

Early History of Mount Olivet United Methodist Church

Arlington's Oldest Church

BY HANK HULME

On the twelfth of March 1855, John B. Brown and his wife Cornelia deeded approximately nine-tenths of an acre of property in Alexandria County to seven individuals in trust for a Methodist Protestant¹ meeting house and burial ground.² On the thirtieth of March 1855, William Marcey and his wife Ann deeded the same piece of property to the same individuals in trust for the same purpose. The location was the southwest corner of Glebe Road and Brown's Bend Road (now 16th Street North). And with that, Mount Olivet United Methodist Church became the oldest church site in continuous use in Arlington County,³ known at that time as Alexandria County. In 1847 that part of the District lying on the western bank of the Potomac was returned to Virginia as Alexandria County.⁴

Undoubtedly some of the Mount Olivet members attended services at "Church Hill" on Leesburg Pike in Fairfax County. Built by Colonel William Adams around 1750, it was a stopping place for the first Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury. Attendance shifted to "Fairfax Chapel" when it was constructed about 1780 on the north side of what is now Seven Corners. The churchyard is now Oakwood Cemetery.⁵ In the mid 1800s, Methodist preaching in Arlington began in the area known as Walkersville near the north intersection of Glebe Road and Dittmar Road. Homes in the area were used for services. The names and locations (present day names) of those believed to have been active in forming the Mount Olivet church show that there was widespread interest in erecting a house of worship. Some of their homes undoubtedly were host to worship services. A few to mention are:

William Minor, known as Bill Joe, from Minor's Hill

George Ott Wunder from Lee Highway and Old Dominion Drive

John D. Payne from Seven Corners

Samuel Titus from upper Glebe Road

John Birch from Wilson Boulevard and Pollard Street

William and Julie Shreve Birch from Wilson Boulevard and Buchanan Street

Samuel and Horatio Ball from upper Clarendon

William Birch from Bon Air

William Marcey from Glebe Road just north of the church

John Marcey from Marcey Town, north of Cherrydale

When parishioners began to discuss forming a church, the Methodist Protestant Church had separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1830, and was a young twenty-eight years old. Its ministers were young, vigorous, evangelistic and looking for opportunities to establish new churches. The future Mount Olivet area was a part of the Maryland Annual Conference. This conference covered Maryland, the District of Columbia, and parts of Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia, and Virginia. The Potomac Circuit was included in this conference. Circuits or charges were comprised of two or more Methodist churches that were served by a "Circuit Rider" minister. The churches in a circuit or charge were "mission churches," or a "circuit church" if it was considered the strongest church in the charge. Salem Church, now Great Falls United Methodist Church near Forestville, was the closest church in the Potomac Circuit to the present Mount Olivet and is considered its mother church. In 1853, the Maryland Annual Conference assigned Dr. E. J. Drinkhouse to the Potomac Charge. Associated with him was young Oliver Cox, who was assigned as the sole pastor in 1854. It was the vision and energy of these two ministers that lent encouragement to the group of farm folks and tradesmen meeting in homes around the future Mount Olivet location.

At the March 1854 Annual Conference held in Easton, Maryland, Dr. Drinkhouse was assigned elsewhere and Oliver Cox was assigned to the Potomac Charge. Conference minutes noted that the Potomac Charge had forty-four members, fifty Sunday School scholars, eight teachers and W. C. Lipscomb as a local minister, i.e., a lay person who was not an ordained minister.

It would be the group mentioned above along with Oliver Cox, the young and handsome minister serving his first year as pastor of the Potomac Circuit, W. C. Lipscomb, and others that would meet in the home of William Minor to decide whether to build a church. Although the exact date of this meeting is unknown, there is a degree of certainty that it was the fall of 1854. At the fiftieth anniversary of the church, Frank L. Ball, a well known and beloved local attorney, in his book, *Mt. Olivet Methodist, Arlington's Pioneer Church*, writes that he recalls the remarks of George O. Wunder, one of the founders and most probably the Chairman of the Trustees at that time, remarking that "he lay aside the shucking peg" to attend. It was well known that corn was shucked in October and November in this area and so the meeting had to be in one of those months.

Next to decide would be where to build it and what to name it. A location central to the existing parishioners would be a logical conclusion. Travel was difficult. Glebe Road, unpaved and canopied by trees, was barely wide enough to permit the passage of two horse drawn carriages, yet it was the main travel

way between Alexandria and Chain Bridge and beyond. What is now Wilson Boulevard ran from Clarendon to Payne's Corner (Seven Corners) and crossed Glebe Road at Ball's Cross Roads (West Ballston). Brown's Bend Road at Glebe Road was midway along the Glebe Road route and stretched into Falls Church. Thus, this location was accessible to many of the parishioners.

