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Florida Methodist Centennial, 1844-1944

Frank A. Smith

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ORANGE COUNTY. Methodist.
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Methodist Church.

LOCAL HISTORY

FLORIDA METHODIST CENTENNIAL

1844 - 1944



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ORLANDO, FLORIDA

First Methodist Church

ORLANDO, FLORIDA



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A GROUP OF CHURCH OFFICIALS---1944



Left to right: Dr. P. C. Harrell, Church School Supt.; Mr. Jim Burden, Chairman Board of Stewards; Hon. James L. Giles, Chairman Board of Trustees; Rev. A. Fred Turner, Pastor; Rev. Harris DeWese, Associate Pastor; Mrs. Mary H. Knox, President W. S. C. S.

Here are those who would follow in the footsteps of those daring and consecrated pioneers who planted Methodism in Florida and made this Church possible.

Florida Methodist Centennial

Edition of the History of

First Methodist Church

Orlando, Florida

1859 -- 1944

Compiled By

Judge Frank A. Smith

The Photograph on the front cover is a picture of our present Church home, erected in 1913, showing Educational plant on Jackson Street.
Other buildings will soon be added.

Preface

Quite naturally the observance of the Florida Methodist Centennial requires that attention be given to our local church. Data is being assembled and a complete history on Methodism in Florida is being written, but this treatise will be limited to First Church in Orlando and only occasionally will it cover a wider scope.

Acknowledgment is made of the use of the "Souvenir and Year Book" compiled by the late Rev. John B. Ley, former beloved pastor of this church, which has been the main source from which the present "history" has been obtained. It was printed in 1916 and but for the assembling and preservation therein much valuable information probably would have been irretrievably lost. We are deeply indebted to Brother Ley for that splendid work and the use of it here made.

Also much valuable assistance has been received from a brief history which was compiled and printed in 1938 in our regular church bulletin. The occasion was the observance of Homecoming and Founders Day on the Eightieth Anniversary of the First Methodist Church of Orlando. This program was prepared by our beloved Dr. Turner, who very fortunately had the valuable assistance of Mrs. Annie L. Baumwart in the preparation of this historical sketch.

History of First Methodist Church

ORLANDO, FLORIDA

The most complete and accurate record and the truest picture of the development of First Church up to the year 1916 is that printed by the late Rev. John B. Ley, so that we are taking the liberty of adopting it here to reflect the growth during that period.

HISTORICAL

"True to her traditions and doctrines, Methodism planted her banners in Orange County along with and among the first settlers. Unfortunately we have no written records of the work in those early days. Brother Leroy B. Giles, father of our fellow townsman, Hon. Jas. L. Giles, a local Methodist preacher, held services throughout this section before and during the early sixties; and within the bounds of Orange County out near what is now Zellwood, the writer's father, Rev. J. C. Ley, conducted services on several occasions as presiding elder in the year 1859, though at that time there appears to have been no regularly organized churches. We quote a paragraph illustrative of his district and general conditions at that time.

"My district extended from the Georgia line embracing Orange County, and from the Atlantic to the Gulf, yet in the whole district there were but three ordained pastors. To meet these conditions I arranged with the pastors to hold revival services at different places each week between quarterly meetings and administer the Sacraments." J. C. Ley "Fifty-two Years in Florida."

At the annual conference held in Jacksonville January, 1874, I think Rev. O. W. Ransome, who had been transferred to Florida on account of tuberculosis, was assigned to the "Orlando Circuit"—the whole count comprising the pastoral charge, as well as most of the territory now embraced in Osceola and Seminole Counties, with the exception of some territory around Mellonville, which was served by Rev. R. H. Barnett.

A great revival was held this year, in which the pastor was assisted by Brother Barnett and Col. R. T. P. Allen, a local

preacher. Colonel Allen had been president of the Kentucky Military Institute, and was a man of piety and ability.

At this time Orlando was a little village of about 450 inhabitants. It boasted two or three stores, a small hotel, and a grogshop. The grogshop proprietor and the town marshal were one and the same man.

In a private letter from Brother Barnett before us the following facts concerning this meeting are related:

"On Saturday night the town marshal and some of his pals went to the meeting and tried to break up the services. The following Wednesday night the bar-keeper was shot to death by one of his drunken customers, leaving a helpless wife and several little children. Thus God's judgments, while always sure, are sometimes swift."

