



A PERSONAL HISTORY OF SALEM
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

This Place is Holy



Compiled by
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Introduction

There is a small rural church outside of Weaverville, NC that is called Salem United Methodist Church. Though it has a Weaverville address, the church sits in the heart of what has been known for over a hundred years as Flat Creek. Salem is considered to be a family church, with members' roots deeply grounded in the community. Many of the present members have grown up in this church. Their family names can be traced back to those first appearing on the Deed of Trust in the late 1800's. Still, change has been a part of life for this community and church. What Salem is experiencing now is growth from the outside. The long standing members are still active, but other people -- "outsiders"-- are seeking and finding a home for their spiritual needs and a place to act upon what they believe.

There has never been a history compiled for this church. Since it was announced recently that the church was approaching it's 100th anniversary, now seemed the right time to attempt such a task. But why? Why look back when the church is so committed to moving forward? Maybe the answer to that lies in a recent comment from Salem's present minister who suggested that though we needed to live our life always looking forward, we could only really understand it when we look backward.¹ Perhaps a written history can help us to do both better ... live and understand.

Connectionalism: Roots Reaching Near and Far

Methodism in England

No United Methodist Church history can be considered one church at a time. Every Methodist Church has its roots all the way back to England. There the movement known as Methodism had its beginning in the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century. Religion in England was almost nonexistent in that era. It was in the midst of this void that two young brothers, students at Oxford, desiring a deeper knowledge and greater spiritual insight formed what was called The Holy Club. The term Methodists was applied to them by others in jest. The elder brother, John, redefined the term which meant, "exact Method," as "the Method laid down in the Holy Scriptures." "The Holy Club was not given to a withdrawal from the world. It set out to visit the destitute and minister to the wretched."² Later John came as missionary to the Indians in America. His time in Georgia was by all accounts, personal and professional, a dismal failure. He returned to his native shores. Since John Wesley, an Anglican Priest until his death, never intended to form a new church, it is hard to say exactly when Methodism began. Most Methodists, however claim May 24th, 1738. It was then that John felt his heart strangely warmed in a Quakers meeting on Aldersgate street and Methodism was born.³ Charles through his music and hymns and John with the power of proclamation could not possibly have envisioned their effect some 250 years later on a little singing church⁴ called Salem in Flat Creek N.C.

Methodism in America

As Methodists came to American shores, so came Methodism. Unofficially, laymen were the first to organize groups. It was not until 1769 that Wesley sent two official missionaries to the colonies. On October 22 of that year, Richard Boardman and

Joseph Pilmoor arrived in Philadelphia.⁵ But it was not until 1771 that the man destined to be called the Father of American Methodism arrived at the age of 24.⁶ Francis Asbury felt the call to the American Circuit in Bristol England in 1771 in August and arrived in Philadelphia just two months later with the blessings of Wesley and others. Unlike many of his colleagues who returned to England during the Revolutionary War, Asbury never went back to his native shores. John Wesley sent Asbury to be Superintendent of the Colonies. But, it was his fellow American Methodist Clergy who elected him Bishop in 1784. When Asbury left that gathering, he headed south. Eventually the wanderings of this itinerant preacher led him to the mountains of North Carolina, and into the hearts and homes of the mountain people.

Methodism in North Carolina and the Western Mountains

The roots of Methodism in the state of North Carolina reach back far and deep but the movement did not enter the western mountains of the state until much later.⁷ In 1776, The Carolina Circuit which was wholly in North Carolina was created. By 1777 the name had been changed to the North Carolina Circuit. One of the preachers assigned that year was the Rev. John Dickens. North Carolina was his first appointment. Dickens made his mark on more than the state. His influence was felt on the whole of American Methodism. He prepared the plan for the first American Methodist School. Mrs. Dickens is reported to be the first woman to live in a Methodist parsonage. As a member of the Christmas Conference, he gave the name to the new church. He prepared the first *Discipline* in its present form and was the first Superintendent of the Book Concern, using his own money as the original capital of what later became the multi-million dollar Methodist Publishing House.⁸ Via John Dickens, North Carolina became the point of origin for the "first plan for a Methodist school, the first money for education, the

