

A HISTORY OF BETHLEHEM METHODIST CHURCH

ca. 1803 - 1974 A. D.

*In his* Foreword, *he records:*

History is such an awesome study to many, for it brings us face to face with a God who is active in His creation. Today we stop the march of history for a brief review of the "traditions of the fathers" and the grave responsibility of holding high the "torch of truth" which has been passed on to us. The trials and tribulations of our forebearers and the struggles of the present generation are but ripples on the sea of eternity, yet the prelude to a growing awareness that we live in eternity in the here and now.

This writer would like to express appreciation to the Committee in the Bethlehem United Methodist Church who worked so hard in gathering up the information that has been used in putting this history together. Most of the material used in writing the history was obtained by the committee from many sources. This writer has tried to identify their sources as well as his own that have been used. The Committee was composed of Mrs. H. M. Chason, Mrs. W. M. Dunham, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. G. S. Council, and Mrs. C. C. Council.

The records of the church reveal sacrifices which have been made by devout souls, now gone on, to bring Bethlehem Church where it is today. They have made the present members heirs to great traditions. Though absent, "they re-dedicate this generation to a task now become doubly theirs, that through the beckoning years the traditions of the church, which they loved, may live and relive in work and faith." The true history of any church is to be found in the lives of the men, women, and children who have accepted it as their spiritual home.

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June 14, 1974

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A Tribute

In every period in the history of old Bethlehem Methodist Church there have been many heroic and faithful servants of Christ who have kept aflame in the White Oak Community the torch of a living faith. These gave sacrificially of their talents and means to make the church a spiritual power in the community.

The Church today is a living tribute and a lasting memorial to those who nobly began the church in the community of White Oak in the early days of the nineteenth century and to those who through the years have added so richly to her progress. The church today should cherish the memory of those who have ended their labors and entered into their eternal rest. Let us lift our hearts to God in gratitude for those who have shared in the rich spiritual heritage of Bethlehem Church.

HER EARLY BEGINNINGS

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The heroic beginning of Bethlehem United Methodist Church lies unknown to any of us in the annals of time.

History documents for us the visit of Francis Asbury, first and greatest bishop of American Methodism, to White Oak Community as early as 1787. In his Journal on March 7, 1787, he writes that he "crossed the main fork of Black River, and came through a wild country to Colonel R\_\_\_\_\_':s: the colonel's wife is a tender, devoted woman." <sup>1</sup> Bishop Francis Asbury was a close personal friend of the Richardson family and often visited, lodged and preached at their homes. When the news traveled through the community that Bishop Asbury was in the community the crowds would gather at the Richardson home, "Harmony Hall", and "Purdie Place" across the river where Elizabeth Purdie Richardson's son, James S. Purdie lived. At these homes the people eagerly listened to the preaching of the Gospel by Bishop Asbury. These visits by Asbury most likely influenced



the begin. of Bethlehem and Purdie Methodist Churches.

Asbury states in his Journal for February 6, 1805, "the rain came on, but we rode seven miles, and were compelled to ferry ourselves over Cape Fear River, after being detained nearly half hour in the rain." "Monday, 7, We had about twenty-two miles to make to reach Purdy's Chapel. I preached upon Titus ii, 11, 14. We lodged at Samuel Richardson's. I have had a day and night of temptations." Tuesday, 8. "We came down the north side of the river to Elizabethtown. Nicholas Snethen preached in the court house; I was silent." <sup>2</sup>

He was in the home of Amos Richardson, son of Colonel James and Elizabeth Richardson, on Monday, February 21, 1811. Amos Richardson was living at "Brompton" near old Bladen Court house between present day Dublin and Elizabethtown. While here Asbury records in his Journal: "Monday, 21. We began our march, and my suffering from pain in the foot was sore indeed. Came in to Amos Richardson's in the evening. The parents of this man died in peace. Tuesday, a ride of thirty miles brought us on to Alexander King's." <sup>3</sup>

Then on the Sabbath, 27 (February), 1811, Asbury writes in his Journal: "I preached in the morning and afternoon. The congregations were large, and I felt my heart greatly enlarged towards them. Monday, rose at five o'clock, and moved off pretty soon; we cautioned the ferryman, who had placed his flat so as to be upset; he was obstinate, and would not alter her position: in jumped the horses, over went the skiff; our lives were endangered: the horses reached the opposite shore by swimming, and plunging through the mud got on dry land: our clothes and some of our books and papers were wetted, but not spoiled....Tuesday, we pushed on to Amos Richardson's, and thence after dinner to James Purdy's (James Purdy lived in Bladen County, North Carolina): I preached in the evening. I have been deeply afflicted with an influenza; but God is with me, and supports me." <sup>4</sup>

