

Margaret Windley's Historical
Perspective

A Brief History of Monumental United Methodist Church

By Margaret Edwards Nix Windley

1772, Missionary Year

A church is a spiritual home for people who share a common need for God and each other. The members of Monumental have hung together as a congregation since before the American Revolution. During those years, the Monumental family has survived such known crowd thinners as wars, pestilences and famines. The family has its own ghost stories and romances, both known and unknown, its own flirtations with troubles and successes. But the family also reflects the story of God at work through individuals and movements.

The actual beginnings of Monumental date back to early in 1772 when Rev. Robert Williams, a Methodist minister and missionary, came to Hampton Roads. He had preached first in Norfolk where he was not well received. Tradition says that a crowd gathered to hear him but soon became unruly. However, Isaac Luke, a Portsmouth man who was in the crowd, was impressed with Williams' words, invited him to accept his protection and told him that he could preach from his porch.

The rest, as they say, is history--Monumental's history. Some of the earliest members of our congregation were Isaac Luke and his family as well as their friends and neighbors. A short list contained in a letter written to the Norfolk Methodist District Magazine by John W. H. Porter on August 18, 1893 included several of those names (Letter, computerized records).

Porter related that Luke was married and had three sons, Paul Dale Luke, William B. Luke and Isaac Luke Jr. as well as one daughter, Elizabeth Luke. Porter's letters suggests that all of these went to the meetings of the Methodist Society. John W. H. Porter could only remember the names of three other early members--William Porter, Dempsey Veale and Crawford Veale (Letter, computerized records).

William Porter married Elizabeth Luke, the daughter of Isaac Luke, after the American Revolution and thus became his son-in-law. Both William Porter and Paul Dale Luke served in the American army during the Revolution (Letter, computerized records). The Veale family intermarried with the Porters within a few generations.

In Portsmouth, Williams had worked vigorously for the Lord. He started a Methodist Society in Luke's home on Court Street according to the church records. Most of the early meetings at Luke's house were held in a small outbuilding on his property. But before leaving, Williams secured an unoccupied warehouse in Gosport (now a section of Portsmouth) where the Atlantic and Danville Railroad depot was located as of 1893 (Letter, computerized records). In an 1894 city directory this address was given as 121 1st Street and it would thus have been near the present day Trophy Park (Chataigne's City Directory, p. 20).

There was more work to do and Williams had to leave. Although Williams did not apparently

write down his actual dates of service in Portsmouth, he reported to the Rev. Francis Asbury on April 22, 1772 that he had had a successful mission in Virginia (Asbury, Volume 1, p. 28).

In the summer of 1772 the Rev. Joseph Pilmore, another Methodist minister and missionary, came to build upon Williams' work. Pilmore was a more meticulous record-keeper and left a journal in which he noted reading the rules of the Methodist society to a throng in worship in Portsmouth on November 14, 1772 and receiving 27 into membership (Pilmore, 162). That is considered the official date of our church's beginning even though Rev. Williams preached earlier.

Of Names

Some words should be inserted here about our name. Although our church started in 1772 and it was recognized as part of the Methodist church early onward, our specific name has been Monumental Methodist only since the 1870s. The name was first broached in a paper read at a District Conference in 1873, but the actual official name change was not passed until 1875 at the Norfolk District Conference of the Methodist church meeting at Benn's Church. The name was meant to indicate that the church was a monument to Rev. Robert Williams, the founding missionary.

Before that, the congregation had many other names. These included the Methodists in Portsmouth, Portsmouth Station, Glasgow Street Methodist, and Dinwiddie Street Methodist Church. A few of these names reflected the physical location of the church, and this will be covered under the appropriate part of the history.

Our denomination has only been known as United Methodist since 1964. The historic name for our denomination was the Methodist Episcopal Church. During a period of approximately 100 years, Monumental was part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South until the two sections of the church re-united. Before the American Revolution, Methodist missionaries and ministers tried to encourage a view of the Methodist societies as prayer groups within the Church of England. Thus, for the first 12 years of our congregation's existence, our members would have been considered Episcopalians as well as Methodists. Isaac Luke died in October 1784, only a few months before the Methodist Church broke off officially from the Episcopal Church as part of the Christmas Conference (December, 1784). He is buried in the churchyard of Trinity Episcopal Church, Portsmouth.

For easier reading, I will generally refer to our church as Monumental Methodist throughout this work regardless of the year.

The Church Starts

Monumental is said to be the oldest continuing Methodist congregation in the South (Lower Tidewater Virginia, Volume II, page 13). The church's tradition also holds that we are the third oldest continuous Methodist congregation in the nation.

