

History of the Rocky Springs Chapel

Rocky Springs Chapel, built by the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (U.B.) denomination in 1882, is a one-story frame church with German siding and an oculus window located in the gable over the foyer. It is a good example of a frame rural church of the last quarter of the 19th century. It retains with few changes, its exterior and much of its interior appearance and materials. The two exterior additions, the foyer and the frame shed addition on the rear, are faced with the same siding as the main section of the church. Rocky Springs Chapel is listed on the Maryland Inventory of Historic Places (Survey No. F-3-96). In addition, the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church lists Rocky Springs Chapel as a Heritage Landmark of the United Methodist Church “point of interest,” on the United Brethren Founding Sites Cluster, Frederick and Washington Counties, MD. Used first as a U.B. house of worship, then as a church for “union” worship, Rocky Springs Chapel served continuously as the spiritual and social center of the Rocky Springs Community for over 100 years (c. 1882-1982).

The land Rocky Springs Chapel is built on was originally surveyed by Daniel Dulany for Jacob Staley (1698-1760) in 1741, and patented to Jacob Staley (originally spelled Stehly) in 1744. When Jacob Staley died in 1760, he bequeathed the Rocky Springs Chapel property to his son Joseph Staley (1752-1808). On 12 November 1792, Joseph Staley was granted a “Special Warrant of Resurvey” from the Maryland Land Office (an office created in 1680 by Charles Calvert, 3rd Lord Baltimore, to distribute land in Maryland) that authorized the resurvey of several tracts of his land. As a result of the resurvey and the combining of several parcels, the property was redesignated and named “Foxe's Spy” tract, and on 29 January 1798, Joseph Staley received “*Foxe's Spy*” tract by Patent Certificate #1465 (MSA S 1197-1530), which was a parcel of land containing 201 ½ acres. When Joseph Staley died in 1808, he left his land to his descendants.

According to the book, *Landmark History of the United Brethren Church*, published by the United Brethren Publishing House, Dayton, Ohio in 1911, the U.B. Denomination was “*ecclesiastically born*” in the Rocky Springs area of Frederick County, Maryland on September 25, 1800, at the nearby home of Reverend Peter Kemp. The book reads, “...*this made Peter Kemp's home historic—the Bethlehem of our denomination.*” The U.B. claim the organization established in 1800, at the home of Reverend Peter Kemp, is the first religious denomination to actually originate in the United States, rather than be transplanted from Europe. After the church was officially established in 1800, the U.B. Congregation of Rocky Springs continued to worship at Peter Kemp's private residence for many years. However, according to U.B. history, “*When the society at Peter Kemp's ceased to worship at that historic home, the Church and Sunday School services were transferred to Rocky Springs School House*” which was “*built for both school and sanctuary purposes.*”

By deed dated April 15, 1839, John Staley (1777-1858), a pioneer U.B. minister and decendent of Jacob and Joseph Staley, and his wife Margaret, conveyed a 1-acre parcel of “*Foxe's Spy*” tract, located about one mile west of the Kemp home, to “trustees” Cornelius Staley (their son), Ezra Doub and Nicholas Whitmore for Rocky Springs School House to be built (recorded in Liber HS-8, Folio 443, 444, 445, one of the land records of Frederick County). *Landmark History of the United Brethren Church*, records that “*Here the congregation worshiped and flourished till the chapel was built.*” On January 4, 1882, Cornelius Staley (1808-1883), John Staley's son and a prominent U.B. leader in the Rocky Springs Community, and Rhuanna, his wife, conveyed another one-acre parcel of “*Foxe's Spy*” tract (adjacent to the Rocky Springs School House lot) to the U.B. for the chapel to be built (recorded in Liber A.F. no. 4, Folio 470, one of the land records of Frederick County).

