

Opequon Presbyterian Church



Worship since 1732
Organized since 1736

A sketch
of the historic

Opequon
Presbyterian
Church

Winchester, Virginia

by
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"Mother Church of the Valley"

The name Opequon is of Indian origin and goes back some three hundred fifty years. Though obscured by time, both legend and tradition hold it evolved from the name of an Indian chief called Opechancanough. This chief and his warriors held sway over the area long before the coming of the white man, and for reasons unknown his name became associated with a large stream of water originating in the area. This Indian place name appears in the earliest written records of the area simply as Opekon, or as "Opekon settlement", or "the Opekon".

The roots of Opequon congregation go back to the year 1731, when in October of that year sixteen families, led by the German Joist Hite, migrated to the lower Shenandoah valley from the York, Pennsylvania area. Most of these original families settled on or near Opequon and Cedar creeks. Within the next few years many additional settlers arrived, some settling closer in to present day Winchester.

Predominant among these early settlers were the Germans and the Scotch Irish, whose faiths were rooted in the reformed traditions. From this group of families, along with some English, Welsh, and Dutch, Opequon congregation had its beginning.

While there are no dates indicating exact time and circumstances, it is believed these early settlers joined in worship as early as 1732. By the year 1736 the first log meeting house was built at this site on land donated by William Hoge. Tradition holds that he built this first meeting house at his own expense. He also donated an additional two acres of land for a burying place.

The organizational date of Opequon congregation into an official Presbyterian one is again unknown, but strong evidence indicates this was done either by the Rev. Samuel Gelston in July or August of 1736, or by the Rev. James Anderson sometime in 1737. This was done under the oversight of Donegal (Pa.) Presbytery, of which Opequon became a part.

From its organization until the outbreak of the French and Indian war in 1754 Opequon was served by various itinerant ministers, evangelists, and supplies provided by Donegal Presbytery. By 1755 the congregation had become quite large and Opequon was the most important church in the lower valley, being the only place of public worship within a large area. It is believed that the second log meeting house was built about this time. In that year the Rev. John Hoge, grandson of William Hoge, became the first settled minister at Opequon.

The Rev. Hoge came upon the field in trying times. It was the time of the Indian outrages in the valley, and many members, particularly those living to the west along the Great North Mountain, were daily subjected to the fear and reality of Indian attack. In addition to the Indian problem times were hard, and on many occasions there was not enough money to pay the preacher. In fact, after eighteen years of service Rev. Hoge's pastorate, at his request, was dissolved by Presbytery "on account of none payment of salary".

During the Revolutionary war Opequon congregation sent many of its sons to fight in the war of Independence. At least seven of these are known, and they are buried in the cemetery to the northeast of the sanctuary. Their contribution is recognized by a large limestone boulder which now marks their final resting place.

Perhaps the grandest days of Opequon occurred during the twenty year period following the Revolutionary war. Under the pastorate of the Rev. John Montgomery, and the Rev. Nash LeGrand the congregation became quite large, and worshippers came from far and near to worship at old Opequon. Shortly after LeGrand arrived the second log meeting house was torn down, and in 1790 a new stone structure was erected. It was approximately fifty per cent larger than the present sanctuary, and on many occasions was filled and overflowing.

By the late 1700's the membership began to dwindle. Many of the old families left the area and migrated down the Great Wagon Road to America's new frontiers in the Carolinas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In addition to this exodus many members withdrew from Opequon when the first Presbyterian congregation in Winchester was organized there in 1800 (Old Stone Church).

In the first one third of the 1800's Opequon was served by a succession of very able preacher-teacher scholarly type ministers (Shannon, Foote, Chapman, Riddle, Matthews, Kilpatrick). The membership ebbed and flowed, and in the great revival of 1831 Opequon again gained a large number of new members.

The next twenty five years were disruptive for Presbyterians in general, and Opequon was caught up in the division between "old school" and "new school" Presbyterianism. In addition, storm clouds were gathering between the North and South, and in 1861 Opequon joined with other southern congregations in the formation of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederacy.

When the Civil war erupted Opequon was caught directly in the line of fire. The first battle of Kernstown in 1862 raged around and just to the west of the church. The building was heavily damaged and finally in 1863, after further damage, services were discontinued. Some sporadic services were held during the remainder of the war in the stone school house which stood about forty feet north of the present sanctuary.

In 1866 a small remnant of the former congregation (about 20 members) decided to rehabilitate the ruined structure. Worshiping for awhile on a sawdust floor, and led by the very dedicated Rev. William A. Crawford as minister, they slowly improved it and had it nearly completed when in 1873 a fire broke out during a Sunday morning service. Before the very eyes of this pitiful congregation the flames consumed the building, leaving only the stone walls standing.

Because of the financial panic of 1873, and other hardships following the Civil war, there was no money for rebuilding. This die hard congregation however refused to die, and with only 13 members remaining they continued to worship as a congregation, first in Grace Methodist Church in Kernstown, and later in the Mennonite Church at Kernstown. During this period of some twenty odd years the old church site reverted back to nature. The stone walls crumbled and the old burying grounds became overgrown with bush and briar. It was indeed a forlorn sight.

