

**THE LITTLE WHITE CHURCH ON A HILL**

**A SHORT HISTORY OF  
COKES CHAPEL  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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## PROLOGUE

The roots of Cokes Chapel are deep in American history but the absolute beginning stems from John and Charles Wesley, two Church of England (Anglican) priests who unknowingly created a new church with the premise of God's love for his people. Plain and simple the Wesleys created an evangelical movement within the Church of England in mid -18<sup>th</sup> century England.

The colony of Georgia was founded in 1733 under the leadership of General James Oglethorpe as a military buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida. Within 43 years the population of Georgia grew to 25,000 whites, 14,500 blacks and uncounted Native Americans. They were settled mostly along the lower Savannah River and the Georgia low country. Settlements in Georgia rapidly grew and advanced from one river to the next. From Savannah to the Oconee, the Ocmulgee to the Flint and on to the Chattahoochee River.

In 1735 James Oglethorpe decided he had to recruit a minister-missionary troupe as he had lost his priests in what was known as the Trustee era. This new troupe consisted of three priests; John Wesley, Charles Wesley and Benjamin Ingham and a layman Charles Delamotte. They arrived in March, 1736.

Almost as soon as the Wesleys came ashore they ran afoul with Oglethorpe and some settlers. Their mission was hardly a success. They were both discouraged largely because Oglethorpe was a staunch member of the Church of England. Charles left by December, 1736. Ingham departed after a year. John was not far behind leaving in February, 1738. Only Delamotte remained but by the summer of 1738 he too departed.

During these years many denominations began to establish themselves in Georgia. The Lutherans known as the Salzburgers, Moravians, Presbyterians, Puritans, Quakers, Baptists and Jewish all came. The Africans had their own indigenous religions as well. However, less than 10% of the population up to the time of the Revolutionary War had a limited interest in any kind of religion.

After the Revolutionary War the Anglicans fell into disrepute. Americans wanted nothing whatsoever to do with anything English. The Anglicans reconstituted themselves as Episcopalians' and Methodists by the 1780's. The Methodists had a difficult time getting a foothold in Georgia because of the Wesley's opposition to slavery and having to create an infrastructure from scratch.

To solve this problem John Wesley assembled a mission group composed of Richard Whatcoat, Thomas Vasey (Vassey) led by Thomas Coke. Coke was to



*Statue of John Wesley in Savannah, Georgia*

superintend the work of Francis Asbury. Asbury had previously been dispatched to America and became an important figure in building the growing American Methodist societies.

Coke brought with him "The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America" which was written by John Wesley. He also sent hymns, psalms, liturgy and the "Articles of Religion." When they arrived in America a special conference was convened and on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1784, sixty traveling preachers were assembled in Baltimore, Maryland for this "Christmas Conference." Coke took the dais, presented his credentials and explained what had to be done. There were no dissenting votes in the assembly. Thus formed the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. In 1785 he returned to England.



*Thomas Cook*

All in all Coke made eight journeys to America before moving on to other countries to spread the "good news." Coke never came to Sharpsburg, Georgia but the little country chapel was apparently named for him on the deed when that small congregation bought the land that small log cabin stood on back in April 6, 1842. The trustees named it Cokesberry Chappell in honor of the great mission work Coke did in America and other places in the world. His final visit to America was in 1805.

It was in 1805 that the land lottery system began. It was primarily for the benefit of tough pioneers and gave a preference to the Revolutionary War Veterans. At this time the amount of land was usually about 200 acres but by the 1830's it grew to about 600 acres. This lottery system lasted until 1833. During this time the pioneers of Georgia had little participation in religion with the exception of the people of Savannah and Augusta. These early Georgians had embraced the Church of England until after the war and then wanted little to do with England. There wasn't rapprochement for the two countries until after The Great War (WWI).

The Great Awakening swept the South between 1790 and 1830. First came the Baptists and then the Methodists. They dominated the rural countryside and won the hearts and minds of the pioneers. In this period the church was the first building block of the community. Churches were the community center, social center, courthouse and anything else the pioneer society needed except for tavern and other frowned upon activities. There seems to have been a progression from arbor to log cabin to a frame structure or box church.

Because of the land lotteries and the fact the land in other states had been exhausted or depleted of nutrients a great migration began and new settlers began to flood the state of Georgia.

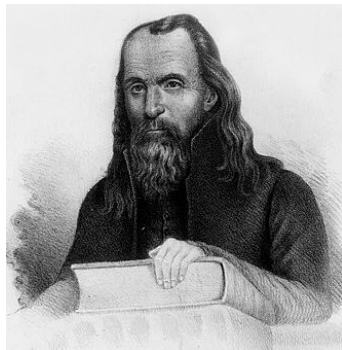
The religious groups, mainly Baptists and Methodists were often unable to provide missionaries or ministers and found life on the frontier too diffuse and disparate to create much of a presence but by the early 1800's this began to change even though Georgia was for the most part secular. During this period of the Great Awakening the Baptists and Methodists grew exponentially. Much of this was due to the circuit riding pastors. It was the Methodists who were known for these itinerant preachers. In addition to the itinerant preachers there were camp meetings which could last 3-4 days. Many times these were held on plantations. Frequently the Methodists combined the camp meeting

with the itinerant pastors. The camp meetings produced thousands of converts across Georgia.

