



First Presbyterian Church Jackson: 200 Years and Counting

Our church began in the wilderness of West Tennessee in the private homes of the first settlers of the city of Jackson. It was officially formed in 1823 as part of the Presbytery of Western Tennessee and of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. It did not get its first church building until 1832 and its first organ until 1845. In 1861, along with other West Tennessee churches, Jackson Presbyterian Church seceded from the PCUSA and joined the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America, then the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In 1897, under the pastorate of Reverend Dr. Mark A. Matthews, our church was officially incorporated by the State of Tennessee, becoming one of the first such organizations in West Tennessee. This allowed our church to broaden its ministry to the community and to pioneer civic activities. In the early twentieth century, it helped build and manage Jackson's first hospital, the YMCA, the Carnegie Library, and the Humane Society. It was a pioneer in education and in health services and created a Mission Church in 1909 (the future Johnson Memorial Presbyterian Church). After World War I, the Women of the Church played an important role in the field of missions and also as helpers in the congregational life. In the 1930s, under the pastorate of Reverend Dr. Samuel Stanworth, the church women started to preserve and write the church's history. They also supported Southwestern University (Rhodes College today) during its relocation from Clarksville to Memphis. In World War II, ten percent of the congregation served in the United States Armed Forces.

In 1952, the church voted to relocate to Trenton Road (now North Highland Avenue) thanks to a gift of land from Mrs. Sally Pigford, long-time church member and widow of lawyer, businessman, and Jackson Sun owner Clarence E. Pigford. This new home, with its beautiful grounds and numerous new buildings, gave the congregation room to grow, and in particular to develop youth sports leagues that became quite competitive. The church continued its mission to the congregation and the community, starting with the building of the Memorial Carillon dedicated to the men and women of

Madison County who served in World Wars I and II. It also founded the Presbyterian Play School, the Regional Interfaith Association, and the annual Starlight Symphony concerts. Having weathered the turbulent 1960s and 1970s and held prayerful congregational discussions about societal issues affecting the life of the church, First Presbyterian Church Jackson reunited with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1985. The addition of professional staff such as a Director of Christian Education, Director of Recreation, and Associate Pastor testified to the vitality and growth of the congregation. Our church ended the twentieth century with the construction of a new Gym-Ed building in 1993-1994 that added a much needed sports venue, library, and Sunday School classrooms.

In the new millennium, the church continued its service to church and community under the pastorate of Reverend John White, assisted by Associate Pastor Reverend Sharon Junn and, currently, Reverend Courtney Bowen. During this time, while continuing its outreach to the community in the areas of hunger and education at home and abroad, hosting Room in the Inn, and participating in the building of houses for Habitat for Humanity. The church reaffirmed its Presbyterian heritage by starting the tradition of the Kirkin' of the Tartans service on Reformation Sunday. It built a new Schantz organ with 56 ranks, 3 manuals, and pedals, enhanced its musical programs, and created an Arboretum on the church grounds. Maintaining the church campus became more important following two severe tornadoes in 2003 and 2008. In 2015, Memorial Hall was renovated to mark its centennial and the church campus was added to the National Register of Historic Sites. Awareness of the environment grew with the certification of the church as an Earth Care congregation since 2016. In 2020, the church overhauled its technology to hold its first live-streamed Sunday service as the church was forced to close for several months owing to the Covid pandemic, a practice that today enables the church to reach more congregants and community people.

Chevy Chase House / Memorial Hall

Chevy Chase House sits atop 430 acres of land purchased in 1912 by Clarence E. Pigford that once housed a square, two-story stone house with four rooms on each floor built in 1824. Willow Banks, as the property was named, saw quite a bit of history happen within its walls. The Pigfords renamed this storied location "Chevy Chase" and quickly endeavored to build a new home on the property, leaving the 1824 house intact and using it for servants' quarters. It survived until the mid-1950s but no longer exists.

Constructed of stucco-covered brick, Chevy Chase House features four classic Corinthian columns gracing its front door and is built in a Classical Revival style. Although the architect is not known, and despite similarities with a Sears catalog luxury "Magnolia" home kit, the house was not built from a kit and word has it that Mrs. Sally Pigford had a lot of input in its design. Flanking the house is a terrace decorated with a balustrade, in front of which two lions sit on either side of the front steps. There is a second-floor balcony above the front door and French doors opening onto the terrace. The southern steps leading from the ground floor to the terrace were used as a stopping point to unload guests to the Pigfords before their vehicle continued to the rear of the house, where it was parked. A sunroom to the south and an open porch to the north finish the profile of the house.

