

**CHRIST CHURCH,
ROWAN COUNTY: AN
HISTORICAL SKETCH**

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Christ Church, Rowan County: An Historical Sketch by Robert B. Owens

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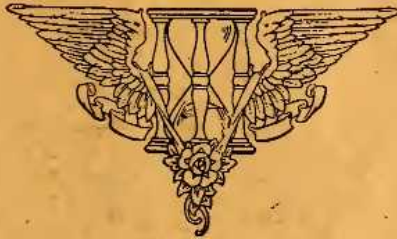
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Christ Church

Rowan County

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH



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Foreword

THIS HISTORICAL SKETCH of Christ Church was prepared in response to the request of members of the congregation, and read at the Centennial celebration. It makes no claim to originality. It is little more than a compilation of materials that have been gathered by other hands, but are inaccessible to most who will read this. I have quoted freely from Hon. John S. Henderson's article on "Episcopacy" in Ruple's History of Rowan county; from Bishop Cheshire's article on "Parson Miller" in "Church History in North Carolina;" from "The Book of Remembrance of St. Luke's Parish" written by Rev. Francis J. Murdoch, and still in manuscript; from Dr. Murdoch's copy of the old "Parish Record and Vestry Book" of Christ Church, made by him before the original was destroyed by fire; from the file of "Journals of the Diocese," beginning with the first convention of Tarboro, 1794; and from various other sources. I have used quotation marks only when they would seem to add interest to the item quoted, and I feel sure that if those whose materials have been thus used could have been consulted, they would raise no objection. If the reader finds anything in this sketch that is thus quoted without credit, let him remember that such credit is **freely** given here.

ROBERT B. OWENS.

Charlotte, N. C., Monday in Easter Week, 1921.

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Christ Church

Rowan County

CHRIST CHURCH, Rowan County, was admitted into union with the Diocesan Convention Saturday, April 28, 1821. But the congregation was organized some years prior to that date, and the history of its beginnings reaches back further still into the last half of the 18th century, to a period antedating the Revolutionary War.

It should be borne in mind that before that war, the Province of North Carolina was under the control of the King of England, and that English laws and customs prevailed. The English Church was the "Established religion," of the Province as it was of the mother country. But the people were accustomed to an established church, and it caused but little restlessness. All denominations during the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries believed that some form of Christianity should be established by law as the Church of the State; and as this was an English province and more than half of its citizens adherents of the English Church; and as the "establishment" was administered in the broadest spirit of tolerance and charity, but little objection was made.

But while England "established" the Church here, she did little else for it. Very little effort was made to give the people religious privileges in the Colonies. Such few ministers as came were, for the most part, missionaries sent out by the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel," a missionary society of the Church of England, and were supported, not by the State, but by that Society. The Bishop of London was the nominal head of the Church in America, but he lived 3,000 miles away and never thought of visiting his distant charge. No Conventions could be held, no Bishops were allowed, and there could be neither organization, confirmations, or ordinations. Candidates for the ministry were obliged to go to London for ordination,—a journey both costly, and so hazardous that it is said that one-fifth of all who set out returned no more. It was an "Episcopal" church without an "Episcopus,"—a body without a head.

The non-episcopal denominations were, because of their different polity, in much more fortunate condition. They could hold their conventions and associations, and could set apart their ministers on the spot, and wherever they chose, and so they grew, while the established church languished; and this growth was, to some extent at least, at the expense of the established church. Adherents of that Church, being deprived of the ministrations of

their own Church, were compelled to make use of the ministrations of the denominational preachers, and it is not to be wondered at if after awhile many of them united with the churches in their vicinity.

I have spoken of these difficulties in order that the faithfulness of the pioneer church people of Rowan may stand out in contrast. They had the **same** difficulties and discouragements, but most of them remained faithful to the church of their fathers, and this fidelity resulted ultimately in the organization of this Church.

Christ's Church, though older than St. Luke's was originally a part of St. Luke's Parish. Rowan County and St. Luke's Parish were formed at the same time in 1753, and their boundaries were coterminous. They included all that vast territory south of Virginia; west of the eastern boundaries of Randolph, Guilford, and Rockingham; and north of the Southern boundaries of Rowan and Iredell, crossing the Catawba river near Beatty's ford, through Lincoln, Cleveland, Rutherford, Buncombe, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Cherokee, and on west indefinitely to the Pacific Ocean. St. Luke's Parish included the territory occupied today by more than thirty counties in North Carolina, besides that indefinite territory outside the present bounds of the state.

It is of course impossible to estimate the number of adherents of the church in the parish at that time, but there were unquestionably a large number. Nearly all the English people and their descendants, as well as the Welch, and many of the Irish were Episcopalians. Hon. John S. Henderson gives the following names of persons living here before the Revolution, as probably Episcopalians: Frohock, Giles, Locke, Chambers, Macay, Dunn, Coles, Boote, Carter, Foster, Churton, Steele, Little, Martin, Rutherford, Pearson, Dobbin, Craige, Brandon, and others.

