



Bell Church



History of Bell Church

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Bell Church was born at a time, and in a southern place, with competing ideas. During the famous Calhoun-Webster debate over the issue of slavery, and the Missouri Compromise in particular, Calhoun mentioned the numerous ties that once held the Methodist Episcopal Church together. He said they “are all broken and its unity gone. They now form separate churches — they are arrayed into two hostile bodies . . .” Webster, in expressing his own disappointment, said: “I looked upon that religious denomination as one of the great props of religion and morals throughout the whole country.” It was widely held that “the Baptist cords had also snapped and the Presbyterian chords were giving way.”

Long before the Civil War, Francis Asbury wrote of a visit on September 27, 1806. He said: “I rode twelve miles to Turkey Creek, to a kind of camp meeting. On the Sabbath I preached to about five hundred souls: It was an open season, and a few souls professed converting grace.” Beginning in 1865, B.F. Wells became the first preacher for what was then known as the Sulphur Springs Circuit. This center for “Northern Methodism” later became Leicester.

Although he had always opposed slavery, Frances M. Fanning (1812-1881), had been the Presiding Elder in the Asheville District of the Southern Methodist Church. Shortly after the Civil War drew to a close, he became the key leader as the Methodist Episcopal Church returned to the south and developed a strong Asheville District. At the urging of Fanning and many others, Methodists were asking “What can we do to help some four million former slaves?”

It was a new era for connectional Methodist Episcopal work in Western North Carolina and elsewhere. The circuits in and about the Blue Ridge were largely served by native preachers either ordained or local. A strong Northern Methodist Movement in Leicester influenced congregations forming throughout the area. Leicester was widely known for its then well established Turkey Creek Camp Ground.

Bell Church was organized in 1866 at the home of Walter A. Gillespie on South Turkey Creek. It was known as a “Preaching Place” that was frequented by circuit rider Francis Fanning. The congregation later worshipped in the Union Church Building on the Turkey Creek Camp Ground from 1872 until moving to its present location. As freedom continued to ring throughout the south, Bell Church was named after the bell that called people to worship along the corridor that is now New Leicester Highway and Newfound Road.

Professor Henry Ketron was a prominent member of Bell Church as he also headed Brown Seminary in Leicester. The denomination quickly embraced the concept of “freedman’s aid” and established its own Freedman’s Aid and Southern Education Society. Today Bell Church faithfully carries out the work that needs to be done. It quietly feeds the hungry as it nourishes souls. It clothes the naked and guards their dignity. It shelters the homeless as it covers them with intercessory prayer.

Bell Church is actively engaged in balancing the needs of its seniors with the imperatives of young families. It is now focused on new educational initiatives and outreach. It is poised for growth, just as it was on the day of its founding.