Early Presbyterianism in the Lower Cape Fear

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The founder of Presbyterianism in America was Francis Makemie, Irish born and Glasgow educated, who received his license as a Presbyterian minister in 1681. He came to America in 1683 and settled on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia. His home site and burial ground is in Accomac County, Virginia. There is a monument erected there commemorating "The chief founder of organized Presbyterianism in America A.D. 1706, and the First Moderator of the General Presbytery". Reverend Makemie led the movement "to get the Virginia General Assembly to accept the Toleration Act passed by Parliament and signed by King William and Queen Mary in 1689." This act was passed by the General Assembly in 1699. "It provided for the licensing of ministers, other than those ordained by the Anglican Church provided they did not represent a sect with political motives or rules that forbade members from being in the militia." Makemie immediately received his license to preach in his homes. He became the first licensed preacher outside the Anglican Church in Virginia.

Presbyterianism was much slower arriving in the Cape Fear country. It was not until after George Burrington became Governor of the Colony on January 15, 1724, that the Cape Fear country was opened to settlers. Until 1724, the country was a vast untapped and deserted wilderness. The time was ripe to open up this rich and well-watered land for development. There was no Indian danger as they had been defeated, and an end had been put to piracy. With the removal of these two dangers settlers would feel safer in taking up land, clearing it and building their homes.

Burrington got to know the land he was governing. One of his first acts was to lay out a road in 1724, "from Nuse to Cape Fear River about one hundred miles in length." He reopened the land office and began issuing warrants for land. Some few had taken up land in 1723 and Burrington accepted the fact. During the winter of 1724-25, he spent in the Cape Fear country, distributing land, travelling widely, exploring the land and checking the channels of the Cape Fear River.

Before 1724, there may have been a plan to establish a Welsh settlement on the Cape Fear. Thomas James, a Welshman, was granted three parcels of land totalling 1,270 acres on the west side of the Cape Fear "above and below Sedgeby Creek." This land was granted to James by the South Carolina government on August 17, 1714. Three weeks later, Price Hughes, obviously a friend of James, received grants for 3,184 acres of land. Thomas James and his family were murdered by the Indians, his property plundered and "burnt."

A town was laid out in 1726 by Maurice Moore. It was called Brunswick Town. The laying out of a town signalled the beginning of the settlement of the Cape Fear country. The establishment of Brunswick Town gave impetus to trade, a deep water port, and served as the seat of government. Hugh Meredith visited Brunswick Town in 1730 only two or three years afterwards. He was not impressed with the town. He described it as "poor, unprovided, with only 10 to 12 scattered mean houses, and hardly worth the name of a village."

It wasn't long before the Scotch-Irish, the Scotch Highlanders, the Pennsylvania Welsh, the Swiss Protestants and others began to come to the newly opened Cape Fear country. There are reports that a few Scots (Scotch Highlanders) were living on the Upper Cape Fear by 1729.

At this time in North Carolina there was a scarcity of ministers or preachers. Governor George Burrington became the first Royal Governor. On March 15, 1731/1732, he wrote to the Bishop of London seeking aid. There were two ministers of the Church of England, one Presbyterian minister and four Quaker meeting houses in North Carolina to meet the spiritual needs of the people. We are not told the name of this Presbyterian minister, or where he was located.

The Irish Protestants were Irish Presbyterians. In America they are called Scotch-Irish. They did not come to America until after 1730. There may have been a few scattered families before that time. John Fiske tells us

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RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION IMPOSED BY COMMERCIAL AND DESPOTIC ECCLESIASTICISM.”

The Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia at the Fall Synod held in Philadelphia in 1720 discussed the causes which forced the recent emigration from Ulster to America. Twenty-six ministers attended the Fall Synod. Four causes are given. “(1) Religious persecution by the Episcopal authorities, of a nature most galling and outrageous; (2) A system of unjust and unwise landlordism, which served to discourage thrift and enterprise; (3) Prohibitory discrimination against the trade and manufacture of Ulster in favor of England; (4) The enforced payment of tithes to the Episcopal clergy, to sustain a theocracy which the Presbyterians believed to be contrary to the laws of God, and known to be destructive of their own rights and liberties.”

