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Where Two or Three Gather In My Name: A History of the Burns-Belfry Restoration and Racial Reconciliation Between Churches in Oxford, Mississippi

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WHERE TWO OR THREE GATHER IN MY NAME: A HISTORY OF THE BURNS-BELFRY RESTORATION AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION BETWEEN CHURCHES IN OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI

by
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"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a (wo)man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."
-1 Corinthians 13: 11-13.

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents.

ABSTRACT
Where Two or Three Gather In My Name: A History of the Burns-Belfry Restoration and Racial Reconciliation Between Churches in Oxford, Mississippi
(Under the direction of Curtis Wilkie)

This paper is an exploration of the intersection of race and religion in Oxford, Mississippi. In particular, it gives a history of the restoration of the Burns-Belfry Church in Oxford, Mississippi. The project was a cross-cultural effort to save the town's first church built by freedmen in 1868. Many individuals worked together to save the town's historic landmark. In addition, the work also examines attempts by churches in Oxford to improve race relations in the community. The work looks at how events held between these churches may be the key to forgiveness and racial harmony. The title is taken from the scripture Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them."

Thirteen interviews with members of the Oxford Lafayette County Heritage Foundation, Oxford Development Association, and pastors from First and Second Baptist Church, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, and Burns United Methodist Church comprise the bulk of thesis. Information was also gathered from the archival collections in the JD Williams's library, The Oxford Eagle, and The Daily Mississippian.

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First, I would like to thank Dr. Debora Young. Without her, I would not have this project. I hope that in a small way my thesis captured a part of her mother's memory and legacy.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Curtis Wilkie, for being a master editor and great teacher. I'll always treasure my time spent hearing "war stories" from one of the South's journalistic legends. I would like to express thanks to my readers Patricia Thompson and Charlie Mitchell not only for their support during my thesis but throughout my four years at the university.

A special thanks to Maralyn Bullion and to those from the OLCHF and ODA for assisting me with this process.

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Last, but not least I would like to thank my family and friends that urged me to preserve.

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Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr. was known to refer to 11 o'clock on Sunday morning as "the most segregated hour in America." Over 50 million Americans routinely attend service at their respective places of worship.[1] Fifty years after the Supreme Court Case Brown v. Board of Education and nearly 50 years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Americans willingly choose a form of de facto segregation in their church pews.

Religion is important in Mississippi. One need look no further than statistics. The state has the most churches per capita in the nation,[2] while the 2014 legislative session was marked by the passage of a Religious Rights bill including adding the phrase 'In God We Trust" as part of the state's seal. The influence of the church on politics and community life was perhaps no more apparent than during the Civil Rights Era. Pulpits in white churches that were once dedicated to the saving of souls became hotbeds for pro-segregationists. For civil rights activists, the term *sanctuary* took on a new meaning when black congregations dared to provide protection. Many parishes held meetings to organize voter registration drives, sit-ins, and other sessions.

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[1] http://www.gallup.com/poll/166613/four-report-attending-church-last-week.aspx
[2]http://www.clarionledger.com/article/20120516/NEWS/205160339/Mississippi-by-numbers

I should begin by saying that for many years the idea of a 'black church or white church' was a foreign concept to me. Growing up, I attended a nondenominational church in Jackson, Mississippi, with a white pastor. Members of the congregation were

African Americans, whites, Hispanics, as well as recent immigrants from as far away as Africa and India. Several interracial couples attended as well because they felt it was a nonjudgmental environment.

It was on the bus in second grade when I came to the realization that my church was not the norm. One of my classmates explained that her pastor said that it was sinful for blacks and whites to like each other. At our age, we didn't grasp a lot about the concept of love and marriage, but we still knew about pretending and playing house. Having seen the couples at my church, I told her I didn't think her pastor was right. She remained adamant that he was. She conceded, however, that he wasn't against all interracial relationships; he thought marrying Hispanics (in her words: Mexicans) was fine.

Naturally, I asked my mother. She explained that most churches were not like ours. Later she would expand upon this, stating how her own mother had been confused as to why we had joined a multiracial congregation. My grandmother quickly came around, but another family member feared we were in a cult. At the time, I remembered thinking that was ludicrous. My mother explained that this was because of Jim Jones. Prior to the mass suicide committed by members of the People's Temple in Jonestown,

Guyana, Jones' church was known for another revolutionary concept: integration. The church was welcoming to all races, or in Jones' own words, a "rainbow family."

This is a thought that has remained with me as I have explored my own faith and worked on this project. Eighty percent of Americans identify with some facet of religion.[3] My generation and the following one have been perceived as growing up in a 'post-racial' world. The question remains, however, whether we truly moved forward if one of the most important aspects of American life remains segregated. I don't think there's an easy answer. What I have found throughout the course of this thesis, however, is that individuals are working together to improve. The restoration of the Burns-Belfry church may not be the solution, but it's a start. The racial history of the four churches near the Oxford Square-- Burns-Belfry, St. Peter's, First Baptist and Second Baptist-- are inextricably intertwined.