first *Discipline*, and the first periodical."⁹

Francis Asbury accompanied John Dickens when he received that first donation for a Methodist School in Halifax County.¹⁰ Between 1774 when he first entered the state and 1816, when he died, Asbury visited practically every preaching place in North Carolina. He is the one credited with beginning the system of itinerancy, a hallmark of Methodism which enabled that denomination to span the continent, growing at a faster rate than even the population.¹¹ Asbury certainly led the way in this circuit riding itinerancy. He covered an estimated 228,000 miles, all on horseback or foot.¹² Just a matter of weeks before his death, he told a friend in England to send his letters "to any part of the United States. American was his only address and any Postmaster in the country knew that Asbury could be by anytime to claim his mail."¹³

Methodism in the Asheville Area and Dry Ridge (Weaverville)

Bishop Asbury first began to visit the Asheville area, via Hot Springs and Marshall in 1800. A favorite stopping place for Asbury was the home of Daniel Killian.¹⁴ (presently the Beaver Dam area) It is believed that here John Weaver and his son Jacob came and heard Asbury preach. They were converted to Methodism and responded to the call, offering a piece of property with an abandoned cabin and helping to organize the Reems Creek Methodist Church in 1805. Until that time John Weaver had been a member of the Reems Creek Presbyterian Church. Early membership roles of that church record his leaving with the notation, *joined the Methodist, died*.¹⁵ The Weaver name would then appear, again and again in local Methodist history. Descendants of John Weaver were instrumental in the origin of what is now the Salem United Methodist Church and some are still active in the life of that church today.

Part II

The John Weavers Arrive

It was the late eighteenth century when a white man, his wife and baby entered the Cherokee territory just west of the Blue Ridge mountains. The family was welcomed by the Indians and offered a visitor's wigwam. Dating between 1780-1785, this was the beginning of the first white settlement in this part of North Carolina. The Indians and whites lived together in peace for a number of years.

Local legend offers this story of Mrs. Elizabeth Biffle Weaver's experience with the Indians. While she was doing the family wash by the creek, Mrs. Weaver was interrupted by the presence of an Indian chief who saw her bright red flannel petticoat hanging on the line. He made gestures so she could understand he wanted the petticoat. She refused, thinking she would need it later during the winter, more than this Indian. Later in the day Mrs. Weaver was again at the creek, leaving her small infant asleep in the wigwam. When she returned she found the Indian carrying her child off into the forest. She overtook him, but he refused to return the child. They bargained for the red, flannel petticoat in return for Mrs. Weaver's baby. Early the next morning Mrs. Weaver was awakened by the Indian outside her wigwam. On the ground lay a deer which the Indian had brought for payment of the red petticoat, which he was proudly wearing. Once again by signs, he conveyed to Mrs. Weaver that he had not intended to steal or beg for the beautiful red garment.¹⁶

Francis Asbury Comes to the Area

While the Weavers were establishing their home in this area, the itinerant Methodist preacher, Francis Asbury was making his way into these mountains as well. Life for the circuit preachers was hard. It was not long after the Revolution that the

Western District of the Methodist Church in America was established. One of the first circuits in that district was the French Broad. There were no established places to preach so the Methodist preachers traveled on horse back and preached wherever people gathered. Bishop Asbury reports in his journal about traveling the Warm Springs Road and resting overnight at the home of Elizabeth and John Weaver. This road came through the area which is now Lake Louise, Weaverville. Asbury's trips to this section continued for 14 years during which time he established Methodism in the region.¹⁷

Campgrounds

The nature of pioneer and mountain living led to the building of campgrounds. At first, the camp grounds were simply a place for families and friends to gather for fellowship and games. They would come prepared to stay for several days but the purpose was not religious in nature. Such gatherings were fertile ground for traveling preachers and in time the Camp Ground became a feature of early religious life. Just such a Camp Ground was established about 1810 in what is now known as Weaverville. It was named the Reems Creek Camp Ground and was apparently very popular for more than 50 years. Dr. Price, a historian for the Holston Conference describes it in this way:

It was a very popular camp ground. Great meetings were held there. Thousands of souls were converted to God at that sacred place. Some of the greatest preachers of the church preached there.¹⁸

In 1835, a Conference House was built on the camp ground to accommodate the Holston Conference which was meeting there. In 1844, a deed from Montraville Weaver and Andrew Pickens to the Trustees of M.E. Church Salem Camp

Ground refers in the description of the property to the New Meeting House. The assumption is that the New Meeting House was built about 1843 and the name of the Camp Ground and meeting House was changed to Salem Camp Ground and Church.¹⁹ This is first time that the name "Salem" appears in connection with Methodism in the area.

