

Early History of Methodism in Elizabethton

Over two hundred years ago, many adventuresome immigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland and the continent of Europe, trudged across the rugged mountains from the north and east into what is now east Tennessee. The only roads at that time were mere trails made by native American Indians and by early pioneer explorers. They moved south and west following streams and sheltered mountain paths. One elderly gentleman, whose forefathers were among those who came, was asked why he thought they stopped and settled here on the banks of the Watauga and Holston, in the shadow of the mighty Roan. He replied, "They found exactly what they were looking for – available land with fertile fields; springs and streams of pure water; virgin forests with plentiful timber, tall sugar-maple trees, wild turkeys and grouse; beautiful mountains with deer and small game animals. They could build their homes, raise their families, and establish their independence." Perhaps he was right, for indeed our forefathers did find all of these things here!

They were God-fearing people, and some of them, especially the English and Irish, brought with them their Methodist beliefs. Methodism, rooted in John Wesley's "Holy Club" in England, was growing in the colonies in the mid-1700's. In 1770, the name "America" first appeared in the list of John Wesley's conference appointments, when he sent two lay preachers to America. Appeals for more preachers reached John Wesley, who asked for volunteers to go to America to proclaim the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ to as many people as possible. The Reverend Francis Asbury was one of those who volunteered, and he became one of the missionaries who came to carry on extensive evangelistic work in the middle and southern colonies. They became known as "circuit riders" because they traveled from place to place on horseback, keeping in touch with their constituents of the conference which radiated from Baltimore and Philadelphia. Most of the circuit riders remained unmarried; they had no homes of their own, and few worldly comforts. They were rewarded by the spiritual zeal they generated and by the increasing number of converts.

We owe much to one particular circuit rider, Francis Asbury, who gave his life to the cause of Christ as he crossed the uncharted Appalachians more than sixty times! He is said to have ridden on horseback over 270,000 miles, keeping his rigorous schedule in spite of poor health. His detailed journal shows that he preached over 16,000 times in school houses, private cabins, meeting houses and out in the great outdoors.

Methodism Comes to Elizabethton

It was during this time of spiritual enthusiasm that the Methodist Church of Elizabethton had its beginning. The Holston Circuit was created in 1783 when a circuit rider named Jeremiah Lambert traveled the circuit. Francis Asbury tells in his journal of making several trips across this area. It was 1833 when an official Methodist Church was established by a group of faithfuls worshiping at the courthouse, and later at Duffield Academy. They eventually erected a wooden church building on Main Street in 1836. About twenty-three years later they built a brick church on First Street.