

Methodism may be said to have originated at Oxford University, England, under the leadership of Rev. John Wesley in the organization known as the Holy Club, between the years 1725 and 1730.

The year 1766 seems the date of the first Methodist preaching in New York. An interesting fact concerning the beginnings of Methodism in America is that the first sermon preached in North Carolina by a Methodist minister, Rev. Joseph Pilmoor, occurred in Currituck County, September 28, 1772. In the closing days of 1772 Mr. Pilmoor came to New Bern. Of the people here he says: "In all my travels through the world I have met with none like the people of New Bern". After an evening service on Christmas he records, "Mr Wm. Wood took me home with him and I had everything that my heart could desire". On December 26 of this year 1772 he dined with Mr Edwards who was secretary to Governor

The first annual Conference in North Carolina was held at Green Hill's house situated about one mile south of Louisburg, April 20, 1785. The last annual Conference held in Durham, N.C. November 1926 adopted a resolution providing for the purchase and preservation of this historic property. In 1776 for the first time Carolina circuit was named with three preachers. Previously whatever Methodists were in North Carolina were under the Norfolk or Brunswick circuits of Virginia.

The earliest mention of Methodists in New Bern, N.C. was in a letter from Rev. James Reed, a missionary of the church of England, to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He refers to a great number of dissenters who have settled in his parish, among

whom he numbers the Methodists, whom he describes as "ignorant, censorious and uncharitable". This was in 1760. The historian Grissom thinks that he could not possibly have referred to real Methodists as the adjectives do not fit. But even more bitter and untrue words were being at that time hurled against the followers of Mr Wesley by Mr Reed's colleagues in England. Moreover it is to be supposed that there were Methodists in that day of whom these words make a fair description. However, Mr Reed later tells of a visit of George Whitfield to New Bern, N.C., and quotes Mr Whitfield as saying that the Methodists previously referred to were not regular Methodists, as none were Methodists who did not follow either himself or Mr Wesley. It is supposed that these dissenters referred to by Mr. Reed as "ignorant, censorious and uncharitable" were a sect called "New Lights" and not real Methodists.

In 1779 there appear New Hope, Tar River and Rean Oak Circuits which probably constituted at that time the work in North Carolina. In 1786 the appointment is called New Bern, New River and Wilmington. In 1797 New Bern appears with 296 white members and 387 colored members. This probably was not the membership of a single station but of the entire circuit, for there is no record of the New Bern station until the visit of Bishop Asbury in 1803 when he planned the New Berne Station.

An interesting fact in connection with New Bern Methodism is that the most prominent of Mr Wesley's colleagues visited this place. Mr Pilmoor who was sent to America by Mr Wesley himself, visited New Bern in 1722; Bishop Asbury in 1785, 1796 and 1803; Mr Whitfield as early as 1760 and several times later, and Lorenzo Dow in 1804. Also to be noted is the fact that the knowledge and fame of Methodism had reached New Bern simultaneously with the first preaching in

New York in 1766. When Bishop Asbury visited New Bern in 1796 the Methodists owned no house of worship and he preached in the Episcopal Church.¹

Rev. L. C. Vass in his interesting book on the Presbyterian Church in New Bern¹⁻ says: "In 1803 many large Camp Meetings were held in the New Berne District, with signal blessing like those great Presbyterian protracted services and communions held amid the quiet forests where population is scattered and the means of grace are limited, these extraordinary meetings proved valuable in saving souls and building up the Redeemer's Kingdom".

"Not to the dome, where crumbling arch and column
Attest the feebleness of mortal hand
But to the fane, most catholic and solemn
Which God had planned."

For many years previous to erecting a church building, therefore, a few Methodist persons met together at some convenient place and worshipped God according to the usages of that denomination. But not until 1802 was a regular organization formed and a church building erected. A lot was secured on Hancock Street and a very plain building erected, which was called Andrews Chapel, and a preacher was sent each year from the North Carolina Conference. This was the second church building erected in New Bern, only one, the Episcopal Church, antedating it.¹ The number of members grew steadily. One of the most telling revivals was conducted by Rev. John Edwards, Pastor of Andrews Chapel, aided by Dr. Charles P. Deems, then quite a young man sent out in the interests of the Bible and Tract Society.

