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THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE PEAKED MOUNTAIN  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ROCKINGHAM  
COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

BY CHARLES E. KEMPER, STAUNTON, VIRGINIA.

The early history of this congregation is most obscure, and prior to this no genuine effort has been made to rescue from oblivion the beginnings of the Presbyterian Church in the great County of Rockingham, Virginia, which lies in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>1</sup>

It was first called the Peaked Mountain Church and bore this name until after the American Revolution; its present name is the Massanutten Church. Some reference is made to it in Foote's *Sketches*, but the date of its founding, the names of its first pastors, and its early membership have remained almost entirely unknown until the present day, and the purpose of this article is to place upon the bases of facts all that the court records of Augusta County show concerning its history.

The church is located one-half mile east of the hamlet of Cross Keys, Rockingham County, Virginia, seven miles south of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and two and one-half miles from the base of the Peaked Mountain, the southern end of the Massanutten Range, from which its early name was taken. This portion of Rockingham County is drained by three creeks, Cub Run, Mill Creek, and Williams Run (the last called Stony Lick Branch in Colonial days), and the waters of these streams find their way into the Shenandoah River. These creeks flow through fertile and beautiful valleys, and many of the Scotch-Irish settlers who came to the Shenan-

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<sup>1</sup> Every statement of fact in this article is based upon the Court Records of Augusta County, Virginia, and the Court Records of Rockingham County, Virginia, on file in the respective offices of the Clerks of two counties mentioned. Rockingham County, Va., was a part of Augusta County until 1778. When a statement is made which is not based upon a court record, the proper reference is given.

doah Valley of Virginia from Lancaster, Chester, and adjoining counties in Pennsylvania in the period between 1740 and 1750, settled in them and constituted the dominant element of population there for many years.

These settlers lived from sixteen to twenty-five miles from Augusta Church in the present Augusta County, Virginia, founded in 1740, and the necessity for a nearer place of worship soon became apparent, and a site for the church was selected in the middle or Mill Creek Valley.

At the March term, 1747, of the Augusta County Court an order was entered appointing Thomas Stephenson Overseer of the Road from "Henry Downs' Mill to ye Meeting House."<sup>2</sup> Survey Book No. 1 of Augusta County, Virginia, p. 8, shows that Henry Downs in 1746 owned lands and a mill on North River near the present Port Republic, five miles south of the Peaked Mountain Church.<sup>3</sup> "Ye Meeting House" mentioned in this court was beyond question the Peaked Mountain Church, now Massanutten, and as the order was entered in March 1747, we may safely assign the preceding year, 1746, as the date when this congregation is definitely known to have been in existence. In May, 1749, a petition was presented to the County Court of Augusta County, Virginia, asking for the establishment of a road from the vicinity of present Elkton, Virginia, "in a westerly direction joining the court house road at the New Stone Meeting House." This petition was signed by John Stephenson, John Craig, William Craig, Robert Hook, William Williams, David Chambers, Robert Scott, Mathew Thompson, Sr., Mathew Thomp-

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<sup>2</sup> Order Book No. 1, March Term, 1747.

<sup>3</sup> Survey Book No. 1, p. 8.

Henry Downs, Jr., was appointed Surveyor of the Highway from his house to the Stone Meeting House May 29th, 1751. (Order Book No. 2, p. 581.) Henry Downs, Jr., as shown, lived at the present Port Republic, Rockingham County, Virginia, in 1746, at the "Head of Shenandoah" River, and this further identifies the Peaked Mountain Church as the "Meeting House" and "Stone Meeting House" referred to in the court orders cited.

son, Jr., and eight others who signed in German;<sup>4</sup> and at the May term, 1749, an order was entered directing Jacob Rogers, Robert Scott, and James Beard to view and mark the road.<sup>5</sup>

The language of the court order, the "new stone meeting house," shows that a permanent church structure of stone had been built in 1749, and almost certainly in the preceding year 1748. The stone foundations of this church were still visible and frequently seen by the writer during his boyhood days. The Church stood in the woods about seventy-five feet south of the present Massanutten Church; it was approximately thirty-five feet long by twenty-five feet in width, and marks the spot where the Christian religion was first definitely established in Rockingham County, Virginia.

