

Church Window Illuminates Complexity of Past

Submitted by Scott D. Myers

A window at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church honoring Stonewall Jackson is featured in a new Civil War book.

By Tonia Moxley, The Roanoke Times

Photos by Stephanie Klein-Davis | The Roanoke Times



Longtime members of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church Ralph Shepperson, 88, Carnis Poindexter, 73, and Shirley Calhoun, 72, pose in front of the window honoring Confederate Lt. Gen. Stonewall Jackson.

BLACKSBURG -- Not slavery, nor war. Not segregation, nor civil rights. Not even fire could destroy the bonds forged more than 150 years ago between a group of Virginia slaves and a Confederate general.

It remains enshrined in a stained glass window honoring Lt. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson that has looked out on the predominantly black worshippers of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Roanoke since before 1937, and is featured in a new illustrated history of the Civil War written by eminent scholar James "Bud" Robertson.

"There's nothing else like it," the retired Virginia Tech professor said of the relic and its story. "I fought like the devil to keep it in [the book], and the congregation will be so happy."

Depicting soldiers camped by a river, the window behind the altar is dedicated to Jackson, and features his dying words: "Let us cross the river and rest in the shade of the trees."

It was designed and ordered installed by the Rev. Lylburn Liggins Downing, the son of two former slaves who attended a Sunday school class taught by Jackson at Lexington Presbyterian Church in the 1850s.

In doing so, Jackson, then a Virginia Military Institute professor, skirted laws of the day banning education for blacks, Robertson said, and Downing's parents instilled in him gratitude for that act of courage.

The window has remained, cherished by a congregation that bore the humiliations of segregation, yet resisted efforts by civil rights activists to remove it, Robertson said.



Detail of the stained glass window that honors Stonewall Jackson and installed by the Rev. Lylburn Liggins Downing, the son of two former slaves who attended the Sunday school class that Jackson taught when he was a VMI professor. The bottom of the window includes Jackson's last words: "Let us cross the river and rest in the shade of the trees." The story of this window is included among 132 vignettes taken from Bud Robertson's book, "The Untold Civil War: The Human Side of War," published by National Geographic Books. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church at 301 Patton Avenue N.W. in Roanoke came under some criticism during the civil rights era when activists urged church leaders to remove it.