

The Early Days

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Founding Cove Presbyterian Church during the last half of the eighteenth century must have been an extremely exciting and sometimes frustrating experience. If life was hard in eighteenth-century Virginia, there were the satisfactions of carving farms out of the wilderness and of creating communities cemented together by common experiences, goals, and beliefs. Despite the isolation of life on frontier settlements and the endless backbreaking work, the Presbyterians of Rich Cove eventually overcame every obstacle and succeeding in forming a church.

As Scotch-Irish, they or their parents had been driven out of Ireland in the early eighteenth century by the economic exploitation and religious bigotry of their English cousins. Braving a sometimes deadly Atlantic voyage, they settled first in the backwoods of Pennsylvania and then, as those lands were taken up, moved into the Shenandoah Valley. A small number penetrated through the passes of the Blue Ridge and settled in Albemarle County. As members of the Presbyterian instead of the established Anglican faith, they suffered distinct although not crippling discrimination. Even though Virginia's official intolerance was comparatively mild, the presence of Presbyterian churches in Albemarle County was a challenge to the status quo.

According to The Lexington Presbytery Heritage, edited by Howard M. Wilson, Cove Meeting House began in 1756 when George Douglass petitioned the Hanover Presbytery for supply preaching at Rich Cove. You need a topographical map of Albemarle County now to locate Rich Cove. It lies on the west side of 29 North along Cove Creek, up Route 699: the area we think of McLanahan's (now Harvey's) orchard.

For the next twelve years this little community of Presbyterians, probably numbering fewer than twenty, struggled faithfully along without a regular pastor. When a supply minister was in the neighborhood, Cove Presbyterians attended worship in the home of George Douglass. They traveled to North Garden to hear the Rev. Brown preach once a year at Mr. Garland's house (Rev. Edgar Woods, Albemarle County in Virginia).

Five times between 1757 and 1768, Cove joined with other settlements in calling a minister; the request was turned down each time. Finally, in April 1769, the Rev. Samuel Leake, who had relatives in Albemarle County, accepted a call from the Cove, Rockfish, and North Garden congregations. On May 3, 1769, the Cove Presbyterian Church was formally organized and the Rev. Samuel Leake installed as pastor.

Few Indians still lived east of the Blue Ridge, but southern Albemarle County still retained much of its frontier flavor in 1756, as described in John Hammond Moore's book Albemarle. Jefferson's County 1727-1976. The homes of these first settlers were planted in forests so abundant in wildlife that we can hardly believe reports of their numbers. In his history of Albemarle County, the Rev. Edgar Woods reports that

deer were exceedingly plentiful. A tradition, which descended from one of the first settlers near the Blue Ridge, states, that by stepping from his door almost any morning he was able to shoot a deer. Flocks of wild turkeys thronged the woods, and every fall and spring wild ducks and geese darkened the rivers. Tradition

refers to more than one pigeon roost where great limbs of trees were broken by countless numbers of that bird.

Despite such natural abundance, life in eighteenth-century Virginia was hard, even on prosperous plantations. According to Rhys Isaac, a social historian of the Old Dominion, "work had no beginning and no end." In addition to raising food crops, farmers, often with the help of two or more slaves, devoted much time and energy to tending tobacco, Virginia's cash crop until the Revolution. Before one tobacco crop was ready for market, preparations for the next year's planting were underway.

Women's work was equally strenuous. In her book, Founding Mothers, Linda Grant DePaw reports that colonial women not only cooked, cleaned, and took care of the children; they also manufactured items such as clothing, candles, and lye soap. In fact, I was appalled to discover that the rosy cheeks of early Americans so noticeable in the portraits of the eighteenth century are not a sign of blooming health, but of the action of harsh homemade lye soap.

Depaw also states that colonial women were too busy to be good cooks. Instead, "they were generally considered to be terrible cooks... Colonial Americans bolted down their food and did not expect to enjoy it." A commentator on everyday fare in 1758 complained that in America, "House pie in the country places is made of apples neither peeled nor freed from their cores, and its crust is not to be broken if a wagon wheel goes over it."

Despite the difficulties of life in colonial America, there were opportunities for fellowship and merriment. Building a log church such as the one the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of Rich Cove constructed in 1769 must have been such a joyous sort of occasion. The first elders of the church, George Douglass, Schuyler Harris, and Mask Leake, the brother of the Reverend Samuel Leake, must have been present, felling trees and giving orders.

Very little is known about the first Cove Church building except that it was made out of logs and that its floors and seats were made of puncheons, or logs split lengthwise, the flat side leveled and planed. We have no record of the construction of the first Cove Church building, but there is a story about the raising of a log church in a frontier community in western Pennsylvania in 1800. Let me remind you that this did not take place here in Covesville. But it gives some sense of how the building of a church went on during the very days when Cove Church first was founded. (A fuller account of this narrative can be found in William Warren Sweet's Religion on the American Frontier. Vol. 2: The Presbyterians, 1783-1840.)

The Rev. Samuel Tait was sent out to the frontier to preach wherever he could find hearers. At one settlement the people responded so positively to the gospel that he promised he would stay and preach if they would secure land and build a church.

On the appointed day, men and boys showed up with their axes and commenced to felling trees. Once the logs were sized, these devout Presbyterians discovered that the logs were too heavy to be lifted into proper position without a yoke of oxen. As the Rev. Tait told the story,

Alas, the only team of oxen in all the settlement belonged to a professed infidel, and no one wanted to broach him on the subject. Just as the necessity became pressing, who should appear ... but the infidel with his yoke of sturdy oxen, shouting in a merry voice, 'Here comes the devil with his oxen to help you build your meeting house,' and the work went gaily forward.

The next important thing was the appearance of Thomas McLean with a flat keg of whiskey under his arm. This was placed in the minister's hands, and beginning with the minister and ending with the donor, all took a drink, after which there were three cheers for Thomas McLean, with the promise that when the church was organized he should be the first elder. And this promise was fulfilled.

At the end of the day the church was completed, covered with clapboards. The floor was made of puncheons, and round logs were rolled in for pews. A huge stump served as the pulpit. Two puncheons sat upright in front, with another laid across and secured to the uprights with pins, upon which a Bible might be placed.

We all wish that we had such a wealth of anecdotes about the building of Cove Church. But at least history has left with us this story from Pennsylvania, which conveys a flavor of what the building of the church might have been like. Its evident good humor complements the sense of purpose and community spirit that marks American Presbyterianism in its best moments, and that has been with Cove Church since the beginning.