Rev. T. Bishop followed Mr. Ransome as pastor. We had no church building and all meetings were held in the Court House. In 1878 or 9 a great camp meeting was held near Zellwood, as the result of which Methodism was much strengthened in Orlando and throughout the territory.

In 1881-2 Orlando became a half station and was served by Rev. Anderson Peeler, M. D. During this period a church building was enterprised. C. A. Boone, our present efficient City Clerk, J. J. Davis, father of Brothers Sumter and Joe and J. W. Walker, father of Brothers W. T., E. H. and J. Brush, were members of the building committee and Board of Trustees. A contractor and builder by the name of Hendershott was employed to put up the building for \$1000. The lot had been purchased a little earlier for \$200 and was covered with a pine forest. During 1882 the front part of the present parsonage was erected by Dr. Peeler. This was added to some years later by Rev. W. M. Poage.

In 1884 Rev. C. E. Pelot became pastor. Bro. Pelot was an indefatigable worker, and under his excellent direction the congregation soon outgrew the capacity of the little church. A new building became necessary, and in 1888 it was undertaken amidst much opposition, on the ground that the people were poor. But with indomitable zeal and abounding faith the pastor led his forces and at the close of that year a building, perhaps 50 by 90 feet, had been inclosed with cheesecloth

tacked in the windows. There was no interior finish, but finished so it could be used for the first Conference session in this city, which convened in Jan. 1886, with Bishop R. K. Hargrove presiding. It was during this Conference session that the historic freeze of 1886 visited Florida. The writer was in attendance and witnessed the novel sight of "frozen fish" around the edge of Lake Lucerne and puddles in the streets, frozen hard enough to bear a man's weight.

The earliest record of the church organization in Orlando now dates from January, 1885—previous records having been lost or misplaced. From this we find the following as constituting the "Official Board" for that year:

LOCAL PREACHERS

R. M. Dickinson, L. E.	D. F. Hammond, L. E.
Wm. A. Waller	

STEWARDS

E. Ives	J. A. Beal
W. P. Kyle	R. M. Dickinson
Jas. A. Knox	

TRUSTEES

Jas. A. Knox	L. J. Dollins
I. Fletcher	J. N. Butt

Of course it is not possible to enter into historical detail of the years that have passed since those early times, in the brief compass of this booklet. God has honored the church and given it many loyal men and women, who have served and do serve with signal loyalty and ability.

During the pastorate of Rev. R. V. Atkisson better church building facilities became supremely necessary, and in 1904 and 5 after much discussion, and no small measure of questioning as to whether a building should be erected, or the old one remodeled, the conservative influences prevailed and the old building was made over—at a cost of several thousand dollars. Scarcely had the last of the indebtedness incurred been liquidated till it became manifest that even better accommodations were required, and only seven years after the old building had been improved, we find Dr. Chapman, the pastor, and some of his faithful laymen, laying plans for a great modern structure. Dr. Chapman was moved, however, before

work actually began, and Dr. Wray took pastoral supervision. During his pastorate the work, so splendidly planned by Dr. Chapman, became a realization in the erection of the present \$50,000 edifice which now occupies the site on which the first little modest structure was reared 36 years ago."

(Quoted from "Souvenir and Year Book.")

It is interesting to note that the pulpit had always been located at the south end of the building until the church was remodelled during the pastorate of Rev. R. V. Atkisson about 1904, at which time the floor plan was completely redesigned and the pulpit was placed at the west, where it has ever since remained. We have seen that the first Conference convened here in 1886 and so far as we can learn the next one was held in 1895. Also Orlando entertained the Conference in the years 1904, 1921, 1925 and 1935, so we find that Orlando has entertained the Conference six times.

The construction of our present brick edifice has already been fully shown, so that we will now proceed to our next building program, occurring during the pastorate of Dr. W. A. Cooper, deceased, under whose leadership it was decided to erect an educational hall. The frame parsonage which stood on the present site of Wesley Hall was razed to make room for that splendid structure, which was done some twenty years ago. As usual it was necessary to go in debt to accomplish such a pretentious project, but fortunately all of that indebtedness has been liquidated.

