

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE PEARL RIVER CHURCH
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UNITED METHODIST SOUTHEASTERN JURISDICTIONAL
CONFERENCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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In tracing the history of the Pearl River Church and the Lambuth family, I think that we should first begin with a brief overview of the history of this particular area of Madison County. Mississippi was formally admitted to the Union as the twentieth state on December 10, 1817. At that time, the land that we now occupy here in Madison County was owned by the Choctaw Indians, who were beginning to realize that things were not looking good for them. Almost three years later in 1820, three of the principal chiefs of the Choctaw Nation---Pushmataha, Puckshunubbee, and Mashulatubbee---met with the United States commissioners---Andrew Jackson and Thomas Hinds---in what is now northeastern Madison County to sign the Treaty of Doak's Stand that opened some five and one-half million acres of Choctaw land in central Mississippi to settlement. Initially, one gigantic county named "Hinds" was created from this session, but the land rush would soon be underway. Eight years later in 1828, Madison County was created by the Mississippi legislature.

During a visit some years ago to the Madison County Chancery Clerk's Office in Canton, I happened to notice the old ledgers that contain the county's earliest records. When I opened the oldest record book, I came upon the plats and notes of the government surveyors who had surveyed the land following the Treaty of Doak's Stand. I noticed that on one of the maps the

surveyor had drawn a picture of a house. The notation by the drawing of the house read “Puckshunuble” [sic]. I wrote down the the legal description for the house site---Section 12, Township 7 N, Range 2 E---and when I returned to the Department of Archives and History, I checked the legal description using a present-day quadrangle map. My heart skipped a beat when I saw that Puckshunubbee, one of the principal chiefs of the Choctaw Nation, had at one time lived five or so miles east of the city of Madison and only a little more than a mile south of where we are assembled at this moment.

The Choctaw Nation was divided into three districts, and Puckshunubbee, one of the medal chiefs recognized by the United States government, was chief of the western region of the Choctaw Nation as early as 1801. Thanks to the splendid research of Jack D. Elliott, Jr., historical archaeologist, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, we now know that Puckshunubbee moved to this area around 1807. Some years ago, Jack provided me with a typescript of the December 15, 1807, letter from Thomas Wright of the Chickasaw Agency to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn. The letter reads in part as follows:

There is a small settlement of Choctaw Indians establishing themselves into a neighbourhood, on the road leading from Nashville to Natchez on the waters of the Pearl River and big Black, where the soil is exceedingly fertile and productive. The object of these Choctaws in abandoning their Towns, and settling out on the road was, to change their mode of living, to cultivate farms and keep supplies to accommodate Travellers.

The principal of this party, and by whose influence this little Emigration has taken place; is the principal Chief or King of the

Upper Towns, who is setting his newly acquired neighborhood a bright example of industry. He is known by the name of Puckshunubbee, he appears to be a man of a strong mind, frequently making very pertinent observations on the advantages he has already experienced from his new mode of living, thereby encouraging his little community to embrace the same means that is enabling him to live so comfortably. . . .

Puckshunubbee served as chief during the period when the Choctaws ceded much of their land to the United States. He was one of the signatories to the Treaty of Mount Dexter in 1805, the Treaty of 1816, and as I have already mentioned the Treaty of Doak's Stand in 1820. Four years later in 1824, Puckshunubbee left his home just a short distance to the south of us to go to Washington, D. C. with Pushmataha, Mashulatubbee, and other Choctaw leaders to meet with Secretary of War John C. Calhoun and other leaders of the United States government. On their way to Washington, an intoxicated Puckshunubbee died of injuries sustained during his fall from a cliff near Maysville, Kentucky. The 1824 trip to Washington was devastating for the Choctaw Nation---not only did they lose Puckshunubbee, but in addition the great chief Pushmataha was taken ill and died in Washington where he was buried in the Congressional Cemetery.

Sam Price, our friend and fellow member of the Pearl River Church Historic Council, has spent a good bit of time researching the history of the Pearl River Church property. He has told me and the other members of the council that he feels comfortable in stating that Christian worship services at this site probably began soon after a deed on this property was conveyed by George N. Robinson to the trustees of the Pearl River Academy on April 3, 1833. The first

church services in this area may have been held in the schoolhouse until a new school building or church was constructed.

David W. Haley, one of the trustees of Pearl River Academy, was born in Grainger County, Tennessee, on February 12, 1793. He served in the War of 1812 and evidently made the acquaintance of Andrew Jackson. Following the Treaty of Doak's Stand, Haley secured a contract to carry mail on the Natchez Trace, and he would retain these contracts for almost a decade.

