

Montreat: Preserving Southern church heritage deeply felt issue

Written by Leslie Scanlon
Monday, 31 October 2005 12:00

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What's the value of someone being able to come to the archives at Montreat and find her grandmother's name listed as a Sunday school teacher in the records of her childhood church?

It's hard to know how to put a dollar value on that. What's the right amount to pay to preserve such memories? When does that price become too much?

That bone-deep love for a place and a heritage is whipping up a storm in Montreat, where the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) has decided that, for economic reasons, for the sake of other priorities in the financially-struggling Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Montreat Historical Society should shut its doors.

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The Board of Trustees of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., is considering whether to take responsibility for part of the history collection now at Montreat -- something COGA has asked the seminary to consider doing. While it's not completely clear what would go where, it's likely that many local church history records and personal manuscripts now at Montreat could end up in Columbia's library if the plan were approved.

The Columbia trustees met Oct. 4 and 5 and decided to continue studying the matter -- in part to determine what would be involved in accepting those archival holdings and how much it would cost to store them properly and provide public access to the collection.

The seminary also is considering what kind of courses and programs it could offer on Reformed and Presbyterian history and theology, both at Columbia's campus in Decatur, Georgia and at the conference center in Montreat. And it's trying to determine how well such an endeavor might mesh with Columbia's other commitments and priorities -- in other words, what the costs and benefits would be.

"We had only a little time to put some of the rawest data together" before the trustees meeting, said D. Cameron Murchison, Columbia's dean of faculty and executive vice president. The capital and programmatic costs for Columbia to take over part of the archives are estimated at about \$1.7 million for the first five years.

In the weeks to come, Columbia's faculty is being asked "to clearly get in focus how it could be utilized for both the research and teaching ministry of the seminary" if the seminary accepted part of the archival collection, Murchison said.

In the meantime, some in Montreat are incensed at COGA's decision to shut down the Montreat Historical Society. There is talk of initiating overtures to submit to the General Assembly next summer in Alabama, perhaps of lawsuits, or of possibly raising enough money independently to keep the Montreat history office alive (although a feasibility study COGA commissioned indicated that would be a difficult task.)

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A flock of rumors have taken flight -- that the history center in Montreat would close immediately, that the PC(USA) would sell off the center's holdings or move them to the Presbyterian Historical Society's main offices in Philadelphia and stick them in boxes in some dark place. Some are raising the question of whether the northern and southern branches of Presbyterianism ever should have reunited in 1983 and whether southern church interests were trampled in the process.

In a letter to its supporters, the Friends of the Historical Society at Montreat said the closing of the Montreat office "and the dispersal of its unique holdings would be a tragedy that need not occur."□

Richard Ray, a retired Presbyterian pastor and Montreat resident, served on a task force COGA established to consider the future of the Montreat office. "People have just felt deeply betrayed by the whole process,"□ Ray said. "They're angry, they're upset . . . Some of them are beginning to question the merger of the denomination itself."□

Frederick J. Heuser Jr., president of the Presbyterian Historical Society and Department of History, said it costs close to \$500,000 a year to keep the Montreat office open, out of an historical society budget of about \$1.8 million. He's not surprised that an economic decision has been made to shut it down -- the PC(USA) already is expecting more budget cuts, perhaps next spring -- or that feelings are running so high.

"When reunion happened, the historical society piece was the last piece dealt with,"□ Heuser said. As it's worked out, two offices remained open, in Philadelphia and Montreat, "but I always knew there would come a time,"□ he said, when the PC(USA) would decide it couldn't afford to do that anymore. To some who have never been totally comfortable with reunion, "this has turned into a classic North-South confrontation,"□ Heuser said.

How the office at Montreat typically has been used is also a factor. While some who visit it are serious academic scholars --there are records, for example, regarding Presbyterian mission work in Korea and Africa -- many others are Presbyterians who go to Montreat for a conference or vacation, and who stop by to visit the museum or look up a piece of family history. The Montreat office holds the records of congregations from across the south, many of them compiled by Presbyterian women's groups and updated year by year.