The next building program was the remodeling of our church auditorium, which was so successfully accomplished two years ago. The same faith and vision that brought about this greatly improved auditorium was recently active in the acquisition of the Kilgore home at the west of Wesley Hall, and which is a most useful addition to our church plant. The building is proving most useful in its present condition until such time as the growth of our church may require an improved edifice in its stead.

COMPARATIVE FIGURES.

A realization of the extent of our growth is obtained by comparison in the finances and increase in membership roll. We trust that the spiritual growth, which is of the greatest concern, has kept pace.

When the congregation moved into its second building the pastor's salary was fixed at \$1,000, the Presiding Elder at \$100 and all benevolent collections \$122. By 1916 our benevolent assessments had risen to more than \$1,400, while the total reported for all purposes thirty years before was less than \$1,500. In 1916 we were very proud of an aggregate of \$15,000 in contributions for the year, yet now our benevolent assessments alone have increased to \$5,000 and our total contributions for last year amounted to \$46,946.

The earliest figures available reveal a membership numbering seventy-five during the pastorate of Rev. Reaves (1872, when it was known as Orange Circuit). By 1938 the membership roll had mounted to 1,878, making the largest Methodist Church in the Florida Conference. Since then it has increased to the imposing total of 2,454, in addition to which there are 464 names on the inactive list, so that we can still boast the largest membership of any Methodist Church in Florida and probably as large as any church of all denominations.

No history would be complete without a list of the ministers who have served and the dates of their service. This was ideally set forth in the "Appreciation" on the back of the 1938 bulletin previously mentioned, so that we will take the liberty of repeating it here:

IN APPRECIATION OF OUR PASTORS

VERY EARLY IN THE YEAR 1859 Orlando Methodism was born. Rev. R. A. Carson, pioneer Methodist preacher, was appointed to the Central Florida Area, including Orange County. For eighty years our Church has ministered to the cultural and spiritual life of this rapidly developing section. During the trying days of the Civil War the work was interrupted. Rev. W. F. Roberts came in 1863, serving for a short time. Other than this the record does not show that there was any shepherd of the flock from 1862 to 1872. The roster of consecrated servants of Methodism who have ministered to this congregation bears many honored names: Preachers in Orange County, Rev. R. A. Carson, 1859; Rev. B. J. Johnson, 1861; Orange Mission, Rev. W. F. Roberts, 1863; Orange Circuit, Rev. R. M. Reeves, 1872; Rev. J. B. MacDonell, 1874; Rev. O. W. Ransom, 1875; Rev. A. A. Barnett, 1877; Rev. T. Bishop, 1879; Rev. W. M. McIntosh,

1879; Orlando Circuit, Rev. T. Bishop, 1880-'81; Rev. A. Peeler, 1882; Orlando, Rev. A. Peeler, 1883; Rev. C. E. Pelot, 1884-'85; Orlando Station, Rev. Josephus Anderson, 1886; Rev. W. M. Poage, 1887-'91; Rev. J. F. Marshall, 1891; Rev. B. K. Thrower, 1892-'96; Dr. W. J. Carpenter, 1896-'99; Rev. W. M. Poage, January to December, 1899; Rev. F. R. Bridges, December, 1899-1900; Rev. L. W. Moore, 1900; Rev. Henry F. Partridge, 1901-'03; Rev. Robert V. Atkisson, 1903-'06; Rev. J. B. Mitchell, 1906-'10; Rev. J. S. Chapman, 1910-'12; Rev. J. E. Wray, 1912-'14; Rev. J. B. Ley, 1914-'17; Rev. J. R. Cason, 1917-'19; Dr. W. A. Cooper, 1919-'23; Dr. I. C. Jenkins, 1923-'27; Dr. O. E. Rice, 1927-December, 1930; Dr. M. H. Norton, December, 1930-June, 1935; Dr. A. Fred Turner, June, 1935.

A feature of our celebration of our Eightieth Anniversary in 1938 was the honoring of nine who had been members for more than fifty years, namely Mr. James L. Giles, 1882; Miss Gertrude Else, 1884; Mrs. Linnie Brigham, 1884; Mrs. Minnie B. Burden, 1884; Mr. Arthur T. Butt, 1884; Mrs. Mary Lou Helms, 1885; Mr. E. G. Duckworth, 1885; Mrs. Kate Rinaldi Ferris, 1888; Mrs. Edna G. Fuller, 1887.

