

# A HISTORY OF THE HESS ROAD WESLEYAN CHURCH

## INTRODUCTION

History is hard to write. Writing a history of a local church is no exception to this rule. There are two main challenges.

First, there is a source problem. Some churches have done well to preserve historical records. Others have lost their history altogether. Thankfully, for our local church, the hard work of writing history has been done before. On December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1927 Ada Harwood Shaft shared a “short history of the little class and church” which has been preserved. About 50 years later, a Centennial Committee consisting of Edna Palmerton, Louise Strong, James Wendler, and Thea Russell produced a fresh history in 1978. These main sources, when combined with newspaper clippings, town histories, pictures, and personal remembrances, provide a sort of unbroken chain linking us to our past.

A second problem in writing a local church history, though, is the question of selection. How does one choose what history to include? Should the focus be on names now mostly unknown to the present day members? Should it be on the stories behind the construction of still standing buildings? Some combination thereof is preferable, but it must be admitted that any telling of history is a history hand-picked by the person who takes up the task.

I, Rev. Matthew Rose, take up that task now. As the current Lead Pastor, and having attended for about 35 years, I am well-positioned to tell the story of the Hess Road Wesleyan Church. I do so with a strong desire to share our rich history with the present congregation.

## A WESLEYAN HISTORY

When the Centennial Committee wrote their church history in 1978, they were celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the original sanctuary on Hess Road. The history of the congregation, however, goes back further. Of course, most broadly speaking, the church was begun by Jesus our Lord, but this being a local church history, I will resist the temptation to give account as to the general existence of Christian churches!

Perhaps a brief explanation, however, is in order regarding the name “Wesleyan.” The name derives from an 18<sup>th</sup> century Church of England minister named John Wesley (and, to a lesser extent, his brother Charles). Wesley provoked the “Methodist Movement,” so named for the disciplined (methodical) routines that made up the spiritual life he and those who banded together with him practiced. The Methodist Movement soon spread to America, and by 1820 the “Methodist Episcopal Church” had become the largest religious body in the U.S.A. The spread of Methodism reached Western NY in full force with the completion of the Erie Canal project in the mid 1820’s.

All was not well, however, within the ranks of Methodism. The 1830’s were marked by increasing division (the “Lockport Wesleyan Church” sanctuary, for instance, was built in 1835 by abolitionists who had left the “Methodist Episcopal Church” in Lockport over the issue of slavery). Finally, a larger separation occurred in 1843 when many Methodist Episcopal pastors and members broke away, insisting that the church had left important parts of its “Wesleyan” heritage (like Wesley’s anti-slavery stance) behind. This group formed “The Wesleyan Methodist Connection” (which was later renamed “The Wesleyan Methodist Church”).

## A LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY



And so it was that in May of 1844, a group of Wesleyan Methodists organized at a school house in Olcott. They shared the building with some Baptists (who later built in West Somerset) and some Methodist Episcopalians (who later built at Somerset Corners). Olcott remained a hub for Wesleyan Methodists from Ransomville, Olcott, and Hess Road. Eventually the latter group began meeting at a school house on Hess Road (now home to Bryan & Judy Meahl). According to Ada Harwood Shaft, “the Hess Road group held their services in the school house in District #3 for 34 years” even while sharing a pastor with the other groups.

It was during the ministry of Brother Krahl (see list of pastors on page 8) that the members began to dream of having their own meeting place. It became a matter of prayer and planning. A committee was formed and an offer was made on some land. The Lord providentially secured the necessary funding. Bricks for the church were brought from Lockport. The driver was said to have worn out 2 teams of horses and a wagon in making his way, as Hess Road was then a dirt road with deep ruts.

The entire structure was built at a cost of \$2,850. G.W. Sibley was pastor at the time of completion (1878). Ada Harwood Shaft reported that “those days were days of fasting and prayer, thanksgiving and praise, days when much expression was given to emotional feeling and lengthy meetings were not considered a misdemeanor.” During the winter months that followed, members sat as close as possible to one of the two wood burning stoves that heated the sanctuary. Of note, at this time the church was strongly against the use of instrumental music and resolved that they “will not tolerate by our consent or approval the use of an organ, melodian, or any other instrument of music in the house of public worship on any occasion whatever” (the strength of this resolve only lasted about a decade).



