

# Baptist and Methodist in Old Murphy-Town

by Wally Avett, 4-6-2017. Published in Cherokee Scout.

Freedom of religion was one of the founding fathers' bedrock beliefs.

I went to high school at a rural crossroads in the Yadkin River country mid-state N.C. Freedom of religious choice meant you were completely free to be either Baptist or Methodist, both large structures within 100 yards of the blinking traffic light .

Knowing I was joking, I still repeated many times as an adult that religious freedom was your personal choice to be Baptist or Methodist. One of my companions, born a Presbyterian and converted to Mormonism, did not laugh at all and scolded me for saying it.

Nevertheless, in many Southern towns the two most imposing churches downtown were First Baptist and First Methodist. White columns, red brick, beautiful traditional stained-glass windows.

Murphy was no exception, had them both just off the public square, well within sight of the only traffic light in town.

## EARLY BAPTIST ACTIVITY

The Baptist congregation here was formed about 1840, two years after the removal of the Cherokee Indians from this area. N.C. assumed ownership of the land, surveying began and Murphy was planned, it didn't just happen. Which is why the downtown streets are 100 feet wide, including sidewalks, from storefront across to storefront.

At the Register of Deeds office, June of 1845, it was recorded that the Baptists had purchased four acres on McClelland Street (the "Laundry Hill" neighborhood) for "a place of worship and burying ground." The cemetery there is quite visible, the small wooden church long gone.

Sixteen years later, 1861, the Civil War broke out and wrecked church activities, congregations torn between loyalty to North or South. The Murphy Baptists suffered as well, the congregation dwindling down to just one member.

After the War it was rebuilt, sometimes worshipping once a month at the brick Harshaw Chapel provided by a Methodist benefactor.

The Baptists finished building their fine new two-story brick church diagonally across from the marble Courthouse in 1927, with much fanfare and civic pride, corner of Central and Peachtree streets.

## EARLY METHODISTS

Methodists here met in various wooden buildings until Joshua Harshaw, a wealthy planter, donated the first brick building in the county a few years after the Civil War.

Nationally, the denomination had split over slavery. Harshaw was a slave owner, was thought to have used slave labor on the chapel and naturally gave it and the surrounding land to the Southern faction of the Methodists. Their rift was officially healed in the 1930's.

Our First United Methodist Church cornerstone is dated 1922, when initial construction was done.

However it took longer to finish than anticipated and the SCOUT had an editorial then urging the Methodists to finish the work on the handsome building. Downtown merchants pledged a part of their profits and made a significant contribution to finishing the job.

These days tourists are sometimes seen photographing our church, asking if it is the library or courthouse. And they ask for an on-the-spot tour of the interior. The building is now 95 years old and we look forward to its centennial in 2022.

### CHANGES AND DIFFERENCES

Murphy Baptists moved into a huge new building in 1971 in the Bealtown section where a new four-lane bypass would soon be built. The old church was demolished and a new Wachovia Bank built on the site, now PNC Bank across from the Courthouse.

The Rev. Woodrow Flynn, pastor, led an impressive candle-lighted procession that wound its way from the old church site downtown across the Hiwassee River to the new church.

Saw a piece last weekend in a daily paper about a mountain mayor, who said he often had to be the tie-breaker at his Town Council meetings. Six regular members, he said, split three on one side and three on the other.

“Democrats and Republicans?” the reporter asked.

“No,” the mayor said. “Three Baptists and three Methodists and they stick together like glue. So I often end up breaking the tie.”

Baptists are more conservative, Methodists are more liberal. They argue mostly about the correct way to be baptized. Baptists favor full immersion in water, Methodists usually settle for sprinkling of water on the head.

And they argue about getting saved. When does it happen and what does it actually mean.

My Dad was a Methodist preacher and we lived once in a small Piedmont town where our 85-year-old Methodist neighbor had run the biggest grocery store in town for decades, selling food on credit and some families owed him lots of money.

He said one of his best credit customers came in one day and announced that he himself had just been saved at a Baptist revival meeting.

Furthermore, he said, he believed Jesus had forgiven him not only from his sins but from any debts in his past, like his current grocery bill.

One of my Baptist friends said it best, after we had discussed baptism, immersion vs. sprinkling.

“The way I see it,” he said. “You Methodists must be afraid of water...”

#### PHOTO CAPTION

First Baptist Church, downtown Murphy, from church bulletin of September, 1943 (Bob Hatchett Collection)

