

A Brief Historical Account

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MOCKSVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA
~ 1767 - 2017 ~

EARLY YEARS

First Presbyterian Church traces its roots to a small log meetinghouse adjacent to Joppa Cemetery in the “Forks of the Yadkin,” just a few miles from present-day downtown Mocksville. The first official mention of this group of worshippers can be found in the meeting minutes of the Synod of Philadelphia and New York from May 1767, when the congregation submitted a request for a supply minister. However, they could have been gathering for worship as early as January 1765, when Daniel Boone’s father, Squire Boone, was buried in the nearby cemetery.

In May 1789, records refer to the church as Joppa – a Biblical word meaning beautiful – for the first time. Three years later, the congregation received its first permanent pastor, the Rev. J.D. Kilpatrick. A frame building replaced the original log church in 1793.

The church was without a pastor for 30 years, during which time it was served irregularly by itinerant ministers and catechists. In November 1827, the Rev. William A. Hall came to serve Joppa and Unity churches. Sessional records, which began in 1832, show a membership of 29. From 1832-35, 49 communicants were added, reflecting the evangelistic zeal of Mr. Hall and the growth of Mocksville, the new county seat of Davie, created in 1836.

MOVE TO MOCKSVILLE

The minutes of the Session are scant and do not mention the Joppa congregation moving to Mocksville, probably in 1834. A letter written by the Rev. S. Milton Frost in 1899 states that when the church moved, “the children and young people met early at the house of Rev. W.A. Hall ... formed in line two by two, and marched to the new church ... singing ‘Come ye that love the Lord.’” It is believed that a vacant house near the old brick schoolhouse building at 537 Salisbury Street served as a temporary church. Tradition tells that the schoolhouse was also used by the church.

In 1840 an imposing brick sanctuary with a pleasing interior was erected on the present site. This era also witnessed the beginning of Sunday School, the election of deacons, and the collection of offerings for missions and benevolent causes.

After the Civil War, many of the church’s African-American members left to establish what is now Second Presbyterian Church. Membership at Joppa dropped from 59 to 30. The next year, in 1868, the name of the church was changed from Joppa to Mocksville Presbyterian Church.

GROWTH & PROGRESS

The church grew steadily during the first half of the 20th century, with membership doubling to 112 between 1900 and 1945. The present sanctuary, standing on the 1840 foundation stones, was built in 1905. At the same time, longtime members T.B. and Jessie Bailey donated the funds to build the Bailey Sunday School Annex, named in memory of their three daughters, Sarah, Evelyn and Annie. In 1928 a frame fellowship building, the “Hut,” was built on the site of the present Fellowship Hall.

The post-World War II years witnessed a tide of progress in Mocksville and the surrounding area. This renaissance impacted the church, with membership, financial giving and community involvement accelerating rapidly during the tenures of the Revs. E.H. Gartrell (1947-50) and Paul H. Richards (1951-57). During Mr. Richards’ ministry, the present manse and the educational building were built, and preliminary plans were begun for the renovation of the sanctuary. A rotation plan for deacons became effective, and midweek prayer services were scheduled. The Sunday School, choir, and some programs and organizations were restructured and/or begun.

The Rev. William F. Long became pastor and choir director of the church Jan. 1, 1958. The renovation of the sanctuary and the chancel-area addition were completed the same year, and renovations were made to the Hut. An Outreach Committee functioned, and the congregation voted to adopt a rotation plan for elders. A significant development in the benevolent program of the church began in 1959 when the congregation voted to assume one-third salary support for a missionary couple. Today, the church designates a yearly missions offering toward the support of Les and Cindy Morgan in Bangladesh and Leisa Wagstaff in South Sudan.

In 1962 the Rev. James E. Ratchford was installed as pastor. During Mr. Ratchford's ministry, a children's message became part of the Sunday worship service, an evening fellowship for grades 4-6 was organized, and a Maundy Thursday Communion Service and the receiving of new communicant members became part of the Holy Week services. For several months in 1963-64, the church sponsored a Cuban refugee couple. In 1967, a spacious Fellowship Hall was built to replace the Hut.

First Presbyterian celebrated its 200th anniversary in 1967 with a week of special worship services, a historical pageant, and dinner on the grounds, among other activities. Four of the five living former pastors participated in the celebration, including the Revs. W.I. Howell (1932-35), W.C. Cooper (1936-43), Paul H. Richards (1951-57), and William F. Long (1958-62).

THE RICHARDSON YEARS

In January 1970, the Rev. Leland A. Richardson became pastor of First Presbyterian. His ministry represented more than a quarter-century of growth and progress for the church and its total program of Christian witness. Membership and financial giving increased, the physical building was updated and improved, and world and local mission work were prioritized.

In 1972 the church purchased a custom-built pipe organ for the sanctuary. The console was later moved to the left side of the chancel area to provide room for enlarging the choir seating area. Thirty years later, the console and piano were moved again, this time to the right side of the chancel, to allow the choir seating to be repositioned facing the congregation.

The sanctuary was air conditioned in 1977, and soon afterward pew cushions were purchased and the first sound system installed. A Capital Funds Campaign initiated in 1987 was used for redecorating Sunday School facilities, updating lighting and air conditioning, and renovating spaces for a new office and choir room.

Several changes were made in church leadership during Mr. Richardson's tenure, as well. In 1972, Ethel Mando became the first woman to be voted into church office. The congregation adopted the Unicameral System and discontinued the Board of Deacons in 1975.

