

A Story of Democracy Told Through the Oldest Church in Arkansas

As told by Ellie F.

Searcy, Arkansas

Story Narrative:

The impacts of American democracy can be found throughout every community's history. Explore how events associated with the oldest church in Arkansas reflect the democratic process. This project was developed as part of Stories 4-History, a collaboration between the Smithsonian and the National 4-H Council. Thanks to Ellie F. and Arkansas 4-H for their work on this project.

Hi, I'm Ellie Farrin. Join me on a historical journey to tell the parallel stories of Smyrna Methodist Church and America's democracy.

According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, democracy is a government by the people, especially ruled by the majority. In 1856, the small community of Center Hill, Arkansas had a Union Church, in which more than one denomination shared the church building. In this case, the congregation consisted of the local Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists. They not only shared the building but had services together as well. Every week, they rotated circuit preachers from each of the denominations. This Union was working great, until it wasn't. Picture it: Everyone gathered together, excited for the Union Church revival. The Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists all filed in to fellowship, to worship, and to hear what the visiting preacher had to say, never expecting what would come next. Whether it was a comment in passing, an emotional outburst, or an aggressive attack, we will never know.

What we do know is that within the revival service, the Baptist preacher declared his strong belief that Methodists would never see the pearly gates. Imagine being one of the Methodists sitting under this preacher, who thinks you are not fit for heaven. How would you feel? Furious? Betrayed? Dejected? Maybe much like the colonists felt under British rule. Not represented. We know the colonists declared their independence, and dissolved their Union, stating in the Declaration of Independence that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such forms. As it shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness. But what did the Methodists do?

After the revival, the Methodists assembled to discuss their unfair representation. At this point, the call to action was raised when one member declared, 'Brethren, I

believe it is time for the Methodists to swarm.' And swarm they did. They quickly raised \$15, bought a piece of land in the Smyrna community, and began cutting trees for lumber. Sounds like they dissolved their union to me. The Smyrna Methodist Church was completed in the fall of 1856. The founding of this church was a direct result of the freedoms granted in the Bill of Rights. Freedom of speech allowed the preacher to voice his opinion. Freedom of assembly allowed the Methodists to swarm. Freedom of religion, of course, allowed them to not only build their own church, but to make their own decisions about how they worship.

The founding members of the church, Jacob Armstrong, T.B. King, Joseph Fortner, and W.C. Petty exercised these freedoms while forming the church, just as our forefathers intended. All things considered; a church is like its own government. Churches have their own governing bodies and bylaws; maybe business meetings and voting systems. Knowing the history of our nation inspired the founding members of Smyrna Methodists to fight for fair representation, to dissolve unjust unions, and to exercise their First Amendment rights. I encourage you to learn the history of American democracy, but also your local history. Get involved in your community all the ways you can. As a Master Gardener, I'm excited to help maintain this new flower bed with my 4-H club here at the church. You can also get involved with your local Historical Society.

Our city's Parks and Rec Department and the White County Historical Society are responsible for the restoration and upkeep of this Smyrna church. The Historical Society is still discovering new things about the church and its people. For example, a member of the Historical Society discovered a tree stump under the building, dating back to the 1600s. Its lumber was confirmed to have been used in the construction of the church. This provided the physical evidence needed to confirm Smyrna Methodist Church as the oldest church in Arkansas. Another recent discovery was the African American Cemetery between the church and the highway. It is full of unmarked graves, with just a few uncovered tombstones. There is still so much to learn about Smyrna. It takes continual support to preserve. So, volunteer! Learn your history and know your rights. Your future may depend on it, just like Smyrna Methodist Church.

Thank you for joining me. Once again, I'm Ellie Farren.

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