

VIII. Arise and Build

By Kit Watts

By 1941 actual membership at Sligo had soared to 1,293. About 700 college students were non-members but attended in the space-available situation. Columbia Hall Chapel seated between 500 and 600. Even two services on Sabbath morning weren't enough. "A deplorable condition," said conference president J. W. MacNeil, "which must be remedied."³⁹

Plans for a college church were laid out in the January 10, 1941, Sligonian. Approximately \$110,000 would be needed, seating capacity was projected at 1,519, and it was optimistically predicted that the church would be done in five months.

Ways to raise money for the new church led to some head-scratching. One Sligonian headline in March said that "Movies Will Add to Church Building Fund." Proceeds of showing Elephant Boy helped swell the incoming cash.⁴⁰

Elementary school children got into the campaign when they each received a penny bank. Together they saved \$41.37 for the new church. The boys of Mrs. Grace Kinder's room brought in the largest amount, \$16.25, and won the prize--a framed, hand-painted picture of the Imperial Palace in Peking.⁴¹

But by August 1941 the church was not only not done, it was not even begun. The proposed site (where the baseball diamond on the college grounds is now) did not suit some. The General Conference brethren recommended a complete restudy of the plan.

Eventually a corner lot known as the Stuart property at the intersection of Carroll and Flower, was settled upon.⁴² Subsequently the college deeded the property to the Potomac Conference, and the Stuart home was jacked up and moved across Greenwood Avenue to finally become the mother-cell of the Columbia Union office complex and now serves as the Sligo Church Offices.⁴³

Sligo members had helped build Columbia Hall during World War I.

As fate would have it, just as their plans for the new church were jelling, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States plunged headlong into World War II.

War-time priorities, permits, and shortages were to greatly retard the building program. But on March 2, 1942, at a punctual eight o'clock in the morning, excavation began.⁴⁴ L. G. Small, college engineer, said that after much anguish the rough heating materials and fixtures, including copper pipes and tubing, had been secured. Most of the electrical wiring was in hand, too.

Getting steel was next to impossible. Then miraculously the contractor, H. H. Hubbard, was granted a priority rating and the church progressed.

But not rapidly.

A combination of construction problems and deficiencies due to the war saw only the foundation laid during that first year.

First of all, the excavators struck quicksand and a small spring. (A pump under Sligo's front steps still monitors the little spring.)

And the freeze on building materials delayed receiving the steel promised to Hubbard for months.⁴⁵ But as hard as it was to get materials, the labor shortage was almost more critical.

In 1943 Clinton Coon was called to pastor the Takoma Park Church. It was Ned S. Ashton who was to see the church of dreams become a finished monument. (Coon, incidentally, later became Potomac Conference president and moved conference headquarters from Takoma Park to Staunton, Virginia.)

The enormous quantity of materials needed for Sligo was remarked upon far and wide. For example, the walls were finished with Indiana limestone--28 carloads of it.

By October 1943 Ashton was hopeful that the roof would be on before winter.⁴⁶

The five-month project had lengthened into three long frustrating years.

A final perplexity threatened even further delays and more costs. In order to assure proper acoustics in the building mohair upholstery was needed; without it, expensive adjustments would have to be made inside.

At this point not a few Sligo members were inclined to remember Nehemiah who faced the reconstruction of Jerusalem in the face of incredible odds. The Bible says that four of his

friends laughed outright at his idea. Without batting an eye Nehemiah retorted, "The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build." ⁴⁷

During the summer of '44 a tunnel was dug under Flower Avenue and a line joined the church to the college heating system. Painting, tiling, light and seat installation continued apace through the fall.

Opening services were announced for the last Sabbath of the year, December 30, to validate the cornerstone, which had already been cut with the year 1944. In the final day bulldozers hastily leveled the church yard to make it safe for crowds. ⁴⁸

The church cost three times the amount predicted by planners in 1941. Materials, labor, and architect's fees came to \$368,762.33, or a cost of 49 cents for each of the 750,000 cubic feet. ⁴⁹

The total seating capacity was 2300. It was the largest church in the denomination--or in the city of Washington, D.C. ⁵⁰

W. H. Branson, vice-president of the General Conference, addressed an audience of more than 2,000 during the opening service. The student reporter covering the event for the Sligonian was a junior theology major, Willis Quigley. ⁵¹

The dedication service was set for June 1, 1946, in time for the General Conference session which opened in the church on June 5. ⁵²

Besides getting the church built, Ashton made a number of contributions to the church in his nine years as pastor.

He hired Thurman Mayes as custodian in May 1947. Mayes retired from Sligo 26 years later having worked for six senior pastors. ⁵³

In 1949 Ashton proposed carpets for the church to reduce the hazard of skidding on the graded ramps leading into the balcony or on the polished aisles that dip one-and-a-half feet on the main floor. ⁵⁴

In April 1949 the Review and Herald Publishing Association chose Sligo Church as the auditorium in which to celebrate its centenary. ⁵⁵

Footnotes:

39. "New Sligo Church Construction Will Commence First of March," Sligonian, January 10, 1941.
40. "Movies will Add to Church Building Fund," Sligonian, March 7, 1941.
41. "Church School Children Save Pennies for New Church," Sligonian, March 7, 1941. The prize was presented by Solicitation Committee Chairman, D. E. Rebok.
42. "Church Approves Change to New Site," Sligonian, August 22, 1941.
43. Interview with Lloyd c. McClellan, Thurman Mayes.
44. "New Sligo Church Under Construction," Sligonian, March 13, 1942.
45. Church Board Minutes.
46. "Pastor Reports On New Church," Sligonian, October 22, 1943.
- 47.. "Progress Is Made on Sligo Church Building," Arden Clarke, Sligonian, April 7, 1944.
48. "New Sligo Church Nears Completion," Phillip Broeckel, Sligonian, October 27, 1944.
49. Church Board Minutes.
50. "New Sligo Church Expected to Seat 2300 People--1400 on Main Floor," Elora Mays, Sligonian, December 20, 1944.
51. "Elder Branson Addresses 2000 at First Service," Willis Quigley, Sligonian, January 12, 1945.
52. Church board Minutes, April 16, 1946.
53. Interview with Thurman Mayes.
54. "Padded Carpets and Quiet Tongues," editorial, Lennie Keith, Sligonian, February 18, 1949.
55. "Review Centenary Services Observed," Sligonian, April 15, 1949.