[3] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/

Part One: Early History of the Church/Pre-Restoration

The Professor and the Promise

In 1848 the University of Mississippi admitted its first class of students. Six years later it established the state's only public law school.

In 1854, William Forbes Stearns of Holly Springs, Mississippi, became the law school's first professor. He was persuaded to accept the position of Professor of Governmental Science and Law, a decision that had only been finalized days earlier. Stearns admitted to his students, "I have had no experience in the work of instruction, except in directing the legal studies of a few individuals in my office."[4]

By most accounts Stearns was a well-respected member of the faculty. Above all else, he had a strong commitment to the law. This was perhaps best embodied in the student conduct trial of Samuel Humphreys. On the night of May 12, 1859, when Chancellor Fredrick P. Barnard and his wife were enjoying an evening out, Humphreys and another student broke into Barnard's home. Humphreys then raped and beat a female house slave named Jane. In a reflection of the times, records simply refer to her as "Jane." No surname attached. It is not surprising that Jane's attacker never suffered criminal repercussions in a system that did not even bestow her with the dignity of having a last name.

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[4] The University of Mississippi School of Law: A Sesquicentennial History. Michael De L. Landon

While few formal rules were listed in the law school handbook, the young men who attended the university were expected to act in a "gentlemanly" manner. Problems arose in applying this principle when Humphreys was brought up on charges of misconduct. During this time, Mississippi did not extend legal rights to slaves. State law did not recognize the testimony of a slave in court. Stearns interpreted this to mean that slaves could not be used as a witness in *any* type of court. As a result, Stearns listened as Jane described the abuse she suffered, but joined his colleagues in voting not guilty. Despite legal barriers, Jane's testimony did not fall on deaf ears. Stearns agreed that Humphreys was "undoubtedly 'morally' guilty" and recommended suspension.

Stearns' moral beliefs regarding slavery seem ambiguous. Although he owned slaves, he was known to have told students that the notion of slavery contradicted the Declaration of Independence, which made clear that all mean were to be free. Stearns also pointed out that slavery was justified according to the Bible and the Constitution of the United States.

When Humphreys reapplied for admission the next fall, Barnard rejected his application. The board of trustees and public officials, who suspected that he might have strange ideas regarding slavery, criticized the chancellor. Stearns came to his colleague's defense, writing a letter in support of his decision.

Stearn's loyalty came with a price. At the onset of the Civil War, attitudes toward the once popular professor began to change. Although he had not lived in his native state of Vermont since his teenage years, Stearns found that he was branded as a Northerner and quickly became unpopular. Stearns left with his wife, Mary, for Peru, New York. During this time, Harrison Stearns, a slave of William Stearns, kept faithful watch over

his master's property. When William Stearns returned to Oxford in December 1865, he signed a deed to Harrison for one lot of land. It would seem that the conveyance was one of Stearns' first tasks when he came back, since it is dated December 1, 1865. Tragically, Stearns committed suicide a few months after the war's end.

Harrison, now a freed man, wrote to Stearns' widow Mary requesting the land that Stearns had promised. It read in part: "You said something bout [sic] conveying my lots to me. I had just write to mass [sic] William a little before his death...he promest [sic] to convey to me as soon as he could be satisfied that the laws of Miss. would allow colored people to hold land. Colored people has the same right to hold land as the white people."

On January 2, 1868, Mary complied with his request and added two more lots of land. Harrison then deeded one of his lots to Oxford's Methodist Episcopal Church, which would later be home to the Burns-Belfry church.[5] A year later Harrison Stearns conveyed part of lot 472 to himself and trustees of M.E. Oxford on March 20, 1869.

Ground is broken

Alexander Phillips served the Methodist Episcopal Church. Phillips was a teacher at the Freedman's Bureau. A formal dedication was held on May 5, 1868. Members of the white community were invited. True to the times, separate seating was ensured. A notice in the Oxford Falcon newspaper read, "Should the white's [sic] attend, which we respectfully invite, they shall have separate seats which will be provided for them. We tender out thinks to the white portion of our population for the liberal contribution, which they have made and are making toward our church. The names and deeds of those

[5] "The Lord's Design" The History of Burns United Methodist Church, 6

gentlemen will ever die out of m [sic] memory while the Church is in existence and I live. I believe this was the Lord's design, when He created all mankind that man should help to man, and for each other stand."

In 1910, the structure that is now designated as a local and state landmark was built. During a meeting held on March 7, 1910, it was determined that the congregation needed a bigger building. A member of the congregation, W.R. Boles[6], deposited a sum of $2,000 in the M&F bank. The donation was a considerable amount and covered most of the expenses for the new building, which totaled $3,000. Work began on a new church. It is believed that the church was finished in October of that year, because that was the building committee's last meeting, according to minutes from October 10, 1910. The new church contained an Amen's Corner, where men would sit. Ladies were seated on the east side of the church.[7]

The building now referred to as The Burns-Belfry Church underwent several name changes. Records from the Third Session of The Mississippi Mission Conference held in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1867, recognized the church as the M.E. Oxford. From 1892 to 1901, members of the congregation referred to the church as the Sewell Chapel. The name honored their former pastor, Richard Sewell, who served the church from 1888-1889. On March 24, 1901, the church again received a new name. The church was now the Bishop Francis Burns Chapel in honor of Francis Burns, the first black missionary bishop elected by the M.E. Church of the Liberia Annual Conference. By 1914, the church was simply referred to as the Burns Church. In 1968, a merger occurred

[6] Boles a noticeably fair-skinned African American owned a shoe store on The Oxford Square. He was and remains one of the few African Americans to have property there.
[7] Project Description by Gerald Walton

and the Burns Church became known as the Burns United Methodist Church. Although the congregation has moved to a different the location, they took this name with them.

