

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Methodism in Franklin

2020

We celebrate 200 years of Methodism in Franklin this year. In the spring of 1820, a surveying party laid out the town and it was named for Commissioner Jesse Franklin. It was that same year that the Methodist Episcopal Church established Franklin as a “preaching point” for their circuit riders. This meant that a Circuit Rider from this region would come periodically to Franklin and hold services in the homes of some of the residents. Neighbors would gather together to hear the preacher when he rode into town on horseback. Reverend Andrew Hammill was assigned to be the first circuit rider to preach in the Franklin area. The good Methodist people continued this practice for nine years.

Bishop Francis Asbury was the guiding spirit of American Methodism and organized the church with the idea of having geographical preaching circuits. A man was assigned to a “territory” and challenged to establish as many preaching points as possible. This tradition was unique to Methodism and proved to be successful among the frontier churches in America. There was great enthusiasm for Methodism during those early times.

It was about that same time the white man came to establish permanent residency in what is now Macon County. The Siler brothers from Buncombe County were among the first pioneers settling in Franklin. Jacob Siler came first and he settled in Cartoogechaye. Then an older brother, Jesse Richardson Siler moved to Franklin and bought an “improved Indian cabin” on West Main Street. In 1829 Jesse R. Siler gave the circuit riders permission to use a small house he had on this property for their preaching. Jesse soon set to work to build the first Methodist Church building that was used from 1830 to 1860.

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It is our good fortune that Jesse Richardson Siler kept a journal that allows us to get a glimpse of the first church building. In his journal written on April 15, 1832, he recorded the following information:

“In 1829 I joined the Methodist Church. I gave permission for the circuit preachers to preach in a house I had on my land where a small somity (sic) was raised. Being few in number I thought of my promise to my Maker; accordingly set to work to build a church. I promised I would give a site and build the house of the people and members would make seats. I built the one now standing 30 X 40 feet, weatherboarded, covered and floored, and made floors and windows—and made a deed to the house an one or two acres of land. The members and liberal people with a little of my help fixed seats and pulpit. In 1831 I had a steeple made and a bell hung which my wife had the honor of contributing to the church. I suppose the house cost me between 3 and four hundred dollars, the bell and steeple about \$50. The good people then went on by subscriptions and in 1832 had it sealed (sic) to which I paid about \$11.”

There is some debate of the precise location of this church building but we do know it was built on Jesse R. Siler’s property. His original “improved Indian cabin” was located near the large white house with columns on West Main Street. This photo shows a small church on the north side of West Main Street and just west of Jesse’s home. This could have been the first church building.

On the other hand, we have information that would place the first church building on the east side of Jesse’s home at the present corner of Main Street and Harrison Avenue. The Methodist Episcopal Church of Franklin, NC was given a land grant from the state on January 10, 1835 by Governor David Lowry Swain. This land was for the purpose of a “Seminary of Learning” and was located at the site of the present Franklin Terrace. According to the land grant deed this section of land was adjacent to Jesse R. Siler’s property. Another deed was recorded in 1844 by Jesse R. Siler. He made a deed of an additional half-acre of land to the church trustees. This deed was apparently made to connect the original church property with the land grant property. In this deed we find a startling clause: “.... including the meeting house now built in the forks of the road leading to Franklin and Clayton.” So, from this information we can gather that the first church building was located near our present-day gravel parking lot by the Outreach Center.

Whether we lean towards either location of the first church building we are certainly blessed that Jesse R. Siler was a man of faith. It is obvious from his journal excerpts that he was the progenitor of Methodism in Franklin. As a young man, Jesse made a covenant with his Maker that if He would protect and direct him that he would endeavor to be useful to church and society. It was in fulfillment of this covenant that Jesse R. Siler built the first Methodist Church which was used from 1830 to 1860.

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Tradition has it that the “weather boarded” church from 1830 burned, however there is no written record of that occurring. But we do know that these good Methodist people desired a more modern church house for practicing their faith. In 1860, just as the sounds of war began to rumble throughout the country, this bunch of Methodists built another church. If you take a walk in the FUMC cemetery you will very likely come across some of the footings left from this second church building.

This 1860 rectangular church building faced south and was approximately 32 feet wide by 64 feet long. The building was frame and veneered with handmade brick. It was covered with heart white-oak shingles and the steeple was supported by a hand-hewn timber from a yellow poplar. Above the door a board hung with the date “1860” painted on it. Once the congregation ascended the long flight of front steps, they entered a large vestibule for “fellowshipping”. The vestibule extended the full width of the building and was also used for the Children’s Sunday School Class during church. “Aunt Mary Jule”, widow of Julius Thomas Siler, taught the Sunday School class for over fifty years.

At the west end of the vestibule were steps that led to the balcony built for the slaves. This balcony was used for more than twenty years after the Civil War. Then the Negro Methodists established the New Hope Church between 1885 and 1890.

The sanctuary had two aisles with a long center section of pews. There was possibly a “petition” that separated the men’s side from the women’s side. Here in Franklin, this entrenched custom of segregating the sexes was challenged in the 1890’s. Two young ladies, Laura M. Jones and Isabel Elias decided to sit on the men’s side one Sunday morning. Miss Laura didn’t remember the consequences, but she did remember the accomplishment. Guess we can thank these two forward thinking ladies.

