



REMARKS ON HISTORY OF THE LITTLE RIVER BAPTIST CHURCH GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY

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Two hundred years and sixteen days ago, on June 22, 1772, John Lewis and Joseph Hutchison, Trustees of the Little River Baptist Church, purchased a part of this lot on which we stand. The one-acre lot at the time was bought from Samuel Wyckoff for the sum of 20 shillings, equal to about \$2.50 today. The deed stated the land was to be used for the purpose of erecting a Meeting House for the Denomination of Anabaptists. We know that the Church was built within the next six years because on September 2, 1778, another deed is on record transferring the Wyckoff farm to Pierce Bayley, "Except for the lot whereon the Baptist Meeting now stands."

The first church on this lot must have been built sometime between 1772 and 1778. It is not unreasonable, though, to speculate that the building was completed before the end of the year of 1772. I suggest it was started as soon as the harvest was in. Why would there have been further delay? Timber for building was readily available and every pioneer settler was a builder by necessity. This was, however, the second Little River Church.

Three years before this lot was bought, a deed was recorded on September 2, 1769, transferring a lot from William West to Benjamin Hutchison, John Smarr, John Shipley, and William Berkley. That lot, located about 1-1/2 miles northwest of here, contained a one-room log building which had been used as a school house. The deed provided that the building would be used "as a public meeting house for the Worship of Almighty God and the Baptist profession." It would also continue to be used as a school. The purchase price was one shilling, or 12 cents into today's money – though we must observe that land was more plentiful and money much scarcer than it is today. The date of that deed in 1769 is the generally accepted date of the founding of Little River Baptist Church.

The question may now be asked about how the living Church, not the building, came into being. Rev. Westwood Hutchison described the way it happened in his address at the 160th Anniversary of the Little River Church on 1 September, 1929. One of the leading Baptist missionaries in the middle-eighteenth century was Elder John Garrard, who had followed a route for the Lord that carried him from England to Philadelphia to Mill Creek (near what is today Martinsburg, West Virginia) to Loudoun County. One of his converts was John Thomas, who founded the Ketocin Baptist Church in 1751. Elder Garrard also converted David and Joseph Thomas, two brothers, who organized the Little River

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Baptist Church in 1769, consisting of fifteen members with Richard Major being ordained as Pastor. We are told that within two years the Church had 272 members and covered a territory from Upperville to Manassas.

Life was difficult for Baptists in the days before the American Revolution. It was the law of the land that all men must regularly attend the Anglican Church and pay tithe taxes for its support as the official church of the Colony of Virginia. Many Baptists went to jail for refusing on both counts. David Thomas was jailed on many occasions. He had a special license to preach, but only at a given church and at specific times. His crime was that he took seriously the Great Commission of Jesus and preached at every opportunity.

The story is told of a time when Richard Major, the Pastor of Little River, was violating the law by preaching at Bull Run in Fairfax County. A warrant was issued for his arrest and a Sheriff's posse was formed to take him to jail. The posse made a mistake by waiting long enough to listen to Major's sermon. Some of the members of the posse, including two huge Davis brothers, were converted while they listened and turned into defenders of Major. They drove the posse away without arresting the preacher.

There is no doubt that the members of Little River Church were among those ardent defenders of individual and religious freedom which resulted in the adoption of the Bill of Rights in our Federal Constitution. It is highly questionable that America would have survived as we know it without the influence of the Baptists of Virginia working through such men as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. You will recall that Thomas Jefferson was proudest of all that had been the author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and asked that it be noted on his tombstone.

The circumstances are unknown, but the record indicates that the third Little River Church building was constructed in 1814. It was a brick building which would stand for 76 years. This particular building contained a special balcony for its colored members, most of whom were slaves.

In 1851, doctrinal differences among Little River's members resulted in the withdrawal of some who founded the Mt. Zion Old School Baptist Church which still stands about a mile from here on Route 50. The split was part of a much larger division among Baptists in the South over the question of election and evangelism.

The year of 1888 was an eventful one in the life of the Little River Church. First, H.B. Hutchison asked the County Court to build a new road from the Church directly to Route 15 for convenient access to the highway. The request was granted and within three months the road was built. The road stands behind us now marked as route 600. It still bears the name "New Road," though it is now 84 years old. The second notable development that year was a determination that the brick walls of the church were unsafe. There was no question that replacement was necessary, so a new building was begun.

The fourth Little River Church building was completed and dedicated on the 5th of July, 1890. This, of course, was the building which stood until last December 11, when it was destroyed by fire.

Today we are left to wonder at God's purpose and His plan. Why has Little River Baptist Church continued as a living body for over 200 years while so many other churches have fallen by the wayside? Only Broad Run Baptist Church at New Baltimore in Fauquier County is older than Little River as a continuing Virginia Baptist Church. Does God have special plans for Little River?

One thing we know is that it is the members of this, or any other, church who makes it live, keep the faith, and work for the Lord. It is God-loving people – past, present, and future – who bind a Church together and make the difference between success and failure.

Each of us is like a traveler on the river of life. We can look back up the river a short distance only. It has been our great good fortune to have known many of the world's finest people in the Little River Baptist Church. No sum of money could buy the worth in Christian love of people like Brother and Sister William and Bessie Gilbert, Sister Ellen Williams, Brother and Sister Milton, and Betty Ish (the one who played such heavenly music) Brother Tullos Costello (kind, patient, a model Moderator), Sister Gertrude and Edna Ish, Sister Estella Pearson, and the most Biblically wise and compassionate Brother Robert Skinner ... we could go on and on because each of us could add names to the list. Just this week Brother Roland Sowers answered the Lord's call. The important thing is that we are bound together with these people in common love of the Lord and, as He has told us, in love for each other.

We are here today to begin a work together to further prove our love of the Lord. We stand together as evidence of faith that God will see it finished. It is a difficult task but we count it a burden of love. Therefore, it is a privilege and a joy that we are now beginning the fifth House of Worship for the Little River Baptist Church.

Jesus gave us our purpose nearly 2000 years ago. We read the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and spoke unto them saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the World.