

STEPHENS CITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH SINCE 1775

Ray Ewing wrote a Stephens City United Methodist Church (SCUMC) history brief which was disseminated at the Churches 235th anniversary celebration on October 10, 2010. It was with optimism that the church elders provided the congregation with an inspirational observance of the 235th anniversary (1775 to 2010) to continue an awareness and an appreciation of the religious heritage as well as a renewed commitment to the present ministries. This effort was made to ensure that the church would pass on the Christian faith to those that come afterward.

Although construction of our first log meeting house began in 1788 and was completed in 1789, many believe a society was formed which was in keeping with Methodist principles and practice as early as 1775. Historic records prove itinerant preachers served the Stephensburg society. This would make Stephens City UMC the oldest Methodist congregation west of the Blue Ridge. Until 1784 the Methodists were a society within the Church of England and not an independent communion. It was the American Revolution that made a separate organization unavoidable. Wesley responded to the shortage of priests in the American colonies due to the American Revolutionary War by ordaining preachers for America with power to administer the sacraments. This was a major reason for Methodism's final split from the Church of England after Wesley's death in 1791.

Mark Gunderman collaborated with Ray Ewing, Pam Barley and Cathy Barley to update Mr. Ewing's 2010 church history. The Stone House Foundation also assisted in the overall research. Reference documents included, History of Orrick Chapel Methodist Church, History Matters, LLC, March 1, 2006, Images of America, Stephens City, dated 2008, Early Days and Methodism in Stephens City, Virginia, dated 1994, Samuel Kercheval's A History of the Valley of Virginia, fourth edition, dated 1925 and various documents reviewed from the church archives and local library.

All through the Bible, the Lord reminds each church to go tell all generations of God's wonderful works. Church congregations must preserve the memory of how God has impacted their lives. A church that has a strong awareness of its history will have a better sense of identity to build on for the future. Periodically, each congregation should reflect back to rediscover the circumstances as to when and where their church came into existence, what its earliest ministry resembled, and how it has evolved over the years.

The first, and extremely important, mention of Methodism in Stephens City comes from the early Valley historian, Samuel Kercheval (A History of the Valley of Virginia, second edition, published in 1850).

"About the year 1775 two travelling strangers called at the residence of Maj. Lewis Stephens, the proprietor and founder of the town, now distinguished in the small establishment as "Newtown Stephensburg," and enquired if they could obtain quarters for the night. Maj. Stephens happened to be absent; but Mrs. Stephens, who was remarkable for hospitality and religious impressions, informs them they could be accommodated. One of them observed to her, "We are preachers; and the next day being Sabbath, we will have to remain with you until Monday morning, as we do not travel on the Sabbath." To which the old lady replied, "if you are preachers, you are the more welcome."

"John Hagerty and Richard Owens were the names of the preachers. The next morning notice was sent through the town, and the strangers delivered sermons. This was doubtless the first Methodist preaching ever heard in our valley. It is said they travelled east of the Blue Ridge, (before they reached Stephensburg) on a preaching tour."

A number of the people were much pleased with them, and they soon got up a small church at this place. The late John Hite, Jr., his sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Hughes, John Taylor and wife, Lewis

Stephens, Sr. and wife, Lewis Stephens, Jr. and wife and several others joined the church, and in a few years it began to flourish.”

In a footnote, the author cited he is not positive that he is correct as to the time this occurrence took place, but has been informed it was just before the commencement of the war of the Revolution. The late Dr. John Tilden communicated this information to the writer — which he stated he learned from Mrs. Stephens.

However John I. Sloat in his book, “Methodism in Winchester” published in 1926, contends that Richard Wright and Williams Watters first preached in Winchester during the summer of 1772. Sloat does not document his claim. Sloat also claims that Francis Asbury also preached here in November 1772. In his book, “The Churches of Winchester, Virginia,” published in 1960, Garland Quarles states, “It has been claimed that he (Asbury) went to Winchester, Virginia in 1772; but that early trip was to a town of the same name in Maryland. Because of the confusion, the name of Winchester in Maryland was later changed to Westminster.”

