

A History of White Oak United Methodist Church

(Formerly known as Providence Chapel of the

Methodist Episcopal Church) *South survey?*

The year 1804 was a good one for Methodism in North Carolina. The revivals and camp meetings which were responsible for the great power and growth of the Methodist movement were well begun, and nowhere were they more effective or fruitful than on the Tar River Circuit. Bishop Francis Asbury has recorded the following in his Journal for the date of December 1st, 1804.

"...It is a cordial to my spirit to reflect, that although we had but one preacher on that circuit and good circuit of Tar, and that one was a young one, and esteemed by some only of moderate abilities, his labors have been signally blessed: it is true that local brethren helped faithfully; and there some good seasons at camp meetings. My mind has great peace in God."

That young minister's name was John H. Gibbons and his ministry on Tar River Circuit was a productive one, but it is to one of the "faithful local brethren" of whom Bishop Asbury spoke that White Oak United Methodist Church is indebted for its existence. The itinerant ministers of the Church were courageous, and their unstinting devotion to the gospel is legendary, yet it is a recognised fact that the great work they did would not have been nearly so far-reaching without the equally devoted support and service of local preachers. Asbury

said on the occasion of one annual conference "Brethren, the local preachers are the cream of our church."¹

One of these local preachers was William Lindsay (alternately spelled Linsey). The Lindsay family had evidently been in residence in the general area of Nash County for some time, since in 1780 Bishop Asbury makes mention of an exhorter named Lindsay who spoke with him to the congregation at Ross'es, in Franklin County.² Likewise, he speaks of stopping at Lindsay's, enroute from Warren County to major Green Hill's home in Louisburg, in the same year.³ Other than this, little is known about the background of William Lindsay. It is evident, however, that his family was strongly and actively Methodist. This had a profound influence on William, and on March 2nd, 1804 he, along with Henry Bradford and Benjamin Nevil, was ordained a deacon by Francis Asbury at the conclusion of a preaching service at Whitaker's Chapel.⁴

The name of William Lindsay never appears on Conference records, so it is obvious that he was never part of the itinerant

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1. Grissom, W.L. A History of Methodism in North Carolina Volume I, pg. 289.
 2. Carroll, G.L.E., Francis Asbury in North Carolina (The North Carolina portions of the journal of Francis Asbury), pg. 40.
 3. Ibid., pg. 38. The route taken by Asbury to and from Lindsay's which was an appointment on Tar river circuit seems to indicate that it was on the very edge of what was then Halifax county, within 10 miles of Nash County.
 4. Ibid., pg. 214.

ministry. An independent source lists him among local preachers of the Tar River circuit with the comment that he was licensed prior to 1815.⁵ Thus as a local preacher his work would have been confined to the general area of Nash County, where he would preach, organize Methodist Societies and oversee their meetings in the absence of the circuit rider.

Sometime between 1804 and 1812, a society was organized in the area of little Sappony Creek.⁶ We cannot be positive as to the names of those who were members of that society but a few of the family names of which we can be fairly certain are Manning, Boddie, Deans, Cooper, Boon(e), Sutton, Batchelor, and Vester.⁷

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5. The independent source is a list, made by an unknown author, of the local preachers and the regular appointments and churches of Tar River Circuit. It survives among a collection of miscellaneous Methodist Church Records gathered in 1879. The collection is housed at Duke University, Perkins library manuscript room, Cabinet #87. The name of William Linsey is listed as a local preacher, licensed prior to 1815. Asbury ordained him as a deacon, but since his name never appears on a list of conference appointments, it must be that family commitments made it necessary for him to locate immediately. (Copy included in appendix).
 6. This is a conjectural statement, but I think such an assumption is surely warranted. In those days, Methodists had few meeting-houses and the construction of a place of worship was generally left off until it was felt that the local society was large enough and permanent enough to justify the expense and effort required to build a separate church. The formation of a class or society would undoubtedly have pre-dated the building of a church by several years.
 7. All these names but one, Boon(e), appear on the first deed. The Boones have been in Nash County since the 1790's, however, and have been members of White Oak and Providence churches as far back as memory will serve. There was a Michael Vester, brother to the Richard who witnessed that deed, who was a local preacher for a time on Tar River Circuit (before being expelled from the church in 1818).

