

A History of Swords Community Church

A United Methodist Congregation

One Hundred Years October, 1912 to October, 2012

In 1807 Daniel Touchstone sold lot 366 in the 4th land district to Joseph Phillips, who in turn sold the lot to Hezekiah Jordan in 1811. This area later was called Blue Spring Place. In 1896, Mr. J. B. Swords and family moved to Blue Springs, where farming was the principal industry. Mr. Swords acquired a large tract of land in the area, and soon several families moved here to farm with Mr. Swords. He also established a large liquor distillery. In 1900 Mr. Swords bought lot 366, along with some others nearby, and the community eventually became known as Swords, and was incorporated as such. In 1910 he persuaded the Georgia Railroad to construct a depot there, thereby providing him with the capability of shipping timber and cotton along with the liquor produced by his distillery. From this beginning, there grew quite a large business section which included a large brick building, the Swords General Store, a Post Office, a bank, and a large and modern cotton gin.

In 1910, Mr. and Mrs. Swords decided to establish a Sunday School. The group met in the school house, inviting ministers from all denominations to come and speak. The Sunday School flourished and they soon began to want an organized church.

An article in the Madison newspaper, dated September 6, 1912: "Last week Presiding Elder Allen held a protracted meeting at Swords. For some time the people have wanted a church organized there, but not until the last week did they begin in earnest. A committee is now at work getting up subscriptions, and work will soon begin." The article further states that the cost is expected to be \$2000.

A handwritten deed, recorded on October 28, 1912 transfers ownership of a parcel of land shown on a hand-drawn plat as one and one-tenth acre, as a gift to "J. B. Swords, L. C. Swords, E. A. Bond, J. W. Car, and C. L. Bryant as Trustees of the Swords Methodist Episcopal church, South, of Swords, GA. And their successors in office.....in trust, that all said premises shall be used, kept maintained, and disposed of as a place of divine worship for use of the ministry and membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South". An article in the December 6, 1912 edition states "The carpenters have now returned to the church building, and we expect to complete it at an early date".

The Madisonion, June 27, 1913: "One of the most notable events of the county will be the dedication of the new Methodist church Sunday at Swords. President Dickey, of Emory College, will preach. Presiding Elder Allen will be on hand also. A basket dinner will be a feature of this occasion, and a general invitation is extended to all who will come."

The Madisonion, July 4, 1913: "Sunday was a great day at Swords, the metropolis of Kingston district, and an important and growing commercial, educational and religious center of Morgan County. The occasion was the dedication of the new Methodist church. From the text 'For we are laborers together with God', Dr. Dickey, president at Emory College, preached a fine sermon of forty-five minutes. The singing, lead by Mr. W. J. Sanders, with Mrs. E. A. Bond as organist, was a feature of the service. At noon, an abundant dinner was served on tables erected under the trees about the spring. There was plenty of basket dinner, besides fine barbeque prepared by Mr. John Buck Swords.

"There is preaching morning and night two Sundays in the month – Rev. W. C. Floyd, a Baptist minister, on the first and Rev. W. D. Amack, of the Buckhead circuit on the fourth. There is Sunday School every Sunday afternoon, except the preaching days, with Mr. J. B. Swords as superintendent. Preaching days the Sunday School precedes the church services. The church membership is twenty five.

“The church is a beautiful place of worship, built at a cost of \$2532.96. There had been raised previous to Sunday \$1510.10. At a collection taken Sunday \$359.00 was raised. The conference is expected to contribute \$200, which leaves a balance of \$463.86 yet to be raised.”

Almost thirty years later, in 1940, just before Mr. Swords' death, he prepared a will giving to the Trustees of the Swords Methodist Church, South, the tract of land, “already marked off by me, same being Four Hundred Feet by Four Hundred Feet, located near the present Methodist Church building, specifying burial lot sizes and sale prices, and that all monies derived from the sale of the above lots be used in caring for and in beautifying said cemetery”.

