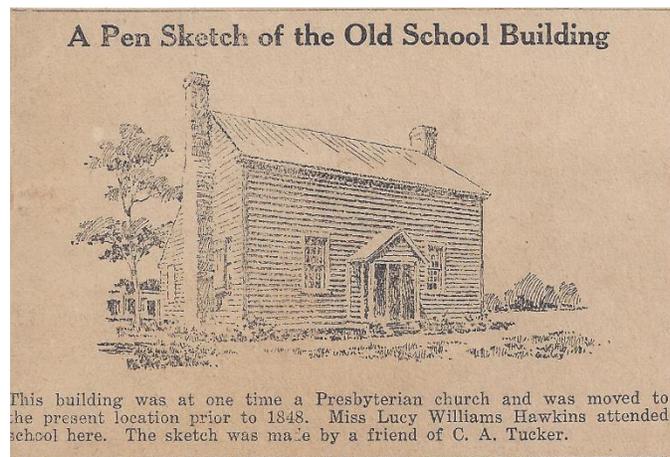

Warren County Historical Tidbits: Warrenton Presbyterian Church

A Bell, A “Brick Church” & A Sturdy Limb

It seems like the more of these stories I begin, the more I realize the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and their story of the “thread of life”, because as these stories begin to blossom I find that there’s never one source...never one tale...and never one person to whom I can give huge thanks for writing down a few bits of information. There is *always* a thread that spans generations and publications to help us uncover another Warren County Treasure.

When we trace the history of the Presbyterian Church in Warrenton, it would be impossible without the help of Jack Smith, who’s local knowledge and collection of artifacts would make the State Archives jealous; or Howard F. Jones, former owner and editor of The Warren Record who in 1946 saw fit to publish a feature called “Old Times In Warrenton”; or Lizzie Wilson Montgomery and her “Sketches of Old Warrenton” that chronicles life in our community in the 19th and early 20th century; or Mrs. Victoria L. Pendleton, lifelong teacher and mother of Katherine Arrington who dictated her memories of life in Warrenton including this Church in the 1920’s; or finally Dr. T. J. Taylor – Pastor to the Warrenton Baptist Church, Brown’s Baptist Church, Macon Baptist Church AND Warren Plains Baptist Church – who on 28 January 1916 wrote a column for the Warren Record under the heading of “Hearth and Home” that told...“The Story of A Historic Bell.”

So that’s how it seems to have begun – with a bell.



“The Kirk”, Warrenton’s first Presbyterian Church and later a school. Published 22 October 1926 in The Warren Record

In 1916, Dr. Taylor began his story with, “Many years ago, so far back in the dim past that no one now living remembers the time, there was built at the intersection of Front & Church Streets (where First Citizens Bank now stands) a little Presbyterian house of worship. This was probably the first house of worship erected in Warrenton; and was very likely built several years before 1800.” It is also noted that during the early years, the Presbyterians of Warrenton were the only possessors of a church bell in this part of the State thanks to the generosity of Mr. Alexander Crossland (more about the date and origin of the bell shortly).

Now, if you look at the picture above, you’ll notice that there is just one problem the congregation faced as owners of this historic bell: no steeple to serve as its home. With typical Warren County resourcefulness, the congregation provided a solution...they hung their bell in an oak tree on the property. The rope was hung high, accessible only when a large block was pushed under it on Sunday mornings. Mrs. Pendleton recalls that this kept the schoolboys of Warrenton Male Academy from ringing it whenever the thought struck them.

As the years marched on into the 1830's the Presbyterian Congregation dwindled and the Church fell vacant. Shortly thereafter, the citizens of Warrenton saw the need for a female college and established The Warrenton Female College in 1841. As we've seen so many times in Warren County, a number of our historic buildings have had many uses...and so it was with the Presbyterian Church. The new college moved both the Church and the bell to our present College Street. It was used as a Chapel and a Schoolroom calling young ladies to worship and class. Still lacking a steeple, the bell found its home in a new oak tree on the college grounds.

In 1848 Rev. N. Z. Graves retired from the college and moved to the northern end of town (next to Warrenton Male Academy) to establish The Warrenton Female Collegiate Institute. The bell, being his property, left with him...once again to find a home in an oak tree to serve as the institution bell until it closed after The Civil War. Graves' co-principal at the Collegiate Institute, Mr. Julius Wilcox, assumed the ownership of the bell on Rev. Graves' death...maintaining it as the Institute bell until its closing. Now at this same time the Presbyterian congregation was making a resurgence...growing steadily. The time came for them to build a new church.



In 1855 Mrs. Martha Goodrum passed and in her will left \$4,000 to the Presbyterian congregation. Her first request was to use the money to buy the Baptist Church...that offer being refused, the money was to build a new "brick church"...she was very specific about the brick part. The congregation employed Jacob Holt to build their new house of worship and he completed the work by early 1857. Mrs. Goodrum had one additional request in her gift...that she and her husband be buried under the new building (they were) with their inscribed marble slabs on either side of the pulpit.

If you stop by the Church today, you'll notice interestingly that once again this Warren County landmark lacked a steeple. For the first few years they had no need to find a solution because "the bell" was next door at the Collegiate Institute in the oak tree...and Mr. Wilcox, being a staunch Presbyterian, would dutifully ring it for any service at the Presbyterian Church. Finally, upon the closing of the Collegiate Institute the bell was given to the Presbyterian Church...to hang in an elm tree in front.

The elm tree is long gone, but the bell still stands in front of the Church, hung from a sturdy metal frame for all to see and hear. But wait just a minute...we're not quite done with our story yet...there's just a little more to hear from "the bell". Stop by the Presbyterian Church on North Main Street one day soon and take a look at it. You can see the years etched in its patina...the cost of living so long marked in the nicks around the bottom of the bell...and around the top of the bell you'll see a cast inscription:

E - FORCE - N - YORK - 1828

After a little time spent with Google, I found that our bell came from the foundry of one Ephraim Force. He operated a brass foundry at various east side New York City addresses from 1807-1848. Based on some of his other clientele I found (including the bell for the State Capital in Milledgeville, Georgia) Mr. Force seems to have provided bells for a number of important Southern buildings over the years.



Dr. J. T. Taylor, first man on left in front

Dr. J. T. Taylor summed up the story of this bell better than I think I ever could when he wrote, *"Other bells have their homes in steeples, towers, and belfries; but this bell has always enjoyed the freedom of out-door life, and like the birds of the air has no home but a tree;...It has been intimately associated with the history of the town for at least a hundred years (written in 1916). From the tree tops it has called multitudes of girls to the schoolroom, alarmed the town when angry flames were leaping around the burning buildings, rang joyous peals to summon happy friends to witness holy vows at hymen's altar, solemnly tolled as some of earth's noblest and best were borne to their long home, and it has called multitudes of pious worshippers to the house of prayer."*

What a legacy!

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.