

MT. ZION



The original church as pictured in the mind of the author.

*I love this little church house,
That stands on sacred sod.
That calls to those who listen
And points all souls to God.*

*I've always found a blessing,
Within its hallowed walls
And so have all the people
Who've heard its clarion calls.*

*So come ye worn and weary,
Come, now, ye sad of soul,
And sup of that great blessing
Far greater than pure gold.*

*Many have heard God's summons,
And many have answered, "Yes"
But there are yet still others,
To come, their souls to bless.*

--Merdyth McCullers Lane

THE EARLY CHURCH



Old Mt. Zion Church
1840 - 1948

*"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go
into the House of the Lord". Psalms 122:1.*

For untold years, since the first Methodist Society was organized in North Carolina in 1773, a small tree-shaded nook located in Northwestern Johnston County, Cleveland Township, has resounded with God's praises raised by the voices of a multitude of people who were determined, with God's help, to build a Methodist Church and keep it growing.

Mt. Zion was established when our Nation was scarcely fifty years old and only twenty states strong. Hence, God's laborers in the fields of Mt. Zion have witnessed wonders far beyond the dreams of our founding Fathers; far beyond the dreams of Francis Asbury, the first Bishop of North Carolina; also beyond those of John Wesley, the very founder of Methodism in England in 1729.

God has endowed us with His richest blessings in spiritual and material ways, and with His precious help we shall continue to push forward in every phase of His Holy Work. Truly we can say with the Patriot of Old, "What wonders hath God wrought". Out of the wilderness, He led the people to build a temple, gathered them together as a flock, sent His chosen Shepherds to feed their souls and has appointed counselors and leaders among the members of every generation. We do thank our Heavenly Father and praise His name.

The earliest known official record concerning the Church property is that found in Land Book "A", page 236, Registrar of Deeds Office of Johnston County, Smithfield, North Carolina. Prior to this recording, the land on which the Church stood had remained in the hands of the same family, namely the Leach Family, so there was no legal mention

of it on the County Books. The above mentioned record is dated January, 1840, and states that in the division of the lands of Susan Leach, widow of John Thomas Leach, lot Number 3, drawn by her daughter Susan Leach, wife of Adam Banks, contained a certain parcel of land on the south side of Buffalo Swamp and north side of Middle Creek, "surrounding, but not including two acres on which Mt. Zion Church House stands".

Found in letters in the hands of the descendants of John and Susan Leach is proof that they gave the land and built the Church prior to the year 1825. However, tradition has it about 1809, and claims that when John Leach brought his bride, Susan Parham, who was a member of the "Methodist Society" in Southeastern Virginia, to this community, she was quite unhappy because she could not return to her "Methodist Meeting House" for spiritual sustenance. Consequently, her young husband, in order to make his lovely bride more content, set aside a two-acre plot of his plantation, known as "Leachburg", built the Church, and dedicated it in perpetuity to her comfort and to the Glory of God.

In Volume two of *Bishop Asbury's Journal*, he mentions that in 1812, on his way from near Fayetteville to New Bern, he went by Mt. Zion Chapel to preach. Since the old "Cornwallis Trail", which was a much-traveled thoroughfare in those days, ran near the Church, this "Mt. Zion Chapel" could have been our Mt. Zion. However, there is no proof that this is authentic since Bishop Asbury did not definitely locate the Chapel.

It has been handed down through the generations by word of mouth that the first meeting house was small and built of logs and that after a few years, as the congregation increased in number, a more elaborate structure was erected. This was a frame building constructed of hand-hewn planks and equipped with windows and doors. It also had an open spire rising above the altar with a bell to summon the worshippers as the hour for the services approached. Prior to 1840, this Church was burned and replaced by a still larger building which was also built of hand-hewn lumber. The frame was morticed together and fastened with heart-of-pine pegs. The planks were attached with hand-forged nails. The sanctuary was fifty feet by thirty feet which was ample size at that time. The roof was a hip roof, and no steeple was erected. The walls were plastered, and the chancel, communion table, and altar were built to form a crescent in the north end of the sanctuary. The glass in the windows was treated with some substance that resembled stained glass. However, this was not permanent, and I remember, as a small child in the early 1900's, peeping through the spots where the stain had worn off to watch the birds flit through the branches of the many beautiful oak trees outside.

