

From Frontier Faith to a Heart for the City

By Linda H. Yates

Presented at Trinity United Methodist Church, Tallahassee

September 13, 2017

Trinity United Methodist Church was organized in 1824, the same year Tallahassee was selected Capital of the Territory of Florida and 21 years before Florida became a state. This account of the church begins even earlier where worship of God always begins—in the hearts of people whose faith in their Creator compels them to share it with others.

John Wesley of England had such a heart. He believed in social justice guided by Scripture and a personal relationship with God. He and his brother Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, were the first missionaries in the new country of America. They came to the Georgia Colony in 1736 to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. John returned to England a year and a few months later feeling he had failed his mission and that he himself was not yet converted. He continued work with the Holy Club of Oxford he had formed a decade earlier. During a gathering at Aldersgate he felt “his heart strangely warmed” and a new depth and certainty in religious living. Later he convened the first conference of the people called Methodist, thus beginning the Methodist Movement. He sent Francis Asbury and later Bishop Thomas Coke to organize the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Betts, 1915, pp. 1, 3).

The moral and religious state of the colonies at that time was very favorable for the start of this vital type of Christianity that put aside the dogmas and controversies of the European churches they left behind. The faith of those who connected with the new Methodist churches, preached by pioneer itinerant circuit riders, helped them turn away from the drinking and gambling of the day and strive to be honest and hardworking citizens of a new country (Daniel, 1923, p. 9).

The churches increased in number, united by a form of Connectionalism that continues today. That conception by the founders of the churches ultimately guided the policies of the United Colonies into the building of the United States. Connectionalism made possible the democratic government under which an autonomous church developed freely (Daniel, 1923, pp. 20-23).

South Carolina was one of the first annual conferences organized to carry on the connectional work of the Methodist Church and in 1821 formed a Missionary Society as inspired by John Wesley. It was the beginning of a long record of mission work to the American Indians in Georgia and Alabama. In 1829 it turned its attention to the slaves on Southern plantations and added 21,300 colored members to its rolls. Most significant to settlers moving to the Territory of Florida was the decision of the S.C. Conference to send missionaries there in 1823.

The Territory of Florida was fertile ground for missionary work by the S.C. Conference and later by the Georgia Conference. Ponce de Leon discovered this land in 1513 and claimed it for Spain. It was occupied by Spain, then France, England and again Spain, until 1819 when Spain ceded it to the United States.

U.S. took full possession of the territory in July 1821. The first question was where to locate its capital. East Florida was governed from St. Augustine, and West Florida, from Pensacola. A commission was appointed to select a new site. The story goes that a man was sent from St. Augustine on horseback and another from Pensacola. When they met about halfway between the two towns, the location would be designated the new capital. On March 4, 1824, it was announced that the old Indian village of Tallahassee had been selected.

When the Territory of Florida was ceded to the United States by Spain, S.C. Mission Society sent a missionary to St Augustine, and two, John Twiggs and John Slade, to the northern part of the Territory. They worked first in the Chattahoochee area and when the first group of settlers arrived in Tallahassee they were here to greet them (Delp, 1965, p.7).

On the fourth Sunday of September 1824, James Tabor and Isaac Sewell, who replaced circuit riders John Slade and John Twiggs, met with 10 settlers—six white and four black—at the home of a Mr. Myers to organize the first religious organization in the new capital city. The S.C. Methodist Conference took a bold step and created the Tallahassee District. Josiah Evans was appointed to be presiding elder as well as pastor of its first religious organization, the Tallahassee Mission.

In 1825, a small wooden building was erected for worship services. On January 7, 1826, after Governor Duval laid the cornerstone for the new capitol building of the Territory in a ceremony on what is now Monroe Street, government leaders went to the simple Methodist Church at the corner of Bronough and what is now West Park Avenue, largest meeting place in town, to complete the ceremony with oratory.

Settlers continued to arrive and the mission grew. John Slade returned to Tallahassee in 1826 and earned the reputation as Father of Florida Methodism. A succession of others followed, each more devout than schooled, answering the call with courage and great sacrifice.

The Rev. Joshua Knowles was pastor at Trinity in 1836. Years later he wrote of his experiences in a paper to be read at the Semi-Centennial of Tallahassee Methodism. In 1924 it was published in a book by Sallie E. Blake, *Tallahassee of Yesterday*.

When he arrived he found that many families had been driven away because of Indian attacks, and those who stayed ran to the newly constructed capitol to hide behind bales of cotton that barricaded the building. There was a great deal of sickness in Tallahassee at that time and the Rev. Knowles conducted as many as four funerals a day. In 1841, the town was visited by yellow fever. In many instances it was fatal to entire families.

Then followed a period of dissipation. Church people of the town rallied together with business owners around the temperance cause. “This temperance movement reclaimed many a drunkard,” the Rev. Knowles reported, “and was followed by a glorious revival of religion in the Methodist Church . . . and worked a most satisfactory change in the moral and social aspect and feeling of Tallahassee and vicinity” (Knowles, 1924, p. 85).

Trinity’s story during the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, World War II and beyond, and pastors who ministered during good and bad times is told in *Trinity United Methodist Church, Tallahassee’s First Church, 1824-1999*. Copies are available in the church library and in its Heritage Room.

For 193 years, Trinity has had a heart for God and for the people of this city. In January 1960, the Rev. Glenn James, for whom the church chapel is named, wrote a column published in the *Trinity Tidings*. He said then:

Today, the people called Methodist claim to know a great truth, to believe great doctrines, and to care for the spiritual welfare of people—God’s people everywhere.

In view of all this strength in our land, we have, as a Church, a great responsibility. It is not enough for us to praise John Wesley, his brother Charles, and Francis Asbury and the many others of those early days.

It is rather for us to make history on our own. (James, 1960, p.3)

Sources

- Betts, A. D. (1915). “Historical Address Delivered by Rev. Albert Deems Betts Before the South Carolina Conference, Charleston, S.C., November 30, 1915.” *In South Carolina Methodism and Missions*, Methodist Historical Society Addresses, 1. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.wofford.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1017&context=histaddresses>
- Blake. S. (1924). *Tallahassee of Yesterday*. T.J. Appleyard: Tallahassee, FL.
- Daniel, J. W. (1923). “An Address Before the Historical Societies of the Upper South Carolina Conference, Newberry, S.C. and South Carolina Conference, Kingstree, S.C, October 30, 1923, and November 27, 1923.” *In The Background of Methodism in America*. Methodist Historical Society Addresses, 9. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.wofford.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1025&context=histaddresses>
- Delp, T. F. R (1965) *History of the Tallahassee District of The Methodist Church*. Tallahassee, FL: Author.
- James, G. (1960, January). “From the Minister.” *Trinity Tidings*.
- Knowles, J. (1924). “Methodism in Tallahassee 1836.” Paper Read at the Semi-Centennial of Tallahassee Methodism. In Blake. S., *Tallahassee of Yesterday* (pp. 77-85). T.J. Appleyard: Tallahassee, FL.
- Yates, L. (Editor). (1999). *Trinity United Methodist Church: Tallahassee’s First Church: 1924-1999*. Tallahassee, FL: Trinity United Methodist Church.