

Historic Rural Churches

PENFIELD BAPTIST

BY CLAYTON H. RAMSEY, PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAIL DES JARDIN

Religion and education have always been mutually dependent enterprises. For those “religions of the book,” there has been a perennial need for trained experts to compose, copy, and interpret their sacred texts. Communities of teachers and students emerged to preserve, explore, and understand the writings of faith. European religious refugees who crossed the Atlantic in the seventeenth century to form a society in the New World maintained this association, and they established the first universities in the English colonies to train clergy. Puritans founded Harvard “to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”¹ Many early Harvard alumni were Congregational and Unitarian ministers. The College of William and Mary was granted a charter in 1693 for a “perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences.”² Yale started as a training ground for Congregational preachers, and Princeton was long a stronghold for New Light Presbyterianism. While denominational schools still exist, of course, the secularization of the academy and the

rise of the research university essentially severed the formal tie the earliest colleges had with their religious roots. But it exists, this historical affiliation of pulpit and lectern, though not always acknowledged or accepted by many current institutions.

Mercer Institute was founded by Baptists on January 14, 1833, in Greene County, Georgia. For the next 173 years, the university that developed from this modest beginning was the flagship school of the Georgia Baptist Convention, only parting ways in 2006 over issues of control and philosophy. For those intervening years, religion was at the core of a Mercer education and the center of this commitment for the first few decades of its existence was the chapel in Penfield, later the Penfield Baptist Church. The intertwined history of Georgia Baptists and Mercer began at Penfield, and Penfield began with the vision of one remarkable man.

Josiah Penfield was born on June 6, 1785, in Fairfield, Connecticut, to Nathaniel and Rachel Marquand Penfield. He was the middle of three brothers. At fourteen, Josiah began to learn the silversmith trade as an apprentice to his uncle, Isaac Marquand, and a watchmaker partner, Cornelius Paulding, in



their Savannah firm. By 25, he was a full partner in the business. At 28 he married Sarah B. Pettibone, and while they had no children, he was devoted to her for the year of their marriage. For the five years that followed his apprenticeship, the three craftsmen operated locations in New York City, Savannah, and New Orleans. After 1820, Josiah felt comfortable enough with his skill and business acumen to work with his cousin, Frederick Marquand, and a man named Moses Eastman in several commercial ventures. In 1823, he married his second wife, Elizabeth Letitia Russell, after the early death of his first.³

During these years in Savannah, he grew a profitable jewelry business, developed an extensive clientele, and was deeply involved in religious activities. In 1808, while still an apprentice, he was baptized into the First Baptist Church of Savannah. He later demonstrated his commitment by serving as a deacon, a Sunday School leader, a clerk of the Sunbury Association, and a Baptist witness among the many sailors in the seaport town. Under the pastorate of Dr. Henry Holcombe, he also acquired an appreciation of the virtues of education. When he died in 1828, in Rye, New York, his will specified that \$2,500.00 was to be given for ministerial education, as long as the Georgia Baptist Convention matched the amount. This bequest by Penfield was the seed money and catalyst that Baptists in Georgia needed to begin Mercer Institute in a town that was given his name.⁴

Of course, this educational experiment did not emerge in an historical vacuum. Baptists had established Rhode Island College in 1765, later becoming Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island (1804). They founded Columbian College in Washington, D.C. (1822), Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky (1824), Newton Theological Institution in Newton Centre, Massachusetts (1825), and Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina (1829). Others would follow. But Georgia still lacked a Baptist college. Following the three Powelton Conferences in 1801, 1802, and 1803, “the first organized efforts of Georgia Baptists for the extension of evangelism and cooperation,” a resolution was presented in 1804 to the General Committee of Georgia Baptists meeting at Kiokee Church, the first Baptist congregation in the state, to start “The Baptist College of Georgia.”⁵

Three years later the charter for Mt. Enon Academy was granted. It would be the first attempt by Baptists to establish a college in Georgia. Dr. Henry Holcombe of Savannah was the principal founder and president of the trustees, Charles O. Screven was the school president, and, significantly, Jesse



Mercer was vice president of the trustees.

