, Hurd, Weatherley, Doak, Gaston.

I must say my family folks were not first family; they got here a little late, about 1850. But my father was born here. My grandfather, I learn from the church minutes, was an Elder, rather undistinguished it seems, for a few years prior to his death in 1869 at 47 years of age, from typhoid. He and my grandmother are buried in this church yard. I claim, with pride, that this gives me the right to call myself a son of College Hill. And my wife, Marjorie Tankersley Lewis, has not only a

grandfather buried here, but two great-grandfathers, and a great- great-grandfather. Others here can say the same thing.

Presbyterians have always been education-minded people.

Ministers are not ordained unless they possess college and seminary degrees. There was an early saying that Baptist preachers farmed on the side, Methodist preachers spent their time in the saddle riding their circuit, Presbyterian preachers stayed at home and taught school. In 1840 a college, closely identified with the church, was founded here, and named North Mississippi College. It was at this time that the church changed its name again, to College Presbyterian Church, and the community for the first time was called College Hill.

On July 3, 1840, Goodloe Warren Buford and his wife, Selina, deeded a quarter-section of land to the Trustees of North Mississippi College. The trustees were Alexander Shaw, John S. Phifer, R.H. Patillo, Samuel Hurd, Daniel Russell, James S. Craig, and R. H. Buford. Two brick buildings were erected. Samuel Hurd was named President. As you might expect, he was also minister of the church. Full collegiate courses were offered in Latin, Greek, mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, engineering, and mental and moral philosophy. It was the first college in North Mississippi and quickly gained recognition and importance, students attending from most of the surrounding counties. It ceased to operate after the University of Mississippi opened its doors in 1848 in nearby Oxford.

To have set up this college within five years of the earliest

arrivals in the community was a remarkable achievement. But from the earliest days no community could show a better cultural atmosphere. It should be noted that many of the people here were of the Whig political party. Remembering, as we should, that Presbyterians in religion and Whigs in politics were more conservative than people of other religious and political beliefs.

College Hill people may be thought of as a stable, conservative people, where emotionalism was discouraged, and the more serious things of life considered worthwhile. The church, naturally, was the center of life and of influence; the college was the fountainhead of culture and knowledge; and the session of the church was the guardian of moral behavior and spiritual righteousness.

The time had come now to build a new church building, larger and finer. The style selected was that of the old Virginia churches, rectangular in form, with Tuscan columns in front, located in a portico. The bricks were burned close by, the lumber sawed and polished by hand. The sanctuary was built under the direction of Francis Timmons. The splendid state of preservation after 140 years of constant use is a rare tribute to the builder and his helpers who did their work so well.

Putting up a church was no easy task in 1842. The interior was like it is today with one exception. As you can see, down the center ran this row of heavy columns supporting the ceiling. Facing the pews were this platform and pulpit. The old high-backed family pews are still in use, each having an aisle entrance door equipped with a latch, to keep the children from running

out into the aisles and disturbing the services, it was said.

But gone is the balcony which ran across the back and the outside stairs which led to an outside walkway and two doors opening into the interior balcony.

Deed records show that at this time for a consideration of \$400, the Trustees of North Mississippi College deeded to the Elders and Deacons of College Church the land occupied by the church and the adjoining cemetery. From the beginning the church has been not only a religious center, regularly and faithfully attended as such, but the social center of the community, where friends and visitors come together and mingle with one another in an on-going fellowship, discussing the health of their folks, the weather, the crops, politics, and occasionally, hard times. The church is the vital center of community life.

The 1830's were the time of beginning; the 1840's were the time of building; the 1850's were a time of prosperity. The diaries of the early settlers indicate they experimented with a number of crops, rice, wheat, and other grains, but corn and cotton soon become basic and dependable, corn for the animals, cotton for money in the fall. Cotton was becoming king and this was cotton country. Cotton ginned early before the roads got bad was hauled by wagon and mule to the Memphis market. Late cotton was hauled to Wyatt, a small town a few miles north on the Tallahatchie River, from which it was transported by steamboat down the river when the water was high in winter. When the railroad was built in the mid-1850's, cotton was shipped by rail.

