



**A History of St. Mary's Episcopal Church  
Beaver Creek, North Carolina**

**1905-2005**

**By**

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# St. Mary's Church History

## **Origins (from the Parish Register)**

At the close of the Nineteenth Century, Northwestern North Carolina was as remote and difficult a place as any Third World country you know of. The Civil War was as recent a memory as Vietnam is to us. The inhabitants of this region had not been enthusiastic supporters of the South and the Virginia-bred politicians who dominated the scene after the War took their revenge by denying money for roads, schools, hospitals and other services. A region to which the original settlers had brought Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible in their knapsacks became known for isolation, poverty and illiteracy. In this climate, the Right Reverend Joseph Blount Cheshire, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, sat at a desk in the little community of Venus, later renamed Glendale Springs, took out a large new leather-bound Parish Register and penned the following account of his efforts to start a mission field:

“In September of 1894 the Bishop of North Carolina sent the Rev<sup>d</sup>. Milnor Jones, Deacon, to Valle Crucis, to attempt a revival of the old Valle Crucis Mission, and directed him to extend his ministrations into Ashe County, and to seek out the scattered members of the Church there. It was not however until the summer of 1895 that he visited Beaver Creek, having some months before held service in the North Fork section. Visiting Beaver Creek in 1895, he was cordially received by Mr. and Mrs. Rufus A. Hamilton, and was encouraged to attempt the work of building up the Church in the Community. Beginning in the Spring of 1896, he devoted much time and labor to this work, and had the gratification of gathering a large class for Confirmation, and of baptizing a number of adults as well as infants. He was able to make but one visit a month, usually preaching on Saturday after-noon in the North Fork section, and in the Beaver Creek Academy, in the after-noon of Sunday. As soon as it became plain that he was making an impression on the people and many of the more intelligent class were coming into the Church, Mr. Jones began to experience the most violent opposition, coupled with bitter personal abuse, from the Methodists and Baptists, especially the latter. Falsehoods of the most groundless and injurious character were freely circulated about him, in some instances by the preachers of those denominations. Efforts were made to refute his teaching in public disputations, but with so little satisfaction to his opponents, that they soon abandoned this open warfare, though he granted them every opportunity, and returned to the safer and baser methods of calumny and falsehood.

This bitterness of opposition had its first culmination upon the occasion of the Bishop's visitation to Beaver Creek Academy on the Third Sunday after Trinity, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1896. This building had in the preceding March been leased by Mr. Jones acting for the Bishop, for a term of two years, and with the beginning of June the Bishop had sent two teachers, Mr. John C. Leigh and Miss Lou Hill Smith to open a school in it. Besides using it for a school, services were held in it on the fourth Sunday of each month, but upon other Sunday(s) the building was free to others for the purpose

of religious worship, as it had been before.

On Sunday morning, June 21<sup>st</sup>, it was observed that men began to assemble at the Academy at an early hour. The Bishop and Mr. Jones were then at the residence of Mr. Rufus A. Hamilton, where they had been since the preceding Friday. About half past nine o'clock Sunday morning a deputation from the crowd at the Academy came to Mr. Hamilton, and informed him that they were deputed to inform that no service could be held at the Academy on that day. This message being communicated to the Bishop he refused to receive it, or in any way to recognize such lawless proceedings. As the time appointed for the service drew nigh the Bishop accompanied by Mr. John C. Leigh, the teacher carrying the necessary books and vessels, proceeded to the Academy. He was met at the door by a crowd estimated to have numbered something near one hundred. They informed him that he could not enter the building. After expostulating with them, and pointing out the discreditable and criminal character of their conduct, he informed them that he purposed entering the building, and having service, according to his appointed *custom*, and thereafter endeavored to pass through the crowd to the door. They pressed together in front of the door, and when he endeavored to pass through them, they thrust him away, declaring that he should not enter. Being unable to overcome this physical opposition he desisted, and gave notice that he would have the service in the yard of Mr. William H. Hamilton, nearby, and invited his opponents to attend the service.

At the appointed hour in front of Mr. Wm. Hamilton's house, the Bishop confirmed nineteen persons, and preached to a large congregation. This was the beginning of St. Simon's Church, Beaver Creek."

