HISTORY
OF
THE SHARON METHODIST CHURCH
SHARON, GEORGIA
BY
MISS CHRISTINE DAVIDSON BROWN
It has been aptly said that the biography of a man begins with his grandfather. Just so, in order that we may understand the history of our church, we must seek beyond the narrow confines of its constituted existence for its earlier origins and influences in the powerful personalities remote from, and in many instances unknown to, its present membership. From the study of all available records, from the garnered memories of our older members, and from the traditions handed down to us by our grandparents, we of the Sharon Methodist Church recognize, and hereby gratefully and lovingly acknowledge, our debt to Raytown as our "Mother Church." In her nurture our founders had their being; and from the inspiration of her early ministry they gained the power that sent them forth to organize and carry on a church which has throughout its history maintained with her the close relationship of family ties, of friendly intercourse, and a rich and lasting Christian fellowship. So close have these ties been that it would be almost impossible to write separate histories of these two churches without losing much of the spiritual significance of both. Located within two miles of one another and both situated within that part of Taliaferro County cut off from Wilkes in 1825, their memberships have sprung from many of the same origins; the names of many of the "charter members" of the Sharon Church transferred from the rolls of the Raytown Church; their ministry, with the exception of a few years when Sharon was not in the Norwood Circuit, has been the same; their organization and their government have been identical.

In our history of Raytown's Methodist Church we have written briefly of its origins and influences. These same apply to our Sharon Church and, for those who will review their church history no farther into the past
than this reading, we repeat them here. Limited as we are in space, we
must leave to others the wider study of Georgia's religious life: - The
story of the Reverend Henry Herbert who came with General Oglethorpe to
remain but three months and and die at sea on his way back home; of the
Salzburgers and their Lutheran ministry; of the Reverend Samuel Quincy,
a native of Massachusetts, who came to Savannah in May, 1733, and, though
dissatisfied, remained until the Wesleys arrived; of the arrival on Feb­
uary 8, 1736 of John and Charles Wesley with Benjamin Ingham and Charles
deLamotte; of their unhappy stay of less than two years and their return
to England; of George Whitefield's successful ministry and the inspiring
story of his "gospel ranging" --- from Savannah to Boston in every colony
along the eastern seaboard, in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales ---
and of his founding the Bethesda Orphanage, imperishable monument to his
memory; of Cornelius Winter, convert of Mr. Whitefield in England, who
came to Georgia in 1769 to spend a year in teaching and preaching to the
negroes, only to return to England a wiser and a sadder young man. We can
but mention the names of these great men so familiar to all students of
our early church history as instruments in the Methodist reformation and
its impact upon the infant colony of Georgia.

Our church origins, however, do not stem from Savannah. It was long after
the return of these men to England that Methodism came to America in
sufficient power to warrant the organization of the widely-scattered
Methodist Societies into one body. Our church historians emphasize the
advance
decade following 1760 as the years marking the great
in the formation of
these Societies by the "irregulars" who took possession of the field befo-
re the first missionaries appointed by Wesley came to the new world in
1770. These were local preachers who, converted to Methodism, migrated
to America, became naturalized, grew in love of the soil and of the peo-
ple, and, during the Revolution, stood by the cause of Methodism in Ameri-
ca when all but one of the "regulars," Francis Asbury, were routed from
the field. Again, we can but name these founders of Armenian Methodism in America: Robert Strawbridge, first in order of time and talent, from the Methodist ranks in Ireland, to Maryland in 1760 to organize the first Methodist Society in America and to build in 1764 the first Methodist meeting house; Philip Embury from Ireland to New York to begin his ministry in 1766 and build Wesley Chapel, dedicated October 30, 1768, a shrine to be seen today by all Methodists who visit New York; Captain Thomas Webb, a British officer and a "chosen vessel" for the northern colonies; Robert Williams, an Irish itinerant, arriving in New York in 1769 to become the first great name in our Southern Methodism and called "the apostle of Methodism in Virginia and North Carolina," John King, an Oxford graduate and a physician, who laid the foundation of Methodism in North Carolina, "an earnest, fearless, faithful, preacher of the gospel," whose home was a favorite stopping-place of Bishop Asbury on his journeys to Georgia. These were the "irregulars," or volunteers for service, before any organization of the Methodist work in America and the regular appointment in Wesleyan Conference of men to this field.

