

The first record of a church on Ocracoke Island is in 1828 when the Ocracoke-Portsmouth Circuit of the Methodist Episcopal Church was established. In October, 1769, Joseph Pillmore had been sent from England to parts of Virginia and North Carolina by John Wesley. As one of the first regular itinerant Methodist preachers to visit North America he established societies in Currituck, and either he or one of his followers seems to have preached as far south as Ocracoke. At any rate, the Methodists had made inroads on the Outer Banks, and a combination school/church was soon erected on Ocracoke Island, approximately where Lois Ann Wahab's home is today, across the street from the present-day firehouse. The Reverend J. Atkinson served as pastor.

Only 16 years later, in 1844, a schism in the national body, the Methodist Episcopal Church, erupted over the issue of slavery. At their General Conference, pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions clashed. Pro-slavery forces eventually drafted a Plan of Separation that left the church with two ecclesiastical structures, The Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The latter body met in Louisville, Kentucky in May 1845 to organize their new church. The first General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was held in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1846. The Ocracoke charge, like virtually all other southern Methodist congregations, then came under the care of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

From the beginning of the Civil War, in 1861, when Confederate forces opened fire on a Union garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, Ocracoke residents had conflicted loyalties. As a result of years of profitable schooner traffic along the Eastern seaboard, many Ocracoke natives had established economic and personal ties with residents in northern port cities. Nevertheless, the Outer Banks were in a strategic location and Confederate officers were intent on keeping inlets open to ensure uninterrupted lines of supply to their forces on the mainland. The village of Ocracoke, with its maritime culture, was not as dependent on slave labor as many southern plantations were. As a result, several men from Ocracoke served in the Union army even though most supported and fought for the Confederacy. However, like most Outer Bankers, Ocracoke natives seemed to be more independent than partisan.

On May 20, 1861 North Carolina seceded from the Union. On the same day, volunteers from the mainland began construction of an earthen fort on nearby Beacon Island. In late August of 1861, Union bombardments of Confederate forts Hatteras and Clark along the Outer Banks resulted in Federal control of the area. On September 16, 1861, a Federal detachment vandalized and burned Fort Ocracoke, which had never been fully supplied and which had been abandoned by the few remaining Confederate forces that had not been moved to Fort Hatteras.

Although Ocracoke village (which had neither entrenchments nor guns) was not the target of Federal bombardment, the war caused so much uncertainty that the Reverend R.A. Raven also chose to abandon his Ocracoke charge just a few months after his arrival. This left the island without a pastor for nearly a decade. Since Mr. Raven absconded with a young lady from the Portsmouth church, whom he later married, we may justly wonder if the advancing Federal troops were just an excuse for the young cleric.

Eight years later, in 1869, four years after Lee's Surrender at Appomattox, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South resumed its care of the Ocracoke charge when it sent the Reverend George E. Wyche to Ocracoke Island. Very likely the congregation had continued to meet under the guidance of lay leaders, although it was said that on his arrival, Mr. Wyche found the charge "demoralized to a great extent." Local tradition suggests that the "scattered fragments of a once happy church" welcomed their new preacher warmly. Whether the original church building was still standing, had been replaced, or had been abandoned is not known. Perhaps the local congregation had built a new church prior to Mr. Raven's departure, or maybe a new building was begun after Mr. Wyche's arrival.

Ocracoke Methodist Church, South, c. 1880



The Methodist Episcopal Church, South continued to meet for almost seventy years, with a succession of four dozen preachers, in three different buildings, the last of which, at least, was situated on Howard Street where Dicey Wells' home sits today.

Ocracoke Methodist Church, South, c. 1930



On August 21, 1899, a fierce storm ravaged Ocracoke Island. Contemporary reports suggest that the wind velocity exceeded 100 miles per hour. Huge waves broke over the island and the tide rose up to five feet over much of the village. Thirty-three homes were severely damaged and a number of boats were sunk or dashed to pieces against the shore. As a consequence, the handsome Southern Methodist Church, with its arched, stained glass windows and decorative woodwork, sustained considerable damage. The church was soon rebuilt.

One of the last of the “Southern” preachers was the young and handsome, but naïve, Mr. W. A. Tew. Shortly before arriving at his Ocracoke charge he married an attractive young woman. He called on Homer Howard, one of the pillars of the Ocracoke church, for marital advice. Homer returned home with a wide grin on his face. “Aliph,” he told his wife, “Mr. Tew wanted to know ‘what to do!’”

Meanwhile, the Methodist Episcopal Church had sent a representative to Ocracoke in 1883. He conducted religious instruction in a schoolhouse that was located near the old Howard Cemetery (on present-day British Cemetery Road). As a result, a new congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church was reestablished on the island. Many of the congregants came from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which had become divided. A church was constructed near “Big Ike” O’Neal’s home (on the present-day “Back Road”). Dedicated by the Rev. W.F. Parker, and named Wesley Chapel, it was built from lumber salvaged from a ship wrecked on a nearby reef. The Reverend John Carson was installed as the first pastor in February, 1885.

Wesley Chapel, c. 1930



The Atlantic Mission (later a part of the Blue Ridge Atlantic Conference) was organized on Ocracoke at Wesley Chapel.