Much credit for our success is attributable to the guidance and supervision we have received from the presiding elders who have served here through the years, namely: Chas. A. Fulword, T. W. Tomkies, W. F. Norton, A. E. Householder, H. C. Christian, J. W. Bigham, S. W. Lawler, J. R. Cason, F. R. Bridges, J. D. Sibert, Smith Hardin, C. W. White, J. P. Hilburn, R. Ira Barnett, C. Fred Blackburn, M. H. Norton, J. H. Daniel, I. C. Jenkins, W. F. Dunkle, R. E. Wicker and R. C. Holmes.

Before the recent enlargement of our auditorium the attendance upon our morning service was so large that it was found expedient to hold a double service during the Winter season. This was inaugurated in the Fall of 1936 and continued for five seasons. Repeating the exact service from the early hour at the regular eleven o'clock hour imposed a heavy burden upon our Pastor, the organist, choir and ushers, but they cheerfully cooperated in meeting the demand in that manner until it could be overcome by providing an adequate auditorium to hold the crowd.

The rapid growth resulted in such a heavy burden of

pastoral duties under Dr. Rice, as to require the assistance of another pastor, so in 1930 we fortunately obtained the services of Rev. P. M. Boyd, who served most efficiently and satisfactorily for three years. With his valuable assistance our finances were much improved. The operation of the church was placed on a cash basis, whereby all current bills were promptly paid each month. This plan has been rigidly followed and has played a prominent part in the financial success of our material affairs.

After losing Brother Boyd to another charge, it was necessary to manage without an Associate Pastor until 1941, when we were successful in obtaining the splendid assistance of Rev. James E. Bartlett, but only for one year did we have the benefit of his fine services before his country demanded them in the armed forces.

Last Summer fortunately we obtained Rev. Harris DeWese, who has faithfully served as our Associate Pastor, as well as pastor of another church. Through him we have sponsored the establishment of the suburban College Park Methodist Church. He has organized this new church and it has started off with a very fine start.

Mrs. Grace C. Adkinson came to this Church in 1927, continuing as a faithful and efficient servant until her death in April, 1940. She first served as secretary, but later assumed the larger task of administering the financial affairs, gathering in the funds and taking care of the obligations. As a stalwart Christian woman she was a source of strength to whom many turned for counsel in hours of need. And she is entitled to a large place in the mind of a grateful membership for the contributions she made toward the continuing success of the Church.

Miss Mary Hubbard, who had served as assistant to Mrs. Adkinson for four years, took up the task that fell from her hands and carries on faithfully and well to this hour. Miss Mabel Viehman, who came to share in the growing responsibilities for the office work, continues as assistant bookkeeper and custodian of Church records.

But any reference to the employed staff would not be complete without mention of James Howard, the faithful one-armed Negro janitor. He is the oldest employee of the

Church, having come with Dr. Jenkins from Gainesville and having ministered in the care of our property and the comfort of our people for the past eighteen years.

MUSIC DEPARTMENT

No history of First Church would be complete without reference to the music department.

About sixty years ago the singing was led by a mixed quartette of gifted singers, namely: Miss Mary Fleming, soprano, Mr. F. A. Curtis, tenor, Mrs. Guernsey, alto, and Mr. Jos. L. Guernsey, bass. All had excellent voices, were thorough musicians and devoted much industry toward preparation of the numbers they rendered. Their singing was a delightful part of every church service and was a splendid help to our worship. Their singing was in demand in all local entertainments and afforded great pleasure to all.

In 1887, much to the regret of everyone, Miss Fleming moved away. Her place was taken by Miss Marian Curtis, who was also possessed of a beautiful voice. Her singing delighted our congregations until she married in 1900, when she transferred her membership to the Presbyterian Church to which her husband, the late Hon. B. M. Robinson, belonged.

Our first pipe organ was purchased by the ladies of the church from the "Organ Fund" which they had accumulated in the early nineties. As nearly as can be ascertained it was acquired about 1895. The ladies encountered sturdy opposition to their effort from some of the men of the church, but their progressive judgment prevailed and they installed the organ. While we may have acquired another instrument sooner, yet the next one about which we are definitely informed was in 1920. Our present organ was obtained about twelve years ago and Mrs. Freymark, our organist, was very prominent in raising the money and assistance in the selection and installation of same.