The Move

The activities of the Burns church were not limited to Sunday sermons. After the town of Oxford's sole black school burned down, the children were moved to Burns church. Elsie Pugh still remembers using the pews as makeshift desks.[8]

She recalls that one of the teachers, Della Davidson, was "second only to her mother in shaping her in to the person she is today." She is not alone in her thoughts. Davidson was one of the most prominent figures in the African-American community in Oxford. She was a key figure in ensuring that integration of the school systems went smoothly and became the first black principal in the new system. Later, the town's new elementary school would be named after her.

In 1954, pastor W.N. Redmond Jr. led the purchase of land on 600 Molly Barr Road. Redmond taught school in Abbeville and wanted to include more educational facilities. A history of the church notes, "Many of the laity were prominent educators and administrators in the community."

Two decades passed before the church was ready to move to its new location.

A Delicate Situation on Campus

The 1950s not only presented challenges for members of the Burns congregation, but to the entire African-American community in Oxford. One white religious leader would find him self waging a one-man war against the town's epicenter, the University of Mississippi. Will Campbell came to Ole Miss as an idealist. In 1956, his hopes for the

[8] Interview with Elsie Pugh

university would be challenged. Campbell recalled in his memoir Brother to a Dragonfly, "For me it was the year I would take on the State of Mississippi and involve myself in the racial crisis in a fashion I had not intended, and really did not mean to do." [9]

Campbell decided to persuade the Committee of One Hundred that sponsored the university's Religious Emphasis Week to pick a speaker who would be "sympathetic to racial justice."[10]

They selected Alvin Kershaw, an Episcopal priest from Ohio. An enigmatic figure, Kershaw gained notoriety for his appearance as a contestant on the game show "The Sixty-four Thousand Dollar Question." His expertise was jazz. Not what one would expect from a typical preacher.[11] After amassing $32,000, Kershaw quit and donated his winnings to various charities. What was first seen as a devout action soon created a stir when newspapers began reporting that Kershaw intended to give his money to the NAACP.

In the wake of this revelation, Campbell faced an ultimatum. Cancelling Kershaw would go against his values; allowing Kershaw to speak could cost his job. Contemplating the right course of action, Campbell, with his brother Joe in tow, met in Ohio with Kershaw and a group of ministers. Concerns were raised about Kershaw's safety. George Mitchell, the director of the Southern Regional Council, responded, "They don't kill white folks in Mississippi. Not yet anyways."[12]

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[9] 'Religious Emphasis Week' Excerpt from Brother to a Dragonfly, Will Campbell 94
[10] 95
[11] ibid
[12] Mitchell made both an interesting and ominous statement. A few years later the death of two white civil workers during the Freedom Summer would cause national outrage, much to the chagrin of African Americans who witnessed the murders go unnoticed.

While enjoying bourbon at the home of James Silver (two signs that Campbell was not the typical Baptist preacher),[13] "well past midnight the doorbell rang" and Campbell was summoned to Chancellor J.D. Williams' house. Escorted by a policeman, Campbell's suspicions were probably aroused. What urgent matter required his attention at such a time?

The conversation that followed after Campbell's arrival quickly turned from Coach Johnny Vaught's Cotton Bowl win to Religious Emphasis Week. Hugh Clegg, the Director of Development, expressed Gov. James P. Coleman's concerns that having Kershaw speak would be "the Willie Magee [sic] case all over again."[14] McGee was an African-American man tried and convicted for the rape of a white woman in Mississippi in 1945. He would spend eight years fighting his sentence, before being sent to the electric chair in 1951. Before his death, McGee's case became a cause célèbre for Communists. The governor's statement made it clear that at best he believed Kershaw's invitation was influenced by liberals, at worst Communists. In the years leading up to the second wave of the Red Scare, the university could not afford such an association.[15]

Although tasked with the responsibility by Williams, Campbell refused to sign a drafted telegram asking Kershaw to "withdraw voluntarily." By the end of the week, every invitee had sent telegrams informing the university that they wished to withdraw

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[13] A brief explanation: Baptists typically abstain from alcohol. James Silver was a professor who would go on to write Mississippi: The Closed Society, a scathing critique of the state's segregation policies. According to Campbell he was "considered the most liberal man on campus." His views were well known. He would leave soon after Meredith's enrollment.