And so it was that a disputed parcel of land became the focus of attention as a location for the church. Both William Marcey and John B. Brown claimed the parcel of land immediately south of Brown's Bend Road and fronting Glebe Road. The contested parcel contained 3 rods and 9 poles [sic]. Brown claimed that his north line ran to the south boundary of Brown's Bend Road and Marcey claimed that his land extended to the south 13 poles [Ed. note: 214.5 ft.] beyond this boundary along Glebe Road. Frank Ball's book, in describing the location selection, states "It is often the case that differences between individuals will be resolved to the benefit of others who are in no way connected with the original dispute." A delegation was dispatched to approach Brown and Marcey to seek their donation of the disputed land to be the location of the new church. The mission was successful—a friendly settlement was made and each individual deeded the land to the trustees for a church building. The trustees were William Minor, Smith Minor, George O. Wunder, Henry Wunder, Vallorous G. Austin, and Ranel Farnsworth, all of Alexandria County, and Nicholas Lemon of Fairfax.

There is no documented record on the naming of the church, but tradition says that young minister Oliver Cox selected the name Mount Olivet. Undoubtedly this came from the Biblical text in Matthew 28, verses 16-20 giving the location where Jesus spoke to the eleven disciples. It was on Mount Olivet that he proclaimed the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...." The Mount of Olives or Mount Olivet is a ridge of hills at an elevation of 2,700 feet, a little more than a mile long in the West Bank of Israel east of Jerusalem. Rising about 200 feet above the city there is a commanding view of Jerusalem. At its western foot is the Biblical site of the Garden of Gethsemane.

Having achieved a site and chosen a name, all that was left for this company of courageous church people to do was raise money to purchase building materials and solicit volunteer labor to build the church—no small undertaking! Indeed, following the laying of the cornerstone in 1855, it took six years to complete the edifice. Volunteers hauled materials, donated stone, and performed carpentry and common labor work. The grand sum of twenty-eight hundred dollars in cash was contributed. It's been said that "a noble little band of women" cooked, baked, and held suppers, bake sales, picnics, and fairs.

The original church building was a two story frame structure, about 36 by 50 feet, resting on a stone foundation. There was a large vestibule in front and

a large room on the first floor, which served as the day school taught by Mr. Cox during the week and as the Church School on Sunday. On each side of the vestibule stairways led into the main auditorium on the second floor, with a gallery above at the end. The seating capacity was about 350.

Unfortunately, school during the week and Sunday worship in the church continued for only a very short time before the Civil War intervened. Following the first Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, defeated and injured Union soldiers made their way back toward the defenses of Washington. The newly constructed church became a makeshift hospital and gallantly served as the recovery location for the physically and mentally wounded soldiers. After several months, it served as a commissary, a guard post and as a lowly stable for officers' horses. As winter approached, there were over 50,000 Union troops encamped nearby. They comprised regiments from Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Ohio. One by one and in increasing amounts, the timbers so laboriously erected were removed to better the lot of the encamped soldiers. Used for tent platforms, writing desks, and even firewood, the building was totally demolished. Witnesses say they saw the Michigan and Ohio troops carrying the lumber away.⁶

In celebration of Mount Olivet's one-hundredth anniversary, a centennial pageant was produced.⁷ In that play, there is a scene around a Union campfire where a chaplain is questioned as to why he made such little protest against the use and ultimate destruction of the church. The chaplain's reply reflects the church's attitude toward that wartime event. He replied: "It has worried me for a long time. Of course as a hospital it was serving mankind by sheltering the sick and the wounded. I could find no wrong in that. Sometimes I have thought the wounded healed more rapidly while they were under its roof. The stable idea hurt my pride at first. Then I remembered that Christ was born in a stable and that he would have found shelter even for animals. So I held my protest." When questioned about tearing the church apart piece by piece he replied that seeing the boards used to keep sick soldiers out of the mud and in a warm and dry wooden bunk, or building a floor under their leaky tent, or using the boards as a writing desk to write to their loved ones, he couldn't protest because he saw the love and sacrifice that built the church still living to serve Christ.

