

MEMORIAL
 OF
THE FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
WILMINGTON, N. C.

SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY.
1817-1892.

Whittet & Shepperson, Printers
1001 Main Street, Richmond, Va.

RICHMOND, VA.:
 WHITTET & SHEPPERSON, PRINTERS, 1001 MAIN STREET.
 1893.

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John W. Deventer
West Palm Beach

HISTORY

OF THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

WILMINGTON, N. C.

THE first sermon by a Presbyterian minister in Wilmington, of which there is any record, was preached February 15, 1756, by Rev. Hugh McAden, whose descendants in the fifth generation are on the roll of the church at the present time. In 1760 Rev. James Tate, and in 1785 Rev. William Bingham, both Presbyterian ministers from Ireland, opened classical schools in Wilmington, and preached here, and in adjoining counties.

There seems to have been no formal organization prior to 1817, the Presbyterians worshipping with the Episcopalians and Methodists, who alternately worshipped in the Episcopal Church. At that time a petition from "a large and respectable number of citizens of Wilmington," met to organize themselves into a Presbyterian congregation, was presented to Fayetteville Presbytery, asking to be taken under the care of Presbytery. The petition was granted and the church was enrolled. There is no record of the formal organization of the church by a Committee of Presbytery, but it may have been done by Rev. Colin McIver, who was appointed to preach there before the next stated meeting of Presbytery. At all events, in 1819, Mr. John McAuslan was seated as commissioner from the church in Wilmington.

In May, 1818, the congregation assembled in the Episcopal

Church—then on Market street, between Third and Fourth—and heard a sermon from Rev. James O. Andrews, a minister, and afterwards a bishop, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, after which a procession was formed and marched to the site chosen for the Presbyterian Church, on the east side of Front street, between Dock and Orange. There the corner-stone was laid by St. John's Lodge and Concord Chapter.

On May 12, 1819, Rev. Artemus Boies, a licentiate, having been duly and unanimously called, was regularly ordained and installed pastor of the church by Fayetteville Presbytery, convened there for the purpose.

November 3, 1819, the church was destroyed in a disastrous fire that swept away nearly all that portion of the town, thereby wiping out, let us hope, the reproach upon the church of having raised the money for building it by a lottery.

With commendable zeal and liberality, in spite of the prostrate condition of the city, the congregation went to work to rebuild. They were generously assisted from without, and through the kindness of Rev. Adam Empie, rector of St. James' (Episcopal) Church, they meanwhile occupied that building one half of each Sabbath-day. The corner-stone of the new church was laid in 1820, and the building was completed in 1821.

Mr. Boies had meanwhile accepted a call from Charleston, where he had visited while seeking funds for the new church. He was a man of taste and cultivation, and his work in Charleston was greatly blessed. On account of his health he returned to New England, and at the time of his death (1844) was in charge of the Pine Street Church in Boston.

Mr. Boies was succeeded, after an interval, by Rev. Leonard E. Lathrop, a native of Helbron, Conn., who was ordained and installed in January, 1823. At the first communion of this pastorate fifteen ladies were added to the church, and at the second, one gentleman—the first male member received on



REV. THOS. P. HUNT.

examination since the organization of the church. In consequence of ill-health Mr. Lathrop resigned his charge in October, 1824. His very useful ministry was terminated by death in 1857.

The church was supplied at intervals after the departure of Mr. Lathrop, until, in April, 1827, Rev. Noel Robertson, a licentiate of the Second Presbytery of New York, was ordained and installed pastor. The relation was dissolved at his request in the April of the following year, and in October of the same year he died, at Manayunk, Penn., in the 22d year of his age.

After this the church sunk into a period of great depression. It was without a session; its pulpit was for a while profaned by a man of scandalous intemperance, and many families seem at this time to have left the church. In 1830, a ray of light fell on the darkness. The first annual report to the General Assembly was sent up in the spring of this year, and is as follows: "Communicants (at beginning of year), 30; added on examination, 6; died, 1; dismissed, 1; total, 34; infants baptized, 4." The facts are explained by the visit of Rev. W. S. Plumer (then a young man), as a Domestic Missionary,

The better times thus begun grew brighter in the latter part of the same year, when Rev. Thomas P. Hunt (a stepson of Rev. Moses Hoge, D. D.), came to Wilmington as a temperance lecturer. He remained with this people, and under his preaching the church was revived; a session, consisting of Alexander Anderson, William P. Hort, James Owen, and Robert W. Gibbs, was elected in March, 1831, and May 13, 1832, Mr. Hunt was installed pastor. Before his installation, as shown by the report to Presbytery that spring, the number of communicants had been increased by twenty-nine, a Sunday-school with forty-nine scholars had been organized, and also a Foreign Missionary Society. Mr. Hunt preached his farewell sermon, June 22, 1834, having been appointed agent to re-

ceive funds for the endowment of Donaldson Academy at Fayetteville.

