

HISTORY OF THE FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, PORT NECHES, TEXAS 1881 - 1981

Prior to 1880, little is known of the history of Methodism in the community which was then called Grigsby's Bluff. Circuit riders came occasionally to preach, stayed in the homes where services were held, then moved on to other communities. Hazardous conditions were evidenced by the death of one minister, Rev. J. C. Kee, who drowned in the Neches River, and Rev. W. H. Crawford's report of having become lost in a dense fog between Grigsby's Bluff and Taylor's Bayou.

On September 6, 1881, Rev. W. H. Crawford organized the first local Methodist Church at the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Gentz with sixteen members from the following families: Keith, Smith, Gentz, Beaumont, Remley, Sampson, Cline, Lee, Nelson, Block and Merriman. Rev. Crawford traveled 200 miles each month to serve Sabine Pass and Terry Missions, which included Orange, Jefferson and Hardin Counties.



Circuit riders continued to hold services in homes until 1885, when a house that stood about the 500 block of Port Neches Avenue was damaged while it was being moved by wagon. Mrs. Margaret Ann Keith bought the house from Mr. McFaddin in Beaumont for \$100.00, repaired it and offered it for a church and a school. For the next nine years the community had a school, Sunday School and church, where the men sat on one side and the women on the other, worshipping by the light of coal oil lamps.

In 1894, Mr. Bud Smith offered an acre of land in the center of what is now Port Neches, Texas, to the congregation. The building which was erected on this site served as both church and school until 1911, when Mrs. C. A. Baird gave land for a school and ended the church building's dual role.

Church services were held only once a month, since the minister served Sabine Pass, Deweyville, Port Neches and Nederland. By 1916, Rev. J. L. Red was holding services twice a month for a membership of less than 100.



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Later, when Mr. Smith sold 50 acres of land, including that on which the church stood, to a Mrs. Baxter of Orange, the congregation was faced with a possible need to relocate. Mrs. Baxter sold the acre which held the church building to Dr. William Haizlip of Nederland, who then sold it to the church. Faced with an agreement to pay their preacher \$125 a year and the additional \$150 indebtedness for the land, the members feared that they might lose their church building. Mr. Con Wagner paid off the entire amount and later cancelled the debt, giving clear title to the property to the Methodist congregation.

Membership grew rapidly and, in 1919, Mrs. Lola Staffen and Anna Block called a meeting to discuss building a new church. With Mr. W. T. Block presiding, the group pledged \$700. The Texas Company donated an additional \$500, and a new church was constructed on the corner of Main and Nall streets (where the First National Bank now stands).

In 1920, Rev. W. E. Hassler became the first full-time minister for the Methodist Church in Port Neches. The church continued to experience rapid growth, and a parsonage was built in 1921. During Rev. Hassler's ministry, the first Vacation Bible School in the Texas conference was held here.

The present church building, located in the 1800 block of Nall Street, was completed in 1950. Mr. W. T. Block and Mr. Keith were trustees; Mr. Mullins, Mr. Bunch and Mrs. Wallace Morgan were stewards. By 1955, membership had reached 767 and a new parsonage had been constructed. A new wing which contained Fellowship Hall, a parlor, kitchen and other rooms, and an education building were added in 1961, completing the present physical plant. On February 13, 1981, membership in the First United Methodist Church of Port Neches numbered 1,100.

