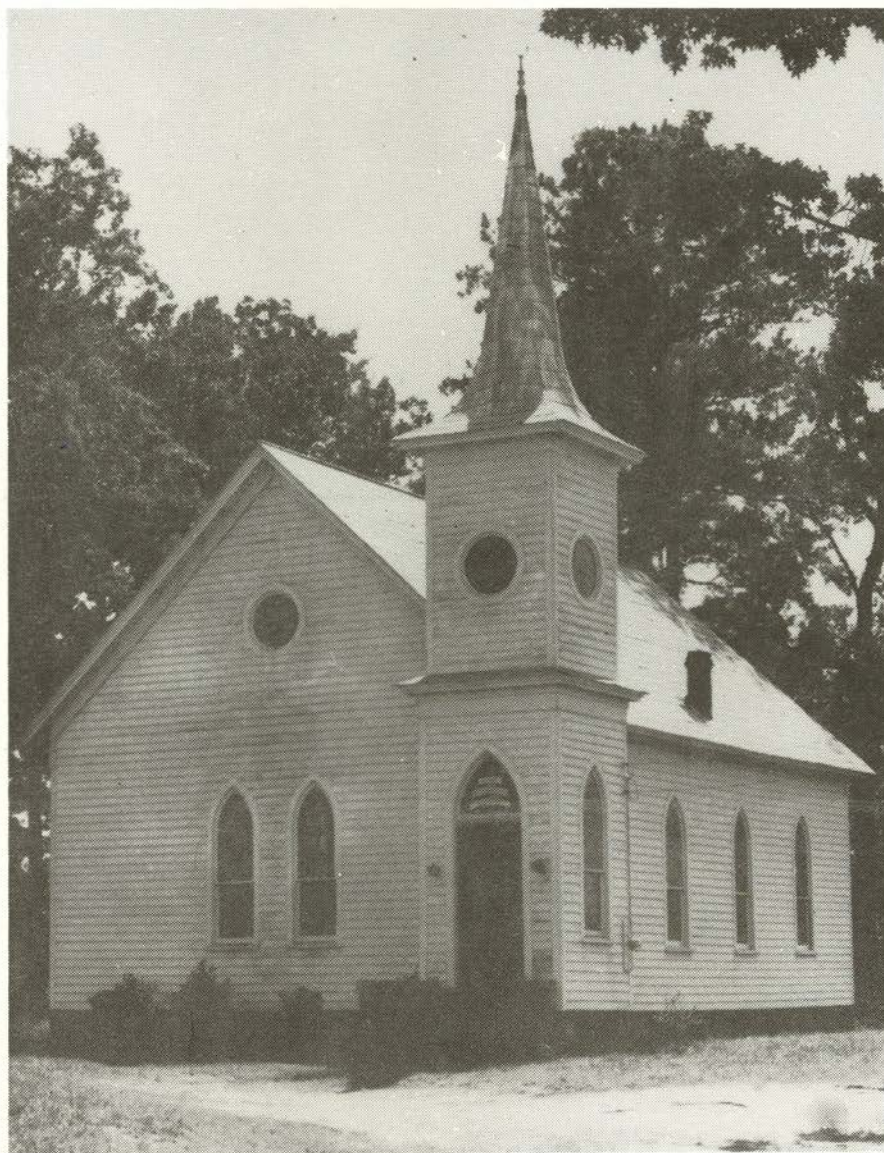


Evans United Methodist Church

Esther Jennings Evans



Edenton, North Carolina

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Evans United Methodist Church is a small white-painted one-room building about eight miles from historic Edenton, North Carolina, on Route 32 North. (A part of the first post road from New England to Charleston, South Carolina, it is also known as the Old Virginia Road and the old Indian Trail.) Once the church was surrounded by giant white oaks, but almost all of the fine old trees have been uprooted by hurricanes. Strangely enough, not even one tree that was blown down ever damaged the church the least bit.

The inscription on the arched stained-glass window above the entrance reads simply: "Evans M. E. Church/Founded 1826/Rebuilt 1888/Remodeled 1913." Had there been room for more words, these might well have been added: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden." During its long life the church has never drawn either racial or denominational lines in giving both spiritual guidance and material assistance. Today, a further message might be, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Zachariah Evans, the founder and first pastor of the church, was born in Hertford County in 1781. He was converted in a camp meeting in Gates County in 1811, joined the Methodist Episcopal Church and, on the same day, was appointed class leader. In time he became an exhorter and later was licensed to preach. In 1836 Bishop Hedding ordained him a deacon in Norfolk, Virginia. He

preached in Chowan, Gates, and Perquimans counties; his ministry and devotion to Methodism continued until his death on October 18, 1857.

