GRACEWOOD, GEORGIA
May 9, 1966

Rev. A.B. Elizer
179 Etowah Drive
Cartersville, Ga.

Regarding Historical Data: Liberty Methodist Church on the Gracewood Charge Augusta, district, was organized in 1786 according to historical records. However some believes it was organized in 1775, but, in either case it is the oldest Methodist Church in Richmond, County, and the 2nd. oldest in the State, and possibly the oldest now with a continuous ministry. Bishop Francis Asbury, preached in its pulpit in 1790, and it was a part of the South Carolina Conference since the Georgia was not in existence at that time.

Assuming that the above information is correct, we believe that this church should be preserved as a shrine to Methodism in Georgia. We are interested at this point and would like to hear from you regarding the possibility. We are not using the old building at present, having completed a new building this year that is adequate at present, both for Sunday school and worship. This old church is coming alive again, we have received 17, members this year with 7 of them on profession of faith. Also the new building is paid for.

Sincerely

G.S. Radford, pastor
Gracewood, Ga. 30812
LIBERTY METHODIST
ORIGIN AND FIRST STEPS

The Methodist Church had its beginning with the Baltimore Conference, December 24, 1784—referred to frequently as "The Christmas Conference".

Prior to 1784 the work among Methodists was largely through individual and small group efforts. Obviously there was little unity and no parent body support. This is pointed out by historians. Dr. W. Thomas Smith, Preludes: Georgia Methodist, The American Revolution, p 22, had this to say...

"Prior to 1784, work done in Georgia would have been by individual Methodists—herein lies much of the Methodist story".

Another historian, Dr. George Smith, Georgia Methodism p27, said that before any regularly assigned preacher arrived in Georgia "70 members of societies were reported... gathered by some unknown local preacher".

According to several historical tracts, and the tradition of some families, claims are made the Liberty Methodist Church had its beginning in the period just prior to, or very soon after the 1784 Conference. Legal documents (deeds) seem also to indicate church building(s) just subsequent to the Christmas Conference, 1784. Our attempt in this paper is to bring to bear as much information as possible about Liberty's origin. Three sources will be used: historical data, legal documents, and family tradition. Copies of the legal documents (deeds) will be submitted with this paper. Also we will submit any printed materials in hand which are germane.

It seems, on the basis of historical documents and family tradition, reasonable to suppose that Liberty Church grew out of individual or family efforts. Associated with this was the Collins family. Most of the researchers and writers cite Samuel Collins as the "unknown" local preacher in this case who was responsible for the group or Methodist society which was to become the S.C. Church, and later Liberty. Frances Asbury mentioned a Collins family in Caroline County, Maryland, at least ten times in his Journal. His first reference to them is in 1779-80.

Walter A. Clark in his book, A Lost Arcadia, said,

"In one of the early years following the Revolutionary War a tribe of Collins brothers and probably sisters made their advent in this section. There were Moses, Lewis, Samuel, Stephen, and possibly others. One of these brothers, Samuel or Stephen, cut the first log that went into the original Church building that stood on the site of what is now Liberty..." (See attached copy from A Lost Arcadia)
Mrs. Philip Seebach, presently living in Louisville, Georgia, in a letter dated May 27, 1980 said,

"I was interested in the article on the Restoration Project at old Liberty Church...

'There was a tradition in my family (Matthews) that it (Liberty) was founded by Samuel Collins who had been converted by Bishop Asbury and sent South at his behest as an itinerant Methodist missionary. We have been told that his daughter, Catherine Collins, who married (1) William Matthews and (2) Aquilla Matthews (brother of William), was my great, great grandmother...

'Further tradition says that he (Samuel Collins) probably came from Cork County, Ireland, to America and apparently landed at Boston, and while living there became involved in the famous Boston Tea Party in 1773, and fled the city to avoid possible arrest. He made his way to Maryland where he came under the influence of Bishop Asbury...

'Samuel's land lay just south of the Richmond County line in Burke County. He is said to have given the land where Liberty Church was erected; but the deed, and his will (if he made one) have never been found. As you possibly know, there have been two court house fires in Burke County, and early records there have suffered destruction or loss."

Since both Samuel and Stephen Collins had the initials, S.C., is it possible that Stephen could have been the one referred to by initial rather than Samuel?? Stephen owned land in Richmond County as early as 1785. If land were given for this Church prior to 1777, it would have recorded in Burke County since Richmond County was not constituted until 1777. The reference to the Church by the initials, S.C., comes from Asbury's Journal.

