

THE HISTORY OF FAIRVIEW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Fairview, the oldest Presbyterian Church in Greenville County was founded in 1786 and received into South Carolina Presbytery in 1787. Its history is a chapter of pure Americana. Its founders, refugees from religious persecution, sought and won for themselves and others that precious freedom passed down as a priceless heritage. Fairview Church was organized the same year in which the legislature of South Carolina established Greenville District on March 22, 1786 and only two years after an office for the sale of land in this northwest portion of the state was opened at Pendleton Court House. Colonel S. S. Crittenden in his *Greenville Century Book* says:

Owing to its exposed situation and being still in Indian territory there were few settlements in this county previous to the Revolutionary War. . . . The first settlements were naturally in the eastern part of the county. Among these was one at Fairview where several families of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians located. They soon built up a flourishing colony in that beautiful section which still is in a great measure owned and inhabited by their descendants.

Therefore this was an organized church and community more than a decade before the village of Pleasantburg, destined to become the city of Greenville, was established and one decade after the first permanent settlement by a white man, Richard Pearis, was made at that site.

Often called the "Mother of Presbyterianism" in Greenville County, Fairview is so named for a gray stone church over-grown with ivy on the crest of a hill overlooking a beautiful landscape of hill and dale in County Antrim, Ireland. The exiled Scots so loved this fair spot where they found brief refuge from persecution that they called this church by the same name.

The first trustees of Fairview Church were so constituted by an act of the South Carolina General Assembly ratified December 18, 1844, declared to be "A body politic whose duties it shall be to take charge of and management of lands, buildings, and other temporalities." They were John T. Peden, John M. Harrison, Alexander W. Peden, Jeremiah Hopkins, and James Woodside and

evidently were responsible for planning and erecting this house of worship.

However, in the years before the creation of the trustees, the church had become an owner of land and buildings. Page 1, Book A of deeds registered in Greenville County Court House shows as its first entry 640 acres of land on Reedy River acquired by General Richard Winn in 1784 and known as the Great Cane Brake where in December 1776 the only battle of the American Revolution fought in this area took place. From the oldest church record extant dated 1814, a summary of the founding and the events of years between 1786 and 1814 is given by Anthony Savage, clerk of the session, in the beautiful script and style of the time. It was found among his personal writings after his death and preserved by another scholarly clerk, James Dunbar. It follows:

Fairview Church situated in Greenville District South Carolina 19 miles from the seat of Justice and 3 miles from the Fork Shoals East side of Reedy River 200 miles from Charleston was organized in the year 1786 by five families that emmigrated from Nazareth Spartanburg District and State aforesaid Viz: John Peden, James Alexander, Samuel Peden, David Peden and James Nesbit with their families. Those five families erected the first house of worship of God perhaps in the up-country and in the vicinity of the present church. This was the voluntary act of those five individuals above mentioned it now appears as if the object was to wait on the true God in the solemnity of worship in his own Sanctuary. . . . No record is to be found of the above transaction nor for the years afterwards. (To this date 1814) The above named Mr. Alexander and his wife are still in being and are capable of furnishing us with a correct statement of these facts. In the course of the next year after 1786 their numbers were increased viz by John Alexander, David Morton, and James Alexander, Sr., the father of the above named Alexander. They were likewise from Nazareth in Spartanburg District.

James Alexander Sr., John Peden, John Alexander and Samuel Peden were duly elected to the office of Ruling Elder. The Reverend McCosh was the first stated preacher, he was a native of Ireland. . . . Here we have given a brief sketch of the origin of Fairview Church. We have suffered greatly from emmigration our church has been kept up chiefly by the population around it for twenty-five years.