Rev. Mercer, born on December 16, 1769, in Halifax County, North Carolina, had been taught by Rev. John Springer, the first Presbyterian minister ordained in Georgia, before attending an academy started by his father, Silas, in their home in 1793 in Salem, Georgia, nine miles south of Washington. Silas, according to one historian, “was justly esteemed as one of the most exemplary and useful ministers in the Southern states.”⁶ He entered his eternal reward in 1796, after a lifetime of ministry and leadership. His son, Jesse, would be no less influential as a preacher, leader, and champion of historic Baptist principles. For several years after his father’s death, he would lead the academy in Salem, having been introduced from the cradle to the importance of religion and education. But despite high expectations, the venture at Mt. Enon was short-lived. In 1811 Rev. Dr. Holcombe accepted a call to a pulpit in Philadelphia and the school was shuttered.

The years that followed were ones of rich ferment for the cause of Baptist missions. From the first introduction of resolutions by Rev. Jesse Mercer to the Georgia Association in 1800 to further itinerant evangelism, missions to indigenous peoples, and the union of Baptist believers, missionary efforts became a central concern for Baptists.⁷ With Rev. Mercer’s direction and the influence of the remarkable missionaries to India, Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson, Baptists developed the organizational infrastructure to support these missions, both home and abroad, to share the Christian message. The “General Convention of the Baptists of the United States for Foreign Missions” was formed in 1813 and the so-called “Triennial Convention” met the next year. The year of the first General Convention, the “General Committee of the Savannah River Association for the encouragement of itinerant and missionary efforts” was founded, the first Georgia associa-

tion organized to send missionaries into the world. In 1815 the Powelton Baptist Society for Foreign Missions emerged with Rev. Jesse Mercer as president.

These were the years of the Second Great Awakening, when church memberships swelled and revivals broke out, when Bible and tract societies, temperance clubs, penal reform movements, and missionary endeavors occupied the attention and clamored for the funds of religious bodies.

And as Baptists formed cooperative associations among autonomous local congregations to relieve suffering and save souls, they recognized the importance of education in their redemptive programs. The Bible had to be taught and preached, and those men set aside for that work had to be trained “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”⁸ Believers calling themselves Primitive Baptists emerged as staunchly anti-missionary, anti-benevolence societies, anti-theological education, a regressive pushback on the developments among their Baptist brethren

during these years, as much a reflection of their socio-economic status as it was a doctrinal stance. They would retreat into their “hard shells” even as missionary Baptists sought to reach the world with their message. And the message of salvation could not be shared if it was not learned and understood. Education, they believed, need not be incompatible with inspiration.

In 1832, the Convention met in Powelton and passed a resolution that called for, in part, “a literary and theological school, which shall unite manual labor with study; admitting others besides students in divinity under the direction of the Executive Committee.”⁹ Four years prior to this resolution, Rev. Adiel Sherwood, known as the “Spiritual Father of Mercer University,”¹⁰ started an experiment on his farm in Eatonton. With 10 students he wanted to see if he could form a manual labor school, combining classroom instruction with physical labor after a Swiss model of pedagogy. After some postponement, Rev. Sherwood presented a motion at the State Convention in 1831 to establish such a school for young ministers in training. Though initially resisted by Rev. Mercer and others, the motion passed and was revised in 1832. Four hundred and fifty acres, seven miles north of Greensboro, Georgia, was purchased from William Redd for \$1,450.00, with an adjoining tract of 14 ½ acres for an additional \$65.00.¹¹ The total expenditure for the land and “two hewed log cabins” was \$1,935.00.¹² The campus and surrounding town would be known as Penfield, after the original benefactor, and the “first permanent institution established by Georgia Baptists for nearly fifty years” would bear the name Mercer Institute, after the indefatigable Rev. Jesse Mercer.¹³ With 39 students and Rev. Billington McCarty Sanders as head of school, superintendent, treasurer, steward, and teacher, the Institute began instruction in January of 1833.

Within a month of the beginning of the first term, rules were released that governed life at the Institute, including requirements for the trustees, steward, minister, and students. The academic year was divided in two halves: the first term from the second Monday in January to the second Monday in July; and the second term from the third Monday in July to the third Monday in December. Students were required to engage in three hours of labor every day for five days a week, in addition to their classroom instruction and private study. Tuition was set at \$1.50 per month for beginning students, and \$2.50 for those in more advanced courses. Students younger than 16 paid \$6.00 per month for board, room, and firewood; older students paid \$5.00. The daily schedule began at sunrise with the reading of Scripture and prayer, and the daylight hours were filled with study and manual work, punctuated with meals and moments of rest.¹⁴ All activity was carefully regulated. All religious services took place in Shiloh Church, about a mile from the campus. Rev. Billington M. Sanders, in addition to his many other duties, and Rev. Nathaniel M. Crawford, first honor graduate of the University of Georgia, served the school community as pastors of the church during



the years of the Institute.

