

## A HISTORY OF THE MARS HILL CHURCH AND CEMETERY

based on records belonging to the Mars Hill Cemetery and a compilation of early records of the old Marr's Hill Church and Cemetery by Marshall County Historian, Mr. Don Jeter and John W. Kiser May 12, 2012

On a beautiful knoll on the north side of Hwy. 129 and about a half mile west of I-65, Exit 27, and overlooking the gentle hills and fields of southern Marshall County stands an old, white-framed church surrounded by a peaceful cemetery. This is the Mars Hill Church and Cemetery, the final resting place of so many who, at one time, lived in the early communities of Robertson Fork, Blue Creek, Cornersville, and Lynnville. Both the church and the cemetery date from around 1885. The beginnings of Mars Hill, however, lie just to the north at a bend in Wright Road. There is the first Mars Hill Cemetery dating back to the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Over the years an "r" was dropped from the spelling of the cemetery. It was, for many years, called Marr's Hill. The second "r" in the spelling of Marris was in recognition of the early settler, William L. Marris, who donated two acres of his land for a church. He did not specify any denomination. At the time Tennessee was so sparsely settled, especially in its southern part, there were not enough citizens of any one denomination to organize a congregation.

It was the Presbyterians who accepted Mr. Marr's offer and built a log meeting house and began to bury on the property. This was the first Mars Hill Church and Cemetery. As to just when this took place we have no record, but the earliest tombstone in the cemetery is dated 1825. It marks the grave of A. E. Davis, a child only one and a half years old. There are unmarked grave stones in the cemetery which may be earlier, but certainly the property was in use by 1825.

Though the Presbyterians probably held the deed, if there was one, to the church and lot until 1869, it is apparent that the congregation did not thrive as

the Baptist Church began use of it at least by 1843. A copy of the church minutes dating from 1843 until 1873 offer an interesting look at its activities during that period. No record indicates whether the Baptists leased the property from the Presbyterians, or if some other arrangement was made. There is an interesting note in the old church ledger for 1859 which states that on "February 14<sup>th</sup>, a committee was formed to determine whether the Baptists could still occupy Mars Hill to hold meetings in by helping to repair said church." Two years earlier a "Mr." McConnell had applied to hold school in it during the winter. The church voted to let him have the use of it for the winter with the agreement that he bind himself to return it in as good condition as he found it. The church building was log with small windows and a large, open fireplace.

In those days of early settlement, both the Presbyterians and the Baptists found it difficult to find, much less keep, a preacher. This was probably a factor in the Presbyterian's leasing. The Presbyterians maintained a somewhat higher educational standard for their clergy than many denominations. Those preachers could reach more people in the larger communities, so they were given priority. The members of the little Mars Hill congregation probably moved to Cornersville or Lynnville, but still retained title to the Mars Hill meeting house and cemetery. In 1869 the Elders of the Presbyterian Church at Cornersville, Thomas J. Kennedy, John B. Gray, and Andrew M. Blackburn deeded to James S. Haynes, Woodson Walker, and Elisha R. Davis, representing the Mars Hill Baptist congregation, "two acres and the Mars Hill church and spring" for two hundred dollars.

Problems faced by churches in the rural areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are reflected in the minutes of the church during the 1843-1873 time period. Weather was always a factor. If communion had been planned for one Sunday, and it rained, the communion was postponed until the next Sunday. It was hard to find a preacher to come once a month. In 1850 Harry Miller agreed to serve the Mars Hill congregation as its pastor with the church "paying what they could". He obviously did not preach for the money as this was his second year with the Mars Hill congregation. He continued to preach for four years.

For the year 1854-1855, a preacher was called who agreed to preach on two Sundays and one Saturday each month for one hundred dollars a year and as much extra as the congregation could collect. He also agreed "when it was possible" to preach to the black people. For the same amount in 1856, another preacher was hired to preach on a Saturday and a Sunday each month for one hundred dollars. The preachers usually served more than one congregation so, in order to have preaching each month, it was sometimes necessary to have two preachers, each paid fifty dollars a year for one sermon a month.

Comfort in the little log church was hardly a factor. During the Sundays when a fire was needed, some men in the congregation were delegated to bring the wood to fuel the fire. Members of the congregation were requested to bring their dimes to pay them.

