

October 12, 2025

A message from Garry Bock

Tomahawk Presbyterian Church - 280th Anniversary Celebration

Welcome to Tomahawk Presbyterian Church 280th Anniversary Celebration! I am Garry Bock one of the Elders here. We appreciate Rev. Dr. Nancy Meehan Yao for leading us in worship this morning. Maria Bock on Piano. Irene Stilwell on Organ and anyone else who contributed in any way making this celebration happen. Let us pray!

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your everlasting presence here. We thank You for blessing this congregation and community and guiding us to seek and follow Your will. Now fill us and this place with the Holy Spirit. May we continue to glorify You in all we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The bathrooms are through that door. The back room also has speakers as well so you won't miss what's happening out here if you are back there looking at the displays. If you have not signed the guest book today, please do that. Thank you

Before we begin, Irene Stilwell offered a very special song on the old pump organ that we purchased new in 1916 for \$90 plus 1.83 delivery charge!

Thank you, Irene!

Our 260th anniversary in 2005 included an excellent little historical booklet by Rev. Rufus Burton at Martinsburg 1st Presbyterian and CLP William D. Moore (may he rest in peace). Ruth Berg and Shirley McDaniel helped pull it all together. Thank you! There are a few extra copies in the back. We can make more if interested. This year, we had hoped to do a similar booklet but faced challenges without a permanent pastor. But God has provided what we need at this time. We're thankful for all who have helped sustain our mission, and we pray for God to continue guiding us toward a full-time pastor if that is His will. As we will see... it's not the first time this church has been without a permanent pastor.

The last anniversary celebration we had was the 265th in 2010. The 270th in 2015 didn't happen for unknown reasons to me and the 275th in 2020 was overshadowed by COVID-19 pandemic where gatherings were frowned upon. I believe a lot of churches are still trying to recover from its effects. So here we are today! We are grateful for your presence for this blessed occasion. May we ever be grateful for Jesus The Christ and what He has done for us!

It's obvious driving up the driveway looking at the majestic oak trees that this is an ancient place at least by American standards.

This stone building constructed between 1826 and 1830 predates the official founding of the town of Hedgesville in 1834. The double layered stonework likely began as early as 1826. Mr. Robert Halbert won the contract to install the lathe and plaster the interior in September 1830 for a price of \$31.77 ½ !

We think the church is a symbol of faith, strength, endurance and our witness in the community, however, the true essence of the church are the people, those here today and those over the years who have sat in these pews to give thanks to God and learn and grow in Jesus Christ.

A little local church newspaper published monthly for many years called The Church Messenger Volume 4 number 11 from November 19, 1931 Joseph Alexander McMurray the Editor covers the historical sketch of Tomahawk Church. Much of today's overview reflects what Joseph McMurray and his wife Madge wrote.

To summarize, he wrote in 1931 how 200 years earlier (now almost 300 years!) Back Creek was the frontier of civilization as the Indians were pushed back into the wilderness and the Scotch Presbyterian immigration from the north of Ireland to America was in full swing. There were extreme challenges between the Indigenous tribes and the early European settlers during this time as they fought each other, long bloody wars and relocating from both sides time and time again. It is a subject that deserves more study.

I commend a book titled The Scotch Irish – A Social History by James G. Leyburn published in 1962. He was born in Hedgesville and is the son of Rev. E. R. Leyburn, who was pastor here at Tomahawk from 1895-1902.

The Leyburn's and McMurray's are related and were close family friends (according to Harlan McMurray Sept. 2025)

A few years ago, William D. Moore told us about the McMurray family being in Congo (Africa) for 40 years working to translate the Bible into Congolese dialects.

Last month I was very fortunate to communicate with Harlan McMurray who is 92 years old and is the grandson of the late Joseph and Madge McMurray. Harlan provided valuable information including family pictures. Harlan's father Louis Armistead (LA) McMurray was a linguist, bible scholar, artist and pianist.