After the Civil War, the church attempted to seek payment for the damaged structure. In 1890 a bill for recovery of damages was introduced into the US House of Representatives. Also, the annual conference petitioned Congress for prompt action on the claim. On April 27, 1904 the Congressional Committee on Claims referred the request to the US Court of Claims for a finding of facts with regard to the loss and also the loyalty of the church to the Union. In the fall of that year the US Circuit Court conducted a hearing. Testimony valued the building at \$4,000 upon completion in 1860. The Court awarded \$3,400;

however it would be quite a while before the Congress would appropriate the money to pay the award. As to the finding of loyalty to the Union, two ministers, Oliver Cox and Joseph Portch, one of the founders, George Wunder (a Presbyterian), and three church lay leaders all could truthfully testify to their loyalty.

The money received was applied toward building the parsonage that is still in use and stands on the southeast corner of Glebe Road and 15th Street North. Completed in 1912, the structure was a wooden frame country home with large porches, upright radiators, an unimproved cellar where there was a furnace, and electrical and mechanical systems that were in vogue at that time. A major renovation occurred in 1957. The interior was completely remodeled, including the addition of a study. The exterior was remodeled to include a new porch and the addition of brick facing on the entire house. No significant improvements other than converting a side porch to a year round room were made after that. Major maintenance and interior upgrading occurred in 1988 and the parsonage remains essentially the same today.

The first parsonage was built on the church grounds in 1870 on the ground where the present church sanctuary is. It originally had four rooms – two down and two up – with a very steep stairway. It had a front porch across its entire length and an entrance door in the center. Later one room was added to the west, which was the rear of the house. Around 1900, the rear addition was removed and four rooms were added – again two down and two up. Over the years, additions tripled its size and it stood as the parsonage until the new one was built across Glebe Road. It then was used for a meeting place for Sunday School classes. Frank Ball in a letter dated July 22, 1954 recalls teaching a class in the second front (northeast) corner room.

During the Civil War, without a place of worship, membership and church activity faltered. For several years, no minister was assigned to the charge, and to an outside observer it would appear that the church had been abandoned. But the tiny congregation hung on without funds and lacking much in the way of material possessions. By 1870, along with the parsonage, a small meetinghouse was constructed. It was shared with those worshipping from the Walker's Chapel area. The long one-story frame structure was much smaller than the original church. Eventually it was relocated close to Brown's Bend Road on the church property and remodeled with the addition of a seven-foot square vestibule with a steeple. A recess pulpit was added at the other end of the building. A new pulpit and altar and new pews were installed. Reverend Yingling stated that "On the whole this is a neat little church."

From its beginning until 1889 Mount Olivet was a mission church, receiving some small financial support from the conference. In 1889, the Salem Church near Forestville and Beulah Church, both in Fairfax County, were each of suffi-

cient strength to form a reconstituted Potomac Circuit, rather than mission, of the Maryland Conference. Mount Olivet and its sister church, Walker's Chapel, had grown sufficiently in membership so as to move from the position of mission churches into full church stature as a part of this Potomac Circuit.⁸ Having been a mission church for the first 35 years of its existence, Mount Olivet and the other Potomac Charge churches were now looked upon as equal with the other churches within the Maryland Conference.

From 1870 through the end of the century, Mount Olivet, in spite of being a mission church for part of this time itself, mothered the churches of Walker's Chapel, Cherrydale, Gum Springs, Bailey's Cross Roads, Beulah and "a new work at Lewinsville."⁹ Cherrydale and Walker's Chapel have survived the passing years, but the fate of the others is unknown.

It would not be until 1924, seventy years after its beginning, that Mount Olivet became a "station" with a full time pastor serving only that church.

The 1870 building, remodeled in 1875, served until a much larger structure was opened in 1897. After several years of musing and planning and the assignment of a new pastor, it was decided to build a new church. In 1894 the Reverend Jesse W. Norris was assigned to the Potomac District which then consisted of



Courtesy Mount Olivet United Methodist Church
Mount Olivet Methodist Church, as it appeared in 1897.

Mount Olivet and Walker's Chapel. Mr. Norris had a reputation as a church builder and, notwithstanding that this was a period of economic depression, he immediately took steps towards the construction of a new church. First there was the fund raising. What were known as brick cards were distributed among Sunday School scholars and Christian Endeavor (youth) members. Bricks were represented on the cards and sold for five cents each. Funds were also raised through entertainments, socials, and needlework. These activities, along with contributions from the membership of the church, provided a fund of \$600 by the end of 1894. In the fall of 1895 there was money enough to start the building, and the cornerstone was laid on October 27, 1895 before a large and enthusiastic crowd.

