

A Brief History of
Historic
Eden United Methodist Church



by

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HISTORIC EDEN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Originally organized as an Anglican Chapel, circa 1760.
Affiliated with the Methodist Protestant Church, 1828-1939
The oldest Methodist Church in continuous operation in the
Rocky Mount District, North Carolina Annual Conference.
One of the oldest Methodist Churches in continuous operation
in the United States.
Present structure erected circa 1890.

In 1715 the colony of North Carolina was divided into parishes for the establishment of the Church of England. The name of the parish in which Halifax County was located was changed several times but after 1741 it was known as Edgcombe Parish. This parish was divided in 1774 and part of the county was placed in the new Elizabeth Parish. According to the Colonial records of North Carolina, the dividing line between the two parishes was approximately where Highway number 301 runs between Halifax and Enfield.

There were at least six Anglican chapels located in Halifax County during the Colonial period. These were: Kehukee Chapel, near Scotland Neck; Conocanara Church in the Conocanara township; a chapel in the town of Halifax; Quankey Chapel in the area around present-day Aurelian Springs and Roanoke Rapids; Whitakers' Chapel, a few miles east of Enfield; and a chapel on Beaver Dam Swamp, a few miles northwest of Enfield. Most of the ministers who served in these chapels and the other state-supported churches in North Carolina were sent from England by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

Historic Eden United Methodist Church is an outgrowth of the Anglican Chapel on Beaver Dam Swamp. It probably received strength in the early days from Whitakers' Chapel which dates from about 1740. According to the Mouzon map of North Carolina, printed in London in 1775, this chapel was situated at approximately the site of the present-day Eden Church.

During the War for American Independence, the Church of England in North Carolina, as elsewhere in the English colonies along the Atlantic Coast, became disorganized. Evangelists such as Devereux Jarratt from Virginia, many of whom were originally connected with the Anglican faith but were converted to the reform movement instigated by the Reverend John Wesley, began to cross the Virginia-North Carolina border into Halifax County to conduct revival meetings and camp-meetings. Eden Church felt the influence of these enthusiastic and crusading evangelists and had endorsed the new Wesleyan—or 'Methodist'—faith by the mid and late 1770's. It is possible that the distinguished circuit rider, Bishop Francis Asbury, preached at Eden Church during this early period when Methodism was establishing itself as a new and independent denomination, for he visited in this general area on several occasions.

According to local tradition, militiamen guarded Eden Church in the first days of May, 1781, when General-Marquess Charles Cornwallis and his British army marched through Halifax County en route from Wilmington to Yorktown.

The first and second structures at Eden Church were, no doubt, built of logs. They were located across the road from the present building. Eden Church was originally a part of the old Roanoke Circuit which was organized in 1778 as a part of the Virginia Methodist Episcopal Conference. (The name 'Roanoke Circuit' was in use in the Halifax County area until recent

years.) The Reverend John Dickens was pastor of the Roanoke Circuit in 1779-1781. He married Miss Elizabeth Yancey, daughter of residents of the Eden Church community, and they established their home near the church. The plan for the first Methodist school in America was prepared at Dickens' home. Originally, the school was to have been established in North Carolina, but later the funds were used for the establishment of the ill-fated Cokesbury College in Maryland. In 1789, John Dickens founded what became the Methodist Publishing house in Philadelphia.

Though the Church had been in active operation for several decades, the deed dates from September 20, 1803, when Jesse Hillman gave land to the following trustees: William Batchelor, the Reverend Henry Bradford, the Reverend James Hunter, James Judge and Samuel Simmons. These men paid four dollars for the site which was located "on the main road leading from the Marsh Store to Infield old Court House." They were empowered to "permit such ministers & preachers as shall be authorized according to the discipline of the Church & none others to preach & expound God's Holy Word therein." The deed was registered in the February session of the Halifax County Court in 1804.

