BETHLEHEM
United Methodist Church

Oldest Methodist Church in Georgia
In Point of Continuous Service
During the hectic years of the formation of the United States of America, the seeds were being sown which were to grow and blossom into the present Bethlehem Methodist church of Elbert County - located on State Road 72, 15 miles east of Elberton and 4 miles west of Calhoun Falls, South Carolina.

In the early part of 1786, following the Conference held at Charleston on Sunday, January 15, Bishop Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke conducted the conference at "Green Hill's" for all of Virginia and North and South Carolina. At this concurrence the members rejoiced over the Methodist Church's increase in membership of 991 during the year and that the youthful church was spreading out into and including Georgia. Coke records, "Beverly Allen has all Georgia to range in." (McTyeire's History of Methodism, page 356-357)

Beverly Allen and his brother, William, came to Georgia from Virginia and, from the record, Beverly was a very popular preacher but came to a bad end so far as the advancement of Methodism was concerned. The two Allens settled near the Bethlehem Church's present location, in the community known popularly as "Pearl Mill" for a cotton mill once located there, but once incorporated as Beverly for the Christian name of Reverend Allen. The brothers, William and Beverly Allen, were engaged in the mercantile business in Georgia and South Carolina.

During this early period, Elbert County was a part of Wilkes County and Elberton was by no means the significant town it now is. The population of the present Elbert County was mostly along the banks of the Savannah River and the more important town was Petersburg, located in the forks of Broad River and the Savannah. In 1786, there appears to have been very few churches in Georgia. According to McTyeire, there were "three Episcopal churches without rectors, three Lutheran churches, three Presbyterian and three Baptist."

After Beverley Allen had ranged in Georgia for a year, the next conference in 1786 appointed John Majors and Thomas Humphries to the state of Georgia under the eldership of James Foster, who had charge of Georgia and South Carolina. They came into Wilkes County where there were a number of Methodists, who had settled there two years before as members of a planned immigration of settlers from Virginia and North Carolina. Under the leadership of George Matthews, a hero of the Revolutionary War and who was later to become governor of Georgia, a large number of complete families - many bringing their slaves along with them - settled in the upper portions of Georgia along the Savannah River. Included in this immigration were the Grants, who later provided "Grant's Meeting House in the present Wilkes County", which lays claim to being the first completed Methodist Church in the state; the Heards, the two Allen brothers, several families of Cosby's who were maternal ancestors of Bishop James Cogood Andrew, Charles Tait, Isham Thompson and others whose descendants still reside in the county and some of who are still active in Bethlehem Church.

Majors and Humphries' work progressed so well that the next year each was assigned to separate areas of Georgia and each with a young assistant and Richard Ivey was assigned as Elder over the work in Georgia. Matthew Harris assisted Major in the Burke circuit, including all the state south and southwest of Augusta, while Moses Park assisted Humphries in the Washington Circuit, in the section north and northwest of Augusta. At the end of 1787 - after three years of effort on the part of these men and whatever Beverly Allen had accomplished - there were over 1100 Methodist in Georgia. "The church had tripled its membership in one year. This success was not to be wondered at. Ivey, Major, and Humphries were no common men, and the pioneers of Georgia heard for the first time the doctrines of a universal atonement and the Spirit's witness." (McTyeire, page 359)
Sometimes in 1786, there was, near the town of Petersburg, a congregation organized and meeting at Thompson's Meeting House. None of the early records of this congregation are available and so many of the facts are missing. It has been necessary to piece together much from the stories handed down by word of mouth from these early settlers to their descendants. Mrs. Paul Wansley, a member of Bethlehem reports:

My mother and daddy remembers my grandmother Iven having said that a Mr. Rich, a big land owner of the community, as having his slaves to help him build a church house of hewn logs on his plantation.
The spot where the church was built is on my daddy's farm. One can still tell where the chimneys stood. The building had two chimneys, one at each end. There were several graves, but no identification, just head and foot marked with soapstone rock.

This site is approximately three miles from the site of the old town of Petersburg. The town did not last long for a flood left water standing in the basements of the homes and in low places and a plague of yellow fever severely decimated the population and those that recovered moved away to higher land immediately.

On April 9, 1788, Bishop Francis Asbury held the first Annual Conference for the Methodist Church in Georgia. According to his Journal, he had conducted the conference in South Carolina and come to the Savannah River at the forks of the Broad where he crossed over. He was on his way to Thompson's Meeting house for the Conference but cold rainy weather had weakened him and he had become rather ill. Judge Charles Tait, one of those who had immigrated from Virginia, and soon to be one of the U.S. Senators from Georgia, took his friend (the Bishop) to his home not very far from Thompson's Meeting House.

According to an eye witness, the conference met in a big room of the second floor of the home, just across the small valley from the Meeting House in one direction and across another from the site of Nancy Hart, the famed heroine of the Revolution. Bishop Asbury had met in quarterly meeting on March 21, in South Carolina and was not well enough to take interest in the meeting. John Major met him there to accompany him on to Georgia and he also was almost dead with "consumption", but he exhorted after Asbury preached. On the first of April, he crossed the Savannah at the forks of the Broad River "And came where I much wanted to be, in Georgia." (Asbury's Journal). On April 2, he reports resting and writing some sections for the Discipline. At the conference, there were ten men present: Richard Ivey who was appointed Elder over the Georgia work; Thomas Humphries, Moses Park and Bennett Maxey who were appointed to the Burke Circuit; Mathew Harris who was appointed to the new Richmond Circuit (apparently formed by a division of the Burke for the membership of the two circuits were listed in the Conference Journal as Burke: 82 white members and Richmond, the county in which Augusta is located, 345 white and 22 colored members); Hope Hull and James Conner who were appointed to the Washington Circuit of which Thompson's Meeting House was a part and which reported a membership of 707 White and 71 Colored members; Isaac Smith, Reuben Ellis and possibly John Mason from the adjoining South Carolina Circuits. Thomas Humphries was not listed as receiving an appointment. He is known to have retired after several years work in Georgia and settled the remaining years of his life across the Savannah on the Pee Dee Circuit as a local preacher.

