

Rev. John F. Owens, District Superintendent's Report to the 100th Session of the Eastern Shore District Conference, December 4, 1969, Atlantic United Methodist Church

(information he gleaned from District Conference records)

"The first District Conference session was held in 1871. We learn this by counting back from 1883 when the 12th session was held, according to the records in the District office. This 12th session was held at Guilford Church, Accomac Circuit, July 25, 1883; Rev. D. P. Willis, Presiding Elder.

The conference was in session for three days, with morning and afternoon sessions. In later years, it was lengthened to four days. The pastors, in making report of their work, dealt with one subject at a time until all had reported, then the subject was considered by the entire conference. Eventually, this custom was changed to allow the pastor to report on all items at one time, and he was limited to 3 minutes per subject, with two extra minutes for answering questions.

Most of the actions taken were in the form of resolutions. Committees were appointed at the beginning of each session to consider and report on the general state of the church, missions, higher education, etc., with one preacher and two laymen on each committee. A special committee was named in 1883 to make plans for a district parsonage, 'which will add much to the comfort of the Presiding Elder and to the desirableness of this district.' This committee reported year after year on fund raising efforts and proposed locations. Onancock, Temperanceville and Salisbury were all considered as suitable building sites; but after a number of years, a house was purchased and remodeled in Salisbury, Md.

District boundaries in 1883 included the following charges: Atlantic, Belle Haven, Accomac, Cobbs Island, Cambridge, Berlin, Dorchester, Dorsett Mission, Pungoteague, Salisbury, Onancock, and Wicomico. In 1887, we note the addition of Newport News and York Circuits. By 1890, Hampton and Fox Hill had become a part of the district.

Lay delegates to the Annual Conference were elected by the District Conference, not by the local churches, as they are now. For a number of years they chose four delegates and two alternates.

The people's pride in their houses of worship, a trait that has continued throughout the years, was expressed by the conference of 1886. 'Resolved, that we hereby express our gratification at the efforts that have been made by the brethren to build attractive, comfortable and durable houses of worship, and we urge continued effort along this line so that the people of the world may have no excuse in this connection for absenting themselves from public worship.'

The Sunday School movement was promoted diligently by each Conference until 1888 found 50 schools with 500 children enrolled, '...the number of scholars being slightly in excess of church members.' Other quotes: 'The schools generally are in a flourishing condition and, we are happy to say, all use our publications;' "All are more or less imbued with the missionary spirit, a majority have Rosebud Missionary Societies, others are using the envelope system.'

The conferences consistently encouraged support of our Schools and Colleges, and commended Randolph-Macon College as 'second to no college in the South,' and urged the pastors to use every opportunity to induce parents to send their sons to that honored institution.

Bishops J.C. Granberry and E.R. Hendrix were frequent visitors to these conferences, and whenever they came they presided."

--John F. Owens

