



The Walker Building and the new chapel, 1914.

A BOYS' CHAPEL

by Richard Barnhardt '66
Editor

Captain Robert Stringfellow Walker had a simple, compelling belief in God annealed in the holocaust of the Civil War and by the misery and impoverishment of its long aftermath. He experienced first-hand the moiling carnage of battle. He was carted home gutshot and thought to be dying. He saw the order of his life upended and swept away. Captain Bob could have given in to bitterness and despair, yet he remained a man of faith. He looked to the future, he had hope, and he inspired this in others.

Even before the school was established, daily worship was a fixed rhythm of the Walker household. After the long day, the family gathered in the fire-lit warmth of the Residence parlor or outside in the fragrant hush of the summer evening, and Captain Bob read from the Bible and led his family in prayer. They did not seek deliverance from hardship nor fix their minds upon the eternal bliss of salvation; instead, they sought guidance and the strength to endure and prevail. As children from neighboring farms began to come to the school, which was then located in two wood-frame buildings behind the Residence, they were taken into the bosom of the Walker family, joining in the evening vespers. On Sundays they hitched up the family buggy and saddled the farm horses, and led by Captain Bob astride his horse Corez, they rode six miles into the town of Orange to worship at St. Thomas Episcopal Church.

Daily devotion remained an important part of the early life of Woodberry Forest School. After construction of what is now called the Walker Building, services were held in the gas-lit Public Hall, with the school minister, Captain Bob, or a member of the faculty leading the boys in song and prayer, accompanied by one of the faculty wives—most frequently Mrs. J. Carter Walker—on the piano. It was a satisfactory arrangement, but on special occasions and whenever else possible, the whole school still journeyed into town to St. Thomas on Sundays. Without a true chapel the boys and their teachers must have felt some of the same frustration and dislocation we've experienced this year. They wanted a special place to worship, a hallowed sanctuary far removed from the quotidian ebb and flow.

The boys' worship and religious instruction was often enhanced by the appearance on campus of one of the famous ministers from Alexandria, Richmond, or Fredericksburg. In their sermons and talks with the students, these august men of the cloth, renowned for their spell-binding orations, often extolled the virile Christianity of the Confederate pantheon. Glossing over the causes of the late unpleasantness between the states, they nourished the Southern boys' hunger for heroes in moving exhortations on Robert E. Lee, on Robert L. Dabney, an Ironside Presbyterian minister who served as Stonewall Jackson's chief of staff, and on Old Blue Light

himself, who, sword in one hand and half-sucked lemon in the other, does seem in fact to have sprung directly from the pages of the Old Testament, the nemesis of the Union Army until felled by the guns of his own men not far away from the future site of Woodberry. In an era when the words of a dying man were understood to be his first response to sighting the Promised Land, much could be made of Jackson's "Let us cross the river and rest in the shade of the trees," and Lee's "Corporal, strike the tent," and both generals' mysterious call to A. P. Hill to move forward to continue the attack. It was old-style, unflinching Christianity, but a new spirit was afoot in the land.

The European powers were scrambling for foreign colonies. The once far-flung world was being newly conjoined by the dubious bonds of Imperialism. The response of America, still preoccupied with its own growth but also in the thrall of its peculiar sense of destiny, was characterized more by the sudden dream of world Christianity than by mundane exigencies of national empire. As the sun set on the Western frontier, the thoughts of many young Americans followed its arc on beyond the horizon to China and the exotic lands of the Far East. There opportunity lay to spread the Gospel.

Edmund Jennings Lee was the first Woodberry alumnus to join in this great missionary exodus. Together with John Carter Walker and Lewis Catlett Williams, he was a member of the first graduating class of Woodberry Forest School. The year was 1894. All three of these young men went to the University of Virginia, and all three of them graduated Phi Beta Kappa three years later, having earned in that short time master's degrees in English. (It's interesting to note that all three of these men had sons who were Rhodes Scholars, and in the case of Edmund Lee, *both* of his sons were Rhodes Scholars.) Lewis Williams went on to law school and a long and distinguished career as an attorney in Richmond. J. Carter Walker returned home and became the first headmaster of the school his parents had started. Edmund Lee, a descendant of the great Southern general, went to the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria and became a China missionary.

In February, 1902, as he set off on his first trip to the Orient, Edmund stopped by Woodberry to deliver a talk to the boys. He spoke not of the Confederate dead but of the great work that lay before him and before all others who took up the challenge to do God's work in foreign lands. He made a lasting impression on the Woodberry students, and others from the seminary followed in his wake, recounting often hair-raising stories of missionary life in China. The Woodberry students responded by forming a missionary society which, after a second visit by Edmund Lee in November, 1908, they named in his honor—the Edmund Lee Missionary Society of Woodberry Forest School, Virginia.

The purpose of the society was to raise money through such activities as benefit oyster dinners to help support the Episcopal mission service in China. The society grew steadily in numbers and zeal, and, as a matter of fact, quite a few students later became missionaries—among them the two Tucker boys, Ellis and Harry St. George. But the students were not entirely unmindful of the sacrifices involved in missionary work, and even members of the society retained their youthful and slightly irreverent perspective on the whole affair. In

the yearbooks, there usually appeared above the list of the members of the Edmund Lee Missionary Society a drawing of cannibals prancing gleefully around a bespectacled, pith-helmeted missionary simmering in a pot of water, and in 1915 this bit of doggerel underscored the cartoon:

"The Missionary's Last Report"

The cannibals persuade me, Sir,
To feed the hungry one;
To *sauce piquante* I should prefer,
But, Lord, Thy will be done!