The first organist was Mr. Carl Warfield, a prominent banker of Orlando. The next was Mr. Ernest Wade, who served most acceptably for about a quarter of a century. Mr. Herman F. Siewert of Winter Park served for a short time. Our beloved Mrs. Freymark played for several years and was serving at the time of her death. Finally we have been suc-

cessful in having Mrs. Jessie Pedrick Baker return to play the organ and direct the music.

Our earliest record of our Sunday School begins in 1885 with Capt. W. G. Johnson as Superintendent. After him the late Bro. James A. Knox guided it well for fourteen years. He was succeeded by Brother C. E. Howard who served faithfully and efficiently for twenty-seven years. Unfortunately these three devout and useful servants have passed to their final reward.

Those who followed next served for much shorter periods and in the following order, to-wit: Frank A. Smith, W. Hal Adkinson and Maxwell W. Wells. Brother P. C. Harrell, our present able and efficient Superintendent has been in office since.

We are justly proud of our completely organized Church School with a splendid staff of 135 officers and trained teachers who are faithful in their devotion to preparation of lessons and instructing over 700 pupils each Sunday. On special occasions our attendance runs much higher and the total enrollment is 1444.

A vital part of any church is the organization of the ladies, so that we must at least briefly review their early organization.

From a most reliable and interesting record accurately and attractively compiled by the late Miss Ella Switzer, we learn that the Women's Foreign Missionary Society was organized by Mrs. J. W. Walker in 1883, during the pastorage of Rev. C. E. Pelot. We are informed she was President for ten years, although no written records of that period have been found. Others who served as president were Mrs. Jos. L. Guernsey, Mrs. C. F. Akers, Mrs. Harriet Perry. Prominent among the early workers in the society were Mrs. C. E. Howard, Mrs. J. L. Bryant, Mrs. John Payne, Mother Mills and Mrs. Jas. A. Knox and Mrs. R. M. Shearer.

About 1886 another Women's Missionary Society was organized, the object being the collection of funds for building parsonages. This work expanded and in 1890 it became known as the "Women's Parsonage and Missionary Society," but for only two years when the name was changed to "Women's Home Missionary Society." In 1910 the Home and Foreign societies were merged.

In 1893 Dr. and Mrs. J. D. Rush arrived in Orlando and

she immediately became a prominent factor in the Missionary Society work. In 1897 she was elected President of the State Society which office she held for fifteen years. She was also persuaded to take the Presidency of the Local Auxiliary and she prevailed upon Mrs. F. A. Curtis to accept the office of Treasurer. Mrs. Curtis also was very active and during the more than twenty years she served was very successful in raising money and managing the finances. Although active in the Missionary society work and holding various offices therein, yet was not till 1910 that Mrs. Jas L. Giles was elected President of the combined societies in which capacity she then served devotedly for twelve years.

We would like to trace to date the interesting history of the bountiful work undertaken and accomplished by the Missionary Ladies, but this treatise has already reached the greatest length to which it should be extended. All who are interested in following through this splendid part of the church's growth are referred to Miss Switzer's History from which this chapter has been taken.

FLORIDA METHODIST CENTENNIAL

1844 — 1944

Upon this anniversary occasion we dedicate this page as a tribute of love and appreciation to the following persons who for more than fifty years have been loyal members of First Methodist Church:

*Hon. James L. Giles
Mrs. Edna Giles Fuller
*Mrs. F. L. Helms
Judge E. G. Duckworth
Mr. John M. Cook
Mrs. H. H. Dickson
Mrs. Ida E. Gettier

*Mrs. Josiah Ferris
*Mrs. Viola Mann
Mrs. C. E. Howard
*Mrs. Minnie Butt Burden
Mr. C. E. McDowell
Mrs. C. E. McDowell
Mr. Arthur T. Butt

*(Those who appear in the group picture below.)



A Group of Half-Century Members

"The Old Wooden Church"



Constructed under the leadership of Rev. W. M. Poage, pastor from 1888-1890. This building was replaced by our present house of worship. Some who worshipped in this old building are among our most loyal, capable members in this greatly enlarged Church program.