

History of First United Methodist Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee

by Kay Horner

First United Methodist Church Historian

December 2005

(minor revisions, March 2010)

Little is known about the Methodists in the area before 1812. The Stone's River Circuit, which first appeared in reports of the Tennessee Conference in 1813, included Murfreesboro (which was not yet established), Shelbyville, Middleton, Unionville, Beech Grove, and parts of Nolensville and Shady Grove stations. The reports provided only listings, not specific information.

In 1812, there was regular preaching at the dwelling houses of John Windrow, Thomas Jaratt, Charles Locke, James Rucker, and Nat Overall. "Methodist Societies" were organized and log church houses were built throughout the county as early as 1814. 1

Religious Campgrounds: The early 1800s

At the beginning of the 1800s, there were few Methodists and were scattered throughout Rutherford County. Periodically as was the custom in those days, circuit riders would hold large services at campgrounds, sometimes lasting for weeks, where thousands of people gathered to worship. These camp meetings were generally held in the autumn after crops were harvested, and people brought enough food, water and other provisions to share with other attendees to last through the end of the meeting. There were many campgrounds scattered through the county, which helped fuel the growth of Methodists in the county.

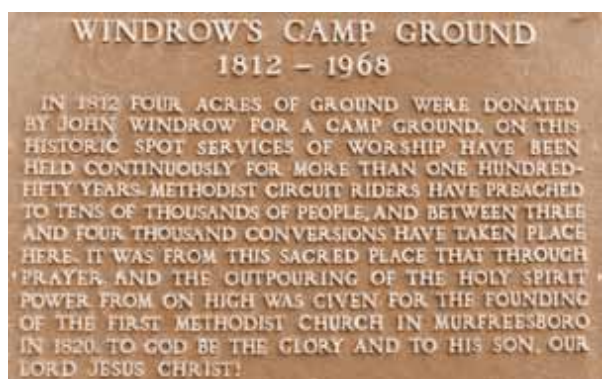
Fervor and emotions ran high at these camp meetings, so much that some Methodists were termed "Shouting Methodists" by those of other denominations. Other denominations felt that the Methodist religion "was too easy getting and the same to lose." However, the environment at the meetings was happy, with singing, shouting, shaking hands and "enjoying religion their own way without restraints and cold formality." Generally, the early local Methodists were described this way: "as a religious people (they) are energetic, undertaking things with a willing hand." 2

In 1811 the numbers of people making a profession of religion surged because of an earthquake felt in the area. People felt that great disasters were in the near future due to the earthquake, so many people "joined" the church. It is noted that after the fright subsided, many went back to their old ways, yet there were numbers "who proved to be faithful Christian people." 2

Windrow's Campground: 1812

The earliest recorded local history of FUMC can be seen today in the form of a small plaque affixed to a modest, white, unmarked building with a small cemetery behind it. It is located about nine miles southwest of Murfreesboro on the Windrow Road near the intersection of Patterson Road in the Windrow Community. The plaque says:

In 1812 four acres of ground were donated by John Windrow for a camp ground. On this historic spot services of worship have been held continuously for more than one hundred-fifty years. Methodist circuit riders have preached to tens of thousands of people, and between three and four thousands conversions have taken place here. It was from this sacred place that through prayer and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit power from on high was given for the founding of the First United Methodist Church in Murfreesboro in 1820. To God be the glory and to his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ! 3



The first camp meeting was held at Windrow's on August 15, 1812, with people coming from as far away as 40 miles. The campground was described as located on the western slope of a hill among a beautiful grove of dense sugar maples that provided shade and partial protection from light rain. "The camps were constructed of cedar rails covered with boards, all sloping the same way. The ground rose in elevation sufficient to give the speaker, standing at the lower edge...a commanding view of a large congregation." There were approximately 50 camp meetings held at Windrow's between 1812-1861. ¹

It was a Sunday in the fall of 1820 that kicked off one of the most notable meetings at Windrow's in terms of numbers of people and length of time. The meeting continued more than a week, with an unusually large crowd and a number of traveling preachers in attendance. At this meeting, more than 300 people professed their religion, with a great number joining the Methodists ² and many joining the ministry. "The great camp meeting of 1820 resulted in the organization of a church in Murfreesboro." ¹