Asbury recorded in his Journal for Monday, March 1, 1790:

"We crossed at Augusta, in Georgia, and rode to S.C. Church..."

The late Dr. Robert L. Rhodes of Augusta compiled a History of Old Liberty Church. Much of his information, he claimed, came from his great grandmother (Youngest child of Samuel Collins, born August 2, 1794) and his mother. Dr. Rhodes was convinced from all evidences that he found that Samuel Collins, urged by Bishop Asbury, came to Georgia and settled south of Augusta where he began to preach, and soon thereafter steps were taken
to erect a log meeting house, which, he said, was known as "Sam Collins Church". Some years later it was given its present name "Liberty Methodist Church".

Dr. Walter Clark, A Lost Arcadia, adds the strength of his pen to the S.C. Church matter. He notes,

"The Church bore for a time the name of its original projector, either Samuel or Stephen Collins, and this fact explains, I feel assured, the initials used by Bishop Asbury in its title."

It appears impossible with the facts presently known to establish a definite date for the initial step which resulted in the S.C. Church (later to be called Liberty). Nonetheless, recurring indications point to a time no later than 1785-1788. Dr. Rhodes claimed an earlier date than the Baltimore Conference, 1784. Others have seemed to imply an early date.

August, 1966, Dr. Rhodes stated,

"A year ago I presented to you the history of Liberty Church obtained from records in my family from Sam Collins' youngest daughter, Katherine Louise, who was my mother's grandmother...

"As to the oldest Methodist Church in Georgia, I stated that Liberty was first built as a log Church by Sam Collins, who himself cut the first log, and, with the assistance of several others, it was completed in 1774 or 1775. I could not be certain because of the blurring of the last figure."

(Quoted from article in Augusta News, dated February 22, 1967)

Dr. Clark said,

"It (S.C. Church) was the first Methodist Church erected in Richmond County and possibly the second in the state. Grant's Meeting House in Wilkes County being the first. (A Lost Arcadia) Here, however, no specific date is mentioned.

Any attempt to establish a definite site or sites for the S.C. Church prior to the present location leaves one with minimal descriptive evidence. However, to ignore the possibility of such would be to discount a legal document which seemed to indicate that a prior site did exist. Add to this the speculation of historians and family records and the case is even stronger for a possible prior site.

A deed from Benjamin and Elizabeth Dunn to the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church (one of whom was Robert Allen)
noted,

"The above 4½ acres of land is part of a tract of 800 acres originally granted to John Hobbs on May 20th, 1788, having a house of worship just built on it."

The description of this property clearly indicates a site different from the present one.

A deed dated January 2, 1804 describes the transfer of title to the property on which the present Liberty Church is situated. This deed transfers two acres more or less to the trustees. The description is followed by this statement:

"Having a house of worship just built on it."

In view of the fact that this deed is dated January 2, 1804, and that it includes the statement that the house of worship had just been built on it, then it follows that the present building must have been erected prior to 1804. (See deed included)

Dr. Rhodes, again drawing from family records, said,

"The original Church was a small log structure located on a ridge a mile or two west of the present site; the second, a larger one, was also made of logs."

Rhodes was unable to ascertain just when the name was changed from S.C. to Liberty, or when the third, still-standing "plank Church" was built. He believed it was built no later than 1810. Evidently he never read the 1804 deed.

George C. Smith, History of Georgia Methodist, claims that the S.C. Church must have been located near Brothersville. Actually this would correspond favorably with Dr. Rhodes' claim that it was "a mile of two west of the present site."

Dr. Clark, A Lost Arcadia, seemed to believe that there was only one site...

"In further evidence of its antiquity (S.C. Church) my friend, Josiah M. Seago, has informed me that his grandfather, The Reverend James Heatherland, preached in this Church in 1818, and that the building in which he ministered was the third house of worship that had sanctified the site."

James Heatherland's great granddaughter, Mrs. Armand Seago, 90 years of age still lives in the Liberty community.
All of our research in historical data, family records, and legal documents produced facts which indicate that the Liberty Methodist Church had its beginning with the Methodist movement in Georgia during the latter 1700's. Moreover, the deed-together with other documents-leaves no doubt in our minds that the present building — 'plank church' — was erected prior to the date of the deed granted 9th January, 1804. We base this claim primarily on the statement in the deed, "they shall continue or cause to be continued thereon a house or place of worship, there being one already erected for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church..." (See 1804 deed enclosed)

We very sincerely request that Liberty Methodist Church be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

* We have made application for a place on the National Register. It is now moving through the channels.