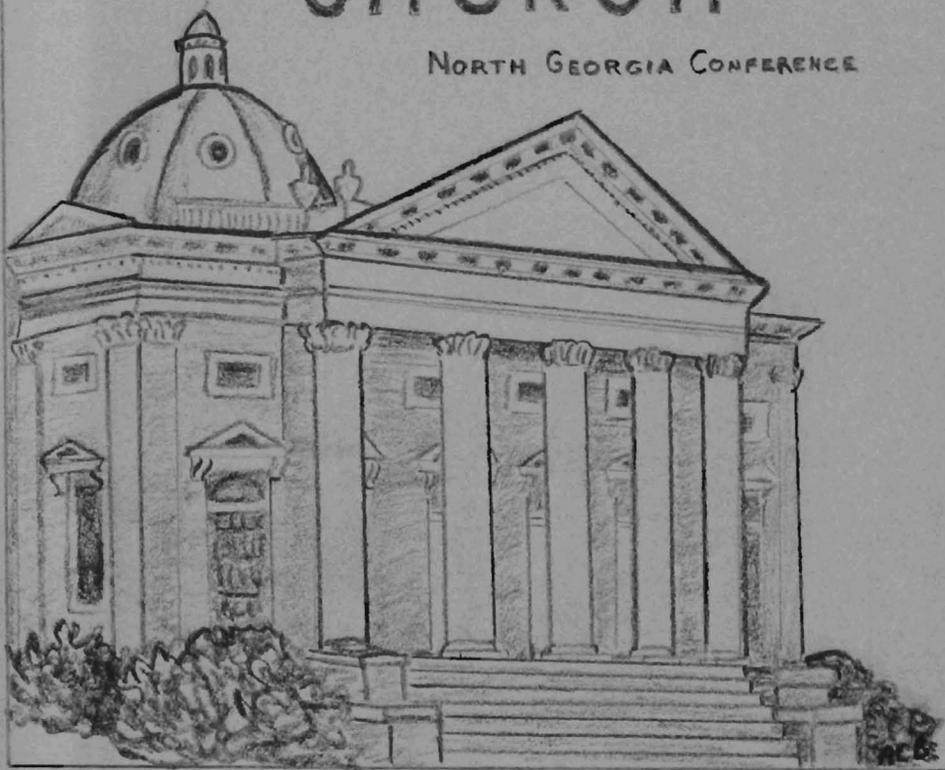




THE OXFORD CHURCH

NORTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE



THE OXFORD CHURCH

The Oxford Church has a richness of history equalled by few, if any, and perhaps surpassed by none in Methodism. And it is quite probable that there isn't another in this area which has contributed so much toward the ongoing of the Methodist Church throughout the world. This is due in very large measure to the close correlation between this church and Emory College for more than a century.

Let it be said in the beginning that this is in no way to be regarded as a history of Emory College or a supplement to anything about Emory that has been written in the past. However, no history of the Oxford Church could possibly be written without recognizing the inseparability of that church and Emory College. For what would the history of the Oxford Church be without such stalwarts as Alexander Means, Atticus Haygood, J. S. Moore, Warren Candler, and James E. Dickey, to mention only a few?

Because of its strategic location the Oxford Church through the years has exerted a very great influence for good, not only throughout Georgia and neighboring states, but even "unto the uttermost parts of the earth." Many young men who came to Emory College with no idea of entering the ministry or consecrating their lives to the service of God and the Church came under the influence of the Oxford Church and dedicated themselves wholly to His service as ministers or missionaries. Joseph A. Sharp, Warren A. Candler, and James E. Dickey, all of whom expected to enter the legal profession, are good examples of this. Many others returned to their homes as Christian laymen, teachers, farmers, statesmen, merchants, bankers, Sunday School teachers, all leaders in their respective communities and bulwarks of the Church. By no means were they all Methodists. Thus the Oxford Church has enriched the spiritual life of the churches of different denominations in many lands.

The name Oxford appears in the minutes of the North Georgia Conference for the first time in 1839, with Covington, in the Athens District. Wm. J. Parks was presiding elder and J. W. Talley, pastor. We remained in the Athens District until 1855, when we were put in the Atlanta District, Hartwell H. Parks presiding elder with W. R. Branham pastor of Covington and Oxford, Alexander Means supply. In 1883 we were put in a new district bearing our name, the Oxford District. G. W. Yarbrough was presiding elder, C. E. Dowman Oxford pastor, with A. G. Haygood and I. S. Hopkins as associates. The Conference was again redistricted in 1931, and the name Decatur-Oxford was given our district, Nath Thompson being named presiding elder and Nat G. Long pastor. We are still in the Decatur-Oxford District. We have a record of the presiding elders and pastors for every year from 1839 through 1951 except the years 1840, 1844, 1848, for which there is no available information.

