

An Historical Sketch of Fork Union Baptist Church



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(Picture, circa 1911)

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This sketch of the history of Fork Union Baptist Church has been prepared to meet the requirements of our church's Self-Study. The guide with the Self-Study materials suggests a "brief summary" of the church's history. This we have tried to do.

To prepare a definitive history of our church is difficult, for Fork's early records were burned-1798-1854. There is another gap in Fork's records--1890-1906. With these records gone, contemporary sources have to be used, and they are scarce. There are a few historical essays about our church, and they seem to depend upon Captain Charles G. Sneed's 1924 history.

This essay tells how and when the Baptist faith came to Fluvanna County and gives a history of our church's beginnings along with an abbreviated chronological listing of church events and activities.

The sources for this history are the following: church records, county records, minutes of the Albemarle and James River Associations, Semple's A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptist in Virginia, 1810, Captain Charles G. Sneed's history, 1924, a brief sketch by the Reverend F.G. Lavender, a former pastor, and interviews with knowledgeable people.

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"Fork, in Fluvanna, was constituted off from Lyles. They were at first tolerably prosperous..." This statement is from the historical work of Robert B. Semple. In 1810, Mr. Semple prepared A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptist of Virginia.

Whence came the Fork Baptist Church? How is Fork related to the Baptist movement in Virginia? Semple answers both of these questions for us.

In his history Mr. Semple wrote that Baptist in Virginia came from three sources. The first Baptists in the Colony of Virginia came directly from England in 1714; they settled in the southeastern part of the colony. From Maryland, 1743, another group of Baptists came to Virginia. Later, a third group of Baptists came from New England. Fork's origin is related to this third group.

A revival of religion sprang up along the coasts of the colonies in the mid-1700's. This event, known as the Great Awakening, caused many to rethink their religious positions; consequently, many people separated themselves from the established churches, and they were general known as "Separates."

Shubal Sterns, a native of Massachusetts, and a resident of Connecticut, became a Baptist in 1751. He had accepted the view that believer's baptism was the scriptural one; thus, he became a

Baptist. He with a group of Baptists in 1754 moved to Berkeley County, Virginia, now West Virginia. Later Mr. Stearns and associates moved to Hampshire County, Virginia now West Virginia. Mr. Stearns and his associates were "Separate" Baptists.

Earlier, friends of Mr. Stearns had moved to North Carolina. Upon hearing from these friends, who had written they were interested in having preaching in their community, Mr. Stearns and followers moved to Sandy Creek, Randolph County, North Carolina. His efforts were successful, for on November 22, 1755, Sandy Creek Baptist Church was founded. From Sandy Creek, Baptist work spilled over into South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia.

In 1765 Allen Wyley, a citizen of Culpeper County, Virginia, when learning about the Separate Baptists traveled to Pittsylvania County, Virginia, to invite Separate Baptists in that county to send preachers to Culpeper. These Separate Baptists in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, were related to the Sandy Creek Baptist work in North Carolina.

Samuel Harriss, a prominent citizen of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, who had served in several official capacities, including church warden (Anglican Church) sheriff, justice of the peace, colonel in the militia, had become a Baptist. Colonel Harriss went to Culpeper County with Mr. Wyley. In Culpeper, Colonel Harriss' preaching met with severe opposition. He was forced to leave. He went to Orange County where he was well received and spent considerable time in Orange before returning home to Pittsylvania County.

In 1766, Elder Elijah Craig, who had become a leading preacher of the Separate Baptists and who suffered jail because of his efforts, went with others to Mr. Harriss' home to invite him to return to Orange County. Mr. Harriss accepted the invitation. Over a period of three years, Mr. Harriss visited Orange and surrounding areas. From his labors and that of his associates, several

Separate Baptist Churches were constituted, including Blue Run, near Somerset, Virginia. Blue Run was constituted December 4, 1769. Elijah Craig became the pastor of Blue Run, and was ordained in May 1771. Thus, we have Mr. Semple's tracing the Separate Baptist movement from New England to North Carolina into Virginia, indeed into our own area. For this account of early Virginia Baptist history, we are indebted to Mr. Semple, whose history was named earlier in this paper.