The name of the first pastor is not positively known, but it was probably the Rev. John Hindman. Rev. Dr. James R. Graham, deceased, of Winchester, Virginia, states in his admirable work, *The Planting of The Presbyterian Church in Northern Virginia*, that Rev. John Hindman was sent to the Shenandoah Valley in 1742, and in 1743 he was preaching at Opecquon in the present Frederick County, Virginia. Dr. Graham quotes the records of Donegal Presbytery as authority, and this is conclusive.<sup>6</sup> The same records show that in 1745 Mr. Hindman was preaching "at the head of Shenandoah." The Shenandoah River "heads"—is formed—at the present Port Republic, Rockingham County, Virginia, by the junction of the North and South Rivers, and this place is five miles south of Massanutten Church at Cross Keys. The Presbyterians have never had a church organization at Port Republic and we may, therefore certainly conclude that the "head of Shenandoah" was the Massanutten Church. This gives us 1745 as the year in which the Peaked Mountain Church was certainly in existence.

In 1747 the Rev. John Hindman changed his church affilia-

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<sup>4</sup> Court Papers, File No. 1. The "Courthouse Road" is the present Kezeltown Road in Rockingham County, Va., and at that time was the main road north and south through the valley of Virginia.

<sup>5</sup> Order Book No. 2, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Records of Donegal Presbytery.

tions and was elected the first rector of Augusta Parish.<sup>7</sup> However, he seems to have maintained his residence among his former Presbyterian flock, because he died in 1748 at the residence of John Stephenson on Mill Creek, one and one-half miles from Massanutten Church, after an illness of five weeks.

In 1751 a chancery suit was brought by John Fletcher and Eleanor, his wife, against John Stephenson, administrator of the Rev. John Hindman, for an account of his estate which was appraised in 1748.<sup>8</sup>

The tradition lingers among the Episcopalians in Staunton, Virginia, to this day that their first rector was fond of sports, and the appraisal of Mr. Hindman's estate shows that along with wigs, and gowns, and divinity books, he owned twenty-three horses and a "jockey coat and cap." John Stephenson lived at "Meadow View" on Mill Creek, the home in more recent years of Edward S. Kemper, deceased, and now the property of Mrs. E. A. Herring. On the "Meadow View" estate there was during the youth of the writer, and is now, a level stretch of land called "the race track," and here, no doubt, the Rev. Mr. Hindman indulged in his favorite pastime with his friends who were similarly inclined. It is probably the oldest race track in the United States west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, dating back to 1745-48.

Who succeeded Mr. Hindman is not definitely known, but in 1758 the Rev. Alexander Miller was preaching at Cook's

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<sup>7</sup> Vestry Book of Augusta Parish.

<sup>8</sup> Order Book No. 2, Court Papers 1751 to 1753. See Chancery Suit of John Fletcher and Eleanor, his wife, against John Stephenson, Administrator of Rev. John Hindman. She was a sister of Mr. Hindman. The suit was for an accounting of the estate. A mutilated and detached deposition on file in Court Papers, 1750-1753, shows that Mr. Hindman had preached in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, before coming to Virginia. The account of his estate, as filed in this suit, shows that John Stephenson had loaned Mr. Hindman a portion of the money necessary when the latter went to London, England, for his Episcopal ordination. Mr. Hindman is probably buried in the Massanutten Graveyard, one and one-half miles distant from John Stephenson's residence, but no stone marks his grave.

Creek and Peaked Mountain Churches. In that year Mr. Miller sued Rev. John Brown, pastor of Timber Ridge Church, now in Rockbridge County, for defamation of character and lost his case.<sup>9</sup> From the record in this case it is learned that Mr. Miller had preached in Orange County, North Carolina, in 1756 and was expelled from Highco Presbytery in that colony for improper conduct. However, he was evidently received by Hanover Presbytery, because he served the Cook's Creek and Peaked Mountain congregations until 1770, when the Rev. Thomas Jackson came from the colony of New York. Mr. Jackson was much beloved by his people, but his pastorate was brief, as he died in 1773. His home was in the neighborhood of New Erection Church near the head of Muddy Creek,<sup>10</sup> and his estate was appraised in 1773 by James Brewster, Archibald Houston, and David Laird of the Massanutten congregation.<sup>11</sup> The appraisement covers about five and one-half pages in Will Book No. 1, and nearly four pages are devoted to Mr. Jackson's library—the largest which appears upon the records of Augusta County, Virginia, prior to the Revolution. All the titles are good, and it was one of the large libraries in Colonial Virginia.

The Deed, Will, and Survey Books of Augusta County,<sup>12</sup> Virginia, show that the following Presbyterian families lived within the bounds of the Peaked Mountain-Massanutten Church during the period between 1745 and 1773: John Craig and Sarah, his wife, on lower Cub Run; William Craig and Janet, his wife, with their son, John Craig; Robert Hook and Jean, his wife, two and one-half miles south of the present Cross Keys; John Stephenson and Sarah, his wife, on Mill Creek where that stream is crossed by the present Keezeltown

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<sup>9</sup> Court Papers, Miller *vs.* Brown, 1758.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. Thomas Jackson purchased from William Samples a farm of 230 acres on the drafts of "Muddy Creek" and "Linville's Creek," May 14, 1770; D. B. No. 16, p. 304. Cook's Creek Presbyterian Church, now New Erection Church, was also under his charge, and he lived within the bounds of this congregation.

