

BRIGHT PAST, PROMISING FUTURE

A sermon preached in The Leesburg Presbyterian Church on May 4, 1969, by the minister, Robert W. Simpson, celebrating the 165th year of the founding of the church.

Scripture: Revelation 1: 9 - 2: 5.

Yesterday

Nicholas Cresswell, a young Tory Englishman touring the colonies, was detained by the Revolution while in this area and spent some time in Leesburg. In his diary of October 20, 1776 he writes: "The Presbyterian clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of Congress from the rostrum, gaining prosylites, persecuting the unbelievers, preaching up the righteousness of their cause and persuading the unthinking populace of the infallibility of success. Some of these rascals assert that the Lord will send His angels to assist the injured Americans." (From Penelope Osburn's "History of the Leesburg Presbyterian Church". No date, typewritten manuscript in the files of the Leesburg Church. Cresswell's story is in possession of the Kincaid family, Mt. Jackson, Va.)

One of those rascals is buried just outside this window by the name of the Reverend Amos Thompson. His is the first grave opened in the church-yard on September 8, 1804.

Thompson is considered the founder of the Leesburg Church, beginning his work here in the county somewhere around 1762 or '63. Educated at the College of New Jersey, now called Princeton University, and ordained there by Brunswick Presbytery of New Jersey, he came to Loudoun as a missionary.

Our building dates from 1804 but by 1782, the Presbyterian Society of Leesburg was sufficiently strong to secure from the Presbytery the full time services of one of its ministers, the Reverend David Bard. Court records show that he was licensed to perform marriages in the county in 1781.

It may be no comfort, but it certainly is a lesson in consistency, that Presbyterian divines are always meddling in politics. (J. Shannon Montgomery, in his historical address here in 1934, reminds us:

"Bancroft the historian aptly says, 'The first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve all connection with Great Britain came, not from the puritans of New England, nor the Dutch of New York, nor the planters of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.' Dr. Englis, the then Tory rector of old Trinity Anglican Church in New York wrote in 1776: 'I do not know of one Presbyterian

minister who has not by preaching and every effort in their power promoted all the efforts of the Continental Congress, however extravagant.'

"Only one Presbyterian minister threw in his lot with the British and he was suspended by Synod of New Jersey."

"Horace Walpole, the British Prime Minister, remarked in the House of Commons, 'America has run off with a Presbyterian parson and that's the end of it!'"

That Presbyterian parson was John Witherspoon, decendent of Knox, sometime president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), the only minister member of the Continental Congress and the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation."

I have cited these incidents for the flavor of the times in which this congregation was born. George Washington, a member of the Anglican Church, showed his gratitude to the Presbyterians by worshipping in Presbyterian churches in New York and in the field during his campaigns.

Witherspoon was president of the College of New Jersey and taught Amos Thompson, the first pastor David Bard, and the famed parson who presided over the organization of this congregation and the dedication of this building, Dr. James Hall.

In the year Lewis and Clark left on their famous exploration of the unknown Northwest Territory and Thomas Jefferson was re-elected President of the United States, Dr. Hall stopped here on his way to Philadelphia, where he would open the General Assembly of the American Presbyterian Church as its Moderator and preach the opening sermon. On Saturday, May 4, 1804, he dedicated this building and organized this congregation.

The next day communion was celebrated and the first twenty-seven members were admitted to the Lord's Table. The offering of forty shillings was given to missions in Virginia, which represents (I understand) a large sum for those difficult times in the aftermath of war.

When Amos Thompson died four months later, September, 1804, Moses Hoge, the outstanding Presbyterian minister of his generation, who was to become President of Hampden-Sydney College and found on its campus Union Theological Seminary in 1812, came to Leesburg to preach Thompson's funeral, attesting to the eminence our Revolutionary War Chaplain and founder had attained in his ministry.

By 1824 there was a Sunday School in the Leesburg Church teaching spelling, reading and other elementary subjects as well as the doctrine

of the Church. The church library was quite significant and provided material for the surrounding territory. (It is interesting to note, speaking of libraries, that a Ruling Elder, Judge Balch, was father of Thomas for whom the library across the street is named. Both were graduates of the College of New Jersey and prominent lawyers.)

The church was always active in starting new churches in the adjacent area. By 1876 a church building was being erected at Farmwell Station, now known as the Ashburn Presbyterian Church. It was the site of the largest congregations on Sunday in Loudoun County - often more than two hundred people.

About 1850, William Robey, a black member of the Leesburg Church, desired to become a minister. The time required, the expense involved in acquiring an education was a bit much for ordination, but Winchester Presbytery examined Mr. Robey and found him to be an unusually intelligent and pious man and licensed him to preach. He founded the still active Mr. Zion Methodist Church on North Street in Leesburg.

