

Islamorada church on historic register

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ISLAMORADA — Matecumbe United Methodist Church, formed by Islamorada's founding families, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on Nov. 24, 2020.

Victoria Kattel, president of the Colonial Dames XVII Century Indian Key chapter, who lives in Islamorada and attends the church, researched the church's history so she could submit a request to the national registry as part of the Colonial Dames' efforts to preserve local history. Her request was granted.

In September 1900, Preston Pinder made a promise to his grandfather, Richard Pinder, to continue the work of the wood-frame church and Sunday school that Richard had started six years earlier, Kattel said.

The little church was located on the east end of today's Upper Matecumbe Key. In 1901, it was to be moved to a more central location to better serve the three area families, the Pinders, Parkers and Russells. Two large rafts were made and lashed together to move the church via water, local historian Jerry Wilkinson wrote at keyshistory.org.

During high tide, the rafts were brought up on the beach as far as possible. Then, while the tides were changing, the building was rolled down to the water's edge and placed on the raft. When the tide came up again, the rafts set sail with the church riding to its new location. That site was the beach at today's Cheeca Lodge & Spa. Not long after that, a church cemetery was established next to the church, and that historic graveyard, known as the Pioneer Cemetery, remains on the oceanfront resort's beach at mile marker 82.

Preston and Johnny Russell conducted many church services themselves since pastors from Miami visited the Keys once a month in rotation with other churches. Church services were announced by the ringing of the church bell. People arrived from Matecumbe and surrounding islands. Some walked; others arrived by sail or rowboat.

Wilkinson wrote, "Most of the settlement of Matecumbe remained on the ocean side. It encompassed from about where the Cheeca Lodge is ... to the south end of the island. Sand had built up along the beach, so 8 to 10 feet of

ground elevation was easily found. The 1935 hurricane spread the sand around more or less as one finds it today."

Charles "Prof" Albury moved up from Key Vaca (today's Marathon) to join Ferran Pinder in teaching at a rock-built schoolhouse next to the Matecumbe Methodist Church located on the sandy Atlantic beach, Wilkinson added.

In 1912, the Flagler Railway Company finished the railroad extension to Key West, allowing preachers to arrive more quickly by train, rather than boat.

"Uncle Johnny Watkins," a Key West preacher, became the "regular" pastor for Matecumbe, meaning once a month since he was still a circuit preacher, Kattel said. "Special occasions often had to be delayed waiting for him to return. If the family didn't want to wait to be married or have a child baptized, they could 'import' a preacher from Key West."

The church remained until the 1935 Labor Day hurricane destroyed it. Upper Matecumbe Key was just to the right of eye's path. Four seriously damaged but recognizable structures remained standing on the key: O.D. King's Rustic Inn, the Methodist parsonage, the Hotel Matecumbe and Leo Johnson's house, according to Wilkinson. The coral rock post office was also recognizable by those who knew it before. Almost nothing was left standing and there was a great toll of human life, but the determined citizens were not to be denied. Houses, a school, post office and the church were rebuilt.

Soon after the storm, survivors gathered on the site where the church once stood and vowed to rebuild as quickly as possible. The new location would be on higher ground. Hugh Matheson donated the land for both church and parsonage so the people of Matecumbe could begin building a new church, where it stands today between U.S. 1 and the Old Highway, across from Cheeca Lodge.

The early settlers started building using wood, nails and other materials that littered the islands after the storm. The new church was named Carlson Memorial Methodist Church after their pastor who had perished in the Labor Day storm.

The bell that tolled at the little church was found months later by a group of fishermen on Rabbit Key, 11 miles from its original location. The bell that called people to worship for more than 50 years was returned to the church and hung up in a buttonwood tree for a long time, but eventually, someone took it, Kattel learned.

Before the new church was built, residents still found ways to worship, Kattel said. Near where the old church had stood, four men would sit on the back seat of an old Buick car while another was in the front teaching an adult bible class. The women and children were sent to Miami for a few months while the island and structures were being rebuilt.

Eventually, a Sunday school annex was added to the church to meet the challenge of a growing congregation. The growth continued and by 1956 a campaign was started to raise funds for a new church. By 1958, the new church was erected and Martha McKenney of Islamorada donated a stained glass window of Jesus Christ to the Matecumbe United Methodist Church as a memorial to "all of our faithful members who were lost in the storm." The congregation worships in this sanctuary today, and more stained glass windows created by members adorn the church.

The church property grew in 1964. Bert Pinder owned and ran a business in the building next to the church annex. He sold his building to the church when he retired. Now used as a fellowship hall, it, too, is listed in the national registry because part of that building was Pinder's shop.

With this acquisition, the church owned nearly an entire block next to the corner containing the Florida Keys Memorial, known locally as the hurricane monument.

"Our church today offers a number of ministries and programs open to members and visitors alike. We continue to thrive and strive to do the work of God that the founders of our congregation began 125 years ago," Kattel said. "Matecumbe Methodist Church may no longer have our beloved bell, but our chimes continue to ring throughout our community every day as a reminder of our faith and our place in the history on these islands."