During the early years of the church, the charge rented a house in Buckhead and the first pastors, Rev. Amack, Rev. Taylor, and Rev. Lawrence Neff, lived there. However, the charge felt it needed to own a place for the pastors to live. The charge met to decide where it should be built. Buckhead and Greshamville both wanted to have the parsonage. The Charge building location was put to a vote and Swords won. Mr. Swords gave the lot in Swords, next to the church lot, in 1918, and the house was constructed there. The first pastor to live in the parsonage was Rev. J. W. Steven. Others were Rev. Hill, Rev. Z. Spear, Rev. Hoke Sewell, Rev. Shirley Sherral, Rev. Oscar Greenland and others.

As the years went by, and the circuit changed to four churches to include Apalachee, the parsonage came to be less and less used. Pastors were sometimes students, or others that had other housing arrangements. Subsequently, the parsonage was sold in 1945 for \$750, and the parsonage in Apalachee later became the official parsonage for the circuit.

The church has struggled for membership for many years of its existence due to the decline of the community from its early days. Mrs. Jesse Swords Cochran, daughter of Mr. J. B. Swords, wrote in a 1960 article on the history of the church, “this year, 1960, and for several years before, we have so few members and only a few families. The

family of J. W. Moon, Paul Strickland's, the J. W. Cochran's, the Arlin Wheat's, and the Mitcham family are the active families in the Church". During all the years since its founding, services were provided by circuit pastors, with services during the 40's and beyond being held on the first Sunday of each month. On other Sundays only Sunday School was held.

During the mid to late 90's attendance had fallen to only 5 or 6 on most Sundays, and the members were becoming very concerned about the future of the church. Working with the District Superintendent, the few remaining members, led by Laura Wheat, decided to find a lay speaker that could conduct services on all Sundays instead of just monthly. Steve Wallace, an energetic and enthusiastic lay speaker from Madison came to Swords church in 2002, and was the catalyst for a revival of the church, both in attendance and spirit. Along with Steve, his wife June, a very talented pianist, accepted the role of music director in the church. The church was also able to purchase a modern digital piano shortly after their arrival. Within a year, attendance was up to 30 to 40 on any given Sunday. As the years went by, Steve felt other callings and obligations, and the district worked with the church to provide other pastors on a full time basis. However, due to the continuing decline of the local community, the church continues to struggle with attendance. The congregation is ever hopeful that with new ideas and efforts in the community, the church will once again start to grow.

As for the structure itself, not all that much has changed in this beautiful Gothic style building since those days of 100 years ago. The pot belly stove has been removed and gas space heaters were installed. About 15 years ago, a restroom was installed, replacing the outhouse which still stands today, located at the back of the property. Later, about 10 years ago, central heat and air were installed.

Lake Oconee had attracted a large population of lake residents in recent years, with several subdivisions within just a few miles of the church. Church members today are making efforts on several fronts to encourage people from these areas to visit the church. Members are also making every effort possible to add a fellowship hall to the church,

in keeping with its historic structure, to facilitate carrying out activities that involve the community in the church.

Swords founder, Mr. J. B. Swords died in 1940, and in 1956, due to reduction in passenger service, the railroad depot was removed. The General Merchandise store, the Swords bank, the post office, and jail are now all gone. Fraction Bottom Road, which runs through the middle of the community, leads to the Blue Springs Marina on Lake Oconee where once only rich river bottom farmland existed, and federal highway Interstate 20 runs within a half mile of this once bustling community. However, over the last century, the church has remained as the one unchanging structure in the community.

As John Wright wrote for his talk at this church at last year's (2011) homecoming, Swords United Methodist Church is "no First Methodist Church of Atlanta, Birmingham or Charleston. It's no Saint John's Cathedral in New York City. It's no National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. And yet, over the years it has served to bind this community together and is remembered by people across the nation as a place of comfort and reassurance, where long standing friendships were forged and people's spiritual lives were enriched; as a place where generations of unnamed saints have dedicated themselves to maintaining its vitality and witness". One hundred years later, the church community still celebrates in the same building with homecoming worship and "basket dinner" and barbeque.

Sources: Mr. John Wright. Deeds from Morgan County records. Previous articles written by Jamie Moon, Laura Wheat, and Martha Nunally. Articles published in the "Morgan County, Georgia Heritage 1807-1997". Article written by Mrs. Jesse Swords Cochran in 1960.