The U.B. recognize Rocky Springs Chapel as “*the successor of the old Peter Kemp appointment*” and for over 25 years Rocky Springs Chapel served as the center of religious and social life for U.B. members of the Community. The local newspapers during this period were filled with stories of the wonderful worship services, festivals, cantatas, and picnics held by the congregation. In fact, many people living in the City of Frederick would travel to Rocky Springs to attend them. During this time the chapel was commonly referred to as “Rocky Springs Union Chapel” and “Rocky Springs Union Church.” However, in 1909, because of declining membership, the U.B. officially “*withdrew from the field,*” and, on April 30, 1909, John W. Grove, Charles H. Falk, and John F. Gonso, trustees of the U.B. for Frederick Circuit (all residents of Rocky Springs), sold Rocky Springs Chapel to the newly formed community group “The Rocky Springs Chapel, a body corporate” for \$300 (recorded in Liber STH 286, Folio 403, one of the land records of Frederick County).

However, many U.B. leaders vehemently disapproved of the sale. Reverends Daniel Eberly, Isaiah H. Albright, and C. I. B. Brane, authors of *Landmark History of the United Brethren Church*, published by the United Brethren Publishing House, Dayton, Ohio in 1911, wrote the following statement under a photograph of Rocky Springs Chapel in the book:

“This is a cut of the new United Brethren Church that was built at Rocky Springs, right close to the old Rocky Springs school house, into which the class that worshiped at Valentine Doub's moved. This neat chapel, because we had but few members in that neighborhood, was sold to the community. The ground should have been maintained to the latest generation! For the sake of high and historic sentiment, to say nothing of the spiritual welfare of the community, which will always need the organized life and influence of the Church, this chapel should have remained in the hands of the United Brethren in Christ, who were the first to break the bread of life in this neighborhood.”

On May 1, 1911, the *Frederick Evening Post* published an article entitled “*Building Purchased Recently to Be Used As a Union Church*” which read:

“Yesterday afternoon the following trustees of the Rocky Springs Chapel were elected: John F. Gonso, D. Columbus Kemp, Francis T. Lakin, Wm. Krantz. Joseph Hilderbrand, Julian Kemp and J. Welty Fahrney. The trustees organized by electing D. Columbus Kemp, president; J. Welty Fahrney, vice-president; Francis T. Lakin, secretary; Keefer Staley, assistant secretary, and John F. Gonso, treasurer. The Rocky Springs chapel was lately purchased from the United Brethren church, the money for its purchase being raised by 200 contributions from the neighborhood. About the middle of June, the chapel will be dedicated. The church is for union worship, its congregation of being Reformers, Lutherans, Methodists and-United Brethren. The chapel is at present-undergoing extensive repairs, both interior and exterior, and by the time of dedication will present an up-to-date appearance.”

After it was purchased by The Rocky Springs Chapel, a body corporate, in 1909, Rocky Springs Chapel flourished as a “union” church for more than 70 years (c. 1911-1982) and remained the vibrant religious and social center of the Rocky Springs community. As an example, J. Welty Fahrney reported in an article published in *The Evening Post*, on May 11, 1911, pertaining to the Church of the Brethren (also known as the “Dunkers” or “German Baptist's Brethren” for Frederick County) that “*The brethren have purchased a right in the Union Chapel at Rocky Springs and hold preaching service there every three weeks in the afternoon.*” Moreover, in the 1938 book, *History of the Pennsylvania Conference* by U.B. Reverend Paul E. Holdcraft, the author wrote the following in reference to Rocky Springs Chapel:

“Although our work has been discontinued here, this history must by all means record the story of the Rocky Springs appointment...the big spring is on the old Peter Kemp farm where the denomination was

organized in 1800... The services were transferred from the Kemp-Doub home to Rocky Springs School House, (built 1837) about a mile westward. Here the work was carried on for many years in this venerable stone structure...About the year 1881 a neat chapel was erected along-side the school house and the services were held in it. The leader in the work was Cornelius Staley. In 1910, because of a lack of interest in the work, the church house was sold and the United Brethren withdrew from the field. As the historian sees it, this was a grave mistake. This was one of our most sacred shrines and sentiment should have prompted holding on a litter longer. The community purchased the building for \$300 and it is now a union church, very neatly kept, well equipped, and has a thriving Sunday School. For many years the Gonso family have been pillars in the work here and since the U.B. denomination withdrew from the field three members of the family have become prominent ministers in the Church of God, namely, Revs. John, Harry, and Raymond Gonso.”

