
Warren County Historical Tidbits: Hebron Methodist Church

Candles To Chase Away The Darkness Across 4 Centuries

My first visit to Hebron Methodist Church was 2 years ago last week. We had just moved to Warren County in August and our neighbors, Al & Linda Fleming, invited us to join them for the annual candlelight service. Now, I've been to plenty of candlelight services...and enjoyed every one of them...but little did I know what was waiting for me at *this* candlelight service and *this* special Church.

Linda offered to drive and I gladly accepted since we still hadn't had time to explore the country roads of Warren County and I wasn't entirely sure about the directions. After a short drive consisting of what seemed like seventy turns from road to road we slowed and in the dim light in a clearing to our left I could just make out Hebron Methodist Church. Even though we were there an hour early I could see a number of cars parked on the grass in front already.



It's interesting to remember what I first noticed...the fact that I could see more stars overhead than I had seen in 15 years living in the suburbs of Atlanta...the ancient cedars and gnarled oaks covering our walk to the door of the Church...and the Church itself – a simple, white church that had obviously been here for years...but mainly the glow coming from the two windows on either side of the door.

The candlelight service was unlike anything I had ever experienced...I was to learn later that the Minister had developed it years ago just for Hebron. As every well-worn

pew was filled, with worshippers in the rear on folding chairs, the service unfolded beneath the glow of candles in sconces mounted to the walls of the Church. The highlight came as we lit our candles and walked out of the Church singing "Silent Night"...everyone forming a huge circle in front of the Church and continuing to sing under the stars. Now, whether it was due to my weakening eyesight or just the magic of the evening, as I looked beyond the circle of people I could not see any cars...nothing to remind me that it was 2014. In fact it could just as easily been that Christmas Eve in 1818 when Franz Gruber & Joseph Mohr performed the hymn for the first time at a small church in Austria. At that moment I felt that "Silent Night" was connected to Hebron in a way that very few places can claim...and that I finally experienced the amazing beauty of that tune in the way it was meant to be.

I knew then that I had to find out more about the history of this wonderful Church. And so I began to search... What I found is that modern historians often look at the Church we see today and base their history on what fits the façade...dating the Church to about 1848. What I found with a little more digging (and wonderful insights from Al Fleming and an article written in 1934 by Mrs. Mary T. Palmer about the 150th anniversary of the founding

of Hebron Church) was that by that mid-nineteenth century date Hebron Methodist Church was already a senior citizen of our county as buildings go.

Mrs. Mary Palmer's history was re-discovered in 1975 through the papers of a relative found in Sumter, SC. When we combine her account – roughly halfway between our modern times and the founding of the Church – with that of the National Register of Historic Places application, we can safely date the Hebron Methodist congregation to 1771...when Six Pound Township was still part of Bute County and plans for Warrenton had not even been put to paper. The original land was deeded to 46 subscribers (the congregation) "for the goodwill and love and affection he hath to said subscribers...one acre of land concluding (sic) the new meeting house on six pound waters..." in 1771 by a Mr. James Walker. History notes that the first Minister of this congregation, Rev. Henry Fitts, likely built the first Church on the site as a log frame building. When the "second church" was built (as Mrs. Palmer wrote) it was after the congregation had outgrown the "first church" and Mr. Sampson King deeded "one acre of land to seven trustees of "Hebron Meeting House" in order that "they may build, repair, and keep in repair or cause the same to be done a house of worship for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church..." This event in 1810 was likely the original building date of the Church building we cherish today. Interestingly, this date would also put it in close proximity to the writing of and another tie to "Silent Night", whose original lyrics were composed a few years later in 1816.

Now, why in the world, you ask, would a Church be established at this location so many generations ago? The answer is fairly simple...early settlers to the County we call Warren today settled near the Roanoke River on fertile land. The River ensured that they would have a highway to market for their timber, tobacco, cotton and pitch. Within a short drive of Hebron's location settled the Macons, the Jones, the Fitts and the Eatons to name just a few prominent families.

As the years marched on and master-builder Jacob Holt relocated to Warren County, the continually growing congregation and the increased wealth of the county residents allowed the Church to hire him to enlarge and update the building in 1848. His distinctive Greek Revival style and interior woodwork details in this renovation are likely the reason many casual historians date this Church to only 1848.

As further noted by the National Register and Mrs. Palmer's account, an 1886 renovation added one bay to the front of the Church and in 1910 a Narthex was added to the front and a Chancel to the rear behind the pulpit. With that (setting aside the addition of electric lights sometime later in the 20th century) you find the Church we all can visit today.

If you'd like to see a diamond of Warren County history...and more importantly, experience an awe-inspiring candlelight service, you can join scores of your neighbors for the annual Candlelight Service on 22 December at 7:30. And as would likely have happened after a similar service almost 245 years ago you can visit with everyone over hot cider and delicious baked goods on the lawn to cap off the evening. It's one of the few chances we have today to celebrate in a Church that has lit candles across 4 centuries to chase away the darkness in the world. And once again we find the words of Al Fleming ring true, "In Warren County, we *live* (and worship) in the originals!"

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.