<sup>11</sup> Will Book No. 5, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Deed, Will, and Survey Books of Augusta County, Va.

Road; Archibald Houston and Mary, his wife, with their family of twelve children, near the headwaters of Mill Creek; William Williams near present Good's Mill on Mill Creek; Mathew Thompson, Sr., and Mathew Thompson, Jr., on Stony Lick Branch (now Williams Run) near North River; Robert Scott on North River near the present Port Republic; Samuel Scott, and William Beard and Mary, his wife, on Cub Run near the base of the Peaked Mountain; Patrick Frazier and Thomas Hewitt at the head of Stony Lick Branch, one mile southwest of the present Cross Keys; Robert Frazier on Stony Lick Branch; James Wayt near the head of Mill Creek; and James Laird, his wife, and his sons, James and David, and daughter Mary, at the head of Cub Run and at the base of Laird's Knob; and Robert Shanklin on Stony Lick Branch.<sup>13</sup>

This mention is made of the Scotch-Irish families who once composed the Massanutten Church because their names and places of residence do not appear elsewhere, and their early history has been almost entirely forgotten in their respective neighborhoods. Nearly all their descendants have gone from the lands of their forefathers to other sections and states and this information may prove of value to many Presbyterian families scattered throughout the United States.

The wills of nearly all the heads of these families are recorded at Staunton, Virginia. John Craig removed to Lincoln County, Kentucky, after the Revolution—about 1793—

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<sup>13</sup> As before stated, all or nearly all of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians named in this sketch came from Lancaster, Chester, and adjoining counties in Pennsylvania as shown by the Court Records of Augusta County, Va., of which Rockingham County was a part until 1778. The record in the suit of Wm. Hartley *vs.* James Craig shows that James Craig, son of William Craig and Janet, his wife, with his brothers, Robert and John Craig, were living in London Grove, Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1737, and certainly until 1739 (Court Papers, File 390). William Craig, through his youngest son, John Craig, was the ancestor of Rev. Willis Green Craig, D.D. (deceased), of the McCormick Theological Seminary of Chicago, Ill., and through his second son, James Craig, of Rev. J. Newton Craig, D.D. (deceased), of Atlanta, Georgia, both of whom were elected Moderators of their respective General Assemblies in the same year.

and his will (1802) is recorded at Stanford, Kentucky. James Laird died in 1803 and his will is recorded at Harrisonburg, Virginia, in the "Burnt Records" there. The descendants of his brother, David Laird, live in Fayette and adjoining counties in Kentucky.

All the foregoing is based upon the court records of Augusta and Rockingham Counties, Virginia, and the records of Presbyteries, and is authentic. Tradition, however, sometimes points the way to exact truth, and an interesting tradition has survived concerning the Peaked Mountain Church. Col. W. W. Hook, an old elder of the Massanutten Church, once told the writer that the "Rev. Mr. McDowell and Rev. Mr. Thompson" were the first ministers who preached at that place. The records of Donegal Presbytery as quoted by Dr. Graham show that Rev. Alexander McDowell was sent to Virginia in 1741. In 1753, Rev. Alexander McDowell sold his farm on Mary's (South) River, a branch of the James. It lay in the present Rockbridge County, then a part of Augusta County. He is described in the deed as being then a resident of "the Province of New Castle" (Delaware). It is highly probable that he preached at the Peaked Mountain Church as early as 1741.<sup>14</sup>

After the Revolution, the Scotch-Irish families of this section commenced to move away, and Massanutten Church declined in membership and was overshadowed by other denominations. The organization, however, has always been maintained, and this parent church of all the churches in Rockingham County, Virginia, is now increasing in numbers and importance—coming into its own again.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An echo of the building of the Peaked Mountain Church is found in an action brought by John and Thomas Stephenson for four pounds against William Williams, "who was indebted to ye congregation for building ye meeting house and other charges for ye congregation." See detached paper in Court Papers, File No. 391. The action was dismissed at the November Term, 1752. As before stated, William Williams lived on Mill Creek near the present Good's Mill, in the present Rockingham County, Va., about three miles east of the Peaked Mountain Church.

<sup>15</sup> The writer desires to express his sincere thanks to Rev. William J. Hinke, Ph.D., Auburn, New York, for valuable assistance relative to the early pastors of the Peaked Mountain Church.