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Mystery of the Washington Street United Methodist Church's Cornerstone

By Jonathan M. Leader

The historic Washington Street United Methodist Church is celebrating its 200th anniversary. Founded in 1803, the historic church was the first to be built in Columbia and is the

oldest continuing congregation. It has been the site of many historic personages and events and at least one case of mistaken identity. The church was accepted to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

During the course of its long history, the church has been moved about the property, expanded, burned, and rebuilt. The burning of the church by union forces during the occupation of Columbia is an interesting footnote to that event.

According to church history, the soldiers were actually looking for the First Baptist Church where the Secession Convention of 1860 had been held. Misdirected to the Washington Street Church, the soldiers burned it to the ground amid chants of "burn the heathen temple." Undaunted, the congregation rebuilt the church finishing in 1875.

When the main building was modified and later rebuilt, the

cornerstone was removed and the contents replaced. The items known to have been placed in the cornerstone are of great importance to church and state history. The Bicentennial Committee wished to locate the cornerstone, open it as part of the celebration, preserve the contents, and replace them with contemporary items for the next two hundred years. There was only one small problem; no one knew where the cornerstone was located.

The additions and modifications that took place after the rebuilding of 1875 were sufficient to make it impossible to simply locate the cornerstone. The areas that a cornerstone would normally occupy were totally obscured. What to do? Knocking holes in the foundation was out of the question.

The church contacted the Office of the State Archaeologist for consultation. They had heard that a ground penetrating radar (GPR) unit was available and wondered if this might be a solution. The answer to their question was a qualified yes and no.

GPR has been successful in mapping structural walls. In those instances the equipment used a 1.5 GHz antenna that provided a very shallow penetration of the target with fine-grained resolution. The equipment available in Columbia was a 900 MHz antenna that had never been put to this purpose before. Nonetheless, it was agreed that an attempt would be made.

The Reverend Mike Alexander and Ms Maxine Sullivan, representing the church, assisted in the deployment and use of the GPR.



The Reverend Mike Alexander using the GPR on a buttress of Washington Street Methodist Church in Columbia. (SCIAA photo courtesy of Jonathan Leader)

Each corner of the building facing Washington Street was thoroughly tested for voids. The corners produced by the decorative buttresses on either side of the main doors were tested as well. The equipment performed flawlessly showing substrata and other inclusions within the brick facade. Unfortunately, it showed no void or area consistent with a cornerstone.

The church records provide a very clear description of the cornerstone. Careful scrutiny of the building's facade identified two areas that met the description. Neither location was in a corner or even at ground level. They were both on either side and above the level of the main doors.

Borrowing equipment used by the craftsmen restoring the exterior of the building, the GPR was raised to the level of the target areas. As before the equipment performed flawlessly and this time identified a void behind the right hand side decorative facing. Since this was a nontraditional location for a cornerstone, a second opinion was sought from the architectural restorers. They concurred that given the description and other available information that the facing was most likely the cornerstone. In due course the facing was removed. The void behind the decorative stone conformed to the space as described, but contained no box or other items.

The mystery of the cornerstone has yet to be solved. The Bicentennial Committee is soliciting information from the congregation and community as to the possible removal of the cornerstone box during repair work or other activities. The Office of the State Archaeologist continues to assist the Washington Street United Methodist Church in their efforts.



The Reverend Mike Alexander, Maxine Sullivan, and their assistant locate the void behind the marble marker on the front facade of the Washington Street Methodist Church in Columbia. (SCIAA photo courtesy of Jonathan Leader)



Jonathan Leader, Maxine Sullivan, and Reverend Mike Alexander standing in front of the void exposed during the investigation of the missing cornerstone at the Washington Street Methodist Church in Columbia. (SCIAA photo courtesy of Jonathan Leader)