

Almost Forgotten History of Bluffton's United Methodist Church by John Samuel Graves, III



Bluffton Methodist Church after the 1940 hurricane.

I shall begin at the end of this story and work backwards. Very few people today, if any, can remember the Bluffton hurricane of 1940. My mother, *Florence Rubert Graves*, lived in Bluffton at the time and she never forgot it. I had not been born yet. Later, it took me many years to fully understand the significance of *Bluffton's Methodist Church* for my great grandparents, *George and Jane Guilford*. This article is about them and their long term relationship with Bluffton's UMC.

On August 11, 1940, a Category 2 hurricane came ashore in Beaufort bringing winds of 105 mph, killing 34 people, and leaving at least \$10 million worth of damage. (That would be approximately \$178 million today.) Beaufort received almost 11 inches of rain in 24 hours. The people of Bluffton experienced the same storm. Below are excerpts from my mother's account that appeared in the newspaper several days after the event:

Bluffton people have paused to take a breath after, first, a frantic struggle with a terrific storm that lashed out at the lowcountry Sunday and, second, after the first necessary efforts toward rehabilitation. This was undoubtedly the worst storm in this section of the country for ten years.

The wind, high all morning, noticeably increased shortly after noon, and by 1 and 2 o'clock, many had already sought refuge in the school house, thought to be the safest building at hand due to its modern and sturdy construction. Many took their pets with them to sanctuary and there was a motley assortment of animals as well as humans. With every street cluttered and practically impassible even on foot, every tree a threat of danger, all electric wires down, no telephone and no concrete aid or contact to be hoped for from the outside world, chaos reigned for a few brief hours.

There were many children and families from out of town as two family reunions had been scheduled in Bluffton for that day, the Graves and the Hodges. The cottages along the river were filled with week-enders, some of whom had not heard the warning sent out that morning.

The water rose to unheard of heights. The waves resembled those of the Atlantic itself. All of All-Joy, a small resort section just outside of town, was covered and water came up to the floors of several very high houses there. (Some of these houses were resting six or seven feet off the ground on pilings.) In Bluffton itself, the tide reached the porch of the Gold Eagle Tavern and swept away every dock along the bluff with the exception of the old pavilion which somehow withstood the forces turned against it. (The Gold Eagle Tavern used to be down by the river just past the Colcock-Teal House which is now owned by the Bluffton Historical Preservation Society.) Hilton Head and Jenkins Island were reportedly washed clean. Many buildings and houses were gone and, hence, many homeless.

Many families, due to the tides and flood water from the swamps, were marooned in their own homes, with great fallen trees on every side. The trees, among them many of the beautiful age-old oaks this town is famous for, fell across the streets and struck several houses. The Methodist Church was completely demolished by one of these, the whole center crushed leaving the altar exposed at one end and the steeple slanting at the other with the faithful old bell poised visibly, as though to ring prophetically the last call to prayer.

My great grandfather, *George Sewell Guilford*, had built the church's steeple and bell tower. That is part of "the rest of the story" that follows.

The *Bluffton Methodist Episcopal Church*, as it was initially called, was built on its current location on Calhoun Street sometime between 1890 and 1892. Some of the history of the *Bluffton Methodist Church* was recorded during that time and I inherited copies of two handwritten documents that discuss some of the early efforts at organizing the church, finding places to have church meetings, and purchasing land for the church.

The Organization Document shown on the next page is a reconstructed version of a handwritten record of the early organization of the *Bluffton Methodist Episcopal Church* in the 1880's and 1890's. The document was passed down to me by my Graves relatives. It probably was a product of a church meeting, perhaps the same meeting that produced **The Resolutions Document** that follows it. **The Organization Document** was unsigned and undated. However, it bears the same handwriting as the **The Resolutions Document** which was signed and dated by the church secretary, *J. C. Snyder*, on August 20, 1892. **The Organization Document** declares that a site for the new church was purchased on February 1, 1889 for \$150.00. Mr. Snyder and three other men, including my great grandfather, *George Sewell Guilford*, were elected to the building committee. Both documents were too deteriorated to permit good photographs.

