

WILLIAM MERCER GREEN

Chapel of the Cross

First Annual Meeting of the William Mercer Green Society

September 17, 2015

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Welcome to the first Annual Meeting of the William Mercer Green Society. This society aims to make possible the continued vision and ministry of the Chapel of the Cross by providing resources, especially future ones, so that our own participation is not limited to our tenures here, but extends into whatever future God has in store, a truly noble calling.

This is an historic occasion, since it is the very first meeting. And fittingly we are going to explore some of the history of the origins of our congregation, and especially the role of William Mercer Green. He has been referred to as our first rector, but Michael McVaugh, who serves as our parish archivist, contends that he was indeed our founding priest, but never actually named rector. Both Joe Ferrell and Dr. Pfaff have accepted his conclusion, and there seems to be no evidence to the contrary.

Mr. Green graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1918, second in his class. He would have been first except for the presence of James Knox Polk, who prevailed. Polk, of course, later became the 11th President of the United States (1845-49)! Green was ordained an Episcopal deacon three years after his graduation and a priest two years later. After he served as rector of St. John's, Williamsboro for four years, he became rector of St. Matthew's in Hillsborough, the seat of Orange County, in 1827. During his ten years there, he served as the first superintendent of the Hillsborough Female Academy, established for the education of young girls in the mid-1820's. In a preview of things to come, one of his best and favorite pupils was Mary Ruffin Smith, later a major factor and benefactor in establishing the Chapel of the Cross!

Numerous times Green made the horseback ride from Hillsborough to Chapel Hill, trying to establish an Episcopal group of worshippers, but wrote in his diary of his disappointment at any fruit from his efforts. Finally in 1837, the University President appointed him professor of belles letters (logic and rhetoric) as well as the campus' first chaplain. Remember that all the faculty were ministers prior to the Civil War, mostly Presbyterian and Baptist. Perhaps not to favor one group or the other, the president first called his brother-in-law, a Methodist, to be the chaplain. When his superior decided there were not enough Methodists here to squander a minister on, the president turned to Green, an Episcopalian. Green maintained the previous practice of the professors rotating leadership of mandatory Sunday

chapel, but he rankled some of them by introducing the regular use of the Lord's prayers, a practice some of them considered quite sectarian!

Finally in 1842, after five years of gathering other faculty and spouses and students around him to worship in homes, Green led them to the formal step of incorporating themselves as an Episcopal congregation. They soon set about purchasing land and, with the help of a nationally known architect, Thomas Walter, designing and building the chapel. What a bold and imaginative vision they developed! Keep in mind that the handful of University buildings, which then constituted the campus, were fairly conventional rectangular affairs. How striking the gothic chapel with its crenellated tower and buttresses and arched, beautifully traceried windows must have been! At least when it was finally finished!! The money ran out and for several years, without any roof or floor, the walls enclosed only dirt and leaves and snow instead of the dedicated worshippers who continued to meet in homes. Finally, apparently with the financial help of William Mercer Green himself, five years after it was started, the chapel was dedicated to the worship of God and to the service of God's people on October 19, 1848.

One story which has come down to us from that construction concerns Mr. Green, whose home was on a large piece of land in the vicinity of the present Tenney Circle, where the bricks were made and baked in his kiln. One Saturday evening, the bricks were not yet finished by sundown, and his slaves asked if they should further stoke the fires. "No," was Green's answer. "It is now the Sabbath, and we shall honor the Lord no matter what the cost." We may think of that as a waste of money, ruining a whole kiln of bricks, since sadly the Sabbath means so little to us today. But that story is an indication of the deep faith commitment of our founding priest and is embedded, literally you could say, in our chapel and in our DNA.

Another significant story, this one about the early years of the chapel, is that Mr. Green managed to persuade the University Trustees that worshipping on Sunday morning at the Chapel of the Cross should count for any student (all male, of course) as attendance at mandatory chapel. Once that permission was given, the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians rushed to follow suit; and that accounts for the number of churches on the edge of the campus on Franklin Street!