The Name "Salem" in Weaverville

Later the name of that church would be changed to Methodist Episcopal Church South at Weaverville probably about the same time that the community changed its name to Weaverville in honor of Montraville Weaver. (Dec. 12, 1873 ²⁰) Church records from that period show the last entry under Salem at the date 1875. The next entry was under the name Methodist Episcopal Church South at Weaverville in 1880.²¹

The name Salem would not be lost for long. We know from a pamphlet printed in 1854 that a society of Methodists were meeting in Flat Creek as early as 1851. (An Exposure of the shameful religious Persecutions suffered by Rev. A. Pickens and Others, by John Paris, page 60.) A deed dated August 2, 1889 records the purchase of a piece of property in Flat Creek Township by the Trustees of the Church of The Methodist Episcopal South at Flat Creek. Ten years later, another deed reports these same men as the Trustees of The Methodist Church South known as Salem. (Records, Buncombe County Courthouse)

Salem Built at Flat Creek

The exact building date of the first Salem church remains unclear. A newspaper clipping from the 1950's when the second Sanctuary was built suggests that the first structure was 60 years old which would place the building date at 1892,

between the two property deeds. (See Appendix B) It is impossible to determine the accuracy of this date. Since Conference Journals reported by Circuit rather than local church at that time, they are of little help. And the first Membership Rolls found at the Church are very incomplete and date from the year 1905.

Further research of Western North Carolina Conference Archives indicate that permission to build a meeting house in the Weaverville Circuit was requested in 1898. We assume this was the Salem Meeting House at Flat Creek. Thus the building date is set as 1900.

It would be interesting at this time to note some of the names appearing on those early deeds, their ancestors and descendants. Perhaps most noteworthy is the name W.E. Weaver. (See Appendix C). In 1874, Captain Elbert Weaver is listed in the records of the Class book of Salem (which would become Weaverville UMC). Captain Weaver fought in the Civil War, lived in the town of Weaverville but ran a Plantation just north in the Flat Creek area. (just a mile from the present site of Salem United Methodist Church). We cannot tell if Captain Weaver participated in the new church or simply lent his name for the purpose of the deed of Trust. Captain Weaver was the grandson of the original settler, John and the son of Montraville Weaver, great Methodist Preacher and benefactor to the town of Weaverville.²² All three men are buried in a small cemetery on what was once the Salem Camp Ground property. In fact, Montraville, the last to preach in the old log church was buried in 1882 with the head of his grave where the pulpit of the old church stood. Captain Weaver, his son is buried nearby. Through them and others, the Salem UMC can trace its history all the way back to those early 1800's when John Weaver was caught by the power of Francis Asbury and his preaching. Present members from that family include Addie Lou Wilde

Weaver, wife of Victor Montraville Weaver and Leslie Cook.

Two Chambers appear on the early deeds. William R. (also on the church roles) is reported as a present at the March 1852 meeting of the Asheville District along with M. M. Weaver, John S. and Jacob Weaver.²³

Another important name from those early days is Robert Brittain. Though not on the deed of trust, Robert Brittain is listed on the 1906 rolls at Salem UMC. His name had been on the Weaverville Rolls in the 1870's. Robert Brittain is believed to have been the contractor that built the first Salem Church Meeting House. Apparently, some of the Brittains, like others kept their names on other roles but participated in the life of Salem. Sons of Robert Brittain, Nebula and Phoenecia were preachers. Menieva and Verona Brittain were both Sunday School Superintendents.²⁴ Others of that family are remembered with great affection. Though no direct descendent is presently on the church role, a number of that family have joined United Methodist Conferences as preachers and the great granddaughter of Robert lives in the area and attends the church (Wendy Brittain Spainhour).

