

Presbyterianism In Rockbridge—New Providence—Timber Ridge—Other Early Meeting Houses—The Methodist Church—The Baptist Church—The Episcopal Church—Rural Churches

Presbyterianism In Rockbridge

Ever since the Protestant Reformation took root in Scotland, the Presbyterian has been the national church of that country. The pioneers of Rockbridge were staunch upholders of this faith, and brought its creed with them. The first regular Presbyterian sermon in Augusta was preached in 1738 in the house of John Lewis near Staunton. The minister was James Anderson.

When American independence was declared, the Presbyterians and the sects allied to them in religious belief constituted the strongest religious force in the land. The New England section was overwhelmingly Congregationalist. The Dutch Reformed and the German Reformed churches were conspicuous in the Middle Colonies. Presbyterianism was heavily represented wherever the Ulsterman had gone. All these sects were at one in creed and differed only in methods of church government. It was mainly because of the democratic spirit pervading this group of churches that the War for Independence was successful. The Presbyterian minister was a leader of opinion. His church would not ordain a man who could not teach, and from its clergy it exacted a high order of educational attainment.

New Providence

Before the Revolution, according to the Reverend Samuel Houston, the people of New Providence kept Sunday with great strictness. Howe adds that the gay amusements of Tuckahoe Virginia were here unknown. There was little social intercourse outside of the churchyard. But the influence of camp life during the Revolution was very demoralizing, and the change for the worse thus set in motion was not counteracted by certain of the new families that settled in Rockbridge. Yet there were no revivals in the Valley of Virginia until the fall of 1788, and they were not well thought of by the Ulster-Americans. However, there was a schism among the Presbyterians in the colonial period. The conservative wing was known as the "Old Side," and the progressive as the "New Side," or "New Lights." The Rockbridge congregations allied themselves with the progressives. These differed with the Old Side in approving the outdoor, unconventional, and revivalist preaching of George Whitefield, who made a tour of the colonies in 1739-41. The breach is said to have been healed in 1758, yet something of the rift remained.

The perfervid, emotional camp meeting oratory of a century ago sometimes caused that nervous derangement in the hearer which was known as the "jerks." Ann Henderson was seized with this manifestation in Timber Ridge meeting house, Sunday, August 4, 1805. Major Samuel Houston told her it would not do to dance during the preaching, and he took her outside. He was assisted by James Decker and resisted by Daniel Lyle. Houston was presented for disturbing public worship, but his course was upheld by the pastor and the congregation generally.

For sixteen years there was no settled minister in Rockbridge, although the immigrants were visited by Alexander McDowell and others. Three ministers, McDowell, Alexander Craighead, and William Dean, acquired land in the Borden grant or on the South River. Craighead lived on the Cowpasture a little below Millboro Springs, and Dean on Brandywine Creek in Pennsylvania. In 1746 John Blair effected church organization at New Providence, Timber Ridge, Monmouth, and Falling Springs. But for seven years longer there was no resident minister at any of these places.

The log meeting houses at New Providence, Timber Ridge, and Falling Springs were accepted as houses of worship by the court of Augusta, May 20, 1748. And as the order-book informs us that the one at Timber Ridge was in place in February of the same year, it could scarcely have been built later than in the fall of 1747. The statement we have seen that it was built in 1742 is very doubtful. The log Timber Ridge church had high pulpit, split-log seats, and earth floor. The pioneer church in this county was always a log structure. It was usually succeeded by a stone building, and then by a brick.

There seems to be some fogginess as to how New Providence came by its name. Archibald Alexander said his grandfather worshipped at a Providence church near the site of Morristown, New Jersey. Some families of that congregation came to "New Virginia," built a New Providence, and when it had become inconveniently small, another New Providence was put up on Timber Ridge. On the other hand, the name Providence is said to have been adopted at the suggestion of John Houston, because of the harmonious spirit shown by the people in selecting a site. Yet the name New Providence is used in the call refused by Mr. Byram in 1748. Another call was at once presented to William Dean, but he died the same year. In 1753 the call extended to John Brown by 114 attendants at New Providence and Timber Ridge was

accepted.

The first home of the New Providence congregation stood close to the log academy of Robert Alexander. The location was at length deemed unsatisfactory, and after some discord it was decided to move into the valley of Hays Creek. About 1789 some of the members took offense at the singing of the hymns by Isaac Watts, and built a stone meeting house on the old site, which became known as Old Providence. It lies a mile beyond the Rockbridge boundary.