[14] Campbell spells the name Magee, but subsequent records have spelled his name as McGee

[15] The second wave of the Red Scare occurred during the 1950s. Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy caused this new fear when he claimed that hundreds of Communists had infiltrated the government.

from the week. Joseph Fichter noted that he "could not appear on a program in such an atmosphere of blatant suppression of free speech." For good measure, he added that he too, was a member of the NAACP.

Faced with finding new participants or cancelling the event, Williams announced to Campbell that local ministers would replace the original participants. When their discussion ended, Campbell immediately drove to the home of Emilie Joffrion, the local Episcopal rector. He explained the controversy and asked for Joffrion's assistance. If other ministers spoke at the event, the protest would be null.

"I was never sure how he worked it out; not one local minister agreed to come," Campbell recalled.

For the first time since its inception, a religious week was not held. Instead, Campbell announced that he would go the Fulton Chapel on campus for the scheduled time for the events each day and sit in silence. His intentions, he explained, were to reflect on the actions that "brought us to such a sad day." Hundreds of students, faculty and members of the community joined Campbell during "his silent hour." One professor, Wofford K. Smith, resigned in protest of Kershaw's cancellation. The situation may not have been as controversial as Willie McGee, but it certainly caught the attention of state legislators. They drafted, but did not pass, a bill that would make it illegal to criticize a state official's decision.

That year Campbell resigned. It would be his last formal role as a minister, as he would later leave the Southern Baptist convention. Campbell left Ole Miss not defeated, but determined. He would go on to participate in the fight for Civil Rights across the South.

A priest stood on a statue

The fall of 1962 still haunts the University of Mississippi. James Meredith, an Air Force veteran, applied for enrollment. After he disclosed in his application that he was a Negro the university denied him admission. After months of court battles that would eventually reach the United States Supreme Court, the university was ordered to admit Meredith. The ruling would spark a visceral reaction from Mississippi officials and citizens that culminated in riots on the Ole Miss campus.

Black churches in Oxford faced their own struggles during Meredith's fight to enroll. It was not uncommon for parishioners to go outside after service and find police, who were suspicious of their activities, waiting. According to Reverend Leroy Wadlington, who grew up in the town, this surveillance pushed many of the civil rights meetings to churches further out in Lafayette County. One of the most prominent was Mount Hope in Taylor.

Episcopalians are remembered as one of the more progressive religious groups during the Civil Rights Movement. The stance has continued today the church remains one of the few prominent denominations to allow members of the gay and lesbian community to serve as priests. Much like his predecessor, Emilie Joffrion, Rector Duncan Gray of St. Peter's church in Oxford had a progressive view on civil rights.

It is important to note, however, that many members of the church did not agree with Gray's stance. Current St. Peter's Rector Taylor Moore said the congregation split over the issue.[16] Several parishioners left because of Gray's stance, most noticeably

[16] Interview with Rector Taylor Moore

members of the Falkner family, relatives of William Faulkner (who used a 'u' in his name.)[17]

In late September 1962, Gray began addressing Meredith's pending enrollment in his sermons. In a September 20 radio sermon, he preached:

"There are times when pressing social problems, no matter how complex their background, boil down to a specific situation in which our duties and responsibilities as Christians are clear and unequivocal. Such a situation now faces us – or soon will- in the admission of the first Negro to the University of Mississippi."[18]

Gray proposed three actions for members of the congregation to take. The first would ensure that no violence occurred. Members had the "responsibility for preventing any demonstration which might lead to violence." Second, they must obey the law. "When a Negro enters the University, the law admitting him will be quite clear, and our duty under it will be just as clear." Their third responsibility was to ensure that Meredith was "accepted and treated as a person." Gray went on to explain this would be the true test of their Christian faith.

The next Sunday, Gray mentioned that his congregation had probably tired of hearing his sermons. Yet again, he insisted that it was their Christian duty to prevent violence from occurring. The prior week when Meredith had come to campus to attempt to enroll and had been met with racial slurs and taunts. Gray discouraged the behavior and revealed his fears of it escalating. In six days, his belief that the church shared responsibility for what happened to Meredith would be put to the test.

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[17] 'He called me padre' interview with Duncan Gray
[18] Duncan Gray, Radio Sermon, Delivered 9/20/62

September 30, 1962, should have been a peaceful Sunday. That night, however, Leroy Wadlington's family knew something was wrong. With a house that sat just off of Highway 6, they were accustomed to seeing heavy traffic flow out of Oxford on the days of football games. It was the Johnny Vaught era, and that year's team would become the only team to go undefeated and untied in Ole Miss history. Wadlington explained that because of their location they knew when the light had changed as far down as Batesville 20 miles away. While accustomed to hearing racial slurs and seeing waving Rebel flags from those on the way to see the Rebels play, the family had never felt threatened. That night their windows were shattered by a shotgun blast.[19]

"My father took us to the back and put us on the floor. Then he went outside to protect his family," Wadlington said.

Decades later Wadlington and Duncan Gray III, the son of Duncan Gray Jr., would come together as leaders of their own churches to make the city better.