### **Fr. Savage & Church Army**

The work in Ashe County was taken over by the Reverend William Rutherford Savage who thought he had earned a quiet life in Blowing Rock. Instead, he found himself saddled with three widely dispersed missions: Holy Trinity in Venus, St. Matthew's in Todd and St. Simon's in Beaver Creek, which he was obliged to attend to on horseback. He wrote the following:

"In the Spring of 1903, at a meeting of the members of the Mission, presided over by the Missionary, it was decided to change the name of this Mission provided the Bishop approved of it; and the choice of name being left to the Bishop, he called it St. Mary's.

..... through the untiring efforts of a few members, principally Mr. and Mrs. Rufus A. Hamilton, who procured aid in and out of the field, the (*building*) fund grew rapidly, until in the Summer of 1905 ground was broken for a Church, and on Saturday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1905, the Church was used for the first time, the Christmas Tree Celebration being held therein. On Sunday, the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, Morning Prayer was said and the Holy Communion celebrated for the first time in the new Church; while on Monday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, the first Christmas Service was held in St. Mary's Church which is a very pretty Church, well furnished and with modern conveniences and comforts, the Vestry room one of the most completely and comfortably furnished that the Missionary ever saw."

Father Savage tended his charges for the rest of his life. He was aided by workers from the Church Army who were based at the Mission

House in Glendale Springs and provided schooling, midwife care and basic medical attention for the people of the area.

### **1934 – 1972**

After Father Savage's death in 1934, the Diocese sent no permanent priest to our region for many years. The missions were left in the care of a Deacon and lay-readers, with occasional visitations by the Bishop and supply priests.

Years later, in the '70's, St. Mary's Day was also Hazel Campbell Day. Hazel was by then the oldest member of our congregation. We would set out the Bishop's throne, seat her in it and beg her to tell us her memories of church doings. She would regale us with tales of riding to church on horseback, and of pranks played on the clergy.

We may understand the Bishop's lack of enthusiasm for his Lost Province children when we hear that he was once baptized by a pail of water propped over the church door. Then too, it was at St. Matthew's mission where a black snake crawled up out of the lectern during the Bishop's sermon. Seizing the subtle reptile by the neck, he held it aloft and suddenly cleared the church. Many of the congregation had not realized that the Episcopal Church was a snake-handling sect.

The life of the church during the time following Father Savage's death in 1934 is best summed up by the historical entry made by the Reverend James McKeown in 1946:

"This entry being written Nov. 6, 1946, it being forty years since the latest event of the former histories, the consecration of St. Mary's Church, August 24, 1906. Life of St. Mary's has moved slowly under ministrations sporadic and infrequent. Valiant men have labored in the field but the Church has never been able to send a missionary into these parts without his having to cover too large a territory. The names of Savage, Atkins, Sill, and Dobbin are still in the minds and hearts of the people of St. Mary's

In 1946, June 14<sup>th</sup>, the Rev. James McKeown was appointed by Bishop Gribbin as missionary to Boone, Glendale, Beaver Creek, and Todd. Modern invention having provided the automobile, regular weekly services are held in Beaver Creek every Sunday, and week-day ministration given regularly. St. Mary's not having had regular attention had dropped to less than twenty members by 1946."

We don't have a complete list of these less-than-twenty members, but

we find some names (especially Barlow, Herman, Payne, Ray, Richardson, Speers and Sturdivant) mentioned frequently in the scant service records for this period.

After the brief tenure of James McKeown, whose last service entry appears in Easter of 1947, the activities of the church centered around St. Mary's. The efforts at Holy Trinity in Glendale Springs and St. Matthews in Todd were abandoned. At St. Mary's, the services consisted mainly of Evening Prayer and Sermon led by Thomas Seitz or visiting clergy, with occasional celebrations of the Eucharist by a visiting priest or by Bishop Henry. The average attendance at Evening Prayer in 1951 was about a dozen.

This pattern continued through the 1960's, the visiting clergy including the Reverends John S. McDuffie, Frank S. McKenzie, C. Ward Courtney, W. Todd Ferneyhough and A. W. Rudolph.