For a good will consideration, Joseph Kennedy conveyed three acres and 118 rods of ground to the trustees of New Providence meeting house. The deed is dated August 21, 1754, and says the building is already under way. It was not then known that sand for the mortar could be found any nearer than South River. A supply was brought from that watercourse in sack-loads, each horse in the train carrying a girl as well as a sack. An armed escort was in attendance. A sycamore seed brought from the river took root in the sand-pile, and grew into a tree that is yet standing. Nails and glass came by packsaddle from Philadelphia, and were paid for with butter carried to market in the same way. But for want of means, the meeting house was not finished for about seventeen years, and swallows made nests inside. In 1771, Brice Hanna, who had contracted to complete the building, failed and went to parts unknown. The brick structure which now serves the congregation dates from 1859, and is the fifth in the series. Its immediate predecessor, also of brick, was erected in 1812.

John Brown was pastor forty-five years. His first elders were John Houston, Samuel Houston, James Wilson, Andrew Steele, and John Robinson. The salary promised Mr. Brown was 120 pounds, or \$400. The most liberal giver at the start was Andrew Steele, who contributed \$7.22. John Bowyer subscribed two pounds. The minimum was five shillings, or eighty-three cents. John Brown went to Kentucky and was very soon succeeded by Samuel Brown. The third pastorate was that of James Morrison, who was here from 1819 to 1857. E. D. Junkin, was pastor from 1860 to 1871, C. R. Vaughn from 1871 to 1881, and G. A. Wilson from 1890 to 1908. The wife of Samuel Brown was Mary Moore, whose second daughter wedded James Morrison, the next pastor. The wife of H. W. McLaughlin, pastor since 1909, is a later descendant of Mary Moore Brown, whose grave in the extensive and well-kept churchyard is often inquired for by visitors.

A Sunday school was organized at New Providence in 1830, the first superintendent being James, a son of Samuel Brown. The revival of June, 1834, caused the membership to rise to 591. It was here that the Synod of Virginia was organized in 1788, and the centennial of this event was observed in October, 1888.

Until suspended in 1917, on war considerations, there had for some twenty years been an annual chrysanthemum exhibit at New Providence. The money derived from a small admission fee and from suppers and other adjuncts was used in the expenses of the church. The fine floral displays became widely known, and drew crowds of people from within a radius of more than twenty miles. A further attraction was the opportunity for social intercourse.

It is worthy of mention that the New Providence built at McAfee Station, Kentucky, in the dawn of Kentucky settlement, and the New Providence of Blount county, Tennessee, were in reality daughter churches of the New Providence of Rockbridge. Another New Providence arose in the west of North Carolina.

Timber Ridge

The log Timber Ridge meeting house stood some distance north of the present church. The spot is on rising ground, about 100 yards east of the nine mile post on the turnpike, and near a log schoolhouse no longer in use. Nearby is an early graveyard, now almost indistinguishable. The logs of the pioneer church were built into the dwelling house of M. H. Crist, which was standing until after 1906. The stone church was built in 1756 by the efforts of about fifty families. There was a puncheon floor, high-backed pews with very narrow seats, and stone stairways to the gallery. The clerk stood at a desk in front of the pulpit and led the singing, the lines being given out in couplets or by verses. As in other houses of worship of the pioneer day, there was a sounding board above the pulpit, which was placed much higher than in the present custom. With considerable enlargement and modernizing, the old stone church is still a part of the one now in use.

The Hanover Presbytery met at Timber Ridge in 1784 and licensed John Blair, pastor of the first organized Presbyterian church in Richmond. Two years later was held the first session of Lexington Presbytery, attended by twelve ministers. The first elders of this church were Archibald Alexander, John Davidson, Daniel Lyle, William McClung, Alexander McClure, and John McKay. The first pastor was John Brown,

who resigned in 1767. William Graham was pastor from 1776 to 1785, Daniel Blair from 1802 to 1814, Henry Ruffner from 1819 to 1831. The later pastorates number fourteen.

Other Early Meeting Houses

Hall's Meeting House in the "Forks of the James" stood an hour's walk west of Lexington. A deed for the ground was given in 1754. William Dean was called in 1748, but there was no regular pastor until William Graham came in 1776. During this long interval there was occasional preaching by John Craig, John Brown, and others. Graham also preached at John McKee's, where Doctor Archibald Alexander gave his first exhortation in 1790. The meeting house is supposed to have been built about 1748, and is said to have been a large building in a beautiful grove. The second was of stone, appeared in 1789, and was given the name of New Monmouth. It was torn down in 1902, at which time the locust frame and walnut facings were still sound. The present New Monmouth, in the valley of Kerr's Creek, is the successor of a brick structure completed in 1853. Doctor John Leyburn has left us an account of the blue limestone Monmouth, which in his boyhood stood in a dense grove of oak. A steep outside stairway led to the gallery. Above the large pulpit was a sounding-board. The pews were very high, and therefore unpopular with the young people. To accentuate this peculiarity, the aisles were so low that only the heads and shoulders of standing people could be seen. Some came from Lexington, either afoot or mounted, and carried dinner baskets. They entered the meeting house two abreast. Outside, the people stood in groups or sat on stones or rude benches. The dinner baskets were deposited in the session house. Mothers who could not leave their babies at home remained outside and listened. At communion time, in spring and fall, religion was a very prominent theme of conversation.