After the missionaries of 1772, the church was assigned to the circuit serving both Norfolk and

Portsmouth. Thus Methodist ministers have specifically served our congregation as a part of the appropriate circuit since 1773. According to the church's records, the Rev. Richard Wright was sent in 1773 to be the first minister and the Rev. John King came in 1774 to be the second.

In 1775 came the Rev. Francis Asbury, our best-known minister, the only one who regularly shows up in encyclopedias with his own entry. After the American Revolution, Asbury would become the first bishop of the Methodist church in America at the aforementioned Christmas Conference of the Methodist Church. This conference was held at Lovely Lane Methodist Church in Baltimore at Christmastide, 1784.

Asbury was a truly remarkable person who deserved the honor of bishop as much as anyone did. During the course of his life, he traveled approximately a quarter of a million miles by foot, horse, boat etc. up and down much of the Eastern Seaboard to spread the Gospel.

At Monumental, official records indicate that he was in charge in 1775 when building started on our church's first sanctuary to be built as such—the South Street Meetinghouse at the intersection of South and Effingham Streets. However his journal indicates that he became actively engaged in setting up more Methodist churches in the countryside after the congregations of Norfolk and Portsmouth raised 34 pounds toward the building of a church (Asbury, Volume I, 158). He did not get back to our church until April 4, 1800. At that time he preached at the church only four years after it had been moved to Glasgow Street and was so much impressed with members' work on it that he referred to it as "the neat new house" (Asbury, Volume II, 229).

On February 8, 1805 he met with the church's trustees over their desire to continue having a regularly stationed preacher and described the church as having been enlarged to sixty feet by thirty feet. During that meeting he advised them to add galleries (Asbury, Volume II, 458).

As an interesting sidelight, Asbury was in the area when the news came about the Battle of Great Bridge (now in the city of Chesapeake, Virginia), the first important land battle of the Revolution in the South, and he recorded the news in his journal entry for Wednesday December 27, 1775 as follows: "We have awful reports of slaughter at Norfolk and the Great Bridge; but I am at a happy distance from them, and my soul keeps close to Jesus Christ" (Asbury, Volume 1, page 171).

He was in Delaware on Tuesday June 1, 1779 when he heard the news of the Battle of Fort Nelson (Portsmouth, Virginia) on May 9, 1779 with its concomitant British burning of Suffolk and plundering of merchant ships in the Elizabeth and James Rivers:

"We have a sound of war from the southward; Lord, think upon us, that we perish not!" (Asbury, Volume 1, page 302).

Asbury as a traveling minister became aware of feelings in the Colonies about the desire for a break with the mother country. Yet his loyalties must have been torn by the requirements of his clerical position. After all, Rev. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lived in England and expected his ministers to be loyal to the king and had called on the Methodist clergy in America to return at the outbreak of hostilities. Although Asbury stayed in this country, he is generally

considered to have been a Tory because he refused to take a loyalty oath to state of Maryland. However, the actual certainty of his loyalties is unclear. He wound up spending much of the Revolution from 1778 onward in Delaware in a judge's home, either as a willing or unwilling guest. But by war's end, he had tired of the fighting. When he received the news that England had accepted American independence, he was pleased: "Here I heard the good news that Britain had acknowledged the Independence for which America has been contending-may it be so" (Asbury, Volume 1, page 425).

Religious Life Before The Revolution

Before the American Revolution, there was very little freedom of religion in this country. Throughout most of the Colonies, everyone had to belong to the Church of England or the Episcopal Church to be able to participate in their own government. It is said that only in the Colony of Rhode Island was the vote permitted to landowners and their oldest sons without religious restrictions.

In the Colonies everyone was expected to pay taxes to support the state church and they ran the risk of civil punishment if they missed church on a regular basis. They could also be punished for adultery and blasphemy.

The Methodist church was able to get started before the Revolution because it was seen as a prayer group operating within the Church of England. Such freedoms were not accorded to the clergy or members of many other denominations that are well known today. It seems to be a truism for instance that the Catholics, Quakers, and Baptists could not worship freely in this country in those days. However by the 1770s both Asbury and Pilmore were regularly running into Baptist and Presbyterian ministers who seemed to preach freely.

Although lack of religious freedom seems unnatural to modern Americans, it was generally the way of much of the European world in those days. In Protestant Europe it was illegal to be a Catholic and in Catholic Europe it was illegal to be a Protestant.

