History of LIBERTY CHURCH---1830-1951
Madison County, Georgia

In 1830 Andrew Jackson was president of the United States. There were 24 states in the Union, and the country was just beginning to build national roads and canals. 1830 was the year the first steam locomotive in the country was tried out. By 1830 most of the Indians had left the South and gone west of the Mississippi, and the land they left was filled up with planters and their slaves and given over to the cultivation of cotton.

And it was in 1830 that Liberty Church was first organized, by some of these pioneer farmer families. The first building was a hewn log house about a quarter of a mile from the present site, on the north side of the Hudson River in Franklin County. Nothing has remained for many years to mark the spot except the burial ground with some dozen graves overgrown with weeds and briers. When this first house was outgrown and a new site selected for a more pretentious church the building was dismantled and the hewn logs moved and made into a barn, so the story goes.

Who the founding members of Liberty Church were we do not know for sure, but some of the earliest members of whom we have any record are George Fowler, James M. Stephens, Harvey McEwen, Atkinson Tabor, Barton Guess Payne, Marcus William Parr, Asa Miller, James McWhirter, and John Fowler.

Who chose the name Liberty we do not know, but certainly it was appropriate, for in 1830 the country's hard-won liberty from England was still new enough to be a constant source of thankfulness in everybody's mind.

If, as older members of Liberty have said, the church first belonged to the South Carolina Conference the connection must have been a short one. For 1830 was also the year the Georgia Conference was organized.

According to records left by older members, between 1830 and 1866 preachers at Liberty included W. J. Parks, James Quillian, Dr. Cotter, R. W. Bingham, and Daniel Cox. Older members have also said that Liberty was first on the Dahlonega District, on a circuit including Carnesville,
Carroll's, Bold Springs, Ebenezer, Pennington's Chapel, Wesley's Chapel, Redwine, Mt. Zion, Diamond Hill, Center, and New Franklin Springs.

In 1866 when the Georgia Conference was divided into North and South and the Elberton District was organized, this circuit, including Liberty, became part of the new district.

In 1875 the Danielsville Circuit was organized, Liberty being one of the churches.

During the pastorate of Frank Rutherford, 1883-84, Liberty was transferred to the Carnesville Circuit. And it was while I. H. Miller was pastor, 1909-10, that Liberty, because it was a church strong in membership, wealth, and influence, was transferred back to the Danielsville Circuit to be a help to the weaker and newer churches on the charge. And if Liberty Church cannot still be considered the strongest church on the charge, the one the others depend on for support in membership and wealth, this beloved and historic old institution is no less strong in the devotion of its members, though they be declined in number. This very decline in number seems to draw the members close together and make them even more loyal and more persevering in their determination to stand together and work to grow and increase and to keep up the work started by our Methodist fathers.

In 1856 the original hewn log church was abandoned and the present site chosen for a new meeting house, this one framed and weatherboarded but not ceiled. The site, eight and eighteen-hundredths acres, was given by Captain John N. Montgomery, one of the large landowners in the community. The deed to the site, beautifully written in long hand, dated February 1, 1859, and signed by Captain Montgomery, is in possession of the members of Liberty. Trustees named in the deed are Barton G. Payne, Marcus W. Parr, James N. Stephens, James L. Bird, and Atkinson Tabor. A reservation in the deed allows the Presbyterians in the community the right to hold meetings in the church two Sabbaths in each month, this provision being made because the Presbyterian brothers had, in the words of the deed, "-----assisted in building said
house by paying part or portion of the money, for paying the same and building said house----." The deed also allows for the building of a schoolhouse opposite the church, and, according to best records available, the first schoolhouse was built in 1858. One of the earliest teachers, perhaps the first, for he was teaching in 1860, was Lewis Gaines.

Ten years later, in 1870, Miss Jane Hall, who came from Elbert County to teach at Liberty School, founded our Sunday School. Miss Jennie, as she was called, stayed on in Fort Lamar to marry Mr. Luke Montgomery, son of Captain Montgomery. One descendant of Captain Montgomery is at present a member of Liberty--Miss Virginia Thornton, his great-granddaughter, and granddaughter of Miss Jennie.