The imaginative and bold vision of Green and the early parishioners was not limited to the physical structure of the church. It manifested itself also in their sense of who made up the Church, who constituted the Body of Christ, who was "in" and who was "out." When they signed the articles of incorporation in 1842, which required by national canons the signatures of twelve men, they obediently complied; but expressing their vision of the comprehensiveness of the Church, they also included on the document the signatures of twelve women. Let me show you that original inspirational

document, which we still have. (Notice that of these twenty-four lay signatures, five of them are named Green!)

The incorporation of the slave loft into the construction of the chapel – although such segregation and the practice of slavery itself rightly horrified later generations – made it possible at that time for slaves to be included in the worship and education of the parish. Most of you know that Cornelia Fitzgerald, who was baptized in our chapel and sat in the loft, later helped raise her granddaughter, Pauli Murray, who became the first African-American woman ordained an Episcopal priest. When she presided at our chapel altar in 1977 at her first service of Holy Communion, she was the first woman to celebrate the Eucharist in the state of North Carolina and so helped heal and widen the circle of the Body of Christ.

Cornelia was the daughter of a slave woman named Harriet, but her father was the brother of Mary Ruffin Smith; so she and three of her sisters (sired by the other brother) were the nieces of Miss Smith. Mary, perhaps influenced by the faith and integrity of her mentor, William Mercer Green, took that relationship very seriously and brought them all to church here regularly, all dressed in white Sunday dresses and riding in her handsome open carriage. The townspeople and parishioners were very tolerant of this unusual group, who were so faithful at worship. Let me show you their original baptismal record, which we still have. (“Five servant children of Mary Ruffin Smith”, Dec. 20, 1854.)

Mary, whose name you see on the eagle lectern in the chapel (a gift from the diocese at her death in 1888), never married, but she raised these nieces as her own. She saw to it that they married respectable biracial men, and she left each of them 100 acres in her will from the family property (in the vicinity of Smith Level Road). She also left significant property to the Chapel of the Cross, to the University, and to the Diocese of North Carolina. All three were helped to prosper by her gracious benevolence.

In the meantime, William Mercer Green was elected the first bishop of the Diocese of Mississippi in 1849, the 51st to be consecrated in the Episcopal Church. He was among the founders of the University of the South, in Sewanee, TN in 1860, and in 1867 became its chancellor. He, as you would expect, allied with the Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America. A few years later, during a return visit to Chapel Hill, one of the villagers, Charles Peter Mallett, a book store owner, reported a story told by Green of his visit with Jefferson Davis, the former Confederate States President, then in prison. I repeat it to you to show you both the flavor of the times and the underlying compassion of Green.

During the first twelve months of his imprisonment, he was subjected to all the indignity and severe usage which could have been practiced toward a Felon (sic). He was not allowed a pen knife to pair his nails.

When they had grown out to an insupportable length on his fingers, they grew long and turned down like the talons of an eagle – on his toes they were so long he could not wear a shoe. At last a thunder storm broke in a window, and he made use of the fragments of glass to pare them. His condition is now more comfortable. (Miss Mary's Money, H.G. Jones, p. 119)

Some family information: Green was married twice, the first time to Sarah Williams, who died in 1832 when Green was just 34, leaving him five children. The second time was to Charlotte Fleming, who bore him eight more children! One of his grandchildren, also named William Mercer Green, became the fourth Bishop of Mississippi.

I think you will agree that it is fitting that we have named our legacy society after this remarkable man, who left such a legacy. Not only did he found this significant congregation on the campus of the first public University in the United States to open its doors, and even provide the financial means to finish its visionary chapel, but he inspired many whom he led and mentored to live remarkable and fruitful lives. He helped grow the fledgling Church in Mississippi, he helped found the University of the South, and he even provided future generations leadership through his numerous progeny, especially in the person of one of his grandsons. May all of us together, the initial founders of the William Mercer Green Society, leave even half the legacy of this inspirational and devoted follower of Jesus!