In November of that year, Rev. James A. McNeill arrived in Wilmington as Stated Supply for one year. He was then a licentiate, but was during the year ordained *sine titulo*. At the end of the year he was called to the pastorate, but on account of failing health was never installed. He left Wilmington in the summer of 1836, in the hope of regaining his health, and was never able to resume his labors. He paid a visit to his people in the following November, and then took passage for Cuba. He died of consumption, September 27, 1837.

In 1837, the church was supplied for a few months by Rev. Robert Southgate, and in 1838, by Rev. Henry Brown, a brother of the now venerable Rev. William Brown, D. D., for many years permanent clerk of the General Assembly. His labors of a few months were much blessed. In the end of that year, Rev. W. W. Eells, a licentiate of Harmony Presbytery, was invited to Wilmington, and after laboring a few months was called to the pastorate, and was ordained and installed, April 28, 1839.

In March, 1840, the building of a session-room in the rear of the church was determined on, and it was dedicated October 22nd of the same year. It was used for the Sabbath-school, the weekly prayer-meetings and lectures, and contained a room for the pastor's study. The first organ was introduced during this pastorate.

Mr. Eells was in delicate health, and for that reason was much away from his charge, and resigned in September, 1841. He continued to supply the pulpit at the urgent request of the congregation until February, 1842, although the pastoral relation had been dissolved the preceding November. The membership at the close of his ministry was fifty.

Rev. Thomas R. Owen, who had become a candidate for the ministry from this church during the pastorate of Mr.

Hunt, frequently supplied the pulpit during Mr. Fells' absences, and was called to the pastorate the August after his resignation. The following September (1843), to the surprise and regret of the congregation, he tendered his resignation without having been installed.

The great need of the church during all this period was a settled pastorate. In less than thirty years it had had seven pastors or regular supplies, all but two of whom were ordained in connection with this church. Of its first four pastors, Mr. Boies, Mr. Lathrop, and Mr. Hunt were still living and laboring successfully elsewhere. If any one of them could have continued with this church, it would have developed into much greater strength before this time. But it is evident that the proper development and training of the congregation could not take place under these conditions. The male members were few; the session was small; there were no deacons; and the affairs of the church were almost entirely in the hands of the trustees—a public-spirited, high-toned body of men, but for the most part not communicants.

In January, 1845, Rev. J. O. Stedman began his labors here, for reasons of his own preferring to act as stated supply. He remained with the congregation for six years, and under his care the growth of the church was rapid and substantial. Great attention was paid to the catechetical instruction of the children of the Sabbath-school; a Sabbath-school for colored persons was organized; the monthly concert of prayer for missions was regularly observed; a Juvenile Missionary Society was formed, and also a Domestic Missionary Society.