Immediately after his conversion, Zachariah Evans began to hold religious services in his Chowan County home, "Prospect Lawn." Apparently they were well attended; the first church roll, dated 1811, bears sixty-eight names. An incident that occurred during one of these early prayer meetings is still remembered. One of the participants was on her knees, devoutly praying, when the tall grandfather clock just beside her began to strike. Alarmed by its strident tones, the poor woman leaped to her feet, exclaiming wildly, "I ain't tetched it, I ain't tetched it!"

The recorded history of the church begins with a deed dated November 4, 1826, when a group headed by the Reverend Henry Holmes, of Edenton, paid Henry Welch three dollars for land on which to build a place of worship. The indenture was signed by Mr. Welch, Mr. Holmes, Zachariah Evans, Cullen Jones, Richard Howit, and Johny Hanking, trustees; Edmund Brinkley and Thomas Evans witnessed the Welch signature.

In 1827 a resolution asking that "the meeting house on Virginia Road built by the industry and zeal of Brother Zachariah Evans, be henceforth known as Evans Meeting House" was passed.

Plain churches were favored by early Methodists. In fact, the Methodist discipline of 1784 states: "Let all our churches be built plain and decent, but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable." Evans Meeting

House certainly complied with the request. It had four doors: one in the middle front; one at the side front, leading to the gallery for black people; and one on each of two other sides. It was neither ceiled nor plastered; but it was floored and it did have a stove. The pews were made of planks that had been sawed and dressed by hand. The small pulpit, with steps leading to it, was not only boarded up but also was so high that when the minister stood in it, only his head and shoulders were visible. The lectern was nailed to the pulpit.

Even though they were segregated, black people were an important part of the Meeting House congregation; and Zachariah Evans ministered to their needs, too. Because of what it implies as well as what it actually states, the following note may prove interesting:

Dear Sir: My negro woman, Martha, wishes to be baptized in your church. I certainly have no objections if it will make her more happy and a better woman. I, therefore, give her liberty to go to meeting today for that purpose.

Charles E. Johnson

Sunday, February 27, 1848

Originally, the North Carolina Methodist churches were in the Virginia Conference. On February 8, 1837, however, at a meeting of the conference, most of the North Carolina churches withdrew and formed the North Carolina Conference. Not unexpectedly -- probably

because

of geographical reasons -- the Elizabeth City District remained in the Virginia Conference until 1894.

A most significant event in American church history was the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844. The northern states declared that the split was due to slavery in the South; the southern states maintained it was brought about by the question of the power of the general conference over a bishop. After the separation, the little Chowan County church became known as Evans Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

After the death of Zachariah Evans, the church turned to his son, Benjamin L. Evans, for leadership. In 1870 Benjamin started a Sunday School. In more than a century, it had only four superintendents: Benjamin L. Evans (1870-1906); Zachariah W. Evans (1906-1937); B. Warner Evans (1937-1974); and Mrs. Myra Bunch Stokley (1974-ca. 1980). The Sunday School survived many vicissitudes and, definitely not denominational in character, was during its existence an important part of the social as well as the religious life of the community. In June came Children's Day -- with which the writer still associates "speaking pieces" and stiffly starched white dresses with blue or pink ribbon sashes. The annual Sunday School picnic, always at a beach (Colerain was a favorite place), usually in August, was a day upon which families and friends met for relaxation and fellowship -- and for the enjoyment of one another's good food! All day ice cream was dispensed freely until no one could eat any more. The Christmas season invariably included a program that featured the joyous singing of carols and a

Christmas tree. Lemuel R. Bunch, a long-time Sunday School teacher, was always the jovial Santa Claus; and everybody was the recipient of a "treat".

All the Sunday School teachers were strong in their faith and compassionate in their beliefs; but Mrs. Artelissa ("Miss Lizzie") Cofield was outstanding. For many years around the turn of the century, she taught the beginners. In later years, without exception, they remembered her with affection and appreciation of what they had learned from her. It was of such as she that Henry Adams wrote: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

The Rosebud Missionary Society, organized for the children in 1880, flourished about three decades.

In 1888 a new church was erected on the site of the old one. It was a rectangular white-painted building with green blinds, typical of country churches that may still be found in New England and the South. An undated memorandum, faded but still readable, is quite revealing:

This is to certify that Mrs. Lizzie Cofield has been duly appointed by the Church Conference to solicit contributions for the rebuilding of Evans M.E. Church, located in Chowan Co., N.C. Amount necessary to complete it, One Thousand Dollars. All persons who are willing to aid us, will please give their donations to the bearer, signing their names to this subscription, with amount given opposite.

