Methodists of Baton Rouge move, grow

By JULIE KAY  Special to The Advocate

The roots of Methodism in Baton Rouge reach back in time and extend from the heart of downtown at First United Methodist Church.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, as people moved into new territory, the Methodist “circuit system” moved with them.

With the circuit, ministers moved with the people, leading them in worship, unattended by church buildings.

There were enough Methodists in the area to create a circuit, but not enough to constitute a church with a permanent pastor. Services would be held in private homes or buildings when an itinerant pastor traveled through.

The Baton Rouge circuit began in 1832 and became a station complete with a preacher in 1834. First Methodist Church was built on the corner of Fourth and Laurel Streets in 1836. It stood for 90 years before moving to its new location on North Boulevard in 1926. There were trying times for the Methodists in their quest to reach into Louisiana. Methodist historian John G. Jones referred to parts of Louisiana as “an unpromising and dangerous expanse of prairies, canebrakes, pathless forests, lagoons, lakes, bayous, mud and water, with any imaginable quantity of flies, mosquitoes, gnats, alligators, and carnivorous animals, with a sparse population, mostly of foreign origin.”

Times would continue to present challenges as the land became settled and Methodist worshippers increased in numbers.

When New Orleans and Baton Rouge were captured by the Federals in 1862, the pastor of the church was taken prisoner. Needless to say, the event caused disruption and no pastoral appointment could be made until 1866 due to federal control.

When the church decided to move, it was sent to the city in 1866, records show that when membership lists were revised, “a great many names were stricken from the rolls.”

A yellow fever epidemic, which struck the city in the late 1870s and early 1880s, pressed local ministers into service.

First Methodist’s pastor, the Rev. J.T. Sawyer, distinguished himself through his tireless work for the victims, according to an Advocate file copy of an editorial of journalist Russel Klabunde.

The pastor “devoted his energies and goodwill to members of all faiths and was literally an indefatigable worker among untold victims.” He remained true to his post during the entire period of the fever, nursing the sick and burying the dead,” Klabunde wrote.

When Standard Oil set up operations in the community, members moved north and a mission church was set up in the area by members of First Methodist Church.

Church history records, as one of its expenses, the funding of a bicycle for an assistant pastor of First Church to travel from his post to the new mission, which became Istrouma Methodist Church.

His duties were also to minister to students at LSU.

As the city grew in all directions, other churches such as Ingleside, North Baton Rouge, University and Broadmoor organized as well.

Some of the Methodist churches had been named for Sunday schools.

In the 1860s such classes were not provided for adults, with the exception of church officers and teachers.

Following the teaching of John Wesley in 1862, members organized Sunday schools in Baton Rouge and surrounding areas. Eventually, some of those schools, which met in the church basement, homes and local buildings, became small churches.

First Methodist continued to grow, but its location at Fourth and Laurel streets became even more of a problem.

Church history and Advocate file information indicated that church members became more and more frustrated with the odor and flies coming from the horses of the Washington No. 1 firehouse next door.

The fire bell, which rang at noon each day and, of course, during fire emergencies, interrupted church services if they ran longer than noon.

North and East boulevards was the site chosen for the new church location, and the cornerstone was laid in 1926.

Construction on LSU’s present campus, which began in 1923, was a factor in the church movement and larger facility needs.

It meant that local churches began trying to offer activities for newly arriving college students.

The Rev. C.W. Crier, pastor of First Methodist during those years, said the erection of the new church building would benefit the hundreds of Methodist students enrolled at the university.

“We are not only taking care of the present, but we are handing down something that will be a benefit in the generations that are to come,” he said at a speech to college officials.

As the country entered the Depression years, financial trouble caused the Methodists and other denominations hardships as well.

Leila Detels, in a recent Advocate story on First United Methodist Church, said she recalls talk among family members about the church debt.

Detels, whose grandparents joined the church in 1915, said church women sold gumbo or crawfish bisque each Friday during the spring and summer to help with the debt.

“My mother was one of the ladies. The children came along and played on the big floor while our mothers cooked,” she said.

The debt was eventually retired and Methodism in the city continued to flourish.

As Edward Klabunde wrote in “A Century of Methodism in Baton Rouge,” meager beginnings in the 1830s led to greater growth through the years.

“Methodism in Baton Rouge has risen till it soars before it only greater progress, still richer and truer Christian service for the whole community.”

“The words from the parable of the mustard seed, from the New Testament, really come to mind, as one’s interest so noticeably grows to a deep admiration of all those earnest pioneers and their followers, the makers of a strong parish benefiting more and more souls each year.”

Advocate staff photo by Mandy Lunn

First United Methodist Church moved to its present location on North Boulevard in 1926.