The first large group of Scotch-Irish to settle in the Cape Fear country were from Ulster. They had been persuaded to settle in America by Henry McCulloch and they were to be exempted from quit-rents for ten years. McCulloch and Governor Gabriel Johnston had 60,000 acres laid off in 1735 in the Black River region. In 1736, 60,000 acres on the North East Cape Fear and 72,000 acres from the North East Cape Fear to the head of Black River were granted to Henry McCulloch. The Scotch-Irish and others were settled on the North East Cape Fear grant.16 Henry McCulloch’s son reported that 400 emigrants settled in Duplin County, and the family retained 64,000 acres.17 It was these people that formed the congregations of Goshen and Golden Grove Presbyterian Churches in Duplin County.

About 1730, the Pennsylvania Welsh from the Welsh Settlement located there and in Delaware began to emigrate to the Cape Fear country and settle in an area known as the Welsh Settlements in New Hanover county along the North East Cape Fear. These settlements are plainly noted on the Moseley Map of North Carolina, 1733. Sometime in 1730 Hugh Meredith, a former business partner of Benjamin Franklin in the printing business visited Brunswick on the Clarendon River and journeyed overland up the North East River to where David Evans, a Welshman and a magistrate from Newcastle, had settled.18 The bounds of the Welsh Tract were set by court, held at Brunswick on the 16th of March 1737/1738. The bounds were “from Burgo Creek and the Widow Moore’s to the bounds of the precinct.”19 It is possible these Welsh settlers and others who settled among them were responsible for organizing the congregation at Rockfish.

The first of the Scotch Highlanders to arrive in a large body numbered 250 individuals and they came to the Cape Fear in 1739. Most of them after tarrying in Wilmington for a few months moved on up the Northwest Cape Fear. Those Highlanders that arrived later followed this first group.20 Some members of this early group may have settled the Black River area near what is now known as Corbett’s Ferry and Ivanhoe and became the organizers of Black River Chapel in 1740. After the defeat of the Highlanders at the battle of Culloden in 1746, entire families and families of their friends left Scotland for North Carolina and settled along the Cape Fear River. They occupied a large area of land with present day Fayetteville as the center.21 The Scotch, the Scotch-Irish and the Swiss Protestants were Presbyterian.22 It is my opinion that most of the Pennsylvania
Welsh coming into the Cape Fear country were Presbyterian. Early Presbyterian church records from September 20, 1710 to September 20, 1715 mention the Welsh, the Welsh Tract, Pennsylvania, the petition of the people of the Welsh Tract and the Great Valley. The petition was received with great respect. A Mr. David Evans was ordained the 3rd of November 1714.24

The Cape Fear country was never blessed with too many ministers, either of the Anglican Church nor of the dissenters. An occasional missionary came through the country. In late December, 1739, George Whitefield, an English religious leader and a strict Calvinist, came to Wilmington and was the house guest of James Murray. He preached twice on December 30, 1739. Once in the morning and again in the afternoon, both times in the Court House. He was well received. George Whitefield was a strict Calvinistic fundamentalist who believed that one could not be saved without having an emotional experience.25 Occasional itinerant missionaries were not able to organize congregations. They did not stay anywhere for more than a day or two.26 Lawrence Lee, authority on the history of the Lower Cape Fear notes, “There is no evidence of an organized Presbyterian congregation in the Lower Cape Fear until after the Revolution.”27

The first Presbyterian minister to preach in North Carolina was William Robinson. During the winter of 1742-43, he preached in the Piedmont settlements. While preaching at Cub Creek he received a message from Hanover requesting a visit. If he came to New Hanover he probably visited Duplin County.28 In 1742 James Moir, an Anglican missionary reported from New Hanover County, “We have no churches. Of the population of 3,000 inhabitants, two-thirds were slaves and one-third whites. Of the 1,000 whites Rev. Moir reported one-half or five hundred of the total white population were dissenters of various denominations.”29 There may have been a Reverend Samuel Black living in the Duplin county or New Hanover County area about 1730/1744. There was only one minister who had lived in the Cape Fear country before 1760. This Presbyterian minister was Hugh McAden who served the congregations of New Hanover and Duplin Counties from 1759 to 1768.30