When this nation's Founding Fathers set up freedom of religion after the Revolution with the Constitution's Bill of Rights, they knew the necessity of what they were seeking. They and their families had seen their Mother Country torn by religious strife for about 200 years as power had shifted between Catholicism and Protestantism under the Tudors. They had then seen that definition of Protestantism begin to further define itself under the Stewart kings with their Cromwellian Interregnum and more so under the Hanoverian kings. The Founding Fathers had noticed that whatever church had been in power had tried to dominate and squelch the others and they had come to view freedom of religion as the best means of liberating the proverbial better angels of the religious nature.

The Methodist Lifestyle

Our founders had different views on proper behavior than we do today. Drinking, dancing, playing cards, Sabbath-breaking, cursing, bad tempers, wearing fancy clothing and other forms of perceived worldliness were considered grounds for which members could be drummed out of

the Methodist church in the early days. The extent to which this was a serious inconvenience to the members cannot be determined at this point. After all, these seemed to be the general expectations of behavior from all Protestants from a Dissenting background. By the 1840s and 1850s the Methodists were beginning to soften at least some of their original rigidity (Brent, throughout). Until the 1950s and 1960s Methodists maintained some of their original concentration on behavior although they had long since stopped excommunicating members.

One item of curiosity-the Methodists as a denomination did not view the institution of slavery in a favorable way. The Methodists of New England were some of the most active of abolitionists. However, Methodists of other regions were less aggressive. In the South, Methodists had to accept a rather different reality and they set up the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1845 over the issue of slavery. In the Methodist Church's General Conference of 1844, there had been a move to vote Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia out because he had become a slave owner through inheritance and marriage. Several states including Andrew's Georgia would not at that time permit the manumission of slaves. So Andrew was caught in a dilemma. But when he considered withdrawing from the Methodist church, others with similar problems encouraged him instead to form a separate sister branch of Methodism. In 1939 the Northern and Southern branches of the church reunited.

Monumental In A New Nation

During the American Revolution, the church kept up "a sort of precarious existence" (letter). A few congregants met from time to time but the requirements of war kept people busy and uneasy.

But then the peace came and with it was freedom of religion through the Bill of Rights. It would have a special depth of meaning for Monumentallers. After all, among the members and ministers in the early years, a few Revolutionary War soldiers are easily identifiable. Two charter members, Paul Dale Luke and William Porter, and two early ministers, William McKendree and Jesse Nicholson, fought on the American side during the war. Nicholson would eventually settle as a local minister (ordained only to one locality) and he joined the congregation. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which a friend of his, James O'Kelly, influenced him to avoid furthering his ministerial career. James O'Kelly served as the Presiding Elder of the Norfolk District (this included Portsmouth) from 1788 to 1792 before leaving to form the Republican Methodist Church or O'Kellyites, a group of people who were disturbed that the Methodist Church in America had installed bishops. Francis Asbury, the American church's first bishop, had earned a reputation for being a difficult man with whom to work. The O'Kellyites later combined with other religious splinter groups and with the Congregationalists of New England to become part of the United Church of Christ. Nicholson became a schoolteacher, surveyor and postmaster. He also became involved in politics.

But back to the church--in 1792 Monumentallers bought a tract of land from (Mrs.) Director Friedley on Glasgow Street and the church's tradition says that shortly afterward they moved the church there on rollers to what is now the church's present Glasgow Street Park where Monumental prospered as Glasgow Street Methodist.

Monumental In The Early Years Of The Nation

In 1818 church members joined a united effort with the Presbyterians to form Portsmouth's first Sunday school in a building in the 200 block of High Street. The school prospered, and the churches separated to further develop their own Sunday school classes.

A cholera epidemic hit the city in 1832 and Monumental minister Rev. Vernon Eskridge, did his best to serve the physical and spiritual needs of the citizens. According to tradition he had a holistic view of the ministry. He is supposed to have picked out an unofficial headquarters under a tree in the middle of town during this time where he kept food and medicine with him to give out during visits to the sick along with prayers and spiritual advice.

Just the year before, 1831, Monumentallers began to build a new church on Dinwiddie Street at approximately the present site of the church. This church would become known as the Dinwiddie Street Methodist Church. Members had been planning to make a move for a few years beforehand but the rise of the black codes requiring separate worship as a result of the Southampton Insurrection gave their move a new impetus. According to our church records Rev. Eskridge was the minister that year.

Monumentallers gave the old church on Glasgow Street to the black members. A white man from Monumental, the Rev. George Bain, was assigned to be the minister to the black congregation, and several members of the Monumental congregation were assigned to lead Sunday school classes for the blacks, who were not allowed by law to lead their own worship or classes.