By the year 1812 this society had grown to such proportions as to feel the need of a meeting house. On December 23rd of that same year, George Sutton deeded a tract of land to the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Providence Chapel was born.⁸

The following deed was duly recorded at the February, 1813 session of Nash County Court:

This Indenture made this twenty third day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twelve between George Sutton of Nash County and of the State of North Carolina of the one part and Wm. Linsey, Wm. Boddie, Willis Boddie, John Cooper, John Deans and Pridgen Manning Trustees in trust for use and purpose herein after mentioned all of the county of Nash and State and State aforesaid of the other part witnesseth that the said George Sutton for and in consideration of the sum of one dollar to him in hand and at and upon the sealing and delivery of these presents the rights whereof is hereby acknowledged hath or have given granted bargained, sold, released, confirmed and conveyed, and by these presents doth or do give grant, bargain, sell, release, confirm and convey unto them the above named trustees and their successors hath or have into all and singular a certain lot or piece of land literally lying and being in the county and state of or is bounded as follows to wit beginning at a post oak corner between James Bachelor and the George Sutton and the George Boddie line formerly called green hills then on an east course to a red oak thence on to a post oak corner thence on a west course to a hicory, thence on to a pine thence on to another pine thence on to a persimmon tree corner on the James Bachelor line thence on a west course to the beginning corner post oak containing an woods, waterways and appertenances their unto belonging or in anywise appertaining to have and to hold all and singular the above mentioned stead or piece of land to them the

8. The list of Tar River ~~circuit~~ preachers and churches provides the only recorded instance of the name Providence Chapel known to this writer.

the above named trustees and their successors in office forever in trust that shall erect and build or cause to be erected and built thereon a house or place of worship for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church Trustees and I the said George Sutton do by these presents, warrant and forever defend all and singular the above mentioned and described seat or acre of land with the appertences thereto belonging unto him the above claims or claims of him the aforesaid George Sutton his heirs and assigns hereunto affixed my hand and seal the day and year first, above written signed sealed and delivered.

George Sutton

In the presence of Richard Vester
Willis Bachelor

Nash County February Court 1813

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From 1812 to 1837, Providence Chapel was a part of the Virginia Conference. Locally it was served by William Lindsay, whose name appears on the first deed, and a variety of other preachers among whom were likely Michael Vester, and Amos and Hill Jones.¹⁰ There were 40 circuit riders appointed by the Conference to Tar River Circuit in those twenty-five years, some of whom had begun as local preachers along Tar River and later been received into Conference.

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9. Book 5, page 384, Nash County Register of Deeds. A xerographic copy is provided in the appendix to this paper.
 10. These are local families, one of whom is still active in White Oak United Methodist Church.

From available records, it would seem that during this time there were only two Methodist churches in Nash County; Sharon Church begun in 1808, and Providence Chapel.¹¹ It is almost certain that there were several more regularly appointed preaching places, but no other meeting houses.

In 1837 the North Carolina Conference was formed, and the minutes record that Tar River circuit became a part of the new Raleigh District, while Nash County seems to have been transferred to the New Berne district. In 1840, a Stantonsburg circuit of the Newbern district was formed and Providence was a part of this circuit. This remained the situation through 1843, under the ministries of Charles Coulson, Jeremiah Johnson (who founded Bethlehem Church), Thompson Garrard, and Nathan Anderson.

Providence Chapel endured, as did the settlement around little Sappony Creek, through the division of the Church over slavery, the Civil War and the period of reconstruction which followed. Indeed it not only endured, but grew so that by 1874 the need of a new building was felt. The first meeting-house was, in all probability, no more than a plain log building. Since the building was probably showing effects of the passage of time, as well as being too small, it was decided to construct

11. Deed records indicate that Sharon and Providence Chapels may have been the only churches of any denomination in Nash County. A Mount Zion Baptist Church was begun in 1804, but it was in an area now within Wilson County lines.

a new church. At the same time, the decision was made to move the location of the church to the present site. The reason for moving the church is not ascertainable, but tradition has it that the present location was the most beautiful spot in the immediate area. The owner, Mr. Eli Manning, was a member at Providence Chapel, and he offered the site for the building of the new church. There is a local tradition about the church, once almost lost, which has been passed down to us from Mr. Eli Manning through D.L. Boone to his grandson Donald Boone. It is said that a slave of Eli Manning Sr. was the first to find the spot on which White Oak Church now stands. He was so impressed with the beauty of the place that he cleared the undergrowth and tended the white oak trees himself, using the one free day a month which was given him by his owner. Though he never attended the church, his labor of love has provided peace and beauty for many people down through the years.