The newel posts from the chancel railing of this Sanctuary are still used today in the Church as pedestals to hold arrangements of floral offerings. Also, the old curved communion table, made of hand-carved plank, is used in the vestibule as a console table, and the pulpit cabinet

is used in the music room as the storage place for music. So, for those who dream of and love the past, there is still quite a bit of it in reality with us today.

For more than a hundred years this "House of the Lord" was in His continuous service, and was the "Old Mt. Zion Church", attended and loved by the people up to the year 1948. Many, many precious little feet were started on their upward paths through her doors and before her Sacred Altar.

The earliest roll of the Church members found up to this time is dated in the late 1830's and early 1840's. The first name listed before that date is of Elizabeth Willis Sanders Leach, wife of Dr. James T. Leach, son of John Leach. Elizabeth Sanders was the daughter of Colonel John Sanders and Mary Boddie Sanders of near Smithfield. Miss Sanders and Dr. Leach were married in 1833, and it is assumed that she moved her membership from Elizabeth Church in that community to Mt. Zion at about that date.

From the beginning of the Church up through the 1860's, the membership was made up of both whites and negroes. Mrs. Alma Leach McCullers, great granddaughter of John Leach, who attended Mt. Zion as a small child in those years, remembered vividly the large Negro attendance at the services. She recalled having seen many of them kneel at the altar and receive Communion in brotherhood with their white masters. (Truly this was brotherly love at its greatest.)

Many churches of that day were divided into three sections; one for the Men of the Church, often spoken of as the "Amen Corner"; one for the women and children; and one for the colored people. At Mt. Zion the men sat on the right, the women and children on the left, and the negroes in the back section in the winter season, and in an attached ante-room in the summer months at which time partitions were opened so that they could enter into the worship services.

As in so many churches in the early years, especially in those of the rural areas, there was no musical instrument. The preacher would read the words of the hymn, a "music master" would "hoist" the tune, and the congregation would follow. The volume thus created by the blending of the voices of the white and colored members in singing praises to God would almost raise the roof. As naturally would follow so resounding a beginning, Mt. Zion has always been known as a "Singing Church".

One memory that is very dear to the hearts of the older members of today is that of the clear bubbling spring that used to be a few hundred feet down the hill from the north side of the Church. They remember how deliciously cool and refreshing the water was to them as children after sitting through the two hours of service in the Church on hot summer Sundays. To me, it made the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well more meaningful, when He said to her:

"But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life".

John 4:14.

MY CREED

I would be true,
For there are those who trust me;
I would be pure,
For there are those who care;
I would be strong,
For there is much to suffer;
I would be brave,
For there is much to dare;
I would be friend of all—
The foe—the friendless;
I would be giving,
And forget the gift;

THE CIRCUIT RIDERS



Sketch by Hardyth Lane

The Circuit Rider

*There he rode in his power and might;
Shedding abroad God's holy light,
Helping the sick and weary in heart,
Faith and hope he sought to impart.
This Circuit Rider as he went on his way,
Travelling forth from day to day,
In every Church his wisdom was rare,
For he depended on talking in prayer
To his Heavenly Father, Whose love divine
Was a sacred force and a hallowed shrine
Within his heart. His work was done
Because He followed God's own Son.*

— — Christine Waring Walker

When the first itinerant Methodist preachers came to America, there were no buildings set aside solely for worship; hence, services were held in the homes of those who were "hungering and thirsting after righteousness". After the gatherings grew too large for the homes, the people began to search for more commodious quarters. In the towns they were allowed to use the Courthouses and private schools, and sometimes even the great rooms of the inns and saloons, as well as the Churches of other denominations. When Bishop Asbury came to Raleigh in the early 1800's, he used the State Capitol Building, which was then called "The State House", for services. (Following that first Conference in Raleigh, Edenton Street Methodist Church was established.)

