

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LEWISBURG, TN.

By Nat K. Reiney

Most of the material presented here was secured by reading the Session minutes. The Ewing family genealogical material came from the records of Mrs. Olivia Davis.

In 1776 the population of the United States was approximately three million persons composed of one million Scotch-Irish descent, one million Calvinists or Reformed, and one million of other doctrines or beliefs. At this time the three centers of population were Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Baltimore, Maryland, and Charleston, South Carolina. Presbyterians from these areas came down the valley of Virginia and across the Carolinas going west and many came into the new state of Tennessee. For the most part these early settlers were Scotch-Irish or English.

Eventually some came to what is now Marshall County, and as was the custom, they very early established churches. The third Presbyterian Church to be established in Middle Tennessee was Bethbirei located about 4 miles north of the present site of Lewisburg. The first sermon was preached in June 1810 from a rock that remains on the cemetery grounds. The minister was the Rev. Samuel Finley, and his text was "Upon this Rock I will build my Church." Bethbirei was to become the mother church of the First Presbyterian Church, Lewisburg.

It is hard to determine the number of Presbyterian Churches that have been in Marshall County, but my best count is seventeen. Of these five were U.S.A. or United Presbyterian; seven Presbyterian, U, S.; four Cumberland, and one Associate Reform.

The town of Lewisburg was incorporated in 1837, and in 1850 Marshall County had a population of 15,616 persons or just a little over one thousand less than the current population.

Abner Houston gave 50 acres of land for the new town, and in the layout provision was made for lots on which churches were to be built.

The First Presbyterian Church was chartered in June 1847. The Rev. Edward McMillian was the Pastor, and the seven charter members were: G. B. Black, Hugh Hall and his wife Esther, Mrs. Elizabeth Ewing, Miss Jane Ewing, Dr. Samuel Penn and wife Mary Ann Dryden. Noted in the Session minutes is that Dr. Penn was a good friend of U. S. Grant and had driven the carriage when General Grant was married.

The Session minutes do not record any transfer of membership of these charter members, but it is safe to assume that most if not all came from Bethbirei, which has over the years been considered as the mother church of First Presbyterian Lewisburg.

Furthermore, I could not determine whether or not Abner Houston who gave the land for Lewisburg was a Presbyterian. Early records of the Bethbirei Church have been lost, but it is a likely supposition that he was a member of that church. At least we know that later Houston's were members of the Lewisburg church, as well as Bethbirei. Mr. Frank Houston and his family were members at Bethbirei and Mr. C. C. Houston and family were members in Lewisburg. Both were Elders in their respective churches.

The story of First Presbyterian, Lewisburg, is in many ways the story of one family – THE EWINGS. It is said they were Presbyterians first and pioneers second. There was a Ewing by name on the Session continuously from 1849 to 1959 or a period of a hundred and ten years. At one time there were 22 Ewings

on the church roll and as best I could count there has been a total of 46 Ewings who have been members of the church. An interesting note that at this writing no Ewing name appears on the roll since the last Ewing, Miss Helen Ewing, died Jan. 4, 1980. Noted however, is that the Ewing son-in-law, John Ezell is still a member. He is a past Clerk of the Session, an Elder for a long period of years, and today Elder Emeritus.

Let's take a look at the Ewing family and their descendants. There were ten ruling Elders of First Church, and a Ewing gave the ground on which Bethbirei Church was located. George Ewing and wife Eleanor, came to America and settled in Virginia in 1760. His son Samuel Ewing and wife Mary Daniel, came to Marshall County from Wythe County, Virginia. He died in 1809, and his widow in 1834. The Samuel Ewings had six children: James D., Jane, George, William D., Joseph P., and Andrew. From these children the Bond family were descendants of George Ewing; Knox Ewing and family, the Fergus family, Jim Scott Ewing, Pauline Ewing, and the Galbreath's trace their line back to William D. Ewing; the J. Will Turner's, and olivia Davis from Joseph P. Ewing; Jane and Andrew Ewing had no descendants in the Presbyterian Church that I could locate.