Three or four persons from the Lyles neighborhood in 1769 went to hear preaching in the Blue Run Community. (Semple) As a result of this visitation, Lyles Church was formed in 1774 by the united efforts of Elijah Craig and David Thompson. Fork Baptist Church, a daughter of Lyles, was constituted in 1798 by Elder William Basket, pastor of Lyles, and Elder Martin Dawson, moderator of the Albemarle Association. The Fork Church was constituted at "Bro. Abram Price's in the fork..." (The "fork," though not a refined description, designated the large area of land lying in the fork of the Rivanna and James Rivers.) The beginning of Fork Church as an independent unit was Sunday, November 4, 1798. (Thompson)

Captain Snead tells us that Fork Church is the daughter of Lyles, and Fluvanna and Bethel are daughters of Fork. Below are statements which come from his history of our church.

The Fork Church's meetinghouse, a plain, wooden structure, known far and near as the old Fork Meetinghouse, was located one mile this side (east) of Central Plains. (Snead)

The present meetinghouse (our present church), built in 1824, was known for years as the "Brick meetinghouse." It was constructed at its present location to offer a place of worship at some central point within the fork neighborhood. This meetinghouse was not built as a Baptist meetinghouse; it was a union meetinghouse. The Presbyterians had use of the house on the first Sunday of the month, the Baptists on the second Sunday, the Episcopalians the third Sunday and the Methodists the fourth Sunday. The building committee was Thomas W. Omohundro, John Winn, John H. Cocke and William Parrish.

This building, our present church, the "Brick meetinghouse," has had three additions during the fifty years prior to 1924, the year Captain Snead wrote his history of Fork Church. Originally, the pulpit was at the west end. At the east end of the building was the front door, and over the entrance there was a gallery erected for the black members.

The first addition to the building was the wing on the right (when entering from the east door), and the pulpit was placed where it is now. The need for this addition was apparent as the membership was over 300 white members and 400 black members. (Snead) The second addition was the pastor's study and the baptistry. Today, the organ pipes are located in the former study, and not too many years ago, it was a Sunday School classroom. It may well be that the baptistry Captain Snead mentions was under the pulpit. There is one under the pulpit still, but it is never used.

The third addition was the vestibule with the bell and the belfry. A most timely improvement was the handsome pulpit erected at the cost of one hundred fifty dollars. Dr. William E. Hatcher in recognition of the many kindnesses shown to him and his family by the church and community, donated one hundred twenty-five dollars towards the construction of the pulpit. (Snead)

During the pastorate of Elder William Moore, 1846-1851, Fork divided over keeping Elder Moore as pastor. In those days the pastor was elected annually. Mr. Lavender, pastor of Fork church, 1912-1920, writes that this awkward custom contributed to Elder Moore's problem with the Fork Church. So intense was the division that some members withdrew from the Fork and constructed a meetinghouse one mile away (west). This was done while Elder Moore was pastor at Fork. The church, Corinth Church, was dedicated in 1854. Elder Moore became Corinth's pastor. Fluvanna Church supported financially the building of the Corinth Church. Fluvanna Church, according to Captain Snead, is a daughter of old Fork Church. Early Fluvanna Church records are strangely silent about her relation to old Fork. The records of old Fork could be of service, but unfortunately, these records were burned. To date, the organizational records of the Corinth Church are not available. Fluvanna Church records give the designated Sundays when the Fluvanna Church and the Corinth Church had use of the Corinth meetinghouse. Each was assigned two Sundays of the month. The Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches are not included in this schedule; however, a deed in the County Clerk's office would suggest otherwise. Obviously, to establish an accurate history of Corinth Church is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper.

One Saturday in January 1880, a heavy snow storm came and about noon on Sunday, the roof fell in, and the building was ruined. At this time, Dr. George H. Snead was pastor at Corinth, Bethel and Fork. Dr. Snead worked diligently to bring back to Fork those Corinth members who had left Fork earlier. A call from Fork went to the members of Corinth "to cast in their lot with us (Fork) to advance the glory of God and the good of immortal souls." Dr. Snead was eminently successful in leading former Fork members to return to Fork. This was thought by many to have been his greatest accomplishment. (Snead)

It is not known with a certainty the exact location of old Fork Church. It was east of Central Plains--about a mile east. (Snead) Mr. J.P. Tillman, when a youth, remembers an old decaying frame church building just off of Route 6, about two miles west of Fork Union. Mr. Tillman took us to the site of the old building.