It was not until the twenty-seventh Annual Conference, held in London in 1770, that the new work was listed as a circuit: - "No. 50, - America!" There it stands in the minutes -- the entire Western Continent as one circuit, and the appointees are Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor who had been sent out the year before and had returned a good report. They traveled wifely, Boardman as far north as Boston and Pilmoor as far south as Charleston, working with the local and itinerant preachers, gaining new converts, forming new Societies, but never effecting any compact organization nor holding conferences to divide the territory or assign the work. The result was a duplication of effort with each preacher working as he pleased and going wherever fancy dictated. The monumental task of organization and administration awaited the coming of one whose talents along those lines have never excelled, -- the evangel, the
man of complete devotion, of dedication, and of destiny, the Founder of American Methodism, Francis Asbury!

Born August 20, or 21, 1745 at Hamstead Bridge near Birmingham, Staffordshire, England, Francis Asbury was the son of Joseph and Elizabeth (Rogers) Asbury and his earliest memories were of the religious life of his parents' home. At fourteen he began attending Methodist meetings in Wednesbury in the heart of the "Black Country" in Staffordshire. He marks the time of his conversion as "about sixteen" and his twenty-second year as the time when he gave himself "wholly to God and his work." He was admitted to the Wesleyan Conference on August 18, 1767 in London and he served on several circuits until 1771. At the Bristol Conference on August 7th of that year, he and Richard Wright were chosen from the five who volunteered as "missionaries to America." They sailed September 4, 1771 from Bristol and landed in Philadelphia on October 27th. On that day Francis Asbury began his work, setting the pace he was to keep -- and expect others to keep -- for the forty-five years of his "divine employ." His amazing travels during these years were to carry him on horse-back up and down and across an ever-growing America at a rate of not less than five thousand miles per year!! Severely ill from the exposure of his first New York winter and never again free from an increasingly serious lung trouble, Francis Asbury was to continue his gospel ranging through the heavy snows and freezing rains of winter as well as the exhausting heat and burning droughts of summer. In his travels he was to meet and know the wealthy and the cultured and call his own the homes of the young nation's most prominent people; to penetrate the forests of the frontiers in un-ending search for souls he might save and lives he might convert "wholly to God and his work;" to swim the swollen creeks and rivers that he might keep day-to-day appointments; to sleep wherever night-fall found him -- upon the ground, or, as he said, "in worse circumstances" upon the floor of the rude and crowded cabin of some isolated settler; to save souls and
win converts to Methodism; to gather them into Societies; to organize circuits; to hold conferences; to assign territories and delegate ministerial duties; in short, to "ride the circuit" of America. No. 50 in his ever-widening sphere of influence of his spiritual exploration and conquest of a continent. A nobler, truer, braver, man never lived and to no man does American Methodism owe a greater debt than to Francis Asbury.

We can, of course, give no detailed account of this fascinating story, but a few "firsts" of our church history should prove of interest:

We have mentioned the first Methodist preachers, the first Societies, the first meeting houses, the first missionaries, the first regular appointees, the first great American Methodist. Now, we shall list some of the milestones in the development of the Church.

The first Annual Conference held in Philadelphia, July 14, 1773, with ten preachers whose reports showed a total of 1,160 members.

First General Conference held December 24, 1784 at Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore with sixty of the eighty preachers present and 14,983 members.

Here, with Dr. Thomas Coke, ordained by John Wesley and sent over for the purpose, presiding, Francis Asbury was ordained deacon on Christmas Day, elder on December 26th, and on the 27th he was consecrated General Superintendent with thirteen elders and four deacons. The word Bishop was not used in the service but came into general use within a year and appeared first in the Conference minutes of 1787 when the authority of Wesley over the Church in America was formally set aside. Francis Asbury had, in the organization session of the conference (1784), made it plain that he would not serve as Superintendent unless elected by the ministers, and, therefore, in the very beginning this became the method of selecting our Methodist bishops. Dr. Coke was also chosen as General Superintendent to serve with Asbury but he remained only a short time in America and never became very effective.

The first Discipline was drawn up at the 1784 Conference.
The first name, The Methodist Episcopal Church, was adopted at the 1784 Conference, freeing the Church in America from Episcopal Church rule.

The first Methodist College was authorized at the 1784 Conference with the name Cokesbury selected and about five thousand dollars subscribed. It was established at Abingdon, Maryland, and opened and dedicated on December 8, 9, 10, 1787 with Francis Asbury preaching each day in the chapel...