Although Oxford was listed as a circuit for many, many years, we may be sure that there was no Sunday in the month without preaching services, since there were available in those days both on the college faculty and in the village ministers of unusual ability. As a matter of fact, at one time during the early days of Emory every member of the faculty was a minister, a situation which meant much to the spiritual life of the village. During those times the regular pastor of Oxford could hardly rate or rank with his associate pastor when such men as Alexander Means, Atticus Haygood, Warren Candler, and I. S. Hopkins served in that capacity.

The first academic session of Emory College began in August, 1839. Since a place of worship was one of the chief concerns of the college trustees, they had a frame building erected during the summer of 1838 which was used on Sundays and for "daily prayers" (twice each day). This "old chapel" continued to serve as a church till 1841 when the "Old Church" was completed.

In this "Old Church" some of the world's greatest and most far-reaching sermons have been delivered. Such characters as L. Q. C. Lamar, Young J. Allen, Atticus

G. Haygood, and Warren A. Candler received there the soul inspiration that made of them world citizens of the first order. And space would not permit the naming of all the illustrious sons of "Old Emory" whose torches were kindled at those old altars under the "power preaching" of those men of God, most of whom were on the faculty of Emory College. Perhaps through the years the Oxford Church has been served by better ministerial talent than any other church of similar size in the area.

In 1854 W. R. Branham was sent to serve the Oxford-Covington charge. From that time till now there have been members of this Branham family in our church. W. R. Branham, Jr., and his family made their home in Oxford after his retirement from the active ministry. He ably filled the pulpit from time to time and was active in the affairs of church and community, serving several times on the town council and as mayor. His daughter, Miss Martha Branham, is now our efficient church treasurer.

Miss Lynn Branham, daughter of W. R. Branham, Sr., is a member of the Oxford Church now, ninety-eight years after her father was first sent to Oxford as pastor. For seventy-eight years she has been giving of her time, her talent, her substance, and of herself to the Oxford Church, as a loyal and devoted member. During her more active years she was practically a one-woman relief agency ministering to those in need, both black and white. Doubly blessed is that church or community that numbers a "Miss Lynn" among its members.

During slavery days the Negroes who had no duties to perform were privileged to attend the regular Sunday services, sitting in the gallery which was reserved for them. Sunday afternoons there were special services for the slaves in the regular church auditorium, which they were required to attend. At the 1865 session of the North Georgia Conference W. R. Branham was presiding elder of the Atlanta District, and Miles W. Arnold was sent to Oxford. Then this additional assignment appears in the minutes: Colored charge, Jno. W. Yarbrough.

The Oxford Church was right in the "thick of the fight" between the North and the South in the controversy over slavery, which finally caused the division of the Methodist Church. And, as a matter of fact, the Old Church was used as a hospital from 1862-64 during the War Between the States. Bishop Andrew lived in Oxford, and of course his family belonged to the Oxford Church. The slave girl Kitty attended services in the Old Church and lived in her own cottage nearby. Not far from the Andrew lot in the Oxford Cemetery stands an impressive marble marker to Kitty, the slave girl, who through no fault of her own or her master's caused the division of the Methodist Church. On this marker is a brief history of important events connected with that historic incident.

At this point it seems not out of place to speak briefly of our Oxford Cemetery which Bishop Candler referred to as the "Westminster Abbey of Georgia Methodism." In this hallowed spot sleep many of the illustrious pioneers of Methodism in Georgia and of Emory College. To visit this cemetery and to read the names on the headstones is to feel that this is indeed "holy ground."

Henry "Billy" Mitchell, who has been connected with Emory longer than any other living employee (about 50 years), gave some of the facts concerning the Old Church. His maternal grandmother, Ellen Robison, belonged to President Luther Smith. And his grandfather, Neil Robison, belonged to Alexander Means. His mother was "Aunt Sarah" Mitchell, and from her he learned much about the old days at Oxford.

