

Talk given on August 15, 1993, at the annual service of the Old Stone Church.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OLD STONE CHURCH: A HISTORIC
CHURCH OF THE UNITED METHODIST CENTRAL
PENNSYLVANIA CONFERENCE

by

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Today, we are here to participate in the annual church service of the Old Stone Church. We do this in part to remember that this church, originally known as the Bowman Church, is a historic landmark for Methodism. It was the first church of the Methodist Episcopal denomination built in the north branch of the Susquehanna River. It is credited with being the birth-place of our denomination in this section of Pennsylvania, particularly, in Columbia County. It stands as a monument to the spirit of the early pioneers of the church and a link to our past. The history of this church is closely linked to the early history of the Bowman family that moved to the Briar Creek area in the early 1790s.

The beginning of Methodism in this area is attributed in large part to the work of two brothers, Thomas and Christian Bowman, Methodist lay preachers. Both are buried in the church's graveyard. Thomas with his wife and five children came from Mount Bethel, four miles from the Delaware Water Gap in Northampton County, to Briar Creek in April, 1792. Soon afterward, his parents and brother, Christian, also moved to the area.

As various itinerant ministers made their circuit rounds, they often held meetings and stayed in the homes of Thomas or Christian. The journal of William Colbert, the first Methodist circuit rider to preach in this area of the Susquehanna River Valley, starting in 1792, frequently mentions visiting the Bownans.

When Thomas Bowman built a stone house, he reserved the third story exclusively for worship services. The first Methodist class or society was formed in 1794 or 1795, and Briar Creek became a regular preaching appointment in the Wyoming Circuit until 1806 when it was transferred to the Northumberland Circuit. In this year the total number of Methodists in the country was only 10, 625. One must remember the Methodist Church was in its infancy at this time.

Bishop Francis Asbury, known as the "Father of American Methodism," and the great "Circuit Rider" was holding a meeting at Forty-Fort near Wilkes-Barre in the summer of 1807. Here he received a petition testifying to the character and talents of Thomas and Christian Bowman and requested that the two men be ordained as deacons. Asbury agreed and ordained Thomas and Christian Bowm on July 19, 1807. Several years later, Asbury came to Briar Creek in July 1813. He stayed in the home of Thomas Bowman and preached at a local camp meeting.

Interestingly, one of Thomas' grandsons, having the same namesake, became a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872. He also served as chaplain of the U.S. Senate and was the Chancellor of DePaw University in Indiana. He lived to be ninety-seven years old.

In the home of Thomas Bowman in 1805 there occurred a revival described as having ". . . power and widespread influence resulting in the conversion of a large number of people. . . ." With this significant spiritual awakening, Briar Creek gained a reputation as a Methodist stronghold and stimulated the growth of the denomination in the area. Consequently, there was a need for a church to accommodate a growing congregation. Under the leadership of Thomas Bowman, land was secured to build a church and establish a cemetery. Interestingly, no deed to this church land exists in

courthouse records. However, in a letter by Rev. Alfred S. Bowman, a descendant of Bowman family, to Frank A. Witman, August 11, 1931, he wrote: "The deed of the Kelchner farm (you pass it as you go north from the church to Briar Creek Park) is specific in making or rather designating the boundary lines around the graveyard grounds thus eliminating the church and church lot from the Kelchner farm land."

To raise the necessary funds Thomas Bowman circulated a subscription list with pledges of support coming from his neighbors and from others as far as Baltimore and Philadelphia to underwrite the cost of the project. But, in time, it proved to be inadequate since many of the pledges were small, and, due to the distance and inconvenience to collect them, there was not enough money to meet the building expenses. Whereupon, the Bowman family undertook the responsibility to provide the major share of labor and materials to complete the construction of the church. With its completion in 1808, it became the first Methodist Episcopal church of its kind anywhere between the Wyoming Valley and the Sutton Church, two miles from Williamsport.