Harlan grew up in Congo and explained it was his father L.A. McMurray, who was on a missionary team along with Congolese pastors (to assure accuracy in use of the language) doing the Bible translations for those 40 years. Harlan was also a missionary there working on a different project

In the 1960's Congo, split to create the Republic of Congo. As a result, L.A. McMurray and his family had to return to the United States – their missionary work interrupted. McMurray then painted these two panels of the 23rd Psalm and The Apostles' Creed on the front wall dedicating them to his father Joseph A. McMurray, who was the Pastor at Tomahawk from 1920-1940. He started as a stated supply in 1889.

We appreciate the information Harlan McMurray lovingly shared about his family and their service to the Lord.

Now... stepping back to that time before this stone building...

The year was about 1745

We can only imagine those people early on... life was not easy... we don't know who they were... getting together with a Bible, reading and studying scripture and praying to the creator. Possibly sitting in the grass under one of those now centuries old oak trees. That is the date this church was traditionally organized, through oral history, which continues to pass along, yet we have no physical proof it started in 1745... but there is and always has been value in oral history being passed down through the generations.

I met with the late Don Wood, past president of the Berkeley County Historical Society, years ago here at the church. He showed me the 1750 survey plat of Hugh Lyle and Sam Cornwall land grants with the dividing property line basically right under us. You can see the line along the fence and trees on the hill behind the church and the property line today hits the back corner of the building. Later, Don Wood gave a historical presentation here about Back Creek Valley and mentioned Hugh Lyle had his property surveyed in 1752 and there was no mention of a church building. What Mr. Wood was doing was disputing our 1745 founding claim, because there was no building present yet as the Hugh Lyle property survey didn't show one. And so now, we continue on knowing the log building also known as "Mr. Vance's meeting house" was built sometime after 1750 or 1752 depending on what side of the line it was on.

Dr. James Robert Graham in his 1794 book, THE PLANTING OF PRESBYTERIANISM IN THE NORTHERN NECK OF VIRGINIA (which is a downloadable .pdf file), says "In April 1760, Rev. John Hoge is ordered to supply Back Creek: For the next nine years Presbytery furnished this church repeatedly with supply ministers in connection with Tuscarora or Falling Waters.

He also wrote: "In October 1770, Rev. Hugh Vance, who had just been licensed, was laid before Presbytery from Back Creek and Falling Waters to become their Pastor."

Now fast forwarding:

In 2007, the Session determined the underlying sanctuary floor was end of life and needed to be replaced.... The new floor pays homage to the old original 5" wide pine planks painted similarly to the color of the floor now. Many here still remember how the old floor boards gave a little bounce as you walked across them... and another coat of paint wasn't going to help. It was quite the sight to see the pews removed and the floor gone and being able to see down into the hand dug basement area... that was completed in the late 1940's by Lynn and Alma "Sis" Coffinbarger with shovels and 5-gallon buckets... They did that so an oil furnace could be installed to replace the wood burning stoves. During the renovation of the floor, we discovered that the logs holding it up had notches on both ends similar to what would be found in a log building... and we can only assume that those logs were repurposed from the original Mr. Vance's meeting house. I believe its location was just to the east of the current brown stone building. The width of the sanctuary today would have been the length of the log building about 26'. I also found what I think is a foundation corner stone for the log building next to the iron fence, and I believe without proof that the grey stone Jones enclosure in the cemetery was likely previously used for the foundation for the log building. The grey-stone enclosure surrounds the graves of the family members founder of Jones Spring the earliest grave of David Jones who died in 1830, which is the year this new stone building was built. I think recycling stones and logs were alive and well in 1830! And for the record, a time capsule was placed under the pulpit stage, and the old pine flooring was repurposed by a local mill and sold to be reinstalled in one of the embassies in Washington D.C. A sample of the old flooring and a piece of one of the two wood stoves are on display in the back room.

