

History of Murfreesboro Methodist Church

The exact date of the beginnings of Methodism in Murfreesboro is unknown but the journal and letters of Bishop Francis Asbury give us a general idea. Coming from the United States from England, Bishop Asbury traveled extensively in Carolina and Virginia from 1784 to 1816.

Asbury's diary reveals much of the life of two and a half centuries ago. The following excerpts especially throw light on Murfreesboro:

April 2, 1802- "I give, perhaps, my last talk in Knotty Pine Chapel, on 1 Peter iv, 17. We hastened to Winton; benighted in the swamp, which for two miles was overflowed with water. We arrived late at Dr. Larogue's where we lodged. .. At eleven o'clock another whatcoat preached in the court house, from John iii, 16. After preaching we hastened to Murfreesboro, twelve miles. I preached at N. Vick's; my text was John iii, 17. "here I labored I lodged."

March 8, 1803 - "The excessive rains in the morning prevented our attending our appointments to the sad disappointment of our friends in Murfreesborough- brethren we have not, for we have no society here. Next day we had a race of a ride to Winton.... Brother Snethen preached in the court house at twelve o'clock. We dined at Mr. Bell's, and were generously entertained. Gates court house, twenty miles further, brought us up for the night."

March 10, 1803- "At the court house Nicholas Snethen insisted upon the one thing needful. I ordained B. Harrell to deacon's office- he is a man of good repute, without slaves."

Feb. 4, 1805- The day was excessively cold: the icy, frozen roads endangered limbs and life itself. We kept on. At Murfreesboro

we had a meeting at the house of the widow Meredith (incidentally, ^{she} ~~sb~~ lived at the home on Broad Street purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Frank (Red) Stephens in 1965 ~~on Broad st.~~ - editor). I spoke to them from 1 Cor. v. 13-17."

Feb. 4, 1806: "We lodged at the widow Meredith's, in Murfreesboro. we crossed Manney's Ferry next day, and came to the widow Baker's, Knotty Pine.

Feb 6, 1806: "I preached at Daniel Southalls, Gates court house: my subject was Rev. iii, 5. I was pleased to see so many come out upon so short a notice; may they overcome."

Feb. 9, 1807- "Thursday brought us to Murfreesboro: I preached upon John iii, 10, 11. It was the day after the celebration of Washington's funeral: many of the respectables had come to town on this occasion, and still remain; these attended. I lodged at Doctor Key's."

Jan. 14, 1810- "Up again at five o'clock, and passed through Murfreesborough to Jesse Battle's."

Jan 15, 1810- "We crossed Knotty Pine at Manney's ferry; stopped a few minutes at Judith Baker's to talk and pray, and came in to D. Southall's, at Gates court house. It is pleasant but cold, cold."

Feb. 15, 1812: "Came to Murfreesboro, dined with respectable widow Meredith and her children, prayed, and continued forward to Jesse Battle's, a hailstorm overtook us on the way."

Theophilus R. Gates, another circuit rider, wrote of visiting Murfreesboro in March 1810, after preaching in Southampton County, Virginia. Gates wrote:

"I held a meeting in Murfreesburgh at night, and there were four Baptist preachers present, from a union meeting not far

distant. After I had spoken, I desired if any one present felt at liberty, they would conclude the meeting. Mr. wright, one of the Baptist ministers, soon after rose up, and observed that what I had spoken concerning the fallen, wretched state of man by nature, was very true; but said in some things I was not correst; for we were not saved by faith as I had represented. I was about to request him to show wherein I was incorrect; but felt willing that the people present should judge for themselves. For sometime I was altogether unable to understand that expression, "We are not saved by faith, " seeing it was so repeatedly declared in the scriptures; but now I suppose he alluded to the words of the Apostle Paul, "By grace are ye saved." After meeting, a middle aged man who lived in the place, a hatter by trade, came to friend Kilby's place in great distress of mind. He had a wife and child living in New York, and had been a great deist, and brought his children up in those principles; but he now saw his erro and wanted to be instructed in the right way. He was filled with regret on account of bringing up his children in those principles, and he wished to see them immediately to tell them of his error. He said he did not want to go to heaven the 'easy way' as he stiled it; but supposing perhaps the hardest way was the safest way, and ffeeling that he deserved to suffer much for his sins, he said he wanted to go in a 'hard way! I endeavored to give him such advice and instruction as was suited to his situation, for which he seemed thankful. Great was his distress of mind by reason of his past sins and former principles; but certainly it is better to experience the pains of repentence on account of them here, than the pains of eternal death hereafter...