The night of the riots, French journalist Paul Guihard sent a telegraph that read, "the Civil War has never ended." It would be one of the last he would send. A few hours later, his body was found near the Lyceum. He had been shot at close range.

Guihard's description of a war zone accurately described the campus. True to his word. Gray believed that he had an obligation to quell the events taking place. When Gray arrived, he made a futile attempt at the base of the Confederate statue to persuade rioters to go home.[20] He clashed with General Edwin Walker, a retired military man, who is mentioned in several historical accounts as influencing the riots. Although the

[19] Interview with Reverend Leroy Wadlington
[20] http://www.episcopalarchives.org/Afro-Anglican_history/exhibit/leadership/gray.php

crowd ignored Gray's pleas, he continued to bargain with them until a police officer led him away for fear of his safety.[21]

The following Sunday he joined other churches in the community in holding a moment of silence.

Reverend Arthur Herod's association with James Meredith cost him his job. Before working in Oxford, Herod had the benefit of an apathetic employer. He worked at a lumber mill owned by a man from Illinois. According to Herod, as long the wood was cut, his employer was not concerned with his workers' outside activities. This was a rare example, as many African Americans faced economic reprisal if they got involved with the movement. At the time, Herod had a church in Holly Springs.

Owning land meant having true freedom for Herod, but black sharecroppers were often intimidated from joining the movement by their white landowners. Herod, who inherited over 200 acres of land in Abbeville, Mississippi, a small town 10 miles north of Oxford, did not face such a problem. In the late 1950s, he led a boycott of gas stations in Oxford, passing out stickers that read, "Don't buy gas where you can't use the bathroom."[22]

Herod would later become the minister of Burns United Methodist Church.

By 1968, integration of k-12 schools was inevitable. That year, Sylvester Moorhead tried to do the right thing. At the time, Moorhead served as a deacon in the First Baptist Church of Oxford. He began to wonder what might happen if African Americans came to worship.[23]

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[21] http://www.newseum.org/scripts/Journalist/Detail.asp?PhotoID=863
[22] Interview with Reverend Arthur Herod
[23] Interview with Sylvester Moorhead

In an interview with the Oxford Eagle, Moorhead said that there were a number of African American groups attempting to become members of predominately white churches around the country. [24] Their goal was to ascertain whether or not churches that claimed to be "welcoming to all" had limitations.

As the former dean of Education at Ole Miss, Moorhead still remembered the lingering smell of tear gas on campus the day after the Meredith riots that had occurred six years prior.[25] Although Moorhead was not concerned with violent reaction in response to visiting African Americans, he desired a smooth transition. He believed that the church ought to have some sort of indicator that they were welcoming to all. That April in a deacon's meeting, he moved to have an "open door" policy. The majority of those present agreed with Moorhead's proposal. Wayne Coleman, pastor at the time, was also in favor.

With the cast of a ballot, what started as progress became regression.

When the time came to the have congregation vote, the small group of deacons that opposed the measure anonymous voting. Those who endorsed the policy had hoped that the vote would be taken by means of standing up or raising hands. Now, the resolution would simply be read aloud to the congregation with no discussion. Furthermore, having a paper ballot took away the fear of public shaming.

Moorhead conceded, "Of course, a secret ballot actually gives you a more accurate picture of how the people really feel."[26]

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[24] 'Church Confronts Past Sin' September 3, 2013, Oxford Eagle, Jon Scott
[25] Moorhead interview
[26] Interview with Oxford Eagle

To his chagrin, a few deacons even solicited 'no' votes. He wryly recalls people that he had not seen in years turning out for the vote.

"To our surprise the church voted to have a closed door policy," Moorhead said.[27]

Forty-five years later, Moorhead would try again to do the right thing. This time, he would succeed.

Before the efforts of reconciliation among the Oxford Lafayette County Foundation, Church Women United served as a strong precursor to the group's formation. Susie Marshall, the group's president, would later lead the charge for restoring the Burns-Belfry. The majority of members in the group belonged to Second Baptist, Burns United Methodist, St. Peter's and First Presbyterian. Noticeably, Kay Moorhead, the wife of Sylvester Moorhead, was the only member from First Baptist Oxford, to join the group.

The ODA

Pastor Wayne Johnson of Second Baptist Church in Oxford founded The Oxford Development Association in 1970. The purpose for the ODA "is to promote and advance the general health, education, welfare and economic development of the poor community through charitable and civic means." During the 1970s, chances were that if one was an influential member of the African-American community, he or she belonged to the ODA. The organization's mission statement-- "one people, one aim, one destiny"-- guided members through the process of school integration.

[27] ibid

By 1976, the congregation of Burns United Methodist Church had moved to their new location. Elsie Pugh recalls that it was hard to say goodbye to the building that served as the foundation for both her spiritual and educational growth.

In 1978, Charles Gafford, a local attorney, purchased the building. Gafford sold the building to a young couple, Dot and Roscoe Newton, who nicknamed the building 'The Belfry." A few years later, the Newtons would sell the Belfry to a young lawyer named John Grisham.