Rev. Huger Vance was the pastor here for 20 years from 1770 to 1791

Vance is buried in the Tuscarora Presbyterian Church Cemetery. Tuscarora is a stone church built in 1803 on the other side of the mountain near Martinsburg, and it appears they used the same kind of grey-stone that I think was used for the log building stone foundation on this site. Rev. Vance was the first installed

pastor at Tuscarora and he traveled over the mountain to minister to the people here in the valley, too. Dr. Graham also stated in his book that during Mr. Vance's pastorate, Back Creek church must have been one of the strongest in this section of the county, as will appear from the following entry in the diary of a certain Mr. Fithian: It said: "Sunday June 18, 1775. Over North Mountain I rode to Mr. Vance's Meeting House at Back Creek. The sacrament was administered. Ninety-three communicants. Vast assembly". Wow... Lord, we wish to return to days like that!

But then... After he died in 1791, "Mr. Vance's Meeting House" was without a regular pastor for 34 years except for the seven years Rev. Joseph Glass ministered from 1799 to 1806. Then another long period of neglect occurred where only 3 ministers are listed providing "occasional services" **It was called Back Creek Meeting House after the death of Vance.**

Dr. Robert Bell Woodworth describes in his 1947 book A History of the Presbytery of Winchester (also a downloadable .pdf) about the Virginia Warrior path, which is a segment of the Great Indian Warpath that ran through the Shenandoah Valley and passed the Conococheague (KAH-no-KAH-cheek) Creek area where it meets the Potomac River in Williamsport, MD. This extensive path was used by various Native American tribes for trade, diplomacy and warfare. As European Settlers moved inland, they adopted sections of the trail, and in the mid-18th century, a portion of the Warrior Path became known as the Great Wagon Road. It passed through the Eastern Panhandle of present-day West Virginia and now Route 11. Indian raids were a widespread problem keeping the settlers on constant lookout while traveling.

Woodworth mentions early missionaries like Jeremiah Smith camping on Back Creek in 1730 and James Lyon coming to the Back Creek area in 1740.

Woodworth says this congregation is dated about 1745 though it does not appear in the records of Pennsylvania Donegal Presbytery until April 16, 1760. He also notes Tomahawk's early connections with Tuscarora and Falling Waters. Several of the same pastors that served those two churches also served here in Tomahawk.

From the height of its prosperity in 1775, the church went down to almost extinction by 1825. We have no direct evidence as to what the causes of the decline were, but remembering The American Revolutionary War 1775 – 1783. It's been estimated that over half of the officers and soldiers of the American army were Presbyterian. We can only imagine the suffering of human life and the long period of recovery and healing taking its toll.

That time around 1820's where the Vance Meeting House membership had only 6 people left... likely because the log building was falling apart so badly as described in a copy of an 1834 letter we have from Rev. James Moore Brown (Back Creek pastor 1825-1834). He said when he came on the scene in 1825... The log building was in state of ruin. The roof was decayed, the floor broken, pews falling in and some log ends rotten. Something had to be done to keep Brown as their minister. They debated to fix the old, but obviously decided to build new. Rev. Brown promised regular worship services and supervised the building of Stone Church Back Creek. When Brown left in 1834 there were 37 members.

The year is 1846

Rev. James H. Jennings came to Berkeley County to begin his work as Pastor of Back Creek Church on April 25, 1846 and stayed for thirteen years. He is the only long-term pastor we know of who actually lived in the community. He is said to have lived in the Alonzo Myers house (Retha Bartgis' father). In the records kept by Mr. Jennings, the name of the church is given as "Stone Church, Back Creek, "and sometimes simply as" Stone Church."

Rev. Jennings pastorate closed in 1859 and for thirty (30) years there are no records of Session meetings or activity of the church. The church had no regular Pastor and was well-nigh extinct.

Again, the desolation of War! This time a civil war where families were divided and the area was besieged by armies of both the North and South of the same country.