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1 Eastern North Carolina. New Bern--Presbyterian Church and New Berne Rev. L. C. Vass, A.M.

1- Historical papers of the North Carolina Conference Historical Society and the Western North Carolina Historical Society 1925.

Happening in New Bern just at this time he proved a most valuable assistant to Mr Edwards. It is said that he preached twenty nights in succession drawing large crowds by his eloquent and attractive presentation of the Gospel. Among the number were some very prominent people from other churches, who afterwards became members of the Methodist church. As a result of this revival the number of members increased so rapidly that it became necessary to build a larger church. A lot was secured on New Street upon which a church was erected in 1843-44. The name Centenary was given this church. After worshipping in this building for sixty-one years it was decided to build again in a more desirable location. Already owning property on the corner of New and Middle streets, used as a parsonage, it was decided to purchase the lot next it on Middle St. and build a larger and more commodious church. This was completed in 1904. During all these years the church was had as Pastors some of the most talented men of the North Carolina Conference. Among them were Doctors Wilson, Deems, Burkhead, Bumpass, James H. Brent, John R. Brooks, L. W. Crawford, P. H. Wood, James E. Mann, R. C. Beaman, J. B. Hurley, R. B. John, R. F. Bumpass and a number of others. Most of these have passed to their reward. It is worthy of note that two of these, Mr. N.H.D. Wilson and Mr Sidney Bumpass had sons who afterwards became Pastors here, one of them occupying this position at the present time.

It must be borne in mind that the early Methodists were almost as plainly severe in their dress and manners as the Quakers. A good illustration of this attitude towards dress is the following story. When Rev. N.H.D. Wilson, the father of the present pastor of Centenary church, brought his bride, a girl of nineteen years to this church

she was worldly enough to have a flower in her bonnet. Horror and consternation reigned in the congregation.

Illustrating the belief of the Methodists in the reality of the mystical and the supernatural is the well known story of the truly remarkable dream and death of Rev. Christopher Thomas, Pastor of Andrews Chapel. "It was at New Bern in November 1829 that Christopher Thomas died, while serving this charge (Andrews Chapel), he having been sent there from the Conference held at Lynchburg, Va. in the early part of the year. Under his ministry during the summer of this year there was a great revival of religion, which not only spread through the town but went like a tidal wave down the Neuse to the seashore, the whole country being deluged by its generous overflow. Soon thereafter Thomas was taken sick and died a triumphant death. It is said that on his way to Conference at a farm house near Lynchburg, where he spent the night with two other preachers, he had a remarkable dream in which all of his experiences during the year, including the events at the conference, the revival and his death were revealed to him. Just before he breathed his last he said: "They come, they come", and immediately the whole room was filled with a light as bright as the noon-day, though it was in the late hours of the night, and the only light otherwise, being a candle in the fireplace. When the strange light disappeared he was dead".¹

The Rev. Charles F. Deems was appointed Presiding Elder of the New Bern District in December of 1842 and was successively so appointed in 1863 and 1864. The surrender of the Confederate forces in threw the whole district in the Federal lines. Dr. Deems promptly visited the station in May 1865. On the evening of June 24th. a

¹ Historical papers of the North Carolina Conference Historical Society and the Western North Carolina Conference Hist. Society.

meeting of the male members of the Church was held at the home of the Rev. J. A. Suydam, a local preacher, and a Quarterly Conference was held in an informal manner. The Rev. Dr. Deems appointed Mr. Suydam secretary. The regular business of a Quarterly Conference could not be transacted, but the Presiding Elder appointed Mr. Suydam to be Pastor until the next session of the Annual Conference. The Pastor was directed to make a list of the scattered church members, appoint a Sunday School Superintendent and Sunday School teachers, in fact to re-organize the whole church. After this re-organization the church started on a new era of prosperity and success, and now numbers over one thousand members with a large and flourishing Sunday School.

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