

THE ROCK

This stone house stood on Montevallo Road to the west of today's Christian Life Center. It was purchased for Mountain Brook Baptist Church in 1968. It had been the residence of Dixie Walker, a legendary baseball player. A group of men in the church, mobilized by Deacon Bestor Brown, got together and bought the place. Then they deeded it to the church. The youth director, Barbara Thurman, mobilized the teens to clean and decorate it as a youth center. Among those who worked during the summer of 1968 were John Compton, Ann Weaver Knight, Susan Little Foster, Janet Walker, Randy Brown, Kathy Trafton, and Dave Ward. Betty Jo Corum, a church member, won a contest to name the house "The Rock." A coffee house was set up in the basement, where musicians performed and games were played. Classes and parties were held on the main floor. The Rock was used as a youth and recreation center for just a few years. The house was old, and it needed extensive renovations. Meanwhile, the church wanted a more appropriate space for a full recreation program. The Rock was demolished in April 1972 to make more room for the Christian Life Center which was built in 1975. Most of the land was paved for parking.



APRIL 28, 2019

WE'VE A STORY TO TELL
75th Anniversary Memories of Mountain Brook Baptist Church

HOSTING BILLY GRAHAM

Billy Graham's one-day Easter rally at Legion Field made history for Birmingham and for the Civil Rights movement. It happened in 1964, after the devastating bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, in which four African American children were murdered in 1963. The Graham rally was the first racially integrated public meeting in Birmingham and the largest in the state. Dr. Graham would not permit segregation in his audiences. Mountain Brook Baptist Church bore heavy responsibility for inviting and hosting Graham for the bridge-building event. Arthur Cook, a recent chairman of Deacons of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, was general chairman for the effort. Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. and more than 100 church members worked for success of the meeting.

There were rumors that a bombing and other violence would occur and people would be injured, if the rally were held as announced—a racially integrated meeting. Dr. Nelson and a small group of white pastors went to Montgomery to see Gov. George Wallace. They asked him to prevent bombing and other violence that had been threatened against the rally. Wallace said, "I'm just the governor. I can't do anything to prevent this."

Dr. Nelson replied, "If anybody is hurt, we will let people know that you had the opportunity to intervene but didn't." Wallace picked up a phone and dialed from memory a number. Wallace said, "J.B., call it off." So the rally went ahead without any bombing, violence, or other unpleasantness.

Who was "J.B.?" It is thought that "J.B." might have been J.B. Stoner, a Ku Klux Klansman who years later was convicted of bombing Bethel Baptist Church in 1958.

In preparation for writing the 50th anniversary of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, I interviewed Dr. Nelson about hosting Billy Graham. He said that immediately after the resounding success of the 1964 rally, local ministers invited Graham to return for a week of preaching events. It would be a great step forward for better race relations in town, and it would be an excellent evangelistic opportunity leading to church growth. Graham always encouraged converts at his preaching to affiliate immediately with a local church.

Dr. Nelson had become chairman of the Greater Birmingham Ministers Association by 1971-1972, and they persuaded Graham to return to Birmingham. Again, the terms of a Graham rally stipulated that the audience would be integrated—and it was. It was a chance for Birmingham to show off its progress in race relations and civil rights.

In preparation, Mountain Brook Baptist Church hosted an intensive evangelism training for its own members, so that more members could bring people to faith in Jesus.



Graham and Arthur P. Cook with the Reverend J.L. Ware at Legion Field on March 29, 1964.

Dr. Nelson told me that the great Graham Crusade of May 14-21, 1972 was heavily the responsibility of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Churches agreed to visit every household in Birmingham to issue a personal invitation to attend the Graham meetings. Mountain Brook Baptist Church was responsible for visiting 1,400 homes in the 35213 zipcode. Each night of Graham preaching, Mountain Brook Baptist Church sent two charter bus loads of people, and each bus had a captain who recruited riders. Mountain Brook Baptist Church had a reserved section of seating at Legion Field.

Chairman of music was Claude H. Rhea Jr., a Mountain Brook Baptist Church member who was the dean of music for Samford University. Norman Anderton and Julian Brown were on the general committee. Arthur Cook again was in an essential role as chairman of ushers, with Al Lee as vice-chairman, and 100 Mountain Brook Baptist Church men ushering. Dr. Don King was business coordinator. More than 75 Mountain Brook Baptist Church people sang in the fully integrated choir, and more than 50 served as counselors to people who came forward in response to Graham's invitation to follow Jesus.

Cliff Barrows, the music leader for the Graham team, came to Mountain Brook Baptist Church for Wednesday night supper—undoubtedly recruiting for the choir and audience.

Dr. Nelson's analysis was that it was amazing for a church of the size of Mountain Brook Baptist Church to have so many people serving to conduct the evangelistic effort. Cumulative attendance for the week was 373,800. Approximately 9,800 people registered personal decisions for Christ. Mountain Brook Baptist Church took responsibility for follow-up with 100 of these.

Dr. Nelson steered the famous visitor to the downtown headquarters building of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union. Alma Hunt, chief executive of WMU, warmly welcomed Graham when Dr. Nelson tipped her off about an unannounced visit. She summoned more than 100 employees to meet a surprise VIP guest.

Miss Hunt noticed that Graham's hair was hanging far over his suit collar—perhaps because of the contemporary style, or maybe because he had not had time to visit a barber. She introduced Graham elegantly to the WMU staff. With him standing beside her, she said, "Now Billy, here in Birmingham you need to get that hair cut before you preach tonight." And she handed him cash to pay the barber. Graham roared with laughter. He took the money. He was freshly groomed when he stood up to preach at Legion Field that night.

Lee N. Allen



Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. and his wife, Grace, welcome Billy Graham to Birmingham on Easter Eve, 1964.