*Original Church Building and Parsonage, 1901*

It was in 1883 that the Hess Road congregation became an independent charge (no longer sharing a pastor with the group in Olcott). In 1901, a parsonage was built (for \$1,600) and remained on location until the 1990's (it was then sold and moved down the street).



*Foyer, nursery, and office, 1966*

During the Northrup's ministry (1926) some sheds (originally built for horses and buggies) at the back of the sanctuary were removed to make room for a barn that became known as “The Community Room” and was host to a wide variety of gatherings. Thirty years later (1956), an annex was built in that same spot and provided both room for fellowship (now called the Williamsburg Room) and Sunday School classes. Ten years after that (1966), a new foyer, nursery, and office were added to the front of the sanctuary (now the youth room). On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Pilgrim Holiness Church merged to become “The Wesleyan Church” and the “Hess Road Wesleyan Church” took on the current form of its name.

Growth under the ministry of George Jones necessitated a larger scale building project in 1973. A 60' x 100' building was constructed and called the "Learning Center" (now more often called the "Fellowship Hall") which helped to support a thriving bus ministry.

It wasn't many years after the Centennial Celebration of 1978 that I began attending the church as a child (mid 1980's). I remember worshipping in that 100+ year old sanctuary (now a gym). I remember growing up in the faith in the "Learning Center" and I remember playing on the dirt piles as a brand new sanctuary was being constructed in 1993 (dedicated on February 7<sup>th</sup>).



*ABOVE: Gen. Superintendent J.D. Abbott & Dist. Superintendent Daniel Heinz, 1974*



*FAR LEFT: New Sanctuary Construction, 1993.*

*LEFT: Wendler Christian Life Center, 2013.*

I was on staff when the Wendler Christian Life Center was constructed to accommodate a growing children's ministry. Now, as Lead Pastor, I write this history in the midst of a global pandemic which forced our church to 'meet online' for multiple months.

The Hess Road Wesleyan Church has certainly come through its share of highs and lows, revivals and stagnations, service and sleepiness... but the Spirit of the Lord is still with us as we look toward the future.

## CONCLUSION

I was truly blessed to read the historical records in preparing this fresh telling of the history of our church. I could sense the passion in the words of Ada Harwood Shaft and the recognition that they were part of something vast in the words of the Centennial Committee. I found myself thinking about how many individual lives have been impacted by God's work through this church. I read that people were saved, drunkards turned into prayer warriors, missionaries were sent out, and on and on. I read about faithful men and women making a difference through a lifetime of Jesus-centered living. I felt the weightiness of being part of something much bigger than myself. I also felt a great responsibility.

I previously wrote that history is hard to write. History is also hard to make. In both writing and making history it comes down to source and selection. What will the source of the strength of the Hess Road Wesleyan Church be as we move into the future? We will only stand the test of time if we continue to find our strength in Jesus Christ. And what about selection? How will we discern what God wants our particular church to accomplish for His Kingdom? I pray that we will be led by the Spirit of the Lord as we walk into the future and, hopefully, make history worthy of the name Jesus.

In Christ,

Rev. Matthew Rose  
Pentecost Sunday, May 31<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Below is a list of ministers who served from 1844 - present with some brief legacies supplied by Ada Harwood Shaft, Edna Palmerton, and present members wherever possible. There are some name and date discrepancies in the early records, but for the most part the records concur.

We are blessed by the fact that Ada Harwood Shaft's family history went back to the beginning of the church (Almira Harwood was a founding member in 1844). Edna Palmerton's history overlapped Ada Harwood Shaft (Edna was born in 1911 whereas Ada's history was given in 1927). My history overlaps Edna (I joined on as staff prior to Edna's death and was able to 'talk history' with her on a number of occasions) and continues into the present.

