

A Brief History of Smith Chapel

We will come to the history of Smith Chapel by a rather circuitous route, so if you bear with me, we're going to start in England in the mid-17th century. At that time, there was a group of young men at Oxford University in England who were very serious about trying to live good Christian lives. They were all members in good standing of the Church of England (called in England the Anglican church). One of these young men was John Wesley; another his brother Charles. They were sons of an Anglican clergyman & his exceptional wife, Suzannah. John was the 15th of 19 children.

In 1738, when John Wesley was 35 years old, he had a born-again experience. Although he had always followed all the rules and regulations of the Anglican church, this was the first time that he trusted in Jesus and Jesus alone for salvation. God rewarded that leap of faith by assuring him that his sins were taken away and that he had been saved from the law of sin and death. John Wesley spent the rest of his life telling this good news to others. Others followed him. These men who joined the Wesley brothers in preaching the good first in England and then throughout the colonies, and eventually throughout the world, were so devoted to the cause that they left behind every earthly comfort for the joy of carrying the glad tidings of the kingdom into the world. It was a call to "come and suffer" that Wesley gave his traveling preachers, known as itinerants. There were no salaries promised, in fact, besides whatever food they were given, these preachers were allowed only enough money to cover their traveling expenses. When they traveled, they were supposed to walk. A few of them, being expected to cover long distances, had horses. Wesley himself traveled 60-70 miles per day on horseback and preached three sermons a day. He continued this well into his 70s. He delivered 42,000 sermons in 50 years, an average of over 15 per week.

What distinguished Wesley and his itinerants was their preaching in the open air. They went to where the people were – in the fields, at the markets, in the city streets. Eventually, regular societies came into being, composed of people who had been converted. They were called Methodist societies, and as these societies prospered and grew, the opposition of the established church of England grew. They claimed that the preachers had no authority to preach, and they were, strictly speaking, correct. Many of the preachers were beaten, stoned, and whipped by the enemies of the Methodist movement.

In 1769, it was decided to send missionaries to the colonies in America. Wesley began the custom of grouping his colonial Methodist societies into circuits and appointing a lay preacher to be responsible for the circuit. For these Methodist societies to leave the church of England and form their own church was not a big deal to most Americans. After all, they had little connection to the church of England anyhow. So, in 1784 at Lovely Lane in Baltimore, a vote was taken to form the Methodist Episcopal church. Interestingly, Wesley remained an Anglican clergyman.

Thanks to the selfless work performed by the circuit-riding preachers, the Methodist church in America grew rapidly. These guys started in the original colonies and moved west with the pioneers, all the way to the Pacific. These men had a short shelf life, usually dying young from the hardships they endured.

Now I'm going to switch gears and talk about the development of Methodist in Virginia. In the mid-1700s, around 1740–1750, a humble bricklayer named Samuel Morris began the Meeting House Movement in Hanover County. Morris became interested in some religious books which fell into his hands, and he and his neighbors began meeting in one another's homes to discuss the books. The number attending the meetings grew too large for the individual homes, so they decided to build a meeting house. Without realizing it, they were preparing souls as well as a place for the Methodist preachers who would sweep in later.

So communities began to build meeting houses. They were non-denominational. The first one that we know of in this area was built in 1768 and was called Liberty Meeting House (church). It was used by both the Baptists and

the Presbyterians before the Methodists found their way to it. Over time, the Methodist acquired Liberty Meeting House, although it was open for all denominations. Eventually, the original structure was replaced with a church. Today that is the site of the Dranesville United Methodist Church on Route 7.

I said that the Liberty Meeting House was open to all denominations. Two of the denominations were the Methodist Episcopal church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. You see, a great break came in 1844 when the slavery issue led to a split and the subsequent formation of two separate churches. This was 17 years before the Civil War started. Other major denominations, such as the Baptists and the Presbyterian also split over slavery. It is stated in one of the books I read that the split in the three major religious denominations was the principal cause of the Civil War, the reason being that the strongest cords which bound the states together were religious. These cords snapped over slavery.

