

Early ARP churches weathered

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plenty of controversy

Only 16 years after the founding of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian denomination, there was an ARP church in York County: Sharon ARP, founded in 1796.

The ARP church resulted from the union of a Presbyterian sect known as the Associate Anti-Burger Seceders and another group known as Reformed Presbyterians. Before the 1780s all Presbyterians in Upstate South Carolina belonged to the General Assembly Presbyterian church.

A less formal way of stating it is to say that the most conservative Presbyterians were sufficiently angry to withdraw from the regular church over the issue of whether to accept a new hymn book called "Watt's Psalms and Hymns." This

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version allowed the use of musical instruments to accompany the worship service.

The Sharon ARP organizer was the Rev. James Rogers. No early records of the membership survived, so a list of the first membership could only be reconstructed from memory. It is thought that the first families attending Sharon were of these surnames: McKnight, Wright, Love, Gallo-way, Miller (Millers donated the land), Kennedy, Lindsay, Bigham, Scott and Russell.

Shortly after Sharon was founded, two new ARP churches were founded. Bethany was located in the northern part of York county and Carmel in the south. The Rev. William Dixon, recently arrived from Scotland, became the first pastor and served all three churches.

Soon there were other innovations to upset the more conservative church members: frequent communions and the dispensing of

days of fasting and thanksgiving.

In 1832, under the pastorate of the Rev. W. M. McElwee, four of the Sharon leaders, Joseph Bigham, Andrew Roddey, Samuel Wylie and William Gibson, withdrew from the congregation. Bigham moved to Steele Creek in Mecklenburg County. The other three went to Indiana. The issue this time was slavery. The defectors objected and went into the Northwest Territory, where slavery was outlawed.

Still, Sharon church was torn over the issue of slavery and of Free Masonry. Nationally, the ARP church opposed slavery and Free Masonry and had laid down some rules on each issue. These did not square with the wishes of the Sharon congregation which had, with the rise of cotton culture, come to accept slavery.

McElwee, not able to resolve the issue, resigned and moved to Pennsylvania. He surely knew that in 1840 the Rev. Thomas S. Kendall

had been tarred and feathered in Fairfield County after he insisted that members end the use of slaves.

For three years Sharon had no minister and was relatively inactive. Then the Rev. Thomas Ketchins left the Associate Presbytery and joined the First Presbytery of the ARP church. Ketchins reorganized the church and called on other leaders of the area to assist. The assistance seemed to have concentrated on having "sacramental meetings" once a year in the summertime.

In August 1843 the church united with two other York County churches, Smyrna and Olivet. The Rev. R.A. Ross was the pastor of the three churches. Ross later wrote that he accepted with great concern because he found incidences of "intemperance, Sabbath breaking and neglect of family worship." However, he wrote that the people submitted to the discipline of the church readily.

During his pastorate of 30 years, Ross stated that it had never been his lot to preach "to a cold, empty house." Still the numbers did not grow as much as Ross would have liked. The minister was a strict disciplinarian and reported that in his 30 years at Sharon he had handled 30 cases calling for discipline and 16 of those had not been resolved.

In 1847, Capt. John Blair of Yorkville, who had once lived near the Sharon church and had been a member, made a generous gift to the church. He gave them enough money to allow the members, with a few donations of their own, to build "a large and commodious church 60 by 40 feet, with a gallery across one end for the colored people."

During the 1850s there was another controversy about the use of music during the service. (Hymns were not allowed in ARP services until after World War II.) In 1855 at Sharon, one of the elders and some

other members withdrew and moved their membership to Smyrna.

After the Civil War there was a great migration of cotton farmers from this area to the "West" (which then referred to Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Missouri and Kansas). Large numbers left the rural areas such as Sharon and set up new congregations, thus spreading the church more widely.

Also, the industrial revolution and railroad building created more towns. During the 1890s and early 1900s many rural people moved into towns and built ARP churches in a new setting. The urban churches were much more liberal than the old rural churches and tripled in membership between 1880 and 1920.

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