Hugh McAden was the first Presbyterian minister to settle in North Carolina.31 This was after he had made a missionary trip visiting most of the Presbyterian congregations in the State. He left his home in Pennsylvania on June 3, 1755 and reached the James River on his return on May 19, 1756. McAden arrived in Wilmington on Friday, January 13, 1756. He preached twice on the Sabbath, January 15, in the morning “to a large and splendid audience.” Only about a dozen showed up for the evening service. He left Wilmington on Tuesday, January 17, “greatly distressed” by the Sunday evening audience. Wednesday, January 18, he arrived at old Mr. Evans, in the Welsh Tract. There he preached on Sunday the 22nd and again on Sunday the 29th. He notes in his diary was detained by the affliction and entreaties of this people, — they wanted time to get a subscription drawn up, that they might put in a call for me. On the 29th the people “expressed great desire for his return, and made out a call for him as their pastor.” Hugh McAden preached two more Sabbaths while in the Welsh Tract, at John James. He spent forty-four days in the New Hanover and Duplin area, twenty-one of which were spent in the Welsh Tract. He preached at Mr. Dickson’s, the clerk of Duplin County. “The people here being very desirous to join with the Welsh Tract in putting a call for me.” “The people seemed all very hearty in giving him a call and making a proper support for him.”32 Hugh McAden returned to the Cape Fear country and became the resident minister of the congregations in Duplin and New Hanover for almost nine years. When he moved away from Duplin and New Hanover Counties to the church at Hawfields on March 7, 1768, the local congregations were without a successor for a long time. There may have been occasional missionaries.33

The Presbytery of Newcastle, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Maryland listed James Campbell as minister, Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1745.34 (Fayetteville did not exist in 1745. Hanna is giving the modern or present location of James Campbell’s ministry.) Hugh McAden, Goshen (1755), and Welsh Tract (1755), both in North Carolina are listed on the roll of Synod in 1760, from the Presbytery of Hanover, Virginia.35

At the Synod in 1760, Synod of New York and Philadelphia, it was estimated that there were 200 to 300 congregations serving the Presbyterian settlements, and there were from fifteen to twenty such congregations in North Carolina.36 Perhaps three of these congregations were located in the counties of Duplin and New Hanover: Goshen, Welsh Tract and possibly Black River.

Reverend James Tate, an Irish Presbyterian minister, arrived in Wilmington to conduct a classical school and to serve as a missionary in the Cape Fear country. Some authorities give 1766 as the date of his arrival and others give the date of 1760.37 Tate’s Academy lasted until the Revolution.38 One historian evaluates Rev. Tate as “one of the most useful men of the period, the Rev. James Tate who opened the first classical school in Wilmington.”39 Rev. Robert Tate, another Presbyterian minister of a more recent period, declared Reverend James Tate to be a “profound scholar and the first teacher of classical literature that ever was in that town (Wilmington).” As a man he was of easy and courteous habits, as a professor of religion he was consistent, and as a minister of the gospel his sermons were edifying, — he was indefatigable in his ministerial labors, in journeys often through different parts of the State, before and during continuance of the war, literally going from house to house, teaching and baptizing children. Rev. James Tate had never been dismissed from his Presbytery in Ireland, and he was not connected with any Presbytery in America. There are a goodly number of old persons now living in the counties of Duplin and New Hanover, who were baptized by this minister, and nearly all of them, of whom I have any knowledge, are members of some Presbyterian Church.40 During the Revolution, Rev. James Tate served as Chaplain of the 1st North Carolina Battalion beginning on October 13, 1775.41 In 1777 he served as Chaplain with the 4th North Carolina Regiment, Germantown, Pennsylvania. He conducted services to the troops at Clover and Germantown as evidenced by the following advertisements or General Orders issued by the Command. "Head Qrs. Clover, July 19th 1777: B.O. Divine Service will be performed by the Rev. Mr. Tate, at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning on the Brigade Parade"42 and "Brigade Orders. Germantown, Aug, the 2nd 1777: The Rev. Mr. Tate will perform Divine Services this afternoon at 5 o'clock, the Capts. will see that all the men off Duty attend and behave Properly."43 Rev. Tate lost
all his possessions in the fire of 1786. His service certificate for 358 pounds was destroyed when his house burned. 44 "On Dec. 11, 1786, the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina voted to pay Rev. Tate one-fourth, 89 pounds 10 shillings and to issue a certificate for the balance." 45 Rev. James Tate was remembered by a friend, William Wilkinson who evidently knew his demise was near. In his will drawn and signed on the 22nd September 1780 willed: "To the Reverend Mr. James Tate five pounds yearly for five years after my decease, and also whatever sum of money he may be indebted to me." 46 The Reverend James Tate died in 1795.47

