

EAST WHITE OAK BIBLE CHURCH  
HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS SERIES

# ORIGINS



## ORIGINS OF THE EAST WHITE OAK BIBLE CHURCH

### HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Most Amish and Mennonite groups have common historical roots going back to the “Anabaptists” at the time of the Protestant Reformation in Europe (1525). The Anabaptists were part of the “Radical Reformation,” which was a movement on the heels of the Protestant Reformation to turn away from the formalism, dogmatism, worldliness and corruption problems of the state churches. As stated in the Encyclopedia Britannica, those “protestations” put forth these beliefs:

“In matters which concern God’s honour and salvation and the eternal life of our souls, everyone must stand before God and give account for himself. - The right of every individual Christian to study the Bible and to reach his own conclusions should be recognized by the Church.”

The term, “Anabaptists,” means “rebaptizers.” They received this name from their opponents because they believed in baptism following conversion, and almost everyone had been baptized as an infant. The Anabaptists sought a return to the simplicity of faith and practices seen in the early Christian church of the Bible. The movement really began in Switzerland over debates about infant baptism. Civil authorities ordered all children to be baptized -- Anabaptists refused, believing that baptism should be for those who have come to a saving faith in Christ. Persecution of Anabaptists began -- prison at first and later death by means such as boiling water, burning at the stake or drowning in the river.

Many fled to Germany and later to the Netherlands. Some extreme radicals developed in Germany (affecting views toward all Anabaptists), leading to more persecution for the whole group -- again, many were killed.

Peaceful Anabaptists in the Netherlands were organized by Menno Simon, from whom Mennonites received their name. In 1535, incidents related to the general reaction to the Anabaptists resulted in many being killed -- including the brother of Menno Simon, reinforcing their belief in complete separation of church and state. They refused to take oaths, to take part in military affairs or to hold office in the government. They were opposed to baptizing infants, believing it was for adult believers only, upon confession of faith. They felt they were to imitate Christ in a life of self-denial. They believed in simplicity of worship, of church organization and in life. Persecution continued in a society organized on a military basis and where churches were a part of the state.

Divisions developed among the Mennonites regarding more liberal practices and in relation to the ban and shunning of offending church members. Jacob Amman, a Mennonite minister in Bern, Switzerland, believed that shunning should extend to all social, business and even domestic relations. Also, hooks and eyes instead of buttons on men’s clothing, beards and long hair came to have religious significance. The practice of foot washing in connection with communion was re-introduced.

In 1693, Amman and his group separated from the Mennonite church in Switzerland. They came to be called the Amish and left Switzerland for Alsace Lorraine and Germany. From there, many came to America, beginning after 1720, and settling in eastern Pennsylvania. There are said to be only about 25 family names of Amish in America -- significant in Central Illinois are: Yoder, Zook, Stutzman, King, Kauffman, Miller and Troyer.

Later settlements in Ohio from 1820 - 1860 were made by fresh arrivals from southern Germany and Alsace Lorraine -- "to better their economic conditions, to escape military service and to seek for liberty and freedom of conscience".

## **ILLINOIS ORIGINS**

In Central Illinois, early Amish settlers arrived in 1840 - 1860 from Alsace Lorraine, Germany, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Switzerland. The first recorded in this area was Peter Maurer, settling near Rock Creek, north of Danvers, in 1829 (he came from Alsace to Ohio to Illinois). A great migration to Central Illinois came in 1832 - 1850. Rivers were natural highways to the prairie land and timber groves. Earliest settlements were in Woodford and McLean counties -- settlers came to practically all of the groves of timber in these two counties.