Despite long periods of neglect, the church's spirit persevered. It was the Rev. Shadia M. Engle who in 1890 found 8 remaining members of the original organization. Engle was installed pastor of Falling Waters church in 1891, but peached here regularly every two weeks. In the fall of 1891, he had a protracted meeting because the membership increased to such an extent that they made application to Presbytery in the spring of 1892 for reorganization of The Back Creek Church also known as Stone Church Back Creek on May 29, 1892.

While Engle was there, He received an old Back Creek Session book and he noted on July 18, 1892, "This session book of the Back Creek Presbyterian Church came to my hands from Mr. James Murphy near Tomahawk W. Va. who took it from under a box in the pulpit in the Back Creek Church. The foregoing portion of this book tells its own interesting story of one of the oldest Presbyterian organizations in Berkeley County... and that the organization was dissolved by the war... "

There is more...

When Engle began his work here, the building was again in dire need of repairs, especially the roof which was sagged and leaking badly. They sistered 2x4 sawed rafters to the hand-hewn logs and a new roof installed. The pulpit was lowered and the "new" pews were installed.

Rev. S.M. Engle was pastor here from 1891-1894

On October 31, 1891, Joseph H. and Catherine Kitchen deeded the ground to the trustees of "The Presbyterian Church of Back Creek". We repaired Catherine Kitchen's broken in half headstone last year, and it can be found just to the east side of the church.

Madge McMurray (Joseph A. McMurray's wife) was instrumental in finding and acquiring the original circa 1790's Back Creek Church pewter communion set (on display in the front of the church), which was in the possession of the Engle family and likely replaced with a more modern set when the church was reorganized in 1892. This communion set was likely acquired during the time Rev. Joseph Glass was pastor here (1799-1806). The estimated age was just

recently verified by the stamped hallmarks. We appreciate the research and preservation done by Rachel Bartgis. Thank you Rachel.

THEN On ~~April 16~~, May 31, 1896 the Pastor Rev. E.R. Leyburn made this statement "Session met immediately after the afternoon service in the Tomahawk Presbyterian Church." THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT THE CHURCH WAS MENTIONED IN THE OFFICAL RECORDS AS TOMAHAWK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.... And, so it continues to this day.

An all-time high of 144 members was reached when Rev. E.R. Layburn was the pastor.

Dr. Robert Bell Woodworth describes Tomahawk (Stone) Church looking similar to Tuscarora Presbyterian Church. He noted the double entrance doors, two chimneys, three shuttered windows on the west side and two on the east side with a door. The latter end with two shuttered windows. Today, we can still see this even with the addition of the side and back education wings built in 1960. What's notable is that almost all work that needed to be done at that time was volunteer labor from the congregation or community. The original front doors and window shutters are in the attic. One shutter, one original window frame and the cast iron parts of one of the original wood stoves found in the old shed torn down in 2003 are in our garage... for now...

Some other notable changes to the building were when the vestibule was added in 1976, the bell tower in 1985 and the kitchen in 2012. There is a cross in the stone above the front doors most people miss coming in unless it's pointed out. Look for it today.

Dr. Dorsey Ellis was the keynote speaker here for the 250th celebration in 1995. He stated in the very early history; circuit riders from the Donegal Presbytery of Pennsylvania came into the area by way of Falling Waters. The circuit extended southward through the Shenandoah Valley to below Harrisonburg, VA. These excursions are another reason Tomahawk as well as Falling Waters, Tuscarora and Gerrardstown Presbyterian Churches were established. He also writes

about a single pew loft over the front doors that used to exist where people had to climb a ladder to get to it. He mentions the beam across the room was used to support the two chimneys going through the roof and the stove pipes that went up to the chimneys. The beam and the chimney platforms are still present today. He said Adele Todd (a past member of Tomahawk Presbyterian), gifted or paid for the installation of the 32-volt Delco electric light plant generator in the 1921 to replace the gas lighting. The generator was stationed in the old shed and it cost \$430 which is over \$7,700 in today's dollars. Adele Todd was a WW1 nurse is recognized on the doughboy statue at War Memorial Park in Martinsburg and buried in Tomahawk Cemetery next to her twin sister. She was recognized with military honors here in November 2023.