Part III

20th Century American Methodism

The history of every local UMC is affected by the general history of the church. A few major dates in American Methodist history need to be noted. In 1844, foreshadowing what would soon happen to the nation, the Methodist Episcopal Church split into the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, primarily over the issue of slavery.²⁵ It was not until 1939 that these churches were reunited along

with the Methodist Protestant Church which had separated even earlier. The Western North Carolina Conference Journal records this union in this way:

All three branches of Methodism forming The Methodist Church are included in this new Conference. From the Blue Ridge-Atlantic Conference of the former Methodist Episcopal Church came thirty-nine ministers and 11,901 church members. The North Carolina Conference of the former Methodist Protestant Church contributed seventy-four ministers and 22,361 church members. The Western North Carolina Conference of the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South added 377 ministers and 167,028 church members.²⁶

20th Century Methodism in Weaverville

This would have an effect on Salem and other churches in the area. Circuit lines would be changed with the addition of the various churches from the other branches. For instance, Clark's Chapel, a Methodist Protestant Church, just 2 and a half miles from Salem would be brought on the same circuit. The history of the two churches would intertwine from then into the 1990's. They would often share a preacher but proud of their own separate heritage a combination of the two would not be considered.²⁷

Just 11 years later the people of Salem built and moved into a new Sanctuary situated next door to the original church. The brick structure remains basically unchanged to this day. J.E.B. Houser was minister at the time. At the closure of the nearby Jupiter church, the bell from that church was brought to the Salem Sanctuary. The exact date of when it first rang is unknown but it is still in service today, ringing it's timeless sound throughout the Flat Creek community calling all to worship.²⁸

Salem was part of what was called the Weaverville Circuit. In 1902, Weaverville Methodist Church was separated and churches in the area were divided into the Weaverville Station

or the Weaverville Circuit.²⁹ While Rev. E.C. Gover was the pastor of the Weaverville Circuit (1954-1958), the new parsonage, standing on Church Street in Weaverville was built.³⁰

A change in circuit lines came in 1959. The Minutes of the 1959 Annual Conference of the Western North Carolina Conference report the change in this way:

Because of the growth of Methodism north of Weaverville, we are, at this Conference, organizing a new Charge, Salem-Barnardsville, taking two churches from the Mars Hill Circuit and one from the Weaverville circuit.³¹

That one church was Salem. That same year, the Trustees at Salem were deeded property from Gaya and Auburn Crowder at a cost of \$10.00. This was to be used to build a parsonage for the preacher of the Salem-Barnardsville Charge. That charge was short lived. By 1965, the Conference Journals report Salem as a station church with its own minister. The parsonage was then deeded from Trustees of Salem-Barnardsville charge to Trustees of Salem. Salem's tenure as a station appointment was brief. By the early 70's, it was linked again with Clark's Chapel. Leslie Ditchfield, a native of Great Britain was assigned to both churches. His wife, Elizabeth Ditchfield, a licensed preacher, still worships at Salem with some regularity. While the Ditchfields were at Salem, the Fellowship Hall which stands behind the Sanctuary was begun. Rev. Don Shuman saw the completion of that building in the mid-70's.

While Salem was shifting circuit lines, the larger Methodist Church was once again shifting names. In 1968, the United Methodist Church came into being as a result of the union of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church.³²

More recent physical improvements at Salem include the remodeling of the inside of the

Sanctuary in 1986-87. The parking was expanded and siding put on the outside of the sanctuary in 1992 and new windows were put into the sanctuary in 1993. Holy Week of 1994 brought the first two panels of stain glass to those windows, one of Jesus carrying his cross and one with dogwoods and a butterfly commemorating the resurrection. An outdoor lift is to be installed in 1995 making the sanctuary handicapp accessible. Other plans for the immediate future call for the paving of the parking lot and a new crosswalk between the buildings.

Property acquisition and the erection of buildings bear a date and are thus helpful in marking the history of a church. However, the real life and power of a church is measured more by its people and its program. Like many churches on large circuits, lay leadership was the glue holding the church together when preachers only showed up once or twice a month. Names like Chambers and Brittain show up again and again as lay delegates or Sunday School Superintendents at Salem. Of particular note are Menieva and Verona Brittain, Charlie Chambers and C E. Clark. The heritage of such leadership has continued through Don McCurry and A.C. McCurry, cousins who have served as Sunday School Superintendent following Mr. Clark.

