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Presbyterianism in Clark County,
Arkansas, 1857-1900

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. James Berryman

Department of Religion

Ouachita Baptist University

In Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Special Studies

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by

James Ryan

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Bound on three sides by the Ouachita, the Caddo, and the Little Missouri River, the rolling lands of Clark County, Arkansas, were availed to pioneer homesteading in the mid-nineteenth century. The young state opened its doors for settlement in 1840, with the Donation Law, which permitted settlers to obtain tax forfeited land in return for future payment of taxes. Thousands of pioneers flocked to Arkansas, from as far away as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.¹ Homesteaders, traveling by wagon train and river boat, began to prosper as farmers and merchants. With them, the settlers brought a deep sense of religion. Repercussions of the "Great Awakening" of the 1830's were felt in the camp meetings held in various communities.² Presbyterians had first moved into the Arkansas Territory in 1828;³ however, it was twenty years before large numbers of the faithful Calvinists began to congregate. This paper will discuss the growth of Presbyterianism in Clark County, Arkansas, from 1857 until 1900.

In 1857 a group of seven women, organized under Colonel Lewis Bullock as a prayer band, managed to exert enough influence to have a Commission from Ouachita Presbytery organize a church

¹"Migrations Into Arkansas, 1820-1880," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. XVII, Number 4, Winter, 1958.

²Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas, (Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890), p. 123.

³Presbyterianism in Arkansas, (Little Rock: The Arkansas Democrat, 1902), p. 11.

in Arkadelphia.⁴ At this time, society in Arkansas was largely male-centered and male-administered; thus the women had somewhat of a time persuading their husbands to support the venture. In the end, the men felt it to their advantage to support their wives. Organized with fourteen charter members, the First Presbyterian Church called Reverend A. L. Beatties as their pastor. Beatties was the first minister licensed to preach in Ouachita Presbytery. He served the community, not only as a minister, but as a schoolteacher ~~also~~.⁵

Six years after its organization the Arkadelphia congregation built their first building, which doubled as Reverend Beatties' school. Located in the main area of town, on land donated by W. A. Trigg, the structure was erected of red brick, adorned with green shutters. The building had two white doors on the north side, one for men and one for women. A bell tower was erected in the church yard two years later. The bell was salvaged from the sunken steamboat, the Will S. Hays, on the Ouachita River.⁶

The first elders of the church were Colonel Bullock and James Morehead. Shortly after the construction of the church building, two more elders were elected, David Stewart and Otis Patten. In commemoration of this election, Stewart and Patten

⁴"A Brief History of One Hundred Years of Service," pamphlet of the First Presbyterian Church in Arkadelphia, 1958.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

presented the church with its first communion service. Reverend A. L. Crawford succeeded Reverend Beatties as pastor in 1865. Crawford helped to bring the church back to its appointed service after the confusion of the Civil War. Faithfully serving his church and county, Governor Harris Flannigan, a member of the Arkadelphia congregation was forced to reside in Washington during Federal occupation. The church increased its membership preportionately during Reverend Crawford's and Reverend F. M. Howell's pastorate.⁷

Reverend W. T. Howison came to the Arkadelphia pulpit in 1878 and immediately set forth to "revive" the church. Howison, serving his position as Moderator of the Session of the Church, August 13, 1872, witnessed the following resolution:

The Session entered into a free discussion of matters pertaining to the welfare of the church and especially in regard to the apparent lack of zeal of some of the brethren. It was resolved that the members of the Session make it their duty to see these brethren and urge upon them closer attention to spiritual matters and if the suggestion are not heeded, to make them subject to discipline.⁸

The Sessional Clerk was instructed to cite twelve members to appear before the Session "to give reasons for non-attendance in the services church and their failure to contribute to the object of benevolence."⁹

⁷Ibid.

⁸Minutes of the Session, First Presbyterian Church, Arkadelphia, Arkansas, August 13, 1882.

⁹Ibid.

Reverend Howison was succeeded in 1885 by Reverend J. C. Williams. Williams, serving his first pastorate, was ordained in the Arkadelphia church.¹⁰ A graduate of Arkansas College, Batesville, in 1882, and Columbia Theological Seminary in 1885, he did much to bring lost souls to Christ. Williams died at 94 years of age.¹¹

Joseph Doby was a native of Roane County, North Carolina, when he moved to Clark County in 1860. Searching for a land resembling that of his home state, Doby settled due west of Arkadelphia some fourteen miles. A graduate of Davidson College with a core in languages, he had operated a mercantile business before moving to Arkansas. Doby and his wife, Margret were both of Presbyterian faith.¹² At the same time, Edward McCallum, his wife and son, Joseph, moved into vicinity of the Doby's. The McCallums were from Robeson County, North Carolina. Arriving with the McCallums was Mr. McCallum's brother-in-law, J. C. McGill, and his family.¹³

Meeting with Reverend A. R. Banks, a Presbyterian Home Missionary, the three families were able to organize the Carolina Church. Joined in their efforts by M. G. Fairbairn,

¹⁰"History of One Hundred Years of Service."