Trusting that all who read this will help us,
even as God had helped them.

May he abundantly reward you for every cent
given.

B.L. Evans Committee

The donors include: the Reverend J.M. Anderson, Mrs. Bettie Holley, E.J. Burke, Mrs. R.E. Cofield, Mrs. T.A. Winslow, the Reverend T.M. Jordan, Carson W. Cofield, Mrs. J. Goodwin and Mrs. W.C. Cofield.

During the summer of 1897 the church entertained the Elizabeth City District Conference. The meeting was no hasty business session but an event that lasted several days -- a time of spiritual refreshment and of social activity. Ministers and delegates, even members of their families, were house guests; and sumptuous dinners were served on the church grounds.

Also in the 90s, the Woman's Missionary Society was organized by Mrs. Underwood, wife of the minister. Around 1916, for some unknown reason it lapsed; it was not reactivated until 1927.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the church was still growing; decrease in membership did not really begin until after World War I.

On November 1, 1902, the church paid J.H. Churchill ten dollars to establish definite property lines. The legal papers were signed by Mr. Churchill, B.L. Evans, Z.W. Evans, W.P. Jones, W.A. Cofield, and Richardson Bunch.

For a while prior to 1905 Evans Church had been attached to the Hertford Charge and then to the Edenton Charge. In that year the Chowan Charge, consisting of Evans and Center Hill churches, was formed. At once, it built a seven-room parsonage at Center Hill. Later two churches in Perquimans County -- Anderson and Bethany -- were added to the charge. The union has proved highly satisfactory.

In 1913 the church was remodeled. A steeple was placed in the right front corner, and stained-glass windows of great beauty replaced the transparent ones. Four of the windows were memorials to men and women who had been staunch members: Zachariah Evans (1781-1857); Mary T.H. Bunch (1814-1900); Benjamin L. Evans (1836-1906) and Clarissa C. Evans (1835-1897); William P. Jones (1838-1911) and Sarah C. Jones (1836-1899). While the church was undergoing renovation, thanks to the kindness of the lodge members, all the usual services were held in the Odd Fellows Hall, which was later destroyed by fire. Around 1938 a window was made a memorial to Zachariah Winborne Evans (1861-1937) and Etta Hudgins Evans (1864-1916).

Evans Church has held many a revival, but the outstanding one in which it participated was the three-week tent meeting on the Center Hill church grounds in July 1917, during the pastorate of the Reverend J.A. Russell. The Reverend Raymond Browning was the evangelist; Harry Chamberlain, the song leader and soloist; Mrs. Leslie P. Howard, the accompanist; and Mr. Kondo, a native of Japan, an assistant minister. The two

daily services were well attended, particularly those in the evening; the number of conversions was gratifying. Incidentally, at least one person who attended regularly remembers the competition given the congregational singing by a chorus of frogs after some heavy rains!

A familiar figure at the revivals and at other services, too, particularly in the 1920s, was a totally blind young man who prayed earnestly, sang deeply moving solos, and greeted friends warmly, "I'm glad to see you." (He always recognized their voices quickly, even in unexpected places.) He was Alphonso Jordan, who became not only a Baptist minister but also -- for many years -- chaplain of the North Carolina House of Representatives.

On November 7, 1921, the church increased its holdings by buying the Edgewood School property (which adjoined that of the church) from the Chowan County Board of Education for \$250. The agreement was made between the board and Z.W. Evans, L.R. Bunch, H.C. Nixon, W.L. Nixon, and J.W. Nixon, trustees.

In 1927 the women in Center Hill and Evans churches formed jointly the Willie Evans Missionary Society. (It was named for an Evans member, an invalid well known for her cheerful disposition.) When the Methodist churches in the United States united in 1939, the group was re-named the Woman's Society of Christian Service. In 1974, it became United Methodist Women. Though a small organization, it continues to be strong and productive, sometimes winning public recognition for its achievements. In addition to carrying out a really good missionary program, on special occasions the society has

covered dish luncheons that both the church members and their friends of other denominations find pleasant.

In December 1935, a massive oak communion table, lectern, and other pulpit furniture, wrought by a master craftsman, were bought for the church. The old furniture, still in very good condition, was presented to a black Baptist church which had lost everything in a fire.