But it was from the line of James D. Ewing through his six children that we look to for the largest number of Presbyterian descendants. His six children were: James V., Eleanor, Louisa, Susan, Lile, and Sam B.

Only Sam B. has no descendants. From James V. we note the J. O. Ewing family with daughters, Helen and Annable Ewing Ezell; the Reeds; the McRady 's, Dr. John C. C. Ewing , and George V. Ewing, the latter two being bachelors. Also, we should note that it was Elizabeth, the wife of James V., who was a charter member of First Church, he later became a member and an Elder.

From Eleanor came the Reiney descendants; from Louisa the Hawkins, Nichols and Carters; from Susan we have the Kerchevals, Crutchers, McKinney and Galloways; from Lile the Appleby's and McClures. It should be noted that Vera Kercheval married James N. McCord, who was to become Congressman, and later the Governor of Tennessee, He too, was an Elder in First Church and longtime teacher of the Men's Bible Class. A further note to say, that George W. Ewing was for many years Editor of the Marshall Gazette, and I would like to further indicate that Eleanor Ewing was my great-grandmother whose family moved to Gibson County in West Tennessee, where the Reiney family had settled in the late 1840's from Ballymoney, Northern Ireland, but being Scotch Presbyterians by descent.

Now, the first ruling Elders in the church wore Dr. Penn, G. B. Black, and Hugh Hall. The first new member to join the church was Mr. W.B. Hill. On July 14, 1849, they elected, two new Elders and that's when we first see the Ewing Elders; Elected at this time were James V. Ewing, the husband of charter member Elizabeth Ewing, and Joseph B. Ewing.

Four years after organization or in 1851, the church had a membership of 29 persons. The pastor's salary was 100.00 per year. During these early years the minutes make note of the fact that many members were coming and going, many only remained members for a short time. They moved west with many going to the new state of Texas.

The membership first worshipped in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church which preceded First Church by a few years. The first church house was built in 1855. It was a frame house on the northwest corner of Third Avenue and Church Street. Presently located on this corner is the Dr. Phelps Clinic. This first church had a tall spire with a bell. It contained a gallery for slaves. The session minutes noted that in

those years the men sat on one side of the church and the women on the other side. The pulpit was made of walnut, trimmed in gold. The choir was in the rear of the church.

The first infants baptized were Mary Biddle Black and Nancy Reed.

Most of the membership came from the countryside. In 1854, only seven years after organization the town of Lewisburg showed a census of 322 persons. On Sunday the area around the church was lined with horse and buggy as well as wagons. In the same year the minutes note that the pastor's salary had increased to \$500.00 a year.

In 1859, the church joined the United Presbyterian Synod. Prior to 1861, there was no U.S.A. or U.S. Presbyterian Assembly as there is today. During the years 1859-1870, we had one of the most historic periods in the life of the Presbyterian Church. There (*sic*) were, of course, during the Civil War time and slavery a contributing factor to the formation of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. in 1861, as a separate branch, of the church. First Presbyterian Church became a member of this. U. S. Branch and remains so today.

During these trying years the, pastor of the church was Rev. Hardin Vernon. From records he surely was a very fine and interesting person, one that would have been a joy to know. He was the son of Ezekiel Vernon and his father apparently lived in and around Marshall County. Records indicate that he was a colporter (*sic*) and distributed bibles and biblical tracts throughout the area. Some of this family is buried in Bethbirei Cemetery. one of the descendants, a Presbyterian in Bel Air, Texas, became a good friend of mine, and about 1955, visited Allie and I here in Lewisburg. Mrs. Lounora Pickens took him to Bethbirei in an attempt to locate graves of his family.

Some records of the early church, especially the early 1850's are missing. But in one record I noted the mention, of one slave by name of Ruth Gordon as a member of the Church. In no other place did I see mention of slaves as being members.

