

A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
CENTRE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Mooreville, North Carolina

In Honor of the 250th Anniversary

Shirley Miller Wagers  
July 2015

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Centre Presbyterian Church has a long and amazing history. There was a Centre Church before there was a USA!

The little church's story begins in the first days of our country's history. At that time the backcountry of the Carolinas was the wild frontier of the thirteen colonies. Rowan County (Iredell formed from Rowan in 1788) was a "wild west" with Indians, buffalo, and vast unsettled tracts of land. This land was the hunting grounds of the Cherokee and Catawba Indians. Attack from the Indians was always a possibility, survival depended upon one's ability to live off the land and there was no established community to promote law and order.

Things began to change in the 1740's when the first European settlers started arriving in the area. Many of these were Scots-Irish Presbyterians. They traveled from Pennsylvania and Virginia down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, which was once known as the Warriors' Path. These hardy men and women were seeking inexpensive land, the opportunity to create a new life in a new world and to form a community where they would be free to worship according to their Presbyterian principles. One of the first things they did was establish regular worship services. The first services were held in private homes and the neighbors would gather from miles around. Later they built a meeting house. The structures were simple log buildings...not fine or fancy...but they were dedicated to spreading the Gospel in the wilderness.

John Thompson was a Presbyterian missionary preacher and was probably the first minister to pass through this area. Born in Ireland in 1690, he entered Glasgow University in Scotland in 1706 and was licensed as a minister in 1713. He then returned to Ireland. In 1715 Rev. Thompson and his family sailed for America. He probably preached in this area as early as the 1740's and by the summer of 1751 he had made it his permanent home. Thompson lived near his daughter Elizabeth and her husband, Samuel Baker. When Rev. Thompson died in 1753, a grave was dug under the floor of his cabin and he was buried there. Later others were buried in this location and the area became known as Baker's Graveyard.

When the Cowan's Ford Dam was built during the early 1960's and Lake Norman flooded the area, the stones from Baker's Graveyard were moved to Centre Cemetery. These graves are located in the far back corner of our historic cemetery, which is across the road from the church and surrounded by a rock wall. The cemetery has graves as far

back as 1765. There are at least fifteen Revolutionary War patriots buried in the cemetery as well as veterans from all the wars our country has been involved in. People from all over the country come to visit the cemetery in search of their ancestors. A complete listing of the graves is on the church's web site.

As the French and Indian War came to a close in 1763, the Presbytery in far off Pennsylvania was able to send representatives to organize the frontier meeting houses into official Presbyterian churches. The officials arrived here in 1764 and Centre Presbyterian Church was organized. Meetings were held originally at Osborne's Meeting House until a log structure was erected to serve as the church in 1765.

Presbyterian mission strategy in early colonial America established churches within each significant colonial settlement. Churches were established about fifteen miles apart, approximately one day's journey at that time. Centre Presbyterian Church was named because it was located in the central area, near the settlement of Mount Mourne, and surrounded by the five other colonial churches.

The site selected for the first church building was about two miles north of present-day Davidson, and here the church building was erected. Nine years later, in 1774, this church building was destroyed by fire and it was at this time that the officers and members of the congregation decided to move to the present location. This second church building was of log construction, fifty by eighty feet. In 1854 this building was demolished and the current sanctuary took its place.

Centre Presbyterian Church had no ordained minister during the first twelve years of its life, being served by missionaries. The Rev. Thomas Harris McCaule, of Pennsylvania and a Princeton graduate, was the first minister. He accepted a call to the church in 1777 in the midst of the War for Independence and served the congregation for eight years. During the war Rev. McCaule helped the men of the church form a militia company and he served as their chaplain.

An ardent patriot, Rev. McCaule was frequently in the camp of his congregation's ranking military officer and greatest local Revolutionary hero, General William Lee Davidson. Davidson fought bravely against the British, but was mortally wounded at the Battle of Cowan's Ford. The British cruelly stripped his body. Legend says that McCaule and two other friends found the body, and each gave one of his garments in which to bury the general. McCaule is said to have given his cloak. The patriots feared to bury Davidson in the burying ground at Centre. Suppose the British came back and desecrated his grave? Therefore, they went to the nearby Hopewell Presbyterian Church and buried the general at night in a grave which remained unmarked until many years after the Revolution for fear of lingering Tory sentiments. Rev. McCaule was

primarily a scholar and left his Centre pastorate in 1785 to become principal of Mt. Zion Academy in Winnsboro, South Carolina.

The Revolutionary War touched many families in this area. You can read the names of many of the patriots from Centre in the narthex of the church on the marble tablet donated by the Mary Slocumb Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1914. Some members of Centre signed the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, a document seeking to sever ties with Great Britain a full year before the national Declaration of Independence. The only actual fighting that took place in this area occurred just a few miles from Centre with the skirmish at Torrence's Tavern on February 2, 1781.

Two early special events took place at Centre...the Synod of the Carolinas was organized at Centre Church in 1788 and the first regular meeting of Concord Presbytery was held at Centre on March 29, 1796.

After independence, the hard work of building a new nation began. The people of the frontier settled in and communities and towns grew up. Davidson College, named after General William Lee Davidson, was started with the support of Centre Church in 1837. Farms grew and families prospered. By the 1850's the church had outgrown its log building and in 1854 the present brick Meeting House was erected. It has large windows to show the glory of God's creation and a plain white interior so as not to distract from His Word. The Session House was built at the same time so that business about money would not have to take place within the walls of the sanctuary, which was dedicated to worshipping the Lord.

