

For a number of years tiny Ocracoke Island was home to two congregations of the Methodist Church.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century the division between Ocracoke's "Northern" and "Southern" Methodist churches grew. At least some families became fiercely loyal to their brand of Methodism and refused to have anything to do with the "other" church. On the other hand, a number of islanders frequented both churches, especially if one of the preachers would be off the island on a Sunday morning. Inter-marriage between the two church families helped heal some of the wounds. It was not unusual for children to attend both Sunday Schools (which were held at different times) and mutual goodwill was seldom entirely lacking.

Several of the less-devout Ocracokers, those who seldom or never stepped across a church threshold, remarked that strains from both choirs could often be heard wafting through the village on a Sabbath morn. Many a laugh was had recounting the Sunday that the Southern church was singing "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown?" while, simultaneously, the Northern Church had launched into "No, Not One."

In 1936 Rev. H. Howard Shaw, pastor of the "Northern" Church reported that it had been "a difficult year." Rev. Shaw, who was remembered by islanders as a very stern and frank man, was appointed to his Ocracoke charge on October 19, 1935. According to his penned notes in the church's official record book, his charge was threatened by "opposition to the church administration," and the community was plagued by "denominational prejudice and indifference."

It was during Rev. Shaw's tenure at the "Northern Church" that the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, sent Rev. Tew to Ocracoke. Mr. Tew was fresh out of the seminary at Duke University, and one of his first gestures was to call on Rev. Shaw. As Fannie Pearl tells it, "they got along well, and Mr. Tew invited Mr. and Mrs. Shaw to have lunch with him and his wife the next week. This news soon reached the ladies of the Southern Church, and they got to work at once. On the day before the preachers were to dine together, Mrs. Tew was pleasantly surprised to have a church member deliver a new set of china to her door. No, siree, that Northern preacher wasn't going to find the Southern parsonage furnished with old chipped dishes."

Apparently most alarming to Mr. Shaw was "the advent into the community of four beer saloons and two dance halls**" which the preacher said "has proved a serious menace to the church."

He goes on to lament that “there being no law to protect us, children of tender age have been permitted to frequent these iniquitous dives. We have tried to combat this evil but have met with little success. However, we are hopeful that public sentiment may be aroused and these places of sin may be driven out of the community.”

Only a few years later a petition was circulated to outlaw the sale of alcoholic beverages on Ocracoke Island. Although it was widely assumed that this petition resulted in a county law prohibiting the sale of beer, wine, and spirituous liquors in Ocracoke township, after more than forty years of self-imposed temperance it was discovered that no such law was on the books.

Rev. Shaw also chronicled his tenure at Ocracoke by noting that twenty-five people were added to the rolls during a revival meeting in 1935 at which time he acted as evangelist. By 1936 the average Sunday School attendance was 92, and 9 more members were welcomed into the church.

In spite of a scarcity of money and hampered finances due to poor fishing and many members being on government relief, the congregation was able to purchase new hymnals, and to make \$200.00 worth of improvements to the church and the parsonage. Mr. Shaw noted that “all benevolences and conference claims are paid in full or overpaid [including \$26.00 overpaid on the pastor’s salary].”

Credit for the “splendid record,” Rev. Shaw says, “goes to a few faithful souls, who have not bowed the knee to Baal and who have cooperated fully with the pastor in carrying out the program of the church.”

Methodists in the early part of the twentieth century helped popularize rival meetings, and Ocracoke was no exception. Residents remember one traveling evangelist who ventured to the island by sailboat and preached fire and brimstone sermons exhorting the citizenry to repentance as a precondition of their attainment of celestial reward. After several days and nights of enthusiastic preaching the Reverend set out in his sail skiff bound for Hatteras Island. Within sight of the village he ran aground in Pamlico Sound on Howard’s Reef.

“How do you like that,” one irreverent islander remarked. “He’s been telling us how to get to heaven, and he can’t even get to Hatteras.”

In 1937 three national Methodist organizations, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church united to form the new Methodist Church. The union of the churches was welcomed by many Ocracokers. After

all, the original source of local conflict had mostly been forgotten. For too long, many agreed, the two island congregations had been unnecessary rivals. Throughout 1938 the newly formed Methodist Church continued to meet in the two separate Ocracoke church buildings, the former Methodist Episcopal Church served by the Reverend W.M. Mann and the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South served by the Reverend W.A. Crow.

In 1939, however, the Reverend E.C. Cowan (formerly affiliated with the Methodist Protestant tradition) was assigned to the newly united church. For almost two years he conducted Sunday services, alternating weekly between the two buildings. He lived in the parsonage on present day Howard Street, near the former Southern Methodist Church. Following Mr. Cowan, Reverend William Brady arrived on Ocracoke where he supervised the demolition of the two existing buildings. Church leaders had decided not to re-use the stained glass windows from the two churches. They agreed to send them across the sound to the Methodist Church in Salter Path for installation in their building.