Leroy Wadlington and Duncan Gray III were both boys on the night of the Meredith crisis. Their reflections on the night would shape them as they became men.

"He was a minister's son and I was a sharecropper's son. We should have known each other, but we were separated by race," Wadlington said.

As the son of Duncan Gray Jr., Gray understood the importance of treating everyone equally. He would follow in his father's footsteps and become the rector of St. Peter's in Oxford. A liberal and a firm believer in social justice, he realized his own shortcomings, however, during a civil rights program sponsored by the church. Vivid memories made it easy to discuss his father's role, but when a student asked him, "What was going on in the black community at the time?" Gray did not have an answer. He reached out to Wadlington, the black minister of Second Baptist, hoping to find them. Their conversation would spark a relationship between the two churches that still remains today.

The two men talked for over a year before bringing the idea of fellowship together to their congregations. According to Wadlington, the gatherings they proposed were not

elaborate; their purpose was simple: “discuss race, have fellowship, and just be people who hadn’t gotten together, but should have gotten together years ago.”

Now, those who grew up in an era of segregation had the opportunities to make friends they might not otherwise have had. Bible studies were held at the home of members from both congregations.

In 1995, the congregations would hold their first “pulpit swap.” The premise was that Wadlington would preach a sermon at St. Peter’s, and some members of Second Baptist would attend. When he ended his message, Gray asked that they join them in taking communion.

“He kept stressing we’re getting ready to take *the wine, the wine, the wine*,” Wadlington said.

One can hear the laughter in Wadlington’s voice, when he describes the look on some of the members’ faces as they took communion. Up until that point, the members of Second Baptist had only partaken grape juice.

Although Wadlington and Gray have both left their churches in Oxford, the partnership continues.

Wadlington, however, believes that the true measure of progress extends further than church pews. “When members freely fellowship in each other’s home, that’s how you know a change has been made.”

The Author

Gerald Walton taught English at Ole Miss, but to know him one would think he taught history.

"I've always been interested in history itself, wherever I've been. Buildings are kind of a special interest to me," Walton said.

Walton, who put together a pictorial history of the university, joked about his battle with the publisher over how many photos to include. The problem? Where they thought one photo would suffice, he felt the need for 20. He explained how for Greek life his editors proposed the book would only include a picture of one sorority house. Walton insisted on having pictures of all of them.

"We finally agreed on 400 pages, and they made a note in the book about including my 'precious buildings' in the appendix," he said.

After his retirement, Walton became involved with the preservation committee established by then Oxford Mayor Patricia Lamar. Patricia Brown Young, a lifelong Oxford resident, was also interested in preservation, but on a countywide basis. She established the Oxford Lafayette County Heritage Foundation, which Walton would later serve as president.

When Walton first met John Grisham at Square Books, he noticed the author not because of his name, but a pen.

"I got to know him in an interesting way," Walton said.[28]

An avid fountain pen collector, Walton's attention was piqued when he noticed Grisham's Mont Blanc pen. At the time, Grisham had only published 'A Time to Kill.'

[28] Interview with Gerald Walton

The book would later pick up steam, becoming a best seller and a movie starring Matthew McConaughey and Samuel L. Jackson. Walton asked to interview Grisham for the magazine Pen World. Still published today, the publication touts, "If it's connected to pens you'll find it in Pen World." They agreed that if the weather was fine, they would meet on the porch of Square Books. After giving Grisham a transcribed copy, Walton sent the piece to the magazine. Walton remembers being at a fountain pen show in Little Rock, Arkansas, when 'The Firm' published. Then, the magazine decided to publish the piece.

As sales of Grisham's book rose, his anonymity faded. In 2001, Grisham moved to Virginia. Locals still claim it was a result of his desire for privacy.

Oxford schoolteacher Susie Marshall is believed by several parties to have been the first to contact Grisham about the building. The president of the Oxford Development Association, Marshall desired a concrete meeting place for the organization. Until that point the organization met in members' homes and churches.

"In their minds and in their hearts this building (The Burns-Belfry) was theirs," said Jim Pryor, who was involved in the project.

Pryor explained that Marshall is referenced in several histories of the project as the first to appeal to John Grisham. While a physical copy of Marshall's letter and Grisham's letter has not found any official records for the museum, all parties agree that the ODA was mentioned in Grisham's response to Walton, then president of the Oxford Lafayette County Heritage Foundation. At the time, the ODA did not have a tax-free status as a 501-3-C, which meant the organization was not eligible for grant money. Two years later the OLCHF still remained in possession of the building. The winter 2003

newsletter for the organization noted, "The ODA does not yet have tax-exempt status, and for this reason the Heritage Foundation is taking possession rather than they." At the time, it was understood by all parties that the OLCHF would serve as a conduit. Later, however, the transaction would become controversial.

Walton addressed a letter to Grisham asking for the property. The OLCHF, he noted, would take possession and all responsibilities. Grisham wrote back that he would rather see it used for such a purpose than torn down.

The deed to the land was transferred, and the next phase was to begin.

