HISTORICAL SKETCH OF

LAWRENCEVILLE, GEORGIA, UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

In 1951, P. M. Christian, member of the church and editor of the News-Herald, a local paper, wrote a history of this church which was printed in the paper. The article was quoted at length in J. C. Flanigan's, "History of Gwinnett County," Vol. II, 1818-1960, published in 1961, and now out of print. Mr. Flanigan had published another book in 1911, called, "Gwinnett Churches!" It is information from these two sources that is the basis for this sketch, plus information from current records to bring it up to the present.

The early history of the Lawrenceville Methodist Church is somewhat shrouded in mystery and if any records were made concerning the activities of the church during the early years of its existence, they have long since been lost or destroyed. Two events probably contributed to this fact; first, the courthouse fire of 1871, then, the church fire of February 13, 1902. Very few records were saved in the courthouse fire and none in the church fire.

The town of Lawrenceville was chartered, December 15, 1821, exactly three years after the county of Gwinnett was authorized by legislative action and signed into law by the governor when the capitol was at Milledgeville. One old record which has been preserved reads as follows: "At the session of the South Carolina/Gwinnett Mission, in 1823, Reverend W. J. Parks was appointed to serve the Gwinnett Mission," and he remained here through 1824. His first sermon was preached in the county courthouse, then a temporary log house. He also served this "Mission" (or circuit), again in 1829. A charter membership list might have been compiled, and if so, probably burned in the 1902 fire. From other records names of early settlers who became members were, Jesse Murphey, Elias Norton, William Maltbie, Isham Williams, Elisha Winn family. Jesse Murphey was a long time class leader and superintendent of Sunday School.

When the first building was erected is not known but it was on the lot with the old cemetery, bordered by present day Crogan and Pike Sts. It was a small wooden building. The second was erected in 1854 and was located on the hill
northwest of the courthouse and one block away. Ten acres had been set aside in this location by county officials in the early years for educational and spiritual purposes. The second building was torn down around 1891 and replaced by a larger and better structure built of heart pine. This is the building destroyed by fire in February, 1902, along with the school building nearby. The fire occurred at night during a high, cold northwest wind. Burning pieces of wood were thrown over the southeast part of town as far as half-a-mile away, creating additional fires. Only persistent and vigilant work by volunteer firefighters saved that part of town from burning.

There was no insurance on this building, but the members immediately began to lay plans for a new church. In the meantime, the Baptists and Presbyterians graciously offered the use of their facilities for worship. It was stated by the News Herald paper that the Baptist offer was accepted for three Sundays a month because of its central location. A good many of the benches had been saved from the fire and these were placed in the Baptist church to help with the seating.

In due time a lot was purchased at the corner of East Pike and Chestnut Sts. and a substantial brick building was erected on part of the lot. This building was adequate until 1920. A church school annex was added then and a great many other improvements made in the building. A parsonage had been constructed on the lot when the church was built. It was a frame building and caught fire in 1932, being damaged so badly it had to be rebuilt. The building was insured and a nice brick veneered parsonage replaced the old one. During the 1950's and 1960's, it became increasingly evident that another building and location would be needed.

However, in July 1954, Boyd C. Winn became pastor and under his leadership physical improvements, that had been long needed, were made to the property. First, the sanctuary was completely redecorated at a cost of $12,000. Next, in May of 1955, the church was given authority by Zach C. Hayes, District Superintendent, to construct a new educational building to be joined to the sanctuary at the rear. A Building Committee consisting of Herman Tanner, John Wilson, Earl Story and Reverend Winn was set up. The church was authorized by the Quarterly Conference.
on October 30, 1955, to secure a loan to finance the new addition over a period of three years. A nice two-story addition was completed in 1957 at an approximate cost of $25,000.

In July 1957, George R. Holden was assigned as pastor. Improvements were made to the parsonage with kitchen renovated, outside woodwork painted; walkway from church to parsonage back door laid; new living room furniture bought by WSCS under leadership of Mrs. Vanus Jones, and a new communion set purchased by WSCS and Wesley Fellowship Class. In 1958, the church voted to sponsor a room at the new Gwinnett County Hospital at a cost of $500.00. In 1959, the church voted to adopt a missionary couple and were assigned Rev. and Mrs. Lyle H. Powell and family by the Mission Board. The Powells were stationed in India and while on furlough, on one occasion, Rev. Powell and family visited the church and told about the life of a missionary.