Another distinguished minister who served on the Roanoke Circuit during this early period was the Reverend William Bellamy whose first appointment at Eden Church was in 1797-1798. During the 1820's, he became one of the most active members of the Roanoke District Conference, which was composed of local ministers who were opposed to the grounds taken by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in exerting dictatorial and authoritative powers and withholding ecclesiastical rights from the people. The Reverend Bellamy collected material to write a history of the reform movement in the Roanoke District but he died in 1846 before it was completed. The History of the Methodist Protestant Church: Giving A General View of The Causes and Events That Led to The Organization of That Church: And a More Particular Account Of Transactions In North Carolina was published in Baltimore in 1849 and was written by Dr. John Paris, also a minister who served at Eden Church.

The Roanoke Union Society was organized at Sampson's Meeting House (Located in the area of present-day Glenview in Halifax County) on November 6, 1824, with the purpose of discussing the need for reform in Methodist Church government. There were eleven members, seven local preachers and four laymen. A committee of correspondence was elected and a committee to draft a constitution. At the time of the fourth meeting of the Roanoke Union Society there were thirty-four members. The Baltimore Union Society and the Roanoke Union Society became the models after which nearly all the reform societies in the United States were organized until the Conventional Articles of 1828 offered a set form. The members of the Roanoke Union Society did not originally intend to organize a new church; they merely sought reform within the established church government.

Eden Church was one of a number of Methodist Episcopal Churches in North Carolina which went practically as an entire congregation into the Methodist Protestant Church following the establishment of that denomination at its first Annual Conference which met at nearby Whitakers' Chapel on December 19-20, 1828. During the next twenty-two years it remained a part of the Old Roanoke Circuit of the Methodist Protestant Church. In 1848 the following churches or appointments comprised the Roanoke Circuit: Eden, Union, Whitakers' Chapel, Bradfords' Chapel, Corinth, Haywood's Chapel, Bellamy's School House, Bloomfield, Red Oak, Hickory, Tabernacle, and Dean's School House. On October 26, 1850, a proposal was submitted by the President of the North Carolina Annual Conference to divide the circuit which then extended from Granville County south and east. As a result, the 'Halifax Circuit' was established and Eden Church became a part of it. Following the merger of the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, south, in 1939, the name of this circuit was changed to the 'West Halifax Circuit.'

Among the well-known ministers who served Eden Church during the early years of the nineteenth century were: the Reverend James Hunter, the Reverend Henry B. Bradford (a descendant of Governor William Bradford of the Plymouth Colony, Henry B. Bradford established Bradford's Chapel near Enfield on the Glenview road and deeded it in 1783), the Reverend Peter Doub, the Reverend John F. Speight (for whom 'Speight's Chapel' near Battleboro and Whitakers was named), and Dr. John Paris (who was a prominent chaplain in the Confederate Army during the War between the States).

One of the most distinguished ministers ever to serve Eden Church was the Reverend William Henry Wills, D.D., who, in 1853, founded Bethesda Church at Brinkleyville. Though Dr. Wills may have preached at Eden Church during the 1840's, the first official record of his appointment dates from 1852. From 1854-1857 he was Superintendent of the Halifax Circuit and he again served in that capacity in 1865-1866. In 1866, he was President of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church which met in Georgetown, D.C. In 1877, Dr. Wills served as a member of the Union Convention which met in Baltimore to unite the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Protestant Church which had split over the issue of Negro slavery in 1855-1856.

The Eden Church Cemetery contains the graves of many men and women who were born in the early and middle years of the last century and who lived through the trying ideal of the War between the States and the reconstruction era that followed. Iron maltese crosses mark the graves of those men from the church who fought in the Army of the Confederate States of America and a special plaque in the sanctuary commemorates those men from the church and community who fought in that war. Several family cemeteries in the surrounding countryside are also filled with the graves of men and women who worshipped at Eden Church during these years. A special endowment fund for the perpetual upkeep of the cemetery has recently been established.