In 1866 the old Fork meetinghouse was offered for sale and the proceeds to go for the education of the children of maimed and dead soldiers. In September the old Fork meetinghouse was sold for forty dollars. Captain Snead remembered that in his youth, he attended preaching in the old Fork meetinghouse. Mr. Lavender states that Fork Church during the early years did not confine its meetings to any one building. Sometimes the church (congregation) met in the brick meetinghouse and at other times the old Fork building near Central Plains. Mr. Tillman recalls the old decaying building which he knew in his youth being called by some folks the poor man's Baptist church. Was this building our old Fork Church? It could have been.

This much abbreviated account of early Baptists in Virginia is given to answer the two questions raised earlier. The above chronicle places the Fork Church in the mainstream of Baptist beginnings in Virginia, and further, it records how Baptist faith was brought to the fork community. The Fork Baptist Church, Fork Union Baptist Church since 1925, was related to, in fact, our church is a child of the Separate Baptist movement known in Virginia during the mid1700's.

Notations

Church business sessions in the early days were held on Saturday afternoons. Usually a preaching service followed. From the beginning only male members participated in the business session and the names of those attending were recorded. It may well be assumed (although the record does not say so) that the female members were given the privilege of participating in the business session in 1913 when the names of the female members attending the business session were recorded, along with the names of the male members.

There were no standing committees for years. All committees were appointed for a given responsibility, and when that responsibility had been met, the committee no longer existed.

The church building the, brick meetinghouse, must have been cold in the winter, for several times the sermon, when given before the business session, would be made a short one. A motion was made in the late 1800's to buy a furnace, but nothing came of that notion.

Fork members were to expected to "abstain from all appearances of evil." Rules of conduct were set by the congregation (the male members for many years). An offender was invited to appear before the church, usually at the Saturday afternoon sessions to explain the offending acts. Upon a sincere repentance, the offender was forgiven. If the offender was dismissed from membership, it was not a closed door. Later, upon repentance the offender would be returned to the full fellowship of the church. It seems that drinking and dancing were the frequent charges. The church was often called upon to settle arguments between members that today would be settled in court.

When Fork Church was constituted, it was in Albemarle Association; later the Fork joined the James River Association, 1832. Fork returned to Albemarle in 1855.

There was a strong temperance movement in the area led by General Hartwell Cocke. The temperance organization had its own hall.

A number of community Sunday Schools were sponsored by Fork Church. Frequently, these Sunday Schools were conducted by Academy cadets. There was a Sunday School in the Mountain Hill community. The Sunday School met in an old building which was known as the Mountain Hill Chapel. Later, 1915, the building was sold. Cadets had a Sunday School, 1917, near Fork Union Station (Cohasset). This entrance follows the recording of the selling of the Mountain Hill building. There were at times a Sunday School at Bremo and one in the Glen Arvon neighborhood.

In 1915 the Academy offered the church the privilege. of connecting to the Academy's water system. The offer was accepted.

A library was established in 1846 with 293 volumes. (Church letter to the James River Association). The next reference to the establishing a library was in 1958 when a library was instituted.

Until the Academy Chapel was built in 1937, the Academy's large assemblies (graduation, etc.) met in the church.

It is interesting and inspiring to note the Fork Church, through the years has been supportive of missions, benevolences, education and the social betterment of its people and its community.

A Chronological Table of Old Fork Church

- 1798. Old Fork Church constituted from Lyles.
- 1824. Brick meetinghouse (present church) built.
- 1832. Fork Church with three other churches organized James River Association, October 6.
- 1842. Sunday School organized.
- 1844. Membership roll listed 326 black members and 299 white members.