Meetings at Windrow were generally described this way:

If the preacher happen[ed] to be a good fire and brimstone declaimer, there were [was] no difficulty at the close of the sermon to have a warm enthusiastic demonstration of religious feelings, singing lively pious camp meeting songs, mixed with exhortations and prayer. This brought on shouting, both men and women [were] engaged in this exercise...At such times as this, women shouted, paying little attention to bows or bonnets. It was immaterial whether they [bows or bonnets] fell off or not. ²

Other Notable Methodist Camp Grounds

Overall's Camp Ground was located 20 miles east of Windrow's where meetings and feasts were held for more than 40 years, possibly as early as 1813. Many of the Overall family entered the ministry. ¹

Closer to the city was the Lytle Camp Ground. Major John Lytle was a prominent, devout "Shouting Methodist" and a founding father of Murfreesboro and of FUMC. He enjoyed calling on Old Mother Wasson when he came into town. She was an 80-year-old lady from Ireland and it was said that she had received communion from John Wesley.

Lytle Campground was located two miles from town on the Salem Road "at the river near the bridge" ² Meetings were held there from 1827 to 1843 or 1845, when it was moved higher up the river. ¹ The rule at these meetings was strictness in observing good order at all times. ²

The Lytle campground as described by John Spence in his book:

When this place was first settled, there was a beautiful grove of timber all through and round the camping ground, making it shady all over the place. The camping ground [was] laid off in a large square, thickly built up all round, with small houses (tents), numbers having brick chimneys, streets entering the square by the corners. In the center of the square, a large fine shed, fifty by seventy feet, roofed on large posts, set in the ground. Under the shed was filled with seats of flat timber, and pass ways. The ground all covered, deep with straw, making everything neat and comfortable. The tents [were] fitted in the same manner with straw. A large altar, railed round, a preachers stand, a little elevated, arrangements for candles on all the posts of the shed, when lit up at night making a fine appearance. ²

Circuit Preacher Rev. Robert Paine

In between camp meetings and up until the time actual churches were built, circuit-riding preachers would make appointments to hold services in Methodist members' homes and dwelling houses.

One of the most significant in the history of FUMC was Rev. Robert Paine, a circuit rider with a large territory that included Murfreesboro and extended into Kentucky. He was described as an energetic young man, determined in his purpose, and punctual in all appointments. His preaching garnered lively and happy interest among the Methodists, but again, as with other Methodists, was looked down upon by outsiders. Another well-known minister of another denomination, perhaps jealous, called the young Rev. Paine "the tallow face[d] young stripling." ²

1821: Chartering a Church

It was about this time that Methodists came together to charter a church, called the Methodist Episcopal Church of Murfreesboro. The group met at the "Lawing House" on College Street,⁴ which was the location of the local furniture maker/undertaker. Today, The Center for the Arts is on this site.

With traveling preacher Rev. Robert Paine in attendance, charter members included Benjamin Blankenship and wife; Martin Clark; Edward Fisher and wife; William Ledbetter; John Lytle and wife; Levi Reeves; Willis Reeves; William Rucker and G.A. Sublett. Rev. Paine was considered the first pastor.

During this time, traveling preachers held services in the courthouse or in members' homes every other Sunday. Because space limited the number of participants, membership grew very slowly. The members needed to have a permanent place of worship and began to raise money accordingly. ²

The Maple Street Building

In early 1823, John Lytle donated a ½ acre lot on the "outskirts of town" on Maple St. (aka Depot St. or Lebanon St.) to build a church. Lytle stipulated that the lot would solely be used as an active Methodist church. ² The lot is described as a woody area located at the southeast corner of the 3-acre grounds of the school called "The Female Academy" (later renamed Soule Female College.) Today, it is assumed to be the site of the Hays Building on the corner of Maple and Burton Streets. ⁵