The Revolution was over. Another classical school was opened in Wilmington about 1785. Rev. William Bingham came from Ireland to preach and to conduct a classical school. It is said he supported himself with the school.48 He later moved to Chatham County where he established a classical school.49

The Synod of Philadelphia reports the following congregations of the Cape Fear country as being without ministers for the year 1788, namely: Goshen in Duplin, Golden Grove, Long Creek and Moore's Creek.50 Two of the churches were in Duplin County and the last two were in New Hanover County. No mention is made of Black River Chapel. The congregation there appeared to continue its ties with the Scottish Church.51

1770 to 1795 was one of the most crucial periods in the history of the Cape Fear country, the State of North Carolina and the United States of America. The Orange Presbytery was organized at the beginning of this period, on September 5, 1770.52 This was a trying time for the Presbyterian settlements and their congregations. It is most unfortunate that the minutes of the Orange Presbytery were burned.53 The minutes of the Orange Presbytery begin with Presbytery, held at New Hope Church, November 18, 1795.54

A great religious revival began to sweep the country following the Revolution. It was "slower in reaching the Cape Fear region than it was in spreading through other Presbyterian sections." Some few of the leaders of this revival were Mr. Murdock McMillan, Malcolm McNaier and John Gillespie. Colin Lindsey came to Black River Church direct from Scotland in 1790. Samuel Stanford served as minister to the Black Run and Brown Marsh churches. Robert Tate served the churches of Rockfish and South Washington. It is reported "so many joined the church under the preaching of these ardent men that in 1812 the Synod set off the Cape Fear territory as Fayetteville Presbytery."55

The first statistical report of the Fayetteville Presbytery, made on April 18, 1815 lists two ministers serving Presbyterian churches in this part of the Cape Fear country, namely: Samuel Stanford and Robert Tate. Rev. Samuel Stanford was minister to the churches of Grove and South-River. Total communicants numbered 128, and eleven infants were baptized. Rev. Robert Tate was minister to the churches of Black River, Hopewell, Rockfish and Keith. Eight new members had been added during the year with a total of 120 communicants and four adults and forty-four infants were baptized.56

Presbyterians in Wilmington were remembered in the will of William Wilkinson. This will was made, signed and witnessed on the 22nd of September 1780. This is evidence that there was a goodly number of Presbyterians living in Wilmington at that time. The will's item is, as follows: "Toward the building of an house of worship in the town of Wilmington for persons of the presbyterian communion provided such house of worship shall be begun within seven years after my decease, I give the sum of five hundred pounds to be paid by my Executors to such person or persons as shall be lawfully authorized to receive the same for that purpose." The will was witnessed by Thomas Maclaine, James Read and John Huske. His executors were Cornelius Harneft, Archibald Maclaine and William Hill. The will was proved at the November Term Superior Court in Wilmington, 1780.57