The first authorized plan for the publication and sale of religious books and magazines by the Methodist Episcopal Church was adopted at the 1784 Conference. This Conference adjourned January 3, 1785.

The first Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was held April 20, 1785 at the home of Green Hill on the Tar River in Franklin County, not far from Louisburg, Carolina and consisted of all of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Both bishops were present, but Dr. Coke left for England early in June and Francis Asbury was left to command the field. Dr. Coke wrote that about twenty preachers were present, all in one house; reported 991 new members; and said, "We have stretched our borders into Georgia!"

Here in Georgia the Trustees had, in 1755, surrendered the colony to the Crown, and the Church of England had become the established church. Though persecution of "dissenters" was not as severe in Georgia as in Massachusetts and Virginia, the Episcopal Church certainly did not encourage other forms of worship and the history of Methodism records but little growth during our existence as a royal colony. It was in 1773 that Governor James Wright secured by a treaty with the Indians all the lands north of Augusta, about 2,100,000 acres in all, now constituting Wilkes, Elbert, Oglethorpe, Lincoln, Taliaferro, and parts of Greene and Warren counties, but appearing for several years upon the maps of Georgia as "The Ceded Lands." In 1777 this entire territory was organized as one county and named Wilkes County.

Settlers from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, soon began
to seek new homes in this lovely land where great groves of oak and hickory stood upon the hillsides, and grass and flowering shrubs covered the earth with a vesture equal to that of a royal park. Herds of deer and flocks of wild turkeys were still on hill and covert. Amidst these bounties of nature, in spite of the dangers and hardships of frontier life, settlements were made along the rivers, the creeks, and near the site of the many bubbling springs. Mill sites were especially coveted and formed the nucleus of the community. Among these migrating families from the older colonies were a few Methodists, but they were too widely scattered and too occupied with wresting an existence from the wilderness to give more than a nostalgic thought to the fervent eloquence and evangelical preaching of the ministers they had once known. They spent the Sabbath in hunting, and fishing, and looking after their cattle; they were somewhat indolent, and --- quite content with their spiritual condition!

Came the Revolution, and all the English preachers returned to England with the exception, as we have seen, of Francis Asbury whose love for American Methodism was stronger than his love for England. Let it be remembered that one of the greatest causes of the American Revolution is to be found in the tyranny of the Established Church. Wherever a state-established church exists, freedom of religion dies; wherever and whenever freedom of religion dies, the death of civil liberty soon follows! Though Georgia entered the fight late, no other colony was more terribly devastated. Here in this youngest colony, where the allegiance of the older members met the fiery revolution of the young, the element of civil war entered, and brother opposed brother, and father opposed son. Property was stolen, confiscated, wiped out, half the wealth of the state destroyed; outrages touching not only property but life itself were inflicted in reprisal by both Whigs and Tories as the fortunes of war changed sides. In Wilkes County this bitterest of all strife became so desperate that this section of the state was called "The Hornets' Nest"
In the moral area the devastation was equally as drastic. The hostility developed such bitter hatreds that both sides at times seemed more like brutes than men and the religious outlook was not only discolored but distorted. There was but little spiritual influence in the colony to offset this condition. By the time Georgia had suffered the moral detriorition of the Revolution, it was plain that Methodism would again be forced to cross its borders if it were ever to be a constructive factor in the only state in which both John and Charles Wesley, as well as George Whitefield, had labored. From South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland, it came ... a Methodist here, a Methodist there, at times an entire family of Methodists ... among the settlers from these older colonies who soon poured in a steady stream into old Wilkes County, the mother of many counties and the cradle of Georgia Methodism.

At the conference of 1785 Beverly Allen was given the whole state of Georgia as his appointment. There is a difference of opinion among our church historians as to the exact time he came to Georgia, some saying that he did not come at all the first year and giving the credit of the seventy members enrolled to an unnamed local preacher. We know, however, that he did come, even though late for his appointment, and that he got into serious trouble with church and state, and that to him belongs the discredit of being the first apostate Methodist itinerant in America.