There is one very interesting point that "Billy" brought out concerning the cultural and religious influences which the Oxford Church has had on the people of his race and of the unusual advantages that they have enjoyed in this historic village. The Negroes had the benefit of the best preaching the Methodist Church could afford, as well as the best in the field of musical entertainment, lectures, etc., since all these activities took place in the Old Church. The Negroes knew that the gallery was for them, and they attended. Thus the Oxford Negroes in all probability had the best cultural and educational advantages of any in the world during the old Emory College days.

The Old Church, which was completed in 1841 and dedicated the same year by Bishop William Capers, still has the partition down the middle, a reminder of the day when the men sat on one side and the women on the other. The date, 1841, was chiseled on the cornerstone by Dr. G. G. Smith, Sr., son of the pioneer Rev. Isaac Smith. Dr. Smith came to Oxford to practice medicine and to educate his sons. Rev. G. G. Smith, Jr., was a well-known author and historian of the Methodist Church. Two other sons, James Rembert Smith and Edward Smith, were ministers also. A daughter, Lizzie, married Rev. A. J. Jarrell. They were the parents of Oxford's own Dr. C. C. Jarrell.

One of the most powerful preachers during the 1890's was Dr. J. S. Moore. Professor of Latin in Emory College. He was a rather plain-spoken, frank individual concerning whom the following incident was related by Uncle Nath Thompson, who was present:

"Uncle Leonard" Thomas, for many years postmaster of Oxford, wore a very large silver watch and a correspondingly large and conspicuous chain. One Sunday while Dr. Moore was preaching, "Uncle Leonard," who was sitting where Dr. Moore had a good view of him, took his watch out in such a manner as to attract his attention. Dr. Moore paused, "Um-m-m, Brother Thomas, do you think this sermon has lasted long enough?" "Yes," came the reply. "All right; we'll dismiss you." Whereupon Brother Thomas got up and walked out of the church, closing the door behind him with such vigor that the sound was heard throughout the building. "Now we'll proceed with the sermon," said Dr. Moore.

One of the most far-reaching sermons ever delivered in the Old Church probably was that of Dr. Haygood on Thanksgiving, November 25, 1880. On that occasion he recounted the numerous reasons the Southerners had for being grateful and expressed his own gratitude that slavery had been abolished. It was a very liberal, courageous, and forward-looking address. At the conclusion of the service Dr. Callaway moved that the sermon be published, and the congregation

concurred unanimously in his opinion. A copy of this sermon came into the hands of George I. Seney, a New York banker. He was so favorably impressed with the spirit of it that when Dr. Haygood was in New York in 1881, he was invited to Mr. Seney's office. Dr. Haygood had no idea what Mr. Seney had in mind. But our Seney Hall here in Oxford on the old Emory campus is the visible, tangible, and material result of that conference in Mr. Seney's office after banking hours. For he gave Emory College \$130,000, of which \$50,000 was spent in erecting Seney Hall.

In all probability Henry W. Grady's famous address, "The New South," never would have been delivered except for that Thanksgiving sermon by Dr. Haygood in 1880. Mr. Grady himself is reported to have said, "I lighted my torch at Haygood's flame."

During one college generation, while the writer was a student in Oxford, there were three future bishops and two future U. S. senators attending Emory: Arthur Moore, William Watkins, and Marvin Franklin; and Spessard Holland and Tom Stewart. The Class of 1891 of Emory College furnished the Methodist Church with two bishops, William N. Ainsworth and James E. Dickey. A total of eleven bishops or future bishops have lived in Oxford: Ainsworth, Andrew, Candler, Capers, Dickey, Franklin, Haygood, Key, Moore, Pierce, and Watkins. The Bryan brothers, William J. and Nathan, each represented Florida in the U. S. Senate. L. Q. C. Lamar represented the State of Mississippi in both houses of Congress, was Secretary of the Interior under Cleveland, and in 1888 was appointed Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Vice President Alben Barkley was once a student in Oxford and worshipped in the Old Church. Although these men were not all residents of Oxford except as students, yet the Oxford Church was their official church.

The students formerly lived in the Oxford homes and became, in many instances, almost like members of the family. Practically all the homes had family prayer, and the students in most cases attended prayers with the family. This influence had a far-reaching effect for good upon the students. This

situation together with the old rule requiring students to attend church services each Sunday made it easier for the church to perform its function with regard to the students.

The following quotation concerning the influence of "Old Oxford" is taken from Bullock's History of Emory University: "Whatever the incidents which led them to it, many boys experienced a religious quickening while students at Emory which did not leave them through all of life. Many there gained the dynamic of vital Christianity and carried it in teaching, preaching, and in private lives, to others. Whatever criticism today may pass upon the religious or educational techniques of these times, many looked back to their student days at Oxford as a turning point in life. In achieving this result the college was realizing a primary aim of its founders and supporters."

