

Donation of the Month

Object: First M.E. Church, North souvenir plate, circa 1910

Catalog #: 1975.78.1

Donor: Virginia May Rose



In the early 1900s there were two Methodist Episcopal churches in Rogers. First M.E., North, was located on the northwest corner of Second and Chestnut. Central M.E., South, was located on the northwest corner of Third and Elm. The north and south designations didn't reflect the churches' geographic locations in the city, although that was certainly the case. Instead they represented a denominational split that occurred in the church in the mid-1840s over the issue of slavery. By the turn of the 20th century there weren't any major doctrinal differences between the two.

But the churches didn't just share similar names or doctrines, they shared similar facades thanks to A.O. Clarke, a prominent local architect. First M.E., North, had its entrance on the west side of the building, through a three-pillared colonnade; its windows and doors shaped into Gothic arches. The windows and doors at Central M.E., South, had round arches and the entrance was through the central tower. How the two churches came to Rogers and built such grand structures is an interesting story.

As pioneer settlers moved into Northwest Arkansas in the 1830s and 1840s, they brought with them their religious beliefs. At first settlers were too scattered to form organized denominations, and services were generally conducted by traveling ministers. By the 1840s the Methodist, Baptist, and Cumberland Presbyterian denominations had all become active in Benton County. Since there were only 12 clergymen in the county as late as 1850, early churches relied heavily on lay people; churchgoers often met in homes.

In the late 1800s an interdenominational group of Methodists settled in the New Hope community, south of Rogers. Members from this group founded a Sunday School class in 1882 which became Central M.E. Church, South. Accounts vary as to who organized the First M.E. Church, North. One says it was organized in the home of Wesley Davis in 1882. Another credits its organization in 1883 to the Rev. O.R. Bryant, who was said to have held the first meeting with seven people, several of them family members, under a brush arbor in Rogers. Whichever is the case, Bryant served as the church's first pastor and it was he who secured its first building, a 26 x 45 square-foot structure on the second lot north of the corner of Second and Chestnut.

Bryant ministered to his flock for three years. During the next 19 years a dozen pastors faithfully served the congregation and oversaw its growth. In 1897 the church acquired the corner lot and moved its building onto it. A 24 x 16 square-foot addition was constructed, along with a vestibule and tower. But the

congregation was still growing and expansion was necessary. In 1905 the Rev. W.R. Wilson was appointed and it was he who oversaw the design and construction of a new church structure for the largest congregation in Rogers.

The church's board approved the proposal to build a new building in February 1907. Soon after Rev. Wilson presented plans for a magnificent \$10,000 brick-and-stone structure designed by A.O. Clarke. The church purchased some adjacent property, moved a few buildings around, and made ready for the work to begin. In the September 15, 1907, "Ladies Special Edition" of the *Rogers Democrat* — "edited by the ladies of the First M.E. Church" — Rev. Nelson described the new church by saying:

The basement is built of Beaver (Ark.) stone and the main church of pressed brick with Beaver sawed stone trimmings, steps, etc. The extreme dimensions of the church are 78 ft, 2 in, by 74 ft, 4 in. The floor space of the main church, including lecture room and gallery, is 75 by 65 ft. The floor space of basement is 75 by 60 ft. The basement contains two furnace and fuel rooms, five Sunday school class rooms, a kitchen, a parsonage cellar, a storage room, two vestibules, a dining room, 21½ by 22 ft. and a parlor or reception room, 38 by 40 ft. The main entrance is by stone steps with a 6 in. rise and 12 in. tread by 22 ft. long, leading into a vestibule porch 9 ft. deep by 22 ft. wide, thence through a 6 ft. opening through each vestibule tower into the auditorium. The main audience room is a bowled floor and circular pews. The lecture room floor is inclined to the main room, making the view perfect from every part of the building.

Rev. Nelson concluded, "The object of the building is the glory of God and the salvation of men." In the end, the cost of the new church and the remodeling of the parsonage was a little over \$15,000. Prior to construction the church raised \$7,000 of the necessary funds. Since an Methodist Episcopal church couldn't be officially dedicated until it was fully paid for, the congregation was anxious to secure the remaining finances. On Sunday, January 17, 1909, \$5,000 was pledged by church members by the conclusion of the morning service.

