Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Religious Groups ©

It would seem there were Episcopalians as well as Baptists and Presbyterians in Georgetown in 1729 when Baptist minister Elisha Screven laid out the town. He provided free land for each of these groups on what is now Church Street. At the head of Broad Street, Lot 227 was reserved for the Anglican Church, but the congregation secured land at the dead center of town – where Broad and Highmarket meet. With the establishment of a new Parish, political function followed. The church served as a meeting place, for voting, for inspection of fire arms, and the front door was used for the posting of all public notices. Officials kept records of births, deaths, and marriages for the parish, also overseeing aid for the poor. They were able to levy and collect taxes yearly. During and after the Revolutionary War, the Church of England felt the greatest strain of any of the churches. For many years, ministers were trained in England and supplied by a British organization called the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Most of these ministers were loyal to the king and this caused quite a number of problems. In 1778, the Anglican Church was disestablished. There was a complete rupture between the church in England and the church in America. The biggest problem for the American Church was the creation of new bishops which the English church refused to continue. Finally, the Scottish Anglican Church anointed Samuel Seabury, an American, as a bishop and he was able to anoint others in this country. The church took the name of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States after the Revolutionary War.

Certainly, there were Baptists in the area very early. The Reverend Elisha Screven, a Baptist Minister, left Lot 228 at the north end of Screven Street for a meeting house. Although they did not build on this lot at first, by 1794 a "large and commodious church" was there. Today this site contains the Baptist Cemetery.

Presbyterians were much more numerous and visible in the back country. They established strong congregations at Black Mingo Meeting House and at Indiantown Presbyterian Church. There were enough in Georgetown, however, for Screven to leave Lot 226 at the head of Orange Street for a Presbyterian Meeting House, but it is not known if they ever built on this lot.

In 1784, the Methodists in the U.S., in a conference in Baltimore, decided to create the Methodist Episcopal Church. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury were appointed General Superintendents for America. In 1785, Asbury started south with Woolman Hickson, preaching at towns along the way. Their first convert in South Carolina was in Georgetown in the person of William Wayne. For some reason, Wayne has been denied membership in both the Baptist and Episcopal churches. However, this rejected man became the solid rock for Methodism in Georgetown. He soon converted others and this gathering became the oldest Methodist Congregation in the state.

There is recorded evidence that Jews lived in the city as early as 1762, and it is possible that they arrived from Charleston even earlier. During the 1790s and afterwards, members of the Jewish community held many important public offices and organized much of the economic life in Georgetown. We have elected 7 mayors of the Jewish faith in our 300 years of history. Services were held for well over 100 years in private homes and not until 1949 did they erect the Temple Beth Elohim.

There have been Catholics in Georgetown since the early 19th century but few in number. After the Civil War, mass was celebrated in the home of Arthur Morgan (now the Kaminski House Museum on Front Street) until his death in I878. Mass was then said in the home of his nephew, W. D. Morgan at the corner of Broad and Prince Streets. The cornerstone for the new Church was blessed on Thanksgiving Day, 1899. St. Mary's, Our Lady of Ransom, Roman Catholic Church is now located on the corner of Highmarket and Broad Streets. An extensive renovation and expansion of the structure was undertaken in 1967. The entrance to the church was changed from Highmarket Street to the present Broad Street location.

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first one in this denomination to be established in the South in 1865. The Reverend Augustus T. Carr, began with a classroom on Rosemont Plantation. By the end of the year, it had been accepted by the Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest Negro religious denomination in the nation (1787). The first sanctuary was erected on the corner of Broad and Duke Street in January of 1866 with a larger building built to the south. In 1908, the church was enlarged and remodeled with brick veneer.

Bethesda Baptist Church was organized shortly after the Civil War with Rev. Edward Rhue as its first pastor. Members purchased its site on Wood Street between Prince and Highmarket Street by 1867. Previously, African men and women of the Baptist faith assembled in a small building on the grounds of the old First Baptist Church on the corner of Highmarket and Queen Streets which was built in April of 1845.

Today, in 2019, when religious affiliation is declining nationwide, even worldwide, Georgetown is blessed with the longevity of our churches. Just pass by any church on a Sunday morning and observe the full parking lots. Many of our churches are responsible for the beginnings of organizations that lend a helping hand to those less fortunate and continue to spread the good word.