



First Presbyterian Church FAMILY HISTORY SERIES



Why God selected our FPC family for centuries to be and remain a powerful beacon of light we do not know. We only know what Christ tells us.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last." JOHN 15:16



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Seeking Christ; Sharing His love

PART ONE

OUR BEGINNING – PERSECUTION

The article below is an excerpt from a December 3, 1911 Norfolk Landmark newspaper article.

First Presbyterian Church in Virginia, organized over two centuries ago by sturdy Scotchmen, still exists.

Over two centuries ago a small band of Scotch immigrants settled on the shores of the Elizabeth River, and after patiently enduring religious persecution for many years organized the first Presbyterian church in Virginia. The successors of this congregation now worship in the First Presbyterian Church, on Church Street near Holt, enjoying the distinction of being the oldest religious body under the jurisdiction of the Southern Presbytery.

After surviving all of the hardships of the early days, they succeeded in firmly planting the banner of Presbyterianism in Tidewater Virginia. History shows they did this prior to 1683, the date of the formation of a congregation at Snow Hill, Maryland, which claims the distinction of being the earliest church.

After the congregations had worshiped for over 117 years in the homes of those who professed that faith, the first Presbyterian edifice in Virginia was erected in 1800 at the corner of Bank and Charlotte Streets. This structure, which has withstood wars and the ravages of time, remains as a monument to those who fought valiantly for religious freedom.

When prosperity became permanent and the little band of Scots and a few Englishmen allied with them began to grow, a larger and more modern house of worship was built on Church Street, and in this the congregation now worships.

Prior to 1683, the date of the founding of the church at Snow Hill, Maryland, the Rev. James Porter, a dissenting minister from Ireland, preached to a band of Christians on the Elizabeth River. When Francis Makemie visited Norfolk, which did not become a town until nineteen years later, he referred to these as "mourning the death of their pastor in the summer of 1684."

Makemie ministered in this tiny congregation until 1692, when the Rev. Jonas Mackie succeeded him, remaining in charge until his death in 1716.

A historical sketch by Dr. Charles Hodge says:

"The records of the Norfolk County Court show that Rev. Jonas Mackie was, in 1692, licensed by that court to preach at three points: at the house of Thomas Ivey on the Eastern Branch, in a house



owned by Thomas Philpot in Tanner's Creek precinct, and at the home of John Roberts, on the Western Branch, and later in 1696, the home of John Dickson on the Southern Branch, was added to the places where he could conduct religious meetings."

Later the Presbyterians at all of these points in the county were united in one congregation and became members of the First Church of Norfolk.

In 1716 Rev. Mr. Mackie died and the pastorate remained, so far as records show, vacant until 1801, when the Rev. Benjamin Grigsby, then a member of the Lexington Presbytery, visited the borough of Norfolk, and after "preaching to the satisfaction of the people" at a meeting of the congregation, held March 17, 1804, he was invited to remain as pastor.

Early in 1800, according to an old volume of the records of the trustees, it was proposed to erect a house of worship and the amount necessary for this purpose was subscribed at a meeting held April 15 of that year.

A recently recovered volume of records established the fact that the church then erected, which is still standing at the corner of Bank and Charlotte Streets, cost a little over \$12,000, all of which contributed by persons living in Norfolk or its immediate vicinity, the amounts of the eighty-seven subscriptions ranging from \$25 to \$300 each.

While many of the subscribers were of Scotch or Scotch-Irish extraction, a large number were Englishmen who belonged to some of the oldest families in this section of Virginia.

According to the archives of the church, the composition of this congregation was similar to that of the old Elizabeth River Church, the first established in Virginia. Records also show that at the time Mr. Grigsby came to Norfolk the Presbyterians had strongly entrenched themselves here.

Regarding a Question of Church History

Those inclined to dispute historical records have asked: was the First Norfolk Church of 1800 a continuation of the Elizabeth River congregation of which old records speak?

In answering this question, Rev. Dr. George D. Armstrong, who for forty years served as the pastor of the First congregation, said in a historical paper now in the archives of the church: "To give an affirmative answer to this question, the principal objection is the absence of all regular church records from 1716 to 1800. In estimating the force of this objection we should consider these facts:

"During all of these years the Dissenters were subject to severe persecution in Virginia, especially in the eastern portion of the State. On this subject Dr. Hodge, giving Bancroft for authority, writes: "Virginia was so completely an Episcopal province, and the laws against all nonconformists were so severe that we can expect but few traces of the Puritans in her early history. Unity of worship was there preserved, with few exceptions, a century after the settlement of Jamestown. As early as 1633 severe laws were made for the suppression of Dissenters who had begun to appear in the colony. In 1643 it was ordained that no minister should preach or teach, publicly or privately, except in conformity with the Church of England, and nonconformists were banished from the colony.

"During the time of Cromwell a spirit of greater moderation prevailed, but with the restoration of Charles II, the Assembly revived all of the laws against Separatists. Strict conformity was



demanding and everyone was required to contribute to the support of the established church. In 1666 the laws were made more severe. Attendance on the ministry of the nonconformists was punished by severe fines, and the rich were made to pay the forfeitures of their poorer brethren.

“Cook says: The law was rigidly enforced. The Dissenters or Independents, as they styled themselves, had a large congregation in Nansemond. But the pastors had to go, their enemies being too strong for them. Some were fined, others were imprisoned and nearly all were driven out of the colony and retired to Maryland and New England.

No sessional records seem to have been kept during Mr. Mackie’s ministry of twenty-four years, nor from 1801 to 1814, during the pastorate of Mr. Grigsby. In 1814, the First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk became a part of the East Hanover Presbytery, and from that year the records of the congregation are complete.

In referring to the lack of records between 1716 and 1800, Dr. Armstrong’s sketch says: “This state of things is not peculiar to the Norfolk church. In so far as I have been able to learn, none of the older Presbyterian churches of Virginia, neither those in the Valley nor those in the Hanover region, have sessional records extending further back than the time at which religious freedom was established in the State in 1785.

“Dr. Mackie came directly from Ireland to Virginia, and during his twenty-four years ministry never attended the meetings of any Presbytery in this country. Mr. Mackie was ordained by the Irish Presbytery of Laggan and was sent out by that presbytery to this country in response to a request from Colonel Stevens of Maryland. There may have been other ministers who visited this church between the years 1716, the date of Mr. Mackie’s death, and 1801; and tradition intimates that such was the case, but of these visits we have no record.”

Rev. R. R. Howison’s History of the Presbytery of East Hanover says: “Careful historic search seems to have demonstrated with reasonable certainty that the oldest Presbyterian church in Virginia existed and still exists within the bounds of the East Hanover Presbytery. And we feel authorized to say that these researches have established a strong probability (which will stand until weakened or destroyed by evidence that may hereafter be discovered) that this was the oldest organized church of our denomination in America.”

Dr. Armstrong Thinks New York Church Older.

Dr. Armstrong did not agree with the claim made by Mr. Howison, the venerable pastor of the First Church, contending that while this is the oldest in Virginia and within the bounds of the Southern Presbytery, it is not the oldest in America, he citing the formation of congregations in New York of 1640 and 1656.

We should leave no less a legacy for future generations than was left for us.

“For the Love of Christ urges us on...” 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14

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