As I said, both the Methodist Episcopal church and the Methodist Episcopal church, South, used the Liberty church. But around 1866, the group whose sympathies were with the abolitionists, started gathering at the Jefferson School House. Jefferson School House was one of those “one room” public schools, which was built in 1852 on Beach Mill Road. There are no records on Jefferson, but it is thought that the church has been used for class meetings and Sunday school. Services were then held on the old circuit rider style. Word would be passed around the different meeting houses that a preacher was coming to Jefferson, and the people came from miles around—walking, on horseback, or in lumber wagons. Buggies were little known here at that time. Having come from such distances with such difficulty, people would feel cheated if the service was not long. The minister preached two to three hours and prayed for at least a half-hour.

In 1888-1889, the people were making plans for a new church. Meetings were held on where to build, and for financial discussions – and for locating and buying the land. The women folks had their part in this project. They held festivals, took collections and donations, many pledges of one dollar, and some 25 cents. They gave many speaking programs, and children could play their part.

“Here I stand; A little man.
To build a church; I think is right,
Although I am a little mite.”
It was written by one of these women during this time.

When Smith Chapel was built in 1890, all the members who were gathering at Jefferson School House transferred to Smith Chapel. The lot was bought on April 1, 1890, from Joseph Cockrell upon which to build the church. The price was \$52.50, and the deed cost \$1.50. The total cost of the lot, the church, the board fence which was around it, came to \$1,200.

In the spring of 1890, May 23rd, the cornerstone was laid, and after ceremonies, men went to work. They gave time, labor, using their teams of horses and wagons, felling of the trees, digging and filling around the foundation. Many men from other denominations came to help out this process. On March 16, 1891, an additional lot was bought from Mr. Cockrell for \$10, the deed for which cost an additional \$1. This brought the church property up to its present size.

The church is named in honor of the builder, Jesse Smith (1818-1906). Mr. Smith was born in Maidstone, England, and was 18 years old, coming to America. He was a carpenter by trade and helped to build several churches in New York State. Mr. and Mrs. Jesse and Lucian Smith (1813-1892) moved to Virginia from New York in 1854. When the new building project began, Mr. Smith carried full responsibility for the construction and bringing about this dream of worship.

When the church was dedicated in 1893, all the bills had been paid. Despite money being really scarce in those days, the collection at the dedication service totaled \$28.68. It was a great achievement for these people who made it a grand "Home Coming Dedication." It was their own church -- "Built with Love, Hope and real Belief in God." It's a place in which they had spiritual gatherings, their social affairs, and their gay celebrations celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter times. Their serious and painful events took place here also -- a time when they gathered to lay away for eternal rest their loved ones.

At the dedication, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bishop donated the first pulpit Bible, which today is preserved as a church asset. Mrs. Bishop taught Sunday school at both Jefferson Meeting House and Smith Chapel, and they were both buried in our cemetery.

A hitching post was in the rear of the churchyard, and the horses were watered at the Bicksler's spring at the foot of the hill.

In 1899, there were 37 members with 12 in attendance at bi-weekly prayer meetings. The Ladies Aid organization raised enough money for the purchase of the organ. They raised the money by having strawberry festivals, sending chain letters, and selling box suppers. The average donation was 25 cents, but people sometimes gave a dollar. 15-year-old Daisy Poole took her father's team of horses and wagon and drove to Georgetown to buy the organ. She paid \$50 for it. The organ was loaded on the wagon, and she drove back on Georgetown Pike. The menfolk unloaded it and placed it in the church. Ms. Daisy was the organist for the next five years.

In 1908, the churches on the same circuit as Smiths were Herndon, Brown's Chapel, and Wiehel (also known as Sunset Hills church).

In 1914-1915, it appears the ladies had taken full responsibility for all the church's needs: the parsonage upkeep, building and grounds maintenance, and the financial needs (sounds like the women may have been over-functioning).

The ladies had quaint fund-raising programs. One was that all the money received from eggs laid on Sunday was donated for church programs. Another was that one month they donated a penny a day to the church for every rainy day. The next month they donated five cents a day for every sunny day. In addition, the sewing circle made quilts to be sold.