Part Two: The Restoration

The Meeting

Ninety one year-old Maralyn Bullion has lived a storied life. As the first female president of the Ole Miss Associated Student Body, Bullion has made history in her own right. A smile still breaks out on her face when she recalls her celebration with a few sorority sisters that involved champagne and sneaking over the state lines to Memphis. [29] It was her experiences on a wartime campus, however, that made her understand the importance of preservation.

"A cloud fell over our campus and idyllic existence," she recalled in her memoirs of the time.[30]

In 2001, a meeting was held in her living room. Among those in attendance were Susie Marshall, Patricia Young, Jim Pryor, Preston Taylor, Cynthia Parham and Elsie Pugh. Of the group that gathered that day, four were black and four were white.

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[29] Interview with Maralyn Bullion
[30] Personal essay by Maralyn Bullion

According to Bullion, it was important from the beginning that the effort was inclusive.

The Process

The restoration of the Burns-Belfry was not the OLCHF's first project, but it was one of the most challenging. When the OLCHF and ODA teamed up to restore the Burns building, no one could have predicted that the process would take over a decade.

"I'm used to projects that take a long time. It takes eight to 11 years to bring in an oil field. You just don't give up," said Pryor. A former executive with Exxon Mobile, Pryor received an award as Community Member of the year. In 2001, the church was placed on a Mississippi Endangered Landmarks list. From the beginning, the committee understood that extensive renovation was needed to the outside of the building. They were, however, taken aback by the interior of the building.

The church received a grant from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in 2002, and matched the funds. They also received a grant of $150,000 from the Department of Interior.[31]

In 2003, renovations began. The project would stall two years later, when an estimated additional $300,000 was needed to complete the interior work.[32]

In 2010, the Worship Experience was held at the Gertrude Castellow Ford Center at the University of Mississippi. The event was a fundraiser and featured performances by the famous Mississippi Mass Choir.

An Accident and a Blessing

[31] OLCHF Newsletter Fall 2003
[32] 'Church Restoration Stalled', November 8, 2005, Samantha Gibson, Daily Mississippian

It seems almost too easy to label a divine intervention. If you ask those involved with the project, however, Ray Neilsen was nothing short of a godsend.

The former CEO of Ameristar Casinos became acquainted with Oxford because of his sons, Chip and Scott, who attended the University of Mississippi. Even after they graduated from Ole Miss, Neilsen's visits to the small town continued. Finally, he made the decision to purchase a home. One afternoon while riding his mountain bike at 30 miles per hour, he hit the curb in front of the Burns-Belfry.

"The sidewalks here are really bad," Neilsen said.[33] When Neilsen looked up he saw a sign asking for donations. After meeting with Jim Pryor and Oxford Mayor George 'Pat' Patterson, Neilsen donated over $200,000.

"Who would have thought we would raise that money. I look on it as a miracle. Glad we got to that point," said Pryor, reflecting on the extensive funding the project required.

In 2003, then Heritage Foundation president Elizabeth Shiver wrote, "In addition to preservation, we continue to pursue racial reconciliation as an ongoing goal and are deeply grateful to all the Belfry donors for their support of our goals." The project was not met without controversy in the African American community. Concerns lingered that although the ODA had received its 501-3-C status, the building was still recognized as belonging to the OLCHF.

Current ODA President Cynthia Parham acknowledges that she has received criticism for her role in the project.[34]

"My parents marched and fought so I didn't have to live in just a 'black' world. God has given us one more chance to get it together. This is right."

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[33] Interview with Ray Neilsen
[34] Interview with Cynthia Parham

She points to a picture of her 13-year old grandson, Jayden, who is bi-racial. To Parham, limiting the project to only the African-American community would be sending a message to her grandson that she only embraced one part of his heritage. She explains that she does not want him or anyone else to walk into the museum and feel alienated.

"I'll never forget the things I was taught, but I'll embrace the things I can learn."

Such feelings are not uncommon on community projects centering on race. The Centennial Baptist Church in Helena, Arkansas, faced similar problems.[35] The historically black church in downtown Helena was on the brink of being demolished when a predominately white preservation committee stepped into restore it. People who were interviewed explained having to choose between the risk of their church being co-opted or torn down. One church member explained that what mattered most to her was preserving the building. Another countered that she would rather see the building fall down than to fall in the wrong hands.

The Dedication

In June 2013, over 400 hundred people gathered for dedication of the Burns-Belfry Multicultural Center. Reverend Leroy Wadlington presented the museum with the last picture of Central High School before it was integrated. As one of the few artifacts that the museum will permanently display, the picture represents a progression.

Another Chance

Syl Moorhead is a man who understands that patience is a virtue. Decades passed and leadership changed, but the "closed door" resolution remained. In spite of this, however, considerable progress had been made. In 1995, the church hosted an event

[35] http://www.npr.org/2014/01/12/260458956/a-black-churchs-dilemma-preserve-a-building-or-our-identity

with the predominately black Second Baptist congregation. A number of African American families had also joined the church. When a new minister joined the church, Moorhead's steadfastness paid off.

When Eric Hankins came to First Baptist in 2005, he was naïve about the church's past sins.