Haley settled here in this area that had once been owned by the Choctaw Nation and acquired the site of Puckshunubbee's house. B. L. C. Wailes (Benjamin Leonard Covington Wailes), assistant state geologist, visited Madison County in December of 1852 and recorded the following statement in his diary:

Passed through Canton and traveled by the telegraph road . . .
to Maj. Haley's at the site of the former residence of the old
Indian chief Puckshunubbe One of the tumuli of the
Indians, some 15 ft. high and about 100 ft. at the base, stands
near the old residence of the chief, and is now used as a burial
ground."

Thanks to the meticulous documentation of the government surveyors and B. L. C. Wailes, the founder and first president of the Mississippi Historical Society, the location of Puckshunubbee's house has been solidly documented.

David Haley served in the Mississippi State Senate from 1836 to 1840, but arguably his most prominent role in the state's history involved his participation in the negotiations with the Choctaw Indians for the cession of their remaining lands in Mississippi and the removal of the

tribe to the west. As a result of his friendship with Choctaw leaders, Greenwood Leflore, John Pitchlynn, and David Folsom, the following paragraph was included in the final section of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830:

At the earnest and particular request of the chief Greenwood Leflore, there is granted to David Haley one half section of land, to be located in a half section on any unoccupied and unimproved land, as a compensation for a journey to Washington City with dispatches to the government, and returning others to the Choctaw nation.

Following his service in the Mississippi State Senate, Haley spent the rest of his life at his Madison County home, “Mingo” or “Council Springs,” at the site of the house that Puckshunubbee had built. Haley died on October 19, 1857, and was buried in the Haley family cemetery on top of the prehistoric Late Mississippian Period burial mound near his home. In later years, David Haley’s remains and monument were relocated here to the cemetery of the Pearl River Church where he had worshipped.

The history of the Pearl River Church has been greatly influenced by the Lambuth family. Some 167 years ago in 1843, the Methodist minister John Russell Lambuth moved his family from Alabama and settled near this site where we are assembled today. John Russell Lambuth’s father, William Lambuth, was also a Methodist minister, who was licensed to preach in 1786 in the Baltimore Conference and who would later be sent in 1798 as a missionary into the newly-opened areas of Tennessee.

John Russell Lambuth was born in Sumner County, Tennessee, in 1801, was licensed to preach at the age of sixteen, and joined the Tennessee Conference in 1821. He was appointed to

serve as a missionary to the Indians and to the Creoles of Louisiana and transferred to the Mississippi Conference, which, at that time, included Louisiana and Alabama. This assignment necessitated his acquiring a rudimentary knowledge of not only the French language, but also the language of the Indians, for he had frequent need to preach and communicate in both languages.

John Russell Lambuth was obviously learned and well-read. In a letter that he wrote to his friend, the Reverend B. M. Drake, on June 1, 1827, he stated that he had been reading Benson's *Commentary on the New Testament*, as well as the three volumes of Milton's *Paradise Lost and Regained*, Cowper's poems in three volumes, Goldsmith's poems, and Blair's lectures. He helped build and provided the leadership for the construction of the first Methodist church in Mobile, Alabama. While in Mobile, he taught school for a livelihood and taught in the Sunday School as well as preaching each Sunday.

When John Russell Lambuth and his first wife, Nancy Kirkpatrick Lambuth, moved here with their children in 1843, their son, James William Lambuth, was thirteen years old. Some forty years later, James William Lambuth writing from Shanghai, China, to the editor of the *New Orleans Advocate* would state that the Comet of 1843 had made a great impression on his mind and that at that time his heart had "yearned to know more of that spiritual life that makes the Christian happy."

Nancy Kirkpatrick Lambuth died on January 18, 1847, at the time of the birth of her tenth child. Had she lived a little longer, she would have been able to move into a newly-constructed home that would stand as a local landmark for well over a century. The Lambuth Home was located a mile or so to the west of the Pearl River Church.

John Russell Lambuth and Nancy Kirkpatrick Lambuth had three sons who became ministers---James William Lambuth, John Wesley Lambuth, and Robert Wilkins Lambuth. John

Wesley Lambuth and Robert Wilkins Lambuth are buried here in the Pearl River Church cemetery with their parents.

James William Lambuth was a member of the first class at the University of Mississippi. It was there in 1850 that he dedicated his life to Christ. Although he had commenced the study of medicine and then law, he became convinced that God had a different plan for his life. He was licensed to preach in 1853, and it was in that year that he read a letter from Bishop J. O. Andrew appealing to young men to become missionaries to China. James William Lambuth felt moved to answer the call and at the meeting of the Mississippi Conference in Canton in the fall of 1853, he was ordained by Bishop William Capers and appointed to serve as a missionary to China. (Incidentally, Bishop Capers was the great-grandfather of my mentor, the third director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History---Charlotte Capers.)