The old Glasgow Street church soon became known as the African Church and it took its place as a stationed Methodist church in 1843. It burned on September 26, 1856 in a fire of apparently suspicious origin. Later in 1856 Rev. Bain received financial assistance from throughout the Portsmouth community to lead the black church members in rebuilding in another location a few blocks away. That church would eventually become known as Emanuel A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church.

Yellow Fever struck Portsmouth in 1855. Due to the epidemic, Portsmouth lost approximately ten percent of its population in only a few months.

One of those lost to the illness was Rev. Eskridge. After serving the church in 1832 as minister, he had returned to serve as assistant minister from 1839-1850, and then left to serve as a chaplain in the United States Navy. His Mediterranean cruise ended just in time to bring him to the Portsmouth area where he became caught up in Portsmouth's epidemic. He died in September 1855 in the service of God and humanity.

A supernatural story about him was related in the official minutes of the Virginia Conference. While Rev. Eskridge was dying of Yellow Fever in the Naval Hospital, his son, Richard, passed on before him. No one wanted to tell the father for fear of depressing him. However, he knew that his son was dead because Richard appeared to him in a dream with several other dead relatives and invited him to the rewards of the Great Beyond (Memoirs, 121).

The Effects Of The Civil War On Monumental

In 1861, the Civil War began and it would have its own effect on the little church that would become Monumental.

Several members joined the Confederate military. Among them were John Luke Porter, the designer of the Merrimac (CSS Virginia)--the first ironclad to be used for war purposes; E. V. White, an officer who served on board the Merrimac/Virginia; William Henry White, John S. Jenkins, Thomas C. Owens, James Toomer, and John W. H. Porter (Monroe and Hatcher, 21, 22). Another Confederate member was Bartlett A. Grimes (treepages genealogical website, Bartlett Grimes, pages 1--3). Two ministers of the church served as chaplains for the Confederate military--Rev. Peter A. Peterson and Rev. W. E. Edwards. Rev. Peterson, who served the church in 1860 and 1861, left when the Confederates evacuated the town and became a Confederate chaplain. Rev. Edwards returned from the service in 1865 to organize Monumental's disheartened members using the chapel of the Second Presbyterian Church (Lafferty, 74, 133).

The city went under Northern Occupation in 1862, and our congregation was joined by some of members of the Union military such as John Johnson, a Northern sailor. After the war we gained Samuel Woods, who had received a Medal of Honor for action during the Siege of Suffolk.

Unfortunately, in 1864 the church burned to the ground as a result of a defective flue. The only relic of the church left from the fire was the pulpit Bible, which was rescued by member Robert G. Cutherell who dashed in and out of the burning building to get it.

Little is known of this period partly because some of the records were destroyed in the fire. The pages covering the time of the Occupation were removed from the one existing book that contains a roster from those days. Only enough remains on the page for 1862 to pass on the information to succeeding historians that the members cooperated with the Yankees. This meant that the church had to go under the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church, which was loyal to the Union, rather than the Virginia Conference, which was loyal to the Confederacy.

As time passed, legends grew about the fire and three main versions have emerged.

The first was that the Yankees deliberately burned the church. This probably grew from the fact that the fire occurred during the Occupation, a time when the church went under the Baltimore Conference.

There was another version, that the members who were Southern loyalists burned the church. This may have grown out of the frustration that the members felt at losing their church to a fire.

The third version--a defective flue--is the most reasonable cause. It is backed up by not only by the official church records, but also by the fact that the church had an insurance policy with the Virginia Mutual Assurance Company and was able to collect a sizeable amount on it from the company. A newspaper article in the Norfolk Virginian from January 5, 1867 recounted that the church had been able to collect \$6,000.

During those days of the Baltimore Conference, Rev. Joseph Wheeler and Rev. G. W. Hobbs,

known in Monumental history as the Northern Missionaries, were in charge. They seemed to have related well to our congregation. In the ten months that he served Monumental, Rev. Hobbs baptized 40 people and married ten couples. Rev. Wheeler refused to leave his records however.

After all, the Northern Methodist ministers were tactful people. They arranged for a "blind Bible" to be given to Fletcher Porter, a blind member of the church. The "blind Bible" was written in raised letters so that the blind readers could run their fingers over the pages and read by feeling the letters. This was before the invention of Braille.

