

# The Old Stone Church Foundation

By Myra P. Lindsey

It was an afternoon of celebration and contemplation at the historic Old Stone Church Site in Leesburg on September 10, 2016. United Methodists from around the Virginia Conference – including Bishop Sharma D. Lewis – came and proudly marked the event of 250 years and four months before. For on May 11, 1766, Leesburg founding father Nicholas Minor sold to Robert Hamilton, Lot 50, the first Methodist – owned property in America “for no other use but for a church or a meeting house and grave-yard.” The celebration was sponsored by the Old Stone Church Foundation.

According to a brief history read by Gen. (Ret.) Charles E. Williams, who presided over the event, a church building was constructed on Lot 50 shortly after its purchase and was replaced around 1785 with a larger structure. The congregation split over slavery in 1848, with Southern sympathizers moving to their own church, the present-day Leesburg UMC, in 1852. African Americans continued to worship at the Old Stone Church with the remaining white congregation until 1867, at which time they formed their own church, the present-day Mount Zion UMC. The Old Stone Church eventually closed, there was a dispute over ownership of the property, and the church building was torn down in 1902.

Consider these early Methodist notables who each played a part in the Old Stone Church story:

**Robert Strawbridge** probably founded Leesburg’s Methodist society in the early 1760s.

**Francis Asbury** preached at the Old Stone Church on his first recorded visit on February 29, 1776.

**Captain Wright Brickell**, a sea captain and one of the original book stewards of the Methodist societies in America, lies in the Old Stone Church cemetery, buried in 1777.

**William Watters**, the first American-born Methodist itinerant preacher, served the Old Stone Church and presided there at the Sixth Conference of American Methodism in 1778 – the first American Methodist preacher to do so.

**Richard Owings**, the first native-born local American Methodist preacher, was later ordained and was pastor of the Fairfax Circuit and the Old Stone Church when he died in 1786 and is buried there.

**John Littlejohn**, entrusted with the safekeeping of the Declaration of Independence during the War of 1812, served as a local preacher of the Old Stone Church.

The Virginia Conference Historical Society acquired the historic site, located at West Cornwall Street and Liberty Street, in 1961 and established the Old Stone Church Foundation to administer the site in 1974. It has been designated a Heritage Landmark of the United Methodist Church and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.

*Gen. Charles E. Williams is president of the Old Stone Church Foundation. Membership is open to all who share the desire to preserve and interpret the site, and may be attained by making a tax-deductible donation to the foundation. Another opportunity to contribute is to purchase a memorial brick for the Old Stone Church Memorial Prayer Garden. To learn more, visit <https://vaumc.org/oldstonechurch>.*

*-Myra P. Lindsey is editor of the HERITAGE publication.*