On Friday, January 17, 1813, he writes in his Journal: "Friday, we had a cold ride to Amos Richardson's..." <sup>5</sup> Then on Thursday, January 21, 1813, he records: "A bitter cold ride of thirty miles brought us to James Purdy's. I have,

a high fever, and great pain.." <sup>6</sup>

Never has Christianity had a more dedicated servant as in Bishop Francis Asbury. We see this dedication in his words written in his Journal on March 17, 1782, "I am willing to travel and preach as long as I live; and I hope I shall not live long after I am unable to travel."

From the HISTORY OF THE RICHARDSON FAMILY by Mary Smith Robinson we are told that Rev. Samuel Oneal Richardson, son of Col. James and Elizabeth Oneal Purdie Richardson, was a Methodist minister and a member of the North Carolina Conference, though not in the traveling connection. He spent the greater part of his life in the service of the church filling a pulpit each Sabbath morning, also teaching his servants and having them prompt in their attendance at the church services, and so careful did he look after the spiritual welfare of his slaves that on each Sabbath morning they were all required to repair to the big house, so they called "Harmony Hall," for family worship. He read and expounded the Scripture lessons to them, teaching them also the hymns and having them participate in the song service.

This Richardson family history tells us that Rev. Samuel O. Richardson built a church on his land that was called "Bethlehem" and that he preached at this church every month. The history says that this early "Bethlehem Church" was located a mile and a half down the river below the home and it was said that on preaching days the church was filled to its utmost capacity by white and black to hear Rev. Richardson preach. All of his children united with the Methodist Church.

Rev. Richardson was born on June 11, 1770, at "Harmony Hall". He married Mary Ann Smith, daughter of Samuel and Sophia Smith, of Bladen County on January 17, 1795. He took great interest in the affairs and progress of his county and state, in politics affiliating with the Whigs and he represented Bladen County in the House of Commons in 1801 and in the Senate for 1802 and 1803.

The story of his conversion is given us in the HISTORY OF METHODISM IN NORTH



CAROLINA, from 1772 To the Present . . . . He was converted while attending a camp meeting at Town Creek near Wilmington, N. C. We are told that this camp meeting surpassed all of the meetings for the display of divine power. It attracted people from Wilmington and from miles around in every direction. The presiding elder preached on Sunday from the text, "Joseph said unto his Brethren, Come near me, I pray you." Before he had finished, the shouts and cries of the people completely drowned his voice. This was in the year 1803. Samuel Richardson professed religion at this meeting, and at once became a happy, rejoicing believer. He became very zealous, talking to the mourners and praying for them. This was the rule among the converts; as soon as they were converted, whether old or young, they turned into preachers and commenced talking to others. The fruits of Richardson's conversion did not stop at the camp meeting. The record states that he was filled with the Holy Spirit, shouting "Glory to God!" He told his wife what the Lord had done for him, and the Spirit pierced her heart, and she at once began to call for mercy. The servants came in to see what was the matter, and they all got down and remained until they obtained pardon. Richardson did not stop here, but began to hold prayer meetings, and by the time the presiding elder reached Mr. Richardson's neighborhood, on the next round, fifty-two had professed religion. 7

It is believed by this writer that the first Bethlehem Church was organized by Rev. Richardson shortly after his conversion at Town Creek at the Methodist District camp meeting in 1803.

The second child of Rev. Samuel and Mary Smith Richardson was Dr. James Stephen Richardson who became a Methodist minister and a physician. After his marriage to Martha Terry of Anson County, N. C., he made his home in Moultrie, Alabama, where he served as a missionary to the Indians and also as a physician. Another child, Mary Ann Richardson married the Rev. Alexander B. Smith of Wadesboro, N. C., and both are buried in the old Purdie Cemetery near Purdie Church.