Reverends John (1888-1974), Harry (1892-1984), and Raymond Gonso (1897-1976) were sons of long-time Rocky Springs Chapel Trustee John F. Gonso (1863-1954), who was a renowned blacksmith in the Rocky Springs community. They grew up in the house located directly across the street from Rocky Springs School House and Rocky Springs Chapel and attended both as children. After reaching adulthood and becoming Church of God ministers, the brothers became well-known for giving “fiery” sermons of an “*Evangelical nature*” at Rocky Springs Chapel. Reverend John Gonso, who had been taught the blacksmith trade by his father, even became known as “*the Blacksmith Evangelist*” since according to the local newspapers, he frequently gave sermons using an anvil for a pulpit. An account of this practice was published in the March 12, 1926 edition of the *Frederick News Post* entitled “*Evangelistic Services*” which reads:

“John H. Gonso, formerly of Frederick County is now conducting a series of evangelistic services at the Rocky Springs Chapel. This series began Sunday. Service is held every night with the exception of Monday. Reverend Mr. Gonso was born and raised at Rocky Springs, having followed the blacksmith trade until he entered the ministry at the age of 21. He uses as a pulpit, the anvil upon which he learned the blacksmith trade. It is understood that the Evangelist is now having made a [musical anvil](#) to replace the one that is now in use. The services are being well attended.”

In an article published in the *Frederick News-Post* on January 6, 2008, entitled “*Influence of Little White Church Remains,*” the author, Howard Faust, whose grandmother “Nanny” Lena V. Dinterman (1916-2008), lived in Rocky Springs for 75 years, describes his feelings about attending the Rocky Springs Chapel when he was growing up, in the following way:

“...In my life there was this little white church in Rocky Springs that was not the biggest church around or the most lavish one, either. Instead, it was a church with strong roots and a solid foundation for shaping lives and bringing together a community. It was a place that was so special that when you simply stepped into it you felt a special sense of peace about you that lifted your spirit and filled you with such joy. It was a church that, today, some would think was out of a story book...I'm so thankful to have had the upbringing I did and to have the foundation I do. Nanny is such a big part of my life and I could never thank her enough for bringing me to and exposing me to the little white church . I will treasure this for the rest of my life, and whenever I need to lift my spirits all I have to do is close my eyes and return to my little white church.”

However, by the early 1980s, the congregation worshiping at Rocky Springs Chapel seems to have greatly diminished, and although it was used sporadically by various church groups from the mid-1980s to 2011, Rocky Springs Chapel was largely silent during this period. In 2014, Historic Rocky Springs Chapel, Inc. was formed by a group of local volunteers with a mission to preserve, restore and

interpret both historic Rocky Springs Chapel and School House for area residents and Frederick County visitors, as well as return the Chapel to service as a public house of worship. On March 23, 2015, the last remaining trustees of “The Rocky Springs Chapel, a body corporate,” the group that had purchased Rocky Springs Chapel from the U.B. in 1909, deeded the Chapel and School House property to the trustees of Historic Rocky Springs Chapel, Inc., in the hope of saving these iconic structures and returning them to active community service.

NOTE: In 1889, the U.B. split into two groups. The group known as U.B., Old Constitution, is that part of the U.B. that withdrew from the larger body in 1889, when the majority group adopted a new constitution. This larger body became known as the U.B. New Constitution. In 1946, the U.B., New Constitution, united with the Evangelical Church to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church and that united with the Methodist Church in 1968 to form The United Methodist Church. Today, the U.B., Old Constitution group is simply known as the U.B. Both groups have historical ties to Rocky Springs Chapel.