I have been unable to find any record of ministrations of the church in St. Luke's Parish before the year 1769,—except a single reference in a letter of Dr. Draige to a visit made by "Mr. Cuppels" and baptisms administered by him. In any case, the Parish had no settled Rector before that date. Williamson in his history of North Carolina gives an "Extract from a petition from sundry inhabitants of Rowan County" to Governor Tryon, in which they complain that "Those who adhere to the liturgy and profess the doctrines of the Church of England as by law established have not had the privileges and advantages which the rubrics and canons of the church allow and enjoin on all her members; that the acts of the Assembly calculated to framing a regular vestry in all the counties have never in this county produced their happy fruits; that the county of Rowan lies under great disadvantages, as her inhabitants are composed of almost all nations

of Europe, and instead of uniformity in doctrine and worship, they have a medley of most of the religious tenets that have lately appeared in the world; who from dread of submitting to the national church should a lawful vestry be established, elect such of their own community as evade the acts of the Assembly and refuse the oaths, whence we can never expect the regular enlivening beams of the gospel." This petition was signed by thirty-four persons some of whom "made their mark."

Because of this petition, or for some other reason, Governor Tryon sent Rev. Theodorus Swain Draige to minister to St Luke's Parish for a few months. If he gave satisfaction, he was to be inducted into the Parish. He began his work in Salisbury December 20, 1769, and in a letter to Governor Tryon dated March, 1770, he said "That there was no qualified vestry in the Parish, but that it was proposed to elect one the following Easter monday." Under the law, the vestry was elected by the "Freeholders" and as the dissenting freeholders outnumbered those who were churchmen, they elected a vestry of "dissenters" who refused to qualify, hoping thus to avoid the expense of supporting a clergyman and building a church. The churchmen, however, elected a second vestry who petitioned the governor to induct Dr. Draige, which he accordingly did. They also petitioned him for an act of Assembly appointing twelve men, whom they named, as vestrymen, until a law could be passed which would put it out of the power of the dissenters to prevent the choice of a lawful vestry.

In 1771 Dr. Draige wrote the S. P. G. that "There were, he thought in his parish 900 families of churchmen; that he had established 40 congregations, and baptized 802 persons; that 'Mr. Cuppels' had baptized many on a tour before he (Mr. D.) came; that the parish was 180 miles long and 120 broad; that owing to having no vestry, he had received no salary and but few fees, and had to live at his own expense, and could not for that reason send for his family."

Governor Tryon left the colony in 1771, and Dr. Draige left in 1775. Rev. R. J. Miller, in a letter, said that "After four years of fruitless effort to organize an Episcopal congregation in this section, he left it as he found it, without any."

Soon after his departure came the Revolutionary War, which had a most disastrous effect on the Episcopal congregations of the state. Most of the clergymen were Englishmen by birth and sympathy, and being deprived of their support, and smarting under the unpopularity of all things English, went back to England. Four or five of them however, remained, but it is doubtful if any of them ever came as far west as Salisbury. The Churchmen of Rowan were left as sheep without a shepherd, and in this state of

spiritual destitution they remained for more than a quarter of a century, with no minister to marry them, baptize their children, minister to them the Bread of life, or bury their dead. That they remained faithful to their church under such trying conditions speaks volumes for their early training and their love for the Church.

About the year 1794 there took place an event which later on made the organization of Christ Church possible. In that year a considerable colony of church people emigrated from St. Mary's county, Maryland, and settled a large tract of country extending roughly over a radius of about ten miles from Young's mountain. The ancestors of some of these colonists had emigrated from England with Lord Baltimore's colony about the year 1655, when Cromwell was at the zenith of his power, and the Puritans in control. Cromwell, toward the end of his career became a thoroughgoing puritan; and a loyal churchman did not lead an easy life under his regime. "One disability after another was laid on Churchmen." They were forbidden the use of their Prayer Book, "In 1655, severer measures were proclaimed by Cromwell against Catholicism and Episcopacy. Priests were banished, and Anglican clergymen commanded to refrain from public ministrations." Dr. Luke Barber, and others emigrated to Maryland in 1655, two years before the death of Cromwell, and a year before the government had granted "Religious toleration, but so that this liberty be not extended to popery or prelacy." The emigrant Churchmen found a much greater liberty of conscience under the Roman Catholic Calvert, than they did under the puritan Cromwell, and in Maryland they and their descendants were free to enjoy the services of their own beloved church without let or hindrance.

It is supposed that when General Green and his army passed through this section during the Revolutionary War, among his troops were descendants of these early Maryland colonists, who after the war was ended remembered "that good land" through which they had passed, and loading their household goods into wagons and carts,—the only means of transportation in that early day—made their slow and toilsome way over rough roads to their future home. Among those who came were the Barbers, Chunn, Garners, Harrisons, Alexanders, Lightells, Mills, Reeves, Burroughs, Dents, and others; all neighbors, and most of them related by ties of blood or marriage.

One of those who came was Rev. Hatch Dent (Parson Dent), a clergyman of the Church, who settled on Withrows creek near the small mountain that now bears his name. Unfortunately for the welfare of the Church, he remained only a short time, soon