In 1858 there was a great revival in which Young J. Allen took a very prominent part. In 1882 under Atticus G. Haygood there was an unusually successful revival in which probably as many as a hundred in the community and in the college were converted. Under Dr. Candler it wasn't uncommon for a revival just to "break out" under his preaching or that of Dr. J. S. Moore. Then they would "strike while the iron was hot," and a great revival would ensue. During Dr. Dickey's administration Rev. W. G. Crawley, who was pastor of the Oxford Church at the time, conducted a very successful revival in which many were converted or reclaimed.

Dr. Candler not only attended the Wednesday night prayer services, but he generally conducted them also. Dr. Dickey likewise was a regular attendant at prayer meeting and frequently led the service. "Billy" Mitchell is authority for the statement that on one stormy Wednesday night at the Old Church there was nobody present except Dr. Dickey and Hugh Howell. But Dr. Dickey conducted the prayer service anyway. Mr. Howell verified this statement. (He said he was janitor and had to be there!)

Our present church, Young J. Allen Memorial, was completed in 1910 while Dr. Dickey was president of Emory.

The Old Church was gradually abandoned and fell into disrepair. But in 1932 it was restored through the untiring efforts of Bishop Candler. Perhaps one of the most impressive services ever held in that historic old building was the funeral of that distinguished churchman. On that occasion Bishops Ainsworth, Darlington, Moore, Kern, and Watkins were on the platform, and the main auditorium was filled to overflowing with ministers and others from all walks of life who had gathered to pay homage to one of the great souls of the ages.

Several years after Bishop Candler's death the Old Church, because of neglect and disuse, again had to be restored. Through the organized efforts of Bishop Moore and others, and under the general direction of Bishop Moore, this was accomplished in 1949. The building is now in good condition, having an apartment which accommodates two college students who act as caretakers. The ladies of the W. S. C. S. hold their general meeting on the first Monday night in each month in the "Conference Room" of this building. The Spiritual Life Group of the W. S. C. S. also holds its meetings there on the second and fourth Wednesday afternoons. The commencement exercises of Emory-at-Oxford are now being held each spring in this Old Church. So it is to be hoped that it will continue to serve a useful purpose for many years to come, as well as stand as a shrine and a memorial to Oxford's and Emory's illustrious of other years.

As has already been stated, our present church was completed in 1910, a memorial to the pioneer missionary to China, Young J. Allen. Although this building is the property of Emory University, the village of Oxford has enjoyed its use for these forty-one years practically free of charge for most of that time. At present we are paying the University a small amount for use of the building and for heating and janitor service. This is a very beautiful and worshipful sanctuary which is found in few villages like Oxford, and which we would not have had except for Emory College.

The Oxford Church has always been a liberal church. It always pays its assessments in full. As far back as 1861 when it was in the Atlanta District, the Oxford Church reported \$625 for missions at the Annual Conference. This was \$455 more than any other church in the district reported. The same year it paid \$1350 for "Sunday School Requisites." The church that came second in the district reported only \$300. The Oxford Church reported 2500 Sunday School Reading Books, 585 being the next highest in the district.

The Missionary Society and the W. S. C. S. have rivaled the Sunday School, and no doubt surpassed it, in liberality. And in addition have done much to alleviate suffering among the needy at home and abroad and to spread the gospel. There are three very active and enthusiastic circles with a total membership of eighty-three. The circles are named in honor of three of the most faithful and active members of "yesteryear": The Susie Bonnell Stone Circle, The Addie Branham Circle, and The Emmie Stewart Circle.

Our church has had an unusually large number of loyal and devoted members and efficient officials. Although it is not a good policy ordinarily to single out individuals, there are three, in addition to those already mentioned, that stand out so prominently in the mind of the writer that he cannot refrain from mentioning them by name. Mr. J. C. Kitchens for twenty-five years was our church treasurer and in all probability never made an error. His report was always on time and in good shape. Professor R. L. "Uncle Bob" Paine for many years was chairman of our board of stewards, and a wonderful influence for good among the students. He never lost his youthful enthusiasm, his zest for living, or his keen and wholesome sense of humor. Professor Harry H. Stone was born in Oxford, reared and educated here and then spent his entire adult life in the service of Emory. He was a grandson of Bishop Capers, an outstanding churchman, a perfect Christian gentleman.