The 1850's were prosperous times, possibly the best, speaking relatively, Mississippi was ever to know, past, present, and future. It was in this period fine houses were built, some of which still exist. But times were soon to change.

War came in 1861. Among the first companies formed of Lafayette County young men was the Lamar Rifles, Company G, 11th Mississippi Infantry. The roster of this unit lists many of the most distinguished names in the College Hill community. The Lamar Rifles and the University Greys, Company A, 11th Mississippi Infantry, a unit composed of university students, left Oxford together by train on May 1, 1861, amid wild and emotional acclaim, to serve in the Army of Northern Virginia. For the four years of the war these two companies, virtually side by side, served the cause of the Confederacy, in which they deeply believed, with distinction and bravery, taking part in many of the major battles and campaigns in Virginia and Pennsylvania. There were eight other units formed in the county, infantry, artillery, and calvary, during 1861.

In December 1862 General Sherman of the Union Army, with 30,000 men occupied College Hill. The grounds of this church were used as a camp site, the church itself as headquarters of the Union general. The Union chaplain held services in the church, but the song books were gathered up, it is said, and removed for safekeeping.

General Grant was at Oxford with an equally large contingent. It was here that they met to formulate plans for their assault upon Vicksburg. Their original plan was to proceed down

the railroad, but this plan was changed after General Van Dorn of the Confederate Army captured all the Union supplies at Holly Springs later in December. The two generals then retired, with their men, on Christmas day, to Memphis and eventually went down the Mississippi River route to Vicksburg, which was taken on July 4, 1863. Many stories have been told and written concerning the Sherman occupation of College Hill and of the brave women who had to contend with the Union soldiers demanding food and valuables, their own men having gone to war.

William Tecumseh Sherman, born in Ohio, was 42 years at the time of his coming to College Hill. His rank at the time was Major General, Commander of the District of Memphis. Probably more than any other Northern general, he was well acquainted with Southern history and Southern life. Before the war he had been for a time the Superintendent of Louisiana State Military Academy, at Alexandria, later Louisiana State University. In 1863, after the victory of Vicksburg, he was made commander of the Army of Tennessee. In 1864 he was made Supreme Commander in the West.

Sherman is said to have originated the phrase "War is Hell." In November 1864 it seems he set out to prove the correctness of these words. Although the war was practically over and won by the North, he burned Atlanta, and with 60,000 men set forth on his infamous march to the sea through Georgia and South Carolina, leaving behind a ruined and devastated land. This is the man who was at College Hill.

After the foe had left College Hill late in December 1862, the church members took counsel together to search out the reasons

for such a visitation at the hands of an inscrutable God. When the congregation assembled in January for their annual congregational meeting, they took action recorded in their minutes as follows:

Resolved that those present deem it their duty to place on record for the benefit and information of posterity some facts as history which will show the dealings of God with us as a church and congregation during the year 1862 which has Just closed. We would first note that a large number of members _at the first call of our country enlisted in her cause for whose preservation, safety, and spiritual welfare many sincere and fervent prayers have been offered up to Almighty God in this house, at the family altar Some of these loved ones have during the past year fallen on the field of battle bravely standing up in the defense of their country, their rights, and their honor A melancholy gloom overhangs our beloved community as from time to time the heart-rending tidings of the fallen have reached us. The hearts of many of our members as they weekly enter the sanctuary are bowed in sorrow through the reflection that those with whom they once communed in the house of God are now numbered with the dead. But acknowledge the hand of a sovereign God in these sore afflictions and submissively kiss the chastening rod and say thy will be done, O Lord. Until October the enemy kept at a distance from our homes. The accounts of the depredations, insults, and cruelties to innocent and helpless citizens in other communities awakened our deepest sympathy and we endeavored to thank God that we were not crushed by the appearance of the relentless foe.