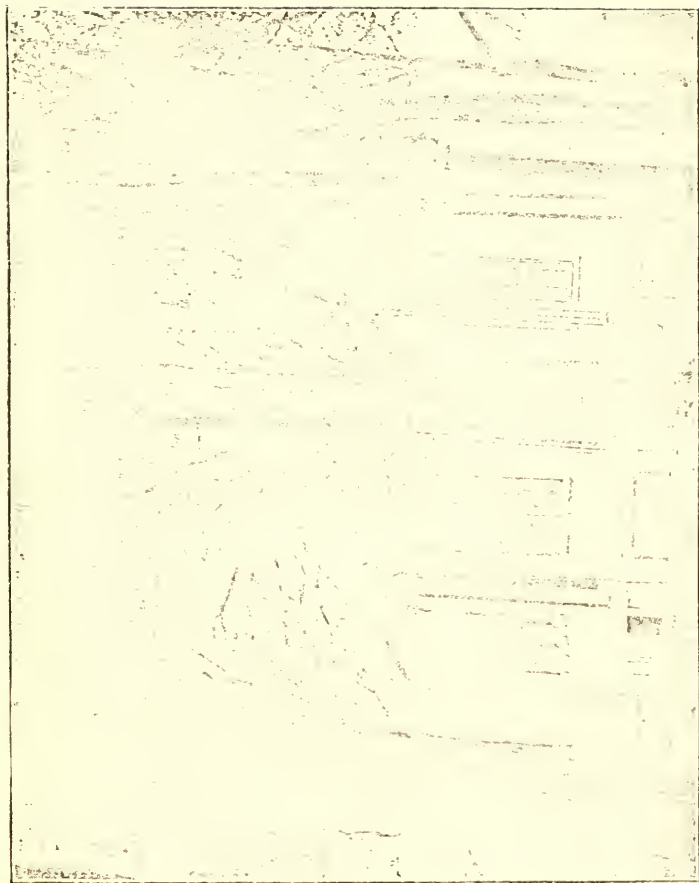
March 25, 1847, a congregational meeting resolved on the remodeling of the interior of the church. Previous to this time it had had upon the sides next to the walls the old-fashioned box-pews, with seats upon three sides, and the high pulpit, elevated upon Ionic pillars and reached by winding stairs. All this was changed, and a modern pulpit and comfortable

modern pews were introduced. A new bell was added in 1850, costing \$448. The old bell was given in part payment, and Captain Gilbert Potter gave the rest. In the latter part of this year a protracted meeting was held by Rev. Daniel Baker, the Texas missionary, and fourteen or fifteen souls were hopefully converted.

Mr. Stedman in 1851, on account of the ill-health of his wife, declined the regular call tendered him by the congregation, and in August, preached his farewell sermon. During the period of Mr. Stedman's services (six years and six months) there were admitted on examination, 34 white and 16 colored members: and on certificate, 30 white and 5 colored. The dismissals were 12, and the deaths 7. The membership reported the following spring was 84. The contributions for benevolent objects (Foreign Missions, Waldenses, Colonization Society, Education, Union Seminary, Domestic Missions, Bible and Tract Societies, etc.) amounted to \$2,450.16.

The changes in the session previous to the close of Mr. Stedman's term of service were as follows: In 1835, William P. Hort removed beyond the bounds of the congregation, and in 1836, Mr. Hervey Law appears as a member of the session. He was at one time the efficient superintendent of the Sunday-school, but removed North in the summer of 1850. Mr. Alexander Anderson, who had presided over the original meeting that petitioned Presbytery for the organization of the church in 1817, died in November, 1844, just before Mr. Stedman came. On January 10, 1850, Mr. John C. Latta, previously a ruling elder in the Fayetteville Church, was elected to that office by this congregation.

Rev. M. B. Grier, of the Presbytery of Baltimore, began labors here as Stated Supply, July 18, 1852, and the following February was elected pastor, but was not installed until May 18, 1854. In 1854, a brick dwelling on Front street, near Red Cross, was purchased for a manse (destroyed in the fire of



CHESNUT STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

1886), and by 1855 the congregation had paid \$4,000 on this account, and the same year contributed \$1,100 to Union Seminary, and \$3,000 to the Seamen's Friend Society. In 1857 a new organ, costing \$2,500, was placed in the church, the old one being used in part payment.

In 1858 the church was visited with a memorable revival. One of the elders returned from a convention of elders and deacons in Greensboro with quickened zeal. A prayer-meeting was called to consult and pray together over the interests of the church. The pastor was absent on missionary duty, and when he returned found the tide of interest and feeling rising. Prayer and preaching services were arranged at once, the families of the church were visited, and many went daily to the pastor's study to receive counsel and guidance. Special meetings were arranged for the colored people, who could not attend the day services. The immediate results of this work of grace were great. In three months forty-two white and twenty colored persons were received into the communion of the church, many of them young men. A mission chapel (situated on Chesnut street, between Seventh and Eighth) was erected as a thank-offering for God's mercy, and used for a time as originally designed. On November 6, 1858, fourteen persons, including one of the ruling elders, Mr. John C. Latta, were dismissed to form the Second Presbyterian Church, and the new building was surrendered to them for a house of worship. On November 29th the session was enlarged by the election of Dr. James H. Dickson, John N. Andrews, Barzillai G. Worth, George Chadbourn and James C. Smith. At the same time the first Board of Deacons was elected, consisting of Captain Gilbert Potter, John W. K. Dix, Thomas C. Worth, Malcolm McInnis, Joseph C. Russell, Samuel Northrop, and James D. Cumming. These officers were ordained December 18, 1858. Another fruit of the revival was the organization of a Young Men's Prayer Meeting, that was kept up until the war,

