

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

EAST TENNESSEE CHRISTIAN CONVENTION

MILLIGAN COLLEGE – SEEGER CHAPEL

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Do you know what was going on in **1829**?

- Tennessee's own Andrew Jackson began his service as President of the United States that year.
- William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was born then.
- Scotland Yard was founded that year as London's Metropolitan Police Service.
- In 1829 William Austin Burt won a patent for the first writing machine (a typewriter) constructed in the United States.
- And that year, on August 17, at least two Christian churches in East Tennessee met for a conference at Boones Creek. Herman Norton in his book *Tennessee Christians* cites the December, 1895 record of the Tennessee Missionary as reporting that there were "five elders present, and the number of Christians in this section of the country were ascertained to be 472."

It has been 182 years since that simple beginning, and according to some records (and lots of tradition), this meeting has continued without exception every single year since then. As far as we have any evidence or knowledge, this is the longest continuous meeting of Christian churches from this Movement (which is called the Stone/Campbell or Restoration Movement) anyplace in the world. That is quite a significant record!

But there have been some interesting changes and developments in this meeting through the years. Initially it involved, and historically has included even to the present, churches of Southwest Virginia and Western North Carolina in addition to "Upper East Tennessee." The people who settled this region of the country in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were primarily of Scotch-Irish descent and were very independent and resourceful. However, they recognized early on a need for one another and the value of shared strength, so this "Annual Meeting" was considered important enough to give it a high priority.

Barton Stone (who urged people to be just "Christians" rather than any denomination) and Thomas and Alexander Campbell (with their efforts at Reform to adhere more directly to the New Testament as "disciples of Christ") were the recognized founders and leaders of two distinct efforts to draw Christians together on a simple basis of unity. While neither ever visited this particular area, their vision for being 'Christians only' and for endeavoring to go back to the

ideals of the Church expressed in the New Testament for faith and practice certainly caught on with people around here. Both Stone and Alexander Campbell did visit Middle Tennessee, and numerous congregations were established in the Nashville area by the 1820's by them or those who were close to them. As far as records indicate the Boones Creek church in 1825 and Buffalo Creek (now Hopwood) in 1826 were the first of such Christian churches around here.* Both were established by a New Englander named John Miller, who had been ordained by Barton Stone in Kentucky. When in 1832 the two movements merged nationally into one, churches began to spring up in greater numbers across a wider part of the country.

In 1841 churches around Nashville began to discuss getting together for "Christian cooperation," and the next year representatives of 29 congregations met. But here in this more mountainous region gathering together annually had continued for more than a decade by that time, and Herman Norton's book, *Tennessee Christians*, relates that the 1846 meeting, held right here at the Buffalo Creek church, had 18 congregations represented. Three of those churches were from Virginia and one from North Carolina, but the reports told that there were 954 members in the area, and

"the evangelist for the past year, David Buck, had delivered over one hundred sermons and 'had won over 122 converts, including two former preachers,' one a Baptist and the other a Methodist. With such good results the delegates agreed to employ two evangelists for the coming year." [Norton, pp. 51-2]

In 1866 the cooperating churches assumed the support of an African-American evangelist, Hezekiah Hankel, who in 1866-67 preached 300 sermons and baptized 400 people in African-American communities. Some here may recall that just a few weeks ago there was an article in the *Johnson City Press* about Brother Hankel as the founder of the West Main Street Christian Church, the oldest building still in use by a congregation in the city. At the 1867 meeting the participants were so pleased with Brother Hankel's report that they agreed to employ "2 white and 1 colored evangelists for the coming year." [Norton, 143, citing the *Gospel Advocate*, Oct. 10, 1867]

Norton relates also that "the East Tennessee Convention held August 28, 1931 had over 2000 in regular attendance. At one session when Will Sweeney spoke, the estimated attendance was 8,500. Those sessions were held in a tent at the Union Christian Church." [Norton, 16]

Apparently the rest of the state of Tennessee did not give such a high priority to gathering together as did people of this region. That same year with such large numbers locally saw the Tennessee state convention with only a few over 175 people in attendance.

* Although Norton has Boones Creek as 1826 and Buffalo Creek/Hopwood in 1828, records at Boones Creek state it was 1825, and Hopwood has always claimed it started within a year of Boones Creek. (RDR)

Over the nearly 200 year history of this gathering, many things have changed. Where once much emphasis was placed on recording numbers – of members, baptisms, additions, etc., and of reports from various agencies or cooperative works supported by the churches – in more recent years fellowship has taken the top priority. Some of the meetings in past years took place over several days, and even in very recent years sessions have been held for women, church leaders, and other special groups. I can remember the 1960 meeting at First Christian Church in Johnson City (where Downtown Christian Church meets now) when a wide selection of classes and topics was presented for the benefit of attendees. And even this year we still have both youth and adult sessions – besides child care for the youngest among us.

One other item deserves our attention: the varied names by which this meeting has been known. It originally, as said, encompassed East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Western North Carolina even in its title. But it was also known early on, and even somewhat recently, as the "Annual Meeting." In 1846 it was called an "East Tennessee Co-operation." According to Norton the 1891 meeting was the "East Tennessee Convention," and it was so called as recently as 1965-67. But the 1968 meeting reverted to the "Annual Meeting" title, and in 1969 it was dubbed the 140th "Annual Convention."

This hopping about with titles reflects a fear for some people that using the term "convention" might imply delegates and binding resolutions that would be mandates for the various churches. As a people of free and independent congregations, such thoughts provoked great concern. Those fears are now generally removed, and our gathering together rises to the abiding conviction over these many decades that **we need one another**. Free churches we remain, but we are not so totally independent that we can ignore one another. We are in fact, by nature and joyful choice, mutually interdependent, and we can even refer to this gathering as a "convention" without any worries of its exercising control over congregations.

We have a great and historic tradition in this assembly that has continued for almost two full centuries. We must not let it lapse in this generation. But more importantly, for the cause of Jesus Christ and the salvation and sustaining of people yet unreached in this area, we need to **help one another keep on keeping on** until the Lord returns to call us Home.