At first, construction moved fast. There were three capable carpenters in the membership who devoted many of their spare hours to the construction project. Other skilled and unskilled workers of the church and neighborhood helped. The foundation was completed by Thanksgiving and the building was enclosed by Christmas. An unusually warm spell allowed the annual Christmas party to be held in the large unfinished room rather than in the small meeting-house. The evening was not without another surprise. Without warning, a thunderstorm blew in, dropping the temperature severely, and folks went home wet and chilly. Construction continued unabated for two years with volunteer help, and dedication was Sunday, October 11, 1897. Dr. H. L. Elderice, President of Westminster Theological Seminary, preached the dedication service.

The completed building was a frame structure with pointed windows and a bell tower with steeple. It had one large room seating 225 people, or 400 when packed in for special occasions. The altar was at the west end and has remained so to this day. The communion rail and table, seats, and pulpit were of oak. Tall plain stained glass windows were along the sides with a large center window in the rear. The vestibule was on the northeast corner. There was a room that contained the church library, at that time comprising almost 1,000 volumes. Four oil lamps lit the space—two over each aisle. A blue sky with white clouds and two or three cherubim floating about the center made up a ceiling mural. The structure was well built, lasting 59 years until being torn down in 1954 to make way for a new education building.

In 1920, an education wing was attached to the south side of the church. In addition, the bell tower was relocated along with the vestibule and stucco was placed on the entire outside. A new heating plant was installed in the large basement built under the new structure. In April 1921 it was reported that the construction was complete—all for \$15,000.

The "Little Stucco Church" served the congregation well until the onrush of persons coming to Washington to take part in the New Deal and then to be a part of the war effort. It was evident that a larger facility was needed. On February



Courtesy Mount Olivet United Methodist Church

Mount Olivet Methodist Church as it appeared in 1920.

29, 1948 ground was broken for the fourth building to occupy this site. The cornerstone was laid November 7, 1948 and the new sanctuary, social hall, and kitchen were completed in time for a regular service on September 11, 1949.

Plans called for a chapel, church offices and classrooms in a two-story and basement addition on the space occupied by the old frame and stucco 1870 church. This occurred in 1954. Additional construction in 1962 expanded the sanctuary into the cemetery and added a two story south wing. The south wing was primarily to create additional classrooms. However a new fellowship hall was included along with a kitchen. The old fellowship hall was converted into classrooms. At this time, church membership approached 2,800 and Sunday School attendance neared 500 with classes being held during both worship services.

A final reconstruction occurred in 1997 with the addition of an elevator, complete rehabilitation of the sanctuary, expansion of the chancel, creation of a gathering space, renovation of the office space, renovation of and adding classrooms and creation of a columbarium.

Mount Olivet's cemetery is a part of the original land deeded to the trustees in 1854 by William Marcey and John B. Brown. Cemetery plots consisting of four gravesites each were sold and deeded to individuals. Unfortunately, the cemetery records, kept by Homer Thomas, Chairman of the Board of Trustees

in the 1920's, were destroyed by fire. Consequently, except what is inscribed on the tombstones, little exists pertaining to the official ownership of the plots or grave burials. It is believed that most gravesites have been used and certainly there are none available for use except those within existing known plots. Even then, there is the risk of discovering an unmarked grave.

There are no records and no tombstones to validate it, but it is highly likely that there are unknown Civil War soldiers buried in the cemetery. Having been used as a hospital during the Civil War, Union soldiers returning from the defeat at Manassas were treated here and in all probability died and were buried here. Also, with 50,000 troops encamped nearby and this being a close cemetery location, it can be assumed that other soldiers were buried here throughout the war. There was no Arlington National Cemetery and mortally wounded soldiers were buried at the most convenient place, so it would only be natural to use this, the Mount Olivet cemetery.

The cemetery is the final resting place of a woman who was somewhat instrumental in creating a special Memorial Day for all veterans of all our wars. Sue Landon Vaughn began the custom of decorating the graves of Civil War soldiers, both Yankees and Rebels, while living in Pearl River, Mississippi.¹⁰ On April 26, 1865, she and other ladies were decorating graves of Confederate soldiers when Mrs. Vaughn decorated the graves of four Union dead. A friend heard of that deed and suggested to General John Alexander Logan, Commanding Officer of the GAR,¹¹ that the practice be established nationwide, and three years later General Logan did so by calling for nationwide decoration of the graves of all soldiers on May 30.

Mrs. Vaughn was born in Lexington, Virginia. After the war, she returned to her native Virginia to be near her sister, Sallie Adams, who was living in Ballston and is buried in the cemetery. Miss Adams' tombstone bears the inscription "Sabbath School Worker and Southern Educator." In a grave beside her lies Sue Landon Vaughn whose gravestone is inscribed "Founder of Decoration Day."