As was the custom and what probably happened here, a “society” was formed very soon. John Wesley, (a priest of the Church of England and founder of Methodism) regarded Methodism as a religious “society” within the Established Church of England. He insisted on this practice in America as well as in England. Wesley’s followers first met in private home “societies” where there was instruction and participation in worship. Attendance was obligatory. When these societies became too large for members to care for one another, Wesley organized “classes,” each with 11 members and a leader. Classes met weekly to pray, read the Bible, discuss their spiritual lives and to collect money for charity. Men and women met separately, but anyone could become a class leader.

The moral and spiritual fervor of the meetings is expressed in one of Wesley’s most famous aphorisms: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

As circuits with itinerant preachers were created (Frederick County was in the Berkley Circuit in 1778, served by Rev. Edward Bailey), their “preaching place” in Stephensburg would have been a home or, more than likely, the school house.

However, as Virginia already had an Established Church, the Church of England, for which a County tax was levied, all had to go to the parish church for Baptism, Communion and Marriage. Passage of the 1689 English Toleration Act by the English Parliament gave new rights to religious dissenters, allowing them to register their meeting houses and license their ministers to preach. The Virginia legislature did not recognize the Toleration Act until 1699. This system continued through the unsettled and tense time of the Revolution. In 1784, one year after the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War, Virginia’s General Assembly voted to disestablish the Virginia Anglican Church. The separation of the American colonies from England in 1783 led John Wesley to plan for the ordination of his own ministers. In 1784 at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, the “Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States” was formed and Francis Asbury was consecrated one of its two superintendents. Six months before this, Asbury had preached here in Stephens City for the first time. Following this, according to Asbury’s Journal, he had come back sixteen or more times. But on his first visit he had been far from pleased with the “society” in Newtown. He wrote: “I raged and threatened the people.” But the next time he came, in August 1790, the tone was different. “Here,” he wrote, “they have built a spacious chapel.” Again in April 1810, he wrote, “I preached at Newtown; we were crowded.” “This is a flourishing little place, and we have a beautiful little chapel.”

This first log church building was located just two lots north of the present site on property that Lewis Stephens has conveyed the previous year for one shilling (about twenty-five cents) to three trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Stephensburg. The property comprised “one lot of land...5

poles in front and 16 poles deep lying on the west side of the great road leading from Stephensburg to Winchester and beginning 10 poles from the cross street at the upper end of said Town." The trustees were Mr. John Hite, Jr., Mr. William Hughes and Mr. Benjamin Talbert.

On this site construction of a log meeting house began in 1788 and was completed in 1789. A graveyard lay to the back of it which still exists and where some of the town's early residents were buried. The graveyard can be seen on the north side of our present parking lot and includes the remains of close friends of Bishop Asbury. Friends he noted visiting and working with were local preacher Elisha Phelps and preacher and Revolutionary War Veteran John Bell Tilden. Rev. Elisha Phelps wife Elizabeth was Granddaughter of Jost Hite (early land speculator) and daughter of Colonel John Hite of Revolutionary fame. The oldest tombstone dates to 1809 and the newest to 1906.

The log meeting house served until 1827 when it was torn down and replaced with a brick one on the same site. The new church had galleries at the sides and end (the rear being reserved for African Americans), two stairways, two side doors opening at the foot of the stairways and two front doors. The northern door and that side of the church were used exclusively by the men. The other side by the women. Promiscuous sitting was not allowed, if it was attempted – "The gentlemen will please take their seats on the other side of the church," was heard from the pulpit. The pulpit was high, enclosed by balusters with red hangings inside of them. it was reached by stairs on the north side and when the door was closed the preacher was almost hidden until he arose to begin service. There was a closet under the pulpit with a low door in front. The children had an idea that this closet was for those who misbehaved in church.

The church had a belfry and a bell. Up until 1827, a horn had been blown to call the people to worship. Evening services were announced to always be held "at early candlelight." The collections were taken up in red velvet bags with tassels at the ends. These bags were attached to long handles and were hung near the pulpit stairs when not in use. About 1847, the high pulpit was taken down and replaced by a much lower one which remained until the church was demolished.