During 1963 the membership voted to buy a new parsonage in Western Heights on Stark Street. The old parsonage adjacent to the church was converted into a nursery and Sunday school annex for the younger children as additional space had been needed for some time. The new parsonage was paid for during the ministry of Rev. J. Douglas Gibson who had been assigned to the church in July 1964, following Rev. Donald Gray.

As the need for expansion became more evident the membership voted to buy seven acres of property in 1965 at the corner of Crogan St. and Langley Drive, about five blocks from the center of town. This was the old home place of Mr. Sam Craig, former member of the church. At the Quarterly Conference in October 1969, construction of a new educational plant was authorized and a Building Committee set up with Jack Welchel as chairman. This committee was to work directly with the Administrative Board and the Architect. Additional committees were set up to report to the Building Committee their recommendations on various aspects of the building program and, finally, ground breaking time rolled around but under a new pastor. After serving the church for seven years, Douglas Gibson was placed on special assignment by the Conference and in July 1971, Harry L. Mitchem became the
pastor. In the early fall of 1971 ground for the new building was broken and a contract with the builder specified that the building would be completed in 270 working days. The records do not indicate that this schedule was met. Anyway, the first services were held in the new structure in the fall of 1973, using the social hall for worship services until the new sanctuary is built.

In July 1973, William L. Childers replaced Mr. Mitchem as pastor, and very ably served the congregation for five and one-half years. He added a considerable number of new members, created a spiritual awareness among the membership resulting in new records for Sunday school and worship attendance. The fund raising programs for the new sanctuary could not keep the pace with the rate of inflation and the increase in interest rates. Sanctuary construction has been delayed for this reason. In an emergency situation the Conference was called upon to make some unanticipated pastoral changes in the middle of the conference year. As a result, William L. Childers was moved to another church at the end of December 1978, and our church heard a new pastor the first Sunday in January 1979 by the name of Charles Farr. The momentum begun with Mr. Childers has not decreased under Mr. Farr and continued growth is anticipated spiritually and physically. We are pushing to get the new sanctuary under way as soon as possible. Rev. Becki Jones was added to the staff at the last conference and has proven a decided asset in her assistance to the pastor and her leadership and work with the youth and children of the church. She will admit she has learned a lot and taught a lot, but, unfortunately we hear that we are going to lose her to another church and we can only pray for her future growth and happiness, and well being. We will miss her.

Statistically church growth has not been exciting since 1823. The town and the county was primarily agricultural until after 1920, and then it was broke when cotton dropped to almost nothing in price. In 1911 church membership was 335 with about three or four members worth more than $15,000. Church property was valued at $9,000, not including the Camp Ground, in 1911. At the end of conference year 1950-51, the membership was approximately 430, and the value of property may have
increased to as much as $20,000. The budget for the year was $5,500 and was all paid up by conference time. In the last 30 years the situation has changed a great deal and is exciting! Today the membership is 925 and the budget for 1981 is over $189,000. Value of the church property, including the Camp Ground, is not far from $750,000.

A record of all the pastors serving the church is not available that we know about. As previously stated, Gwinnett county came under the supervision and direction of the South Carolina Conference until a Georgia Conference was set up by Bishop Asbury. Lawrenceville Methodists were in a circuit of 18 churches for a good many years. Although the circuit was gradually decreased in size it was not until after 1900 AD when the church became a full charge. Miss Bettie Juhan, a loyal life member recorded as many of the pastors as she could, for her own record, and they are as follows: Rev. W. J. Parks came first in 1823-24, and again in 1829; then, a Rev. Graham, 1837; Walter R. Branhm, Sr., 1843; J. M. Verdal, 1846; Joseph Smith, 1849; J. W. Burke, 1856; J. W. Yarbrough, 1858-59; J. D. Anthony, 1860-63; Lucious Anthony, 1864-67; J. M. Lowery, 1868; F. F. Reynolds, 1870-72; George Kramer, 1873; V. V. Harlan, 1874; R. R. Johnson, 1875; H. M. Quillian, 1876; J. R. Smith, 1877; S. H. Dimond, 1880; W. M. Winn, 1881-82; Kosesko Reed, 1883; J. R. King, 1884; M. E. Turner & T. S. Lewis, 1885; E. K. Aiken, 1886-87; R. E. L. Timmons, 1888; G. K. Quillian, 1889; H. M. Edwards, 1890; S. B. Ledbetter, 1891-92; J. L. Moon, 1893; W. A. Parks, 1894; T. H. Timmons, 1895; J. E. England, 1896-98; W. A. Hodges, 1899; J. T. Warlick, 1900; J. W. Griner, 1901; J. A. Timmerman, 1902; W. L. Rivers, 1903; F. F. Spencer, 1904; Wallace Rogers, 1905; J. F. Nixon, 1906; O. L. Kelly, 1907-08; C. H. B. Branch, 1909-10; W. R. Branhm, 1911; J. T. Eakes, 1912-13; J. F. Mashburn, 1914-15; William Dunbar, 1916-18; E. G. Thomason, 1919-20; Henry H. Jones, 1921-22; Marvin A. Franklin, 1923-24; J. M. Tumlin, 1925-26; T. M. Elliott, 1927; S. R. England, 1928-29; R. F. Rutland, 1930; W. W. Cash, 1932-34; H. L. Edmondson, 1935-36; Paul McKnight, 1937-40; C. F. Venable, 1941-42; R. L. Whitehead, 1943-45; W. F. Lunsford, 1946; Wilson J. Gulpepper, 1947-49; Hoyt Henderson, 1950-53; Boyd C. Winn, 1954-57;
J. Douglas Gibson, 1964-71; Harry L. Mitchem, 1971-73; William L. Childers,
1973-78; Charles Farr, 1979 to present. All have been good or better and the
members have been blessed by their ministry, but two of the earlier pastors sent
were outstanding in the memory of a great majority of the members, most of whom are
no longer among the living. Henry H. Jones who served in 1921 and 1922 was one of
the two. He was one succeeded by Marvin A. Franklin who served in 1923 and 1924,
and later became Bishop, assigned to Mississippi Conference. Both were dedicated
Christians with tremendous abilities.

