

## Rev. Robert Davidson, "Pop" Gamble, and the Roger Williams House, 1920-46

After Rev. A.W. Caul left for another pastorate in 1919, Iowa State Professor of History F.P. Fogdal served as interim pastor. It was a long interim. In the 1920 Annual Report to the Central Association, Church Clerk Mary Clyde reported, "Sixteen months we were planning, praying, and corresponding to secure Divine providence to the man God would choose to go in and out before us in pastoral leadership." The pastor called was Robert Davidson, a native of Scotland who was the pastor at First Baptist in Marshalltown, Iowa. Davidson was a graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School and had previously served at Rockford, Illinois, where he was instrumental in organizing the first mutual hospital insurance association in the country.

While outreach to Iowa State students had always been an important component of the church's ministry, this focus was formalized with Rev. Davidson's pastorate as he was called both as minister of the church and as college student pastor, with some funding from the Northern Baptist Convention and the Iowa Baptist Convention. The annual report, with a hint of competition with Iowa City, noted that there were more Baptist students at ISC than any college in the state.



*Robert and Jean Davidson with daughter Ethel*

Rev. Davidson was a musician and served as the choir director throughout his time at the church. In 1923, when the college chapel in Morrill Hall was closed, the church purchased the pipe organ and installed it in the sanctuary. A junior choir was formed in 1929 and regularly sang in worship services.

In the 1920's, a large number of students from the church went on to serve as missionaries. Charles and Viola "Sunshine" Smith served in the Belgian Congo. Lorraine Caul, daughter of the former pastor, was a missionary to Assam in NE India. Daisy Brown, Lydia Brown, and Fred and Daisy (Mellor) Rossiter served in China.

(Lydia Brown, the daughter of Captain K.W. Brown and Margaret Mitchell Brown, died in China in 1924.) Geddes and Gladys Niles served in Alaska and Kenneth and Fannie Reeves served in Albania. John and Alice Gilson went as missionaries to India while John's brother F.L. and wife served in Assam. This was a "Golden Age" of missions for First Baptist, and the number of students who went to serve in mission fields is remarkable. Beyond the missionaries the church sent out and its regular unified mission support, the congregation supported missions and ministries including Bishop College, an African-American college in Marshall, Texas; Murrow Indian Orphan's Home in Muskogee, Oklahoma; the Kikongo Hospital in the Congo; and the mission at Crow Agency, Montana.

As early as 1923, the church had conversations with the state convention and the Northern Baptist Convention regarding the need for a Baptist Student Center at Iowa State College. The dreams were finally realized in 1929 with the building of the Roger Williams House at 120 Lynn Avenue, a cooperative effort of the church and denomination. The first floor served as the student center, used for Bible Studies, programs, and Sunday night meals as well as a place for students to study and meet with

friends. The pastor and his family lived on the second floor (the former parsonage downtown was rented out.) Students lived in a couple of rooms in the basement in exchange for upkeep on the building, including firing the coal furnace and mowing the lawn.

Even with denominational support, the added expense came at a difficult time, with the stock market crash that year. In its annual report, the church reported paying nothing toward the principal on its mortgage in 1931, and only \$100 toward the principal in 1932. Income for local expenses from 1932-36 was around 25% less than it had been from 1927-31.

While finances were difficult, The Roger Williams House proved to be a great asset, and ministry to students thrived. Sunday

School classes were held at the house on Sunday mornings, and students would then take a bus to the church downtown.

In 1930-31, participation in the Roger Williams Club increased significantly over the previous year due to the house. In 1932-33, even with a significant decline in enrollment at the college because of the Great Depression, participation at the Roger Williams Club had nearly doubled from the previous year. The church also sponsored a national sorority for Baptist women, Theta Epsilon.

Rev. Davidson had served at First Baptist for 15 years, until then the longest tenure of any minister. In January of 1936, he died suddenly at the Roger Williams House. The unexpected loss brought on an outpouring of support. Local members as well as former students living around the country and abroad sent expressions of sympathy and contributions toward a memorial. A memorial outdoor fireplace was built in the yard of the Roger William House in memory of Rev. Davidson. When the new church was built on Lynn Avenue, the fireplace was dismantled and moved to the new location.

Rev. J. Harold Gamble followed Rev. Davidson, coming to Ames from Grand Forks, ND. Changes were happening in the church. The fall after his arrival, the church voted 39-5 to discontinue Sunday evening services. The church also voted to add deaconesses as a church office; Margaret Nichols was among those first deaconesses. In 1936, the deacons had conversations with the Christian Church regarding the possibility of a merger. The Northern Baptist Convention and the Disciples of Christ were having such conversations at a national level. In the summer of 1941, the two churches worshiped together, meeting at the Christian Church in July and at First Baptist in August. Conversations regarding merger were again held in 1946, when the decision was made to continue as separate congregations.

“Pop” Gamble built on the progress of previous years, and in 1942, student membership in the Roger Williams Club reached an all-time high of 110 students while church attendance reached 200. The senior choir was made up largely of college students. The Second World War affected the church, of course, and as young men enlisted or were drafted, enrolment at the university declined again. At the Roger Williams House, male students had traditionally lived in the house and served as caretakers, but with fewer male students available, female students took on this role. Katy Seidel recalls living in the



Roger Williams House, 120 Lynn Avenue

Roger Williams House, cleaning, washing dishes, and firing the furnace in exchange for room and board. She had her meals with the Gamble family.



*The church receives the 'A' Award from the Board of Education of the Northern Baptist Convention for excellence in teaching. Rev. Gamble is at the right.*

It was during Rev. Gamble's pastorate that dreams and finally plans for a new church building began to take hold. In 1941, the Fareway grocery store expressed interest in purchasing the church property at Fifth and Kellogg. In that same year, the church mortgage was burned. It was the first time since 1872 that the church had not been in debt. Meanwhile, the church facilities were overcrowded. All of this helped to build momentum for a new church building, and the thriving ministry with students led to purchase of land on Lynn Avenue in 1945.

In 1946, Pop Gamble accepted a pastorate in Binghamton, New York. In August of 1947, the church called as its new pastor a former Iowa State student, Dr. Ronald Wells of Bridgeport, Connecticut.