

The Kenansville Parish
of
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**A Brief History of Four
Small Churches Located in
Duplin County, North Carolina**

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WESLEY CHAPEL, THE OLDEST - 1815



Before it was known as Wesley Chapel, the "preaching place" was at Dark Branch School, a building or meeting house which was located at the present site, five miles east of Kenansville on State Highway 11. Dark Branch is mentioned in records of Andrew's Chapel, Route 1, Roseboro, as one of seventeen churches on the Black River Circuit. From an article in the FAYETTEVILLE OBSERVER, November 15, 1974, "the territory included Duplin, most of Hanover, Sampson, and that part of Bladen County on the east side of the Cape Fear River. It took a preacher six weeks to make a round." Three other churches in Duplin County, Carlton's, Charity, and Providence were a part of this huge circuit of churches. No record of Dark Branch prior to 1815 has been found, although the Black River Circuit was first mentioned in the 1810 Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Even before that date, there was a Goshen Circuit which probably included some of the above mentioned churches and possibly Dark Branch or another place in the lower Goshen area of Duplin County. This, however, is purely speculative. It should be mentioned that the individual churches of the circuits were not identified by name in conference journals and minutes until 1926, therefore information is scanty regarding the early structures of circuits.

Dr. Edgar L. Perkins, a physician, was the minister in 1843 and 1844. He wrote an article for the ADVOCATE in 1887 entitled "Reminiscences of Duplin Circuit." This article is so full of information about the churches in Duplin County as well as the community that it is quoted in its entirety:

"Seeing mention made of the Duplin circuit and the Magnolia circuit, both in the same paper, I was at once led to reflect on the vast changes which have taken place since 1843. Conference was held in Louisburg in the fall of 1842 and I was sent to the Duplin circuit for the following year, 1843. My uppermost appointment was Union Academy, about eleven miles west of Goldsboro, then a little village. My lowest appointment was Pigford's, in Newhanover Co. My most westerly appointment was Salem, near Lisbon, in Sampson county. My most easterly appointment was Prospect, east of the great Goshen swamp, as you go from Kenansville to Kinston. The more central appointments were Thunder Swamp, Friendship, Dark Branch, Center, Charity Chapel, Providence, Evergreen, Bryan's, Carlton's. One appointment was in Wayne county, three in Sampson; one in New Hanover, the rest in Duplin. There was no church and no membership in Kenansville, and there was no Magnolia. This last place was called Stickland's; on the west side of the Railroad stood a little log building where rum and whiskey were sold, and on the opposite side of the road was a small frame of a building not yet completed. No one dreamed of making a town there during this century. At Warsaw there were three buildings besides a warehouse. The Railroad had been running but a few years and the engines had smoke-stacks resembling stove-pipes, only a little larger, and everytime they puffed, about a half peck of live coals were thrown in the air to fall in all directions. You had to stand clear or get burned. It was at this place I started on my first ride upon a railroad. At first I took my seat at the end with my legs so placed that I could spring for the door in case of accident. I soon got used to the danger and sat decently after the first two miles. In those days the cars were mere rattle-boxes compared with those of the present times. The road bed was laid with bars of iron resembling the tires of a cart wheel, and holes all along the bar through which spikes were driven, to hold them to long stripes of wood that rested upon the cross ties. But to return to the circuit. I do not know that there is a single individual living in the bounds of the circuit now, whose house was my home during the two years, 1843 and 1844, I was on the circuit. I have read the obituaries of nearly all of them. "Though God buries his workmen he carries on his work." New and fine church buildings have taken the places of the old ones and many new places have grown up since then.

Union Academy was a well built school house; at this place my homes were mostly with Ezekiel Smith and John Smith. Thunder Swamp was an old free meeting house where everybody could preach and nobody could do any good. I gave it up for Elliot's school house, which has since given place to Smith's Chapel, built by the direction of Dr. Deems. At this place I generally stayed with the celebrated John G. Elliot, whose fame was extensive on account of his having educated so many of the young men of his times. He was a skeptic and withal a very eccentric and a very remarkable man.