But December the 1st 1862 God in his wise but inscrutable providence permitted the enemy to enter our quiet community with a force more than thirty thousand strong. During that month they occupied College Church and its vicinity depriving the congregation the privilege long granted to it of worshipping God in his own house.... Before the first tent was struck or a single campfire was lighted, from twenty to thirty were in every house appropriating to themselves such articles as gratified their fiendish dispositions. Many families when they left them were almost utterly destitute of necessary food, raiment, and bedding. While they were ravaging within, our attention was scarcely directed to what was going on without doors and to our astonishment the depredations of poultry, cattle, hogs, sheep, mules, and horses were no less distinctive. But this first evening's experience was but a faint foretaste of the ignominious treatment which we were destined to receive from their hands. They would enter dwellings at a late hour of the night, arouse the sleeping inmates, and with the most profane and

blasphemous language demand money and search ladies' trunks and private dressers, and, enraged at finding nothing which they desired, they would deface and destroy furniture with their sabers and bayonets. In some instances, they forced worthy citizens to leave at once their homes and then set fire to their domiciles. They were regardless of the pleas of females and offered insults to the old, helpless, and inoffensive and often when protection was sought from those in command, it was denied. Thus, from day to day as we were subjected to the insults and cruel treatment of our insolent unprincipled [sic] foe, they not only robbed us of all property which they could appropriate to their benefit but destroyed much which was of no use to themselves but which they knew was invaluable to us....

Such is a mere outline of the heavy calamity which God in his providence has seen fit to inflict upon our community. To say that there were good reasons for this in the mind of him who holds the destinies of all things in his hands is saying what the Bible and the providence of God in all past ages has taught the nations of the earth. Not only the instructions of the Bible but the dealings of God with nations and individuals teach us that the sin for which punishment is inflicted in this life is brought to our knowledge by the penalty inflicted upon us. Thus, our sin, in some measure at least, is not honoring God to the full extent of our duty in that which he has committed to our charge. Then it is our duty, whatever may be our omission or commission sins in sight of God, to humble ourselves, repent . . . , plead for his mercy, his grace, and for the light of his Holy Spirit, to enable us henceforth to devote ourselves, our powers of body, and faculties of mind, our callings and property, to the service of the church and benefit of the world.

It is regretted that General Sherman never knew that whatever fame and glory he may have won in the war, to College Hill he was "the chastening rod" of an avenging God.

But all things must come to an end. In April 1865 the war was over, and the men began to come back home. That is, some did, many did not. They lay in Southern graves far away, dying in the defense of their beloved Southland. Those returning

4. Session Book of Records for College Church. [Quoted from copy made by Karl and Gladys Morrison in June 1955).

found their home places in ruins, their families in distress, the future uncertain.

But life goes on. Life must go on. A new community life began. The past, though painfully remembered, was behind them.

The young folks married and started new homes. A new generation was born. Soon the young began to drift away, seeking fortune in new places. But College Hill was always in their hearts. Back they would come at every opportunity--to family reunions, to community celebrations, on annual vacations. College Hill, like a magnet, pulled them back home. An outstanding characteristic of the descendants of the people who first settled here is their intense loyalty to the community their ancestors established and their undying love for this church their ancestors built. You can hear it in their voices when they say, "College Hill is where I came from. College Hill is my home."

PRAYER

O Lord, before whose face the generations rise and pass away, age after age the living seek Thee, and find that of Thy faithfulness there is no end.

Our fathers in their pilgrimage walked by Thy guidance and rested on Thy compassion. Take our lives, we pray one by one, into Thy keeping.

Eternal God, in whose name our fathers founded this church long ago, we pray that the spirit that kindled their lives may burn now within us. We thank Thee for every memory which this day revives of strong faith and Christlike character, and for the cloud of witnesses from days gone by who surround our worship here today. Deepen our gratitude for sacrifices made by those who have gone this way before us who have found in Thy church comfort and peace and a challenge to service, and the strength to render it.

We pray for this church. May its rich heritage be an encouragement to the present and a prophecy of the future. For little children who enter these doors, for young people who here seek their inspiration, for all those whose roots are in this sanctuary, for this company, and all absent friends whose prayers are with us, we lift our supplication. Make us, O God, worthy of Thy church.

Amen