

## The Old Army Chapel on North Poplar Street

By L. Jarod Pearson



The church facility that houses Hope Baptist Church is a Cowan landmark with a long, complex history behind it.

The wood-frame church building with its large front spire was originally a chapel for Camp Forrest in nearby Tullahoma. Camp Forrest operated from 1941 until 1946 as a training camp for the U.S. Army during the Second World War. The chapel was among several great assets at Camp Forrest, including a library, a post office, a hospital, and a theatre.

Camp Forrest disbanded at the end of World War II and most of the assets were sold at auction. In this exact timeframe a group of Cowan residents organized a new Methodist congregation temporarily meeting at Cowan Public School. Cowan Methodist Church purchased the chapel at auction and moved to its present location on North Poplar Street adjacent to the Public School. The first service in the relocated chapel was held on April 14, 1948.

The Interstate Highway System sparked a realignment of populations from rail-oriented communities to road-oriented communities. Cowan fell victim to the changing demographics and began a slow, steady decline in population and economic strength. By the middle of the 1960's the Methodist congregation in Cowan was barely sustainable. In 1962, the Cowan Methodist Church and the Cowan Presbyterian Church met to discuss the idea of merging the two into a larger congregation with shared resources and a single facility. On June 17, 1962, the two groups met and voted to accept a proposed union agreement under the name Cowan Fellowship Church.

Cowan Fellowship initially met for services in the former Presbyterian Church while using the army chapel as a youth and fellowship building. In 1965 the former Presbyterian Church was sold to a newly organized (and short lived) congregation of the Church of God - Cleveland

Assembly. Cowan Fellowship Church consolidated all services and programs into the army chapel until a new and larger facility could be built. Cowan Fellowship then moved into a newly constructed church facility in 1969.

The old army chapel sat vacant for the next few years until it was acquired by the Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga. Juniors and seniors at Highland Park's Tennessee Temple University led services and provided other ministries as part of their training. The program ended in the 1980's and the army chapel stood vacant again.

In September 1992, members of the community organized and chartered Hope Baptist Church under the leadership of Pastor Bill Owens. The congregation acquired, repaired and updated the old army chapel for long term use as an Independent Baptist Church.

Today, the old army chapel houses an active and growing congregation with a vibrant missionary program. The building stands as a proud landmark with a storied and complex history.

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