The congregation held services in the church until 1856 when they built a new and larger church at Fowlersville, two miles west, a more central and advantageous location. Besides being a house of worship it also served as a school. Afterwards, for some twenty years, the building became a meeting hall for the Grange. By the late 1800's the property, no longer used, deteriorated into a dilapidated condition; the roof was off, and part of a wall torn down.

Fortunately, Rev. Alfred S. Bowman, a Methodist minister and grandson of Christian Bowman, undertook the leadership to raise funds to save and restore the church in 1915 and 1916. Most of the repairs were to the exterior; the grounds, including the cemetery, were enclosed. The restoration cost, a little more than \$700, came from contributions of the descendants of the people

buried in the church graveyard. It was at this time that the custom of an annual service began.

Rev. Bowman declared that saving the Old Stone Church, this historic landmark of Methodism in Central Pennsylvania Conference, from decay ". . . was to make this church a monument to the work of the early settlers who have sepulture in this burial ground . . . but the highest, the supreme motive in seeking to give permanence to this old shrine was that for which it stands." *The Christian Advocate* commenting on the restoration of the Old Stone Church stated: "Such monuments have no architectural claim to preservation, except that which comes from a stern simplicity and a close adaptation to utility. But as a tablet of remembrance to the self-sacrificing planters of a fruitful vineyard, there could be no more fitting memorial than this house where they wrought."

Indeed, the Methodist denomination in Columbia County was quite large. Dr. J. J. Brown of Bloomsburg in an article written for the *Baltimore Methodist* in 1914 asserted that Columbia County was the "garden spot of Methodism." According to his investigation there were 6754 Methodists, one out of nine inhabitants in the county, and, in addition, 7793 scholars enrolled in Sunday Schools. These statistics in proportion to the county's population place it in the lead of nationwide Methodism.

Additional improvements to the building were made during the next decade. The placing of a marble tablet in the west gable, noting the church's historical significance, occurred in 1924. The present pews were made of the original floorboards, and the lectern was built from wood of the original lectern. Rev. Alfred S. Bowman retained the responsibility as caretaker for the Old Stone Church until 1929.

Whereupon, the First Methodist Church of Berwick accepted the custodial authority for the property. Dorothy Brown, a descendent of the Bowman

family, included in her will, dated June 25, 1909, an annuity to the Old Stone Church. The provision stated the following:

I direct my trustee to pay to the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Berwick, Pa. two hundred dollars annually. The one half of this shall be used for the old stone church property at Briar Creek built in 1808. To keep the grass cut, and repairs on the church building. The remaining dollars the church shall have for its services. Should they refuse, then any other church that my trustee shall name shall have this legacy. My trustee shall maintain, and replace the headstones on these graves if needed. Should a new fence be needed my trustee shall build as good as now. Should a new roof be needed on the old church my trustee shall build the same. My purpose is to preserve this shrine.

Berwick First United Methodist Church exercised this stewardship for some fifty years, and one of its members, Enest Hill, played an important role in this work. In 1984 the trustees of the Berwick Church decided to relinquish their custodial responsibility.

Therefore, Rev. Warren L. Baughman, Jr., District Superintendent of the Lewisburg District, in June, 1985, appointed a committee to assume a temporary superintendency over the Old Stone Church until an appropriate custodial arrangement could be instituted. Before the committee could focus on this issue, an immediate concern was the serious deterioration of the church floor and beams. With generous and sustained financial assistance from the Central Pennsylvania Conference Commission on Archives and History the committee was able to replace the rotting floor and beams with new materials.

More recently, through the leadership of Rev. Charles Hess and Rev. Ronald Bowersox, the District Superintendent of the Lewisburg District, a custodial agreement was reached with the Fowlersville United Methodist Church in 1991. The Trustees of the Fowlersville United Methodist Church agreed to accept the custodial responsibilities of the Old Stone Church. It is fitting and proper that we recognize and extend our appreciation to the Fowlersville Church for their willingness to accept custodial responsibility.

In closing let us remember and think about the dedication of those early Methodists who lived their faith and gave testimony to God's presence in this world. May we in our devotion to the Christian faith be examples of a similar religious heritage to our descendants.