In 1980, the congregation sponsored a young Laotian refugee couple and their baby daughter, providing them a furnished home and any assistance they needed to start a new life in the United States. Four years later, the church sponsored a Cambodian family with four small children, and in 1986 and 1987 assisted two more families.

Continuing the church's involvement in missions, the congregation joined with several area churches in 1990 to help electrify and repair a small hospital in Mwandia, Zambia. First Presbyterian raised about \$10,000 for supplies, and later raised \$12,000 to send four members – Terry and Sandra Johnson, Joe Hemrick, and Sandie Greene – to work on the hospital. In August 1992 the congregation assisted Terry Johnson and Joe Hemrick to return to Mwandia to plan for an additional project.

First Presbyterian Church celebrated its 225th anniversary in October 1992 with special worship services, receptions, a historical pageant, the renovation of the Church Parlor, and the publication of a cookbook. Several former ministers and members of Presbytery participated in the activities, including the Revs. William Long, Leland Richardson and Paul Richards; General Presbyter John M. Handley; and Ruling Elder Price H. Gwynn, former moderator of the General Assembly.

At the eleven o'clock worship service on Jan. 19, 1997, the Rev. Leland A. Richardson announced that he was retiring from active ministry effective June 30. His 27-year pastorate of First Presbyterian Church, the longest in

its history, had been a successful and rewarding experience for him and the congregation, as well as the community.

ENTERING THE 21ST CENTURY

After Mr. Richardson's retirement, the pulpit was filled by interim ministers, including the Revs. Jamie B. Pharr and William F. Long. The Rev. Neal Carter became the 24th permanent pastor of First Presbyterian Church in August 1998. In 1999, the first phase of a Capital Funds Campaign resulted in a new roof on the fellowship hall, an updated sound system, new paint and carpeting in the sanctuary and a major overhaul of the pipe organ. The second phase, completed in 2002, added an elevator and bathrooms. An after-school tutoring program in conjunction with Mocksville Elementary School began in 2000. Also that year, Mr. Richardson was honored with the title of "Pastor Emeritus."

Mr. Carter left the church in June 2004 for a new call in Laurinburg, N.C. The Rev. Kurt Johnston served as interim pastor from September 2004 until November 2006. This period saw increased activity in the church's mission work, with a return trip to Mwandí, two Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in Alabama and Mississippi, and countless local deeds performed by various members of the congregation. In addition, the church was instrumental in the creation of the Advocacy Center of Davie County. The congregation continues to support the organization today with monthly financial donations and the use of office space in the manse.

The Rev. Paul Seelman was installed as pastor of First Presbyterian in November 2006. In 2008, the church began hosting monthly community breakfasts, with proceeds going to local outreach programs and charities. The same year, First Presbyterian Church Preschool was established, offering a half-day program for children ages 3 through 5 years old. Mission trips were made by members to South Dakota and Louisiana. The church also witnessed in 2008 the dedication of the Rev. Leland A. Richardson Library and Media Center, located on the ground floor near the pastor's study.

PRESENT DAY

The Rev. Dana Fruits was hired as the church's interim pastor in October 2011. She held that role until September 2013, at which time she became the first female permanent pastor in the history of First Presbyterian Church. During her pastorate, the church has continued its Christian witness through worship, stewardship, outreach and fellowship.

An ongoing Capital Funds Campaign has brought several changes to the physical plant in the past three years, including the installation of a new organ console, renovation of the fellowship hall kitchen, replacement of the fellowship hall roof, and other roof repairs. In addition, the congregation recently dedicated a Sonata Digital Carillon Bell System, which was given by Jack and Dorothy Corriher in memory of Dorothy's late husband, Joe Hemrick. Now the beautiful chimes in the bell tower share the love of Jesus with our community. The congregation continues to extend a helping hand to numerous charitable and civic-minded organizations through monthly community breakfasts, the provision of office space in the manse for the Advocacy Center of Davie County and Habitat for Humanity, and other service projects.

We have also witnessed spiritual and educational growth within our church over the past few years. There are now weekly Bible studies and prayer groups, as well as a Milestones Ministry program for children and youth. The Chancel Choir and Bells of Praise continue to add inspirational music to our worship service. Shepherd teams have been developed so that every member of the congregation is connected to an elder on the Session.

To coincide with the church's 250th anniversary, the Session approved a long-term mission project in conjunction with Living Waters for the World. Using generous contributions from the congregation, six church members recently attended training in Oxford, Mississippi, to learn how to install water filtration systems. This same team will go overseas – possibly to the Yucatan – to bring clean water to those who need it. So as our forebears came across the ocean and settled along the Yadkin River, the congregation of First Presbyterian will continue to provide water, the source of all life, to others. As Jesus said in John 4:13, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst."

This then is a brief written account of the First Presbyterian Church of Mocksville from 1767 to 2017. It tells of the tangibles, the recorded, the recognizable, and the remembered, of which we can in humility be truly proud. Let the unwritten account – deep within our hearts – remember that the fellowship, the love, the sharing and caring, the inner satisfaction, the prayers, and the desire to be better servants of Christ willed and undergirded the recorded accomplishments. May this glance in retrospect serve to inspire us to greater service so that we may ever declare with the Psalmist: “Truly God hath been good unto this people.”

This brief history was written by James W. Wall and Paul Beaver. It was compiled using Mr. Wall's “History of the First Presbyterian Church of Mocksville,” first published in 1963 and updated in 1997. Copies are available in the church library, as well as the Davie County Public Library.