Indeed, in my early years of ministry at Hess Road (early 2000's), I visited members in the nursing home who had been baptized as far back as the ministry of Charles MacClinchy (Hazel Mead) and Noah & Mae Shaffer (Doris Mead)! Once, upon visiting Edna in the nursing home, she confirmed some of the remembrances from Ada Harwood Shaft and added some of her own stories beginning with Dean Bedford. Remarkably, in fact, Edna's strongest memories picked up nearly exactly where Ada Harwood Shaft's history left off and my memories pick up where Edna's memories began to fail.

Asa Warren

Rev. Phillips

E.P. Ray	Remembered for what he'd say to interest the children
A.N. Hudson	A grand old man from Chestnut Ridge
Henry Norton (1863-1866)	White hair and dignified manners
Johnathan Sibley (1867-1868)	From Chestnut Ridge
C.F. Hawley (1869-1872)	A gracious revival that made the old school house ring
D.B. Dunlap (1872-1873)	
William Pepper (1873-1875)	A man blessed with a wonderful wife
L.W. Krahl	A man once known, always remembered
G.W. Sibley	An earnest and practical Christian
J.L. Benton	The last pastor to serve both Hess Road & Olcott together
Leroy W. Strong (1883-1884)	First pastor to serve Hess Road as an independent charge
Otis White (1884-1887)	Remembered by his short sermons
Ransom Harwood (1887-1888)	Gave himself the name 'just a gap man'
George Cooper (1888-1892)	A 2 <sup>nd</sup> career ministry (organ purchased in 1901)
Harry Kelley (1892-1893)	A young man with many hopes and ambitions
S.W. Jennings (1893-1895)	An old man doing what the Lord might require of him
Wesley French (1895-1897)	A young and very conscientious man
Harry Espey (1898-1901)	Blessed to have a wife who could fill the pulpit
John Willett (1901-1904)	A boy, but a man in the making (helped build parsonage)
C.P. Sage (1904-1905)	A tall man with white hair and a good speaker
J.R. Jeffery (1905-1906)	A man well liked



*Original Sanctuary*

Charles MacClinchy (1906-1909)	A little man in stature with a good delivery
Clarence Smith (1909-1914)	A man small in stature, but a deep thinker
Dean Bedford (1914-1919)	Together with his wife and family, they made a big team
Harry Bullock (1919-1920)	Coming from a dairy county, was a good judge of cattle
John Wilcox (1920)	A young student from Houghton, full of prospects
Charlie Sicard (1921-1923)	Stood firm against all higher criticism (so called)
Noah & Mae Shaffer (1923-1924)	Worked at both Ashwood & Hess Road
Arthur Northrup (1924-1930)	A man who left his trade to be a preacher, twins born!
Francis Markell (1930-1933)	Preached Entire Sanctification, Father of Rev. Paul Markell
Charles Sicard (1933-1944)	His second term as pastor (engaged son died of Leukemia)
Everett Elliott (1944-1949)	Good speaker, model Christian
Daniel Heinz (1949-1952)	Later went on to become the District Superintendent
Milton Putnam (1952-1956)	Came as a bachelor, left with Norma!
Nelson Crowell (1956-1958)	Attended Family Camp until his recent death
Donald Stanton (1958-1964)	A younger man, hard-working and dedicated
Fred Moore (1964-1968)	Had a good ministry with many new converts
Bernard Roof (1968-1971)	An old-fashioned preacher and a musical family
George Jones (1971-1976)	An energetic soul-winner who started the bus ministry
Morton Dorsey (1976-1980)	A pastor with an Evangelist's heart
Joe Liddick (1980-1983)	A very likeable man, also very musical family
Milton Putnam (1984-1985)	A lover of people, serving for the 2 <sup>nd</sup> time
Robert King (1985-1999)	Congregational growth led to building of new sanctuary
Ronald Logan (2000-2001)	Filled in with passion during transitional year
Joe Payne (2001-2019)	2 <sup>nd</sup> career pastor, musically gifted, new parsonage built
Matthew Rose (2019 to Present)	Homegrown, Assistant Pastor from 2003-2019