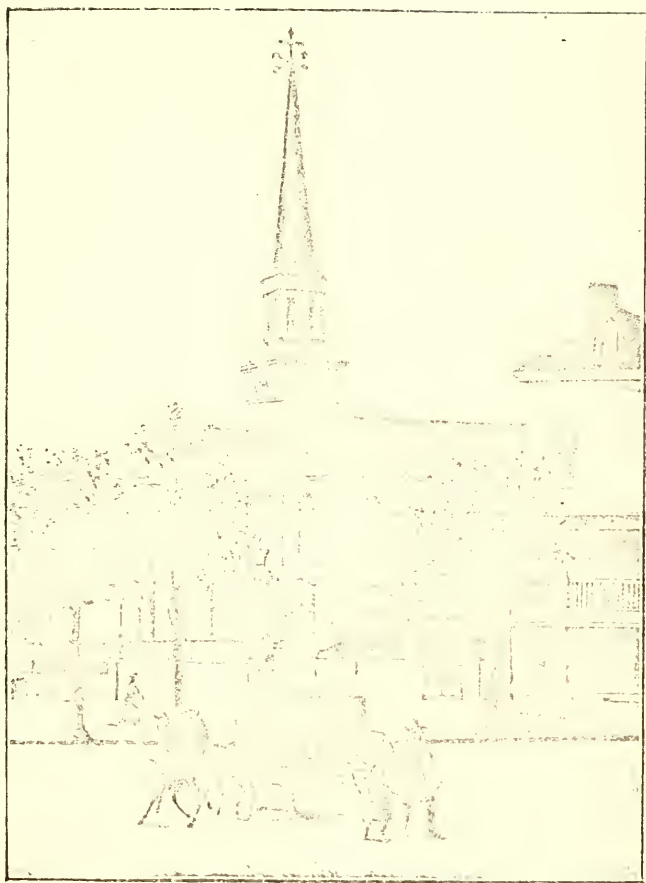
and was useful in inaugurating mission work in the southern part of the city.

April 13, 1859, the church, which was valued at about \$10,000, and on which there was no insurance, was burned to the ground. A subscription was begun on the spot, and a meeting was held in Dr. Dickson's office the same evening to initiate proceedings for rebuilding; a committee was appointed to secure subscriptions, and at the next meeting of the officers a subscription of \$14,000 was reported. Citizens of all denominations contributed liberally. Service was held in the lecture-room (which was still standing) the next Sunday, and Mr. Grier preached from Isa. lxiv. 11. The lecture-room was too contracted for the congregation, and so the use of the City Hall was obtained, and worship was held there from May 22, 1859, until the new church was completed. The Synod held its sessions in that room in the fall of the same year.

It was decided not to rebuild on the old site, so the lot with the lecture-room upon it was sold, and also the manse, and the present lot with the buildings on it was purchased for \$7,500. Out of these buildings a manse was fitted up. The plan for the new church was drawn by Samuel Sloan, of Philadelphia, and the estimated cost was \$20,000. Mr. James Walker was the contractor who erected it. The bell was the gift of Mr. George Harriss, and the organ (which was not put in until after the late war) was chiefly the gift of Mr. Eli Murray. The new house was dedicated April 28, 1861, the pastor preaching the sermon.

It was with mutual regret that during this year pastor and people recognized the necessity of separation, on account of their different attitudes toward the great struggle then impending. Mr. Grier left Wilmington about June 1, 1861, and the pastoral relation was severed by Presbytery the following October.