¹¹A Centennial History of Presbyterians in Arkansas, (Little Rock, 1954), p. 31.

¹²Biographical and Historical Memoirs. p. 137.

¹³Ibid., p. 148.

they were ministered to regularly by the traveling pastor. Margret Doby died in 1860, leaving two children. Faced with the problem of burying his wife, Joseph Doby donated land for a church and cemetery.¹⁴ In 1861, he married Ann Eliza Williamson, daughter of Dr. Samuel Williamson, former President of Davidson College. Dr. Williamson had moved to Arkansas in 1856.¹⁵

Serving the Carolina Church as well as the Arkadelphia Presbyterian Church, Reverend A. L. Crawford led the small community of believers to build a house of worship in 1867. In that same year, Captain William Paisley, a Confederate veteran and prominent Dallas County businessman moved to the community and opened a mercantile business with Joseph Doby.¹⁶ With this new business the community, which came to be known as Dobyville, began to grow. Stan C. Harley moved to Dobyville from Dallas County in 1871 and began to teach in the newly erected schoolhouse. Paisley and Harley, joining the Dobyville Church in 1870 and 1875 respectively, were of very prominent Presbyterian heritage.¹⁷

¹⁴George Davies, private interview with the great-grandson of Joseph Doby, Gurdon, Arkansas, February 9, 1973.

¹⁵Biographical and Historical Memoirs, p. 449.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁷Anniversary Celebration brochure 1915, including membership list.

Grandfather to Captain William Paisley, John Paisley, located in America in 1745, coming from Scotland. The Paisley family moved to North Carolina from Pennsylvania, their first home in the new country. John Paisley served the Continental Congress in the Revolutionary War as a colonel.¹⁸ Stan C. Harley's family arrived from Emerald Isle, Ireland to locate in Augusta County, Virginia. The family later moved to Marshall County, Mississippi, then to Dallas County, Arkansas and to Dobyville.¹⁹

The little church was ministered to by the Arkadelphia pastors until 1880, when Reverend Samuel Orr moved to the community. Reverend Orr opened a general store and eventually, a cotton gin was installed.²⁰ The community grew as the church grew. When Reverend Orr was joined in 1881 by Doctor G. W. Davies, the church boasted 63 members. Doctor Davies eventually married Joseph Doby's youngest daughter, Margaret and settled in the Dobyville area. In 1885, Doctor G. W. Davies resigned the pastorate to join the congregation.

¹⁸Biographical and Historical Memoirs, p. 158.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 142.

²⁰Robert Patterson, private interview with a former member of the Dobyville Presbyterian Church, Dobyville, Arkansas, February 23, 1973.

Captain William Paisley moved to newly established town of Gurdon directly south of Dobyville. Paisley opened a dry goods store selling "goods valued from \$10,000-12,000."²¹ In 1886, joining with Dr. A. B. Moore, W. H. Hammett, his brother, D. L. Paisley, J. C. Williams of Arkadelphia, Paisley led in the organization of a Presbyterian Church in Gurdon. Paisley donated land for the church to be built on in 1890.²² Services were held in the local school until the structure was erected.²³

Reverend I. P. Osborne accepted the pastorate of the First Church in Gurdon as the congregation moved into its new sanctuary. Serving the Dobyville church as well, Osborne saw many of his Carolina congregation move into the rapidly growing railroad town. In 1900, the Gurdon church reported 107 members. Many of the town's more prominent citizens are listed in the membership of this church.²⁴ Its heritage lies deep with the Carolina Church at Dobyville.

The history of Presbyterianism in Clark County is hidden beneath countless undiscovered sessional records and is lost in the minds of those who lived in the early days of the county. In spite of this, the services these three churches

²¹Biographical and Historical Memoirs, p. 158.

²²Memorial Book, First Presbyterian Church, Gurdon, Arkansas.

²³Presbyterianism in Arkansas, p. 185.

²⁴Register of Communicants, First Presbyterian Church, Gurdon, Arkansas.

have offered and the influence they have held for their communities is immeasurable. The community at Dobyville was founded around the Carolina Church and played the role of missionary to Gurdon in the late 1800's. The Arkadelphia church has been the bulwark of Presbyterianism in the county as the largest, most prosperous. The days of pioneer church building are over for Presbyterians, but the story of their life and their work remains to remind us of the heritage of our Christian fathers.

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