The Quakers, Moravians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans all came to America before the Methodists did, some about a hundred years before, and had already built places of worship

in many of the towns. When the Methodists finally arrived these other denominations, in order to further the Lord's work, quite often, unselfishly shared their sanctuaries with them for services until they could build their own. However, it was entirely a different story in the rural areas. When the congregations outgrew the homes, they moved out into barns and finally into the pastures, fields, and forests. There they worshipped, sitting on logs and stumps, while the boughs of the trees arched as green cathedrals in benediction above their heads. In inclement weather the people would construct brush arbors and flimsy cloth tents for shelter. Nevertheless, there was always an altar erected, and a true spiritual blessing received. We know that this is true because God, through His Son, our Saviour, promised this: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them". Matthew 18:20. These outdoor meetings soon grew into great Camp Revivals which swept the Gospel across the Virgin lands like a mighty wind and on into the barren hearts of the people. There was always much rejoicing wherever the Methodists went.

Before the 1870's, Mt. Zion was served by those consecrated, wonderful men of God known as Circuit Riders. There were no parsonages at that time for a permanent abode for the preachers; so the Circuit Riders moved from place-to-place in all kinds of weather, over mountains, through swamps, and across the wilderness. They rode astride their horses, carrying all their earthly possessions in their saddle bags. Many nights they spent sleeping on the ground under the trees with their heads pillowed on their saddles, and with the Heavens for a roof. Their faithful steeds stood by at rest, with heads lowered, seemingly thankful for the respite from their burdens. Bishop Asbury, in his *Journal*, mentions that his horse seemed lame when he had ridden him only five thousand miles each year for five years. (It's a wonder that dear Bishop Asbury could get about - - much less his horse.) It is recounted of the Circuit Rider that they would sometimes ride horseback thirty or forty miles a day and preach three or four sermons enroute. Their average yearly salary was the "great" sum of sixty-four dollars and sometimes "keep for their horses". Truly they gave their all to the Lord.

Very few of these preachers ever ventured into the state of "Holy Matrimony". Most of those who did take the step had to leave their wives and children in the homes of relatives and be separated from them for months and sometimes even years at the time or else "locate" and till the soil to support their growing families. However, these men did not give up the Lord's work when they ceased to travel. They became known as "local preachers" and continued to serve in their communities; and many even built churches, thus increasing the number of worship centers.

It is known that three of Mt. Zion's Circuit Riders married, namely

the Reverend Mr. Thompson Garrard, the Reverend Mr. Robert Crawley Maynard, and the Reverend Mr. William Alexander Smith.

Mr. Garrard was born in 1800 in Orange County, North Carolina and joined the Conference in 1818. He was the son of the Methodist minister Samuel Garrard, who joined the Conference in 1800. He came to this community to preach in the 1840's and married Martha Whitaker McCullers, widow of John McCullers, in 1845 and located here. He died in 1863, at the age of sixty-three and is buried in the family cemetery which is located about three miles from Mt. Zion in Johnston County. More will be said of his many descendants in the community later.

Mr. Robert Crawley Maynard was born in Virginia in 1813, and was admitted to the Conference in 1837. He married twice - - first to Susan Leathers, and following her death, to Seraphina F. Cook. Three of his daughters joined Mt. Zion, and two of them married sons of Mt. Zion. They were Lucie Maynard, who married Dr. John Sanders Leach and Rosa Maynard, who married George Alexander Turner. The third daughter, Anna Maynard, who never married, lived with her sister, Mrs. Leach, and they are both buried in the Leach Cemetery near Mt. Zion. (Mrs. Lucie Maynard Leach was a gifted poet and published a volume of poems in 1877, the title of which is 'Scattered Leaves'.)

Mr. Maynard died in 1863, and was buried in Granville County. His body was later moved to Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh. Today there are two of his descendants and their families in this vicinity, namely, Wilbur M. Turner of the Holland's Community and John Marvin Turner of Garner. Surviving also is a granddaughter, Miss Lillian Turner, who resides in Raleigh. None of his descendants are affiliated with Mt. Zion at the present time.