In 1873, the total membership of the church was 78 with a Sunday School enrollment of 83. In those days it was not unusual for there to be more in Sunday School than members of the church. That's a change from today.

Throughout the minutes in many, many places there is evidence of the disciplining of members, largely for such things as drunkenness, swearing, and neglect of attendance, at worship. I thought it would be interesting to record here one small section out of the minutes of the year 1875. There was a committee of the Session appointed to look into the matter of drinking whiskey (they called it "dram drinking"). They'd get a dram at a saloon of which there were many located all around the square of Lewisburg. I quote from minutes:

"And just whereas intemperance with all the steps that lead thereto is a most pernicious evil in our land, carrying in its fold the wreck of human hopes and happiness both here and hereafter by destroying the peace and prosperity of families, undermining the morals of society, unsettling the faith of many members of the Church of Christ, thus destroying their usefulness to the church and the society in which they move, filling their minds with gloomy foreboding of the future and finally resulting in complete alienation from the Master who died to, save them."

Now there are many instances of recordings like this in these early minutes that are most interesting to read. In the one recorded above there is two more pages of the "whereas" before they get to a resolution passed by the Session. The resolution says to the membership that we are calling this to your attention, and, if you are guilty we advise you to cease these kind of doing if you want to remain a member of the church.

The first Marshall Countian to serve as minister of the church was the Rev, Marion Kennedy who was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Cornersville.

As indicated earlier the first church building as on the corner of Third Ave. and Church St. Then in 1890, the membership purchased the lot where the church is located today on the corner of the square and Church Street just one block from the original church building. A brick church was built on the corner at a total cost of 10,000.00. It had two towers and a newspaper article said at that time, "it is elegantly finished in every respect and furnished in a style in keeping with the general convenience and modern style." That same year the membership had increased to 104.

This church built in 1890 was destroyed by fire in 1903, and a new building, the present one, was erected and dedicated on May 29, 1904. A story has been handed down that arson was suspected in the fire that destroyed the church. It was said that someone who disagreed with the church's pronouncements relating to the drinking of alcoholic beverages was a likely suspect.

There have been many persons who have expressed their love for the church by providing physical things for the beauty and enhancement of the church. For instance, the communion table was given by Mrs. Mary Ewing McClure. She was one of the Ewing descendants of Lile Ewing. The present memorial windows are the gift of the McClures and McRady's. Among the donors no one was more generous than Mrs. J. E. McRady, later Mrs. Alice McRady Collins. Her first husband was J. E. McRady, then she later married a Collins. Mrs. Collins died somewhere around 1934-36. I remember her well since, when I moved to Lewisburg, she was living at the hotel across the street from the church. In 1913 Mrs. Collins gave the silver communion set which is still in use. Then in 1914, she gave the silver baptismal font, and in the same year gave the pipe organ. The organ was a memorial to her only child, Mabel McRady who died at the age of sixteen.

There were other significant gifts. In 1932, the church had no rest rooms, and Mrs. Rena Rutledge Anderson died and left a hundred dollars in her will so that a rest room could be added. The oak flower stands that we use each Sunday were the gifts of Mrs. Mary Fitzpatrick, Mrs. Annie Shires, and Mrs. W. O. Rutledge. They were given as memorials to Mr. & Mrs. C.C. Houston, the parents of Mrs. Fitzpatrick and Mrs. Shires. Also, the bulletin board that graces the corner of the lot was given by Mr. Jim McCord.

During the first 50 years or until 1897, the church membership had reached to 139. At that time there were seven elders and four deacons.