It is probable that the land behind the church became a burial ground at the same time as the building of the original church at this location (1855-1860). Even though the custom was to bury family members in family cemeteries, it is certain that some members of the congregation dying between 1854 and 1865 are buried in the cemetery. There are no records bearing such information, however there is one tombstone dating back to 1860 bearing the inscription:

Harriet Z. Osborn
Died July 31, 1860
age 9 years, 10 months
and 8 days
She sleeps in peace

Three Methodist clergymen who served Mount Olivet are buried here: Hampton Dye, William F. Livingston, along with his wife Amanda and her sister Sadie Embrey, and Edward R. McGregor and his wife Ann. Each of the clergymen's tombstones has a brass plaque identifying him as a Methodist preacher. Also in the cemetery are the graves of local families prominent in the history of the church and Arlington County—Veitch, Donaldson, Shreve, Ball, and Marcey, to name just a few.

The congregational spirit remains strong as the church history has continued with noteworthy achievements through all the war years, desegregation, economic downtimes, fire, and all the other tests of life. Today, Mount Olivet has a vast, focused, and buoyant program ministry and continues to provide leadership within the community and throughout the Virginia Conference.

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Arlington Methodist Churches and Their Dates of Origin

- Mount Olivet – 1854
- Hunter's Chapel – 1864 (Later to become Arlington Methodist Church.)
- Calloway – 1866
- Walker's Chapel – 1871
- Cherrydale – 1899
- Arlington – 1893
- Clarendon – 1901
- Central – 1911
- Calvary – 1922
- Community – 1935
- Christ – 1943 (Now united with Crossman United Methodist Church in Falls Church)
- Arlington Forest – 1943
- St. Mark's – formerly Evangelical United Brethren
- Arlington Temple United Methodist Church – 1962

Endnotes

¹ In December 1784, the famous Christmas Conference of preachers was held in Baltimore at Lovely Lane Chapel to chart the future course of the movement in America. Most of the American preachers attended, probably including two African Americans, Harry Hosier and Richard Allen. It was at this gathering that the movement became organized as The Methodist Episcopal Church in America. The founding period was not without serious problems, especially for the Methodists. Richard Allen (1760–1831), an emancipated slave and Methodist preacher who had been mistreated because of his race, left the church and in 1816 organized The African Methodist Episcopal Church. For similar reasons, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was begun in 1821. In 1830 another rupture occurred in The Methodist Episcopal Church. About 5,000 preachers and lay people left the denomination because it would not grant representation to the laity or permit the election of presiding elders (district superintendents). The new body was called The Methodist Protestant Church. It remained a strong church until 1939, when it united with The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to become The Methodist Church. On April 23, 1968, The United Methodist Church was created when The Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church united to form the United Methodist Church. (United Methodist Church Official Web Site and Book of Discipline 2000, June 2001.)

² Frank L. Ball, *Mt. Olivet Methodist: Arlington's Pioneer Church* (Arlington: Southern Printing and Lithographing, Inc., 1965), Appendix III. Much of the information contained in this article was obtained from this book. Endnotes are not provided for subsequent individual references.

³ Historical Plaque erected at Mount Olivet United Methodist Church by Arlington County Government.

⁴ Arlington County was originally part of the ten-mile square parcel of land surveyed in 1791 to be the Nation's capital. Then known as "Alexandria County of the District of Columbia," it included what is now Arlington County plus part of the neighboring city of Alexandria. The US Congress returned that portion of the land to the Commonwealth of Virginia following a referendum among its citizens. In 1870, the City of Alexandria and Arlington officially separated their jurisdictions, and in 1920, the name Arlington County was adopted to end confusion with the City of Alexandria. (Arlington County Government Official Web Site, June 2001).

⁵ Eleanor Lee Templeman, "The History of Methodism in Arlington" (newspaper article, date and newspaper unknown, most probably *Northern Virginia Sun*).

⁶ 1904 deposition and court records of Court of Claims of the United States, case No. 11,665.

⁷ Melvin Buckingham, Hazel Davis, and Reuben Miller, *Mount Olivet's First Hundred Years* (Mount Olivet Methodist Church, 1954).

⁸ Mount Olivet United Methodist Church, *The One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* (Mount Olivet United Methodist Church, 1979).

⁹ Ball, *Mt. Olivet Methodist*, p. 56.

¹⁰ R. F. Wrenn, H. H. Hughes, Jr. and Erie Prior, *Methodist Historyland* (Methodist Historical Society of Northern Virginia, 1966.) p. 9.

¹¹ Grand Army of the Republic: an American patriotic organization composed of Union veterans of the American Civil War.