

PRAIRIE GROVE CUMBERLAND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY

by Susan Parks-Spencer
August, 2014

The land now known as Washington County, Arkansas, was first home to Native American tribes such as the Osage and Cherokee. In 1817, this territory was part of Lovely's Purchase, named after Major William Lovely, who bought the land from the Osage Indians in hopes that it would serve as a boundary between the rival Osage, Cherokee, and white settlers. Legislators representing Arkansas territory established Lovely County in 1827 that included what is now Washington County. Almost exactly a year later, borders along Indian Territory were drawn up, and Washington County was officially established.

Pioneers of Washington County built small communities in which they farmed the land. Mills were built along the creeks flowing through the countryside, where many of the crops were processed. The climate was well suited for apple orchards and tomatoes, which became fairly numerous on many farms. Settlers in the Prairie Grove area during the mid-late 1800s discovered rich soil near the Illinois River, and fruits and vegetables later became an important part of the town's economy, especially after the Ozark and Cherokee Central railroad opened a depot on the south side of town in 1901.

Beginning in 1840, the community of what is now Prairie Grove was known by the names of its post offices. The first one, Sweet Home, was open for six years. In 1857, the Ada post office was established and named after the daughter of the postmaster. This building was just north of the site of the Civil War Battle of Prairie Grove. The post office received many bullet holes during the fighting, and residents would stop by after the war and pull bullets from the wooden structure. When the old post office was eventually razed, the front door with its many bullet holes was stored in a nearby residence where, in 1940, the door was unfortunately consumed by fire. Prairie Grove was incorporated in 1888, and in 1890 the first census recorded 412 residents.

Around 1826, a group of Cumberland Presbyterian travelers arrived in the area now known as Cane Hill. These people, in addition to seeking a new life on what was then the western frontier of the United States, were devout and education-minded.

Almost as soon as they established themselves in Cane Hill, the Cumberland Presbyterians built churches and schools. From an early school came the renowned Cane Hill College, recognized as not only a fine educational institution, but also as one of the very first in our county. From Cane Hill, the Cumberland Presbyterians moved northeasterly in the area, establishing churches in other newly created places such as Prairie Grove and Fayetteville.

The significance of the Cumberland Presbyterians can be seen not only in their establishment of churches and schools, but in the very creation of the county seat in Fayetteville. Two of the original Washington County Commissioners who established the county in 1828 were James Buchanan and John Woody (also Woody). These men, founding members of the Cumberland Presbyterian community in Cane Hill, actually named Fayetteville after their own original

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hometown of Fayetteville, Tennessee. The Cane Hill group also established the first Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville as well.

In 1824, Tennessee native and Kentucky resident, Andrew "Uncle Buck" Buchanan, became a candidate for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church ministry. Five years later, Rev. Buchanan and his family left Kentucky for Arkansas. While visiting his brothers in Cane Hill, Rev. Buchanan heard of a fertile valley with a bountiful spring several miles to the east. Arriving at the spring he found a settler, Tom Wagnon, who had already laid claim to the land. However, Wagnon agreed to trade the land to Uncle Buck in exchange for two sermons. Sometime afterwards, Rev. Buchanan organized the Prairie Congregation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, as well as a school, but where each group met is unknown. On September 21, 1838, Andrew Buchanan and his wife, Sinai, sold a little over two and a half acres of land for \$25 to representatives of the Prairie Congregation for the "use and benefits of a place for the worship of God[,] for teaching school, and for a burying ground for all peoples who may wish to rites their dead there." Sometime later, over half of the property's west side was donated to the Prairie Grove Cemetery Association. This section is where Andrew and Sinai Buchanan are buried.

In a letter dated April 9, 1978 from Thomas H. Campbell of Harrison, Arkansas, to a Cumberland Presbyterian church member in Prairie Grove, Lucille Mast, Campbell discusses his research regarding the church's founding and quotes from an article written by F.T. Charlton in the May 1, 1890 issue of the *Cumberland Presbyterian*. Charlton specifies a year that the church was officially organized, as well as the date of the third and current church's dedication:

The congregation at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, has just completed a new church which was dedicated last Sunday, April 20. The house is a good one[,] neat and attractive. It was paid for before the day of dedication, no collections taken on that day. It was a day of gladness with the members of the church and their friends. Notwithstanding the cloudy weather, the house was crowded, both sitting and standing room being occupied. This is an old congregation, having been organized in 1831. For several years it was in a rather unpromising condition, but during the past two or three years, under the efficient ministration of Rev. G.A. Henderson, it has been quickened and strengthened and bids fair to become a healthy and useful church.

In another letter written on May 28, 1980 to the church's current pastor, Rev. Harold Bartholomew, Mr. Campbell describes his most recent findings of the church's early history. The first mention of a Prairie Congregation is found in the spring 1834 minutes of the Arkansas Presbytery. However, he writes, "...Minutes of Arkansas Presbytery for 1832 and 1833 are missing."