Salisbury,
The Virginia Conference of 1786 met at Lane's in North Carolina, and, in answer to the call for missionaries to go to Georgia, Thomas Humphries and John Major volunteered. At this Conference South Carolina and Georgia became one district, with James Foster as presiding elder. They hurried into Wilkes County and viewed the situation:—In all Georgia, only three Episcopal churches without rectors, three Lutheran, three Presbyterian, and three Baptist churches; not more than seven Christian ministers; no church of any kind north of Augusta except those organized by Abraham
Marshall and Silas Mercer for the Baptists; no roads, only pathways and Indian trails; no houses of worship, only the private homes of the settlers in which to hold services. All Georgia was one circuit and their work was to explore the country and map out lines of advance. They may have traveled as far south as the lower part of Burke County but no detailed records are available. By far the largest number of the 430 members enrolled by Humphries and Major that year lived in Wilkes County, where some Methodists from Virginia had settled.

March 22 - 29

At the 1787 Conference held in Charleston, Georgia was made a separate district with Richard Ivey as presiding elder. There were two circuits, the Augusta and the Burke. Thomas Humphries took charge of the Augusta Circuit which included all the territory that had been visited north and south of Augusta. John Major was given the Burke circuit. A wonderful success attended them and by the end of the year the membership numbered 1,100; again, the greatest accomplishment was in the rural area, where, for the first time, the pioneers of Georgia heard the moving message of universal atonement. Dr. Coke had arrived in Charleston and was present at the Conference; it is in reference to this conference that the name, "Washington Circuit," is used by Bishop McTyeire and he says, "Georgia was long the Southern frontier. It has been propitious for Methodism. The leaven is in the lump; the seed is in the soil." The appearance of the name of Hope Hull, a native of Maryland, in the records was memorable for Georgia Methodism as the future was to prove.

The first Annual Conference held in Georgia convened April 9, 1788 at, probably, the Tate home near the junction of the Broad and Savannah Rivers, then Wilkes, now Elbert, County. This was Bishop Asbury's first trip into Georgia and here he met six members of the Conference with four probationers: Richard Ivey, Thomas Humphries, Moses Park, Hope Hull, James Conner, Bennett Maxey, Isaac Smith, Matthew Harris, Reuben Ellis, and
probably John Mason from the adjoining circuit in South Carolina. John Major, of the Burke (Ga) Circuit, died on his way to Conference. Bishop Asbury introduced that section of the Discipline which provided for the "removal from Society" preachers or members who were "disorderly." The preachers received their appointments and the Bishop left for the Holston Conference. Hope Hull was appointed to the "Washington Circuit" and came to be called the father of Georgia Methodism. Richard Ivey, presiding elder.

In 1789 the second Georgia Conference was held at Grant's meeting house, the first Methodist Church building in Georgia, located in Wilkes County, not far from Washington and near the home of Daniel and Thomas Grant who had come from Virginia in 1784. What is of significance to us is that the Grant home and the "meeting house" they gave to Methodism were not very far from Raytown --- at least its present location! At this conference a committee was appointed to procure 500 acres of land for a Methodist school in Georgia, the Wesley and Whitefield School. Richard Ivey, elder; Moses Park and Wyatt Andrews on the Washington Circuit.

The 1790 Conference met at Grant's and the first native Georgian to become an itinerant Methodist preacher, John Andrew, was admitted. The fact that he was the father of James Osgood Andrew made him important. Richard Ivey, elder;

The 1791 Conference was held at Scott's meeting house, also in Wilkes not far from Grant's, and Bishop Coke was present. Richard Ivey, elder; John Andrew and Hardy Herbert appointed to the Washington Circuit.

The 1792 Conference was held in Washington with Bishop Asbury presiding; Richard Ivey completed his four years as elder and was succeeded by Reuben Ellis, who remained in Georgia only one year. His "district" extended South Carolina from Charleston to Greensboro, Georgia, from the Saluda to the Altamaha! Two new circuits were formed, the Elbert and the Oconee. James Tolleson, from South Carolina, was appointed to the Washington Circuit. He was one of the best of the few men the Bishop had to supply his vast field... and he remained in Georgia but one year!
11. Sharon Methodist Church.

At the Conference of 1793 it was agreed that Georgia and South Carolina should be united in one Conference and this was done in 1794. At the first Conference in Georgia (1788) reports showed one district, seven preachers, two charges, and 1,100 members. Five years later, when the two states became one Conference, there were in Georgia one district, ten preachers, five charges, and 1,894 members. This session of the Georgia Conference was the last held until 1820 when the growth of the work in both states warranted their separation into two conferences.

