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Bethel Church marks 200th year

By FRANCES GLENN

BETHEL — Bethel Presbyterian Church in York County was founded in 1764 by Scotch-Irish emigrants who came to this country in search of freedom of worship. These people were Scots who had brought back to Ireland from Caledonia a pure faith and Scriptural Church polity which their forefathers believed in — Presbyterians who had a sense of right and hatred of oppression. When they moved southward from Pennsylvania to find suitable places to settle, the fertile region between the Yadkin and Catawba rivers attracted many.

Bethel Church is 200 years old, 12 years older than the signing of the independence of the United States and was organized by Rev. William Richardson, pastor of "The Waxhaws" in Lancaster County, who had engaged in missionary work in this region. The house is a frame building painted white situated five miles east of Clover.

The site was selected by Andrew Floyd, Adam Baird and Colonel Samuel Watson appointed a committee for that purpose since they resided at extreme points of the area. They met at the spring at the foot of the hill on which the church now stands and chose the location for convenience since it was the most central point for the congregation which covered an area of 20 miles. Most of the people were Presbyterians and it is only natural that they wanted to establish a church of that denomination; and they called their church Bethel, which means "The House of God."

Hardships Suffered

Early members of the congregation suffered many hardships during their struggle for independence and they had no pastor at times; but their determinations never wavered. The important battle of Kings Mountain was fought on Oct. 7, 1780, just 15 miles from Bethel.

Maj. Patrick Ferguson planned to lead his British and Tories across York County, spend one night in Bethel Church, leave it in ashes by daylight, destroy Hills Iron Works nearby before noon, and be on the east side of the Catawba river before nightfall. So Bethel had made some impression on the enemy. Ferguson was killed in the battle and his army defeated at Kings Mountain which left Bethel safe.

In 1788, Presbytery met at Bethel for the first time when the old Presbytery of South

Carolina held its seventh session during the ministry of Rev. Francis Cummins, who organized Bethel Academy built about one and one-half miles north of the church. Among famous South Carolinians who studied there was Andrew Jackson who spoke of his school days at the Academy.

Incorporated in 1786

The church was incorporated by the Legislature of South Carolina on March 22, 1786, with the title — "The Presbyterian Church of Bethel Congregation." Bethel Presbytery was named for the church. There is no record of the first two church buildings. The third house of worship was erected between 1801 and 1811. The fourth church which is in use today was built in 1873 and on Sept. 20 1873 "the new House of Worship was this day set apart to the Worship of the Living God by a special service" during the ministry of Rev. Samuel L. Watson.

During the ministry of Rev. James S. Adams, 1811 to 1840, camp meetings were held at the church on sacramental occasions. Families left their homes on horse-drawn wagons carrying provisions to last from Friday until Monday. Three services of plain preaching were held each day and no extra means were used to create excitement; large crowds assembled.

During the ministry of Rev. William B. Arrowood, 1899 to 1909, "Cotton Picnics" were held to raise funds for foreign missions. Mr. Arrowood gave each family one quart of cotton seed to plant on "The Lords Acre" and the cotton was brought to the picnic in the fall after crops were gathered. The cotton from each family was baled together and sold with the money going to foreign missions.

Youth Organized

A Young People's Christian Endeavor was first organized in 1915 and is now known as Presbyterian Youth Fellowship. The Woman's Auxiliary was formed in 1925 and is still actively interested in all phases of church work. A Ladies Aide Society had been organized in the 1880s.

Four Sunday School classes were added, electric lights and running water were installed in the church and manse prior to the 165th anniversary celebrated with a homecoming on Aug. 7, 1929. An educational building added to the rear of the church was dedicated at the 186th anniversary homecoming on Aug. 22, 1950 which climaxed a week

of preaching services by Dr. W. W. Arrowood, a son of the church.

The Bethel Church Cemetery which dates from the 1760s is kept in good repair as a tribute to "Those we have loved since and lost awhile." The Bethel Cemetery Association was organized in 1938 to help with upkeep.

Bethel claims a distinction as the mother of ministers. During the 200 years of organization, two sons of the church supplied the gospel for 71 of these years — Rev. James S. Adams, 1811 to 1840; and Rev. Samuel L. Watson, 1840 to 1882.

Fame Established

Other sons who gained fame during the early years were Rev. Robert G. Wilson, D. D. who became president of the University of Ohio; and his brother, Dr. Samuel B. Wilson who was professor of Systematic Theology at Hampton Theological Seminary at Hampton Sidney, Va., from 1841 to 1859; Rev. A. M. Watson, Bethels missionary to Indians of West Tennessee; Rev. James M. H. Adams who left his mark upon female education while pastor of York Presbyterian Church. Throughout the years, young men have entered the ministry and today there are several who are actively serving pastorates of Presbyterian churches.

