The Land

Tracing the chain of title to the land on which our church building stands brings to light many interesting people and events.

Before the white man settled here, this was the home and the hunting-ground of the Cherokee Indians. But after the Revolutionary War was ended and the State of Georgia was secured, the white man moved farther and farther into the wilderness area.

On May 31, 1783, Lyman Hall, Governor of Georgia, signed a treaty with the Cherokees and on November 1, of that year he signed a treaty with the Upper Creek Indians. These lands were formed into Franklin County (an original county) on February 25, 1784. Our building site lay within the land ceded by the Cherokees to the State.

On January 27, 1785 the Legislature of Georgia issued a Charter for the University of Georgia. This was the first such Charter issued by any State and it shows the foresight of our early statesmen. However, this noble effort was destined to wait many years before the University was to become a reality.

In October 1785, Governor Samuel Elbert, acting for the State of Georgia, granted 1120 acres to William Few. Since the land thus granted included our church site, a short biographical sketch of the first individual owner of our land could add interest to this narrative. His paternal ancestor accompanied William Penn to this country. William Few was born in Maryland, spent his early life in North Carolina and moved to the environs of Augusta, Georgia about 1774. In 1778 he became Surveyor-General for the State and Presiding Judge of Richmond County; in 1779 he was re-elected to the Legislature and was appointed to Congress. In 1783 he was again elected to the Legislature and was appointed to the Commission which negotiated the 1783 treaty with the Cherokees. Along with Governor Lyman Hall and four other Commissioners, he signed this Treaty for the State of Georgia. Perhaps his work on this commission led to the grant of a portion of the Cherokee land to him. Col. Few was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention which met in Philadelphia on May 25, 1787 and was one of its signators. Subsequently, he served in the U.S. Senate, but returned to Georgia when his term of office expired in 1793.

On February 11, 1796 Jackson County was formed from a portion of Franklin County and our church site lay in this newly-formed county.

In the summer of 1799, William Few moved to New York City where he continued to reside for the remainder of his life. It is interesting to note that he served at Alderman of the City of New York, as a member of the General Assembly and as Inspector of State Prisons before his retirement in 1804.

In March 1800, Daniel W. Easley purchased 693 acres of the Few tract for the sum of $697.00. The land thus purchased bordered other land of Easley with the Oconee River as their common boundary. The site of our church was in this Easley purchase. With the newly acquired Few land, Easley now owned
both sides of the Oconee River at a point known as Cedar Shoal. He constructed a race for providing water power and built a grist mill and a saw mill at Cedar Shoal and a small community began to develop there. The location of the Cedar Shoal was just downstream from the bridge over the river on Oconee Street in present-day Athens.

On July 6, 1801 a group of the SENATUS ACADEMICUS (a committee established by the Legislature to activate the University) met at Billups' Tavern on the Lexington Road. Present at this meeting were George Walton (a signer of the Declaration of Independence), John Milledge (who later became Governor), Abraham Baldwin, John Twiggs and Hugh Lawton. Meeting with the group was Daniel Easley who sought to interest them in a portion of the land which he had purchased from William Few. The Committee agreed on this site for the University and John Milledge personally bought 633 acres and gave this land to the Trustees of the University. Our church site was a part of this purchase. Thereafter, Josiah Meigs began instruction at the University of Georgia "under the shade of the forest oaks" since there were no buildings.

On December 5, 1801 Clarke County was formed from a part of Jackson County and in 1802 Watkinsville was made its County Seat. The site of our church was in this newly formed County.

In May 1805, a Plan of the Town of Athens was prepared by President Meigs and Rev. Hope Hull and recorded in the Minutes of the Trustees of the University of Georgia. The Plan set off 36½ acres into a "square of the University" and laid off lots for a town. The lots lying between the present Foundry Street--Broad Street--Pulaski Street--Washington Street were sold and the funds therefrom were used to build Old College. Later, a professional surveyor was hired to lay off additional lots north of Washington Street and along Lumpkin Street. The Trustees incorporated the Town of Athens in 1806 with William Malone, Stephen (Stevens) Thomas and Rev. Hope Hull as Commissioners. Our church site lay within this new town.