The Sunday School still continues to be an important power in the life of Salem. Nearly 75% of those attending Worship also attend Sunday School. And education occurs in age level groups which meet on Sunday evenings. Recent additions to the Education program of the church are All Age Bible Studies and Salem Sonshine, a midweek program for elementary children. All of these continue the great heritage of Christian education which saw the children of Captain W.E. Weaver sending their children to the Sunday School at Salem.³³

As mentioned earlier, Salem has always been known as a "Singing Church". First Sunday

afternoon singings under the leadership of Verona Brittain and Wesley Rice brought people from all over the area into the little country sanctuary. The three daughters of Wesley and Donnie Clinton Rice were part of a Singing group with its roots in Salem. Known at one time as the Salem Six, the group was organized and accompanied by the now Rev. Wendell Brittain, grandson of Robert. Now into its 4th decade, that group, though shifting in membership through time, is still singing at Salem and in other churches. Now, they are known as the Harmonettes. Though appropriate, the name can not possibly convey the power of their harmony, not only in song, but through the life of the church, in spirit. All the group members and their accompanist are active workers and leaders in the church.

Perhaps a church is best judged by the way it calls its members into Christian service, gives them opportunities to serve and then supports them in that service. From the Robert Brittain family alone, seven Methodist ministers can be identified with Salem spirit in their hearts and souls. Nebula and Phoenecia were sons of Robert. His daughter Vistula, long time Sunday School teacher at Salem, sent two sons into the ministry, Alda and Rondall Woodall. Their two cousins, sons of Verona Brittain, Bobby and Wendell are active United Methodist Ministers and Robert's great grandson, Tim Brittain was recently appointed to nearby Christ UMC³⁴ and preached in the Salem pulpit on Heritage Sunday, April 24, 1994. Even more ironic is the name of the present minister. Rev. Julianne Brittain (Jan) is the first ordained woman to serve the Salem church. Though originally from South Carolina, she is believed to be a distant relative of the local Brittains. What could be more appropriate?

But even more important than sending people off to be ministers is giving local church members the chance to do the work of Christ as

well. Since 1993, the people of Salem have taken an intentional and broad step into the work of Missions. Since that time, they have sent team members to Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Panama and Homestead Florida and an entire team to Albany, Georgia ---all on United Methodist Mission teams. Wouldn't those early traveling preachers be pleased at such a report? Surely that same spirit of outreach and commitment to service is alive and well in their descendents.

An interesting final note concerns the role of women in the Salem United Methodist Church. When few women were reported as Sunday School Superintendents, Minieva Brittain, daughter of Robert served at Salem in the 1920's- 30's. In the 1950's when Rev. E.C. Gover was the assigned pastor, his wife, was a supply preacher.³⁵ Then in the 70's Leslie, Ditchfield was assigned to the circuit and his wife Elizabeth was a liscenced preacher.³⁶ Finally, in 1991, an ordained woman deacon, Jan Brittain was assigned as pastor of the Salem-Clark's Chapel Charge. While serving the church, she was ordained Elder in Full connection in 1992. From lay worker to supply to liscenced preacher to ordination, the role of women in the United Methodist Church can be seen clearly in the life of this single congregation.

In these few pages a church's heritage liesspread open for all to see. Some is documented as fact while other pieces of history must still be recorded from conversations, memories, stories handed generation to generation. As I plundered through this sea of scribbled notes and read through original minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church South dated from the 1800's, I found myself wanting to know more about these people. The names became familiar as I read more mateiral and soon I felt I did know them, in some strange way. Such feeling was made obvious in my outward excitement when I discovered the grave site of

Captain Weaver and his family. Somehow, knowing how important the Methodist Church has been to so many through the years and how our little church, is a product of their interest and care, makes it even more precious to me. And, I find myself more concerned about what we, the present leadership, of that church will have recorded about us in days to come. I suppose one could say that looking backward has caused me to turn my eyes to the future.