For successive years, 1936-1942, vacation Bible schools were held, one of them in cooperation with Ballard's Bridge Baptist Church. The young Duke Divinity School students who conducted them were (not in chronological order) Linwood Blackburn, Luther Booth, Carl Judy, Talmage Mallory, and Marshall Shrives. The schools, all well attended, were highly successful.

The last group organized in the church was the Methodist Youth Fellowship around 1940. Though never large, under the leadership of Helen Evans, Louise Wilson and Willietta Evans Whichard, it was active for several years and gave its members opportunities to worship with the young people in other churches.

On the morning of November 8, 1979, the entire community was shocked and distressed to learn that between eleven o'clock and dawn during the preceding night the lower sashes of thirteen windows had been stolen from Evans Church. (Two antique hanging lamps and the portrait of Zachariah Evans had also been taken.) The thieves had neatly removed side molding on each window and slipped out the lower part intact. They did no further damage. When the two men were miles away from

the scene of the crime, they deftly removed the name plates from the memorial windows, leaving no trace of their ever having been there. Within a surprisingly short time, two able law officers, the late Sheriff Troy Toppin and Kent Inscoe, of the State Bureau of Investigation, with their deputies, had located the windows in an antique shop in the Norfolk area and had apprehended the two men. Identification had not been difficult. The culprit with a criminal record had, in a careless moment, left a perfect fingerprint -- thumb and forefinger -- on a small, inexpensive vase that happened to be in his way. On April 8, 1980, the two men were tried jointly and were sentenced to prison for not less than six and not more than eight years. Meanwhile, a great outpouring of love and sympathy for the church members had lessened the trauma.

Unfortunately, a complete list of the ministers who have served Evans Church has not yet been attainable; but those who have served since the formation of Chowan Charge are:

W.M. Towe, 1905-1909

M.Y. Self, March-December 1909

L.N. Booth, 1909-1910

J.A. Martin, 1910-1912

B.T. Hurley, 1912-1914

J.A. Russell, 1914-1917

C.C. Carson, 1917-1919

J.L. Midgette, 1919-1922

N.W. Wright, 1922-1923

M.R. Chambers, 1923-1925

H.A. Chester, 1925-1926

C.A. Johnson, 1926-1928

R.F. Taylor, 1928-1929

F.E. Dixon, 1929-1932

W.B. Humble, 1932-1935

M.O. Stephenson, January-November
1935

R.E. Walston, 1935-1939

J.T. Stanford, 1939-1941

A.G.L. Stephenson, 1941-1946

Earl R. Meekins, 1946-1950

R.M. Gradeless, 1950-1952

C.H. Beale, 1952-1954

P.M. Porter, 1954-1957

F.W. Fortescue, 1957-1961

Claude T. Wilson, 1961-1963

G.D. Miller, 1963-1965

Gillette Bryant, 1965-1966

W.D. Moore, 1966-1968

Richard Griffin, 1968-1969

Dan Middleton, 1969--August 1969

Daniel M. Forbes, Jr., 1969-1977

David Langston, 1977--December
1978

J. Kern Ormond, January-June 1979

Virgil Free, 1979-1982

Carol Goehring, 1982-1983

Susie Williams, 1983-1984

Sherman Guthrie, 1984-1986

Bobby Jordan, 1986-

Except for a few years when she was away from Edenton, Helen Evans has been the organist since the early 1940s. She has served in this capacity longer than any other person.

Several marriages have been solemnized in Evans United Methodist Church. The following list--possibly incomplete-- includes the names of each man and woman known to have been "joined together in holy wedlock,"

the date of the ceremony, and the name of the minister who officiated:

E.F. Cherry and Mary R. Elliott,
October 21, 1877, Joshua S. Garrett

Richardson Bunch and Annie Evans,
April 14, 1879, James H. Harris

N.F. Kearns and Amelia Jones, March
19, 1882, N.B. Christian

Asa V. Evans and Celia A. Evans, August
12, 1885, W.M. Jordan

William J. Griffin and Esther Alberta
Evans, October 19, 1890, J.H. Riddick

W.R. Brothers and Sallie Jones, April
28, 1897, W.F. Jones

Stephen C. Gray and Bertha Edwards
Cofield, June 20, 1901, M.D. Hix

Nathan Elbert Chappell and Delia
Walker Cofield, December 18, 1907, W.M.
Towe

Paul Clinton Brittle and Johnnie
Commander Elliott, May 27, 1908, W.M.
Towe

Joseph H. Churchill and Maggie
(Margaret) L. Evans, April 14, 1910, J.O.
Alderman (Baptist)