### **1972 – 1986**

In 1972, Bishop Henry sent a young seminarian to Ashe County "to stretch him." The young man's name was J. Faulton Hodge. He was a Rutherfordton, North Carolina native, but he had recently graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York and had been a docent at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, so he needed an opportunity to re-connect with his roots. Asking whom he needed to impress to be accepted at St. Mary's, he was directed to Stella Anderson, the editor of the county's only newspaper, The Skyland Post. When he presented himself, she looked him up and down, then pronounced, "Well, you'll do, but you'll have to shave that beard."

Faulton's ordination to the Priesthood took place in the First Baptist Church in West Jefferson, showing how far ecumenical relations had progressed since Bishop Cheshire's encounter. Faulton displayed his flair for the dramatic in the order of the service, which was rich with liturgy, pageantry, abundant music, incense and the release of live doves (the latter not especially appreciated by the church's cleaning crew).

Over time, the new priest and his fledgling congregation developed

what came to be known as “The Beaver Creek Rite,” a semi-High-Church order which Bishop Henry described as being “somewhere between Oral Roberts and the Bishop of Rome.” Father Hodge’s creative style of ministry attracted an unusual blend of people ranging from local professionals to summer residents to hippies and earth children. The congregation’s accepting and inclusive attitude welcomed people who were different, including young people, black people and gay people. There were Jewish friends who worshipped regularly with us. St. Mary’s became known among teenagers in Ashe County as “the Cool Church.” My dad used to paraphrase comedian Flip Wilson’s line, calling it “The Church of What’s Happenin’ Next.”

Faulton’s devotion to St. Francis of Assisi aroused a special concern for the poor. Like St. Francis following the command to “restore my Church,” he undertook the restoration of abandoned church buildings at Glendale Springs and Todd. He also revived the medieval custom of a service of blessing for animals on the Sunday nearest St. Francis’ Day. This service is now an annual tradition here.

Because there was often not enough money to pay the light bill or the priest’s salary, the congregation held chicken barbeques and other events, including benefit concerts by George Hamilton, IV, and an annual Festival, to raise funds. A church softball team got organized, and was regularly trounced by the other teams in the league. Nothing so brings people together as having their backs to the wall. We began to think of ourselves as an extended family. The growing congregation, now using two church buildings, applied for, and received recognition as a parish, taking the name The Parish of the Holy Communion because of the centrality of the Eucharist in our worship and from our sense of community and togetherness.

As a family, we began to reach out to the community at large. Christmastime included caroling at the rest homes and the homes of elderly and shut-in folks. Members of our congregation started the Meal on Wheels program in Ashe County. Faulton brought us the needs of those he called his “crevice people;” those who fell through the cracks of the social system. There were those who needed food or clothing, firewood or heating oil, doctoring or medicines. Some of them just needed

a job, and Faulton would find or make work for them. Once, our Vestry countersigned a mortgage for a single mom with two daughters and no house.

Faulton's cordial loathing of the funeral industry brought a new concept to Ashe County: cremation. The funeral of Miss Frances's husband, James McMeekin Kerr, was, judging from the confusion of the funeral director, the first time ashes had been interred in the County, and the tale of that funeral, my children, is a story unto itself.

Then, in 1974, something curious happened. A young artist named Ben Long knocked on Fr. Hodge's door to follow up on a conversation that Faulton had forgotten. The two had met at a party and Ben had offered to paint a fresco in St. Mary's church. Faulton had accepted, as one does to lightly-given offers over cocktails, but thought no more about it. Now here was this same fellow at his door. The two came to St. Mary's trying to decide what to paint. As the conversation is remembered, it went something like this:

Ben: "Do you have a favorite Bible verse?"

Faulton: "No."

Ben: "Do you have a favorite saint?"

Faulton: "No."

Ben: "How did you become a priest?"

Ben: "I feel a great expectancy about this place."

Faulton: "Well, this is Saint Mary's Church. Why not paint her expecting."

Ben's answer to that is here on the wall, and although the sight of a pregnant virgin caused some stir in the County, as it must have in her own home town, we loved her. In 1976, Ben came back to paint John the Baptist, the wild, hairy desert prophet, for another wall. Both of these frescoes are in steel frames because, like the churches who rejected Ben's offer in his home town of Statesville, we weren't sure we could trust Ben with a real wall.