Leesburg sent eleven of its members to the Catoclin Church in 1853 to help it reorganize after a period of inactivity. There were preaching points at Clark's Gap, Cool Spring, Cannon Chapel and in private homes. Leesburg was assisted in erecting the Ashburn Church building by Franklin Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Central Presbyterian in Washington, D. C. and Second Presbyterian Church of Alexandria. In March, 1967, this church dismissed thirty of its members to form the now thriving St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Purcellville. The long history of helping to start other churches is still the practice of this congregation.

The records of our church are nearly blank during the days of the Civil War and historians generally agree that the pastor, the Reverend Henry Smith, was at the front ministering to the forces of Lee and Jackson.

In 1867 Reverend J. W. Lupton became the pastor. I mention him because you will see on display in the Fellowship Hall, the communion service we use today, given around 1867 by Mr. Lupton.

Time does not permit detail here but the women of the Leesburg Church have been active from the beginning and in 1889, our Session noted: "The ladies of the church deserve special commendation for their zeal, for in all that pertains to the welfare of the church they far surpass the men." I suspect the present Session would concur with those sentiments!

The frustration of making these observations is that one must leave out more than he can include. But one thing is clear - from some excellent work already done by such people as Nan Lin Kincaid, Ellen Metzger, Penny Osburn, J. Shannon Montgomery, among others, it is time for someone with the gift and calling to prepare a definitive

history of the church. With each passing year that task grows more difficult and I hope a capable soul will feel the burden of assuming the task in the not too distant future.

Tomorrow

The Leesburg Church was born when the word "Presbyterian" meant one thing only - Presbyterian. There was only one Presbyterian Church in the United States. It has lived to see the nation and Church rent asunder by a great Civil War. The nation has long since reunited but the grave rift in our beloved Presbyterian Church persists to this day. I hope I see the day when our Leesburg Church will be again in the one American Presbyterian Church in which she was chartered and set sail so magnificently. Like some of you I was born and raised in the other half of our Presbyterian Church and have always hoped, since I have become a minister, that my family back home and I would belong to the same denomination before we join the innumerable throng.

The men who founded this congregation and built this church were revolutionaries with John Witherspoon, dedicated to "a democratic society based on the rights of man and the necessity of education for an enlightened electorate." (Directory of the Presbyterian congregation at Leesburg, Virginia, May 2, 1954 -Kincaid-Osburn. p.8)

It ought not to surprise anyone to see Presbyterians spearheading modern dramatic movements to secure those rights in full and in fact. Presbyterians are not always popular, but they are always provocative. The Presbyterians at Leesburg, if they are to be true to their heritage, will risk life and fortune to see that all people in their sphere of influence, enjoy the rights of freedom, dignity and equality. To do less would be to betray a brilliant, if troubled, heritage. It is always a source of astonishment to anyone who knows Presbyterian history to find a Presbyterian wed to the "establishment." They have always been farsighted innovators who believed God was more to be served in the future than enshrined in the past. May we recover their vision and daring!

As our fathers, one hundred and sixty-five years ago today, took an offering for mission work in the Commonwealth of Virginia, may we share their concern for neighbor near and far. Our offering will take new forms, to be sure, of self as well as substance, but their example beckons to us over the years. Where Franklin St. Church in Baltimore, Central in Washington and Second in Alexandria helped Leesburg build Ashburn Church we will have to help the struggling inner city churches to maintain their life and their ministry. It is a debt long due and which we would be happy, of course, to discharge.

And the circle is going to swing again for our turn as a so-called "city church" is probably coming. With new installations drawing closer and closer to Leesburg each year, the future holds great challenge for this church as it does for our sister churches here and in the

county. How to meet the deceptive but rapid growth which will engulf this quiet little town within a few years should be a prime object of study and concern for us. If yesterday is respendent with its accomplishments, let us work to the end that tomorrow will be bright with achievement based on vision and on commitment.

Conclusion

When the Lord spoke to the church at Ephesus in a voice that echoed with the sound of many waters, he urged them to recapture the love and zeal they had in their beginnings.

So would Christ speak to us today, saying, "*Remember the love you had at first.*"

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Material in this address was gleaned from several important sources on file in the church office, among them being:

Directory of the Presbyterian Congregation at Leesburg,
Virginia - May 2, 1954

Directory of the Presbyterian Congregation at Leesburg,
Virginia - May 6, 1934

Historic Address - J Shannon Montgomery - 1934

History of the Leesburg Presbyterian Church, Penelope
Osburn (Date not given - typed manuscript.)

The Presbyterian Church Building
(Typed manuscript, no author indicated.)