Another interesting part of the Lambuth family story involves a young lady from New York by the name of Mary Isabella McClellan, who had come to Madison County to teach. In the antebellum period, it was not uncommon for Northern ladies to journey south to teach. Mary Isabella McClellan was related to General George B. McClellan and Grover Cleveland, who would later become president of the United States. James William Lambuth and Mary Isabella McClellan fell in love, and prior to their marriage, she made the commitment to accompany James William to China. The decisions of these two young people to leave their homes and families and become missionaries would have a lasting impact on the spread of Christianity to the Orient and many other parts of the world.

In March of 1854, this young couple (James William Lambuth was twenty-four years old and Mary Isabella only twenty-one) left their home in Madison County to make their way to Richmond, Virginia, and then on to New York, where they left for China on May 6, 1854. Mary

Isabella was around three months pregnant at the time. They arrived in Shanghai, China, a little more than four months later on Sunday, September 17, 1854, having completed a voyage that had taken them from New York, across the Atlantic Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, through the Indian Ocean, the Java Straits, and the China Sea.

Can you imagine arriving in a new land in your early twenties and having to learn the Chinese language? According to James William Lambuth, there were only approximately three hundred Christians and just sixty-five missionaries in the entire nation of China. The Lambuths immediately began their work with Mary Isabella devoting her time to teaching and ministering to the women and girls while James William taught and ministered to the men and boys. Thirty years later, the Lambuths would find themselves in Shanghai with only one other Christian missionary couple.

On November 10, 1854, almost two months after their arrival in Shanghai, Mary Isabella gave birth to their first child---a son, whom they named Walter Russell Thornton Lambuth. The young parents prayed that God would “bless him, make him a useful member of His church, and a blessing to many others.” Their prayer would be answered for Walter Russell Thornton Lambuth would grow up to become a missionary who would take the message of Christ to Japan, China, Korea, Mexico, Cuba, South America, Belgium, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, Africa, Siberia, Manchuria, and other lands. He would also become a bishop and a leader in world Methodism.

James William Lambuth and Mary Isabella spent almost a half-century of Christian service in the Orient. Mary Isabella returned to the United States in 1859 to leave their children, Walter and Nettie, with her parents in New York. Two years later in 1861, the father and mother returned to New York. During the midst of the Civil War, they made their way here to Madison

County in 1862 where they remained until 1864. This was a sad time for the nation and the Lambuth family. While they were here, James William's brother, Bass, was away serving in the Confederate army and participating in the bloody battles of Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. Another one of James William's brothers, John Wesley Lambuth, was wounded during the Siege of Vicksburg. While James William and Mary Isabella were here in Madison County at the Lambuth Home, their young daughter Mary Jeanette (Nettie) died on March 2, 1863, and was buried here in the Pearl River Church Cemetery. Almost five months later, a new daughter, Nora Kate, was born on July 29, 1863, before they made their way back to China.

James William Lambuth and Mary Isabella McClellan Lambuth remained in China for some thirty-two years and then transferred to Japan where their son Walter Russell Lambuth would establish a school that has grown from its founding in 1889 to become one of the nation's largest private schools---Kwansei Gakuin. Since its establishment, Kwansei Gakuin has had the mission of providing its students with an education based on Christian teachings while at the same time incorporating the best practices of Japanese culture. The leaders of Kwansei Gakuin University consider the Pearl River Church to have contributed to the genesis of their institution, and groups of administrators, faculty, and students from the school have made several pilgrimages here to the church and cemetery.

James William Lambuth died on April 28, 1892, and was buried in the Foreign Cemetery in Kobe, Japan. His wife, Mary Isabella, continued to serve as a missionary in Japan before returning to China to live with her daughter and son-in-law in Soochow, China, where she died on June 26, 1904.

The Lambuth Memorial Monument was erected here on the front lawn of the Pearl River Church on August 9, 1900, during the pastorate of Henry G. Hawkins, who had served as a missionary to Japan.

Lambuth Day became an annual observance in 1927. Temporarily interrupted for four years during World War II, the observance of Lambuth Day was renewed in 1947 and is held today on the first Thursday in October under the direction of the Pearl River Church Historic Council. The Council operates under the auspices of the Madison United Methodist Church and the Commission on Archives and History of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The Pearl River Church was formally designated an official Methodist Historic Site in 1975 and is one of five such Methodist Historic Sites in the state of Mississippi.

We are delighted that our church in Madison was selected to host your annual meeting and are especially pleased that you could join us here today at the historic Pearl River Church.

Elbert R. Hilliard

Director Emeritus, Mississippi
Department of Archives and History and
Chair, Pearl River Church Historic Council