If little attention was paid to a worshipper's physical comfort, a great deal more was focused on his spiritual well-being. Any member reported to have brought shame on the church by their conduct was called before the Elders of the church and admonished. Most were forgiven, but if they did not repent they were removed from the church roll. Common offenses were public drunkenness and swearing.

There were no entries for the Civil War years in the church ledger until 1865, and little was recorded for the following years until 1871, except for the deed to the church in 1869. In September of 1871, a "brush arbor" was erected near the front of the church to accommodate the large crowd expected to attend the meeting of the Judson Baptist Association. The meeting was so successful that the church chose to follow it with a week-long protracted meeting. One of the sermons was given by a Methodist preacher. The last entry in the church ledger is for 1873. No records have yet been found for the years between 1873 and 1895.

The old log meeting house and its cemetery had outgrown themselves. Rather than build a new building on the site or attempt to enlarge the cemetery, the congregation chose to move to a new site overlooking the Lynnville-Cornersville Road. The site was a hill-top of an acre and twenty-five squares given

to the church by Mr. Joseph G. Edmondson on February 19, 1885. The deed stated that the church was to remain on the lot. This seems to indicate that the church had at least been started before 1885.

The following May, Mr. and Mrs. John A. Burrow “for the consideration of having a Baptist Church in the vicinity of our lands and near our house” gave one acre to the Mars Hill Church. Other gifts followed. Mr. J. W. Edmondson bought one and forty-five hundredths of an acre from Sophia Griffis and gave it to the church in 1891. The oldest tombstone in the new Mars Hill Cemetery is dated 1889. (Based on inspection of the tombstones on March 13, 2012) In April of 1926, Mr. and Mrs. W. M. Bryant sold a parcel of land for one hundred fifteen dollars to the church. While boundary lines are given in the deed, the acreage is not.

The twentieth century saw many changes in the Mars Hill community. The automobile became the common form of transportation and roads, including the Lynnville-Cornersville Road, were greatly improved. This also meant that people found it convenient to leave their small country churches and go to the bigger ones in town where they could be assured of a preacher. This may be what happened at Mars Hill, but worship services at some date ceased to be held there. Though the church was no longer used for worship by a resident congregation, the cemetery continued in use by the community.

When on December 1, 1943, Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Wright and Mr. W. C. Wright sold two pieces of land adjacent to the cemetery, containing two half acres, more or less, for fifty dollars, the deed was made to the Mars Hill Cemetery Association, rather than to the Baptist Church. This indicates that at least by this time the Cemetery Association was acting separately from the church.

The Cemetery Association was loosely organized without by-laws, a Board, or officers. To remedy the situation, word was circulated that there would be a meeting to address the subject on Decoration Day, May 8, 1976. The minutes of that meeting recorded that the cemetery for the past twenty-five or thirty years had been taken care of by Mr. J. M. Kaiser and Mr. Philip Edmondson, but both

were now deceased. After some discussion, the assembled group decided to elect seven individuals as Directors to look after the cemetery and the church building. Those selected were Wilburn Clark, Tom Ed Wright, Howard Pinkston, George Pinkston, William Hickerson, Jim Edmondson, and Allen Hickman. At a meeting in June all the Directors were given offices as follows: Wilburn Clark-President, Howard Pinkston-Vice President, Allen Hickman-Secretary, Tom Ed Wright-Treasurer, George Pinkston-Maintenance Supervisor, Jim Edmondson-Fund Raising Chairman, William Hickerson-Assistant Fund Raising Chairman.

In mid-July, 1976, a group of Baptists who had broken away from Lynnville Baptist Church contacted Wilburn Clark to request the use of the Mars Hill Church for their services until they could build a new church at Richland. Mr. Clark contacted the Board members, and they saw no objection to the proposal. Accordingly, the Lynnville group requested a meeting with the Board on August 16, 1976, to discuss the specifics of their proposal.