1852. Fluvanna Church constructed.
1854. Corinth Church dedicated.
1854. A meetinghouse for Bethel was built by the members of Fork Church. Bethel was an arm of Fork meetinghouse cost \$1,500.
1855. Fork Church returned to Albemarle Association.
1861. Church meeting on 'Saturdays was changed to Sunday before preaching because the military was drilling on church grounds.
1862. Pastor Whitescarver recommended that the Temperance Hall be used as a hospital for wounded soldiers.
1880. Blinds put on church
1882. Church was used by the Fork Union Graded School for closing exercises.
1886. The brick floor of the church was removed and sold for \$5.25. Wooden floor placed. Envelop system used for special offerings. The WMU was organized.
1888. Offerings at services were received by basket.
1889. Church sent letter to the General Association's Committee on the orphanage asking that Fluvanna County be considered as a site for the proposed Baptist Orphans' Asylum.
1898. October 14. Convocation for the first session of Fork Union Academy was held in the evening at the church before the school opened the next morning, October
1899. May. The Academy's first graduation exercises were held in Fork Church.
1907. Men met to clean up rubbish from old hotel site. Church voted to reserve a portion of the church for the cadets on Sunday morning.
1909. Christmas program with tree for the children was given by the church.
1911. The November record indicates the design of the church building then was as we know it today.
1911. The church requested the family of the late Dr. George H. Snead to bury him in the churchyard. The church accepted the plan offered by Columbia Church for calling a pastor. Salary was shared in this manner: Fork, \$1500; Bethel \$800; Columbia, \$250.
1912. Plans for a memorial window honoring Dr. George H. Snead approved. Church voted to buy new organ. \$750. A person was hired to pump the organ.
1913. Steps and concrete walk placed at north entrance to the church. Church voted to have gutters placed on west side of church to fill more easily the baptistry. The church was divided into "rooms" for Sunday School by curtains. Names of female members as well as names of male members were now recorded for church conferences.
1914. Individual Communion set bought.
1915. Social Committee appointed to direct amusements of the church and community.
1916. Ushers appointed. Organ placed in choir loft. Wall and ceiling were adjusted to accommodate organ in new location.

- 1919. Motion carried to raise money to buy a parsonage. Church resolution sent to State Highway Commission affirming the church's support for a national highway "through this place."
- 1920. Church wired for electricity. Current furnished by Academy. Basement of church improved to accommodate two Sunday School rooms.
- 1921. Church adopted budget system. A committee was appointed to canvas the church membership.
- 1922. Land for cemetery given by Mr. and Mrs. Cabell H. Snead.
- 1923. Fork Church received this year \$400 from the Virginia Board of Missions and Education.
- 1925. Fork congregation changed name of church to Fork Union Baptist Church.
- 1938. Sunday School Annex constructed.
- 1940. Cemetery enlarged by four acres given by Mr. and Mrs. B.A. Burgess.
- 1945. Pipe organ placed in church
- 1947. Bought Bethel's share in parsonage.
- 1948. Training Union begun. Bought new stove for kitchen.
- 1949. Three thousand dollars was pledged to construct present baptistry.
- 1951. Construction of present parsonage begun.
- 1953. Crump House rented for Sunday School
- 1956. The Sunday School building was dedicated.
- 1958. The library was reestablished.
- 1959. The Brotherhood was organized.
- 1961. Rotation of deacons began.
- 1966. Interior of church renovated.
- 1976. Road Camp ministry begun by Brotherhood.
- 1986. Organ repaired.
- 1990. Two female members elected deacons.
- 1991. Pictorial directory of church published.
- 1991. History Committee appointed to prepare history of our church in observance of our church's 200th anniversary.

Roster of Pastors

P.P. Smith..... 1830-1845

William Moore..... 1846-1851
James Fife Supplied 1 year
William A. Whitescarver 1852-1869
J.B.T. Patterson..... 1871-1875
T.L. Johnson.....1 Year
Andrew Broaddus 1875-1878
George H. Snead 1878-1911
A.L. Shumate1 year
F.G. Lavender 1912-1920
Cosby M. Robertson 1921-1931
James L. White, Jr..... 1931-1936
J.W. Cammack..... 1936-1942
Walter C. Scott..... 1943-1947
T. Lee Richardson..... 1948-1950
H.W. Connelly 1951-1953
Roger R. Clement..... 1954-1963
Jerry L. Holloway 1963-1968
Clyde A. Kirby..... 1969-1973
W. Malcolm Fuller..... 1974-1978
Mr. Elliot (Interim)1978-
Harold W. Johnson..... 1979-1988
A. Paul Thompson (Interim)..... 1988-1989
William J. Bess 1990-2002
John Chandler (Interim, Summer)2003
James Pardue (Interim) 2003-2004
Warren L. Johnson..... 2004-2017
Anthony Clore.....2018-present