

The History of Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church

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Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church, located near Cowan and above Boiling Fork Creek, is Franklin County's first organized church and played a major role in the pioneer settlement of the area.

In 1808 Rev. Gideon Blackburn, a Presbyterian minister, organized the first church on Goshen hill. Most of the pioneer settlers in Franklin County were Scotch-Irish immigrants from Ulster Plantation (now known as Northern Ireland) and most had a Presbyterian faith history.

Of course, there were no churches in the area at the time of his arrival. The religious practices of families in the American frontier involved prayer and scripture reading at home. Then, on occasion and maybe once per year, a minister of the gospel would visit and hold camp meetings so that area families could hear preaching, receive the sacraments, and break bread with fellow believers.

Camp meetings grew in popularity and importance as part of the Second Great Awakening, a revival movement that swept pioneer settlements and even the established churches in New England. Rev. Blackburn was a product of this great revival.

The influence of the Second Great Awakening on Presbyterianism in America is critically important to the history of Goshen. Unlike their Methodist and Baptist brethren, the Presbyterian establishment in the United States was divided on its view toward the revival movement. Old School Presbyterians placed a huge emphasis on the formal education of ministers. That emphasis made it difficult for Presbyterians to respond quickly to changing demographics, namely the vast population growth in the American frontier. Another related issue was the fact that ministers who were trained at Princeton and other prestigious institutions were less inclined to brave the wild frontier.

Cumberland Presbytery, a geographical body of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, responded to the urgent need for ministers by ordaining a group of men to preach and administer sacraments without a formal theological education. Some of these men also opposed certain

elements of the Westminster Confession of Faith and embraced a more Armenian theology of "whosoever will".

Kentucky Synod of the Presbyterian Church refused to recognize the newly ordained ministers, and voted to dissolve Cumberland Presbytery. In response to those actions, 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 meeting took place on February 4, 1810.

Rev. Samuel King was among the ministers who helped organize the first camp meeting revival at Goshen in the Year 1810. A brush arbor was built for holding the services and a camp ground developed to house the visiting families. Revivals at Goshen were usually held in the month of August consisting of powerful church services, singing, instruction, meals, and fellowship. Literally hundreds of people, including area slaves, were baptized in the first few years of the annual camp meetings. Some 13 men who attended services at Goshen in the first two decades entered the ministry of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

Rev. Robert Bell was installed as the first pastor of the newly organized Goshen Church and the first five Elders were: James Keith, John Cowan, James McCord, William Alexander, and Benjamin Wear. The original church structure was built with logs and served also as a pioneer school for the area.

A permanent brick facility was constructed in 1844 to replace the log structure. Written memoirs from the church tell conflicting stories about what became of this particular church building. The general consensus is that it was destroyed during the Civil War along with the campground cabins when Union soldiers stayed on the premises through an entire winter season. Others claim that the building survived the Civil War and was used until a wood-frame replacement was built shortly thereafter.

In post-Civil War years, Goshen grew into a more traditional church setting. The camp ground was never replaced; however, a new brush arbor was constructed in 1865. The church building was then used for services year round except when the annual August revivals came around and the church met in the brush arbor. By the early 20th Century the pastor of the church was a stipendiary position.

In 1949 the congregation undertook a massive building and growth program. By 1952 a new brick structure was built using generous contributions of money and labor from church members and extended family. The building stands today having received several updates and one significant expansion.

Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church continues the tradition of August revival meetings; however, these days the revivals last a few nights rather than several weeks, as in the old days. The adjacent Goshen cemetery contains some of Franklin County's oldest graves and with the names of pioneer families still well-known in Franklin County. The church membership still consists of some of the founding families and settlers, namely Cowan's, Keith's, Knight's, and Williams', among others.

As Franklin County's first organized church and as one of the first congregations in the entire Cumberland Presbyterian denomination, history is alive and well at Goshen!



Source: "History of Goshen Church", prepared by Hazel Money Cowan for the Golden Jubilee Celebration held on May 8, 1960.