

Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Future

A Brief History of Methodist Circuit Riders and the Spread of Methodism in Tennessee

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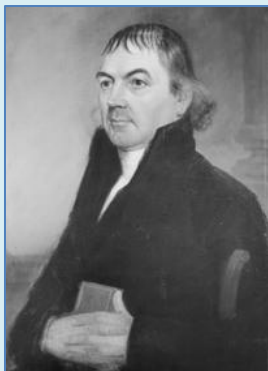
During the early 1800s, Tennessee was still in its early stages of development. As people began to establish new communities and lives in the newly created state, religious denominations began to filter into the new frontier.

For Methodists, the most effective way to grow the denomination and establish new members was to have circuit riders who traveled to different places to preach. The system of having circuits was ideally suited for Tennessee's scattered population during the 1800s.

A circuit involved as much as 500 miles and took five to six weeks for a minister to cover. The services were held in a variety of places including cabins, sheds, taverns, and even in the outdoors under trees.¹



*"A Methodist Circuit Rider on the Frontier."
Image from the United Methodist News Service*



*Portrait of Bishop William McKendree
Image from the General Commission on Archives &
History of the United Methodist Church*

As a result of the circuit riders, the Methodist movement grew and many churches were established in Tennessee. Eventually, William McKendree, Bishop of the Western Conference of the Methodist Church, and Francis Asbury devised a plan to establish a general governing organization for the denomination in Tennessee. In 1812, they officially created the Tennessee Conference of Methodists.

Today, First United Methodist Church of Tullahoma is one of many churches in the Middle Tennessee area that belong to the Tennessee Conference of Methodists organization that was established so long ago.

¹ Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee, 1777-1945* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 27.