Mercer Institute met a need, but it was not enough. In 1835 Presbyterians proposed to found Oglethorpe University in Washington, Georgia, Jesse Mercer's place of residence. That year they had a charter and by the next, they opened the school in Midway, near the state capital of Milledgeville. His sense of righteous competition piqued, Rev. Mercer called for a Baptist college in Washington. The Institute, as effective as it was, was still not a college and Rev. Mercer wanted a place of higher education to prepare men for service in Church and State. He initiated steps to turn the school in Penfield into a university, beginning with the search for pledges and support from among Georgia Baptists. In the summer of 1837 trustees met in the Baptist church in Washington and by late December of that same year, a legislative charter was issued. The next year the first Board of Trustees of Mercer University was elected with Rev. Mercer as first chairman, and in July the Board had their first meeting in Penfield on Commencement Day. The first university classes in the seven-year program of study began in January of 1839. There were 95 students who were enrolled when the doors opened.¹⁵ Rev. Sanders, indispensable for the operation of the Institute, was named first president of the University.

Religion continued to define and elevate campus life after 1839, as it had before the founding of the university. The "Laws of the University" required students to attend daily morning and evening prayers in the chapel, Sunday worship, including two sessions of preaching and one of Sabbath School, and classes of Bible instruction. Students would later lead their own twilight prayer meetings and revival programs. When the university was founded, Penfield Baptist Church was organized, with Rev. Sherwood as first pastor. He also ministered to Bethesda Church, where he had been ordained.

Church minutes of Penfield Baptist Church from its founding in 1839 to 1892 are held by the Department of Archives, Special Collections, and Digital Initiatives at the Jack Tarver Library on the campus of Mercer University in Macon. Covering more than fifty years, the almost 400 handwritten pages map out the life of the Penfield Church and its narrative arc from university chapel to vibrant, independent congregation.

The Minutes and the story begin on May 11, 1839, when a Presbytery was formed "for the purpose of constituting a Church at this place." Articles of

Faith, Church Covenant, and Rules of Decorum were drawn up, and "a door was opened" to begin accepting members. This was to be a properly constituted church to serve the nascent University community. Rules of Government were drafted, the pastor and two deacons were chosen, letters of dismission from Shiloh Church were granted to form the core of the new congregation, and a letter requesting admission to the Association was submitted. The organizational foundation of the church was formed, including a committee of inquiry that sat before the end of the year to investigate charges against a Mr. C.G. Postell for violating Institute regulations and leaving unpaid debts. He would be the first, but certainly not the last, church member whose behavior was publicly scrutinized as a requirement for his involvement in the congregation.

The Church in Penfield served more than one function. Foremost, it was the place of worship for the University. Faculty, students, and families in the community met regularly for divine service. The close relationship between the two institutions is seen in the week-by-week transcript of the life of the church. The pastor was vital in founding the University, and faculty regularly served in positions of responsibility in the church. There are traces of the financial cooperation between the two. For instance, in the March 7, 1840, entry, the church agreed to pay one-quarter of the expense of lighting the chapel during services. The University would pay the remainder. By July of the next year, an agreement was made for the church to furnish materials, and the Institute was to light the candles, keep the house in order, and ring the bell. There was even a conference between church and university representatives to





change the communion schedule to accommodate visitors to the campus on Commencement Day in 1841, an agreement that was made under the leadership of the pastor who served after Rev. Sherwood resigned, Rev. Thomas Curtis.

By July 17, 1841, the logistics and expenses of the church using the college chapel pushed the congregation to offer a resolution that while they were grateful (with “great obligations”) for the use of the university chapel, “it is expedient that a meeting-house, for the use of the church, be erected forthwith.” As expected, a building committee was formed to confer with the Executive Committee of the University. By August 7, the church declined an offer to “unite in building a house for a church and chapel.” But the desire remained. It wouldn’t be until 1845 that a contract was signed with architect David Demorest to build a church next to Shiloh. By the next year it was occupied, having cost \$6,974.00 from the Town Lot Fund to build.¹⁶ This classic revival, two-story, red brick structure with white columns, would serve as the center of worship and Mercer University religious life for as long as the school stayed in Penfield. On November 7, 1846, a church committee approached the University Trustees to see if their new chapel could be used for public worship, a request that was granted on August 7, 1847. After that date, the Baptist church in Penfield and Mercer University shared this remarkable structure, as they had the chapel.