In 1977, Ben was ready for a real wall, and so were we. He produced "The Mystery of Faith," his largest work up to that time, for our chancel wall. Today, these frescoes, plus the frescoes at Holy Trinity in

Glendale Springs, provide us with our greatest opportunity for evangelism by allowing us to share the basic principles of our faith with thousands of visitors from all over the world every year.

And now, we must speak of dark things.

“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” For anyone who does things, there will be some who don’t like what was done. There is, over time, an accumulation of grievances.

The church building fills up with worshippers and some people complain because they can’t get “their” seats. The organ gets moved to the back of the church to make room for more seats, and the lady who remembers her mama playing it in front leaves the church. The stained glass window of the Madonna which used to stand behind the altar gets moved to make room for a fresco, and ten percent of the congregation leaves. The church houses famous works of art, draws visitors by the thousands, and is no longer the quaint, quiet little country chapel that the older members of the congregation knew and loved.

Then, by the hand of an anonymous donor, the Parish got land, lots of land; a spacious valley threaded with spring-fed streams and bordered with woods, just off a main highway. And Father Hodge had a plan. He wanted to consolidate the Parish holdings in one place by moving the church buildings to the New Land, adding a child care center and a retirement home for the elderly.

This new force split our Parish like an earthquake. All the pent-up strains along the fault line sprang at once, and the congregation divided almost exactly in half. Those who thought the new idea was great and couldn’t wait to get started were countered by those who thought it was a disaster and would ruin everything they treasured. The lines were drawn, the armies mustered and the civil war began. There was the Skirmish of the Vestry, the Battle of the Art Conservators, the Engineering Front, and the endless War of Attrition in the Press. And over it all, the shrill whine of ricocheting insults. We did to ourselves, with “calumny” and “personal abuse,” more injury than all the denominational zealots of Bishop Cheshire’s time had ever been

able to accomplish.

No matter what I say about this period, I will offend half of my hearers old enough to remember, so it is best to say as little as possible. Those who lived through those times still feel the pain as of a bitter and vicious divorce. In 1986, Faulton Hodge retired to his family farm in Rutherfordton. The land he had such plans for was ceded to the Diocese and sold. The other art and building projects he had been working on were abandoned. Many members left the Parish, or, in some cases, the Diocese. The broken relationships, bitter attacks, and loss of the sense of belonging are things that some, including Father Hodge, literally have had to die to get over.

### **1987 through 1998**

During the remainder of the 1980's, a crippled and demoralized congregation struggled to heal. Bishop Weinbauer sent the Rev. William A. Pilcher, III, as Interim Rector, who did his best to bind up the wounds of the casualties and restore some sense of purpose and unity to the floundering organization.

In November of 1989, the Parish received the Reverend Doctor Robert Crewdson as full-time Rector. Doctor Bob provided a quiet period of repose for the congregation and a warm pastoral ministry to many individual members. His work with our young people included Appalachian Trail hikes and trips to acolyte events and the National Cathedral.

Doctor Bob retired in January of 1998 and the Parish began the search process for a new priest. During that long process, we were supported by two interim priests: the gentle, scholarly John Southern and the jovial Franciscan, Kale F. King. These two helped to stretch us and get us ready for a new adventure.

### **1999 to Present**

Unknown to us as we searched for a new priest, a cagey Marine had already made a stealthy recon patrol deep behind our lines. While we were scouting him out as a candidate, he had been scoping our position from his camouflaged observation post in the back pew of our church.

Apparently both his expeditions and ours yielded satisfactory intelligence, for on the first of August, 1999, Father Steve Miller was installed as our new Rector.

He found his new unit to be a mix of grizzled veterans and fresh recruits with no combat experience. His first challenge was to get this outfit focused on the mission. With his direct, open style, he began to move us toward acting our way into new ways of believing.

With Father Steve's leadership and by DOING the Gospel among ourselves and for others, we have begun, once again, to carry Jesus into our world. It should be no surprise that the more we reach out to others in the name of Christ, the more others reach to us. We are again a growing parish, so much so that occasionally once more the plaintive cry is heard: "Someone has taken MY seat." And that's a good problem. No longer trapped in the past or mesmerized by some imaginary future, we are "The Church of What's Happenin' NOW."

DFL, 28 DEC 2005