By 1943 both churches had been dismantled and a new building was constructed using much of the material and furniture salvaged from the older structures. On July 4, 1943, under the leadership of the Reverend William R. Dixon, the new church was dedicated.

Ocracoke United Methodist Church, 1943



According to the Dedication Program Mr. H. J. Williams and Mr. Amasa Fulcher directed the building project, assisted by the pastors. "With very few exceptions," the program notes, "almost every man in the congregation and many of the women have put in actual working hours on the building construction." Several men are singled out for their special efforts and "constant, persistent, and peculiarly industrious" dedication to the building program. They are Homer Howard, Amasa Fulcher, James Garrish, H.J. Williams, Lt. (jg) J.P. Woodruff, T.W. Howard, Leonard Bryant, W.S.C.S, Charlie Scarborough, and the Officers and Enlisted Men of the U.S.C.G. and Navy.

The new church's eighth pastor was an avid fisherman. Reverend Hale spent many a relaxing afternoon wading along the shoreline, casting his line into the sound in hopes of catching enough fish for his dinner. His passionate interest in fishing did not go unnoticed by the local men, who frequently gathered in Jesse Garrish's "Community Store" to swap

stories. Oscar Burrus stepped into the general store one day and commented that Reverend Hale spent so much time standing in the water that he thought the islanders should chip in and buy him a gallon of copper paint. "Boys, if we painted the preacher's feet maybe we could keep the ship worms from getting to him," Oscar suggested.

One of Ocracoke Island's more colorful characters was Frank Treat Fulcher. Frank Treat, who was born in 1878 to an island seafaring family, shipped out as a seaman, 3rd class, on the schooner "Emiline" when he was but ten years old. He endured hurricanes and shipwrecks, learned to "cuss a blue streak," and described himself as "a salty old seaman" at the age of twelve.

In the next few years Frank Treat experienced more storms and shipwrecks, as well as a near-mutiny. By the time he was 18 years old he had circumnavigated the globe as quartermaster of the steamer, "Neptune." It was said that he ruled his crew with "fist, marlin spikes, and boot toes."

After leaving the sea, Frank Treat changed his ways and became a Methodist preacher. During the Depression he supplemented his income by serving as a part-time policeman in Norfolk, Virginia. One day his bishop encountered him on the streets. Noting his billy stick and crisp, new uniform, the bishop wondered aloud about Mr. Fulcher's new career. "Well," Frank Treat replied, "I figured if I couldn't preach Heaven into people, I'd try beating the Hell out of 'em."

In the early 1950's, soon after the first car ferry was established at Hatteras Inlet, Frank Treat drove his brand new automobile to the Ocracoke United Methodist Church, where he had been asked to preach the Sunday sermon. In the middle of his homily some local boys climbed into his car and started blowing the horn. Mr. Fulcher stopped his sermon and asked one of the men in the congregation to "please go outside and make those boys cease their annoying behavior."

Not many minutes later, the bleating of the horn resumed. Frank Treat paused again and directed someone in the audience to give the boys one last warning. When the horn began blaring again after a short pause, Frank Treat decided to take matters into his own hands. With a flourish, he threw off his black preacher's robe and rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. "I'll teach those s-o-b's a lesson," he whispered under his breath as he marched down the aisle.

A hand-made wooden cross rests on the altar in the sanctuary of Ocracoke's united church building. The cross was constructed by Homer Howard, and painted gold by his wife, Aliph.

The cross was made out of salvage from the ship on which island native, James Baughm Gaskill, served and lost his life. Jim Baughm's ship, the "Caribsea," was torpedoed and sunk offshore by a German U-boat on March 11, 1942, little more than a year before the new church was dedicated. Shortly after the sinking, Christopher Farrow, James Baughm's cousin, found his framed license cast up on the ocean beach. Later, the ship's nameplate and other debris washed up at his family's dock, at the old Pamlico Inn. The cross stands today as a memorial to James Baughm Gaskill, 3rd mate in the USS Maritime service.

Altar Cross on the Ocracoke United Methodist Church:



The bible on the altar, printed in 1633, was given by Dr. and Mrs. T.V. Bennett in memory of their infant son, Fletcher Murdock Bennett. The baptismal font and prayer desk were handmade by members of the congregation: the font by Mike Riddick and the prayer desk by Lawton Howard.

In 1968 the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church. Technically, the Ocracoke church thus became the tongue-twister "Ocracoke United United Methodist Church."

******Two of the "beer saloons" were Leslie Garrish's store (now the Suter-Begiebung cottage) and Albert Styron's store. The two dance halls were located at Captain Bill Gaskill's "Pamlico Inn" and Stanley Wahab's "Spanish Casino." Although some older islanders do not remember that the dance halls sold alcoholic beverages, others remember that they did sell beer and wine. It could be that alcohol was sold there surreptitiously. Sometimes hard liquor was sold "under the counter" at the Spanish Casino, but not after Stanley's mother, Martha Ann, found out about it!

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