Among the free, white members of Penfield Baptist Church, there was a conversation on July 2, 1842, related to the “propriety” of admitting African slaves into their membership. The Southern Baptist Convention would split off from their northern brethren three years later over their policy of appointing slaveholders as foreign missionaries, and it would take until 1995 for the SBC to offer a formal apology for their

century-and-a-half-long stance on slavery and call for racial reconciliation.

But Penfield, even in this environment of severe racial inequality that characterized the South before the Civil War, took steps to minister to the enslaved among them. On October 14, Rev. B.M. Sanders accepted the call to serve as Penfield’s pastor and promised to “make arrangements with the young brethren” to preach to the African Americans in the community. By January 10, 1846, a home once occupied by a Brother Chandler was given for use as a place of worship for slaves. Prayer meetings were to be held every Sabbath evening

there, conducted by African American leaders, although three white representatives from Penfield Church had to be in attendance at any given meeting. On August 7, 1847, two women of color were accepted as members of Penfield Baptist, and on May 14 of the following year the church met in conference to consider the possibility of “organizing a branch of the church for the benefit of the colored people.” On September 4, 1848, the Minutes first record, “The African church met in conference.” By October 5, 1853, out of a total membership of 119, there were 25 black members of Penfield Baptist identified.

The powder keg of race relations exploded with the Civil War. For the four years of conflict between Fort Sumter and Appomattox, there are only a handful of oblique references to the impact of the War on life in Penfield. On September 7, 1861, two congregants asked if their membership could remain at Penfield while they were at war, as another member requested on February 8, 1862, while he was training at the Military Institute in Marietta. On August 13, 1864, an A.J. Cheves of the Army of Northern Virginia expressed an interest in entering the Gospel Ministry. Those three references are the only ones made during the war. Four years after the Confederate surrender, when the state was in the vise of Reconstruction, Baird’s Church expressed a desire to resume fellowship with Penfield, “which had been interrupted by the war,” mentioning nothing of the deprivation and suffering of those days. Lighter color, cheaper ink in the pages of the Minutes in the 1870s is the only physical reminder of the scarcity of those lean years.

The last reference to the war in the Minutes was recorded on June 8, 1866. The line of argument begins with “the duty of the Churches to define clearly their views on questions of disorder at all times, and especially after periods of great polit-

ical convulsions (like the late war), which naturally tend to efface the lines of distinction between the church and the world..." The contemporary reader is expecting some grand political or philosophical statement, something equal to the magnitude of the carnage and chaos of the war. Instead, the line introduces a discussion of the evils of dancing. Penfield wanted to be on record in agreement with the Georgia Baptist Association that dancing was improper, what they considered evidence of the social disruption brought on by the Civil War, and liable to punishment by the rule of discipline governing the church.

This was another function of the church at Penfield, as an instrument of both moral instruction and moral regulation of the community. In some cases, Penfield Church served as a sort of disciplinary board for the University. Throughout the years recorded in the Minutes, there were cases brought before the church of all variety of ethical infractions. Some cases are relatively minor, such as using profane language, playing cards, and frequenting "grog shops." On November 12, 1853, a Brother McCall even asks, "Is it consistent for a Christian to engage in playing marbles when betting is practiced?"

But they were not only concerned with the minutiae of their members' lives; they also served a judicial role, mediating between members in conflict (including one who punched a

doctor who accused a family member of poisoning a friend), and a theological role, censuring a man preaching without a license, and excluding from their fellowship another "honorable gentleman" guilty of the heresy of "Swedenborgianism."¹⁷ The decisions of the church had consequences; some members were excommunicated for their moral failings, while others were absolved. Some sent away were later restored, and others disappeared from the record. It was a dynamic community in which personal behavior, church membership, university involvement, and public standing all coincided. And between the admissions and expulsions, the baptisms and dismissals, the services and ordinations, the work of God's Kingdom advanced in this little village.