There have been four manses. The first was in 1897, located on the northeast corner of Third Avenue and Water Street, the present location of Richter's Grocery. The first manse committee to locate and purchase the home was an interesting committee in that it was composed of people that those of us today know about. There was Miss Nannie Woods, Sara Bigham's grandmother; J. L. Marshall, the father of John Marshall and grandfather of Miss Annie White Marshall; and W.K. Kercheval, the father of Mrs. Vera (Jim) McCord. The second manse was on Second Avenue, but I don't have the exact location, except it

was next door to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The third manse was on the corner of Haynes and Fifth Avenue, the stucco house where the John Barnes' live today. But, this is the second house on that lot, the first one burned in 1928, when the Rev. H. S. Henderson was pastor. The church went into debt for the first time to rebuild the stucco house as it is today. This house was sold in 1944 to the Grady Coble family. The present manse on Joyce Avenue was purchased in 1953, soon after the marriage of the Rev. J. L. Perry, who had been pastor for a number of years as a single person and lived in the hotel.

A fact I noticed with some interest is that in the 27 years from 1892 to 1919, there were nine ministers. The minutes make a point of saying that some of these resigned after being here only a short time, even just a year or two. Some were asked to resign. A comment is made that in those days the members just ran a minister off when they did not like him.

During this period however, there was one man Rev. W. E. Phifer, pastor from 1913 to 1916, and very much liked. While here his wife died and is buried in Lone Oak Cemetery. They had two minister sons that are known by many in this congregation. One son Rev. W. E. (Bill) Phifer, Jr., was pastor for some years at Westminster in Nashville; Another, Rev. Kenneth Phifer serves a church in New Orleans at this time.

Rev. H. S. (Hal) Henderson was pastor from 1926 to 1938. These were tough years for First Church. During the period the church could not support a pastor full time, so in 1933 Mr. Henderson shared his time with Lynnville and Brick Church as well as Bethbirei. First Church's share of the salary was only \$600.00, plus furnishing the manse and utilities.

When Rev. Henderson left to be the pastor of Lynnville and Brick Church, the church decided to call a full-time pastor once again. In 1939, Rev. Joe Ed Hollis accepted the call to Lewisburg. At this time he was associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Jacksonville, Florida. In 1943, Mr. Hollis moved to Owensboro, Ky. Later in 1943, Rev. J. L. Perry accepted a call and was pastor until 1957. He came from Mason, Tennessee in Memphis Presbytery. Mr. Perry was single and lived in the hotel across the street from the church until he married in 1953.

In 1957, Mr. Perry accepted a call to the Marks, Mississippi, Presbyterian Church. Rev. Joe Holder came to the church from Dothan, Alabama in 1958. He continued to serve until 1966. A tragedy was to strike the Holder family for in 1960, his wife Mary suffered a blood clot that went to her heart on Christmas morning from which she died almost instantly. Mr. Holder moved to Second Church, Nashville in 1966. Following Rev. Holder's move the Rev. Claude McMillion from Virginia accepted a call and as of this writing, thirteen years later he remains the minister.

In 1939, First Church gained some very fine Presbyterians when the U.S.A. Presbyterian Churches in Lewisburg and Farmington disbanded. Most of the members in these two churches transferred their memberships to First Church. *(Later note from the session minutes: the Farmington Church disbanded in 1953.)*

It needs to be recalled and spiritual note made of the fact that 23 members of the church saw service in World War II, 22 were men and one was a woman. Two of the fine young men gave their lives during this terrible war. They were Billy Pickens, the son of Lounora and Ernest Pickens, and James Clark, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Jim Clark. Soon after the close of the war a Bible Class was started, made up of young adults, and named the Pickens-Clark Bible Class.

As they do today women have had an active role in the church over the years. The Woman's (*sic*) Auxiliary or as we know it today, Women of the Church, has over the years been a very strong and active group. In a wider relationship they provided at least three Presbyterial Presidents that I know about. These were Mrs. W.B. (Edna) Schmidt, Mrs. Nat (Allie) Reiney, and Mrs. George (Mary) White. There may well have been others in years earlier.