The construction date of the first church is unknown, however a church document refers to it as a "log building." Church session minutes dated May 23, 1851 and subsequent session meetings

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throughout the 1850s and into 1860 indicate that the congregation called their building the Prairie Meeting House.

Arkansas seceded from the United States government on May 6, 1861 and joined the Confederacy. On December 7, 1862, Union and Confederate armies fought a bloody battle on what is now the Prairie Grove Historic Battlefield State Park, less than two miles from what the soldiers called "the Prairie Grove Church." About a day before the battle began, Confederate General Thomas C. Hindman "reached Prairie Grove about 11 a.m. and briefly established his headquarters in an old church house."

During the first day of the battle, wounded Confederate soldiers were taken to the Prairie Grove Church, where surgeons with the Southern Army tried in vain to keep up with the incoming injured. Toward sunset on December 7th, two Union soldiers with the 20th Wisconsin Infantry, John Henry Smith and Thomas P. Murry, walked from the battlefield toward the makeshift hospital. Some years later, Smith wrote what they came upon...

"...a church that had been taken possession of for a hospital and there, Oh, merciful God, what a sight met our eyes. All around the church laid three or four ranks of wounded soldiers, placed side by side, dozens of them dying for want of surgical aid; some bleeding to death while a bandage around a leg or arm would have saved their lives but no one was allowed to touch them but a surgeon with a diploma so you see a great many of the men outside patiently waiting for the aid that came too late, died for want of help. With heavy hearts we look inside of the church. It is brightly lighted and rows of wounded men laid on the floor all around the four walls and in the center of the room long tables were erected where wounded men were laid and the surgeons and their assistants were busy cutting and sawing off legs and arms and doing surgical work on all kinds of wounds. The men who were being treated first, of course, were the commissioned officers, the private soldiers had to wait until all the men of rank were attended to. As each regiment only had one surgeon and an assistant, it is easy to see how these poor boys outside on a frosty December night with the sky for a covering must have suffered before surgical aid reached them. Tired, wounded and cold, chilled through from loss of blood, most of them had been without food for thirty-six hours. We then stepped outside of the church again and looked over rows of wounded as they lay side by side in the cold."

Sometime after the battle, the Confederate soldiers and surgeons vacated the church. The Union Army then commandeered the building, where it "was taken down & used in constructing winter quarters for federal Soldiers in the winter of 1863." It is undocumented as to what happened to the "winter quarters" when the Union left Prairie Grove, but it is possible that the building or buildings were burned. The church and its property are one of the stops on the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park's CD driving tour of the Civil War battle.

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Church documents show a gap between pastors from 1860-1872. In 1873 Rev. John Buchanan is on record as the church's next preacher. This year or the next might be when the next church, a wood frame building, was constructed. Session minutes from February 21, 1874 state that their meeting was held at Prairie Church. Previous session minutes had no mention of the location where they met.

This second church was built behind where the first church stood and faced east. It was also used as a school. During 1887-1888, according to church records, the third and current church was built and then dedicated in April 1890. The wood frame building behind it was possibly used as a school building until around 1900, when the first public school in Prairie Grove opened. In 1911 the old church and school building was sold by the highest sealed bid to the First Presbyterian Church of Prairie Grove, who used the wood to build their manse, which is still standing.

Prairie Grove was incorporated on July 25, 1888. The street running through downtown and in front of the Cumberland Church was named Buchanan in honor of Andrew Buchanan and his family.

In the Session Meeting on September 1, 1890, the elders agreed to submit a claim to "The United States government for distruction [sic] of Church House during the late war..." On July 10, 1905, the session clerk wrote that the church had received a reparations check for \$800 from the federal government. Attorney fees totaled \$266.67, which left the church with \$523.33. During the fall of 1906, the congregation used part of that money to purchase new pews for \$444 plus \$44.64 in freight charges.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Bethel Grove in Washington County was built sometime after 1915. The land was sold to congregation members that year for one dollar and the promise of a church to be built. By 1959, however, the Bethel Grove Church had ceased having services, and the building was in need of repair. The fourteen remaining members of the Bethel Grove Church agreed to give the building to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The Prairie Grove congregation had the church moved to the west side of the main church and connected the two buildings with a covered concrete walkway. It was used as their Fellowship Hall.

During the latter part of the 20th century, the church began experiencing a decline in membership. By 2013, there were less than 10 active members left. Due to its small congregation numbers, the church held its last service on March 30, 2014.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church is a historic landmark in downtown Prairie Grove. That building, its previous two incarnations, and its connection to the Civil War battle are an important part of Prairie Grove and Cumberland Presbyterian history.

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