Noah Felton and Mary Alice Bunch,
May 10, 1911, J.A. Martin

John Goodman Small and Rebecca
Winborne Evans, November 18, 1914, B.T.
Hurley

John Linwood Brown and Pattie
Elizabeth Nixon, June 6, 1923, N.M. Wright

Megnar Ruffin Medlin and Sara Louise
Nixon, September 6, 1924, J. Vincent
Knight

Warden Murdock Martin and Etta
Evans Pardee, June 23, 1939, Robert E.
Walston

Edward Crawford Williams and
Marguerite Etta Evans, July 20, 1944,
Edward Williams (Presbyterian)

Murray Parmer Whichard and
Willietta Evans, December 26, 1944, E.
Crawford Williams (Presbyterian)

Richard Buxton Overton, Sr., and
Eleanor Small Buckley, August 23, 1947, H.F.
Surratt

Edward E. McBride and Margueritte
Asbell, March 28, ~~1848~~¹⁹⁴⁸, Earl R. Meekins

Arthur Stanton Cooper, Jr., and Mary
Winborne Evans, June 10, ¹⁹⁴⁸1949, E. Crawford
Williams (Presbyterian)

George W. Killebrew and Kathleen
Asbell, August 22, 1948, Earl R. Meekins

Benjamin Warner Evans and Irene
Stanley Strange, November 27, ¹⁹⁵⁴1958, E.
Crawford Williams, (Presbyterian)

William Thomas Foster and Beatrice
Wilson Evans, June 30, ¹⁹⁵⁶1954 E. Crawford
Williams (Presbyterian)

Robert Stewart Marsh and Edna Louise
Wilson, June 15, 1957, Earl R. Meekins

Wesley Jones and Faye Peeples, August
4, 1963, Claude T. Wilson

Jesse Meadow Wilson and Frances
Brownley Evans, June 17, 1967, E. Clifford
Shoaf

^{Devlin}
Philip ~~Devlin~~, Jr., and Marguerite Etta
Evans Williams, July 29, 1972, Daniel M.
Forbes, Jr.

No history of Evans United Methodist Church would be complete without reference to men and women who served it continuously, faithfully, and unselfishly, but have never had any visible memorial. Among those who are now

deceased but have left their mark in various intangible ways are:

William A. Cofield, 1850-1913

Artelissa McCoy Cofield, 1844-1908

Richardson Bunch, 1856-1907

Sarah Susie White Bunch, 1867-1943

John Wesley Nixon, 1857-1941

Virginia Nixon, 1857-1931

Lemuel R. Bunch, 1858-1940

Donnie Brown Bunch, 1861-1920

Henry C. Nixon, 1860-1947

Lizinka Morris Nixon, 1861-1947

Maggie (Margaret) E.C. White, 1878-
1958

Beatrice Wilson Evans, 1881-1969

Reuben Nixon 1889-1980

Mattie Rountree Nixon, 1897-1971

Mordecai M. Nixon, 1891-1964

Willietta Evans Whichard, 1891-1984

Eddie Nixon, 1892-1977

Mattie P, Nixon, 1903-1983

B. Warner Evans, 1893-1974

Marguerite Wilson Evans, 1897-1950

Irene S. Evans, 1903-1980

Frances Evans Wilson, 1906-1986

Today Evans United Methodist Church is almost the smallest church in the North Carolina Conference. (Holly Grove Methodist Church, in Tyrrell County near the Scuppernong River, is smaller.) Ironically, the membership of the church has declined because of the very thing it has stressed most next to Christianity--education. For generations almost all of its young men and women have had the benefit of college or university training. Afterward, almost all of them have departed from Chowan County and gone to urban areas to establish their homes and practice their various professions: the ministry, university administration, medicine, dentistry, law, teaching, music, and librarianship. Almost all have been active--some outstanding--in the religious life of their respective communities.

The oldest former member is Mrs. Paul Brittle, who made Burlington, North Carolina, her permanent home decades ago. Now on the threshold of her hundredth birthday, she is the oldest living member of Burlington's First Methodist Church and is still interested in its activities though, understandably, she does not participate in them to the extent that she once did.

A few devoted members determinedly continue to keep the doors of Evans United Methodist Church open. Periodically not only Mrs. Brittle but also others who reside elsewhere return for a worship service for the renewal of spirit that only the church of one's childhood can give.

September 1, 1986

Note: I have found that the name of one family has been spelled two ways: Cofield and Coffield. I have chosen Cofield, as that is the way it appears upon certain primary sources of information.

E.E.