Elder Jonathan Yoder came in 1851 to McLean County from his prior home in Pennsylvania -- he soon became leader of the Amish people of Danvers and Dry Grove townships. In 1853, a meeting house was built on high ground at Rock Creek, about 5 miles north of Danvers. This is believed to be the first Amish meeting house west of Ohio (most Amish groups met in the homes of members). Rev. Yoder was a recognized leader in the Amish Conferences in America (conferences organized to seek common doctrine and practices among the many independent and self-governing Amish congregations). He was moderator of the first Amish Conference held in Ohio in 1862. His views were conservative regarding conventional Amish dress and yet he was progressive as new matters arose (such as a meeting house contrasted to meetings in homes).

The Rock Creek congregation included territory within a 10 miles radius -- some near Hudson, others close to Eureka and others south of Danvers. Rock Creek was near the center of the territory. As Bishop Yoder was growing older, the congregation elected Joseph Stuckey to assist in the pastorate -- he was ordained in 1860. In 1867, Rev. Stuckey became the leader of the church (his family were charter members of the Rock Creek church). Bishop Yoder died in 1869 -- during his ministry, the Rock Creek congregation grew from 100 members to about 400 members.

By 1872, following growth to some 400 members, the center of the church community had shifted and the Rock Creek building was too small. The church decided to build a new church building nearer the center of the community -- the present North Danvers church is on that new site, about 2 miles southeast of Rock Creek and 3 miles northeast of Danvers.

Bishop Stuckey grew to be a powerful speaker and leader, with Bishop oversight of a number of churches in the area. In addition to his native French language, he spoke fluently in German and English -- most preaching in the early Amish congregations in this area was done in German. He traveled over the states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania,

Michigan, Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska -- baptizing converts, ordaining ministers, establishing churches and dedicating church buildings (he was present at the dedication of our original East White Oak building in 1893).

Although he would be considered very conservative today, he was criticized by other Amish leaders for his progressive ideas and sympathetic attitude toward those who might differ with him. In one notable incident, he was criticized for not acting quickly enough nor extensively enough in requiring the shunning of a member of his congregation.

The North Danvers church had a staff of several ministers, as was typical of Amish churches at that time. Because of the aging and deaths of some of those ministers, the congregation in 1882 elected two young men for ministerial help -- one was Peter Schantz. Rev. Schantz was an assistant pastor until 1892, when he was chosen as pastor by the new congregation which organized in the White Oak district.

Early churches typically drew attendance from very large areas (for horse-drawn transportation). As numbers of settlers and their children grew in the White Oak area, people were driving their wagons and buggies 10 to 15 miles every Sunday morning to attend church services at North Danvers ("long miles in summer and impossible miles in winter" -- Walter Ropp reminiscences).

With encouragement from some in the North Danvers Church, a group of families in the White Oak area organized a Sabbath School on July 31, 1892. They met in the Maple Grove school house at the southwest corner of section 25, one mile north and one mile west of the present East White Oak Church site. As classes began in August, there were a total of 80 pupils, 6 teachers and 3 officers. A feeling quickly grew that a fair-sized congregation would gather if a worship house and ordained minister were located in the community -- a committee of five men was selected to explore what could be done to meet the need. The men were Manasseth Troyer, Joseph King, Jacob Schad, Christian Miller and John Mears. After surveying conditions, they decided to seek a minister first along with pledges for building a house of worship.

The committee first talked with Rev. Peter Schantz, an assistant pastor at the North Danvers Church, who was seeking land to farm. The committee helped Rev. Schantz to find the Patton land (just south of the present East White Oak Church location) and gave him funds to assist in his move into the midst of the White Oak families.

Church location was next and land was offered as a contribution by John and Mary Ropp at the present site -- the plot was recorded in the book of deeds in 1892. Discussion produced a plan to build a prairie school type building with two doors at the south end and a baby room between. This was the type of building that Amish and Mennonite groups were building at that time, arranged inside to have the men on one side and the women on the other -- one large room heated by wood-burning stoves.

