

A Brief History of the United Methodist Church of Bismarck, 1885 – 1985

By

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The United Methodist Church of Bismarck is one hundred years old. May God be praised. May the congregation maintain its identity, by the grace of God, for centuries to come or until God's Kingdom be fulfilled upon the earth.

Some time before the year 1885, at a site where two roads crossed in Hot Spring County, local people had erected a sturdy log building that served as both a schoolhouse and a church house. We are not certain whether the individuals who raised the Old Crossroads Church building were of a single Christian denomination or not. Very likely the structure was used for services and revivals whenever a circuit rider passed through, and people of several denominations probably worshipped there at different times and oftentimes, together.

We do know that in 1885, a Methodist circuit rider named James Madison Emerson, who was born in Rome, Georgia, founded the Hopewell Methodist Episcopal Church and conducted the first meetings of this congregation in the log building.

Property deeds show that on November 25, 1886, one John W. Allen sold to the Methodist Episcopal Church one and one half acres of land where the current building of the United Methodist Church of Bismarck site is located. The selling price was sixty dollars. The pioneer members of the congregation who signed the contract included S. J. Kinnaird, J. C. Dewoody, C. C. Perry, John Perry, and E. L. Massey.

Probably within one or two years of the purchase of this property, the members erected a white frame building in a "meeting house style". This building served until 1930, lasting for over forty years. It was finally torn down.

During the 1930s, a beautiful new building of native stone was erected on the site. Records show that a loan of five hundred dollars was obtained on the building, probably to pay (at least in part) for its construction through the Methodist Conference.

The native-rock building had a tin roof, a cupola, a concrete apron, and concrete steps. Large windows, each of sixteen panes of frosted glass, revealed an interior with varnished wooden benches for the choir and the congregation, a pulpit, and a wood burning stove. During 1941, a woman named Josephine H. Thompson described this building in her report for the Arkansas Historical Records Survey—Church Inventory. She described it as "the prettiest rural church in Hot Spring County".

The stone building was replaced in 1977 with the current brick structure, which was enlarged in 1983 by an addition of a Sunday school classroom wing. The parking lot was paved in 1983 and a handsome brick and metal sign erected alongside Highway Seven.

The history of a church is not a record of its buildings, but of its people. Unfortunately, we do not have the name of all of this congregation's members since 1885. We do not even have a complete and

accurate list of all of its ministers. But we do know that a congregation has met here, without interruption, for a full century.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was active in Arkansas for three quarters of a century before the Reverend James Madison Emerson founded the Hopewell society.

The first Methodist preaching in Arkansas was done by William Stevenson, who lived in Smith County, Tennessee, and who then moved to Belleview, Missouri, where he preached and helped to start congregations as far south as northwestern Arkansas. William had a brother named James, who lived on the Ouachita River in Clark County. In the fall of 1814, William visited his brother and preached the first Methodist sermons, and helped found the first Methodist societies in central and southern Arkansas. In his autobiography, William Stevenson describes the region as “mostly wilderness except on the rivers and rich lands where we found settlements of industrious people, but among them hunters...The people had made a great many small settlements all through the country from five to twenty miles apart. No wagon roads yet laid out, as they generally moved on pack horses, nothing but horse paths...No ferry boats except on one of two rivers. We had to cross by canoes or rafts or on horseback”.

Two years after Stevenson’s first trip to Clark County, the Missouri Conference was organized by the General Conference. This Missouri Conference included all of Arkansas north of the Arkansas River, but had no definite western border. William Stevenson was sent to a circuit called Hot Springs, south of the actual conference borders, which consisted of the many small congregations that he had organized in the southern part of the state. Stevenson moved to Mound Prairie, in Hempstead County, about 1817, and brought several families of Methodists with him from Belleview, Missouri. The Mound Prairie area became densely populated with Methodists, and in the 1820s, was the center of Arkansas Methodism.

In the fall of 1817, William Stevenson was assigned to the Hot Springs Circuit with John Harris as his assistant. One year later, the two men and Alexander McAllister, of the Spring River Circuit, reported a membership of “477 white and 35 colored” in Arkansas.

With the westward movement and the growth of population, and largely due to the hard work and devotion of these early preachers and lay people, the number of Methodists grew. By 1820, there were four circuits in Arkansas, and the Hot Springs Circuit (centered around Clark County) boasted 139 members. A congregation was founded at Rockport, according to Walter N. Vernon in his book, Methodism in Arkansas—1816-1976, about 1832. Some have claimed that the Rockport church dates back to 1816 and was founded by John Henry, who came to Arkansas with William Stevenson from Belleview, Missouri. At any rate, Rockport became a strong Methodist center.

By 1836, there were “2,042 whites and 423 colored” on the Methodist Episcopal Church’s rolls in the territory’s four circuits, and the General Conference felt justified in creating the separate Arkansas Conference. This was the same year that Arkansas became the twenty-fifth state to join the Union.

Great turmoils, which were generated over the question of slavery, severed the national church into two groups in 1844, when the separate Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed. The Civil War itself, lasting from 1861 to 1865, followed by the Reconstruction Era, created further rifts, so that by the 1870s, the state contained six separate Methodist divisions, holding separate annual conferences. These were:

Methodist Protestant
Methodist Episcopal
Methodist Episcopal, South

Colored Methodist Episcopal
African Methodist Episcopal
African Methodist Episcopal, Zion

When James Madison Emerson founded the Hopewell Methodist Church at Bismarck in 1885, the congregation was part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with the "South" in the name. As early as 1870, members of these separate groups were making attempts at unification, but the situation remained relatively unchanged until 1939, when the United Methodist Church at last became a reality. So, the current name of the church, the United Methodist Church of Bismarck, dates back to 1939.