The trustees of the church were Norman Spence, Willis Snell, Daniel Leinan and S.B. Christy. ^{6, A}

Local contractors were hired to build the church: Jerimiah Fletcher, brickwork (grandfather of James T. Rather, later a Sunday School teacher at FUMC in the late 1800s); John Jones (father of W.R. Jones) and Jeremiah Pritchett for woodwork. ⁶

Outside, the church was described as a one-story brick, measuring 60 ft. long and 40 ft. wide. There were two doors in the front and the church had six windows. There was a gable end fronting the road and it had a "small cupaloe with a good sounding church bell, altogether giving the air of a house of worship."²

Inside, the walls were plastered and painted. The church contained two rows of plain benches with backs and a gallery at the end for the use of blacks to worship. There was a plain box pulpit, elevated about two feet above the floor, with room enough for the preacher and "four or five 'choirsters,' the whole finished in a plain substantial manner, taking on an air of cheerfulness." ^{2, 6} Rev. Germon Baker served as pastor the first year, followed by Rev. Green T. Henderson. ⁶

Methodist membership at this time was small. It was described as difficult to keep up appearances in such a large church, so members scattered about in the seats to make the membership look larger. This enabled them to live up to John Lytle's expectation for an active Methodist church on that site. ²

The lot south of the church was used as a graveyard. After the property was sold (eventually to the Trustees of Soule College), most of the caskets were moved to the "Old City Cemetery" on Vine Street. ⁶

About Proper Dress, Preachers and Salaries of the Time

In the mid- 1820s, Methodist people dressed very conservatively and humbly during this time. Men generally wore coats and straight collars and women wore plain dresses and simple bonnets. "Ear bobs and gold finger rings were not in keeping with a Methodist woman. This expense [was] reserved for a better purpose." ²

Once a traveling preacher was assigned a "station," they boarded at members' homes on a rotating basis, each family taking a turn. There were no parsonages. B Methodist preachers were generally single men and earned \$100 plus board during the mid-1800s. If the preacher was married, he and his wife earned \$100 each, plus \$20 for each child. Most Methodist preachers did not have a formal education, which contributed to many in the community looking down at Methodists in general. To overcome this and to better prepare its ministers, the Methodist Conference adopted a systematic educational program with a required examination at the close of studies. ²

A More Convenient Location

Desiring a more convenient location for the church, the trustees purchased a lot from Mariah Smith 6, C on the southeast corner of Church and College Streets, now the location of the Flower Center. Built by the same contractors as the Maple St. building, a basement was added to be used by black worshippers for general services and for Sunday School. Tilford and Buck Allen dug the basement. 6

The building was completed and the first sermon was delivered June 8, 1843 in the basement by the current station preacher, Rev. Thomas W. Randle. Two weeks later, the church was dedicated on June 23, a clear day. The presiding elder of the district, Rev. M.L. Andrews presided before a large crowd at the dedication ceremony. D The new building was described as the most eloquent in town. Church membership grew during this time. 2

As the slavery issue heated up and divided the country along Northern and Southern lines, it also divided churches. Consequently, at the General Conference in New York in 1844, the Methodists split along geographical lines and the Murfreesboro church became the Methodist Episcopal Church South.

The Soule College Connection

Meanwhile, "The Female Academy" had changed its name in 1852 to Soule Female College, after Methodist Episcopal Church South's Bishop, Joseph Soule. Although the college was multi-denominational, the Methodists operated it and the president of the college was always a Methodist. 6, 7

The Rutherford County Housing Authority today sits at the former location of Soule College. Methodists have been encouraged to "open their books" to reveal more about life at Soule College, which closed in 1916. 8

Civil War

In 1862, worship services were suspended when the Confederate Army used the church as a hospital. As the Union occupied Murfreesboro, the building was taken over by the Union Army and the seats were taken out. "Loyal Methodists" from the North took over the church and refused to return it to the original, local trustees. The "Loyal Methodists" said the church was legally theirs, and they continued to use it until the close of the Civil War in 1865. 2

