

Methodists Celebrate Centennial

South Carolina's Story
The making of a state



The year 1984 has been chosen by American Methodists as the year to celebrate the founding of the church in this country. On Christmas Eve 1784, a group of 60 Methodists came together in Baltimore to adopt a liturgy and to ordain two bishops, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury.

By that time, South Carolina had a strong connection with Methodism that preceded the Baltimore formalities by almost a half century.

John Wesley, the church founder, and Charles Wesley, his brother, had visited South Carolina and Georgia in the summer of 1736. Both were Oxford graduates and devout Anglican churchmen. While in Charles Town, they worshipped in St. Phillips Church and visited with Alexander Gardner, its capable minister.

John Wesley was a scholar and a skilled linguist. Charles Wesley is remembered for his musical talent. Charles wrote some 6,500 hymns and poems.

After visiting in the Southern colonies for several months, the brothers returned to England. John Wesley returned to Charles Town in April of 1737. During his second visit, Wesley read the proofs of his songbook, "Collection of Psalms and Hymns." It was the first religious songbook published in America. The byline of the book reads: "Printed by Lewis Timothy, Charles-Town, 1737." The book is now considered the most rare and valuable of all South Carolina imprints.

Lewis Timothy was trained by Benjamin Franklin. In fact, Franklin had a one-third interest in the print shop which also printed the Gazette, the best-known of South Carolina's colonial newspapers.

Timothy, originally Timothee, was a French Huguenot refugee. Interestingly, many of the descendants of the Huguenots (French Protestants) joined the Methodist Church. This was especially true of those who were artisans.

George Whitefield, one of the most gifted pulpit orators of all time, became a Methodist while a student at Oxford. Whitefield saw America as his special missionary field and as a site for an orphanage which he eventually built near Savannah, Ga. He visited and preached in South Carolina 15 times before his death in 1770.

When the American Revolution broke out, most of the Methodist ministers sent by Wesley to America returned to England. They had broken away from the state-church but could not bring themselves to break away from the State. Francis Asbury, alone, renounced the Crown.

Early records reveal that there was a South Carolina Methodist Conference in 1776 headed by James Foster who ministered to the Broad River Circuit. The Broad River Circuit took in most of today's Newberry, Fairfield, Union and Chester counties. This was eight years before the Methodist Church was established in Baltimore.

The 1784 Baltimore meeting established Methodist governance along lines already adopted by John Wesley in England. Bishops, deacons, elders and superintendents were assigned duties and formal obligations quite suitable to the English situation but less appropriate for the Americans. The Methodists of the Southern frontier added a new dimension in the form of rugged circuit-riders. Most of the circuit-riders were single men armed with a Bible and an emotional fervor that was especially appealing to frontiersmen.

Dr. David Ramsey wrote of the "great good" of these early Methodists, saying: "Drunkards have become sober and orderly, bruisers, bullies and blackguards meek, inoffensive and peaceable; and profane swearers decent in their conversation."

In 1795 Charleston had a Methodist Church on Cumberland Street near the Public Square which had a membership of 35 whites and 23 blacks. By 1861, statewide, the white membership was approximately 38,000 and the black membership more than 48,000.

Opposition to slavery was a basic tenet of Methodism. Yet, many Methodists, including the ministers, owned slaves. This circumstance created the major social issue debated at the pre-Civil War Annual Conference.

When the Civil War settled the slavery issue, South Carolina's Methodists turned their social reform energies to their other major concern, the American Temperance Movement. Most of the black Methodists changed their membership to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church or the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.