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A Narrative of Past Events Relating to a Particular People

Five weeks ago today, at this very hour, I stood in the nave of one of the world's greatest churches, and marveled that such a building, started before 1100 AD, could be still standing and serving the daily religious needs of its parishioners. The church was the great cathedral of Chartres, in France; a building thought by many to represent the most perfect architectural achievement of man. One of the many legends surrounding Chartres, this one first recorded in 1145, tells that "men brought up in honour and wealth, nobles, men and women, bent their proud and haughty necks to the harness of carts, and like beasts of burden, they dragged to the abode of Christ wagons, loaded with wines, grains, oil, stone, wood, for the construction of the church."

Today, we are far removed, both in time and distance, from the medieval cities of France. Our little church, less than 80 years old, can hardly be compared to Chartres. The Church of the Ascension is no cathedral, nor does it house such precious relics as the veil of the Virgin Mary. But the simple legends that have come down to us, here in this church, like those of the building of Chartres, seem to describe the same kind of steadfast faith, the same kind of willing self-sacrifice, and the same kind of loving cooperation.

The history of a church - - or of a nation - - is a narrative of past events relating to a particular people. It is the personal aspect, the story of the people themselves with whom we are concerned today; those who have gone before, who are with us now, and who are yet to come. In recounting our own legends from the past, perhaps we can find inspiration for the future.

Today is a very special day in the history of this parish, because the services held here will be the first as a completely independent parish. But another important day in the history of this church was Sunday, June 30, 1895 - - just 79 years ago; for on that day, the Reverend James Stoney drove down from Camden and held the very first service under this roof. The building was not yet completed, and boards were temporarily laid where the center aisle would be located, and Holy Communion was taken without an altar rail. But the tiny new congregation was proud of its beautiful silver communion service, a gift from St. Paul's Church in Boston. And it was on that June morning that the first infant was brought to baptism. She was Mary Sanders Ellerbe, named for her grandmother, Mary Sanders Ellerbe, who had died only 4 weeks before. How appropriate that her own great-grandson should be baptized today!

Mary Sanders was the wife, and first cousin, of William Crawford Sanders Ellerbe, and it is with him that the story of Ascension Church begins. William Ellerbe was a devout Christian and a loyal Episcopalian, who had been raised in the faith of his father, even though his widowed mother was, like the other Sanderses of her day, a Baptist. In 1890, William Ellerbe was living in Camden, where he had moved

after the Civil War to educate his large family, and where he had served, for a time, as mayor. Now his children were grown, and he had decided to move back to his plantation on Rafting Creek, where he owned a mill, a store, and a large tract of land. Already he was spending more and more time in the country, and would soon build a home, but he was far removed from his church, which he loved. When Sundays came, he walked - - walked because he insisted that the farm animals, too, must have a day of rest - - to a small Baptist church which stood further down on Rafting Creek, on the road between Hagood and Horatio. The idea of building an Episcopal church must have occurred to him, and the others in his family. The first question to arise would naturally be one of cost. The most cherished legend of our church tells us that his daughter Ellen found a dime on the sidewalk in Camden, and announced that with this dime, the church would begin. The question of who would worship with them must surely have occurred to the Ellerbes, for even though they were a large family, they proposed to erect a church in the heart of Baptist country, for all their Sanders relatives had long been Baptist, probably since the High Hills pastorate of Richard Furman.

The chosen site was already holy ground. In 1807, a group of rustic entrepreneurs, calling themselves the "Shiloh Burying Ground Association," obtained 2 1/2 acres of land from William Sanders, grandfather of both William Ellerbe and of his wife, and in addition to a cemetery, built a black smith shop and a school. The buildings had disappeared by 1895 as had most of the graves, but Mr. Robert Moody, years ago, said that many people are buried where the church and parking lot now stand. The oldest marked graves in the cemetery are, appropriately, those of William Sanders, the father of Mary Sanders Ellerbe, dated 1875, and that of his sister, Epatha Sanders Ellerbe, who was the mother of William Ellerbe. The choice of the site, then, was a logical one, and before long the entire community had been infected with enthusiasm, or perhaps, inspired by the Holy Ghost. Work began with vigor on raising money to build the church, and the 10¢ mustard seed soon began to sprout and flourish.

The stories of the fund raising drive have come down to us, and are well known to this congregation. Every form of entertainment was undertaken to raise money. Each family from Horatio to Boykin took their turn. Even as faraway as Stateburg, Mr. and Mrs. William Saunders gave a party at Marston and raised \$60 for the fund. Ice cream festivals were popular, and a cake, won at a raffle by Thomas Polk Sanders, Sr., was shared with all the losers. One strawberry festival was attended by none other than Bernard Baruch himself, who, it is said, made a donation.