On October 19th, 1874, the land passed into the hands of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. A summary of that deed is provided below.

Simon Jones and wife, Aquilla Jones, and Eli Manning and wife, Harriett Manning, to Van B. Batchelor, Newsome S. Deans, J.G. Matthews, T.H. Matthews, and David Cooper, Trustees and their successors, Aug. 19, 1874, for - dollars a parcel of one acre of land near the road running from the York Bridge Road near Richard Bachelor's to the Red Crossroads, seventy yards square, to be used for the erection of a house of worship for the membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South!²

¹². Book 103, page 176 Nash County Register of Deeds

The first meeting-house in the new location was a one room structure of hewn logs, built during the ministry of Rev. L.J. Holden. It had no means of heat and no light other than candles, but it served the community until 1898, when it was sold for \$10.00 to be used as a kitchen and a corn crib.

In 1892, during the pastorate of Rev. J.T.B. Hoover, White Oak Church (as it had come to be called) was joined to the newly formed Spring Hope circuit which included nine churches; Spring Hope, Bethlehem, White Oak, Sandy Cross, Stanhope, Baily, Mt. Pleasant and 2 others of which we cannot be positive, probably Hornes and Pleasant Grove. In 1898, a new building was erected; the first frame building the Church had ever owned. The timber for that church was given by Mr. J.W.T. Matthews.

Records for this period are still scarce but tradition, and the statements of members who remember the later part of the period well, say that the years from 1898-1935 were probably Providence - White Oak's strongest years. Despite World War I and the great Depression, White Oak church grew and flourished until in 1933 the need was ~~again~~ felt for a larger building. The old one was sold for \$150.00 and the church negotiated with the Nash County board of education to buy the local school house, which stood empty as a result of merger with Momeyer.

Nash County Board of Education to the Trustees of White Oak Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Nash County and their successors. March 6, 1933 for \$151.00 two lots of land: (1) one acre adjoining the White Oak Church lot. Eli Manning, and D.L. Boone: (2) one-half acre adjoining the White Oak School lot and Eli Manning.

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The school house turned church still serves the present congregation. Additions include three Sunday school rooms, an educational annex with kitchen, stained-glass windows, front porch, new furniture, air-conditioning and other accessories but basically the church is what it was then. White Oak Church was later transferred to Nash Charge in the Rocky Mount district along with its sister churches of Gold Valley, Castalia, and Bethlehem. These churches built a new parsonage in the nearby town of Spring Hope in 1961.

The history of White Oak United Methodist Church is, for the most part, an uneventful one. Its chief virtue has perhaps been that of endurance, but in many ways it typifies the very best of Methodism. The church is a small one. Some members say it is out of touch with the times; some say it is too weak in terms of membership and money to be an effective witness for Christ. Yet the fact remains that while other churches and many ministers have been long forgotten, there is still a Methodist Church near little Sappony Creek. This church and the ministers sent it by annual conference still serve

13. Book 389 page 354 Nash County Register of Deeds.

a community of people who hold their faith to be a precious thing. For one hundred and sixty three years, the Methodists of this church have endured and grown stronger, to "civilize, methodise, and spiritualise in spite of sin, flesh and hell."¹⁴ The church, as the oldest existing Methodist Church in Nash County, has become a symbol of perseverance, faithful service, community, and the power of faith to conquer adversity. That is no small achievement.

¹⁴. Asbury, Francis, Journals, March 18, 1792.

¹⁵. Much of the local information has been supplied by Mr. Donald Boone, to whom I am indebted for information and encouragement. A copy of the history which he furnished is enclosed in the appendix.