Sunday night, two thousand dollars more was pledged, and the real hustling then came in securing the remaining one thousand before the Monday afternoon service. That every cent was in sight before four o'clock speaks volumes for the energy and perseverance of the committee as well as for the loyalty and generosity of the congregation and friends of the church.

The church's Ladies Aid Society led in the pledging with \$1,275. Other congregants donated as well, some giving another pledge in addition to their first pledge. The stained-glass memorial windows were also claimed with pledges by various organizations and people including B.F. Bryant, one of the many sons of the church's original founder. The church was fortunate that it could pay off its debts so soon after construction. Central M.E., South, wasn't able to dedicate its church until 1916, seven years after its 1909 completion.

Around the time of the church's construction and dedication, or shortly thereafter, J.W. Bryant, local merchant and son of the church's founder, commissioned the Wheelock firm to make souvenir teacups, saucers, and plates featuring the image of the new church; Bryant had similar china made for the First Baptist Church as well. The C.E. Wheelock Pottery Company was founded in Peoria, Illinois, in 1888. By the 1900s it was a major importer of finely crafted souvenir china and postcards, much of it produced in Germany.

Available with pink or blue backgrounds, First M.E., North, souvenir china must have graced many a church-member's home.

In 1912 the church had 325 individuals on its membership roll. Some of its subsidiary organizations included the Sunday School, the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, the Ladies Aid Society, and the Epworth League which ministered to youth and young adults. The church claimed its "Busy Men's Bible Class" as "the first organized Bible Class in this entire section of the country." Another Sunday School class, organized by Rev. Robert L. Selle, was "The Builders Class." In 1926 Selle walked into Frank Mackey's Cafe on North First Street and spoke with a group of 16 young men about "physical soundness, mental development, moral integrity, business competency and spiritual welfare." Four weeks later Selle boasted that 100 young men had been or were planning to visit the class.

During the 1920s and 1930s big shifts were happening within the Methodist Church as a whole. There was talk of reuniting the north and south branches of Methodism and merging with the Methodist Protestant Church, an event that finally occurred in 1939. But over a decade earlier Rogers' two Methodist churches had decided to reunite.

On September 13, 1925, the churches voted to merge and almost 100 members of the north church transferred their memberships to the south church. For reasons that are unclear, a second merger occurred in 1937. In 1939 the First M.E., North, congregation moved to the Central M.E., South, church at Third and Elm, selling their old building at Second and Chestnut to the Church of Christ. (For many years the Church of Christ had their own building on the northeast corner of Second and Chestnut, opposite the First M.E., North.) The congregation that meets today at the Third and Elm location has had several names through the years, first as Central Methodist Episcopal Church, followed by Central United Methodist Church in 1969, and then First United Methodist in 1994-95, when the congregation split over the issue of retaining its historic church building.

By 1970 the old First M.E., North, building was scheduled to be torn down. The Downtown Church of Christ replaced it with a one-storey brick building designed to seat 265. A few remnants of the old church still remain, such as the dressed stones from the foundation that flank the front doors. While its sister building is gone, the old Central M.E., South, building still stands, giving today's viewers a glimpse at how magnificent the old First M.E., North, Church must have been.

CREDITS

Untitled article, *Rogers Democrat*, 2-6-1907; "History of First M.E. Church," Pastor W.R. Nelson, *Rogers Democrat*, 9-25-1907; "M.E. Church Dedicated Monday," *Rogers Democrat*, 1-21-1909; a 1912 M.E. Church Directory and a 1927 introduction to *Household Helps & Directory* in the Permanent Collection of the RHM (1999.46.2 & 1999.46.1); "First Methodist Church is Home-Like Church," *Rogers Daily News*, 1927; "Methodists Vote Merger of Two Churches in 1925," *Rogers Daily News*, 7-1-1950; "Rogers Landmark," *Rogers Daily News*, 11-12-1970; *Our Heritage*, Central United Methodist Church (April 1990); "Christianity," *Goodspeed's History of Benton County, Arkansas*, 1889 (a reprint of the Benton County Historical Society, 1993); "A History of Churches in Rogers," Rogers Historical Museum, (2002); Larry Robert, "Florida Souvenir China," reprinted from *Antiques & Art Around Florida* (Winter/Spring 1999) (<http://aarf.com/fevlch99.htm>); and Ken Cheek on his Cheek Antique website (<http://rubylane.com/shops/cheekantiques/item/CA-119>).