The Meeting House is made of sun dried, hand-made bricks. The large green shutters on the windows have heavy, hand-wrought hinges. The windows are eleven feet high. Today the sanctuary remains much the same as it was when it was built. The original pulpit furniture and offering bags are still used, as are the original lamps, which have been electrified. The pulpit Bible was presented to the church in 1849 and it has only recently been removed for preservation. A new pulpit Bible has taken its place. The Meeting House, the Session House and the historic cemetery are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Rev. Stephen Frontis, born in France in 1792, came to this country at the age of eighteen and graduated from Princeton in 1823. He first engaged in missionary work which extended over several states. In 1849 he began work at Centre but was also given, part time, to Thyatira Church. After two years, Centre extended a call to him for his whole time which he accepted, and he stayed at Centre until his resignation in 1856. It was during his pastorate that the present church was erected.

The 1860's would bring a war over slavery and other issues that would ultimately devastate the south. The men went off to fight and the women desperately tried to keep life going while learning to "make do" with less and less. Over forty Confederate soldiers lie buried in the historic cemetery at Centre. After the war, the men who survived returned home to try and rebuild their lives. Like their great-grandparents who carved homes out of a wilderness, they persevered and struggled and ultimately triumphed.

With the turn of a new century, many things began to change. Horses and buggies, for instance, were replaced by automobiles. Centre sent her men off to war...the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Many of Centre's young men, as well as women, also served proudly in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. The church outgrew the rock border of the "Old Cemetery" and a new cemetery was started behind the old brick church.

As the congregation grew, the Faith Building (1955), the Williams Building (1956) and the Parker Building (2004) were added, as well as the Scout Hut.

The longest period of service by any pastor was that of the Rev. Dr. William Walter Pharr, who served the church for fifty years from 1858 until 1908. Dr. Pharr was born in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, on January 1, 1832. He entered Davidson College in 1850 and graduated in 1853. That same year he entered the Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and graduated there in 1856. He accepted the call from Centre Church in 1858. In 1869 Dr. Pharr married Sarah Elizabeth Moore, daughter of James Warren Moore of Gaston County and they had five children. In 1890 Rev. Pharr received his Doctor of Divinity degree from Erskine College in South Carolina. Dr. Pharr died in 1912 after a life of long and faithful service.

Another noted pastor was the Rev. J. Kenton Parker, Sr. of Lynchburg, Virginia, who served Centre for thirty-one years. On September 15, 1927, he accepted the call from the congregation at Centre to become their pastor. His salary was \$1,000 per year, which he gave back to the church, plus he had the use of a manse. He and his wife and their six children lived there until he resigned the pastorate in 1958 and they continued living in the Mount Mourne area until his death in 1960. During Rev. Parker's pastorate, the Faith Building and the Williams Building were built, a pipe organ was installed in the sanctuary and other physical improvements made.

The current minister of Centre, Rev. Dr. Robert M. Howard, accepted his call to Centre in August 1994. Rev. Howard was born in Darlington, South Carolina and received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. He later received a Master of Divinity degree from the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell

Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is married to the former Cynthia Anne Hunt of Danville, Virginia and they are the parents of one daughter, Anne Hunt Howard.

During the pastorate of Dr. Howard a number of improvements have been made to the campus. The Williams Building, built in 1956, was renovated and the kitchen was enlarged. An addition was added to this building in 2004, the Rev. J. Kenton Parker Building. The historic Meeting House for worship was repaired, renovated and preserved. The Session House, built ca 1854, was also restored and preserved. The original educational building was renovated and renamed the Faith Building. A new organ was installed in the Meeting House in 2013. In that year the congregation cast an historic vote to move its affiliation from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

"May the spirit and power of the spirit-filled men and women of these olden days descend in large supply upon their sons and daughters!" [Article in the Statesville Landmark dated Tues. April 14, 1896..."The Centennial at Centre."]

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**Note:** This brief history of Centre Church has been compiled using references, newspaper articles and other miscellaneous files that I discovered while locating and organizing the church archives in preparation for the 250th Anniversary of the church. I wish to give special credit to a paper written by the Rev. Tracie Mayes Stewart in August 2009, entitled: "The Old Brick Church: A History for the Children of Centre Presbyterian Church," which Dot Morrow kindly shared with me. I also want to thank June Robb for her invaluable assistance and encouragement in helping me with this project.

Sadly, I was unable to locate any actual church records prior to May 1871. However, this whole project has been a learning experience and a labor of love and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve Centre in the capacity of Church Archivist.

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### Ministers of Centre Church

Rev. Thomas Harris McCaule		1777-1785	8 yrs.
Unknown		1785-1798	
Rev. Dr. James McRee	(1)	1798-1828	30 yrs.
Rev. Dr. R.H. Chapman		1828-1830	2 yrs.
Rev. Thomas Espy		1830-1831	1 yr.
Rev. John M. Erwin and Rev. Walter Smiley Pharr	(2)	1833-1839	6 yrs.
Rev. John Leroy Davies		1839-1848	9 yrs.
Rev. Dr. Stephen Frontis	(3)	1849-1856	7 yrs.
Dr. William Walter Pharr	(4)	1858-1908	50 yrs.
Rev. R.W. Culbertson		1908-1915	7 yrs.
Rev. W.E. West		1915-1925	10 yrs.
Rev. J. Kenton Parker, Sr.	(1)	1927-1958	31 yrs.
Rev. R. Jackson Sadler		1959-1962	2 yrs.
Rev. Marcus B. Prince III		1962-1969	7 yrs.
Rev. Dwight L. Barker		1970-1979	9 yrs.
Rev. George W. Alexander, Jr.		1981-1993	12 yrs.
Rev. Dr. Robert M. Howard		1994-present	

- (1) Served Centre 30 years or longer.
- (2) Served Centre jointly.
- (3) Present church building erected during his ministry.
- (4) Held longest pastorate at Centre.