"On Sunday, the circuit preacher not coming, I preached to

a very large assembly at Barn's meeting house, twelve miles northwest of Muffreysburg. I spoke with considerable freedom, and I trust to the profit of some of my hearers. On taking leave of brother Kilby on Monday morning, he told me he believed the Lord had called me and if I was faithful he would make me useful to many."

According to Judge B.B. Winborne's "History of Hertford County" "Samuel Wells, a follower of the Wesleys, had by his logic and wonderful discourses, fastened the Wesleyan Methodism in the hearts of many of her people and established the first Methodist church in Murfreesboro in 1806. However, we have no record of pastors being assigned to live in Murfreesboro until several years later.

The Murfreesboro Circuit composed large sections of northeastern North Carolina and some parts of southeastern Virginia.

Methodist records show that in 1822 the Reverend Jacob Hill was assigned to the new Murfreesboro circuit of the Norfolk District in the Virginia Conference. In the journal of the next year Rev. Hill reported 247 white and 38 colored members of congregations in the circuit. Three years later the Murfreesboro church became a station appointment with 61 white and five colored members.

wesleyan Female College

In June 1853 Wesleyan Female College was erected in Murfreesboro by the Virginia Conference. In 1854 the Murfreesboro District was established with the presiding elder living here.

Wesleyan was closed during the Civil War and Murfreesboro was transferred to the Petersburg District. After the college reopened in 1865 the Murfreesboro District was reorganized (in 1866) when 160 white and 40 colored members were of the local church.

wesleyan College was burned to the ground in 1877, but was rebuilt and reopened in the fall of 1881 with Dr. E.E. Parham as president.

Murfreesboro was a cultural center with Chowan Baptist Female Institute and wesleyan Female College.

Although the Methodist College was growing, the Murfreesboro methodist Church declined so much in membership that Winton was added to form the Murfreesboro Circuit in 1879. In 1881 the last Negro died leaving 103 white members in the church.

In 1920 the Murfreesboro- winton charge was transferred to the weldon District with Union and Harrellsville churches being added to form a new four- point circuit with a total membership of 269.

In 1930 the circuit was transferred to the Elizabeth City District. Local membership was then around 130. In this year of 1965 Murfreesboro Methodist Church has around 300 members.

The old church on Main Street was abandoned in 1949 upon the erection of a modern brick building on corner of High and Union Streets.

The exact date of erection of the old church is not known, but historians estimate it around 1810. Its tall steeple, finely detailed woodwork, paneled doors, and galleries for slaves were among its quaint features.

This church was the scene of the stately military wedding of Dr. Walter Reed, discoverer of the cause of yellow fever, to a local belle, *Emily Lawrence* on April 25, 1876. Dr. Reed's father, the Rev. Lemuel Sutton Reed was pastor of this church at three different times.

The old church was demolished a few years after the erection of the new church.

By 1954 the new church was cleared of indebtedness during the pastorate of Rev. Owen Fitzgerald. On September 14, 1958 the church building was dedicated by Paul Neff Garber, resident bishop of Richmond, Virginia and C. Freeman Heath, Elizabeth City District Superintendent and local church officials. Dinner was served by the men of the church.

In 1955 Mufreesboro Methodist Church became a station church again with a full time pastor.