The above is a true copy of that paper found at the decease of Mr. Savage and known to be written by himself,

Signed

James Dunbar
Clerk of Session

1814

The story of the founding is also told by the greatest historian yet produced among the descendants of the first families, Miss Eleanor M. Hewell, in her book *Pedens of America* published in 1900:

In the fall of 1785 came the Peden brothers John, Samuel and David with their nephew James Alexander and their good friend James Nesbit; their wives, little ones and a few possessions left by the fortunes of war to the new and untried wilderness of what is now Fairview Township, Greenville County, South Carolina. Each holding a grant or deed to the newly acquired lands. The younger men acted as guides through the trackless woods, blazing a trail for the others to follow. After leaving the old historic Blackstock road and crossing the old boundary line on Enoree River they followed an Indian trail for awhile then struck out boldly westward. Night-fall found them footsore and weary beside a bold spring of ice-cold water issuing from among the rocks and roots of three immense tulip or poplar trees. . . . Here in this green spot the tired guides kindled the first campfire to have a cheery blaze when the others should come up the stream. . . . Before they allowed themselves to partake of food, or indulge in rest, they retired apart on the eastern hillside joined hands in solemn covenant with God and each other, after a fervent prayer they repeated a psalm and singing "Old Hundredth", they went down to camp.

After a simple meal of corn porridge known as mush and drinking it with new milk hastily drawn from the few cows and quickly cooled in jugs set in the limpid waters of the spring. They had a prayer, sang a hymn and laid them down to sleep under the star studded canopy of Heaven.

It is worthy of record that a house of worship was built and a church organized the same year that the settlement was made. The rude temple erected under such circumstances is a testimony to their religious faith and zeal. The devout spirit coming down

from Culdee to Covenanter to Presbyterian, passing through ordeals of blood, fire, and death itself.

Four church buildings have stood on this land since 1786, all on that portion, of the now sixteen and one half acres owned by the church, which was donated by James Alexander, Sr., "... who gave the land for church and school buildings." The first and second buildings were built of logs, the third of brick molded and burned by slave labor on his plantation. In a hollow dell between his home and the church a few visible remains of the burning could be seen in 1900. This generous benefactor of the church was the father of Major John Alexander of the famous Spartan Regiment under General Daniel Morgan, as were four Peden brothers and David Morton — who rest together in the churchyard here at Fairview.

Only one brief statement found in the church record concerns the third building dated August 11, 1818, and reading, "About this time our new meeting house is finished and dedicated by Reverend Mr. Carter." The brick church as described by Miss Hewell was

... a square brick building with a heavy roof and an outside stairway to the slave gallery. The great doors at either end were mullioned, the windows were high on the walls and had wooden shutters and even in the coldest weather stood open. As the building had no means of heating, there was some shivering done. The aged and infirm had rocks heated in the fireplaces of the nearby session house and well-wrapped in blankets or woolen coverlets to keep their feet warm during the long service. It was the good fortune of some to possess soapstones. To complain of being cold was considered a weakness bordering on crime as the sermons were supposed to keep the congregation warm.

These sermons were long never less than one hour, oftener two, for in early days preaching was rare therefore of great value.

There was usually an intermission of a few hours at noon spent under the great trees in summer, around hospitable tables; in winter or inclement weather in the old log church or the session house, a few rods away.

An interesting feature of this old brick church was the pulpit described by Miss Hewell as being a high boxed-up pulpit, so

small and high with steps so steep and narrow that visiting minister once gave great offense by remarking that "Satan must have designed this pulpit." About halfway down was a smaller box known as the clerk's place and from this perch he "lined out" the psalms and hymns for the congregation to follow his lead in singing. The last known singing clerk was Captain Moses T. Fowler who died in 1889.

This, the fourth and present building was completed in 1858. As noted on the memorial upon these walls — "this building was erected principally by a legacy left in his will of 1848 by David Morton."

He was born in County Antrim, Ireland in 1760, a Revolutionary soldier of the Spartan regiment under Daniel Morgan and later under the partisan leaders. David Morton was described as a strong and noble character of a stern age. His old homestead was located near the source of South Raeburn Creek. A small tract of land was given by him for a Negro church, Bethlehem, now on the old Simpsonville to Fountain Inn road. He was an elder in the church at Fairview and a worthy member of the session until his death. Without bodily heirs, he left a handsome estate to be divided between this church and foreign missions. Much of the timber used in this building was cut from the choicest timbers on his plantation.