Construction began in the fall of 1892, with the farm men donating much of the hauling and carpenter work. As the building went on, the pledges were gathered in by treasurer Schad from the White Oak families and from friends in other nearby areas. The new church house

was dedicated on the 5th day of February, 1893 (Bishop Stuckey of the North Danvers Church was present). On the next day, February 6th, the "Mennonite Church of White Oak" was organized and the first annual business meeting was held ("these congregations were self-governing and independent of one another" -- Weaver, Preface to "Central Conference"). The Building Committee treasurer reported that the cost of the building was \$1915, with collected pledges of \$1666.53, leaving an amount due to the treasurer of \$248.47. The remainder was to be settled on the first of March.

Other interesting bits from that first business meeting:

- "The janitor shall wash and scrub the house twice a year. Open, start fire and sweep every time when a meeting is called. To start fire 1 1/2 hours before service and keep a supply of fresh water on hand."
- Motion carried to tax every member \$1 per year to pay running expenses.
- Motion carried to form a Mission Fund.
- Motion carried to plant shade trees in the church yard.

There was a significant change of organizational direction in the early 1930's, while remaining true to the fundamental doctrines of our faith. The White Oak congregation had voluntarily joined in an association of Amish/Mennonite churches in 1908, forming the Central Conference of Mennonites. As with the rest of protestant denominations in the 1920's, the issues surrounding the authority of scripture arose among Amish/Mennonite groups. By the early 1930's, there were disturbing effects of long-debated differences among Amish/Mennonite groups over Modernist/Fundamentalist positions. These debates were over five key points: 1) The inerrancy and authority of the Bible; 2) The virgin birth of Christ; 3) The death of Jesus Christ as a substitutionary atonement for sin; 4) The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead; and 5) the historicity of the miracles of the Bible.

Some felt that these issues were not that important to divide over; some denied these positions; some believed that these positions were most important for the church. The Central Conference generally held the first two positions, while the majority of East White Oak held the third position. After much discussion and a significant majority vote in the White Oak congregation, the church elected to withdraw from the Central Conference and resumed its path as an independent church.

As the church ministries grew, along with relationships among other independent churches, the congregation adopted a new constitution in the 1960's (with later amendments) and incorporated under the name East White Oak Bible Church. There was a formal affiliation with the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA) during this period. The goal was to join with like-minded churches in fellowship and advance of the Gospel. This affiliation was later dropped, not because of a change in the doctrine of East White Oak but because of a desire to move away from some legalistic tendencies in that fellowship and to move toward greater connectedness with other biblically based ministries.

Our vision, as demonstrated through this history, is to be thoroughly biblical, cooperative with others who have that same commitment without being wishy washy nor separatistic.

In the 125 year history of East White Oak Bible Church, several themes repeat. First, there is a heart for the genuine worship of Almighty God, made known through His Son, Jesus Christ. That passion fueled the beginning of the church, continued through many challenging seasons, and continues to be our passion today. Second, there is a commitment to the Bible as our sole authority. This fueled the beginning of a Sunday School in 1892; it fueled the very difficult break from the Mennonites; it fueled the long-standing commitment to biblical preaching, utilizing the very best that every generation's technology can bring to that proclamation. Third, there is a focus on helping every believer, from child to adult, to maturity in Christ. We have never been content to proclaim truth; we long to see maturity in Christ formed in the hearts of every worshiper, young and old. May the rich heritage cause us to have thankful hearts and encourage us to seek an even more effective work for God in the future, to the praise of His glory.

Sources:

- (1) "History of the Central Conference Mennonite Church", by William B. Weaver, M.A., then pastor of the North Danvers Mennonite Church, published 1927.
- (2) Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 19, "Reformation".
- (3) Reminiscences of the East White Oak Church, written by Walter Ropp of Normal in 1928.
- (4) Recorded minutes of the first meetings of the Sabbath School and of the first Annual Business Meetings of the Mennonite Church of White Oak.

Gathered by Howard G. Frink, revised March 2003, revised July 2017 by Scott Boerckel