The Lynnville Group specifically asked to:

1. Put in a dropped ceiling
2. Panel or paper the walls
3. Replace some broken window panes
4. Refinish the church benches
5. Install gas heaters
6. Place a house trailer against the fence in the southwest corner for use as a Sunday School room and as a nursery

The Mars Hill Board had no objection to any of these requests which would be paid at the Lynnville Group's expense. In fact, the Board thought they would be an asset to both the Cemetery Association and the community, but they could not give them a definite answer until they talked to the leaders of the Cornersville Baptist Church who they believed actually held the deed to the building.

The next week on August 22, 1976, members of the Cemetery Association met with members of the Cornersville Baptist Church at which time Mr. Lawton Tarpley explained what had happened with the request from the Lynnville group, that the Cemetery Board could not give permission until the ownership of the church building was clarified. After two long discussions, it was decided that Mr. Clark could tell the Lynnville group to go ahead with their plans.

The Lynnville group used the church building until late 1980 or early 1981 when they moved to their new church at Richland. The minutes of the Cemetery Board for March 29, 1981, reported that “when the congregation moved to their new location they temporarily moved some benches and chairs. Everything has been returned except one bench and one of the pulpit chairs. The chair fell off the truck and broke up, so they are trying to get it repaired before they return it. William Hickerson is to check on the keys they had and get them returned so we can get in the building.”

After the attorney, Mr. Knox Bigham, had determined that the church building legally belonged to the Cornersville Baptist Church, both the Mars Hill Cemetery Board and the Association began a campaign to persuade the Cornersville church to donate the building to the cemetery. The Association had maintained the church after the Mars Hill Baptist Church members left it.

Mr. Wilburn Clark was asked to ascertain from the leaders of the Cornersville Baptist Church if their church was going to keep the Mars Hill building, or if they were going to deed it to the Association. The Association’s views were clearly stated in a letter dated March 30, 1977, to Mr. Lawton Tarpley, the chairman of the Board of Deacons of the Cornersville Baptist Church. The letter is quoted below in its entirety.

.....LETTER...(pages 9-11).....

Mr. Clark’s letter had been preceded by a petition dated March 2, 1977, and signed by thirty-one individuals, requesting the Cornersville Baptist Church not convey the property to any group other than the Cemetery Association. Nothing further appears in the Association’s minutes until March 29, 1981, when

Mr. Clark reported that he had talked to Mr. Tarpley, and Mr. Tarpley said that “before long” he believed the Cornersville Church would convey the building to the Cemetery Association. Finally on October 30, 1982, the Cornersville Baptist Church deeded the church building at Mars Hill to the Cemetery Association for one dollar.

In 1987, another religious group, “the Church of Salvation,” asked to lease the church building. The Cemetery Association agreed to a lease with provisions that the group carry liability insurance, which they did, that the property be kept clean, and when they left, be in as good shape as they found it, and that no changes be made to the building without the consent of the Board. The lease was made on a two month basis to determine if the community had any objections to it. The building would then be subject to renewal. Mr. Bill Yates, who headed the organization, says that they used the church for fourteen months. When they left, they bought the Judge Lee farm just north of Pulaski on Highway 31. The Cemetery Association did not charge rent, but the group agreed to donate seventy-five dollars a month to the cemetery, and as their attendance grew, to donate one hundred dollars a month. An inventory of the contents of the church was made at the time of the lease, listing twenty-five short benches, sixteen long benches, one podium, one chair (evidently the Lynnville Baptists never got the broken chair repaired), one organ and one organ stool.

This was the last use of the church building as a meeting place for worship. The building has been used for weddings, and the Mars Hill Cemetery Association opens the building on Decoration Day each year for anyone who wants to go inside.

The purpose of the Mars Hill Cemetery Association as stated in its by-laws is the maintenance and upkeep of the cemetery and church building, which involves financial stability. At the first meeting of the newly created Board of Directors the chairman, Mr. Wilburn Clark, proposed the creation of a trust fund for this purpose. This was done on February 1, 1977, with a deposit of nine thousand dollars in the First National Bank of Lewisburg. Only the interest was to be used

for the upkeep of the cemetery and church building. Other funds for the cemetery upkeep would have to come from donations.

Over the years, minutes of the Association reflect the problems in raising operating funds each year at the annual Decoration Days, such as the purchase of mowing equipment, removing trash that would accumulate, finding good men to do the mowing and keeping the church in repair. Expenses naturally increased each year and still do. Plot maps and records of lot purchases were also kept by the Association.