Wesley Chapel was washed from its foundation in the 1899 hurricane, but was soon rebuilt.

In 1908 an annex was added to accommodate the growing congregation. Other improvements were made a few years later.

Ocracokers have always been known for their quick wit and penchant for short pithy comments. Their observations are often irreverent, sometimes border on the melodramatic, and are frequently hyperbolic. No person, group, or institution, including the church and its representatives, is immune.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Mr. Winslow Sanderson Bragg was a recognized pillar of the Northern Church. As is often the case, not everyone was overjoyed with Bragg's leadership style. During an emotion-filled revival at Wesley Chapel one evening the evangelist thundered, "Let's get together and throw the devil out of this church!" Without a moment's hesitation one of the congregation stood up and fired back, "Let's throw Sanderson Bragg out the window first."

In the late 1890's Thaddeus W. Scarborough, Jr., who was stationed off-island in the U.S. Coast Guard, married Mary Wright Jackson, from Ernul, North Carolina. Mary, who was known as "Polly," soon moved to the island with her new husband and attended the Northern Methodist Church. Polly had been reared in the Christian Church. In 1908, when her daughter, Elizabeth, was seven years old, Polly asked the preacher to baptize Elizabeth by immersion, according to the custom in the Christian Church.

Ocracokers had never participated in a baptism by immersion, but the preacher agreed. Church members and other island residents eagerly anticipated the ceremony. On the appointed Sunday they gathered near the U.S. Coast Guard Station at "The Ditch" (the entrance to Silver Lake Harbor), which at that time boasted an attractive sandy beach. Elizabeth's baptism by immersion was such a novel and dramatic event for this isolated community that islanders talked about it for many years.

At about the same time, Miss Polly confided in her pastor and his wife that she had impishly divided the young eligible men of the community into three "classes" of desirability. The pastor's wife let this news slip one day, and soon the entire island was abuzz with the ratings. For years, Clemmie Williams would laugh about how he was put into the "Third Class" while his brother, Dallas, was considered "First Class."

Wesley Chapel's sixth pastor, Rev. W. E. West, was known to take a drink now and again. According to Elizabeth Howard, as recounted in Alton Ballance's book, Ocracokers, "This preacher had a very good delivery. He'd get in the pulpit and be a little under the influence of intoxicating beverages. One woman said that she would much rather hear him preach

drunk than hear some sober.”

An open air revival meeting was being held on Hatteras Island and Mr. Leolen Jackson, who had been off-island studying to be a preacher, was home visiting. Mr. West asked Mr. Jackson to take him to the meeting in his skiff. Jackson agreed on the condition that the preacher promise to refrain from strong drink, which he did.

Mr. West preached with enthusiasm and charisma during the revival, bringing many to the Lord. On the last night of the revival preacher West invited his friend, Mr. Jackson, to offer the final prayer. “May all the strong drink be poured into the River Jordan,” he prayed. With that cue, preacher West announced, “We will now stand and sing ‘Shall We Gather at the River.’”

Another of the early pastors of the reestablished Methodist Episcopal Church was Reverend W. H. Luther who hailed originally from New Jersey. When he left the Ocracoke charge Mr. Luther and his wife had two teenage sons. After graduating from high school up north, one of the boys became a police officer in Philadelphia.

Some years later, Ocracoke native Norman Garrish, as so many other islanders, moved to Philadelphia seeking work on dredges and tugboats on the Delaware River. Mr. Garrish approached officer Luther on busy Market Street, unaware of who he was, and asked for directions to the offices of the US Army Corps of Engineers. Recognizing Mr. Garrish from the days he had lived in the Ocracoke parsonage, officer Luther decided to have a little fun and replied, “I don’t think you’re looking for the Army Engineers. I think you must be looking for Mr. Piland’s store*.”

For fifty-four years (from 1883 to 1937) Ocracoke was served by two branches of the Methodist Church. Although the issue of slavery had been the catalyst that originally divided the two national bodies, it seems that the islanders’ differences were of another sort.

Ocracoke islanders in the 20th century rarely talked about the source of local church conflict, so much is speculation, but tradition indicates that the major reason for the division centered around the choir. According to Fannie Pearl Fulcher, who heard the story from her grandmother, “a young singing master” came to the island who “wanted to teach the choir to sing by note.” This was in the early 1880’s. Other islanders remember hearing that church leaders also wanted to replace the older hymn books (which included only the words to songs, not notes) with newer hymnals that included notes. Some members were attracted to singing classes and musical notes while others were not.

According to Fannie Pearl “one Sunday morning a member of the choir locked the church door” after the pro-notes group had assembled. She goes on to say that “those locked out decided to leave the church and organize one of their own. They sent a delegation to Marshallberg, [NC] where there was a Northern Methodist School, to persuade the headmaster, W.Q. A. Graham to come to the island and establish a church.”

Most Ocracokers agree that the two churches’ common local names reflect their geographical locations on the island much more than the larger theological and social issues of the national bodies. Economics also appears to have been a factor in the division, as some of the more well-to-do families could afford lessons to learn the new musical notes, while others could not.