During this pastorate there were 57 white persons and 41



OLD FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

colored received on examination, and 34 white persons by certificate; 25 persons were dismissed to other churches, and the membership reported the following spring was 195. In 1857 there were 130 scholars in the Sabbath-school, and 180 in 1860. From 1853 to 1861, \$846 was contributed for Foreign Missions, \$845 for Sustentation, \$882 for Education, and \$169 for Publication. Mr. Grier, on leaving Wilmington, became editor of *The Presbyterian*, of Philadelphia, and has remained in connection with it to the present time. The period of his pastorate was one of great blessing to the church, the influence of which we rejoice in to the present time. The church entered upon a higher plane of usefulness, from which it has never since descended.

During the civil war the church was without a pastor, but on the temporary suspension of the Second Church, its pastor, Rev. Martin McQueen, supplied this church. This was in 1863 and 1864. In the latter part of 1864, and a few months of 1865, it was supplied by Rev. A. D. Hepburn. During this period four white persons were received on examination, and two colored; by certificate, four white persons. The period was not propitious for outward growth. The numerical decline was material. But in the furnace of affliction the faith of many shone brighter, and whether doing their duty on the field of battle, or in the plague-stricken town, there were not a few who, proving faithful unto death, received the martyr's crown.

Rev. Horace L. Singleton, of the Presbytery of Baltimore, was called to the pastorate November 21, 1865, having already entered upon his labors, and was installed May 6, 1866. He served the church until October 1, 1871.

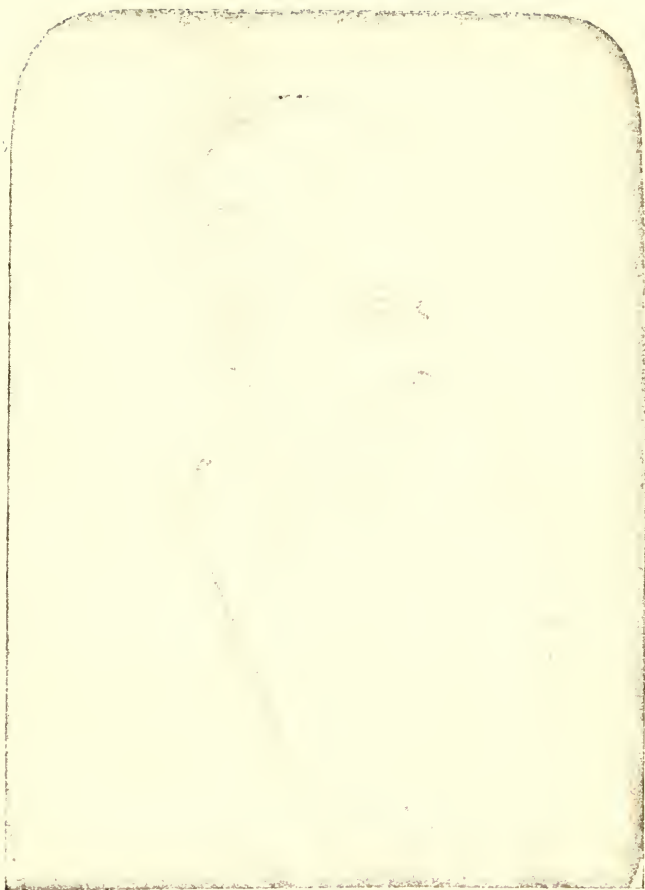
Seasons of revival are reported in the spring of 1867, when special services were held, and 10 persons made profession of their faith between the spring and summer communion; in 1869, when morning prayer-meetings were held for a week, and 16 were received at the spring communion; and in 1870,

when 16 made profession of their faith at the same season. In all, 70 were added to the church on examination, and 57 on certificate during this pastorate. The total membership at the close was 172

In the first year of Mr. Singleton's ministry the debt of \$10,000 resting on the church was cancelled, the eastern portion of the church lot, with the buildings on it, being sold. In January, 1871, the lecture room was reported ready for use. The practice of taking stated collections for the benevolent operations of the church had not been commenced, but in 1870 a balance of \$310, and in 1871, of \$438, was distributed among the different causes. On April 21, 1867, the Chesnut street Presbyterian Church (colored), in connection with the Northern General Assembly, was organized with thirty-four members, most of whom came by letter from this church. They purchased from the Second Church the building originally erected by this congregation as a mission chapel.