After a lingering illness, Rev. Samuel Neal (O'Neal) Richardson, entered into rest on March 1, 1851, aged 81 years and 9 months. Elizabeth Ellis Robeson of

near Tar Heel mentions his death in her diary. She writes: "March 1, 1851, I hear this morning the Rev'd S. N. Richardson is dead. He has been confined to his bed for two years." On the following day she records: "March 2, 1851. Sabbath day. His remains are to be consigned to the earth...as he is an old and highly respected neighbor." <sup>8</sup> The inscription on the tombstone of this founder of Bethlehem Church reads:

"Though filial affection could rear a monument  
The language of the deceased would have been:  
Carve not a line, raise not a stone  
But leave me alone with my glory." <sup>9</sup>

#### FIRST BETHLEHEM CHURCH

→ If the Richardson family tradition is correct, then we can be reasonably sure that the first Bethlehem Methodist Church was founded under the leadership of Rev. Samuel Neal Richardson and located on the vast Richardson estate about a mile and a half down the river below his home. There is no record in the Register of Deeds Office, Bladen County, N. C., to show that a deed was ever made giving this land to the church. It is also reasonable but cannot be proven that the church was started about 1803 following the conversion of Samuel Richardson at Town Creek near Wilmington, N. C.

The Richardson family tradition recorded said that on preaching days the church was filled to its utmost capacity by white and black to hear Rev. Richardson preach. It is reasonable that the crowds being too great for this first small place of worship led to the removal of the church to a new location and the building of a larger house of worship.

Land now in the possession of Mr. A. B. Rice of White Oak Community is still known today as the old "Bethlehem field." It is reasonable that this was the first location. It is located about three quarters of a mile from the Cape Fear River.

*It was in use for more than 50 yrs.*  
We can know from the diary of Elizabeth Ellis Robeson of near Tar Heel that the church was located across the river and most likely within a few miles of the Robeson plantation. She mentions at least six times the services at Bethlehem Church



and members of the Robeson and Dunham families attending services there. There are two references that would apply to this first location. She writes in her diary for May 7, 1848, "Sabbath. All the family went to preaching at Bethlehem. Hard rain in the evening." Then on April 12, 1857, she records: "Her children have gone to preaching at Bethlehem."

There is no known description available to tell us about this first church building, but it was most likely a one room house of worship which was the common style for that day.

#### SECOND BETHLEHEM CHURCH

Some few years after the death of Rev. Samuel N. Richardson the church decided to move to a new location. This location is known to us today.

The land upon which a new house of worship was to be built was given by Dr. John Smith Richardson, son of Rev. Samuel N. and wife, Mary A. Richardson. A plot of this land is available and is found in the records of Bladen County. It states that the plot represents a piece of land given by Dr. John S. Richardson "for the purpose of erecting a Methodist Church on..Beginning at a pine tree the South East corner of the School Lot..." This plot contained two and 82/100 acres. The deed is dated September 16, 1858. *The original is in parchment form - on the Bulletin Board.*

We can be reasonably sure that a church house was soon built on this new location.

The earliest burial according to a marker at the old Bethlehem Church Cemetery was for a child, Daniel Melvin, who was born on March 23, 1856, and died on November 15, 1858. So the church was most likely built in 1858. The next oldest grave is for John A. Dunham, 1834-1862. He was a Confederate Soldier and died in Battle, Fredricksburg, Virginia. Elizabeth Ellis Robeson mentions that on "December 25th, 1862, Christmas Day...Mrs. A. M. Robeson and I went to see Col. Purdie's servant just come home from the Army. He tells me Evander is quite unwell. He also tells us that John A. Dunham was killed in battle..." The Dunham family

were prominent members of the Bethlehem congregation.

Elizabeth Ellis Robeson mentions in her diary the times members of her family and their friends attended services at Bethlehem Church. On "July 8, 1860. The boys went with Samuel and John Dunham to Bethlehem Church." On "August 12, 1860. "Evander and M. Byrne went over the river to Bethlehem." It appears from her diary that the families in that area attended church whenever it was held, and without consideration of denomination. If several churches were having services at the same time on some day it affected the attendance at those churches. On June 1, 1865, she writes: "I went to Beth Car. The congregation was small in consequence of the preaching at Bethlehem Church." Mrs. Robeson's last mention of Bethlehem Church is May 21, 1864, when she writes: "Kate Robeson went with Ellen Robinson over to Mr. J. S. Dunham's to go to Bethlehem Church."

FAIRY CHURCH

minutes of the Fourth General Conference, October 8, 1821, relate that "there

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