Mrs. R.M. James sold her needlework in the North. Miss Ellen Ellerbe arranged to ship a fresh japonica every day to a stock broker in New York City by train -- though what condition the flowers were in when they arrived on Wall Street is unknown. The ladies of the community are said to have brought no new clothes during one winter, and to have donated the money to the church building fund. Solicitations were placed in the church papers, and gifts began to arrive. Mrs. Young, wife of the New York broker, turned out to be a Gibbes from Charleston, and contributed generously. Mrs. Taylor, in Illinois, was inspired to contribute \$50 by a notice in the

Living Church. These early contributors -- only names to us now -- were of vital importance to the founders of our church, and we wish we knew more about Miss Thomas of Boontown, N.J., Mrs. Gatchell of Quincy, Ill., Mrs. Bulow and Mr. W.H. Byrd of Charleston. Grace Church in Charleston sent the altar rail and an old pulpit which was converted into the Bishop's chair. The other chair, now in the sanctuary, was discovered by the Ellerbe ladies in an old mill house in Waynesville.

One of the most intriguing money-raising devices was the so-called "Experience Meeting." All the ladies were assigned a task of earning 50¢ by their own wits during Lent of 1894, and also of making a written report of their activities. A few of those reports have survived, and make delightful reading.

Here is a sample:

When Lent commenced I thought oh how hard it is to earn 50 cts in an unusual way, and now that it is made the query is how can I tell about it. Well! I suppose the sooner I begin the easier the task will be. I commenced by looking over my wardrobe. What could I spare. At last I decided to get a job lot of quilt scraps, cast away garments &c, but that seemed so little to offer a poor darkey for 50 cts, then I instituted another search, found an old tidy, apron, a dilapidated old basket, and mat that corresponded with it. I weighed well the bargain to see if I could ask 50 cts, but my conscience said no, it is only worth 40 cts. Now this heterogeneous collection was deposited in a plain wooden box with leather hinges which I will again mention.

A few afternoons after my task of collection was over, I took a walk, met a woman who sometimes bought clothing from me. I said wouldn't you like to get a nice bargain? mentioning the articles the box contained. Yes, she said, I was just needen some scraps to finish my quilt, but I can't get your things now. Oh! I said, you must come for them soon because I have to make the money during Lent, and then write about it. "Will den, she said, I will come next week, and den you kin write about me." She kept her word, came, and brought 50 cts. I showed her the things, and she was delighted, exclaimed Miss, can't I carry my lunch in that basket to church? Oh yes I said that is the very idea.

Now there was such a collection, I said what will you put them in? Would you like to get the box? She said I will be much obliged to you. Now she had paid me 40 cts and I knew she had 10 cts more and I felt ashamed to say, I mean would you like to buy the box for 10 cts, but I did, for I wanted so much to earn the 50 cts. I don't think I spoke very loud when I asked her, she immediately agreed and commenced thanking me for her great bargain, as she termed it. Of course we were mutually pleased, and my task was done.

Mrs. James, the same lady who sold her fancy work in the North, put her report in the form of verse:

A WAY TO MAKE FIFTY CTS

*A fifty cents I have to make,
In some peculiar way;
So I will think the matter o'er,
And start my work today.*

*First of all I'll look around,
And see if I can spare;
out of my wardrobe this, or that,
Of what I have to wear.*

*Then there's the garden (an after thought
That should have come before);
For onions I can always sell,
If sent from door to door.*

*So I'll select the finest kind
That in my garden grows
And send to friends both near and far
To buy if they should chose.*

*And I have now my money made
For the "Experience Meeting"
Because I have my onions sold
To those who love good eating.*

*So learn this lesson (dearly bought),
My friends both "tried and true,"
That onions sell ten cents per quart
And fifty cents to you.*

*This little essay I have written,
To tell you all about it;
For we agreed not to receive
The fifty cents without it.*

And so it went. Weeks and months passed, and soon the goal was in sight. In the spring of 1895, Mary Sanders Ellerbe signed a note for the balance of the debt, and thus cleared the way for a gift of \$125 from the Church Building Fund. But neither she nor her husband lived to attend the first service in the new church, for they had died 3 months before, within 6 weeks of each other. Some say she died of a broken heart, grieving for her beloved husband. Others say that it was the result of eating cold turkey dressing. At William Ellerbe's funeral, Mr. Stoney said, "Mr. Ellerbe will need no monument but this church." Two years later, William Ellerbe's daughter, Mary Alden Ellerbe, married Dr. Singleton Kirk in the first marriage performed in the church.

But things did not always go smoothly. The night following the first service, thieves broke in and stole the new silver communion service. While still under construction the church was struck by lightning and damaged. Because of their fear of snakes, carpenters could be persuaded to work on the church only by promises of large dinners, brought by wagon every day. Three years later, the roof caught on fire, and the church was saved by the heroic action of Marius Sanders, who climbed to the roof and tore off the burning shingles.