At the beginning of this pastorate there were but two elders,* George Chadbourn, and J. C. Smith. Robert W. Gibbs Gibbs had died in 1861, Mr. Andrews had removed from the city, Dr. Dickson had laid down his life in the yellow-fever scourge of 1862, and Gen. Owen had died in 1865. Of the board of deacons, Dr. Worth and Mr. Dix were also victims of the yellow fever, and Capt. Potter died in 1861. The remaining deacons were Samuel Northrop, James D. Cumming, Joseph B. Russel, and Malcolm McInnis. February 2, 1868, A. A. Willard, John McLaurin, James D. Cumming, Samuel Northrop, and C. H. Robinson, were elected ruling elders, and Thomas W. Payer, G. W. Williams, D. G. Worth, W. Whitehead, and E. P. George, were elected deacons. A few weeks later, C. P. Mebane was elected deacon, Mr. McInnis

* Mr. B. G. Worth had removed to the North at the close of the war, but, returning shortly afterwards, was re-elected to the eldership.



REV. WILLIAM S. PLUMER, D. D.

having removed to Brooklyn, N. Y. Steps were shortly after taken for the more thorough organization of the congregation for Christian work.

In the December following Mr. Singleton's removal, Rev. A. F. Dickson began to supply the pulpit, and was called to the pastorate, March 20, 1872. Up to this time eighteen persons had been received into the church upon profession of faith. He was installed June 1, but his pastorate continued less than a year from that date. The church was at this time distracted by a painful division, and in May, 1873, the congregation united with Mr. Dickson in his request to Presbytery for a dissolution of the relation, bearing unanimous testimony "to his ardent, humble piety and to his entirely faultless Christian character and deportment," and expressing their "full appreciation of the earnestness, zeal and fidelity with which he discharged his duties as pastor of this church." The membership at the close of this pastorate was one hundred and ninety-one.

During this time E. P. George was dismissed to Denver, Col., and James Sprunt was elected deacon in his place.

From September, 1873, until the vacancy in the pastorate was filled, the church was favored with the regular ministrations of that venerable servant of God, Rev. William S. Plumer, D. D., who forty-three years before had visited the church in its time of deepest darkness. Now as then, the church was greatly comforted and blessed by his ministrations. Dr. Plumer continued to come over weekly from Columbia and preach on the Sabbath, until in March, 1874, Rev. Joseph R. Wilson, D. D., of Columbia Seminary, having received a unanimous call to the pastorate of the church, entered upon his labors. He was installed November 1, 1874.

The beginning of this pastorate (the longest in the history of the church) was marked by a gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and during the first year 36 persons were received on

profession of faith and 20 by letter. Again, in the year ending April, 1880, the special presence of the Holy Spirit is indicated by the addition of 25 on profession of faith. During the whole pastorate 121 were received on profession of faith and 66 on certificate. Among the more important events of this period are the following: The re-purchase (in 1874) of the eastern portion of the church lot, with the handsome residence that had meanwhile been erected upon it; the entire extinction in 1879 of the debt of \$14,552, through the labors of G. W. Williams, chairman of the board of deacons; the building of the annex to the lecture room in 1883, for the use of the infant class; the abolition of pew rents and the inauguration of the present system of subscription and weekly contributions; and the adoption of the Assembly's system of stated collections for the beneficent causes of the church.

Under this last plan the contributions to these causes greatly increased, and were for the whole period as follows: Foreign Missions, \$4,132; Sustentation, \$762; Evangelistic, \$1,250; Education, \$400; Invalid Fund, \$755; Publication, \$311; Tuscaloosa Institute, \$272. The increase may be seen by comparing the total for these objects reported April, 1875, \$459, with the total of \$986 in 1885. These figures would be larger if certain special contributions had been included in the reports.

The following changes occurred during this time in the session and board of deacons: James D. Cumming in 1873 was dismissed to Tarboro, and James C. Smith in 1881 to Calah; both had served as clerk of session for many years. Of the deacons, Mr. Whitehead was dismissed to Fayetteville in 1874, Mr. Russell moved to Charleston, and in 1879, authorized his name to be dropped from the list of deacons, and in the same year Mr. Payer was removed by death. On December 21, 1870, B. F. Hall was elected ruling elder, and James Alderman, John D. Taylor, H. H. Munson, and W. R. Kenan,

were elected deacons. In March, 1885, Mr. Alderman was removed by death.