The Organization Document details how the congregation had been meeting in the Masonic Lodge and then in the Episcopal Church before the construction of their new building. *George Sewell Guilford* did much of the carpentry on the new building, and probably much of the planning and coordinating of materials and labor. My relatives told me over the years that he had a high sense of pride and civic duty. For him the building of the church must have been a labor of love. He and his wife, Jane, remained members of this church for many years.

Organization

A Methodist Society was organized in Bluffton by Rev. G. R. Whittaker, preacher in charge of the Hardeeville Circuit. Services were held prior to the organization at first in the old Masonic Lodge. After that was converted into a dwelling, the Vestrymen of the Episcopal Church gave us the use of that church, where services were held every third Sunday in the month at 4 O'clock P.M. On Feb. 1st 1889 a site was purchased from Mrs. B. E. Guerand¹ on which to erect a church for the sum of One Hundred and Fifty Dollars. J. C. Snyder, R. G. W. Bryant, W. H. Niver, and G. S. Guilford were elected to the Building Committee.

Once built the new church stood for almost 50 years. Sadly, as the photo shows, it was destroyed by the hurricane that swept through Bluffton in 1940. The steeple and bell tower built by my great grandfather Guilford survived but were later taken down when the replacement church was constructed.

George and Jane Guilford lived—and died—devotedly following the *Methodist Rules of Life*² put forth by John Wesley in 1743. I know this from family records, oral histories, and from the record of their lives provided by their grandson, Andrew Peebles, in his *Bluffton Boy* stories. I also had lengthy discussions with Luke Peebles, their grandson, about these two wonderful people. (Luke's mother Maud was George and Jane's daughter.) George and Jane were driven by love and concern for each other, for their children, their extended families, their church and their adopted town, Bluffton. George went on to become mayor of Bluffton eleven times. Jane was a midwife and homeopathic, holistic health care practitioner affectionately called "Doctor Guilford." When called to aid someone in need of her assistance she was known to travel many miles by horse and buggy or boat—any time of day or night. George and Jane's lives can aptly be described by the *Methodist Rules of Life*:

- Do no harm, "avoiding evil of all kinds;"
- Do good, "of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all;"
- Practice "the ordinances of God," and engage in individual and communal spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible reading, worship and the Lord's Supper.

The second family document that I have about the Bluffton Methodist Church, *The Resolutions Document*, is shown next. It too is a reconstructed version of a handwritten record of an early meeting of the *Bluffton Methodist Episcopal*

1 The spelling of this name is uncertain. However, a man with a surname of this same spelling, John Guerand, also gave land for building St. Luke's UMC. Perhaps they were related?

2 www.umc.org

Church in 1892. The Methodists had been meeting in the Episcopal Church for four years prior to building their own church at their current location on Calhoun Street. After purchasing their church lot in 1889 they continued to meet in the *Episcopal Church of the Cross* until their new church was completed. The new church building was probably completed shortly before this resolution was adopted in 1892.

The Resolutions Document

Bluffton, S. C.

Aug. 20th, 1892

At a Meeting of the Pastor, Officers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Bluffton, the following Resolutions were unanimously adopted:

First, We extend our sincere thanks to the Pastor and Officers of the Episcopal Church for their Christian Benevolence that has given us the use of their House of Worship the past Four Years.

Second, We feel a deep sense of gratitude that we pray will never be marred by any Sectarian Spirit, but as one Body of Christ, we may work together for the Spiritual Good of our community.

Third, That a copy of these Resolutions be furnished to the Pastor of the Episcopal Church, and such publicity given as he may deem proper.

J. C. Snyder, Secretary

George Guilford was considered a local authority on the Bible and taught both Sunday school and in the public school. His daughter played the piano on Sundays. *George and Jane Guilford* had moved to Bluffton in 1887 and quickly became very active in their church and town activities. George would spend his last 30 years in Bluffton. Jane would survive him by 21 years. They both died in Bluffton—George in 1917 and Jane in 1938. They are both buried in the Bluffton Cemetery.

Please read my recent articles in the April and May issues of ***The Breeze*** about *George Sewell Guilford's* role in the incorporation of Bluffton in 1903. There are also other articles about the Guilfords on graveshouse.org under the *Articles Tab*. My mother's entire article, *Bluffton Methodist Church Destroyed by Hurricane*, can also be found on graveshouse.org under the *Articles Tab*. I can be reached through my contact forms on my websites, astarfell.com and graveshouse.org.