Up until 1945, the chapel was heated by a wood stove placed in the center aisle, with a long stove pipe extending straight up to the ceiling to the chimney on top of the roof. In 1945, an oil burner was purchased for \$68.

In 1949-1950, the membership declined, with often only two adults in attendance. Then in 1952, the church was closed, and it was to be sold one year after the closing. Before the year ended, a young man, Ronald Clark, who was studying at Westminster Seminary, was visiting some friends in the area, saw the deserted chapel, and climbed in a window. Word passed around that he would preach, and indeed he did, for a few Sundays, without permission from the District Superintendent.

Several people addressed the reopening of the church, and the Alexandria District office outsourced a committee to evaluate this possibility. The committee's goal was to learn people's interests and whether they would attend services if church doors were opened. One of the things they discovered was that men congregants took no interest in church affairs. They stayed on the outside while the women and children attended. Now, if the church doors were to be opened, sermons from the pulpit must be for the souls of the men.

One of the committee members was Threasa G. Parrish (1889-1974). She was not a member of Smith Chapel when she was called to the team. She said it was only to provide food to be in the meeting. After many ifs and

whys and what would happen to the church, along with some other committee members, Mrs. Parrish agreed that she would work and take part in attendance at Smith Chapel. In the fall of 1953, Smith Chapel begun its trial period until it officially opened this “Little One Room Church” in June 1954.

It is noteworthy to retrieve Mrs. Parrish’s prayer and her reminiscence of this time. Once she was asked to join Smith Chapel, she prayed,

“O dear Lord and my God,

Thou know me all my life past and present,

I cannot take another church with so much controversy from relative to relative.

Oh, how could this be upon me?

I am weak and tired of bickering back and forth of such good people who mean well among all of them. I can’t, I can’t, Oh Lord, I just can’t stand between our fellowmen and two sides of misunderstanding anymore. As my family had moved from state to another state, Oh Lord, you know the confusion, I can’t take it anymore.”

She recalls, “There was no answer to my prayer. God was silent, and I know now how Jonah felt when running from Nineveh. Oh, yes, I wanted to run when someone called for me to go to Smith’s Chapel.”

After joining Smith Chapel, suddenly she changed her prayer to a more calm, quiet way, over and over:

“Dear Lord, Smith’s Chapel is your church. Take me, humble me to thy will – make known to me the knowledge I need to help where I am needed. Dear Lord, I leave it up to you. This flesh may be weak but it is willing. Do with me as you will.”

In 1959, a revival was held at the church, and things started to pick up. The people set themselves what they considered an impossible goal of raising \$1,000 to build a Sunday school/social hall (Lambert Hall). It was a community project. Different churches hosted fundraising events such as fried chicken night to raise the fund for this project. Through many hearts and hands, the money was raised in one year, and groundbreaking for the social hall was held on April 12, 1959. About a year later, on Easter Sunday, on April 17, 1960, the consecration of Smith Chapel Hall was held. In 1963, the floor was replaced, the sanctuary painted beige, and the lower part varnished.

There were three churches on the circuit at that time: Dranseville, Smith, and Browns.

In 1967, Browns Chapel closed. It was sold and moved from Route 7 to Reston. Brown was built in 1874, so it is older than Smith’s.

Over the years, most of the pastors at Smith came from the seminary at American University (i.e., Wesley Theological Seminary).

In 1982, Smith Chapel became a station church, as opposed to being on a circuit. Depending on who's counting, there have been 46 pastors at the chapel. After some 23 years of being shepherded by Pastor Dave Zuchelli, who retired in 2018, Smith Chapel is now blessed to be led by Pastor Ho Kang, who came to us with his wife Yeon Me and their lovely young daughters Charis and Noelle. If you want to hear a dynamic preacher whose message, mission, and indeed his entire life are Bible-centered, join us some Sunday. You’ll also be welcomed by a warm congregation. We currently have anywhere from 20 to 50 in attendance (both in-person and, in this post-pandemic world we now find ourselves in, online), and we are hoping to grow some more. We’d be pleased to see you here.