The next mention of Presbyterians in Wilmington was on Wednesday, 7th December 1785 when "Mr. Maclaine presented the Petition of divers of the Inhabitants of Wilmington, Members of the Protestant Presbyterian Church," to the House.58 He later presented a Bill for incorporating the Protestant Presbyterian Church. The Bill for incorporating was read for the first time on the 8th December 1785.59 The Bill passed on December 29, 1785 read as follows: Laws of North Carolina—1785 "An Act to Impoverish Certain Persons Therein to Receive, sue for and recover all Such Bequests, Donations, Benefactions and Other Things as Have Heretofore Been Bestowed, Given or Made by any Person or Persons Whatsoever, for the use of the Congregation or Society of the Presbyterian Communion at Wilmington." John Hill, Thomas Wright, John Huske, Thomas Maclaine, Robert Wells, John Bradley and James Reed were appointed Trustees. The purpose was to protect funds of the Presbyterian congregation. Ground had already been purchased on which they planned to erect a Presbyterian Church for the "use and benefit of the congregation or society of the Presbyterian communion at Wilmington."60

The Presbyterian communion at Wilmington continued to remain inactive until 1817 when The First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington was organized.61 The church remained inactive until after 1820. The Fayetteville Presbytery report for the year April 1819 to March 1820 notes that the Wilmington Church is "not yet organized and the number of communicants not yet ascertained."62 In 1859 a large lot was purchased by the Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church. The lot was purchased from Isaac W. Hughes of Craven County and Adrian H. Van Bokkelen of Wilmington for the sum of seven thousand and five hundred dollars. This transaction was signed on the 25 May 1859. The church Trustees were: James H. Dickson, Oscar G. Parsley, Edward Kidder, Robert W. Gibbs, Isaac Northrop, John A. Taylor, James Owen, Edward P. Hull, Levi A. Hart and James Chasbourne.63 The large lot purchased in 1859 is the site of the present First Presbyterian Church. Other church buildings had been erected and dedicated as early as 181964 but they burned. It is said that funds for building the first church had been raised by lottery. Fire destroyed the first church November 3, 1820. In the opinion of the Dr. Peyton H. Hoge, a later pastor of the church and its historian to 1892, it wiped out "the reprobation of the church of having raised the money for building it by lottery."65

The earliest Presbyterian churches in the Cape Fear country were Black River Chapel (1740), Grove (1756), Rockfish (1756), Brown Marsh (1756), Moore's Creek (1788), Union (1793), South River (1796), Hopewell (1800), Keith (1817) and Wilmington First (1817).66
Charles A. Hanna in his The Scotch-Irish and writing of Early Presbyterian Churches and Settlements of North Carolina assigns the following dates: Goshen in Duplin County (1740), Welsh Tract (1745-55), The Grove (before 1755), Wilmington (1785), Moore's Creek (before 1788), Rockfish in Duplin County (before 1789), South Washington (before 1798), Brown Marsh (before 1799), Hopewell (before 1799) and Keith (before 1799).67

The earliest gift deed of land to a Presbyterian congregation in the territory is found in the New Hanover County Book of Deeds—Book I, Page 760. SIMON MALPASS TO THE INHABITANTS OF V. MOORES CREEK “I Simon Malpass of the Widow Moore's Creek in the County of New Hanover and State of North Carolina for and in consideration of the regard and Love that I have for the worship of Almighty God and the advancement of our Lord and Redeemer's Kingdom I do by this presents of my own free will and accord freely and absolutely give convey confirmed and set over for the use to the People and inhabitants of said Creek and the people round about ONE ACRE of Land for them or any other person and their Posterity forever to erect or build a Meeting House for the Public Worship of Almighty God.” This deed dated the 14th February 1800. The signing of the deed was witnessed by William Bloodworth and James Malpass.68 A most interesting statement appears in the Session Records of Hunts Church, North Carolina, 1830-1834. “For several years past the Rev. Robert Tate preached at a Free Church called Moore's Creek one Sabbath in the month. But no Presbyterian Minister preached there since the year 1812; except the Rev. Alexander McIver, missionary agent who preached there once in 1830. Several persons residing in the neighborhood connected themselves with the Presbyterian Church chiefly at Black River Chapel.69 The Moore's Creek Presbyterian Church was organized in the fall of 1858. The first Ruling Elder was Samuel Baker Riverbank who had been an Elder at Black River Chapel from which he was dismissed to the Moore's Creek Church.”70