The local trustees petitioned and by order of President Andrew Johnson in 1865, the church was rightfully returned to the trustees.6 Rev. J.R. Plummer was the first preacher appointed after the Civil War and was also named President of Soule Female College. 2

The church, battered by the Civil War, was in dire need of repair. The church was thoroughly renovated beginning June 3, 1872 and completed in November 1872. 6 A noted Sunday School teacher, James T. Rather, was presented with a bible by his Sunday School Class in 1880. 11 Services continued at this location until 1888. 6

Today, a plaque is imbedded on the side of the (Flower Center) building in what looks to be a "plastered-in" old church window facing College St. The plaque says "Erected AD 1843; Remodeled 1872." 9

FUMC's Home for 115 Years

In 1886, the trustees bought a lot across College Street from its current church to build another church to accommodate its growing congregation. H.C. Jackson, a local carpenter, was hired to build the new church. He also built the historic Collier-Crichlow house that still stands at 511 East Main Street. 10 Bob Sanders built the pulpit and carved the Lord's Prayer. 12 MidSouth Bank is now located at this site.

Two years later the new church was completed. It was built in the Romanesque style with arched windows and doors and a grand tower. 10 The church bell, dated 1872 from the old building, was moved across the street into the new church, where it remains today. 12 In return for his services in building the new church, Jackson was given the old church building.



Murfreesboro Methodist Church (1888 building). No date, but this photograph was taken prior to the 1911 tornado which partially altered the church's exterior.



Two former church buildings, used in 1843-1888 and in 1888-2003 (with steeple), stand beside each other across East College Street just north-east of the Square, as seen in this 1910 photograph.

Throughout the 1900s, the church campus grew to accommodate its growing membership:

- 1910 – small education building constructed
- 1955 – a larger wing, gymnasium and chapel added
- 1990 – Harrison House purchased 12

During this century, FUMC created a growing and innovative pre-school program, adult and youth programs, and outreach to local, national and world communities. It became a vital, seven-days-a-week ministry, active day and night with church and community programs, praying, worshipping, training and gathering for mission. 13



Mrs. I.N. Gattis Class, 1931
Made at the home of Mrs. Henry Huddleston, Sr.

Murfreesboro Methodist Church Men's Bible Class
In front of the Princess Theater where it met from the early 1920's until 1945. This 1938 photograph celebrates the culmination of an attendance contest between the "reds and the blues" groups, totaling 118 men present for this day's Men's Bible Class.



In 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Protestant Church joined to become the Methodist Church, and the Murfreesboro church became First Methodist Church. In 1968 the Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren to become the United Methodist Church.

As a historical footnote, three other local Methodist congregations have been started from FUMC: St Mark's United Methodist (1929), Trinity United Methodist (1963) and Fellowship United Methodist (1996).

Moving Forward to Grow in a New Century

By the 1990s, the growth of FUMC exceeded its downtown church campus and consequently, threatened future growth for the church and its offerings. Emotions ran deep, divided by a passion for its history in its old location, yet passionate in its desire to accommodate growth in all aspects.

After discussions and debates, in December 1998, the FUMC congregation voted to build a new church to accommodate its growing membership. Richard Siegel donated 20 acres of land for this purpose on Thompson Lane. Groundbreaking was held for the new church building on August 26, 2001.

On Easter Sunday, April 20, 2003, FUMC worship for the first time in the new sanctuary, which has a capacity of approximately 1,350. During the first year, there was an increase of approximately 400 people attending worship services and a 50 percent increase in Sunday School attendance.

The church now has four Sunday worship services. Services are held in the Sanctuary at 8:30 (this early service was re-established in the early 1970s) and 11:00, and contemporary worship services called "The Open Table" are held in the Family Life center at 8:30 (begun in 2005) and at 11:00 (begun in 2009).

At the beginning of 2010, there were more than 2,730 members of FUMC – and the congregation continues to grow in numbers.

There is a continued focus on maintaining and growing its strong educational children, youth, and adult programs. FUMC continues to be involved in ministry, relief efforts and social issues through expanding its missions and outreach in the local, national and international arenas.