EPILOGUE

The history of this church would not be complete without mentioning the Camp
Ground and its part in the spiritual life of the church. Camp Meeting has to be a
Methodist innovation, partly or mainly because of John Wesley's activities out in
the open all over England. Every person he sent here to help carry the Methodist
message to every frontier was accustomed to preaching from a stump more than he was
inside a building of some sort. George Whitefield preached from Georgia to New
England, most of the time outdoors. A Camp Ground was the logical answer in a good
many places. Bowen's Camp Ground was in existence by 1820, west of Lawrenceville
about five miles, and the Boring family was active there. In 1827 Bethesda Church
came into being and the camp ground was moved to a site north of Lawrenceville.

This is the location of the Lawrenceville Methodist Camp Ground. The property
was purchased in 1832 by five Methodist Laymen, George Brogdon, Buckner Harris,
William Maltbie, Isham Williams and Elisha Winn. The cost for 50 acres was $10.00
each or $50.00. All of these men were members of the local church except George
Brogdon, and he belonged to Level Creek Methodist Church near Suwanee. The first
service was held at this location in the summer of 1833, and continued without
interruption until the Civil War. Camp Meetings began after the war but the date
is not available, and have continued until the present. The Methodist preachers
present at the first local Camp Meeting were: William J. Parks, Presiding Elder;
John W. Glenn; John Pendergrass; Allen Turner; and Jonathon Betts. Parks had
served as the first circuit pastor to Lawrenceville.
In Flanigan's "History of Gwinnett County", Vol. II, p. 245, is found the beginning of five essays on Lawrenceville Campground, written in 1895 by Richard D. Winn, not long before his death. He was the son of Elisha Winn, one of the five who contributed to the purchase of camp ground property. Richard Winn had strayed from the Methodist church to the Presbyterians and was a member at Fairview Presbyterian church, but he was still Methodist enough to be intrigued with camp meeting and its spiritual influence and effect upon the county. These essays are about some of the preachers he heard at camp meeting.

Traditionally for reasons based on agricultural activities, camp meeting had always begun around the first full week in August. Crops were laid by, vegetable gardens had reached their peak, watermelons and peaches were ripe, frying size chickens were in abundance and everybody was ready for a full week of good preaching and fellowship and eating. Many a Methodist preacher established his reputation as a fried chicken eater at camp meeting. The fast food chicken one reluctantly gets today would not have been permitted on the table by a Methodist hostess and, of course, frozen foods were not even dreamed about.

On the final day, Sunday, there were usually four services: 8AM, 11AM, 3PM, and 8PM. No preacher ever stopped under an hour at the 11AM service, and some held out longer. The arbor was filled to overflowing and there were some always standing around the edges. Everyone had on their Sunday best and no man dared go without a coat. The grounds were full of wagons and buggies and livestock. Now and then a horse would neigh, a mule bray and a cow moo. Some of the tenters had the cows along for fresh milk. The congregation, though, only heard the preacher because this was what they came for, and frequent and hearty "AMENS" attested to this fact.

Source material referred to in first paragraph

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