The Rockfish Female Missionary Society was the beginning of woman's work in this area. The Society was organized in 1817 by the women of the congregation of Rockfish Presbyterian Church. Their first contribution to the North Carolina Missionary Society was in 1818. They contributed $17.50. $6.00 was given to Rev. Robert Tate for the purchase of Tracts. The early records have been preserved.71 The Women of the Church are successors to those courageous women of old Rockfish Church, and they have made and are continuing to make an outstanding contribution to the Mission of the Presbyterian Church.

FOOTNOTES

2. Ibid., p. 216
3. Ibid., p. 101
6. Ibid., p. 65.
7. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 79
10. Meredith, Cape Fear Country, pp. 7-29
14. Ibid., v. 1, p. 383
15. Ibid., v. 1, p. 1
16. Ibid., v. 1, p. 15
17. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 183-4
18. Foote, North Carolina, p. 159
19. Meredith, Cape Fear Country, pp. 7-29
20. New Hanover County, Court Minutes, Abstracted, compiled and edited by Alexander McDonald Walker, Mimeographed, 4 volumes, 1738-1800, Bethesda, Maryland, 1962, v. 1, p. 3 hereinafter to be cited as Court Minutes
21. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 184
22. Foote, North Carolina, p. 129
23. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 225
27. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 225
28. Foote, North Carolina, p. 158
29. Saunders, Colonial Records, V. IV, pp. 605-6
30. Rev. D. I. Craig, Development of the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, Richmond, Virginia, 1907, p. 11, hereinafter to be cited as Craig, North Carolina.
31. Foote, North Carolina, p. 175
32. Ibid., pp. 164-175
33. Ibid., p. 32
34. Ibid., p. 175
35. Hanna, Scotch-Irish, v. 2, p. 95
36. Ibid., p. 94
37. Ibid., p. 94
38. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 196
39. James Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, Raleigh, 1914, p. 544
41. Robert Tate, Rev. Tate's History of Black River Chapel, Scottish Institute of America, Bulletin No. 1, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1925, pp. 1-7.
42. Walter Clark (ed.) State Records of North Carolina 1776-1790, 14 volumes, last four volumes, S. B. Weeks' index to these and Colonial Records (Winston-Salem, etc., 1895-1914), v. XII, pp. 475, hereinafter to be cited as Clark, State Records.
43. Ibid., v. XII, p. 473
44. Ibid., p. 479
46. New Hanover County Will Book, C-444
47. Court Minutes, V. 4, p. 21
48. Foote, North Carolina, P. 179
49. Ibid., p. 517
52. Craig, North Carolina, p. 11
53. Foote, North Carolina, pp. 78 and 453.
54. Minutes of the Orange Presbytery, 1795-1808, p. 1
56. Minutes of the Fayetteville Presbytery, volume 1, 1813-1824, p. 19, hereinafter to be cited as Minutes of the Fayetteville Presbytery.
57. New Hanover County Will Book, c-444
59. Ibid., v. XVII, p. 328
60. Ibid., v. XXIV, pp. 157-8
61. Dudley, Wilmington Presbytery, p. 28 (map)
63. New Hanover County Deed Book, QQ-9
65. Ibid., p. 17
66. Dudley, Wilmington Presbytery, p. 39
67. Hanna, Scotch-Irish, v. 2, pp. 113-115
68. New Hanover County Deed Book, L - 760
69. Minutes of Hunts Church, 1832-1834, preserved by the Historical Foundation of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.
70. Microfilm of the Minutes of the Sessions of Moore's Creek, Keith and Caswell Presbyterian Churches owned by the writer.