A combination of today and yesterday, some members can trace their FUMC affiliation back multiple generations to the earliest days of the Methodist Church in Murfreesboro. 12

With its rich local history as a foundation and an eye to the future in a rapidly-growing and changing city, FUMC will continue to be a relevant spiritual hub through its strongest asset: its people and the desire to serve.

Notes on Records

Records of the early days of First United Methodist Church (FUMC) in Rutherford County are sketchy at best, relying on published personal journals and similar accounts from a variety of sources. It is hoped that as more personal journals and historical accounts are uncovered, this current history will be revised.

Where there are discrepancies of facts among sources, special notes have been added after the bibliography.

Endnotes

1 Sims, Carlton C. A History of Rutherford County. Originally published 1947. reprinted by Rutherford County Historical Society, 1981. pp 182-184.

2 Spence, John Cedric. Annals of Rutherford County, Vols. I & II. Transcribed by the Rutherford County Historical Society, 1991. Vol. 1, pp. 183 - 190; Vol. II, p.4.

3 Plaque, Windrow's "Chapel," Windrow Road at Patterson Road

4 1878 Map of Murfreesboro, Linebaugh Public Library

5 1907 Map of Murfreesboro, Linebaugh Public Library

6 Henderson, C.C. The Story of Murfreesboro. Murfreesboro: News-Banner Publishing Company, 1929; reprint Franklin, TN: Franklin Publishing Company, 1977. pp 130 – 131.

7 Soule College Plaque, Maple Street.

8 Hobgood, Baxter. Little Bits of 'Boro Lore. Murfreesboro: Courier Printing Company, 1996. p. 17

9 Plaque, The Flower Center, College Street side

10 A Walking Tour, Main St.: Murfreesboro/Rutherford County, Inc., by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.

11 Rather Family Bible, presented to R.T. Rather, 1880, family heirloom of Robert B. Mifflin, Sr.

12 FUMC records and interviews

13 Mayo, Rev. Jerry, "When the Bloom is on the Rose" State of the Church address, March 3, 2002.

Special Notes

General: Where direct quotes from Spence's book were used, spelling errors were corrected, but other edits were used only when necessary to aid in reading comprehension.

A Spence lists Edmond Jones, A. Childress, Simpson Simms, Benjamin Rucker, Sterling Ogden, John R. Laughlin, Samuel H. Laughlin as trustees of the Maple St. church.

B The 1907 map of Murfreesboro shows a "Meth Pars" (Methodist Parsonage) on the grounds of the Soule College, the grounds also the location of the FUMC Church on Maple Street. It is assumed that this is the parsonage for the president of Soule College. The Rutherford County Office Building today sits on this site on the corner of Lytle and Maple Streets.

C Spence indicates Daniel Leinau as the owner of the lot. The name Leinau/Leinan reflects difficulty in transcribing handwritten journal.

D Henderson indicates S.D. Baldwin; followed by T.W. Randle, preached the first sermon.

Additional Resources

Beasley, N. C., ed. "History of First United Methodist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Interim Collection," 1977, ca. 82 pages (in FUMC Library).

Brookshire, Jerry H. "Methodists and Murfreesboro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Publications of the Rutherford County Historical Society, Winter 1978, pp. 61-77.

Ison, Martha T., ed. "Pastors: Part I, 1820-72". 1977. Collection of obituaries of pastors who have served FUMC. (in FUMC library)

Pittard, Mabel. Rutherford. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1984, p. 14.

Wiser, Louise. History of Rutherford County Schools. Murfreesboro: Rutherford County Retired Teachers Association, 1986.

Mutual Realty and Loan Company. History of Rutherford County. Murfreesboro: Home Journal Printing, circa 1923. p. 20.

Census data, 1840, 1850, 1880.

Land Deed Genealogy, Vol. 3, 1819 – 1823.

Marriages of Rutherford County, 1804 – 1872, compiled by Edythe Rucker Whitley.

Smith, John Abernathy. Cross and Flame: Two Centuries of United Methodism in Middle Tennessee. Parthenon Press, 1984.