

The History of the Cowan Cumberland Presbyterian Church



At a specially called meeting of some of the members of Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church and of the citizens of Cowan and its immediate vicinity, in the year 1886, it was decided to erect a Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Cowan.

John Cowan Montgomery gave the lot on South Cowan Street we now occupy.

On the first day of May, Mr. Ben Glidwell and a Mr. Kevil, employed to erect the said building, laid the corner stone and the work was begun.

Dirt was dug deep from the red clay earth, and home-made brick were fashioned therefrom to erect what is the present sanctuary of the church. The mortar was of a lime composition. Although exceedingly well buyilt, with interesting "dress lines" on the building, close examination will reveal that the brick vary in length and thickness.

The building was completed on September 25, 1886. Having a number of brick left on hand, and a sizeable hole already dug, Mr. Glidwell and Mr. Kevil decided to make a few more brick and build a house over the hold, utilizing it for a basement. So thus came the home of J.T. Proby.

On October 31, 1886, the new church was dedicated. Rev. G. W. Mitchell preached the dedicatory message, using as his text Gen. 28: 17 - "And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

The total cost of the lot and building was only \$2500! It was paid in full at the time of dedication of the building.

A revival was immediately conducted by Rev. G. W. Mitchell and Rev. R. D. Shook, beginning Nov. 7 of that year. Forty-nine members were received into the church. Many of them came from Goshen.

One of the first acts of the session meeting was that of determining that the church should always be used as a house of God. They wrote into their minutes this stipulation: "This house or church should be used for no other purpose whatever than preaching or other meetings such as are calculated to elevate society and the standard of morality. Also that no person shall be allowed to occupy the pulpit of this church who is not considered orthodox. No charges to be made at the door for anything." Acts of March 10, 1887.

Goshen: Our Mother Church

Cumberlandism had its immediate outgrowth in this area from the old camp grounds where "protracted meetings" (sometimes protracted two months!) were conducted. The site is now occupied by Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which is the mother not only of the Cowan Cumberland Presbyterian Church, but also of most of the other churches of this area.

Denominational Roots and the Question of "Church Union"

In order to explain the complex issue of "Church Union" that affected Presbyterianism in Cowan, one has to understand the denominational history of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. At the height of a nation-wide revival, known as the Second Great Awakening, the Presbyterian Church responded slowly to the demand for more ministers to carry the gospel into the American frontier.

The Presbyterian establishment placed incredible emphasis on the formal training and education of its ministers; however, there were scarcely any trained and educated Presbyterian ministers willing to leave fine learning institutions, such as Princeton, to work on the front lines of the wild frontier. Cumberland Presbytery, feeling a sense of urgency, ordained ministers of the gospel who had not yet completed their formal education and training according to the standards set forth by the Presbyterian establishment. To make matters even worse, some of these ministers were openly opposed to select teaching elements of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In the resulting fallout, the higher court in Kentucky Synod dissolved Cumberland Presbytery and refused to recognize the ordination of its newest ministers.

On February 4th, 1810, three ministers from the former Cumberland Presbytery - Rev. Finis Ewing, Rev. Samuel King, and Rev. Samuel McAdow - met Rev. McAdow's home in Dickson, Tennessee and organized the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The group's willingness to respond to the urgency of the Second Great Awakening led the church to grow exponentially throughout the 19th Century. By the turn of the 20th Century, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church had grown more than 200,000 members spread throughout the nation as well as ten colleges of higher learning.

At the height of its continuing growth, in the Year 1906, the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church voted to reunite with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the majority of the church membership concurred. However, a significant minority of Cumberland Presbyterians were opposed to the union and this contributed to stressful times in local congregations.

The Cowan Cumberland Presbyterian Church was clearly divided on the issue of church union. A sizeable group intended to go with the union movement while another wanted to continue as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Both factions of the congregation stayed together briefly and shared the same facility until the "Church Union" group left to build a new Presbyterian congregation on East Cowan Street. The continuing Cumberland Presbyterian congregation remained in the original church facility on West Cowan Street.

The 20th Century

The period of time following the union movement left the continuing Cumberland Presbyterian congregation in a state of struggle. Much of the church's energy was devoted to reevaluating the present situation and determining the church's future. The members agreed to disallow any apathy toward the departing members and to work for a peaceful and cordial relationship in the community.

It took fifteen years of patience and persistence before the church finally repositioned and hired a full-time minister for the first time since the departure of the church union group. From there the congregation grew steadily into a full-program with a growing membership.

In 1926, the church invested in an expanded and improved facility to accommodate a very successful Sunday school program. Further expansion took place in the 1950's with an upgraded facility, including restrooms and the construction of a manse across the street for a new full-time pastor. Growth further increased in the 1950's when the church organized one of the most successful men's fellowship groups in the denomination's history. Later, the Sunday school program expanded further and the Sunday school facility itself received the additional classrooms.

Cowan Cumberland Presbyterian Church remained one of the largest and most active congregations in the entire denomination until the decade of the 1980's. The fast downturn in Cowan's economy forced many families to move away in search of employment. Membership declined initially, but returned to the previous level as an influx of new industry in other parts of the county brought new jobs to the area.

Cowan C.P. Church Today

Cowan Cumberland Presbyterian Church entered the 21st Century as a vibrant and stable congregation and continues with promise of future growth. The facilities were upgraded with the addition of a new Christian Education complex with full accessibility. Lighting and sound systems were modernized, and the congregation continually operates with the benefit of a full-time minister, a well-trained choir, and a Christian education department for all ages.

As the town of Cowan revitalizes with new homes and new businesses, this historic congregation welcomes a future as bright as her past!