"I had heard sort of whispers that we were on the wrong side of some of the race issues during the '60s, but it never got more specific than that. So my thought was, 'What churches were on the right side of those issues in the 1960s?' so I did not pursue it."[36]

Seven years later that thought would change.

"Quite frankly, I was appalled," said Hankins of finding about the "closed door" policy.[37]

Hankins grew up in one of the first generations of the post-segregation era. His first schoolteacher, he notes, was African American. Although he had an understanding of prejudice, he explains that it was not present in his life. "Racialized language," he states bluntly, was not tolerated in his home. When confronted with what happened at his new congregation so many years earlier, Hankins was determined "not to sweep it under the rug."[38]

Seeking a resolution, he reached out to Pastor Andrew Robinson, minster at Second Baptist Church. Similar to Hankins, Robinson was unaware of First Baptist's history. In fact, the two pastors had somewhat of a budding relationship. In an interview

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[36] 'Church Confronts Past'
[37] Interview with Eric Hankins
[38] ibid

with The Oxford Eagle, Robinson said that within the past twenty years, he was aware of white Southern churches refusing to admit African Americans as members. Still, First Baptist's resolution came as a shock.

"At the same time, when I heard about it, I could only relate to them as to how positive things were when I got here," Robinson said.

After a year of dialogue between the two pastors, the congregation of First Baptist voted to apologize for their "sinful actions in 1968."

On July 21, 2013, Moorhead presented a new resolution to the congregation titled Resolution on Reconciliation and Revival, which denounced "racism in all its manifestations as sin against Almighty God."[39] It read in part:

"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we declare as utterly sinful the vote in April 1968 to exclude African-Americans from worship and the decisions that flowed from it. That time-period in Oxford was extremely difficult, but such difficulties in no way excuse what was done. Many were against those decisions at the time, but the will of the congregation was determined by a clear majority. Even though this happened years ago, we are one body, sharing in all things, even painful things (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Therefore, on this day, we renounce and repent of those decisions with our whole heart. We seek the forgiveness of the Lord and of African-Americans who were and are still hurt by these things, and we hope they will extend such forgiveness to us (Psalm 51:9-13, James 5:16,19-20). In addition to the sorrow we have caused, we acknowledge that our witness and our relationships with God and each other have been diminished greatly as a consequence of this sin of our past."

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[39] First Baptist Oxford, Resolution on Race and Revival

The resolution recognizing "the tendency in the Church-at-large to gather with those with whom we have the most affinity" also set forth a charge to "seek opportunities for continued reconciliation with churches, leaders, and individuals in the African-American community." Its last clause read:

"FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED, that we will be a church that leads the way in calling this town, this state, and this nation away from its ugly past with regard to race, through a present experience of growing Gospel obedience, into the saving knowledge of Christ alone, and into a future where there is no division of any kind, but where we are one in Christ (Ephesians 2:15-22)."

Hankins said that men from the church assist with cleaning the Burns Methodist Church. There are also plans to start a GED Program.

The Future

One volunteer comes straight from her overnight shift at Caterpillar to make sure the building is staffed in the morning.

The museum is open, but work remains.

"I wish I could move on to something else, but it's [the re-opening] just a hesitation point," Pryor said.

For now, the next stage is under way. According to Pryor, from the beginning it was understood that there was a lack of space. In addition to physical constraints due to the building's size, there are other challenges. The museum is available as a venue for social events and community meetings. This has influenced the placement of exhibits. The four main displays of the museum line the wall in order to leave free space in the middle. The remaining exhibits are mobile. Each unit has wheels on the bottom

allowing them to be easily moved. Right now the museum has proposed having temporary exhibits using items out on loan. Darlene Copp, the museum manager, said that one resident has given a baseball bat for a Civil Rights exhibit.

"It's an interesting story," she said, but declined to give any further details.

The museum may center on the past, but the Burns-Belfry committee is already thinking ahead. The ultimate goal is to transition the Burns-Belfry from a traditional museum into a digital one. Reader rails with interactive touch screens will be placed between the four stationary exhibits displaying the history of African Americans in Lafayette County. Using the Smithsonian as a guide, their hope is people will not have to come to Oxford to learn its rich history. 'Virtual tours' will be accessible to anyone with Internet access.

With big dreams, however, come big challenges.

Many days the museum receives few, if any, visitors. The tell-tale signs are there: A donation box with only a handful of crumpled dollars. A guest book waiting to be signed. It can be a disheartening reality, but everyone that signed on board for the project understood it was for the long haul.

Events at the church have brought visitors.

In the evenings, speaker series are held at the building. One lecture led by the daughter-in-law of Sylvester Moorhead, examined the diaries of plantation mistresses. Copp mentioned how it was interesting to see the dialogue between the multicultural groups. Mainly women attended.

On May 4, 2014, The Burns-Belfry held a community dinner on the grounds. Members from the congregations of Burns, St. Peter's, Second Baptist and First Baptist

were in attendance. Again, the Oxford churches take one more step toward reconciliation.

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