The history of the Church and the University shared an intertwined chronology for more than 30 years. The year the first class of three students was graduated in 1841, two years after the founding of the college, Rev. Jesse Mercer died and left \$40,000.00 to the University. With the influx of fresh funding, Rev. Sherwood was hired as first professor of theology, an important step in fulfilling the long-held desire to make the school a place of theological training for future Baptist ministers. After Mercer moved to Macon in 1871, the congregation received from the University on November 1, "The Chapel at Penfield with the appurtenances as a free gift, to be





used for a Baptist House of Worship,” and they continued to function as a Baptist ministry among those who didn’t move with the academic community. In 1880 the Mercer Trustees transferred all Penfield assets to the Georgia Association, except the four-acre cemetery where Jesse Mercer, and Billington Sanders and his wife, among others, were buried. The Association, in turn, gave ownership of the church building to the Baptists in Penfield.

At the 128th annual session of the Georgia Baptist Convention on November 17, 1949, the church was rededicated after restorative work was done on the historic building, according to a bronze plaque affixed to the front. The congregation is still active. Rev. Bryant Miller currently serves as the pastor at Penfield, which still meets 182 years after its founding. They have a dozen or so members every week who participate in worship, and, since the first client was admitted in 1979, they work closely with Penfield Christian Home on site to provide care for those struggling with drug and alcohol addictions. Penfield Baptist Church is not simply another small, rural church. Along with its current ministries, it exists as a magnificent architectural reminder of those years when the histories of Georgia Baptists and Mercer University intersected, and their shared story began.

The 2019 Annual Report of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board lists a total of 1,322,842 members among 99 associations, generating total tithes and offerings of \$1,101,928,319.00.¹⁸ Mercer University currently has 9,026 students from 57 countries, and 1,909 faculty and staff members.¹⁹ In January of 2021, they announced that Mercer’s endowment surpassed \$400 million for the first time in its history.²⁰ Both institutions were joined by faith in 1839 in the sanctuary of Penfield Baptist Church, neither imagining how their stories would unfold over the centuries, guided by the providence and promises of God, and enacted by the tenacity and faithfulness of Georgia Baptists. ▀

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For more photos of Penfield Baptist Church and many other historic rural churches in Georgia, visit www.hrcga.org.

Endnotes

1. No Writer Attributed, “Harvard’s Founding,” *The Harvard Crimson*, October 6, 1884. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1884/10/6/harvards-founding-this-quaint-account-of/>, accessed May 17, 2021.
2. College of William and Mary website, <https://www.wm.edu/about/history/index.php>, accessed May 29, 2021.
3. “Josiah Penfield (1785-1828),” [https://familypedia.wikia.org/wiki/Josiah_Penfield_\(1785-1828\)](https://familypedia.wikia.org/wiki/Josiah_Penfield_(1785-1828)), accessed May 13, 2021.
4. Spright Dowell, *A History of Mercer University, 1833-1953* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1958), 40.
5. Dowell, *History*, 16-17.
6. Dowell, *History*, 13.
7. Dowell, *History*, 16.
8. Jude 3, *Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1975).
9. Dowell, *History*, 42.
10. Dowell, *History*, 70.
11. Dowell, *History*, 42.
12. Dowell, *History*, 50.
13. Dowell, *History*, 42.
14. Dowell, *History*, 43-44.
15. Dowell, *History*, 74.
16. Dowell, *History*, 64.
17. The General Convention of the New Church was founded in the United States in 1817, based on the writings of the Swedish Lutheran theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). The committee at Penfield accused Rev. T.D. Martin of accepting Swedenborg’s teachings about the concepts of purgatory and universal salvation and rejecting orthodox Christian doctrine related to the Trinity, resurrection, election, and other ancient creedal affirmations. After review, they removed him from the fellowship of the Baptist Church on June 9, 1860.
18. “2019 Georgia Baptist Convention Annual Statistics of Associations,” in *2019 Annual Report*, Georgia Baptist Mission Board, Section IV, Church Statistics by Association. <https://gabaptist.egnyte.com/dl/e8X0HSq8r7/?>, accessed May 17, 2021.
19. Mercer University website. <https://www.mercer.edu/about-mercer/>, accessed May 17, 2021.
20. Kyle Sears, “Mercer University Endowment Surpasses \$400 Million,” *Mercer News*, January 22, 2021. <https://den.mercer.edu/mercer-university-endowment-surpasses-400-million/>, accessed May 17, 2021.