Eden Church, like Whitakers' Chapel, Bradford's Chapel and other nineteenth century churches, had, for many years, a school located nearby which was known by the name of the Church. References to the 'Eden School' date back to about 1880 and the school may have been in existence earlier. A Professor Doles who taught at the Eden School for a three-month term in 1883 received a salary of \$30.00 a month. In 1888, a bell, costing \$5.25, was placed in the belfry of the Eden School. Among the teachers in the Eden School were: Osborne W. Neville, Mrs. S.E. Arrington, Miss Margaret Quincey, Miss Willinia Bobbitt, Miss Pet Holland, Miss Lena Robertson, Miss Mamie Parker and Miss Ruby Matthews. On February 3, 1883 the School Committee for the Fifth District, Halifax County, ordered that " a suitable site be obtained and a school building. . .(for Negroes) be erected as soon as practicable " near Eden Church. Both schools were consolidated into larger educational units some years ago.

The present structure, the third one in the history of Eden Church, was built and first used about 1890. Among the men who were active in erecting this building were: Frederick N. Porter, Dudley Keeter, Joseph R. Moore, Henry Brown Neville, Henry Dickens, Joseph D. Wood, Thomas Foster, Solomon G. Britt, and James Parker.

Among the distinguished ministers who have served Eden Church and Halifax Circuit during the last eighty years were: the Reverend William T. Totten (1889-1891), later the President of Yadkin Collegiate Institute for twenty-five years; the Reverend Cary H. Whitaker (1900-1904); the Reverend William L. Harris (1897-1899; 1907-1910); the Reverend Jesse Eli Prichard, D.D. (1911-1914), later the President of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church and a delegate to the Uniting Conference of the Methodist Churches in Kansas City in 1939; the Reverend Neil Graham Bethea, D.D. (1917-1924), an outstanding Conference Evangelist; and the Reverend William M. Howard, Jr., (1936-1940), also a member of the Uniting Conference of 1939 and presently a prominent member of the North Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

'The Ladies Aid Society' of Eden Church was organized in 1918 by Mrs. Rebecca Willey Pettitt through the guidance of Dr. Bethea. Among the active members of the Ladies Aid (later called the Auxiliary) during its formative years were: Miss Blanche Hardee, Miss Lossie D. Hardee, Miss Winnie D. Burt, Mrs. J.R. Locke, Mrs. S.A. Whitley, Mrs. J.R. Dickens, Mrs. Thomas Billups, Mrs. Ben F. Willey, Jr., and Miss Susie Locke. Mrs. Katie Pitt Davenport Hardee was a leader in the work of the Ladies Aid and in the church from 1925 until her death in 1935. Mrs. Ralph G. Willey, I, has also been an active member for many years in the woman's work of the church, known now as the United Methodist Women. Serving at various times during the past seventy-five years, Solomon G. Pitt, George Parker, James W. Hardee, Lewis Britt, Eli I. Bellamy, and Lonnie Williams, and, later, Ralph G. Willey, I, and Ralph C. Rives, laid the foundations for an active Sunday School program at Eden church. The Sunday School building was added to the church about 1944.

Old newspapers dating back to the early years of the twentieth century include references to a variety of activities at Eden Church--box suppers, ice cream suppers, Sunday School Rallies, Mission Days, Children's Days, a quilt contest, and frequent all-day services with 'dinner on the grounds.' Protracted meetings and revivals were held annually during the first week in August and often there would be all-day meetings each day during the revival week. A highly successful revival attended by large crowds of local people was conducted by Dr. Bethea, then Conference Evangelist, around 1915. The time for the annual revival or 'Home-coming' was changed about 1950 to the first Sunday in October.

A highlight in the history of Eden Church was its participation in the observance of the Bi-Centennial of American Methodism with the Reverend Trevor Staniforth, Methodist minister from Saxilby, Lincolnshire, England, leading a week-long series of evangelistic services, May 1-6, 1966. In the fall of 1966, the Historic Sites Division of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, placed a historical highway marker at Eden Church which notes the early history of the church. Bishop Paul Neff Garber, then presiding Bishop of the North Carolina Conference, visited the Church on October 2, 1966, and spoke at the morning worship service and at the dedication of the historical marker. Eden Church is listed in The Methodist Tourist Guidebook Through the 50 States prepared by George H. Jones and published in 1966.

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