In May 1865, after the end of the war Rev. William E. Edwards, formerly a Confederate chaplain, showed up to rally several members for worship at a chapel rented from the Second Presbyterian Church. During some of this time Wheeler and Hobbs were still also operating locally for the congregation out of St. John's Episcopal, which had been given to them to use for worship after Monumental burned. By 1866 Monumentallers had built a chapel on Queen Street at the approximate site of the present-day church's Fellowship Hall. That chapel operated as the church until the present Monumental United Methodist Church was finished in 1876 and then the former chapel became the Sunday school building. By the 1950s, the Sunday school building was no longer serving the needs of the congregation despite a few additions and it was knocked down and replaced with the present Fellowship Hall.

After The War, The Progressive Era And Beyond

In 1881 the women of the church formed the Foreign Missionary Society, leading to the formation of the Home Missionary Society, the Women's Society of Christian Service, and eventually the United Methodist Women.

In 1911 Arthur J. Lancaster, an Englishman, became Monumental's director of music. He would serve the church for 50 years or until his death in 1961. He also bring his gifts to the community during much of that time by teaching and directing music programs for 30 years-1929 through 1959-in the Portsmouth school system. From 1929 through 1947 he directed vocal music at Woodrow Wilson High School and from 1947 through 1959 he directed the entire Portsmouth school system's music programs. He was honored as Portsmouth's First Citizen in 1959 for his dedication to the cause of music. In the ceremonies he was described as someone who would go anywhere to teach any student or reach any audience with an interest in music.

With the advent of World War I, Monumental geared up with patriotic fervor and opened the church to servicemen. The men of the church of draft age either joined the military or went to military school to further their fighting skills.

Members visited servicemen and invited them to services, donated liberally to the American cause, and army and navy chaplains often conducted or assisted in services. After religious services, there were social entertainments at the church. Servicemen were specifically made a part of the life of the church and each was given a part in church activities.

Active member John Deans made himself an unofficial missionary to the enlisted men and brought many to the West Sunday school class as well as to church.

A listing of members who served in World War I included Wendell Cushing Neville, who went on to become the first commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and a Medal of Honor winner. The same list of members of the church included the janitor, Enoch Newby.

With peace came a time to celebrate history. In November 1918 the church celebrated the centennial of the Sunday school and in 1922 the 150th year of the formation of their first Methodist society. In 1931 they celebrated the centennial of the erection of Dinwiddie Street Church.

The ideals of the Progressive Era brought more attention to the role of women. The first women to receive official appointments as stewards of the church were appointed in 1925 and 1926. These women were Edith Neville, Louise Earnest, and Nellie Simmons. Women had been active in Sunday school and had served as class leaders before the Civil War but these were the first women at Monumental to receive official office. Lelia Deans later served as the first female Sunday school superintendent in 1933 to 1936 (Monroe and Hatcher, page 35).

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South reunited with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1939. There were special ceremonies for the Virginia Conference, which were held in the Mosque in Richmond to mark the event. Monumental's choir sang at the ceremonies, and Professor Lancaster played the organ.

With the coming of World War II, the church geared itself up once more to serve the country's needs as in the previous World War. John Deans became active again as an unofficial missionary to the servicemen and another church member, Zinny Murden, became active in organizing programs. The church opened itself up to entertain the servicemen after church services with refreshments, games and "round dances." Professor Lancaster especially looked out for British servicemen.

In 1951, during the Korean War, John Deans was honored with a testimonial dinner for his work with servicemen. Three navy chaplains attended, one of whom credited Deans' influence for his own entry into the ministry (Monroe and Hatcher, 40).

In 1955 work commenced on replacing the former Sunday school building with a new, up-to-date Fellowship Hall. The cornerstone was laid with appropriate ceremonies and Sunday school classes were held at Briggs School on Washington Street until the new building could be finished. A piece of wood from the previous building was encapsulated in the cornerstone.

In 1968 the Methodist church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren and Monumental became Monumental United Methodist Church.

Service to others was still an important part of the church's mindset. In 1972 as part of the commemoration of Monumental's 200th year of existence, the church in conjunction with the Beazley Foundation gave the money to found the Monumental Chapel at Virginia Wesleyan College.

Over the years, the church has formed eight churches in the city. These are Emanuel A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, Wright Memorial Church (now defunct and the building demolished), Central Church (the building has been sold to another denomination and the membership merged with Elm Avenue Church to form Aldersgate in Chesapeake), Elm Avenue Church (the building is now Martin Luther King Church), Park View Church, Broad Street Church, Cottage Place Church and West End Church.

In 1985 Monumental made a former site of the church on Glasgow Street into a park. The ceremonies included special honors for the early members of the church.

In 1995 Monumental's sanctuary underwent an inside renovation or Reformation, and in 2000 the church began a Community School for the Arts.

Today and into the future Monumental continues to strive to serve the spiritual needs of its members and of the community.

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