By the 1820s, middle and upper class families represented a greater proportion of the congregation and the church evolved from a radical sect to a more mainstream denomination. Methodists began assigning resident pastors to congregations instead of itinerant preachers. In 1830 the Church was assigned its first resident pastors, Francis Macartney and William Edmond.



Sunday, March 7, 1915 – Last service held at the old Methodist Church (built 1882). Rev. T.J. Lambert and congregation stood in front of the building to pose for this photograph. George Affleck is sitting in the upper left window.

During the Civil War the church suffered considerable damage as the pews were torn out and the sanctuary used as a hospital to treat wounded soldiers. During Federal occupation, Federal troops burned the parsonage (the pastor's home) and it was not replaced until 1875. The 1827 church sanctuary was repaired after the war, but eventually the church was considered "unsafe" and "uncomfortable" for worship.

In 1882 the congregation replaced the 1827 building with a more spacious facility on the same site. It was noted at the time that the foundation of the old log church could be seen when the 1827 building was demolished. An article in the Stephens City Star, dated January 28, 1882 cites the building committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church South awarded a contract for a good and substantial brick church. The foundation was to be 36×54 feet and the story to be 20 feet in the clear; the hold edifice to be not less than 70 feet including the spire. The masonry contract was awarded for \$550 and the carpentry contract for \$910. However other records indicate the structure cost a total of \$3,000. The new church had a vestibule, a belfry, a high pulpit, and galleries on three sides. The pews in this church as well as in the two that preceded it had a center divider – the men sat on the north side and the women on the south side. There is no mention of a reserve for the use of the rear gallery. In 1886 a wonderful McShane & Company Bell, manufactured in Baltimore was purchased and placed in the belfry.

The number of church members in 1905 grew to 195. With the passage of thirty years, this building had become outgrown. In 1912 the church trustees purchased a corner lot for \$2,500 less than one hundred feet to the south on Main and Locust streets. The trustees were Mr. L. A. Adams, Mr. H. A. Dinges, Mr. A. H. Guard, Mr. J. A. McCarty, Mr. J. H. Orndorff, Mr. C. O. Rowland, Mr. J. M. Steele, Mr. W. B. Steele and Mr. C. K. Weaver. Occupying the land was a brick and frame one-time tavern which for the past few years had served as a school. On this site in 1913 construction of the present

church was begun and completed in 1915. It included a Sunday school room. The cost of the new church and its furnishings was \$12,000.00. Total cost including the land was \$14,500.00. The McShane bell from the 1882 church was placed in the new belfry. Extensive basement excavation in the 1920's added several classrooms, a kitchen, and a social hall.

Mildred Lee Grove said the old 1882 church which was deconsecrated in 1915, was used as a new car dealership garage by Lomax Parker for a number of years before it was torn down. Parker would build a grocery/hardware store on the lot formerly occupied by the Methodist Church about 1940. The store was bought by C&P Telephone in 1946 which renovated the building and operated a telephone exchange (switchboards and operators) there until the system switched to dial in the 1960s.

This 1915 building was gradually not enough for future needs. In 1958, thinking of the future, the trustees bought for \$4400.00 the Brison/Dinges house property on the north side; thus providing the site for an Educational Building. The old house, built around 1789 was demolished, but the original logs were salvaged and used elsewhere. The trustees were Mr. T. A. Grim, Mr. G. W. (Don) Lemley, Mr. Ray D. Rinker, Mr. G. H. Ritenour, Mr. M. S. Barley, Mr. Raymond Sandy, Mr. C. E. Staples, and Mr. Julian D. Steele. The building, completed in 1966, provided an office suite, a fellowship hall, a full kitchen and nine classrooms at a cost of \$145, 415. The educational building was dedicated on September 26, 1976.

Another vital part of our heritage is that of Orrick Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church. From the late 18th century through the early 19th century African-American Methodists in Stephens City worshiped with whites at Stephensburg Methodist Church on the west side of Main Street between Filbert and Locust Streets. When Bishop Asbury preached in Winchester in the mid-1780s, he noted the presence of both whites and blacks among those who came to hear his sermons. Seating arrangements in the first log cabin church are undocumented but at some point after the brick church was built in 1827, it was noted that African-American members continued to attend church services and were assigned seats in the end gallery of the sanctuary.