Thus, the story of the early years of our church is the story of the personal sacrifices and contributions of its people. We should not forget their names, although the list is too long to mention them all. Theresa James Scarborough, the last surviving original communicant, comes to mind. Like her mother, she was a leader in organizing our church, and served for many years as organist. Samuel Gaillard was the first layreader. His future son-in-law, Walter M. Lenoir, was the first person confirmed in this church on the day of its consecration by Bishop Capers, March 8, 1896. Their descendants continue to serve this church loyally down to the present generation. Mr. Arthur Gaillard served as an early layreader and Superintendent of the Sunday School.

In more recent years, the same kind of devotion has been apparent, and to name but a few will perhaps do an injustice to the many others. But who can forget the contributions of Mr. and Mrs. Ancrum Boykin, Mrs. Clink Jackson, Ike Sanders, one of the faithful layreaders, Harold Langtry, Miss Annie Keels, Guy Whetstone, and Perry Brown? The same spirit is alive and well today, and by merely looking around you, you will see many who carry on in the same tradition.

One cannot ignore the clergy, of course. The first regular minister was the Rev. William H. Barnwell who lived at Stateburg, then the Rev. C.W. Boyd. Next came a young man, straight from seminary, who quickly won the affections of the congregation, and who inspired a splendid surge of growth. He was the Reverend William Stoney, son of the first minister, and was described in 1925, in perhaps one of the understatement of the decade, as “full of enthusiasm and energy, doing most acceptable work.”

He was followed by his college room mate, the Rev. Moultrie Guerry, who also did “most acceptable work.” Each clergyman, in fact, has made a unique and vital contribution and in his own way, has done God’s work in this place. The Rev. George Harris, so active with the youth, was next. After 10 years he was succeeded by Alfred Chambliss, Eugene West, Claude Hobart, Bill Stoney again, Richard Sturgis (who inspired us with the dignity and reverence of his services), and William Potts; the last three of whom are, to our joy, with us today.

Like every other community, this one has produced a wide assortment of human beings. A few, who now rest here, are remembered because they were not ordinary people; some, perhaps, might be considered a little strange, but no history of this church would be complete without mentioning some of these. We are reminded of “Cousin,” whose real name was Rebecca Hicks, and who arrived by accident in

Hagood and decided to stay. It is said that she was very fat, and required a specially built buggy, but she had no horse. She moved from home to home, a perpetual house guest, and would summon her next host, and his horse, when she decided to move. Another is Captain Robert Ellerbe, Confederate veteran, brother of William Ellerbe, but not a member of this church, nor of any other. He left a reputation as a thoroughgoing roué, whose drinking and practical jokes are legendary. Harold Langtry, the expatriate schoolmaster, should be remembered. He always insisted that he was Irish, not English, and vigorously defended the reputation of the actress, Lily Langtry, despite all evidence to the contrary. Dr. Swepson Saunders, who added a "u" to the familiar name, deserves a mention, as well as his sons, Gus and George. I can still see Gus, known as the Mayor of Hagood, driving down the center of the road; half of his car was black, and the other half was the color of tobacco juice. It was he who came, one evening, to dinner, and stayed forty years. George, it is said, kept his accounts on the State House wall and insisted on being buried in a sport shirt. Cornelia Sanders Sanders, sister of Mary Sanders Ellerbe, who further complicated the family tree by also marrying her first cousin, was a staunch Baptist and opposed the building of this church so much that she closed the blinds on her house so she could avoid seeing it. She must have relented later, for she gave entertainments in her yard to raise money for the building fund. Now she rests within the shadow of the steeple and her numerous progeny have long been the backbone of this parish. For years she faithfully tended the grave of another legendary figure who may lie buried here. Private Hunnycutt, the only known casualty of the Battle of Rafting Creek, died in her home, and was buried, some say, in our cemetery. No doubt there are those here today who will be remembered in the stories we will pass down to our children.

If the Church of the Ascension appears, from these comments, to be a family enterprise, the appearance is justified, in a sense, because here we are one family. Though we may not all be related by blood, there are other ties, known only to those who have lived and worshipped here, that bind us inseparably, no matter how great the span of time and distance. It is those ties of blood, of familiarity, of a common purpose, and the love of our community and our church that have brought us to this historic day, and which will continue to sustain and inspire us in the year to come.

To those of us who have lived here and have moved away, Hagood, and the Church of the Ascension, will always be home, and to return is truly to come home again. Some day -- no time soon, I hope -- I will return home for the last time to be laid with my ancestors under the magnolia tree. When I pause to think about it -- which is not often -- the epitaph of Robert Louis Stephenson invariably comes to mind:

*Under the wide and starry sky,
dig my grave and let me lie.
And this be the verse you carve for me;
Here he lies where he longed to be.
Glad did I live, and gladly die,
And I lay me down with a will.
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter, home from the hill.*