Each year there was a discussion as how to get more donations as the interest on the Association's savings would not defray all of the expenses. The November 3, 1991 minutes noted that the price of twenty-five dollars for graves per lot would increase to fifty dollars. It was also decided to close the trust fund and invest the money in Certificates of Deposit as the bank did not wish any longer to handle other than large trust funds.

The church and cemetery at Mars Hill have been well-served by the Cemetery Association over the years. As Board members have retired, new ones have been appointed who have a commitment as strong as the original ones did. The increasing costs each year made it necessary that the lot holders increase their contributions, so that this beautiful place, sacred to all who have loved ones buried here, and venerated by the community as a revered landmark, might continue as it has for one hundred twenty-seven years.

What happens when care for a cemetery ends may be sadly seen by visiting the old Marr's Hill Cemetery just up the road.



Mr. Lawton Tarpley  
Chairman, Board of Deacons  
Cornersville Baptist Church  
Cornersville, TN 37047

March 30, 1977

Dear Mr. Tarpley,

The Mars Hill Cemetery Association is pleased that it was decided to postpone voting by the congregation on Wednesday night, March 2, 1977, to convey the Mars Hill Church to the Lynnville Group.

Hopefully, this delay will allow for other solutions.

Members of the Cemetery Association are not happy with the idea that an outside group, such as the Lynnville Group, might obtain control of the Mars Hill Church. The following are some of the reasons:

The Mars Hill Church and Cemetery are very dear to many citizens in the community and have always been thought of, by them, as inseparable. The Cemetery Association has always had access to the church and used it often for community gatherings or cemetery business meetings.

The Mars Hill Church is a landmark to the community and we or they want to keep it that way. Also the Cemetery Association would like to remain to have accessibility to it as they always have had. We do not want to have changes made to the configuration, i.e., add a Sunday School room or cut a door in the rear of the building, as the Lynnville group asked about when they first started using it.

The Cemetery Association has always thought of the church as their responsibility and have done all the maintenance and upkeep that has ever been done. The Cemetery Association would like to retain this responsibility and we were honest in thinking that we had it. When we drafted our By-Laws in May, 1976, under

Article II, Purpose, Quote: “ The purpose of the association shall be to provide maintenance and perpetual care of the Mars Hill Cemetery grounds and Church building.” We acted in good faith when we entered into an agreement with the Lynnville group. They were monitored closely, resulting in improvements to the building with no undesirable changes. We planned, budgeted for, and repaired the roof without any expectations of help from any outside source.

The Lynnville Group has donated \$25 each month, \$225 total, to the care of the cemetery. We would like to remain or rather retain this income. There was no stipulation that they pay any set amount for the use of the church, we only suggested that a donation to the cemetery would be appreciated. In making this arrangement if we over stepped our authority or hurt anyone’s feelings, we stand corrected and are sorry. I did not know at that time that the Cornersville Baptist church had any claim, deed, or interest in the Mars Hill Church whatsoever. Our only intent was to accommodate the Lynnville Group, who did not have a place to worship, and to get those repairs made that they volunteered to make, in order to use the church.

During our meeting with you (the Cornersville Baptist Church) in August of last year, we agreed to agree on the ownership of the church, based on the lawyer’s opinion after reviewing the titles. This agreement we intend to keep, although the opinion is an unpopular one with the association members.

Knox Bigham did tell me, that he suggested to Boots, at the time of the title review, that in his opinion and in the best interest of all concerned, the Mars Hill Church should be conveyed to the Mars Hill Cemetery Association. I believe he still feels this way.

Therefore, we respectfully request that the conveyance of the Mars Hill Church not be made to any group other than the Mars Hill Cemetery Association. If you cannot agree to convey the church to the Association, we request that you grant us the responsibility of maintenance and management, and retain the ownership as it is.

We sincerely hope you, i.e., the Cornersville Baptist Church, will agree to the above as being in the best interest of all concerned. Then, of course we would feel obligated to return the check that was recently issued to us for the roof repairs. We will also assume or relieve you of any legal liabilities you think you may have for the church. This would be done of course by execution of the proper paperwork.

Respectfully,

Wilburn E. Clark