Wrapping this up...

Dorsey Ellis also talks about the addition of the side and back religious education rooms in the 1960's. The brown native sandstones came from a quarry near here (on Tomahawk Run Road on what used to be the Israel Robinson / Brock Winfrey property), which is the same one the original building stone came from... This was mostly done by the efforts of Robert "Bob" Bartgis, Lynn and his son Bill "Billy" Coffinbarger (here with us today), Earl Hedges and his son Wayne, Carlton Dove and Duke Franklin selected the stone and mixed the mortar. The dedication service was November 8th, 1964.

I remember a story from Bob Bartgis about bringing the stone up the hill to build the additions. He told me that the truck was so heavy it couldn't make it up the driveway and it was "rearing-up" the front wheels were in the air... and somehow, they managed to install a very long pole on the front axle and people climbed on the pole and on the hood to counter the weight of the stone on the truck... to make it up the hill.

Enough about the building. We want to maintain the history the best we can of course, but we've already determined the church is really about the people not the building...

The Session consists of Moderator Rev. Karen Greenawalt from Gerrardstown, Clerk of Session and Ruling Elder Jenny Beidler, Ruling Elders Brad Noll, Rick Coffinbarger and Garry Bock.

The Trustees are Bill Coffinbarger and Garry Bock.

Roll call of members or past members who have entered sainthood since the last anniversary celebration the 265th in 2010 are David Parrell, Frank Stilwell, Roland Gonano, Robert and Retha Bartgis, Kenny Corbin, Sis Coffinbarger, Larry Unger, Josh Kuria, Ilene Smith. I apologize if I've missed anyone.

On a final personal note, I wanted to reflect a moment on our first Day of Celebration and Festivities in 1999 with proceeds designated towards mapping the cemetery, which is what I think started my 25-year effort helping care for and document the cemetery. Thanks again to Shirley McDaniel for spearheading that outreach and so many more over the years. This year (March 2025) we were finally able to conduct a Ground Penetrating Radar study in the Tomahawk Cemetery looking for unmarked graves. The funding came from a grant from WV Historic Society that Faith Hall (then President of the Tomahawk Ruritan Club) made me aware of.

Thank you, Faith! The grant was \$2520 and specifically for cemeteries that do not receive perpetual care funding We've always suspected several unknown grave locations from verbal stories, and it was both sad and gratifying to learn of at least another 110 souls buried in the cemetery, which are now marked with a modest paver stone. This means so much to me!

Before I end, we would like to present the Tomahawk Ruritan Club with a church pew for their club building in appreciation for the help we have received from them and their commitment to service in this community over the years. The 1890's pew was one of three located where the piano is now and removed when the sanctuary floor was replaced in 2007. It was made shorter and the remaining wood used for the commemorative plaques made for the occasion of this anniversary. I thank our daughter Anna for that great idea. We hope you enjoy

that little part of our history. By the way, in 2008 when she was in the 5th grade, Anna made a project and gave a briefing at WV state social studies fair about “Mr. Vance’s Meeting House” and received an Honorable Mention! The display and her reports are on the historic items display table in the back. Thank you, Anna! Thank you again Faith and the Tomahawk Ruritan Club members for your enduring service in the community. And thank you all for being here today. Thanks be to God!

At this time, we’d like to invite people to talk about their remembrances at Tomahawk Presbyterian Church.

PRAYER before meal:

Bless us, O Lord, and your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty. We thank you Lord for all those gathered here. Bless them Lord and Bless the hands who have prepared this meal. We pray for your guidance and provision and to do your will. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen