

THE CONNECTION

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William Martin & Family

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The first two installments of this Racial Justice Action Team church historical series have adhered to the principle of objective writing with no first-person pronouns inserted. This one changes. Because of my most favorable feelings about Reverend William Martin and his family, I ask for your indulgence as I cover this piece from a more personal perspective. Bottom line, Rev. Martin and his family were stalwarts of the survival of Washington Street Methodist Church both during and after the Civil War.

Rev. Martin served Washington Street Church twice, from 1863-64 and from 1867-70. In his first time with the church, Martin worked with the black congregation. A primary effort of his second term involved his effort to rebuild the stately structure that was burned by the Union Army in February of 1865. Following the Civil War, Rev. Martin, even with tenuous health, organized fundraising and legal efforts and traveled extensively to bring in money for the rebuilding of the church. One small part of his canvassing involved the distribution of the following circular in 1866:

*To do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices
God is well pleased.—Heb. Xiii: 16.*

*Will you enclose One Dollar in the accompanying envelope, to aid
in rebuilding the Burnt Methodist Church at Washington Street,
Columbia, S.C.?*

WM. MARTIN,
Agent appointed by the S.C. Conference to Rebuild the Burnt Church
(Washington Street UMC Archives, accessed November 2, 2020)

On August 17, 1871, Rev. Martin broke ground for the new church building on the footprint of the razed 1832 structure. Through his substantive collection work as well as the support of many South Carolinians and a determined group of trustees, the beautiful Gothic Revival church that we all revere today was dedicated in June of 1875. I recall, in rough paraphrase, the words of one of our long-standing members who was interviewed for our Bicentennial Pageant in 2003: "Each time I enter our beautiful sanctuary, I'm reminded that we worship at Washington Street Church on the backs of hundreds of faithful Methodists who've supported this church in the past as we do today." Indeed.

Rev. Martin's family members were special in unique ways. His wife, Margaret, a native of Scotland, worked as a governess and teacher following her marriage to William. She was a good writer and poet and, in fact, wrote an inspirational poem on the occasion of our current church dedication in 1875.



An older son, William Maxwell Martin, was a Wofford graduate who had taught school and later began the study of law. He, too, was a published poet whose creativity was acknowledged. During the first call for volunteers, he joined the Columbia Artillery and left for Confederate service on Sullivan's Island. There he contracted typhoid fever, returned to Columbia, and died on February 21, 1861, a little more than two months after the firing on Ft. Sumter. He was buried in the Washington Street Church cemetery beneath

a symbolic broken column with the inscription, "The First to Die for Southern Independence."

The Martin family member who left perhaps the quirkiest and most memorable impression at the church and in Columbia was the daughter Isabella. This strong-willed woman filled several committee leadership roles at Washington Street Church, served as president of the Woman's Missionary Society for thirty-five years, assisted in opening a high school for girls, taught in both the Presbyterian Female College and Columbia

College, and was co-editor in 1905 for Mary Boykin Chesnut's first version of her *Diary from Dixie*. She was referred to, probably in truth, as the "irrepressible Isabella" by Mary Chesnut. One with a strong interest in the personalities of Washington Street Church would do well to read more widely into the many contributions of Isabella Martin as well as her several humorous encounters.

The theme of racial justice common to this series should focus on Rev. Martin's involvement with black citizens as well as other of his Civil War experiences. Always popular with black members of our church, Martin devoted much energy to assisting the black refugees who migrated to Columbia during the war, becoming, with Bishop Early's appointment in 1862, superintendent of the Mission to the Colored People in Columbia. Martin himself once wrote, "Although scattered and confused [the blacks], having no place to worship, yet we held together . . . the larger portion of the colored people still held to me, and through me to the Church" (*S.C. Conference Journal*, 1894, pp. 44-47). And although Northern Methodists established worship sites in Columbia for freed slaves, Martin indicated that "they still looked to me for the Sacraments, which service I performed until they could get ordained ministers of their own" (*Advocate*, March 18, 1882). The Northern residents were surprised at this obvious feeling of faith and dependence on the part of the blacks.

Rev. Martin's concern for the recently freed blacks was apparent, but he was also a man of his time and culture. As the South's fortunes continued to ebb in late 1864, President Jefferson Davis visited Columbia and addressed the citizens from the front steps of the Chesnut cottage on Plain Street. Mary Chesnut's diary entry indicated that Rev. Martin "held his hands over Mr. Davis's head and blessed him with all his heart" (*Diary*, p. 438). As I've suggested in previous racial justice pieces in *The Connection*, the "peculiar institution" of slavery created ironic circumstances that commingled cruelty with compassion, dominion with freedom.

Washington Street Church has found itself over the years in almost a paradox of faith and doubt regarding racial justice. No miracle of conflict resolution has presented itself as the good people of our church have struggled to hear the "still, sad music of humanity."

Sources

Advocate, March 18, 1882.

Diary, p. 438.

Huff, A.V., *Tried by Fire*. Columbia, SC: The R.L. Bryan Company, 1975.

WSUMC Archives (William Martin File), accessed November 2, 2020.