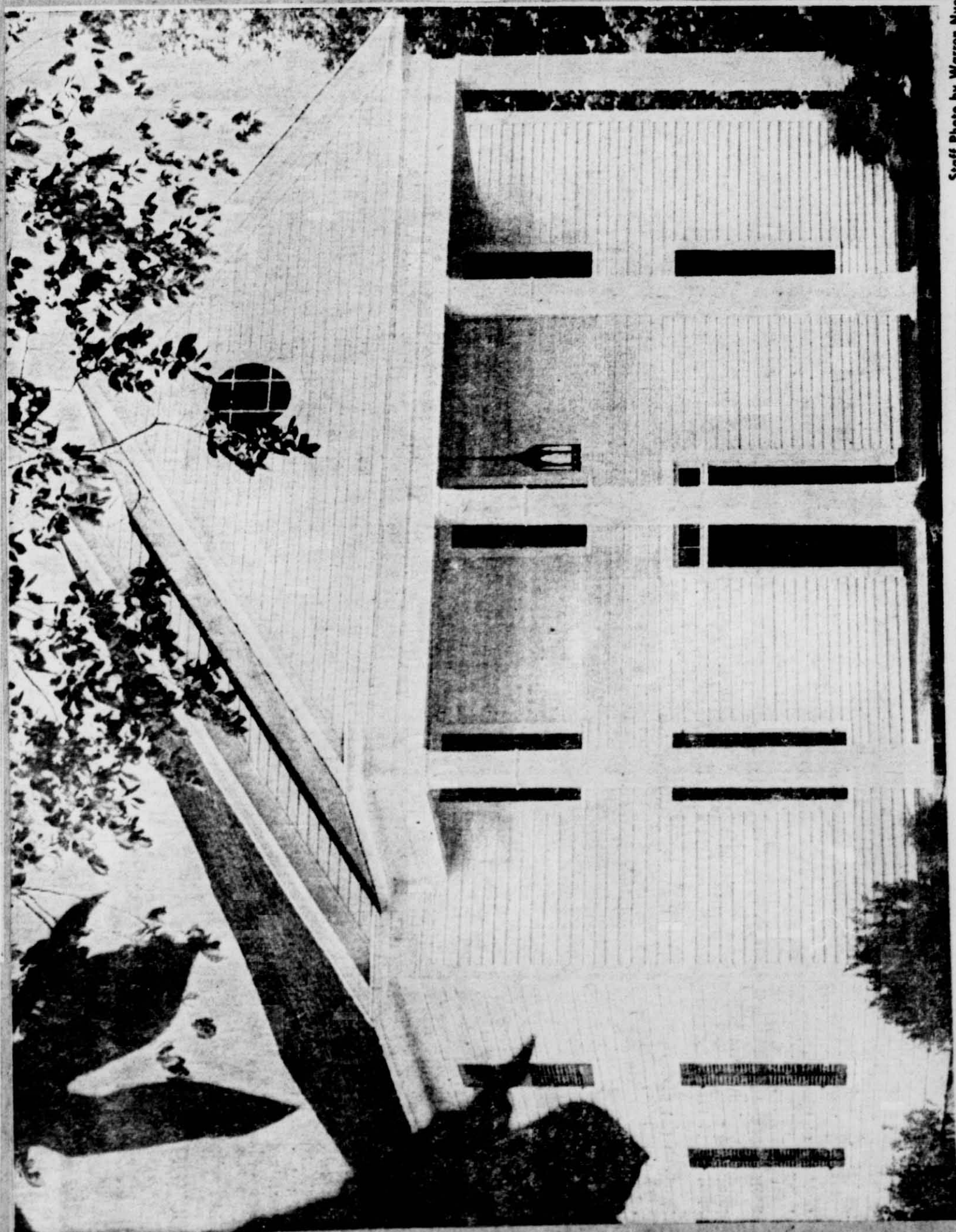
As a mother of churches, Bethel is now surrounded by eight separate organized Presbyterian churches, all founded upon what was originally her own property, and to each she gave of her members liberally.

Other Churches

In 1793, the part of Bethel congregation living in North Carolina congregated as a church under the name of Olney and built their house of worship in South Gastonia, N. C. About the

same time, New Hope Presbyterian Church was organized in the eastern part of Gaston County, N. C. Beth Shiloh located on York-Charlotte highway near York was organized in 1829. Allison Creek which is near Bethel church was formed from Bethel and Ebenezer in 1853. Union Presbyterian Church in Gaston County, N. C., organized and was received by Bethel Presbytery in 1863. In 1881, Clover Presbyterian Church was organized and sprang out of Centre, a small place south of the present town.

On Sunday morning, June 29, 1884, an outpost, Bethel Chapel, was dedicated and has had an important part in the history of



Staff Photo by Warren Nye

Bethel Presbyterian Church as it looks today