

# A Step Back in Time

By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

# LAWRENCE FUNERAL HOME Chapel Hill, Tennessee



Lawrence Funeral Home and Cremation Services

The community of Chapel Hill Tennessee, population approximately 944, located in north eastern Marshall County, is widely known for its connection to several legendary names; Nathan Bedford Forest, a Confederate General, Henry Hollis Horton, the 33rd Governor of Tennessee, Buford Ellington, the 42nd Governor of Tennessee and the Chapel Hill Ghost that haunts the local railroad. Two well-known, Chapel Hill citizens, can also be added to the list. Brothers and partners in business, Thomas and Garrett Lawrence, not only made a difference in this community, but lived up to a dedicated and sincere commitment to help, not only their community, but all the surrounding communities. A commitment that continues today, 73 years later.

As teenagers, Thomas Jr. and Garrett were entrepreneurs of sorts, working at various jobs to earn spending money and to help provide for the needs of themselves and those of their family.

Their parents, Thomas H. Sr. and Mary Sue White Lawrence, worked hard to provide for their four children; Thomas, Garrett, Helen and Dorothy. Their father was a contractor and truck driver and their mother was a school teacher for many years.

Lawrence Funeral Home Chapel Hill, Tennessee was established and opened for business by Thomas H. Lawrence Jr., who began his funeral service career as an 18 year-old teenager in 1933. He began this endeavor, working for the former Lavender Funeral Home. After graduating from the Gupton-Jones School of Embalming in Nashville, Tennessee, and leaving his employment at Lavender's, on May 19, 1939, Thomas opened a funeral service business at 113 S. Horton Parkway. Exactly one year later, May 19, 1940, the building was destroyed by fire. Lawrence Funeral Home re-opened that same year in a building, built for Thomas, by Mrs. Crutcher at 102 S. Horton Parkway, Chapel Hill, Tennessee. This location is presently occupied by the Horton Highway Utility District offices.

In 1941 Garrett Lawrence, younger brother to Thomas, also started his career in the funeral business. He traveled from Chapel Hill to Nashville every day to attend Gupton-Jones Mortuary School,

often hitch-hiking to and from Nashville. He was only required to attend for six months before he was allowed to take the state board exam and obtain his license. For a short time after finishing his

studies at Gupton-Jones, Garrett worked for the former Cotton Funeral Home in Franklin, Tennessee. Garrett joined his brother, Thomas, at Lawrence Funeral Home in 1942, thus beginning a 40-year partnership

The two brothers worked together to build the funeral home business before Thomas was called to serve our country in World War II. Since Garrett was turned down for medical reasons, he ran the funeral home until Thomas returned in 1945.

Since its beginning, Lawrence Funeral Home has evolved into one of the most respected funeral homes in Middle Tennessee. As funeral customs changed and consumer demands changed, Lawrence Funeral Home always made the adjustments to meet their needs. Lillian and Jean, wives of Thomas and Garrett respectively, were also an integral part of and guiding force behind the daily operations of the business.

In 1953, Lawrence Funeral Home moved to its present location in a new facility, in part due to the increasing frequency of visitations and funerals being held at the funeral home, rather than in private homes or churches. The business continued to grow as the years passed. Like other funeral homes of that time, Lawrence Funeral Home was involved in much more than "burying folks". In addition to being involved in numerous civic endeavors, (providing tents, chairs, etc.), Thomas and Garrett also provided ambulance service for the surrounding counties, prior to the formation of the County Ambulance Service. They not only responded to accidents and emergencies, they transported patients to and from hospitals, as well as bringing new born babies and their mothers home from the hospital. These ambulance services were provided until September 1973, when other funeral homes in thirteen counties discontinued ambulance service.

People from all walks of life have visited the facilities of Lawrence Funeral Home, for visitations and funerals. In 1972, President and Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, Vice-President Spiro Agnew, and several other dignitaries attended the funeral services at Lawrence Funeral Home for Governor Buford Ellington who was a personal

friend of Thomas and Garrett.

Services for veterans killed in action in every major conflict beginning with World War II and including the war in Iraq have been conducted at this funeral home. Lawrence Funeral Home has always strived to provide compassionate, dignified and professional service to every family it serves regardless of their circumstances.

After the death of Thomas, on February 28, 1982, Garrett continued to lead the funeral home at the forefront of traditional funeral service. His business expertise, compassion and even his witty, dry sense of humor have contributed to the perpetuity of the Lawrence tradition of funeral service.

In 1986, Lawrence Funeral Home underwent its first major expansion, since 1953, by enlarging the former chapel and other renovations to the facilities. Like the original construction of the funeral home, this expansion was necessitated by the continued growth of the business. 1992 saw another expansion, when a state of the art, preparation room was built and office space expanded.

Lawrence Funeral Home officially changed its name to Lawrence Funeral Home and Cremation Services in 2002, to reflect its accommodation, of the many families who are choosing cremation services for their family members. In January 2004, ground was broken for the new chapel facilities. This project was also launched to meet the need for space demanded by the increased call volume, but more importantly by the desires of Garrett, the management and staff of Lawrence Funeral Home to provide a modern yet comfortable facility for the

families they serve.

The tradition of Lawrence Funeral Home service has a long history of serving its community and the surrounding area – a time honored and cherished tradition of funeral service, which hopefully will continue for many, many, more years.

Garrett Lawrence, CEO/Owner, who has given much to his community, has now turned the day to day operations of the business to Tommy L. Howell, President/Owner/Manager.

A native of Canton, Georgia, Tommy joined Lawrence Funeral Home in 1980 and became a partner in the business in 1982. He is a graduate of John Gupton College in Nashville, Tennessee and has served two terms as President of the Alumni Association. Tommy also has served as a director for the Tennessee Funeral Directors Association and is active in the Chapel Hill Lions Club. He has served on the Board of Directors for the local chapter of the American Red Cross and on the boards of various local governmental agencies. Tommy attends Smyrna Baptist Church where he serves on the Board of Deacon. Jane Howell, Tommy's wife has served as Secretary and Receptionist for several years. Other full time employees are; William H. Preston, Funeral Director/Embalmer, J. Kevin Pratt, Funeral Director/Embalmer and Sandra Hill, Office Manager. In addition to these full time employees, there are also four part time employees, who make up the dedicated staff of Lawrence Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Chapel Hill, Tennessee.



Former Home of Lawrence Funeral Home - Chapel Hill Tennessee 1940-1953



1953 - Opening Day Of The New Lawrence Funeral Home Facility