In 1788 the Presbyterians of Lexington secured one-fourth of William Graham's time, thirty-six members subscribing \$71.75. The first meetings were in a grove on East Washington Street. In 1792 a tent was used. A meeting house, begun 1797, was not completed until 1802, and was enlarged in 1819, when the membership was ninety-four. The Forty-Third General Association of the Southern Presbyterian Church was held in Lexington, May 21, 1903.

Falling Springs, in the valley of Poague's Run, one of the best farming districts in Rockbridge, is a reminder of the olden time. The brick church lies on the border of an extensive burial ground, in which the lettering on some of the headstones is quite ancient. No historical sketch of this organization has come to our hand.

Ben Salem, southeast from Lexington, arose in 1834, or according to another account, not until 1846. The present church was built in 1884.

The organization at Bethesda was effected at Wilson's Spring in 1821 with fourteen members. The first church was dedicated in 1843, the second and present one in 1876. The first regular pastor was W. W. Trimble, who served from 1853 to 1865. There were 209 members when W. W. McElwee closed his long pastorate in 1901. The McElwee Memorial Chapel on Oak Hill was dedicated in 1905.

Oxford is not within the Borden Tract, as is sometimes affirmed. The Henry Borden who is associated with its history was a stonemason living on Collier's Creek. There seems to be no evidence that he was related to Benjamin Borden, the patentee. An "eight-cornered" meeting house is said to have been built as early as 1763. A limestone structure followed in 1811, and the present brick church was completed in 1867. The first minister was James Power, who declined a call and returned to Pennsylvania in 1773. Samuel Houston, Daniel Blain, and Andrew Davidson preached here from 1794 to 1843, Mr. Davidson's long term beginning 1803. Altogether, this church has had twenty pastorates. There are no continuous records prior to 1843.

A church at Collierstown was built in 1837 and was followed by a brick building completed in 1856. The wills recorded in this county throw some light on the philanthropic and missionary spirit among the early people. John Mathews, Sr., left \$10.00 in 1757 to the poor of the parish of Augusta. Hugh Weir in 1821 left \$150.00 to the American Board of Foreign Missions to educate a Hindoo boy, who was to bear his name after baptism. Cynthia Cloyd in 1830 gave to foreign missions and other church work \$500.00 in money and five shares of stock in the Bank of the Valley.

A church census taken in Lexington a few years since gave the following result: Presbyterians, 899; Methodists, 713; Baptists, 350; Episcopalians, 198; Roman Catholics, forty-two; Associate Reformed Presbyterians, twenty-eight; Lutherans, twenty-three; Mormons, eighteen; Jews, sixteen; other denominations, ten; no preference, thirty; total, 2,327. Perhaps the tally for the Presbyterians and the Methodists at the county seat fairly indicates their proportions for the county in general. With respect to the

Baptists and Episcopalians, it would appear to exceed the proportion. At all events, a vast majority of the church members of this county are of the four communions above named.

The Methodist Church

Methodism began as a society within the Church of England, and for the up building of a higher type of religious character than was commonly found in the England of the eighteenth century. When the war of the Revolution came on, the Methodists of America were as yet almost insignificant in point of number. Their leaders took the unwise course of urging them not to uphold American independence, and in this way a reproach little deserved was cast upon the society. American Methodism took its stand as an independent church in 1784. To its flexible itinerant system and its adaptability to frontier conditions are due its wonderful progress.

The first Methodists to preach in the Valley of Virginia were John Haggerty and Richard Owen, who came about 1770. They do not seem to have penetrated as far as Rockbridge, and we have no definite mention of a Methodist preacher of any sort until 1793, when William Craven, a stonemason and also a local preacher, came from Rockingham to build the stone academy on Mulberry Hill. But in the *Gazette for 1873* we are told that John Burgess and his large family were the first Methodists in Lexington. They came in 1823, and the first Methodist sermon at the county seat was preached in the Burgess home. A plain frame church soon appeared, and Presbyterians and others assisted in building it. About this time John Sheltman and his bevy of rosy-cheeked daughters came from Rockingham. The first meeting house proving too small, a brick building—later occupied by colored Methodists—was built in the south side of the town. A larger one was then put up on Jefferson Street. The cornerstone of the present church was laid August 21, 1890. The congregation in Lexington was at first a part of a circuit. It is the mother church of Methodism in Rockbridge. Previous to the war of 1861, the Methodist Church was in some disfavor in this county because of its anti-slavery leaning. The formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church South was little felt in Rockbridge for some time, and there is still a congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Buffalo District. Otherwise, the white Methodists of Rockbridge are of the Southern branch. In 1855 we hear of the Rockbridge Bible Society, which met in the Methodist Church of Lexington.