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Richard DuBose, vice president for development and seminary relations at Columbia, worked at the Montreat office over several summers in the early 1980s.

He remembers grandparents showing their grandchildren records of the family baptisms and people coming in to find pictures of themselves in their high school youth group. "Local church histories were an incredible draw," DuBose said. "We were constantly going back there and ferrying them out to the tables."

Now, some fear those collections will be dispersed -- and that Presbyterians who most want to see them won't go to Philadelphia or Atlanta to look up them.

"Presbyterians in the south are not simply people who happen to be Presbyterian and live in the southern part of the U.S., but a people who live within a particular tradition," wrote Erskine Clarke, a professor of American religious history at Columbia, in an e-mail interview. "That tradition is marked by slavery and racism, by deep commitments to mission, by generosity and self-discipline, by a concern for the public good, by a particular social and cultural location, and by certain theological affirmations and a distinctive character of worship."

For some white Presbyterians from the south, Clarke wrote, "Montreat is a place of deep memories," where church groups met, missionaries took furloughs, children attended summer conferences. "In the midst of Montreat is the Historical Society that preserves the stories of presbyteries and missionaries, of congregations and pastors, of families and church debates. Montreat has become a place -- one of the few places left in a rootless American society -- where grandparents, preachers, and youth workers tell stories that say, 'Listen, this is who we are as a people, a part of God's larger family.'"

While COGA approved in September the closing of the Montreat Historical Society office, the details are still being worked out regarding what will happen to the holdings. But some of what people are speculating about -- that, for example, archival material will be sold -- just isn't true, Heuser said.

Records of the national church -- the Presbyterian Church in the United States and its agencies

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-- will move to Philadelphia, he said. Synod and presbytery records could go either to Philadelphia or to a seminary with an "archival atmosphere" -- perhaps one close to where a particular presbytery or synod is located.

"Those governing bodies own the records," Heuser said. "They decide where they want to put the records."

The same holds true for congregational records -- they could go to Columbia, to Philadelphia, or back to particular churches.

Some personal papers -- manuscripts, diaries and the like -- have been given to the PC(USA) outright; others have been loaned. The historical society will contact the owners of loaned materials to ask what they want done with them, Heuser said. And even if personal papers have been given to the denomination, if a family felt strongly it didn't want them moved to Philadelphia, "we would return them" to the family, he said.

About 60,000 to 70,000 books are housed at Montreat, and likely would be divided between Columbia and Philadelphia. It is possible, Heuser said, that duplicates of some books could be sold.

Some museum artifacts might stay at Montreat -- it depends in part on who buys the building the office is now in, and what use is made of it, Heuser said. But the idea that artifacts such as Civil War diaries would be sold off "is pretty extreme," he said. "I don't know of any reputable institution that would do that ... (Historic) institutions don't like to sell things. You might raise some revenue, but it's a public relations nightmare."

When the time comes, firms with experience in moving archival materials will be hired -- "you don't just rent a Ryder truck for the weekend and load it up," Heuser said. He said there would be a little bit of downtime when the materials wouldn't be available for use, but said it's not true that "they'll be stuck in a warehouse that's already crowded" and that people won't be able to use them.

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The Montreat holdings are already catalogued in the historical society's searchable database, known as Calvin, Heuser said. The database will have to be updated to reflect where particular items have gone, but "the idea that the stuff is going to be shipped to Philadelphia and it will never see the light of day really is a misnomer," he said.

Murchison, Columbia's dean of faculty, understands how strongly some people feel about the Montreat collection, but also hopes Columbia will be given the time it needs to figure out what it should do. "I would like to hope that people would take a deep breath and let this prospect mature a little bit," Murchison said.

The Columbia trustees are to meet again in March.