

## RUTH AND THOMAS MEARS: MEMBERS FOR 68 YEARS

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Ruth and Thomas Mears have been members of Mountain Brook Baptist Church for 68 years—longer than any other persons having continuous resident membership.

Dr. Thomas Mears and Ruth Holcomb Mears returned from Germany in 1949. Dr. Mears had served with the Army Medical Corps. Ruth and baby John had sailed over to be with him. Upon their return, Mountain Brook Baptist Church was meeting in the little house-chapel next to Crestline School. As soon as Mountain Brook Baptist Church built its Chapel building on Montevallo Road, with a large enough nursery, and with its own baptistry, the Mears family was ready to join.

So here came the Mears family, toddler in arms, in December 1950. Dr. Mears had been a Methodist, and he would need to be baptized by immersion. The pastor, the Rev. William Waterhouse, joked, “So, you’ve decided to become a Christian!”

Thomas Mears was the first person to be baptized in the brand-new Chapel, early in January 1951. (The baptistry was located behind the pulpit and the small choir loft. Not until the 1980s was the baptistry replaced by a pipe organ.)

Thomas and Ruth have been devoted church members. They brought a total of five children into the activities of the church. In the early days, midweek services and children’s groups met on Thursday nights. Friday nights were for recreation. Summertime brought churchwide picnics. “Our life was the church,” Ruth recalls. “We had a church-centered life.” She taught Sunday School for beginner children for 17 years. Thomas Mears was a Deacon. Ruth Mears was a champion for starting daycare and volunteered there to care for babies for many years.

In 1971, there was a proposal to refurbish the Chapel, and stained glass windows were designed. Ruth Mears and some other mothers wanted the money to be spent instead on recreational facilities for the young people. In a church business meeting, the vote was inconclusive. Before the next meeting to re-vote, Ruth organized some of her friends to urge support for the recreational needs of the youth. “We wrote a letter urging support of a Christian Life Center, and we hand-addressed it to as many members as we could afford,” she recalls. The next vote was

213 to 173 in favor of a Christian Life Center. Simple repainting of the Chapel was done in 1971, and the Christian Life Center was dedicated in 1975—as soon as design problems were resolved to the satisfaction of the City of Mountain Brook. Generations of children grew up in the gym with Friday night skating and sports and games, and only then came the stained glass windows in 1985.

Now, ailments of age are keeping the Mears elders at home on most Sundays. The situation is heartbreaking for them, because they miss their Bible study class.

*Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Mears, as pictured  
in the 1998 Church Directory.*



SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

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

## THE HOLCOMB HERITAGE

In the 1940s, Mountain Brook was beginning to grow as a community and gained incorporation. Mission-minded Baptists noticed that Mountain Brook was missing one key ingredient: a Baptist church. John H. Holcomb Sr., owner of the Britling cafeterias, was one who acted to correct that situation in Mountain Brook. He was a Deacon at First Baptist Church, but was also close to the pastor at Southside Baptist, Dr. John H. Buchanan. Mr. Holcomb contributed \$100 to \$200 a month for several years from his personal funds for Mountain Brook Baptist Church. He was not a charter member of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, but his anonymous guidance and financial support were present from the earliest planning.

In March 1950 he and his wife joined along with his son, John H. Holcomb Jr. Later in the year came two other grown children: Martha Holley and Ruth Mears with her husband Dr. Thomas Mears. All the Holcomb grandchildren were in the church, and some of them remain as church leaders today: Nancy Holley Capicik and husband Paul, Mary Holcomb Scott and husband John, John H. Holcomb III and wife Diane, Dr. John Mears and wife Darlene, and T. Anderson Mears. There are also great-grandchildren of the church patriarch: John Hudson Holcomb IV and wife Caroline, Taylor Holcomb, and John Mears Jr.

John Holcomb Sr. took few offices in the church, but he was always quietly behind the scenes. He taught his children and grandchildren: "It's nice to be generous. Always be generous." His family understood that he never wanted credit. He never wanted anybody to know what he was doing. He had been through some hard times during the Great Depression, but for his church, he always said, "Let's go first class."

Mr. Holcomb Sr. gave the church its first organ, an electronic model which served in the Chapel for 20 years. Martha Holley remembered sitting in the choir during a heated business meeting when plans for the Sanctuary were being discussed. Her father had brought a report which was strongly opposed by some of the members. Discussion got intense. "Tears ran down my face to see Daddy stand there, always sweet, never retaliating," she said. Not only was the building accomplished, but fellowship was restored.

The elder Mr. Holcomb had already begun passing the reins of leadership to the next generation. John Holcomb Jr. was chair of the Deacons in 1955. John Jr. served on nearly every important committee concerning the church building for 30 years. Hardly a brick was laid on the church property without his support and leadership. However, his vision for the church has always been much wider than the building. He was a founder and first chair of the Mountain Brook Baptist Church Endowment Trust.

A roll call of Deacons in nearly any year is likely to find a member of the Holcomb family. Among Deacons from the family have included Howard Holley, Thomas Mears, Johnny Mears, and John Scott.

In 1988, it was Mary Holcomb Scott who proposed that the church consider electing women as well as men to the office of Deacon. This led to a revision of the church bylaws and the election of women Deacons.

The beautiful chimes which peal across Mountain Brook are another gift from the Holcomb family. These are a memorial to the late Frances Holcomb.

Following the humble attitude of John Holcomb Sr., the Holcomb heritage in Mountain Brook Baptist Church is usually shy, unpublicized, and absolutely essential. They are the type of members who have made Mountain Brook Baptist Church unique.

## TRIBUTE BY JOHN HALL BUCHANAN SR.

Dr. John Hall Buchanan was pastor of Southside Baptist Church. In 1944 and beyond, he gave a guiding hand to forming a new Baptist church in Mountain Brook. In 1965, he was asked to deliver a message when the cornerstone was laid for the Sanctuary building of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. He was too sick to attend the ceremony, but he sent this handwritten message about the church founding. This is a photocopy. The original is presumed to be sealed in the cornerstone.

*A message from John Hall Buchanan Sr.  
next to Southside Baptist Church, Mountain Brook Baptist  
Church occupies the largest place in my heart and  
affections. Realizing some years ago, that the growing  
community would need a Baptist witness, some of us  
felt that a Baptist Church should be established in  
Mountain Brook. In the beginning it was a  
joint enterprise between the First Baptist Church and  
Southside Baptist Church. To this end each of the  
churches supplied two hundred dollars each month  
for the young pastor's salary.*

*After one year the pastor of the First Church felt  
his church could no longer continue this appropriation.  
When John Holcomb Sr., then a member of First Church,  
learned his church had withdrawn its support he  
sent to me, as pastor of Southside, two hundred dollars  
each month to be added to Southside's donation  
toward the maintenance of the young Mountain Brook Church.  
Someone has said that every institution is the  
lengthening shadow of some individual. In my  
estimation, Mountain Brook Church is a wonderful  
institution that is the lengthening shadow of John  
Holcomb Sr.*

*It was my happy privilege in later years to  
assist Mountain Brook Baptist Church in securing  
Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. as its pastor. Under his  
inspiring leadership it has grown into one of the  
great churches of our city.*

*One of the happiest experiences of my life in Birmingham  
is to witness the marvelous growth and influence of Mountain  
Brook Baptist Church.*

*I regret that my physical condition forbids my being present  
at the ceremony incident to the laying of the cornerstone of the new  
building. My prayer is that through the unbroken future this church  
hall continue its great influence upon our entire city.*