The transfers of title of our church site from the Trustees of the University to Mr. Thomas Hancock "sometime before 1824" and thence from Mr. Hancock to our church in 1824 are apparently not of record. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST METHODIST CHURCH, ATHENS, GEORGIA prepared by Dr. R. P. Brooks of the University of Georgia and published October 15, 1924 contains the following interesting paragraphs:

Was A Deed Ever Made To The Church?

A considerable number of families early gathered about the young institution to educate their sons and from time to time the Trustees of the University sold building lots laid off from their ample holdings. Among these purchasers of land was Mr. Thomas Hancock, to whom some time before 1824 was sold Lot No. 36, according to a plan of Athens made by Maj. Thomas Mitchell in 1823 or earlier. This is the lot on which our church now stands. An examination of the minutes of the Board of Trustees of the University has failed to bring to light any record of the
conveying of this lot to Mr. Hancock, nor has there even been recorded in the Deed Book in the Clerk's Office any deed from the Trustees to him. The way in which these sales were usually handled is indicated by a minute at the June, 1821, meeting of the Board. Lots Nos. 28, 29, 30, 31 having been sold to certain named persons, the President of the University, Rev. Moses Waddell, was authorized to execute a deed to the purchasers when the purchase price in full had been paid. Since no reference occurs to any such proceeding in connection with a sale of Lot No. 36 to Mr. Hancock, it may be that he never completed the purchase. This view is substantiated by a resolution adopted by the Board in November, 1824, stating that "the Board are willing to convey Lot No. 36 in the town of Athens to the Methodist Society for the purpose of building a church thereon if Mr. Thomas Hancock, the purchaser of same, will relinquish it back to the Trustees, provided such church is built on said lot in the space of two years from this time." The inference is that Mr. Hancock had made a payment on the lot and had a bond for title, but that he was unable to deed the lot to the church as he desired to do.

A Century-Old Tradition

No record has been found of any such relinquishment by Mr. Hancock or of a deed from the Board of Trustees of the University to the Methodist Church. The books of the Clerk's Office of both Clarke and Oconee Counties have been unavailingly searched by three or four competent persons acting independently and it seems to be definitely established that no deed was recorded conveying Lot No. 36. The failure of the minutes of the Board of Trustees of the University to make further mention of any conveyance of this lot either to Mr. Hancock or to the church and the absence of any record of such deed or deeds do not, however, constitute positive evidence that Mr. Hancock did not actually convey the lot to the church; and the tradition is strong, not only that such a deed was made, but that it contained a reservation by the terms of which the land was to be used for church purposes only and if it ever ceased so to be used, was to revert to the donor's heirs. That such a deed existed, or was believed to exist, is indicated by a resolution adopted by the Third Quarterly Conference on June 13, 1870, in which the property in the newly installed pipe organ was vested in the Trustees of the church building "to be held by them on the terms of the deed to the latter property," and again in 1893 in a report to the Conference made by the Chairman of the Trustees the statement is made that "title papers are kept in the hands of and are recorded in the Clerk's Office of the Superior Court of Clarke County." Still another reference to the original deed of gift from Mr. Hancock occurs in the Minute Book of the Board of Trustees of the church.
It is appropriate that we quote from METHODISM IN ATHENS---A HISTORICAL SKETCH written in 1953 by Dr. Robert C. Wilson, then Chairman of the Board of Trustees of our church, and Church Historian.

"As previously stated, Mr. Thomas Hancock moved to Athens in 1819 and bought a number of lots of land from the University of Georgia on what is now known as Hancock Avenue. He built his home on the corner of Hancock Avenue and Lumpkin Street on the lot now occupied by the Business College. He was a man of considerable property at that time and was a devout Methodist. Dr. Henry Hull, his contemporary, writes of Mr. Hancock: "Of whom and his excellent wife, the writer can only say that they were the most lovable and purest hearted old Methodist people he ever knew."

Bound at Page 25 in the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Church is a letter from Miss Marianna Prierson as follows:

'To the Board of Stewards of the First Methodist Church

Gentlemen:

I enclose a design of a white marble tablet which with your permission I would like to place in the Westibule of your Church, to the memory of my Great-grandfather, Thomas Hancock, who was a devoted and life long member of that Church and who gave the ground on which the Church and Parsonage stand.

Waiting your approval, I am,

Very sincerely,

Marianna Frierson
820 Hancock Avenue
September 27, 1921

The marble plaque commemorating this gift is located in the Narthex of our Church.