

Circuit Riders Started Solid Growth of Hertford Methodism

History Is a Long One

Early priests from the Church of England, coming to Hertford County as representatives of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, found the going rough.

First of all, there were those "so-called Anabaptists and Baptists," as one of the Anglican priests wrote home to London, who seemed to have a toe hold in the area.

Secondly, the Anglicans were plagued by the Methodists (as they called themselves) who made constant forays across the Virginia border into North Carolina. It was harder for the Church of England to compalin about these exponents of the gospel, for their founder, John Wesley, was himself a priest in the Church of England. Furthermore, the Quakers sided with the non-Anglican views, which added insult to injury.

The perseverance of the Methodist "circuit riders" was also almost without equal.

Even their Bishop, Francis Asbury, spent most of the year on horseback, riding from Pennsylvania to the southern states, and as far west as Kentucky, holding prayer meetings with any who wished to hear the words of the gospel.

"The Gospellers," the scattered farmers called these preachers, and gave them welcome in their homes.

One of the earliest to visit the Murfreesboro area was Jesse Lee, who was at that time living in Prince George County, Va.

He passed through Murfreesboro in 1792, on his way to Edenton.

Oddly enough, a record of this early Methodist visit is recorded in the history of the Meherrin Baptist Church, written by the Rev. J. M. Duncan of Murfreesboro in 1929: "Lee's fervent zeal and lively exhortations endeared him to the hearts of the people of this section and he found a heartfelt welcome in every family circle, as there were professors of no other name. Besides the Baptists, in this vicinity, Mr. Lee was received and esteemed without reference to peculiarity of religious opinion. Their hearts were warm, and they could know no difference. The parlors were his chapels, and their houses his home."

Another of the famous Gospellers was Lorentz Dow, who came down from the Virginia mountains full of zeal, and visited Murfreesboro in his travels about 1800.

Following him was Samuel Wells, who set up public worship about

1805 and later built a house of worship across the "great road to Virginia," where the Red Apple Supermarket stands today.

New Circuit

So great was the Methodist influence that in 1822 the Rev. Jacob Hill was assigned to the new Murfreesboro circuit of the Norfolk district of the Virginia Conference. In the Journal of the next year, Pastor Hill reported 247 white and 38 colored members of congregations in the circuit.

He was followed, about 1825, by the fiery Rev. Daniel Southall, who had come from Amelia County, Virginia, in 1815 and assumed the first full-time pastorate at Murfreesboro when the church grew to 61 white and five colored members.

Southall not only fathered a distinguished line of descendants, but was such a fine preacher that he drew crowds from as far away as Como, a hazardous trip across creeks and the Meherrin River.

Jacob Hare, nephew of Col. Starkey Sharp II and a prominent Maney's Neck resident, was one of those who joined the Methodist church as a result of Southall's sermons.

New Hope

But the distance was so great to Murfreesboro that Hare, with several other men, helped organize the New Hope Methodist Church near the Virginia border in 1833.

While Lee, Wells, and Hill were winning Methodists in Murfreesboro, other Methodist preachers were riding the southern section of Hertford County, then part of the Bertie circuit.

A rare, handwritten record dated 1835 is preserved in the archives of the Duke University Library.

In it is the only mention of the earliest history of Methodist churches at Harrellsville (then called Bethel) and Union: "The church at Harrellsville first called Bethel and Union are the oldest churches on the circuit and were in existence before the War of 1812 as this territory was traveled by the Rev. Humphrey Ward as P. C. in 1811."

The antiquity of the Union Methodist Church is also substantiated Union, now in her late sixties. As a child, Mrs. Brown remembers hearing from a very elderly woman that the first Methodist church was located about one mile out of Union, towards St. John's, on the Liverman Mill road. The building was probably on



OLD MURFREESBORO METHODIST—One of the most architecturally interesting buildings in Hertford County was the old Murfreesboro Methodist Church, its plan copied from a blueprint of famed English Architect Sir Christopher Wren. The building was razed in the 1950's. It stood on Main Street in Murfreesboro.

the old Benjamin Beverly place, at the triangular junction of roads.

Cornwallis There?

There is a tale at Union (though of doubtful truth) that Cornwallis camped under a huge tree, now cut down, on the old school grounds. The school, long gone, and the second Methodist church building were supposed to have been located about where the present Union Baptist Church stands.

Mrs. Brown quotes her grandmother as recalling that the Methodist church was abandoned at that

spot, however, because there were so many noisy saloons, open every day across the road, that services were disturbed.

So Thomas Wynns, grandfather of Mrs. Brown, donated a plot of land for a third Methodist church to be built about 1870, where it now stands. The neat little white frame church is now set back from the main paved road to California and Winton, almost hidden from view by a double lane of trees.

Enthusiastic response in the Union area to the Methodist message led to the establishment of a church at Vann's Grove, near Benhall's bridge. This was built in about 1837 by the Revs. R. Adams and A. Caruth. Meanwhile, both Baptists and Methodists had suffered a setback in Murfreesboro. It was 1840 before the Rev. G. M. Thompson and his family moved into the village and commenced services in the week "at candle-lighting."

From thence a new era dawned upon our prospects," says Duncan's history. "At this time religion was at a low ebb in town. Members of the church were in a cold, lifeless state. Scarcely were the outward forms of Christianity attended to. The house of God was too often exchanged for the tavern, and the distinction between professors and non-professors was lost. Efforts had been made from time to time, by the most acceptable ministers in the Methodist and Presbyterian church to no purpose."