To the casual passer by, this dismal scene might have implied the end of an era; it's illustrious past consigned only to the dim pages of history. To those faithful few however, whose ancestors had

worshiped on this very soil for more than 150 years, this was not to be. To them it was just a passing interlude in an ongoing saga, and in 1889 a movement stirred within the small congregation to rebuild the old church.

Though small in number and mostly poor in this world's possessions, these hard core christians struggled with various ways to finance the rebuilding. Finally the idea surfaced to rebuild it as a memorial to the early settlers of the valley. It was decided, that after securing all local funding possible, to contact decedents of those early settlers now living in various parts of the country for additional financial assistance. This was done and the effort was very successful.

In 1897 the present sanctuary was completed, and in a grand ceremony was dedicated to the glory of God. The west and south walls are built on the same foundations as the original stone church of 1790, and many of the stones in the walls are from that same building. Because of the many memorial contributions which made the rebuilding possible the word "memorial" was added to Opequon's name, and for the next 83 years it was known as Opequon Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Five years after the new sanctuary was built the congregation felt that a manse was needed, and in 1902 the present manse was completed at a cost of approximately \$1500.00. This minimum cost was made possible by generous contributions of both labor and materials by members of the congregation, and by gift of land upon which it sits by long time Elder, Marquis Jones.

After the new sanctuary and manse were built the membership again increased. In 1910 there were 49 members, which soon increased to about 60. As the great depression of the 1930's approached Opequon had 83 members, but because of the financial disaster which accompanied it, the church's income was drastically reduced. The budget for the year 1933 was only \$421.40 which included the pastor's salary of \$360.00 yearly.

Opequon congregation has always been interested in extension of the Lord's work beyond its immediate confines. In the years that have passed since its founding, no less than 43 ministers and 8 missionarys have come from families having their roots at Opequon. In the first half of the present century Opequon was

instrumental in establishing sunday school work in various outlying areas such as Nineveh, Bartonsville, Bufflick Road, Evan-dale, and Opequon chapel at head of Opequon creek.

Opequon chapel was for many years an outpost of Opequon church, with the latter having many members living in that area. These members became desirous of having a seperate congregation, and in 1945 a seperate church was organized there and named Second Opequon Presbyterian Church. Because of this action Opequon's membership was drastically reduced.

Again, Opequon congregation did not choose to stand still. A spiritually revitalized congregation, having a vision of the future in its mind, undertook a major expansion and building program. In 1955-56 a new and modern educational facility was completed, and the old sanctuary was refurbished.

In recent times the old original name of the church was restored. By official action of both the congregation and Presbytery the word "memorial" was dropped, and the original name Opequon Presbyterian Church was reinstated. This old landmark is now registered by the Presbyterian Historical Society as an American Presbyterian and Reformed Historical Site.

Thus continues the long legacy of Opequon Presbyterian Church and congregation. This ancient assemblage place of worship has rightfully earned the designation "mother church of the valley". It is the oldest place of Presbyterian worship of positive continuous record in the valley of Virginia, and is widely recognized as the oldest Presbyterian congregation west of the Blue Ridge mountains.

In the four burying grounds which surround the sanctuary lie some of the earliest settlers of the valley, including the oldest marked gravesite in the whole valley of Virginia (Wilson-1742). Those pioneers, who braved the Indian attacks and carved a civilization out of the wilderness, are along with us the living, Opequon congregation. This "cloud of witnesses" whose various lives span a portion of four centuries, inspire us today as we continue to glorify God in this place. Let this proud heritage of the past be exceeded only by what is yet to come.



THE STORY OF THE BELL

The sweet toned bell in Opequon's belfry is not just an ordinary church bell. It was cast especially for Opequon and has a story all its own.

When the present sanctuary was being built in 1896-97, a decision was made that it be built as a memorial to the early settlers of the valley who had established Opequon in 1736. Financial support was solicited from descendants of those early settlers, and many responded. Among these was the family of John Gilkeson of St. Louis, Missouri. Liberal contributions were made by this family during construction, but, prior to completion, Mr. Gilkeson died.

As a memorial to her husband and herself, Mrs. Gilkeson volunteered that, "she desires a bell to be made according to her plan, and entirely at her expense; that she would direct her husband's secretary of thirty years to proceed to Albany, NY, where the bell was to be cast, and carry with him valuable jewels which were highly valued by her and her husband; these jewels to be fused into the molten mass which was to be cast into this memorial bell."

After casting, the bell was delivered to Opequon for installation into its stylish new steeple. Along with the bell came a letter from Mrs. Gilkeson requesting, "we bear in mind if any accident occur while fitting it into its new home, a broken bell meant a broken sentiment."

In a very special ceremony on Saturday, October 30, 1897, this new bell and new sanctuary were dedicated to the glory of God. Its rich tones have rung out over the land ever since, proclaiming this house of the Lord.

Forged in bold letters upon the iron surface of the bell is Christ's command to all Christians, from John 13:34:

**A NEW COMMANDMENT I GIVE UNTO YOU,
THAT YE LOVE ONE ANOTHER.**