In February, 1885, Dr. Wilson, having been elected Professor of Theology in the Southwestern University, Clarksville, Tenn., and deeming it his duty to accept, sorrowfully requested the dissolution of the pastoral tie. The church as sorrowfully united in the request, and, on April 1st, the relation was terminated.

In September, 1853, Rev. Peyton H. Hoge, of Richmond, Va., was called to the pastorate of the church. He formally began his labors, December 1st, and was installed January 24, 1886. Again God was pleased to set the seal of his approbation upon the pastoral relation by graciously outpouring his Holy Spirit. The week before the installation a Mothers' Prayer-meeting was held daily, and such was the interest developed that the pastor preached every night of the following week. The next Sunday 22 made public profession of their faith, and during the year, 39 in all were received on profession of faith and 15 on certificate. Frequent seasons of revival have since gladdened the hearts of pastor and people, especially in connection with the spring communion, when morning prayer-meetings are held daily for one or two weeks. The most memorable revival season was the spring of 1888, when our city was blessed by the presence and labors of Rev. R. G. Pearson, evangelist. The meetings were held in the warehouse of the Champion Compress Company, and consisted of Bible-readings at 11 A. M., and preaching at 8 P. M., followed by an inquiry meeting. Meetings for prayer and preaching had previously been held in all parts of the city, and much thorough work was done in preparing for the meetings both materially and spiritually. In all this the pastor and people of this church took an active part, and with other Christians of the city waited upon the Lord in prayer for his blessing. The city was stirred to its depths, audiences of two

and three thousand crowded the building, and hundreds of new converts and backsliders reclaimed revealed the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit, while Christians were wonderfully quickened and a new impulse given to every good work. That year the additions to this church were 69 on profession of faith and 21 on certificate—the largest number in the history of the church.

During the present pastorate the congregation has been re-organized for Christian work. The Young Ladies' Missionary Society, previously contributing to both home and foreign work, now devotes itself exclusively to the industrial schools and other work in connection with Immanuel Chapel. The Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society, assisted by the Gleaners (a society of young girls), support a missionary in the foreign field, while the Edgar Woods Society (composed of men), supports the medical missionary for whom it is named. The Ladies' Aid Society does benevolent and missionary work among the poor. At the same time that the church began the support of Dr. Woods it undertook the support of an evangelist for our Mission Chapel.

Among the events of this pastorate may be noted: The building first of the school-house, and later of the chapel for the mission; the renovation and remodelling of the interior of the church; the building of the Young Men's Christian Association Hall, to which this congregation was the largest contributor; and the opening by a member of this church of the commodious reading-room in the Seamen's Home.

The following changes in the Session and Board of Deacons have taken place: in 1886 John D. Taylor was elected ruling elder in place of James C. Smith, dismissed, and the vacancy thus caused on the Board of Deacons, and that due to the death of Mr. Alderman, were filled by the election of H. C. McQueen and J. H. Currie. Upon the death of George Chadbourn, whose long and useful services to the church ended

July 8, 1891, David G. Worth was elected ruling elder, and James H. Chadburn, Jr., to his place on the Board of Deacons. On the removal of J. H. Currie to Fayetteville, November, 7, 1892, W. A. Riach, W. M. Cumming, and E. S. Tennent, were elected deacons, the number of the board being increased to ten.

Before the beginning of the present pastorate the session instituted a thorough revision of the rolls, revealing 263 names, of which 27 were placed upon the retired list, inquiry failing to elicit the information necessary to their dismissal to other churches, while 20 others, followed up with similar inquiries, were dismissed, dropped, or suspended, as the case required, thus leaving a membership of 216. To them there have been added, on profession of faith, 215, and on certificate 108. There have died 55, and been dismissed, dropped, or suspended 61; making the net gain 207, and the present membership 423.

The contributions for the seven years have been: Home Missions, \$18,214.58; Foreign Missions, \$9,944.95; Educational Causes, \$4,056.24; all other benevolences, \$21,985.91; total of benevolence, \$54,201.68; congregational, \$47,984.67; grand total, \$102,186.35. This includes a legacy of \$5,000 in the hands of the trustees not yet expended.

Here then, for the present, we raise our Ebenezer, thanking God for what he has done for us in the past, and trusting the same hand that has brought us into this grace wherein we stand to lead us through whatever trials may be before us, and to enable us to do greater things for the honor and glory of his name. Amen.