This was fortunately not the fate of Edmund Lee. He served in China for twenty-five years and then returned to Virginia to be headmaster of Chatham Hall for the next twenty years, dying in 1962 at the age of eighty-five.

Although they often dreamed of missionary service, the Woodberry students remained fundamentally provincial in their outlook and aspirations. They were aware, too, of needs which lay closer to home. Their success in raising money for China provoked recurrent thoughts of building a chapel at Woodberry. The boys were not at all encouraged by the administration. The school was still struggling with the debt incurred by the construction of the Walker Building. The cost of a chapel was prohibitive. The project was considered impossible until another young man from the Virginia Theological Seminary came to Woodberry. His name was Karl Block, and he first visited the campus in March, 1910, to give yet another lecture on the hardships and rewards of missionary life. A large, handsome, powerfully-built young man with a commanding voice and a sure sense of purpose, Karl Block struck the boys as a supernal soldier ready to charge into Hell for a Heavenly cause. And something about Woodberry made an impression on him,



Karl Block

for he returned a few months later as a full-time member of the school faculty.

Karl Block only stayed at Woodberry for two years—he later became Episcopal Bishop of California—but when he left in 1912, the boys had a chapel. The Woodberry Forest School catalogue for that year carried this proud announcement:

A Boys' Chapel is in the course of construction and will be ready for occupancy by the opening of the session of 1912-13. It is being built under the direction of the Missionary Society of the School with the aid of interested friends, and will be a permanent contribution to the religious life of the School. It is to be Georgian in style, and will harmonize in a general way with the other School buildings. The Chapel will be dedicated to the uses of worship, and will enshrine the memory of those of the School community who have died and whose lives are a source of inspiration and of pride to every boy at Woodberry Forest.

The most distinctive feature of the new chapel and its first memorial was the altar, carved in Italy of famous Carrara marble and given by Mrs. John F. Bransford of Augusta, Georgia, in memory of her son, Alfred Baker Bransford '11, who drowned in the James River in a futile effort to rescue his brother only a few weeks after his graduation from Woodberry Forest.

Simple though it was, St. Andrew's Chapel was all that the boys had ever dreamed of—and it was considerably more expensive to build than anyone had imagined. Such is the way of dreams. After Karl Block's departure, the stewardship of the chapel was placed in the hands of three trustees: the headmaster, Raleigh Taylor, and Mortimer Turner. In time the full construction debt was paid, an important source of revenue being the meager profits Mr. Turner eked from his frugal management of the school bookstore.

Under the leadership of the school chaplains and the student chapel council, St. Andrew's Chapel became a special place for the students, faculty, and alumni. Worship services were simple and uplifting, the plain, hard walls of the spartan structure resonating with the warmth of youthful fellowship and energetic singing. At Christmastime the interior was festooned with running cedar for the moving candlelight service, and at Easter it was bedecked with the floral glory of spring. The chapel bells heralded the weddings of the alumni and tolled their passing, a tradition which continues today. It is fitting perhaps that the first death to be tolled was that of Captain Bob in March, 1914. In the years since, the bells of St. Andrew's have marked the passing of his sons and their wives and the whole host of the founding generations.

A scant fifteen years after its completion and with the construction debt finally paid, the chapel was found to be too small to accommodate the growing school community. Architects and engineers were consulted, but their advice was disappointing. The only practical way to enlarge the simple brick structure was to cut it in half, move the altar-end directly backwards, and fill in the resulting gap with additional seating space. Such rough treatment of a fragile building, however, would certainly result in damage to the marble altar, in itself probably more valuable than the building. It was a discouraging



The Bransford Altar

report. Mr. Joe Walker, under whose supervision the campus buildings were moved almost as often and casually as the boys re-arrange their rooms, was not dismayed. He said it could be done.

The chancel was undermined and propped up on a heavy timber framework. A new foundation was dug and laid thirty-six feet in the rear of the altar-end of the building and connected to it by a rough, wooden railway. The chapel was cut in half, and the chancel was hitched to a capstan powered by a single white mule. Mr. Joe placed a full glass of water on the altar and kept his eyes on the meniscus for the next two days during which the chancel was slowly inched out to its present location. Not a drop of water was spilled, and by September, 1928, the newly enlarged chapel had a seating capacity of 300, sufficient for the next twenty years but thereafter increasingly intolerable as the size of the Woodberry student body gradually increased to its present-day complement of 350 students.

During the Tribute Trust development drive in the 1950's, an additional expansion of St. Andrew's Chapel was seriously considered. Plans were made to enlarge the transepts and refurbish the interior. The costs were carefully calculated and weighed against other pressing school needs. Eventually, the project was shelved, but twenty years later it was resurrected and finally realized, as so movingly recounted by George Conway in his sermon this year at the candlelight service in the once again newly enlarged and refurbished chapel.

Now, though the construction cost has not yet been fully funded, old St. Andrew's, an archetypical boys' chapel, reverberates on Sunday evenings with joyful noises, the sounds of the entire Woodberry School community in song and prayer.