Inside, a center hall is flanked by a sitting room to the south and a salon/reception room to the north, which features a grand piano. Beyond the sitting room are the dining room and the sunroom. All rooms have been used for multiple purposes over the years, as meeting rooms, reception rooms, Sunday School rooms, and Session rooms, separated by pocket doors. Today they have been restored as reception rooms, with the sunroom serving as the main meeting room. All the rooms' ceilings are decorated with a crown molding that consists of dentils underneath an egg-and-dart molding. The center hall features a solemn staircase and its walls are decorated with bucolic scenes painted on canvas by a Belgian traveling artist in the 1930s at Mrs. Sally Pigford's request. It reportedly represents the landscape of the Chevy Chase estate as it looked then. At the top of the stairs are large windows decorated by graceful stained-glass panels reportedly made by the Laukhuff Stained Glass company of Memphis.

Chevy Chase House was quickly renamed "The White House" and became in the 1920s and 1930s a bustling center of Jackson's social life. Countless dinners, club meetings, and weddings, took place there as Mrs. Sally Pigford was very active in the community. She was a member of the Altrusa Club, the Jackson Garden Club, and the Ingleside Club; she promoted Girl Scouts and was a leader in the Jackson Art Association. She gave scholarship money to local colleges and worked tirelessly to develop the Mental Health Center. She designed some of the furniture herself, notably the two "lion" chairs located near the entrance of the center hall, and she tended to a beautiful rose garden south of the house. Today Chevy Chase House is called "Memorial Hall." It contains much of the original furniture.

Designing the New Campus

Upon Mrs. Sally Pigford's recommendation, the church's Building Committee retained the services of renowned ecclesiastical architect Harold Wagoner, who also designed Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis. The original campus design, while integrating Chevy Chase, was an ambitious project conceived in the Classical Revival style; it featured a Carillon, Sanctuary, Education Building, and Youth Fellowship Hall. With Harold E. Wagoner continuing to serve as consultant, the firm of Hart Freeland and Roberts, Architects and Engineers, of Nashville modified the designs in agreement with the Building Committee. In part because of financial prudence, buildings ended up being smaller than originally planned. Their construction was entrusted to the Hubert M. Owen Construction Company of Jackson. Despite these modifications, the spirit and style of Harold E. Wagoner remained intact.

The Memorial Carillon

The Bell Tower or Campanile was the first building on the new campus. It was built to house a Memorial Carillon consisting of 47 bells made by the French firm of Paccard (est. 1796) and weighing over twenty-six thousand pounds. The bourdon weighs in excess of five thousand pounds with a diameter of five feet. It is dedicated to the the men and women of Jackson and Madison County who fought in both world wars. The second bell is dedicated to the memory of Clarence E. Pigford who conceived and supported the whole project. The third bell is dedicated to the men and women of

Jackson and Madison County who donated money for the carillon, and the fourth bell is called the Lafayette Bell in memory of Marie Jean Paul Roch Yves Gilbert Motier, Marquis de Lafayette and a great friend of the United States. The smallest bell weighs 22 pounds. On inauguration day, Sunday, September 12, 1954, the Bell Tower stood 80 feet tall near Memorial Hall, as a crowd estimated at more than 5,000 gathered from near and far on the church grounds for the dedication. The installation of the bells was supervised by Dr. Arthur Lynds Bigelow who studied the carillon in Mechelen, Belgium, before becoming Princeton University's Bellmaster. He designed the bell master's cabin on the third level between the bourdon and the smaller bells, in order to obtain a smoother transmission of sound – a design that was eventually adopted for Princeton University's carillon. A sixty-two foot spire was installed in 1968, and a chime mechanism in 1982. Electric and electronic mechanisms have also been added recently. The Carillon today is one of 180 carillons in North America, and one of three Paccard carillons in Tennessee. Over the years, it has been played for Armistice Day ceremonies, the Starlight Symphony, and more recently, the Bells of Peace. Our carillonneur, Kathleen Huneycutt, is playing for your enjoyment today.

The Youth Activities Building / Fellowship Hall

The Youth Activities Building was the second building erected on the grounds. Built of cement blocks in four months during the winter and spring of 1955, it provided temporary meeting quarters and hastened the move from the downtown church. It abuts the rear wall of Memorial Hall rather than being the separate building that was originally planned. Its southwestern corner still shows part of the first floor of a building that served as a garage on the ground floor and as Clarence E. Pigford's library on the second floor. Its eastern ground-level flooring abuts what used to be Chevy Chase's back porch, with steps leading from the ground to the porch and house first floor level. The old back porch is used as a stage today. From the very beginning, this multi-purpose building served as reception hall, sanctuary, gymnasium, and dining hall. It was there that the first service on the new church campus took place on February 5, 1956. It is there that the first two babies were baptized. It has withstood wear and tear well. Today it is called Fellowship Hall and serves principally as a dining and meeting hall, and as an arts and crafts venue.