By 1858 African American Methodists had a separate house of worship on Mulberry Street but they remained under the supervision of the local white Methodists. During the Civil War, Union Troops dismantled the church and used the lumber to build winter quarters. After the Civil War, Robert Orrick was one of the leading African American businessmen in the greater Winchester area. A new church was built between 1866 and 1869 largely through the efforts and generosity of Mr. Orrick, an ex-slave, liveryman and preacher who donated and hauled the construction materials to the site. In recognition of his contributions, the church was named Orrick Chapel. The white framed, green roofed, Orrick Chapel still stands on Mulberry Street, just one block from the Stephens City Methodist Church.

During the 1936 General Conference, A Plan of Union emerged that would eventually segregate African Americans into the Central Conference and place whites in the General Conference. In 1968 the Central Conference that administered the African American congregations and the General Conference that administered the white congregations merged. The difficulty of assigning pastors to the small African-American churches at that time led to Orrick Chapel and SCUMC eventually being served by the same pastor in 1971.

In the late 1970s planning for the complete renovation of the Sanctuary Building was begun. The renovation was divided into two phases. The first of which was expanding the Sanctuary into the old Sunday school room and nursery area, adding additional matching pews in this area. This work included completely rewiring the building, adding a new heating and air-conditioning system and a new sound system. This phase was completed in November of 1980 for a total cost of \$115,211.

Phase two renovated the basement level of this building into six additional Sunday school rooms, a choir room and a kitchenette. Phase 2 was completed in June 1985 for a total cost of \$161,000. Due to dwindling membership, Orrick Chapel merged with SCUMC on April 1, 1991. The small number of remaining members once again, began worshipping with the SCUMC congregation. In 1993, the Orrick Chapel property was transferred to the Stone House Foundation, an organization dedicated to the preservation of historic resources in Stephens City. The Foundation was generously endowed by a good and faithful member of SCUMC, Miss Mildred Lee Grove.

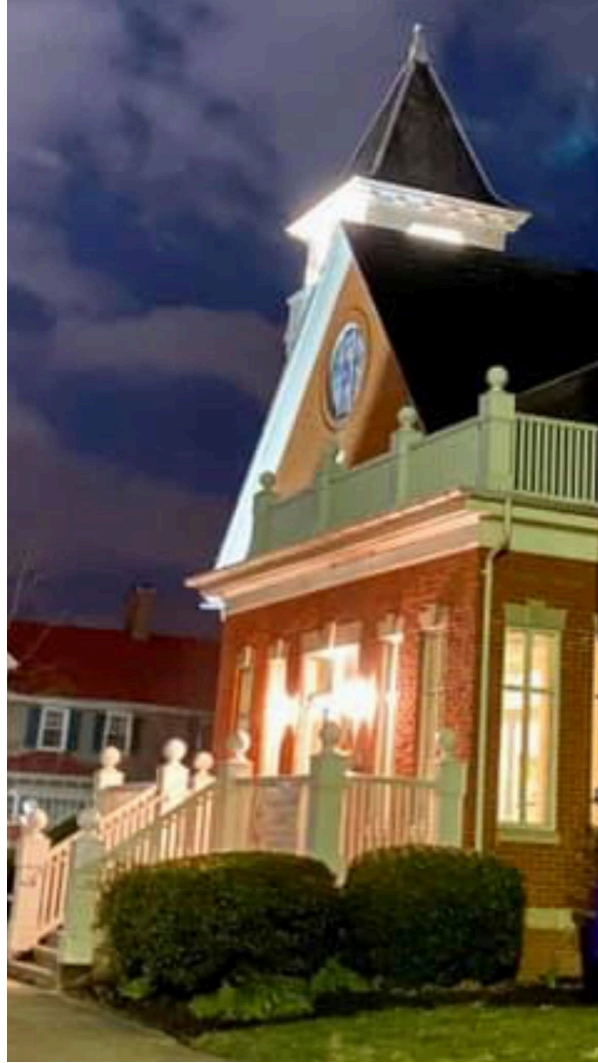
In the period between 1997 and 2001, the church purchased two lots on the west side of Germain Street to create much needed parking. The Parker/Doggett House (located at 5283 Main Street and built in the mid-19th century), just to the north of the property was purchased in part to satisfy zoning requirements with regard to maximum lot coverage. This was done so the church could build the size structure it required. The house was converted into storage space. Alfred Doggett, a Blacksmith maintained a shop on the rear of the property, which was built by John Parker in 1886. Alfred passed in March 1942 and the shop fell into disuse and was demolished shortly after Alfred's spouse Ruth Helen Parker Doggett died in May 1953.

