

EARLY METHODISM IN YORK DISTRICT
by Louise Pettus

While it is true that Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were the dominant group in early York District, the Presbyterian dominance was diminished by the effects of the revival movement known as the Great Awakening which was at its height in 1800-1802.

The older well-established churches found some of their members joining many who had never known the "benefit of clergy," in open-air week-long marathon meetings. There is no record of such a revival in York District but no doubt many people from York attended the large revival at Old Waxhaw in Lancaster County and took part in the protracted meetings in neighboring counties in North Carolina.

As the Presbyterians wrangled over whether to allow only psalm-singing or not, the more open churches gained numbers. In York District, the Baptists were major gainers. It would be a quarter of a century before Methodism would make any inroads in the District.

Yorkville's first Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1824 by Rev. William Gassaway and Rev. Joseph Holmes, according to church history. The first congregation consisted of nine members: James Jeffries, Mrs. Elizabeth H. Jeffries, Col. Thomas W. Williams, Dr. John E. Jennings, John Chambers, Mrs. Margaret Chambers, Mrs. Sarah Beaty, and Mrs. Tabitha Wilkerson.

The first church building was erected on College Street in Yorkville in 1826. It was described as a plain wooden structure. Until 1852, there were only three church buildings in York District.

Even the official histories of the Methodist Church are uncertain about a precise date for the establishment of Methodism in the District outside of the village of Yorkville. The date 1828 is most often mentioned because the minutes of the Lincolnton, North Carolina circuit listed Joseph Holmes as the minister in charge of York District. For many years most of York District was served out of North Carolina and most of the Methodist activity centered on the area from Yorkville to Kings Mountain.

Rev. A. M. Chreitzberg, author of *Early Methodism in the Carolinas*, seems to support an earlier date--around 1824--based on statements made by an early minister who believed that his father-in-law, John Chambers, was preaching in the Philadelphia community at that time. .

By 1831 there were 15 "preaching places" listed in the Quarterly Conference minutes. These were: Yorkville, Zion, Bethel, Walnut Grove, Schoolhouse, Unity, Siloam, Sardis, Prospect, Mrs. Howell's, Captain

Jameson's, Ed Feamster's, Cove Spring, Mount Hebron, and Cross Roads. All of these were in the circuit ministered to by Joseph Holmes.

Joseph Holmes, and other Methodist preachers like him, rode their large circuits on horseback, carrying their sermons, bibles, and a change of clothes in their saddlebags. They were housed and fed by the Methodist brotherhood who lived along the circuit.

The Methodist minister's stipend was not known as a salary but was divided into traveling expenses, family expenses, and quarterage. As Dr. Chreitzberg described the three phases of the stipend: "the first seen at once, the second far off, and the third only in rarest instances seen at all." When Holmes' successor, James J. Richardson, 28 years of age, died in his first year of his ministry, his widow received \$10.62.

Money was scarce. Early Methodists were generally characterized as poor in worldly goods. The same could be said for their meeting houses. The land was generally donated and the first buildings were small and drafty, often with no way to heat them. More often than not, the services were held in homes or in the open.

Few records survive to document the pre-Civil War history of York District Methodists. We cannot know, for instance, how many blacks in York District were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Across the state of South Carolina, the black membership outnumbered the white but York had a smaller proportion of blacks than lowcountry counties. It can be assumed that blacks attended the Methodist services with the whites just as they did at Flint Hill Baptist Church.

The largest number of Methodists recorded in York District during the pre-Civil War period was 408 in 1844.