Itinerant pastors did not necessarily live near the circuit they served. Circuits consisted of many churches, sometimes as many as eight. A circuit could be from forty to sixty miles in length. Few if any parsonages were available to them. Many only saw their families two or three days a calendar quarter. These pastors traveled over rough terrain and forded streams and rivers. There were few roads and the forests were inhabited by Indians, bears, panthers, wolves and other predators. Often times they swam across flooded streams to get to their congregations. Many of these men of faith never reached the age of thirty-five. They ate simple foods, barely enough to keep soul and body together. Often they would go twenty-four hours without any nourishment. These itinerants were rarely able to enjoy the culture of their days. They were persistent students of the Bible, carefully selected literature, the hymnbook, and the Methodist Discipline. These rules were made to be learned and obeyed.

If these itinerants were to become the shepherds of the people, they had to understand the people, their outlook on life, their thought patterns, their needs and limitations. The preachers had to make their sermons simple and meaningful messages heard and understood. Their manner of speech frequently was uninhibited and noisy and they often screamed and stamped their feet. Some had thundering voices that awed their flock. These brave and resolute men must be recognized for their great contribution, which they made in those times long past and down through the ensuing years.

The most famous eccentric itinerant preacher was the great and well known Lorenzo Dow. He was a Methodist after finally being accepted in 1798 on probation. By 1803 he was preaching in the South. He was an odd little man, with long hair, beard and



*Lorenzo Dow*

a hunched back. Just south of Mansfield, Georgia on State Route 11, is a large rock on which is a plaque which states that on that rock, in 1803, Dow preached the first "Gospel sermon" in Jasper County. He was constantly on the move, sometimes on horseback other times on foot.



*Dow's Pulpit*

Another place he preached fire and brimstone and against the evils of slavery and drunkenness was in the town of Jacksboro, Georgia located north of Statesboro on U.S. 301 at State road 24. Dow came to this wild town in 1820 or so they say. He passed out his handbills proclaiming he would preach that night at the local Methodist church. The handbills made their way to the bars and saloons in town, where the owners and patrons were not impressed. While Dow made ready for preaching that evening at the home of fellow Methodist Seaborn Goodall, the town ruffians were also making ready. The church bell was ringing calling the good citizens of Jacksonboro (few that there were) to the meeting. But it was also a signal to the town hooligans the time was right.

As Dow began to preach his sermon, a rowdy crowd gathered outside and began yelling, throwing rock and bricks through the church windows, and shooting pistols in the air. After his sermon, an angry Dow followed the crowd into the local saloon where he

grabbed an iron tool and split open barrel of whiskey. The crowd stared at the amber liquid as it covered the floor. They then began to beat the living daylights out of Dow. Luckily, Seaborn Goodall entered the saloon, seized Dow and took him back to the safety of his home.

The next morning, Lorenzo Dow left town crying, "Repent, Brethren, Repent," at the top of his lungs. An incensed crowd pelted him with tomatoes and rotten eggs. Supposedly Dow then broke open another cask of whiskey. When he reached the bridge at Beaver Creek Dam he removed his shoes and shook the dust of Jacksonboro off his feet. He then placed a curse upon the town, claiming that God would surely bring his vengeance upon the place the same as He had done for Sodom and Gomorrah. The crowd that had followed him out of town laughed in his face.

A short time had passed when the good citizens realized that Lorenzo Dow's curse was no joke. Windstorms came up suddenly, blowing the rooves off many local buildings. Others were destroyed by mysterious fires. Beaver Dam Creek, had always been a docile stream, suddenly became prone to flash floods and swept away entire houses. Slowly the town began to disappear, with the exception of Seaborn Goodall's home. Even General Sherman passed through on his march to the sea, destroying everything except Seaborn Goodall's house which was spared.<sup>1</sup>

Everywhere he went he attracted large crowds to his thundering sermons. "...Dow's public speaking mannerisms were like nothing ever seen before among the typically conservative church goers of the time. He shouted, he screamed, he cried, he begged, he flattered, he insulted, he challenged people and their beliefs. He told stories and made jokes. It is recorded that Lorenzo Dow often preached before open-air assemblies of 10,000 people or more and held the audiences spellbound..."<sup>2</sup> It was claimed that he preached to more people than anyone else and he was an important figure in the Second Great Awakening. His autobiography was the second best-selling book in the United States, surpassed by the Bible. Not all itinerant preachers were as dynamic as Dow but you can rest assured that they thundered out their message.



*Seaborn Goodall House*

Headstone symbols for Methodist pastors are a bronze boss with a preacher on horseback. There are six in the cemetery of Cokes Chapel.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor, The , The Jacksonborough Curse, 27 April 2008

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia contributors, 'Lorenzo Dow' Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, 18 June 2011