In 2003, the 1966 educational wing was demolished to make room for an improved, completely accessible, 19,000 square foot addition. All of these projects along with the construction and furnishings totaled approximately \$3,100,000 and were completed in October 2003. The education wing was designed and built so a third story could be added, if necessary. Additionally the new wing was constructed and lot space retained with the aim of accommodating a sanctuary expansion. To honor Rev Robert Orrick and the Orrick Chapel congregation, the SCUMC Church Council dedicated the new educational wing as Orrick Chapel Fellowship Hall. The McShane church bell that was first used in the 1882 church and relocated to this present church building was removed from the belfry by crane and placed in the entrance way of the new addition in 2003.

In looking back over 200 years, one may visualize many changes: pioneers gathering in log homes for prayer and Bible study with no resident pastor except a circuit rider on horseback... the iron grease lamps in the log church . . . the candles in its brick successor . . . the oil lamps in the chandeliers of the next brick church . . . the very lovely tiered brass acetylene chandeliers that preceded the electric lighting in the present sanctuary. One may actually see the changes in pulpit furnishings, for the church still retains a chair from the pulpit, furnishings of the 1827 brick church; the complete set of pulpit furniture from the 1882 church, the historic 1886 McShane Bell on an upright stand in the vestibule and of course, the furniture in the present sanctuary.

As the church considers the rich heritage of Methodism here, the congregation finds inspiration to more effectively meet the challenge God continues to present for making new disciples and to serve the Stephens City community with a focus on the future. Each church anniversary can be used as an opportunity for testifying to God's grace, mercy and provision.

2019 Illumination of the Belfry



The belfry, illuminated at night.

From the church's beginning, the building never had an illuminated belfry. In 2019, the project to install lights was initiated by church members to honor longtime building superintendent Bobby Cook, who served the church for more than 33 years. The idea began in 2014, when Mr. Cook came to church officials and suggested the belfry be illuminated to serve as "a beacon of hope to a troubled world" – he said often when he was outside doing church landscaping work, he would be approached by "hurting, yearning, and worried souls who had lost their way and were reaching out, eager to receive knowledge about [his] church." He saw a light coming from the church belfry which functioned as a beacon, inviting the inquisitive, the afflicted and the indigent to his church and to God. These instances inspired his vision to illuminate the belfry. As Mr. Cook's idea caught on, the church raised \$2,121 for the project and the lights were installed and turned on July 8, 2019. A special worship service, honoring Mr. Cook and this vision, was held to commemorate the event. Mr. Cook went home to our Lord and Savior in March 2020; we are so thankful he got to see his vision come to fruition before his passing.



Stone House Foundation Photo

The photo of Stephens City Methodist Church was donated to the Stone House Foundation by Toni Crabill in honor of her late husband, Mr. Dan Crabill.

Check out the oil lamp lightpost in the foreground. Stephens City did not have electricity when this photograph was taken.

The Stone House Foundation does not know the precise date when the photo was taken, but the pile of gravel in the front of the doorway with the people standing on it indicates the photo was most likely from March 1915. The same pile of gravel appears in another photograph shared by the late Mr. Allen Barley that was published in the Stone House Foundation's "Images of America: Stephens City." The date on that photograph is March 1915. Stephens City UMC records reflect Rev. Absalom Knox announced the final preaching service in the old church (built 1882) would be on Sunday March 7, 1915 at 11 o'clock. Both photographs may be documenting the completion of the church construction and the first service in the new church on March 14, 1915.