In 1985, looking at the paved highways, the air-conditioned cars, the mobile homes, and the brick houses with sky-dish television antennas where State Highway Seven and Eighty-Four cross, one has difficulty imagining the same spot one hundred years ago. The roads were muddy and rough; and people walked, rode horses and mules, or drove wagons to get where they were going. The outlaw Jesse James, who some historians believe once held up a stagecoach near Hot Springs, had been dead only three years. In many ways, this was still the frontier, and travel for a circuit rider could be hazardous.

The granddaughter of the Reverend Mr. James Madison Emerson, Carrie Alvania Thornton Shaw, related a story of how here grandfather once escaped robbers. She said that circuit riders were gone from home for weeks at a time and lodged with people along the road between churches. One night he rode up to a large, two-story house where he had been told that he might spend the night.

A big man met him at the door and bargained with him. Emerson took his saddlebags, his gun, and his other belongings inside and ate supper. A Negro man, who was called, took the preacher's horse to the barn, and Emerson climbed the stairs to his room.

As soon as he entered the room, he heard the door latch lock behind him. Striking a match, he saw that the room was blood-splattered. Soon he heard men downstairs, laughing, dancing, and talking drunkenly about killing the circuit rider for his money. He knew that he had to escape.

Spying a small opening high in the wall, he dragged the bed over beneath it, slung his saddlebags over his shoulder, and jumped. Crawling out the opening, he found a ladder leading to the ground. Unfortunately, a huge dog was chained to the foot of the ladder.

Somehow, he got to the ground without arousing the dog, but when he got to the barn, he found that his horse was locked in a stall. He hid in the weeds while the men inside cursed his escaping.

Just at daylight, the Negro man entered the barn carrying a milk bucket. At gunpoint, the man released the horse and saddled it. As Emerson rode away, he left a silver dollar on the gatepost to pay for his supper and lodging.

Mrs. Shaw said that after her grandfather told his story to the nearest legal authorities, an investigation uncovered the buried bodies of several murder victims near the house.

James Madison Emerson died after taking pneumonia while holding a revival in Hot Springs. He was buried in the Bismarck Cemetery. His epitaph reads:

J. M. Emerson
Born April 22, 1840
Died March 27, 1888
47 years 11 months 5 days

Servant of God, Well Done.
Rest From the Loved Employ
The Battle Fought, The Victory Won—
Enter Thy Master's Joy.

At its inception, the Hopewell Methodist Church was closely tied to the church at Amity, which had been in existence since 1873. The two were part of the same charge for at least eleven, and perhaps many more, of the years from 1885 to 1939.

What follows is an attempt to list all of the ministers who have served the church of Bismarck. This list has its gaps and doubtlessly contains errors, so anyone who can make any corrections is encouraged to write to the Pastor, the United Methodist Church of Bismarck zip code 71929. The committee compiling the records will appreciate such assistance.

The list is the result of interviews with O C. and Mary Burroughs, Charlie Burroughs, Juanita Spurlin, Maggie Dixon, and Mildred Moore. It also relies heavily upon the record of ministers who served as the Amity congregation as part of the same charge. Such a record was printed in the program prepared for the Amity church's centennial in 1973.

1885	Samuel W. Gamble
1886-88	George H. Gideon
1889	Thomas Shipley
1890	O. P. Noble
1891	John W. Hughes
1892-94	Thomas Gideon
1895	Peter M. Brakebill
1896	unknown
1897-98	William A. Fitzgerald
1899-1900	F. F. Brock
1901	unknown
1902	F. M. Cloniger
1903	(maybe) B. N. Fitzwater
1904	F. M. Cloniger
1905	C. W. Campbell
1906	David Weesner
1907-10	James C. Blizzard
1911-17	R. J. Rail and a Rev. Brownell
1918-21	(maybe) a Rev. Brownell and/or a Rev. Raspberry (maybe) W. O. Miller
1922-24	Christopher C. Van Zandt R. L. Burroughs filling in often
1925-27	R. J. Rail
1928	Charles Myers
1929-31	Christopher C. Van Zandt
1932-33	Charles A. Waters
1934-38	John A. Newell
1939	various college students
1940-43	Edwin Keith
1943-44	K. K. Carethers
1944-45	unknown
1945-48	Rayford Diffie
1948-50	Hollis Simpson
1950-51	unknown
1951-52	Hollis Simpson
1952-55	W. C. Onstead
1955-59	Marvin Wilkins
1959	W. C. Onstead (finished a term)
1959-60	David Cavnor
1960	unknown (finished a term)
1960-61	B. P. Maness
1961-63	William Harris
1963-65	Robert S. Beasley
1965-85	David M. Dunaway
1985	Michael Fikes

Tradition strengthens a church. With one hundred years of local tradition beneath us, two hundred years of Methodist tradition, and two thousand years of Christian tradition, this congregation stands upon and draws strength from strong, deep roots. It remains to us living today to pass this tradition along to the next generation, so that they may perpetuate it to the next and so on to the next.

We must not forget that we are living in the middle of history, and that we will be judged by the future generations as to whether we did or did not uphold the dignity and worth and responsibilities of this church. So let us live and act so that our great, great grandchildren will judge that the period from 1985 until the end of the twentieth century was the most glorious era of the congregation known as the United Methodist Church of Bismarck, Arkansas.

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