Hope Hull, who was appointed to the Washington Circuit at this conference was a Marylander by birth and first came to Georgia at this conference. He was to serve Georgia Methodism well for a few more years and then he became engaged in the educational work of the Church for a time in Wilkes county. Later, about 1802, he moved to Athens and there was instrumental in the establishment of the University of Georgia which was the first state chartered university in the United States. For a time he was its acting President and for many years the most active of its trustees.
Georgia's second conference was held at Grant's Meeting House in Wilkes County in 1789, and likewise the third in 1790. At the second conference, the first, though unsuccessful, educational institution of Methodism in Georgia was launched. At the third, another event of interest for the future members of Methodism as a whole and for Bethlehem took place. John Andrew was the first native Georgian to be admitted to the Georgia Conference.

John Andrew was a man of Puritan ancestry who came from Dorchester, England to found Dorchester, Mass., thence to establish Dorchester, S.C., and later on the Midway settlement near Savannah. John Andrew moved from his birthplace near Midway to the portion of Wilkes which later became Elbert County. In Elbert, he met and married Mary Cosby, of one of the families emigrating to Georgia from Virginia with General Matthews. His length of service as an itinerant Methodist Preacher was short and he became a school teacher.

On May 3, 1794, there was born to John Andrew and Mary, a son, James Osgood Andrew, who grew up not impressing anyone as being of outstanding timber. One year during a camp meeting, which was not very outstanding, he was converted and joined the church. The stewards said of this meeting: "Nobody joined but little Jimmie Andrew." Tradition has it according to Dr. C.C. Jarrell in his "Oxford Echoes" in Wesleyan Christian Advocate for April 8, 1954.

Young Andrew was rocked in this cradle of Georgia Methodism. All the pioneer giants had thrilled him with the marvels of their pulpit eloquence. He heard James Russel at the summit of his fame. He had been fascinated with the eccentric Lorenzo Dow. The master of revivals, Smith Mead, had stirred him with gospel song and sermon. The great Hope Hull had taken him when a child, in his arms and blessing him, had baptised him and begged God to make him a good man, a great man, a Methodist Preacher and to let him die a Methodist Bishop. George Smith tells this Hull story in his "Life of James O. Andrew" and calls it a tradition. At least, it is on the right side. In one sense, his education was limited, at least in the formal sense of the word. But what an education it must have been to have thus been rocked in the cradle of Georgia Methodism (Wesleyan Christian Advocate, P.11)

When the quarterly conference came to act on the pastor's recommendation and the Presiding Elder's insistence, with a not too large majority, James L. Andrew was licensed to preach. After he was licensed, he was called to the pulpit to preach. Afterwards a sour-puss saint (for the good of his own soul) told the lad, "If I had heard you preach first, I believe I would have voted against you."

Another local tradition holds that shortly afterwards, the young James Andrew preached at Bethlehem. None of the members would invite him home for dinner this particular Sunday on which he supplied the pulpit except a negro woman. The fare she provided was very meager – corn bread and sweet potatoes. Years later, after achieving fame, as a Bishop, he preached again and nearly everyone wanted him to come to dinner. But remembering a not too happy reception on the earlier occasion, he refused after seeing an aged negro woman standing on the edge of the crowd. He again went home with the only person who had invited him that first time.

There seems to be no knowledge of the time or circumstances surrounding the movement of Thompson's Meeting House to the present location and the change of its name. There is a mention in Bishop Asbury's Journal of a later trip to Georgia in which he mentions preaching at Tait's Chapel. When this change was made or the
later change to Bethlehem or why the changes were made are unknown. The History of Elbert County (p. 84) states that it was probably between 1830 and 1835. However, there is recorded in Book N, page 88 of the Deed Books recorded in Elbert County Courthouse, a deed showing that on July 25, 1804, for the sum of $6.00 two acres of land were converted from David and Ann Graham (his wife) to Andrew Walker, James Walker, and James Gilman, Trustees for the Methodist Church. The Deed was recorded December 22, 1810.

The date and nature of the first structure at this location is not known. When the building before the present one was constructed is not known. It was a one-room building, long and narrow. Later an addition was made and several renovations which provided for the addition of four Church School Class Rooms and changed the entrance. During the years, the property has also increased from the original two acres to five or six. A new building was erected in 1959. This is a brick structure.

The cemetery contains some very old graves, some of which must contain the remains of the earliest members of the church. A part of the cemetery was reserved for the use of negroes in the community and there are some recent graves in this section. The latest addition to the cemetery was a number of graves which the U.S. Government had moved from the site of Petersburg. When a large hydro-electric dam was built at Clark Hill near Augusta, the back water completely covered the site of the former Petersburg. Many of the graves are marked unknown but there are some in good repair considering their age.

People were so busy making history they did not take time to record it; however, we have several historical facts.

1. Our church was host to the first Annual Conference in Georgia

2. It is the oldest Methodist Church in point of continuous service in Georgia.

3. For a time both of Georgia’s United States Senators lived at Petersburg only five miles away and both worshipped at Bethlehem Church at the same time.

We are proud of the history and tradition of our church but we may with the founder of Methodism that “the best is yet to come.”

TOM LANGSTON