

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

"Downtown by history and by choice"



SESQUICENTENNIAL SNAPSHOT #2

OUR CHURCH IN CRISIS TIMES: THE CIVIL WAR

The great intersectional conflict between northern and southern belligerents from 1861 to 1865 barely touched the obscure and tiny railroad hamlet of Durham Station other than the war's ending at Bennett Place. A full decade elapsed after the war's inception before the founding of our church. Yet, the Presbyterians, who gathered in various accommodations during the first years, experienced the devastating war by association with the circuit-riding pastors who proclaimed the Word of God from the pulpit. These Stated Supply ministers served a congregation initially too small and too poor to afford either a fulltime resident minister or a house of worship of their own.

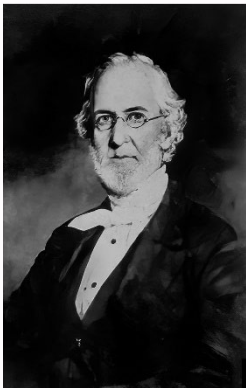


PHOTO: Rev. Drury Lacy, Jr. (1802-1884)

Prominent among the circuit-riders was 71-year-old Drury Lacy, Jr. (1802-1884). Succeeding him was Rev. Pleasant Hunter Dalton (1805-1876) followed in 1877-1879 by Rev. James Henderson Fitzgerald. Virginia-born Lacy, of a distinguished Presbyterian family, graduated from Union Theological Seminary (VA), had been initially ordained as an Evangelist by East Hanover Presbytery in 1833, served churches in New Bern and Raleigh and as President of Davidson College (1855-1860). He returned to the ministry when in 1861 Orange Presbytery ordained him as a Home Missionary and Evangelist.

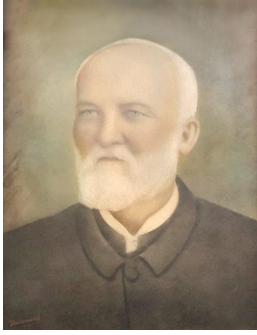


PHOTO: Rev. Pleasant Hunter Dalton (1821-1893)

A pair of successors followed Rev. Lacy to fill the Durham pulpit. Forty-year-old Rev. Dalton, a North Carolinian and 1846 Princeton Theological Seminary graduate, had been ordained in 1858 by Orange Presbytery to serve as an Evangelist and Pastor to High Point Presbyterians. In the first year that he served the Durham church, he also served as Moderator of the Synod of North Carolina.

Rev. Dalton's successor in Durham was 40-year-old Rev. Fitzgerald, a Virginian, Union Seminary (VA) graduate who had been ordained in 1859 as Stated Supply minister to Presbyterians in Scottsville, Virginia as well as Home Missionary in Fluvanna County.

The outbreak of war in 1861 enveloped this trio of Presbyterian ministers. Whether chaplains or ordained to serve in a missionary capacity, these three-well-educated clergy were much older than any soldiers to whom they ministered and were among the only 42 percent of ministers, missionaries, and evangelists who had been ordained. And their soldier-congregants differed dramatically from those in their home congregations; the military venues were devoid of women. Wartime found clergy laboring to Christianize hospital and camp spaces on the outskirts of civilization and bringing heaven and divine order to chaotic surroundings. They variously preached in the tradition of the Second Great Awakening, led revivals, counseled, comforted the sick and wounded, held prayer meetings, offered hymns and Bible classes, conducted funerals, and challenged the profane military world in which they found themselves.

Although a strong Unionist prior to the Civil War, Rev. Lacy answered the call of the General Assembly of the PCCSA for military chaplains and became attached to the 47th North Carolina Regiment. He served in that capacity as one among 1,308 Confederate army chaplains of which 18 percent were Presbyterians.

His regiment saw major action in Virginia, and he went into the field to lead "a Christian Association and an Educational Institute for the moral and mental improvement of the men." And, during 1863-1864, he served as chaplain at the North Carolina General Military Hospital No. 2 at Wilson in which capacity he ministered to soldier-patients who were both near and far from death. So too did Rev. Dalton. His church in the village of High Point became a wayside hospital for patients awaiting

transfer by rail to Confederate General Military Hospitals. In addition, he travelled north in the summer of 1863 to Winchester, VA to bring comfort to some of the 6,000 casualties evacuated from the carnage at Gettysburg. Rev. Fitzgerald's Scottsville residency placed him at the site of the Confederate General Hospital. Situated at a port on the James River and Kanawha Canal, the medical facility became a reception center for canal boats and barges carrying casualties from battles around Richmond and Petersburg.

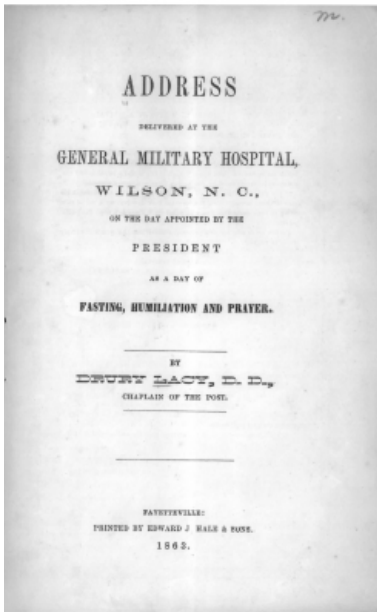


PHOTO: Good Friday 1863 Sermon Delivered by Rev. Lacy

In the midst of despair, Chaplain Lacy offered hope in his Good Friday 1863 sermon, the day designated by CSA President Jefferson Davis as one of “Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer.” For his biblical text, he drew on the apocalyptic message of the Prophet Joel (2: 15-32) lamenting the visitation of a plague of locust that ravaged the land, its crops, and its people. In the current crisis enveloping them, Rev. Lacy called for fasting and repentance, prayers for God’s intercession and His promise to “remove far off from you the northern army [of locusts] and . . . drive

him into the land barren and desolate, . . . and his stink shall come up, because he has done great things.” (KJV) God’s past divine intervention would thus be repeated on behalf of his faithful but hard-pressed southern people until national redemption as Joel had prophesied.

So too, in a sermon that the Chaplain had twice preached at the military hospital, and then again in the disordered and profane Reconstruction world of the Durham congregation that never numbered more than fourteen communicants. In it, he laid out the path to human redemption at the hands of an “infinitely benevolent” God. Invoking Psalm 66: 18, Rev. Lacy stressed that obedience to the law was the only path to “divine pleasure.” He declared that either “you must part with sin or part with heaven.” Although as our earliest church historian, Sarah Blacknall, reported, the circuit-riding pastor was “painfully afflicted with gout” and partially lame, his monthly presence among his Durham congregation left lasting memories. Members would fondly recall Rev. Lacy as “deeply spiritual and versed in the Scriptures, genial and charming in personality and distinguished in appearance.”

Rev. Fitzgerald, the last of the Supply Pastors, brought to the Durham faithful “the highest grade of pulpit eloquence” modeled on those of 18th Century Virginia Presbyterian evangelist and President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) Samuel Davies and Patriot orator of the American Revolution, Patrick Henry. During Rev. Fitzgerald’s service, the Durham church’s communicants increased by 35 percent and, on his departure, the once struggling church became able to call its first full time resident minister and soon to open its own house of worship.

By Peter Fish,
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