Friendship was a well-built school house in a very wealthy and refined neighborhood, but there were few professors of religion and but a small number of them were Methodists. Dark Branch was an old school house with a shed added to make it large enough for a preaching place. During my second year a fine building was put up at this place and it was called Wesley Chapel. My home was mostly with James Pearsall whose daughter Zilphy, Rev. D. B. Nicholson, P. E., married in 1843. Prospect, on the opposite of Goshen, was a framed building, free for all, and where none were successful. Charity Chapel was a framed building. A large class of devoted Christian people worshiped at this place. The preacher's home was mostly at James Carr's, a man of blessed memory to all who knew him. To the weary itinerant his house seemed like home with all the welcome and sweetness which that word can convey. The Mallards held their membership also at this place, a most excellent family of people

Center was a building of hewed logs, and a very odd looking four square building. Providence was a well proportioned framed building. In 1843 we had a meeting, which continued two weeks, at this place, resulting in sixty converts. Bro. Henry Gray came to our assistance. Pigford's was a bush harbor; the Presbyterians have since built a house of worship there. Solomon Turner joined the church during our two week's meeting at Providence. His warm hand was ever afterward extended to invite the preacher to a hospitable home. Whoever went to his house was happy. Kilby Peterson was another whole souled man, the fruit of that great revival. Salem was an old log building, the second of the kind that had been built on that ground. Bishop George once preached in the first building, so I was informed by brother Bright Johnson, who was present on the occasion. From this place went Enoch Johnson into the Virginia Conference. Evergreen was a school house several miles below Salem. The spirit of controversy about the mode of baptism raged in this community. Bryan's was a good framed building constructed with a view to having a school house and a chapel all in one. Here we had a grand temperance meeting lasting two days, eighty persons signed the old Washingtonian pledge. A revival in the church followed and 30 or 40 joined the church. Carlton's was an old log building with one corner tumbling down. It looked dangerous for a congregation to enter it. But when the Rev. Peter Carlton died he left a tract of land to be sold and the money to be applied to the building of a new church, hence the neat looking Carlton's Chapel of the present time.

In those days we often had preaching at school houses and private houses for the want of more convenient places. Since the days to which I have referred, the old church buildings have mostly given way to new and comfortable ones. New places have been built and Methodism has kept pace with the grand march of improvement which has been going on....May it continue to grow."

One may question the printing of the above article in its entirety as a part of our history; however, it is hoped that one envision something of the life of one dedicated circuit rider and the many "parsonages" he lived in, the types of preaching places, and the characteristics of the communities and people to whom he ministered. More will be said later regarding certain aspects found within this article.

We have therefore identified the age of the present building of Wesley Chapel as 1844, making it one of the oldest Methodist buildings in the North Carolina Conference still in continuous use. It originally had a slave balcony above where the pulpit now stands. The pulpit was located at the front of the building with doors at each corner. This was characteristic of many churches in the 18th and 19th centuries, women and children entering through one, men by the other. They sat on opposite sides of the sanctuary. There was a rear door for the slaves to use in ascending to the balcony. In the 1930's, the building was renovated to create a central door as it now exists. The balcony was removed. Although the author has not confirmed it, the doors on the two corner rooms at the sides of the vestibule are believed to be the original outside corner doors.

The ceiling is the original and one can observe where the heating stove once sat in the middle of the sanctuary as well as where the center support column were. One can also detect the location of the balcony by looking above the pulpit at the board design of the ceiling. The walls and floor have been remodeled, but if one desires to examine more carefully he may find around the vent on the west wall evidence of the original wall. The plaster is mixed with animal hair, probably swine, which was used for substance and strength. The flooring may be examined by kneeling beside or crawling under the building to see the huge joists or logs undergirding the structure.

The furniture is all homemade and handcrafted. The pulpit is thought to be the original. The communion table is difficult to date since it was donated to the church in recent years. The pews are thought to be of the Civil War era. This dating was determined approximately by a representative of the State Department of Archives and History.

An ascent to the attic is an inspiring trip to the past, for it is there that one can really see part of the skeleton of the building. The rafters, beams, and joists are hand-hewn logs, many with bark still intact. Most are joined with pegs. Old rough, square-head nails are evident in abundance. The old brick chimney, roughly laid, still stands in the middle of the attic no longer serving as a link between the warmth of the sanctuary and the cold of the sky above. The author could sense the solemn, almost sacred atmosphere in that place where many spoken and musical words through 132 years had ascended.