Wesleyan College

With this rebirth of Methodist purpose, the Murfreesboro church prospered and the town became the site for the Wesleyan Female College, established in June of 1853 by the Virginia Conference. In 1854, the presiding elder of the newly-created Murfreesboro District was living in Murfreesboro.

The influx of Methodist girls was too much for the old church, and a larger building was erected on Main Street.

This church, with a high spire, was believed to have been modeled on a diorama made in Boston of a church designed by Christopher Wren, the noted English architect. The second church stood until 1955, when it was razed to make way for a new, third church.

During the Civil War the college was closed and Murfreesboro transferred to the Petersburg district, but in 1865 and 1868, the college reopened and the Murfreesboro district was reorganized. There were 160 white and 40 colored members in the local church.

Wesleyan Female College grew and prospered until 1877, when it was destroyed by fire. Since insurance covered the loss, it was rebuilt and opened in 1881 with E. E. Parham as president.

More Churches

During the years just after the Civil War, more Methodist churches were springing up in the southern part of the area. Colerain was organized by the Rev. Jeremiah McMullen in the summer of 1868, and Powellsville was built by

the Rev. William Grant and was a post of the Bertie Mission in 1878. Winton was built by the Rev. R. N. Crooks in 1878 or 1879.

With these additions, both the Murfreesboro and Harrellsville circuits were reorganized.

Winton was added to form the Murfreesboro circuit in 1879, and in 1870 the Harrellsville circuit was formed from part of the Bertie circuit, with Harrellsville, Union, Vann's Grove and Colerain churches. The Rev. Joseph H. Riddick was pastor until 1873, when it was again united with the Bertie circuit.

During the second pastorate of the Rev. Mr. Crooks in 1879, the Bertie Mission was formed and placed in charge of the Rev. Mr. Grant, who built three churches. This meant a division at the 1880 Virginia Conference session, when Powellsville and Winton were added to others on the Harrellsville circuit.

Important changes in Conference boundaries were made at the 1890 Conference session, when the Murfreesboro District was dissolved and the Murfreesboro - Winton charge was placed in the Warrenton district of the North Carolina Conference.

The Harrellsville circuit was also transferred to the North Carolina Conference, and only New Hope Church in Hertford County remained a part of the Virginia Conference.

Another Fire

Final ties with Virginia were broken in 1893, when the three-story Wesleyan Female College building burned again in Murfreesboro, and was never rebuilt.

Next change in grouping came in 1920, when the Murfreesboro-Winton charge was transferred to the Weldon district, with Union and Harrellsville churches added to form a new four-point circuit with 269 members.

Meanwhile, Ahoskie had become the site for a new church, organized in 1901 with members primarily from the Union church. By 1930, when the Murfreesboro church was transferred to the Elizabeth City district with the rest of the county, Ahoskie had built a handsome brick building.

During the past two decades, Murfreesboro has seen a significant program of growth culminating in the erection of the present brick building in 1949, during the ministry of the Rev. J. C. Chaffin.

In 1954 the church was cleared of indebtedness, and in 1955, became once more a station church with full-time pastor.

Formal dedication of the building was held on September 14, 1958.

Planters Bank in Ahoskie Began Its Service in 1954

By JOEL T. LEE, Vice President and Manager

AHOSKIE — To the music of the Ahoskie High School Band and the ribbon-cutting ceremonies of Mayor Joseph B. Burden, The Planters National Bank and Trust Company opened its Ahoskie office for business on Thursday morning, February 25, 1954.

In an open letter to the people of Ahoskie and vicinity, Archie W. McLean, president of the bank, wrote:

"We are eagerly looking forward to taking our place alongside the other fine institutions and enterprises in the Roanoke-Chowan area which are dedicated to community development. 'Community Builders Since 1899' is more than a motto with our staff. Our whole organization, now numbering some 80 local employees, is dedicated to wide awake community service. Even though our Ahoskie quarters are brand new from front

with Bishop Paul N. Garber of Richmond presiding, and the Rev. F. Owen Fitzgerald as pastor.

Growth of Ahoskie as a town has been reflected in the building programs of the Methodist church. In 1927, the first brick sanctuary was built at the corner of McGlothlin and Church Streets.

In 1954, construction of a brick educational building was begun beside the church, to accommodate the need for Sunday school classrooms and a pastor's study. The debt on this building has been considerably reduced, and future plans call for a fellowship building which the church, the connect with the new educational facilities. — MARY ELLEN ALBARES

(This article was compiled by reference to "Northampton parishes" by Henry Wilkins Lewis; the "History of Meherrin Baptist Church," by the Rev. J. M. Duncan; Winborne's "History of Hertford County"; "The Gospellers" by Rebecca Harding Davis in the Saturday Evening Post of 1905; a history of the Harrellsville Circuit, written by the Rev. C. F. Snow in 1895, now in the Duke University archives; information from Mrs. H. J. Brown of Union and a historical sketch of the Murfreesboro Methodist Church.)

Certainly the confidence of the past has been justified, and we are even more enthusiastic about prospects for the future."

Members of the present bank staff are: Joel T. Lee, vice president and manager; E. T. Copeland, Manager Time Payment Department; Sid Taylor, Jr., Assistant to the Manager; Howard D. McAdams, Asst. Mgr. Time Payment Department; Miss Libby Jones, Office Secretary; Mrs. Dorothy Mitchell, Teller; Mrs. Wyn-dolyn Eure, Teller; Mrs. Myrtle Overton, Time Payment Department. See BANK, Page 6

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