The Men's Club was started in 1944. The first Secretary-Treasurer of the group was Jeff McKay; first Vice-President was Paul Waldrop, and first President was Nat Reiney, author of this paper. Incidentally, I later was to become President of Columbia Presbytery Men, of the Men of the Synod of Tennessee, and in 1950, to be President of the Men of the General Assembly.

The Men's Bible Class has an interesting history. Going back prior to 1920, the men met in the rear of the sanctuary. Yes, there were then doors that pulled down to separate the back of the church from the main sanctuary. In the early years Mr. Robert Armstrong, an attorney, was a very able and well known Bible scholar and teacher. He taught the class for many years.

Just when he ceased and Mr. Jim McCord took over I do not know. I do remember well the class in the 1930's and 1940's when Mr. McCord was the teacher. It was not unusual during those years for men from all over the town to attend this class, regardless of what denomination they were members. The room some Sunday mornings would often be full, with 25 to 40 people in number.

Mr. McCord became U.S. Congressman, and later the Governor of the State of Tennessee. When he left, W. E. (Wally) Schmidt taught the class until he retired in 1959, and moved away. Following Mr. Schmidt, then came Harden Brown, who has taught the class and continues at this time. The class now meets in the Chapel.

The Women's Bible Class met until recent years in the sanctuary on the right hand side as you face the pulpit. It has had a number of teachers. I can only list those beginning with Mrs. Carrie Armstrong, then Mrs. Cecil (Lula) Appleby, Mrs. N. E. (Edna) Schmidt, Mrs. W.H. (Rhoda) Loyd, Mrs. Alfred (Martha) Overholser, and Mrs. Knox (Sara) Bigham. This class now meets in the parlor and presently is taught by Mr. Knox Bigham.

I'm sure if records were available there could be listed many able and dedicated teachers of the early years of these classes and of the many who taught the young people and children. I can only list a few I remember so well. Included among these would be Miss Jennie Bills who taught children ages 8 to 10 for many, many years, and when I remember her most the class met in the front of the sanctuary on the loft. In the kindergarten were two faithful people in the persons of Mrs. Alma Ewing and Mrs. Jeff McKay.

For most of its years the Sunday School met as a group in the church sanctuary, and then divided into classes. Presiding over the Sunday School was a Superintendent. Among those of record are W. R. Montgomery, Cecil Appleby, Nat Reiney (1934-1945), C. M. Hursh, Thomas Hale Hawkins, and George White. Songs were sung, and the children put on various and interesting programs. When I was Superintendent I asked for song selections from the audience, and I remember so well Mrs. Vera McCord selecting on many occasions Song # 35, "The Way of the Cross Leads Home." She had a beautiful contralto voice and really sang that song well, as others, with much gusto.

The church has been blessed with a very fine organ as already noted given in 1914, by Mrs. Collins. (*Later Note: The organ is one known as a "Tracker organ."*) During these years there have been many excellent

musicians to play the organ. Among these have been Mrs. Kitty Patterson, Miss Syddie Knudson, Miss Pauline Ewing, Mrs. Earl Armstrong, Mrs. C. M. Hursh, Mrs. Bessie Wheat, Helen Ezell Goodman, Mrs. Keith Carney, Betty Reiney Henley, and Annette Bills Lawrie. Mrs. C.M. Hursh not only played organ, but for many years was the volunteer director of the Choir.

In 1946, a Young Adult Bible Class was started, and prospered with so many young couples, many recently married, and many of the young men recently back from World War II. The class was named for Billy Pickens and James Clark, two young men, Deacons, who gave their lives in the cause of freedom. The class first met in the home of Mrs. Lounora Pickens and then moved to the church in 1948, when the first part of the Educational Building was completed. This class was organized and taught by Nat Reiney from 1946 -1958. Well over 100 young adults attended this class during that time. The class remains in 1980, but the age of its members has moved up a few notches.

