

St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel A Brief History

On the banks of the Magnolia River, the little town of Magnolia Springs began as a Spanish land grant in 1800. After the Civil War, the community became a primary destination for the families and descendants of many of the soldiers who fought on both sides, with homes, inns, and businesses rising along the river's edge. The water from the natural springs along the river was declared "the purest in the world" and



a community hall, which still stands today in continued use by the residents of the Springs, was constructed as a center for the growing town's social activities.

A native of Illinois, Mss Gertrude Smith, moved to Magnolia Springs in the late nineteenth century and, finding no Episcopal church nearby, began having Sunday School classes in her home. When Mr. and Mrs. Otis Lyman donated land for a church and a community hall at the turn of the nineteenth century, Sunday School classes were then held in the new hall until a church could be built. With funds raised by Miss Smith, her sister, Ida Gates, and others in the community, the present chapel was constructed by 1902, with labor donated by those who would be attending. The chapel's design was influenced by Late Gothic Revival and was built of heart pine, cut on the very site. Handmade pews and simple furnishings completed the chapel. After construction of the chapel, a cross of magnolia leaves was placed high above the altar — it remains in place today, continuing to mellow to a lovely aged patina.

Descendants of those who built the simple pine chapel include St. Paul's own Miss Maude Skiba, the last living descendant who continues to attend St. Paul's.

The Chapel was well built, having withstood hurricane after hurricane, including the particularly violent one of 1906. In 1916 the building was placed on a strengthened foundation after yet another hurricane caused some movement of the structure.

During the 1960s, the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama considered closing the little chapel but The Rev. F. Stanford Persons, who served St. Paul's, begged to have the Chapel (with its tiny but dedicated congregation) remain open — and so it did. In 1982, a small combination parish hall/office/kitchen/restroom was added and, by the late 1990s, construction had begun on our new Parish Hall — complete with a fully equipped professional kitchen, classrooms, restrooms, offices, sacristy and vesting room. The new addition blended seamlessly with the beautiful old chapel and, to all appearances, looked as though it had been there all along. It was dedicated by the Bishop on August 5, 2001, assisted by St. Paul's then Interim Priest, John W. Phillips.

Listed on both the National Register of Historic Places and the Alabama Register, the Chapel, in its 107 year history, has been served by 21 priests. A mission of the Episcopal Church throughout its history, the little Chapel recently became a full parish and is now served by its first full time priest, The Rev. George G. Riggall.