Some wonderfully stirring accounts have come down to us of our early church leaders. Sometime between 1856 and 1860 Joel Hutcherson, a man who has been described as "powerful in prayer," moved to Fort Lamar with his family from Elbert County and united with Liberty. During the dark days of the Civil War when the church was barely holding its own, C. H. Andrew, a teacher, distant relative of Bishop Andrew, moved into the community. He has been described as "a man of solid piety, zealous in good works," and it has further been said of him that he probably wielded a greater influence for good than any other person belonging to Liberty during its first fifty years.

We have accounts of a wonderful revival in the summer of 1866, by the Reverend Goodman Hughes and Henry Crawford. Among those joining the church were many, including Captain Montgomery, who had served in the recently ended war.

About this time Joshua Hutcherson and his family moved in and became members. This was a musical family, giving generously of their talent and improving the church music.

All these accessions made the church strong in men and money and influence, and the members began to want a new and better building. The present
house was built in 1876 while the Reverend J. W. G. Watkins was pastor. After the new house was built the church continued to grow and to prosper and leaders came forward to carry on the work. Some of these later members mentioned in records and remembered for their faithful good works are R. M. Carruth, John M. Hutcherson, J. C. Tabor, G. E. Pittman, John N. Gordon, J. B. McWhirter, R. L. Stephens, W. J. Stephens, M. F. Fowler, M. F. McWhirter, L. S. McWhirter, W. F. Wilder, Frank H. Parker, B. L. Parker, J. D. Cromer, Martin L. McCay, J. F. Payne, A. L. Payne. In more recent years the E. L. McCay family has a record of generous and faithful devotion to Liberty. They gave our beautiful Bible as a memorial to Lieutenant James McCay who was lost during World War II in India. He now rests in Liberty churchyard.

Our present stewards are John Lawrence, E. L. McCay, Leland McWhirter, and Mrs. B. P. Higgenbotham.

Since its beginning the history of our Sunday School is one of long and faithful service by many men and women. J. C. Tabor, who served as superintendent for many years and as teacher of the Adult Class, is remembered as one of the finest men ever to live in the Fort Lamar Community. At his death J. Howard McWhirter was elected superintendent. He was followed by Frank H. Parker. Other superintendents include Larvin McWhirter, E. L. McCay, Bonnie Ruth McCay, Richard Hart; and our present superintendent is Mrs. Gladys Lawrence.

The Woman's Missionary Society, as it was then called, was organized in 1939 with Miss Rachel Hutcherson as the first president, and with 18 charter members. Now it is the Woman's Society of Christian Service, with Mrs. Fannie Stovall as president.

The writer likes to think about her first recollections of Sunday School—sitting in one of the pine pews hemmed tight by other young ones all too short for their feet to touch the floor—being handed a brightly pictured square lesson card by Miss Lilly Pittman, many years teacher of the "little folks" class. She likes too to think of the first minister she remembers—a tall,
dark-haired young man preaching from Liberty's pulpit: **Brother** Marvin Franklin
they called him then, **Bishop** Marvin Franklin now.

There has been one District Conference held at Liberty, in August 1869 when W. T. Norman was pastor. There have been two weddings in the church: Miss Elizabeth Parker to J. C. Tabor in 1892, and Miss Katie Ann Tyner to Jimmie Gunnells on December 19, 1950. The first person buried in our churchyard was Catherine Shell McWhirter, wife of James McWhirter, in 1857. She was a sister of Lemon Shell, a minister in the South Carolina Conference. James W. Stephens, at present a member of the North Georgia Conference, and a descendant of James N. Stephens, one of the original trustees, joined the church at Liberty's altar.

To use the same quotation that Bishop Moore uses in his introduction to Dr. Pierce's new history of Methodism in Georgia, "Our past is secure." That can be said no less truly of Liberty Church than of Georgia Methodism. But it is to the future we must look and we must try our utmost to make that secure too.

Our present opportunities are greater even than they were in the past. Let us take heart and all work together to realize the power and influence that a united membership, each one zealous in the performance of his duties, can have in the community.

By Callie McWhirter
May, 1951

Church moved from Franklin to Maticeville 1859