The Baptist Church

The oldest Baptist church in the Augusta Association is Neriah, about five miles from Lexington. It dates from 1816. The Baptist church of Lexington was organized May 9, 1841, by a council of three ministers—Cornelius Tyree, William Margrave, and James Remley—and sixteen constituent members, nine of whom were of the Jordan connection. Colonel John Jordan may be regarded as the founder of this church, and he was one of its first deacons. Cornelius Tyree, the first pastor, was followed by seventeen others. The first Sunday school superintendent was Professor George E. Dabney, who became a member in 1843. The first member to be received into fellowship was Milton, a negro, and so far as known, he was the first person ever baptized in Lexington by a local Baptist pastor. He was a deacon for the colored membership, and seems to have been the Milton Smith who was the first pastor of the colored congregation after its separation from the white in 1867. Until 1866 the pastor of the Lexington church divided his time with other congregations. The house of worship built on Nelson Street has been continuously in use, though with some enlargement. Since this book was undertaken, a new, modern, and commodious house of worship has been in course of erection on Main Street. Since 1876 the congregation has been a member of the Augusta Association. In 1867 the colored members, excepting one woman, were granted letters of dismission to organize a church of their own, which took effect September 22, 1867, as the Lexington African Baptist Church. The congregation has prospered. Its large building cost \$25,000, and in 1918 an organ was installed at an expense of \$2,000.

The Episcopal Church

There was a Church of England party in Ulster, and it had an influential following in Augusta. Thomas Lewis, the founder of the Augusta settlement, was a churchman. A house of worship at Staunton was completed in 1763, and in it was held in 1781 a session of the Virginia Legislature. In 1757 there was a "chapel of care" in the Forks of James, and Sampson Mathews drew a stipend as reader. In that year his services were discontinued, because of the number of people who had fled the locality in consequence of Indian alarms. We have no information where this chapel stood, but it must have been in the far south of the county or even within the Botetourt line. Possibly it was the "Fork meeting house" to which a road from

Edmondson's mill was ordered in 1753. In 1804 John Cowman and Molly, his wife, deeded one and three-fourths acres on Walker's Creek to the trustees of the Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations, each to have equal use and benefit. There seems already to have been a house on the lot. The property was sold in 1828 to James McChesney. The first Episcopal church in Lexington was built a little prior to 1845, and has been superseded by the handsome Lee Memorial church in a corner of the University campus.

Rural Churches

In Lexington District, outside the limits of the county seat, are Poplar Hill and Liberty Hall Presbyterian churches, both of very recent organization. In Buffalo District are the Presbyterian and Methodist churches of Collierstown, both of brick. The former was organized in 1843, the latter about 1850. Another early Methodist church is the North Buffalo. At Rapp's Mill is a union church used chiefly by the Methodists. The first building here was erected about 1830. Oakdale Baptist church was not organized until about 1916. At Hamilton's schoolhouse there has been preaching about a century. The building was given by Robert Hamilton for the free use of all denominations. The carpenter work was done by the father of Governor Letcher. In Kerr's Creek District are Kerr's Creek and Chestnut Grove Presbyterian churches, the first organized 1845, the second, 1910. Ebenezer is a house of worship of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, and Bethany, of the Lutherans. The Methodists and Baptists have each a church in the district, but there has been no organization of the Church of the Brethren for more than 30 years. In Natural Bridge District are 13 church buildings. At Glasgow and Glenwood are Presbyterian churches. Broad Creek is Associate Reformed Presbyterian. The Episcopalians have St. Johns, Trinity, and High Bridge, the first at Glasgow, the second at Natural Bridge Station. The Baptists have churches at Glasgow and Natural Bridge, and at Glasgow and Buffalo Forge are two others for the colored people. The Methodist churches are Elliott's Mill, Wesley Chapel, Mount Zion, and Beth Heron, the last named being at Natural Bridge Station. At Gilmore's Mill is a union church. We have no report for the other districts of the county.

A modern custom that is well nigh universal is to inter the dead in public and church cemeteries. The private burial grounds have fallen into disuse and sometimes into great neglect. A resident of Kerr's Creek tells us he knows nearly 40 of these in that district alone.

(Source: The History of Rockbridge County, Virginia, By Olen Morton, Publ. 1920. Transcribed by Andrea Stawski Pack)