The front porch and educational building were added in the 1960's. Other minor repairs followed through the years, and in 1975-76, in celebration of their heritage, the people underwent an extensive restoration project. The educational building's interior and the entire exterior were painted. Shutters were added to the windows to give this beautiful structure a colonial appearance. Further efforts are still under way to retain the original beauty such as the refinishing of the pews and chancel furniture to its natural finish.

A MYSTERY.....BETHEL ACADEMY?

The original deed for Dark Branch School, simply specifying a meeting house or school, was dated 1821 and involved the giving of four acres of land and the building by John Pearsall and Howell Best to the following trustees: Col. Stephen Miller, George E. Houston, and James Pearsall. The witnesses were Edward Pearsall and James Chambers.

In 1829 we find the names of the trustees of Bethel Academy as follows: Gen. Stephen Miller, Maj. George E. Houston, James Pearsall, James Chambers, Howell Best (all listed in the 1821 deed) and in addition, Richard Miller, George Miller, Jeremiah Pearsall, Charles Chambers, and at the top of the list is the Rev. David O. Shattuck.

Rev. Shattuck was the minister for the Black River Circuit in 1826. In 1827 he was listed in the Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church as being "superannuated or worn out." In 1828 he was listed as "located" which means that he was no longer an itinerant or traveling preacher. Rev. Shattuck undoubtedly liked the Dark Branch area and decided to return after he was "worn out." Records show that he purchased 626 acres of land from Jeremiah Pearsall in the Dark Branch area on April 25, 1829. He sold 210 acres to George E. Houston on the same day and the remaining portion back to Jeremiah Pearsall in September, 1829. By the way, he made a couple hundred dollars in the transaction. This does establish, however, his residence in the community at the time of establishing Bethel Academy.

On September 2, 1829, we find Rev. Shattuck deeding the same four acres and meeting house as described in the 1821 deed to the trustees of Bethel Academy (un-named). It is not known how he obtained these acres or why the deed was necessary. This deed, incidentally, was not filed until April 6, 1882 and was attested to by the Rev. Daniel Culbreth who knew Rev. Shattuck's handwriting.

The mystery of Bethel Academy does not stop there, moreover; for we find still another deed dated 1843...one year before the

present building was constructed. This deed specifies that John Oliver gave the same four acres and meeting house to Bethel Academy. Here again, it is not known how and why this occurred. Dr. Perkins said nothing about Bethel Academy but rather Dark Branch School in the article previously mentioned. Were there two separate schools sitting on the same four acres of land? Did two separate educational units use the same building?

The author continued to pursue an answer to the mystery. A deed was then found indicating that on September 10, 1867, one acre was given by James B. Carr to the trustees of Bethel Academy who were at that time: Jeremiah Pearsall, John A. Bryan, Edward Pearsall, William W. Miller, George E. Houston, Alexander H. Grady, and James B. Carr. Questions were asked in the community until it was finally thought that a school by the name of Carr School, located behind D. F. Chambers' home was once known as Bethel. Still it was just heresay until a 1923 county map by Mr. E. S. McGowen (oldest member at Kenansville) showed clearly the name Bethel School in the same location as the old Carr School, a little over one mile from Wesley.



Almost certainly in the opinion of the author, this building was moved to its present location from where Wesley now stands. The building appears to be even older than the present church building. The picture above is Bethel Academy/Carr School and just maybe where our ancestors once worshipped. It is being used presently as a tobacco pack house.

Current Membership Roll

Following is a list of the present members. We apologize for any mistakes, omissions, and misspellings. We copy from the information on hand.

Batchelor, Sandra Kearns
Fresca, Elizabeth Grady
Grady, Alan
Grady, Mrs. Alan
Grady, Roy
Grady, Margaret
Grady, J. T.
Grady, Nancy
Grady, Mrs. Charles
Grady, D. V.
Grady, David Allen
Grady, Teresa
Grady, Frances
Grady, Mrs. Henrietta
Jones, Ray
Jones, Clifford
Jones, Mrs. Charlie
Kearns, Mrs. Clyde
Kearns, Frank
Lines, Mary Grady
Martin, Mrs. Charles
Mozingo, Donald
Price, Mrs. Carolyn
Whaley, Frank
Whaley, Jeannie
Wilson, Snodie
Wilson, Nancy Grady