A Ewing or Ewing relative was Clerk of the Session from 1847 to 1959. These were George W. Ewing, Joseph S. Ewing, George W. Ewing, J.O. Ewing, S. C. Appleby, and John Ezell. From 1959 to 1980, the following have served for one or more years: Harden Brown, George White, Thomas Montgomery, John Owen, and Nat Reiney.

In going through the minutes, I picked up some interesting and possibly significant happenings. One such was a report to Presbytery in April 1925, made by Ruling Elders, J. N. McCord, Moderator; and George W. Ewing, Clerk, since the church at that time was without a pastor. It read,

"For half the year we have not had a pastor and but few preaching services. One member received on examination and four by letter. Few, if any, held family worship. Two communion services held, attended by 50 to 75 per cent of members. No outbroken desecration of the Sabbath Day have been noted. No baptism of infants – catechism not taught at home, nor do members of Sabbath School memorize catechism or hymns. Perhaps 10% of members tithe. Voluntary pledges made on a designated date instead of an Every Member Canvass. Church benevolences fully paid, No specific change for better or worse in Sabbath observance and worldly conformance. No evangelistic work done nor any special effort put forth to secure candidates for the ministry."

Most of the church existence has been grouped with Bethbirei, but in 1912, a breach in this arrangement came in a salary dispute for the pastor, and he resigned. In later years the grouping was re-instituted and remains to this day.

In 1910 the fence which had been erected earlier around the church was removed and a paved sidewalk built on the street sides.

From 1847 to 1948, the church had no Sunday School classrooms except the two corner areas on the east and south sides of the sanctuary. An effort was made in 1926 to build but delayed. Then 19 years later on February 11, 1945, the first action was taken by the church officers to build an educational addition. A campaign for funds was conducted, but fell short. A decision was made to sell the manse, reserve \$3,000.00 for future manse purchase and use balance of proceeds for the Educational Building Fund. This was done and the manse was sold to J. G. Coble for \$8,000.00. Then in 1962, the second addition was made to the Educational unit.

On February 28, 1943, a note in the Session minutes was a resolution to be passed by the congregation to protest the action of the City Council of the town of Lewisburg to permit the showing of movies at the Theatre on Sundays. It was signed by all the Elders and sent to the City Council.

The church has gone into debt on several occasions, but in 1980, it was free of debt for the last time. The first debt was in 1928, to rebuild the manse that burned on Haynes Street. This was for \$2,500.00, and was not paid in full until 1943. There was some debt from the first educational unit built in 1947-48. This was paid in a short time. Then a debt was incurred in 1952, for the purchase of a manse on Joyce Avenue. Later and larger debt was incurred when the last addition to the Educational unit was dedicated in 1962. Both of the latter were fully liquidated in 1980.

The Depression years in the 1930's were difficult ones financially. In 1930, total contributions of its members was \$3,927.00, with the pastor's salary (full time) \$1,800.00. But in 1932, total contributions fell to \$1,969.00, and pastor's salary (half time) was \$900.00. There was no provision in budget for benevolences, but the Session voted to give the offering on 3rd Sundays to benevolences. During this period in 1931, the pastor was shared half time with Lynnville and Brick Church.

In August's 1902 minutes several members were dismissed "To wherever God in His providence may cast their lots."

Rotation of officers was first authorized in 1950, and in 1980, the Session and Diaconate were united to form a unicameral system.

The record indicates that the largest amount given to Benevolences in any one year was 1961, when the total was \$11,049.00.

The largest growth period in the church appears to be in the years 1947-1954, when the church membership went from 224 to 341. In that seven year period, 60 persons united with the church on Profession of Faith, and 130 by transfer of letter. For the seven year period, this was a net gain of 117 or roughly 50%. The largest addition at any one time was Sunday, September 15, 1948, when 34 persons joined the church, of these 7 were on Profession of Faith, 23 transfers of letter and 4 on statement of faith. It was during this period that the church officers led by the Pastor, Rev. J.L. Perry, carried forward with a strong program of visitation evangelism led by a cadre of laymen.

January, 1980