The heat was provided by two “pot-bellied” wood stoves between the front pews and the altar rail. Candle holders were hung along the walls for lighting until kerosene fixtures took their place. In 1908, William W. Jones returned to Macon County with a degree in Electrical Engineering. How thankful these Methodists were to have him design and install electric lights for this second church building!

From the journal of a sixteen-year-old, Miss Hattie B. Sloan, we can get some interesting insights into church life during those years. On November 19, 1878 she mentions having a very solemn communion service and then how much she enjoyed the Love

Feast in the evening. On January 1, 1879 she reflects on how pretty the Christmas tree at the church was and that all the children seemed to enjoy it. In March of 1879, she refers to decorating the church for a wedding. She would probably be pleased that we still carry on those traditions.

It should also be noted that Mrs. Hattie B. Sloan Jones became the teacher for the Children's Sunday School class after the death of "Aunt Mary Jule" Siler. The religious convictions and philosophies of these two ladies were a strong testimony to the beliefs of the Methodist Church of Franklin.

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The little rectangular church built in 1860 served the good Methodists of Franklin for roughly 57 years. Lighting upgrades from candles to kerosene lanterns to eventually electricity in 1908 proved to be beneficial. However, these Methodists thought it was once again time to expand. So, by early 1917 the Rev. R. H. Daugherty was leading worship services in a newly built church.

The elaborate design for this new church was drawn by the architect Choate from Atlanta, Georgia. Zeb Conley, a notable local contractor, took charge. He eventually became a very active member of the Methodist Church. This new church design embodied an existing side wall and the south wall of the 1860 building. They added sixteen feet to the north end plus a choir annex, which made the building 92 feet long. Two brick masons were hired to lay the 20-inch-thick walls. Field rock was hauled in and crushed by sledge hammer because there was not a crusher in the county at the time. Since the irregular brick work from the 1860 building did not match the new brick, the masons used stucco for the outer layer. The lumber was rough-sawn and the floor joists were cut to size with a hand rip saw. Stories have been told of just how bitterly cold the weather was during this construction but that didn't stop these dedicated Methodists.

Rev. Daugherty worked on the millwork and railings daily. The pulpit was elaborate and required several steps to reach the lectern. There were Gothic arches built into the communion rail. The new floor joists were installed at different levels in order to slant the floor downward in the sanctuary. All brides could now truly walk "down" the single aisle that replaced the double aisles of the 1860 building. Stained glass windows gave extraordinary symbolism and beauty to the new sanctuary. Exposed beams were added to the ceiling, much like the ones in the current memorial hall. A new heating system was installed in the basement. It was a wood-fired central unit with a grill in the middle of the church. This new church building cost the

congregation about \$15,000 and was definitely far beyond its time architecturally. It stood in all its glory on the hill overlooking much of West Franklin...for about six months.

Tragedy struck on November 13, 1917, not even a year after construction had been completed. A photo from The Franklin Press shows a smoke-filled sky, falling roof timbers, and gutted walls as the aftermath of a fire that totally destroyed this new Methodist Church. The fire happened before noon and no one knows its origin. There had been steps to secure insurance but the papers had not yet been filed. However, even this did not discourage these steadfast Methodists. As the article in The Franklin Press said, "The Franklin congregation is a plucky one. On the next day after the fire more than \$4,000 was pledged toward the fund for rebuilding and it is their intention to replace the building at once. Much sympathy has been extended them and we have no doubt many friends will come to their aid."

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The Methodist congregation of 1917 did prove to be "a plucky one" just as the newspaper article predicted. In the face of great tragedy, these Methodists held strong to their faith in God. They would rebuild.

With the decision made to move their next church building closer to Harrison Avenue, the same working crew got busy. Zeb Conley was at the helm once again with Burnell Waldroop, Lon Campbell, Frank Moore, Walter Angel, and Charlie West on the carpenter's crew. However, the building consultant from Atlanta was no longer on the job. Many volunteers stepped up to the plate. Jimmy Hauser was one of the teenagers who learned to nail up plaster lathe along with several other apprentices.

Although the same floor plan from the burned church was used, the cupolas and conical roofs were left off the exterior towers to help cut costs. The twenty-inch-thick walls were made from solid masonry. Bricks came by way of the Tallulah Falls railroad while the concrete was mixed on sight with a hoe. The framing lumber was sized with hand saws. Rufe Green lathed the millwork and Zeb Conley "set up his bench" near the altar so he could do the "finishing" carpentry. The communion railing and pulpit were not as elaborate as the previous ones. They were made of pine this time and lacked the Gothic motif. Also, to help cut costs they used amber colored windows rather than stained glass windows. The stained glass windows presently in the Memorial Hall were not installed until 1944.

This church building was also heated with a central furnace in the basement. The basement had wood flooring with a ladder to climb to the first floor. The pastor's study was heated with a fireplace.

Rev. Daugherty must have been devastated along with the congregation during this tragic time. But nevertheless, the ecumenical spirit of the Franklin Methodists was alive and well. By 1919, Rev. Leonidas B. Hayes was appointed pastor in Franklin and he would resume where his predecessor left off. The congregation was using their new place of worship even though it was not completely finished. So, on a daily basis, Rev. Hayes could be seen walking to the church in his overalls to help with the completion of the building. As the 1920's emerged, these "plucky" Methodists were liquidating the indebtedness of their fourth church building. After several renovations throughout the years, this building now houses our Memorial Hall.

The Spirit of the living God continued to flourish in the Franklin Methodist Church. Just as John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, proclaimed, "The best of it is, God is with us".