Rev. William A. Smith's Ministerial Orders

Mr. Smith was born in Wake County, North Carolina in 1834 near Holland's Church, and, as a boy, united with that Church. In 1860 he was admitted to the Conference and was assigned to travel in Eastern

North Carolina and the Southern part of Tide Water, Virginia. While in Onslow County, North Carolina, before and during the Civil War, he met Sarah Sydonia Coston, and in 1864, they were married. Miss Coston was the granddaughter of the Reverend Mr. James Coston who was a Methodist preacher during the late 1700's to 1835. (Mr. Coston was instrumental in helping to establish the historic Queen's Creek Methodist Church near Swansboro, which dates back to 1780. It is said that Bishop Asbury, on his first trip through North Carolina, presided at the dedication of Queen's Creek. In his *Journal* he mentions the Church several times.) Mr. Smith did not locate after his marriage, but continued to travel. His wife, with their young son, spent the time in the home of her parents, Elizabeth Ketchum Coston and John Anderson Coston, in Onslow County, and that of her husband's parents, Carolyn Walton Smith and Johnathan Smith in Wake County near Holland's Church. (She made the long trip by buggy or wagon before the trains came this way.)

Due to the exposure suffered by Mr. Smith during his travels, he, as did so many circuit riders, contracted tuberculosis. He failed to respond to treatment and died in 1867, only thirty-three years of age. He is buried in the family plot near the spot where the "Little Red Meeting House" stood in Wake County. (Holland's, our dearest sister Church, grew out of this "Little Red Meeting House" which was established about 1812). The cemetery is today included in the location of the Garner Country Club Golf Course, and the exact plot cannot be determined.

Six weeks after Mr. Smith's death, a baby girl was born to his widow. This baby was Sarah Alexander Smith who married Henry B. Brady. She was one of the "pillars" of Mt. Zion Church for more than half a century. I find in the *Conference Journal* of 1873 that Mrs. Smith was "appropriated \$125.00 per annum", by the Conference for the support of herself and two young children. To supplement this, she taught school for about three months a year for \$18.00 or \$20.00 per month. (She continued to teach for about fifty years of her long life of ninety years). Mrs. Smith later married Leonidas Armada Willis and to this union was born my mother, Leute Armada Willis. Mrs. Willis, her children, and several of her grandchildren are buried in the Mt. Zion Cemetery. (More will follow concerning her descendants).

We are honored to number among our Mt. Zion friends Agnes Doub Jones, (Mrs. Armistead,) of the Garner Methodist Church. She is a great granddaughter of two of our early preachers, namely; the Reverend Peter Doub, one of our Presiding Elders and Bennett T. Blake, one of our Pastors.

The preachers were always welcomed into the Christian homes of the communities in which they preached and were entertained by these cordial firesides as lavishly as the people could afford. This custom, of course, privileged the preachers to shed a more indelible influence on the young people. This proved, indeed, a great blessing in the form of spiritual training for them.

There were amusing incidents as well. One such is related by the Rev. Mr. R. H. Whitaker in his "Reminiscences", thusly:

"Methodist preachers, from time immemorial, have been called 'chicken eaters' . . . I suppose all readers of this paper have heard how, on more than one occasion, the fowls have taken to the woods. The old guardian rooster would fly on the woodpile and crow out, 'The preacher's here t-o-d-a-y !' Another, down in the lot, would flap his wings and ask, 'How long's he gwine to s-t-a-y?', and one nearer the kitchen would say: 'We'd better get a-w-a-y!' Whereupon the guineas would cry out t- - - 'Make tracks! Make tracks! Make tracks!', and the old muscovy would ask, 'Where you're gwine?', and the old rooster would answer; 'In the woods to s-t-a-y!' "

"Yes, the coming of the Circuit Rider was a big event sixty years ago", wrote Mr. Whitaker in 1905.

There were so few preachers and so many miles between meeting places that most of the time they could get to each place only once a month, and sometimes not more often than once a quarter. They made up for these absences by holding long services. The people were so hungry to hear the Gospel that they sat through some sermons as long as four hours and even longer. Often on Saturday mornings the services would begin and continue, almost without interruption, until late Sunday night. Of course, there was usually more than one preacher present to help with these services. Sometimes the preachers of other denominations would come to help, and the people would bring quilts and lunches and take light refreshments and quick "cat-naps" during the long hours of worship.

Because the preachers so seldom could make their way to the different communities, Sunday Schools were organized in 1786. The first schools began at 8:00 A. M. Sunday and would continue in session until noon. Then early in the afternoon they would begin for the second session which would last until twilight. During these hours the young people were taught to read the Bible and were helped to understand the great truths of God's word. However, since the pastor was not with the people