"He was a liberal soul who devised liberal things."

This writer was much impressed by the fact that the church records of this period placed such definite emphasis on Spiritual matters that material details were almost totally excluded. For example, the only reference to a building committee to be found was the statement dated May 7, 1858, in which the session was asked to meet "that the building committee might report through Mr. A. Thompson." At this time the church officers listed Alexander Thompson as an elder and is probably the aforementioned. One other reference to the building committee was "The session earnestly invites the congregation to assemble or meet at the new church on Saturday before the next day of worship to receive the keys of the new church edifice from the hands of the building committee." The actual date of the completion of the building can be established from the personal diary of the pastor at that time, Reverend Clark Berry Stewart, who wrote on February 5,

1858: "Captain Gault and company have finished the new church at Fairview."

F. D. Jones and H. W. Mills in the *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* says: "The above building was erected by Mr. Robert Wham, afterwards an elder in the same, and its fine appearance and almost faultless preservation today [1925] stands as a monument to his judgment of material to be used and honesty as a workman."

An interesting anecdote is handed down in the family of the builder Captain James Gault, a native of Ireland, a member of this church and buried in its churchyard, to the effect that he did not attend the first service held in the new building "for fear the slave galleries would collapse."

The dedicatory service was held May 15, 1858, by the Reverend David Humphreys assisted by Reverend E. T. Buist.

From its beginning Fairview Church has stimulated the growth of Presbyterianism both in this area and the southeast. As Miss Hewell wrote of this process:

The congregation of Fairview has always been a homogeneous body. Those who first composed it . . . and those . . . added to it from time to time belonging to a common ancestry having the same faith and customs. It is the natural almost uninterrupted growth of unmixed Scotch-Presbyterian Church on American soil. It has the proud distinction of being the Mother of Presbyterianism in Greenville County and of many churches in other states.

These include Fountain Inn, Lickville, New Harmony, Piedmont, Reedy River, Smyrna of Dekalb, Mississippi, and Fairview of Lawrenceville, Georgia. The church record February 13th, 1847, contains a significant entry: "Regularly dismissed Mr. John and Mary Adams to unite with a new church to be organized at Greenville Village." This was to become the First Presbyterian Church of Greenville, South Carolina.

Beginning in 1786 with a communicant list of five families, the records list in 1860 129 white and 19 colored members. In 1888, the membership totals 146, and, according to the present clerk of the session, Mr. John B. Armstrong, the present total list as 173.

The first Sunday School, or Bible class, as then called, was organized in 1855 with forty members. To date it has been served by only four superintendents — Reverend C. B. Stewart, his son Dr. Henry Boardman Stewart who served sixty-three years, Henry Burwell Peden, and the present Scipio Peden.

Fairview is one of the very few churches, if there are others, whose old Scotch customs instituted in the early days are still partly observed. One of these is the practice of sitting on benches around long tables, more than a century old, to partake of Holy Communion. While an invitation hymn is being sung, the congregation takes seats at the table to receive bread and wine from the hands of the elders. The silver goblets, now replaced by individual glasses, were the gift of Mrs. John Stennis. The custom of issuing tokens — small, coin-like, metal pieces — after a communicant satisfactorily answered probing questions asked by the elders as to his spiritual condition was discontinued after 1836. Sad to relate, none remain in possession of a member today. Deacons still pass, to receive the tithes and offerings, a receptacle on the end of a long slender rod as in the Kirks of old Scotland.