The Education Building

The Education Building was the third building on campus. The first floor took less than one year to complete and was dedicated on February 5, 1956. It housed a nursery, children and adult Sunday School classes, and the Albert Noe III library. A second floor was added in 1958 to provide more Sunday School classrooms. In 1971 the first floor began to be used by the Presbyterian Playschool which occupies it entirely today, while the second floor is reserved for children's Rotation Sunday School classes, with the decor entirely built by church members.

The Sanctuary

The Sanctuary was inaugurated on May 26, 1957. It sits next to the Carillon tower whose facade was integrated with the front entrance of the church. In 1957, it featured the 1912 Pilcher pipe organ to which was added an electric mechanism. The chancel was adorned with a balustrade. To its right was the lectern with the Greek inscription which stands for Christ, and to its left the pulpit topped by a canopy and adorned with a dove descending against the background of the sun, symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit from God the Father. Several items were brought from the downtown church, including benches, the communion table, and the baptismal font which is still used today. The chancel's centerpiece was an ornate Dossal Cross especially made for the church. It is the Celtic cross of the ancient Scottish church. On it are symbols of the Passion of our Lord, the cock that crowed after Peter denied his Lord, the crown of thorns, the seamless garment and the dice thrown for it. Around the center of the cross are the symbols for the four evangelists. At the bottom is a man with wings (Matthew), at the left is a winged ox (Luke), at the right a winged lion (Mark), and at the top is an eagle (John). In the center is a phoenix, representing the resurrection. The interior consisted of birch wood floors, central chandelier, and wood pews. Two adjacent rooms to the north and south of the front entrance complement the ensemble. The room to the north features a practice carillon keyboard and has been used as a historical display room. Today it houses most of the church's archives, along with several plaques and artifacts of historical value. The room to the south was used in succession as a Session meeting room, a Bride's room, and finally a chapel dedicated in 1964 by the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale in memory of Hewitt King Tigrett, the 11-year old son of long-time church members. Today, the chapel houses the 1912 communion table and pulpit and its windows are adorned by a set of six lily stained-glass windows in the style of Tiffany. Another stained-glass window from the 1912 church adorns the balcony window on the east front side of the sanctuary.

The Gym-Ed Building

The Gym-Ed building was the long-delayed completion of the original Youth Activities Building. It was completed by 1994 to accommodate the growth of the church membership to over 700 members. Containing a Family Life Center (gymnasium and kitchen), four adult classrooms, one Senior High and one Junior High classroom. It houses the Albert Noe III Library that serves as a library, a historical display area, a meeting venue, and a Sunday School classroom. The design was entrusted to the Architect firm of Pesce and built by H&M Construction. After its construction, a cloister walkway was built to link the Sanctuary to the Dining Hall and further north to the Gym-Ed building and the Education building, further integrating the five main buildings of our church campus. Because it was less than 50 years old in 2014, the Gym-Ed building was the only non-contributing building to the nomination of our campus to the National Register of Historic Sites.

The Arboretum

The Chevy Chase Arboretum at First Presbyterian Church was created in November 2006 by church members working with Keep Jackson Beautiful, the University of Tennessee- Jackson

Extension Office, and local Master Gardeners. The arboretum site encompasses 9.5 acres. Categorized as a Nature Trail/Garden Arboretum, it meets criteria for a Level 2 Arboretum with 78 trees that are visibly marked with a plaque. As an outdoor classroom, the site is open to the public and the tour is self-guided.

To create the arboretum, existing trees were inventoried, and a planting plan and a tree succession plan were established. The arboretum demonstrates environmentally responsible landscape design and restoration of degraded landscapes. To the extent possible, native species are included while maintaining the aesthetic qualities of the grounds. The arboretum architecture and landscape design respond to the cultural traditions and natural forces rooted within Jackson, Tennessee, its environment, people, climate, and resources. The arboretum is uniquely located within the city and creates a harmonious composition of elements along the human/nature/wildlife continuum. The arboretum is designed to enhance and contribute to the stewardship, educational and outreach missions of the First Presbyterian Church, in particular its environmental stewardship mission as an Earth Care Congregation since 2016.

The Stone Posts, Bridge and Gate

The stone entry gates, stone bridge columns and parapets, and the metal fencing attached to the posts were built in 1915, along with the four bridge lanterns and the two gate post lanterns. The wrought iron gates are contemporary to the gate posts. Until the mid-1950s, a stone wall extended from the gate posts to the property limits on both sides of the property. The walls were taken down when Trenton Road was broadened and renamed North Highland Avenue, but the gates retained their original wings. The driveway leading to the house has conserved its original design.

Alice-Catherine Carls