

History of St. David's Episcopal Church

Cullowhee, North Carolina

The first Episcopal service in the Cullowhee area was held in 1879 in the Speedwell School building with Dr. David Hillhouse Buel, head of the Ravenscroft Training School in Asheville, officiating. St. David's is described in early records as a mission, arising from the efforts of Bishop T. B. Lyman and Rev. Buel to expand the Episcopal Church across western North Carolina.

Rev. Buel's visit to Speedwell came at the invitation of a Welshman, long resident in Cullowhee, who played the leading role in the founding of St. David's. Daniel D. Davies was born 1826 in the county of Carmarthen, South Wales, and baptized that year in St. David's Cathedral. At the age of 12 he had gone to work in Wales as a miner. With limited education, entirely in Welsh, and a strong sense of adventure, he left his home at the age of 22, sailing from Liverpool to New York in April 1848. The promise of copper and mica drew him to Jackson County. His interests here and throughout the region soon made him a man of property and influence. Davies was the focal point of planning and leadership that kept the idea of a church in Cullowhee alive both locally and with the Diocese of North Carolina in the years following that first service.

The cornerstone of St. David's Church in Cullowhee was placed on December 22, 1883 and construction began in 1884 on land donated by the Davies family and local landowner, Hamilton Brown. Another early leader was David Rogers, a prominent Cullowhee farmer. It is notable that these same men were among the founders of Cullowhee Academy only a few years later in 1888. The church, built by Mr. Truman Jones of Syracuse, New York, is made of unbaked brick, covered in stucco. It was probably designed by Frank Wills, a prominent northern architect. The church was sufficiently completed for the first service to be held in 1885 when Davies and his three daughters were presented for confirmation. The original pews of hand-hewn cherry are still in use. Thomas Cox, of Greenville, S C, who with his mother and three sisters settled in Cullowhee in 1886, married Davies's daughter in the church's first wedding. His family was instrumental in the completion of the church building. In 1890 a gift from Miss Annie Cox, given in memory of her brother, St. John, provided a bell for the church tower. On August 16, 1892, nine years after construction, the church building was presented to the bishop and consecrated. Robert Lee Madison, the true founder of what would become Western Carolina University, and his wife were also married here and are buried here.

Two families, the Davieses and the Coxes, along with a number of non-Episcopalians, worshipped at St. David's when a priest came monthly from Canton or Waynesville. Cox, lay reader in charge, tried to keep the church going as communicants died or moved away. In 1925, with a congregation of only three, Cox appealed to the Diocese for financial aid so St. David's could better serve the spiritual needs of the college students. No money was available. By 1933, the church had only seven or eight members. It finally closed in 1941 and was deconsecrated in 1942. The building stood unused for seventeen years, and its furnishings were lent to other churches.

Some years later, Dr. Rufus Morgan, then serving a number of churches in the region including St. John's, Sylva, observed the growth of Western Carolina College and felt that Saint David's should be re-activated as a student center for the growing Episcopal population at the school. Morgan, an educator, environmentalist, and a towering figure in ministry in western North Carolina, went to the convention of Episcopal Churchwomen in Miami in January 1959 where he requested and received \$10,000 from the United Thank Offering. Pews, a lectern, an organ, and altar rails were returned and reinstalled. A parish hall was added as part of the restoration. Work began on the restoration in January of 1959. Saint David's was re-consecrated on May 9, 1959 and reopened as a student center. There were no communicants and the priest only visited for Evening Prayer on Sunday nights and Eucharist on Wednesday mornings.

Regular Sunday morning services resumed in September 1961. In 1963, a \$20,000 grant from the Episcopal Church's college fund was used to build a new rectory, and in 1967 the Canterbury House was opened. The Reverend John Rivers became the first full-time resident priest in the church's history in the summer of 1967. He served a congregation of 121 baptized members as priest-in-charge and as chaplain to Episcopal students at the college. Since

that time alterations have been few. The bell was closed by a louvered box to protect it from the weather. Metal railings were added to the entrance portico. In the late 1980's a handicap ramp was added to the parish hall and a new sidewalk was poured in 1993 from the ramp to the parking lot. Exterior ground lights were added in 1999.

Despite its precarious second start, St. David's had found a place in the Diocese and community that would sustain it. The parish has grown with the university and region through its continuing ministry efforts to its parishioners and the entire region.

Full-time rectors of St. David's Episcopal Church:

John Rivers

Sherry Mattson

Heber Peacock

Michael Hudson 1993-present

(updated 2/6/2011 MGB)