The rock-walled churchyard is the hallowed resting place of many generations. The earliest legible inscription being that of Elizabeth Alexander who died in 1797. Seven soldiers of the American Revolution and sixty who served in the War Between the States, along with those of other wars, are buried here. A tall marble shaft erected to the memory of John and Peggy Peden, founders of the Pedens of America, bears the palmetto tree symbol of the state of South Carolina encircled by the Scotch thistle and the Shamrock. Two unusual memorials donated by the faithful superintendent of the Sunday School and long time country doctor, H. B. Stewart, are: "In memory of the faithful slaves who are buried here and elsewhere in unmarked graves throughout our sunny Southland," and the other, "To the memory of the family physician and the wives of these physicians who keep the home fires burning while the doctor is away on his mission of mercy." He now rests from his labors bere with his father, the Reverend Clark Berry Stewart, whose memory is honored on the above tablet. One lonely stone is that of Edward Flannegan, a native of Fernagh, Ireland, who left no known living relative. He was Fairview's man of mystery, a teacher of the country school and by some believed to be connected with Marshal Ney. His secret died

with him among new found friends. A list of family names of those buried in this sacred spot reads like the roster of Greenville's past and present — Cely, Harrison, Woodside, Goldsmith, Anderson, Templeton, Ramsay, Stall, Adams, Baker, and Thomason.

The first record of the rock wall which surrounds it is a contract for its building by the trustees with James E. Savage dated August 19, 1850, and giving precise dimensions and directions for its building. A similar contract in 1897 was made with William Wham to enlarge the area. The last addition to these walls was made in 1933. The iron gates were the gift of Captain David D. Peden of Houston, Texas.

The statements concerning the ministers and faithful officers through the years are brief due to the complete listing in the 1960 edition of *Pedens of America* to be found in the Greenville County Library and in the homes over the entire area. The first sermon preached here was by Reverend Samuel Edmundson of Virginia who helped organize the church and went on to do the same elsewhere. Reverend John McCosh, native of Ireland, was the first pastor of the flock. Reverend Clark B. Stewart preached here for thirty years from 1846-1884 which is said in Jones *History of Presbyterian Church*, "to embrace the era of greatest church enterprise." He served eighteen years as stated supply and twelve as pastor. During the years of the War Between the States, he was given leave to serve as chaplain in the famous Hampton Legion of South Carolina, ministering to the sick and wounded, bringing home the dead to be buried, and the sick to be nursed back to life among friends.

For the first time in a number of years, Fairview again has a resident, full-time pastor, Reverend Davis Davies who lives in the recently completed manse near the church. We pray for Fairview to renew the zeal of the founding fathers and go forward to greater heights of spiritual influence.

The session house of early days was a smaller adjacent building used for the planning and conducting of meetings of the elders of the church whose jurisdiction included many moral matters now left to the civil court. It was the first school building in this community. The first school was said to be taught under the spreading branches of the giant oaks of Mrs. Jane P. McDowell by a friend of the Mortons and Morrows.

Since the church has always held a high standard of education for its clergy, it is understandable that many of the ministers were also teachers. Anthony Savage, among the earliest settlers, came as a teacher as did his successor as clerk of the session, James Dunbar — both natives of Ireland. Later the Rev. Hyde, Rev. Clark B. Stewart, Rev. Austin, and Rev. John L. Kennedy taught as did "not a few excellent women."

In addition to the unique record of having had only four Sunday School superintendents since 1855, there have been only four sextons during the entire record of that office: James Savage, John W. Woodside, James McDowell, and the present one, Walter Henderson, who has been sexton, custodian, janitor. I prefer the title, in this case particularly, of Keeper of the Keys, for the incredible term of sixty-one years of loyal and faithful service.

In conclusion, two quotations seem appropriate: Henry W. Longfellow's oft quoted lines in his immortal "Psalm of Life," "Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime and departing leave behind us footprints on the sands of time" and, from the Source of all truth, a verse from the ninetyeth Psalm, "We spend our years as a tale that is told." The tale that is told of Fairview, its founding by seekers of peace from hardships unspeakable, and persecutions unthinkable unjust, by faithful yet humble people who often, unlike the great, left no visible footprints on the sands of time, yet did leave a truly great heritage of faith that standing the tests of time reaches out in unseen influence to many homes, churches, and places of government. May that influence never be other than good. The sons and daughters of Fairview have a Godly heritage.

"Lord, Thou has been our dwelling place in all generations."

SOURCES

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