In 1794 all South Carolina and all Georgia formed one district and at the Conference, held January 1, 1794 in Abbeville District at the forks of the Broad River, Philip Bruce was placed in charge. He had entered the conference with Thomas Humphries and John Major in 1783 and was a man of such spirit and judgment that Bishop Asbury leaned on him as a second self. He remained on this work only one year and returned to Virginia. Of the Georgia preachers, Douthet, Russell, Posey, Clark, and King, little is known. As for all churches, 1794 was a dark year — settlers were pouring into the new lands along the Oconee, political strife was high, and the state was in turmoil over the infamous Yazoo fraud.

The 1795 Conference met in Charleston on January, first. Preachers were too scarce for one to devote all his time to superintending the work and Josias Randall was given the Burke Circuit and the presidency of the district. Georgia was divided into three circuits, the Washington, the Burke, and the Richmond. Naturally, the church suffered and only 1,028 members were reported for Georgia; the preachers were Handle (sp?), Moore, Guerry, Wilson, and Tankersley; and the Georgia work took the same shape it had when Richard Ivey first came in 1788.

The Conference met in Charleston again on January 1, 1796, with Bishop Jonathan Jackson was given the district. After conference, Asbury Asbury presiding came again into Georgia and preached in old St. Paul's
Church, in Augusta, rode on through Columbia County to White Oak, swam Little River in Wilkes, visited the Comb's Meeting-House and Gartrell's and, the next day reached Coke's Chapel, three miles from Washington. Here he preached and crossed the river into South Carolina at Petersburg. At this conference the form of a deed of settlement for church property was decided upon; rules were adopted for the graduation of deacons to elders' orders; provisions were made for the publication of a Methodist magazine; slavery was again condemned; and rules were drawn for the regulation of students in our seminaries; a chartered fund adopted; allowances for the preachers were fixed at sixty-four dollars for a man and the same for his wife with nothing for family expenses; and the preachers were instructed to proceed against all who retailed spiritous liquors, as in the case of other immoralities. The discipline had already provided for the erasure of the name from the class book of anyone three times absent from class, or wearing a ribbon, a ruffle, or a ring! Membership for the year declined.

The 1797 Conference met in Charleston and Dr. Coke was with Asbury. The appointments for Georgia were the best for several years past: - Enoch George, afterwards Bishop, took the district; James Jenkins in charge of the Washington Church; there were three circuits, six preachers. For the first time we get a clear view of the Washington Circuit. It included the at present (1877?) counties of Greene, Taliaferro, Wilkes, Lincoln, Elbert, Hart, Franklin, Madison, and Oglethorpe. Poor James Jenkins!!

The 1798 Conference met in Charleston, but Bishop Asbury was absent on account of an acute flare-up of the lung disease which was to cause his death in 1816. Dr. Coke presided, with Jesse Lee assisting him with the appointments. Little of note was accomplished. Enoch George, whose health had failed, was succeeded by Benjamin Blanton, a Virginian, who remained in the work only a year, located and settled in Oglethorpe County. After spent twenty-seven days, the conference adjourned, Jesse Lee visited Georgia, and found the coun-
try a "better place than he expected" (!!)

It would be interesting and informative to follow the proceedings of the Conferences through the years, but space does not allow this. By the turn of the century the great revival tide which swept over America had reached Georgia, and, with too few preachers to serve the ever-increasing population, "camp-meetings" became the vogue and proved of inestimable value in promoting the growth of Methodism. Thousands thronged the famous old camp-grounds of Georgia, and enrollment of members increased in proportion.

In October, November, and December, 1801, Bishop Asbury made an extensive tour of Georgia Methodism, accompanied by Bishop Whatcoat, and was thus prepared for a judicious arrangement of the work. It was entirely re-organized at the Conference which met at Camden, S. C., Jan. 1, 1802. The circuits were given the names of the rivers which flow through their territories, making it difficult to define their boundaries. The Wilkes, or Washington Circuit was divided into the Broad River and the Little River Circuits. The Little River Circuit embraced the lower part of Wilkes, Lincoln, Taliaferro, and Columbia Counties. All Georgia was still on District, with Stith Mead presiding elder. Josias Randle and Britton Capel were appointed to the Little River Circuit.

In 1805 Georgia was divided into two districts, the Ogeechee and the Oconee. Josias Randle was sent in charge of the Ogeechee with Reddick Pierce junior preacher on the Little River Circuit; the Oconee District had as elder Samuel Cowles.

Note:—The remaining part of the section on the development of the work in the district and circuit has been included in the Raytown Church history. There is not time to continue it here .... perhaps later! C. D. B.)