

Rev. George Dewey Yeatts, D. D.
1900-1980



By S. Dail Yeatts

In 1636 John Yates, who was known as “John the Immigrant,” came to Jamestown from England and settled on the Elizabeth River. In addition to the challenge of adventure, he brought with him a desire to serve his church and was appointed as the church warden and vestryman of the Lynhaven parish in 1642. His son, John, settled on the Nansemond River at what is now Suffolk, Virginia. He followed his father as a vestryman and also established and financed the first free school in Virginia which continues as the John Yeates Middle School. The dedication to their God and church for Christian training and general education was the beginning of a long line of Yates, Yeatts clergymen and educators.

For more than thirty years, Yates brothers “led the Way to Heaven” in Christ Church Parish in Gloucester, Virginia as described by John K. Nelson author of A Blessed Company. The names of the rectors were Robert, Bartholomew, and William Yates. William also served as rector of Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia after serving as President of William and Mary College in 1761 to 1764.

On the tombstone of Bartholomew Yates are words that describe him as being a “tender husband,” and an “indulgent father.” When I read these words I immediately thought of my father, G. Dewey Yeatts, who was also a minister, a “tender husband” and an “indulgent father” and a descent of Bartholomew.

The descendants of “John the Immigrant” moved into Pittsylvania County prior to 1750. One of them, Stephen, operated the Yates Tavern at Gretna, Virginia. He was also a Patriot of the Revolutionary War. Stephen was an ancestor of George Dewey Yeatts.

Not much is known about the religious life of the Yates /Yeatts for many generations, but in the early part of the Twentieth Century there was a renewing of religious life in the Southern and Western part of America. During this period of time there was a young man by the name of George Dewey Yeatts who lived in the southern part of Pittsylvania County who surrendered to the call of God to become a minister. He was born in Pittsylvania County, Virginia and was the last son of Coleman Bennett and Susan Edwards Yeatts.

Coleman was a son of David Terry Yeatts, who was married three times. His marriage to his first wife in 1841 was to Tempa Parsons. They had two children, Lee and Harriett. The second marriage in 1852 was to Elizabeth Johnson who was from Cumberland County, Virginia. To this union was born nine children they were, Virginia, Cassie, Hubbard, Emma, Charles, Barkley, Coleman, Albert, and Parmelia. After her death he married Mary Herndon in 1892 they did not have any children.

Coleman's father, David Terry Yeatts, served as a Confederate soldier from Pittsylvania County, Virginia during the Civil War. He joined the army on October 1862. He served as a Private in Company F in the 3rd Regiment which was assigned to serve as engineers for the army. He was discharged in May 1864.

Susan's father, Callahill M. Edwards was married twice. He was first married to Elizabeth A. Reynolds and had three children, James H., William F., and Susan Alice. Elizabeth died December 21, 1859. Callahill was mustered into the Confederate Army on July 7, 1861 and served as a Private in Company I, 21st Virginia Infantry, Unit, Turkey Cock Greys until December 17, 1862 when he was discharged. He was awarded an early discharge due to his wife being dead and the hardship of providing for his family. Since it was permissible to provide a substitute to serve in one's place, he took advantage of the rule and found someone to take his place as a Confederate soldier so he could return home to care for his family.

Drucilla "Drusey" Jones, a widow, helped take care of Elizabeth during her illness and also helped care for Callahill's children while he served in the army. Upon returning home he fell in love with widow Jones and they married on November 9, 1865. She had one son, Hannibal. Her son and the three children of her new husband were raised together. Later two sons and a daughter of Hannibal's married two daughters and a son of Coleman and Susan. Robert Jones married Cora Yeatts, Charlie Jones married Carrie Yeatts, and Madie Jones married Bennett "Bennie" Yeatts. The sons and daughters in law always referred to their father and mother in law as Aunt Susan and Uncle Han.

The events in the life of Callahill Edwards, the father of Susan, and in the life of David Terry Yeatts, the father of Bennett, were parallel in many ways. Both of them suffered the loss of their wives to death. They served in the Confederate Army and they were successful farmers. They grew up on farms that were not a great distance apart.

Their skills in farming and determination to succeed, even under the cloud of the Civil War and the occupation of Northern authority were acknowledged by their friends. Everyone knew to be successful during such demanding times required a determination that was equal to the task of achieving. The example that they manifested in those days, no doubt, was the impetus for the success of each of their children as they grew into adulthood. The example that was developed by their parents in those days continued to later generations.

Coleman and Susan had faced years of struggling prior to moving to their farm that was purchased in 1896 by Susan's father, Callahill M. and stepmother, Drucilla "Drusey" Jones Edwards, for their lifetime and then to their children. They brought to the farm the farming skills learned at the side of their parents and endurance skills learned in their own struggle. Coleman had proven his worth as a merchant and a farmhand. Susan had proven her tenacious personality as she battled for the survival of her family under extreme circumstances.

When Susan and Coleman moved to the Dry Fork farm they actually, in many ways, began their married life over and succeeded. They were married in 1876 and for the next twenty years they struggled to maintain a meager existence. When they moved to the farm in 1896 life took on a different meaning. They had a permanent home to rear their children and Coleman could now expend his energy on his own farm.

In 1871 five years before the marriage of Coleman and Susan, Coleman was seeking a job that would provide more money for himself. He worked for a merchant at Callands, Virginia and requested a letter of recommendation from him for other employment. His employer writes of his positive characteristics in his letter of recommendation.

Callands, Va. 27, Oct. 1871

To whom it may concern:

Mr. C. Bennett Yeatts has been living with me for seven months past and only now leaves for the purpose of trying to get a better remuneration for his services. He is a good salesman and I can confidently recommend him to any merchant who may require a good clerk. Mr. Yeatts will certainly adhere faithfully to his intent.

Very respectfully,

Thomas Bably

Prior to moving to Dry Fork from Pittsville and Bedford County, Virginia Coleman had a difficult time supporting his family, based on letters that were written by both Coleman and his wife, Susan. As early as 1874, Bennett had gone to York Springs, Pennsylvania, northeast of Gettysburg for employment as a farmhand. He continued to work there after they were married even after their family began to multiply. In 1890 after six years of marriage, his wife, Susan, wrote him a letter urging him to come home.

1890

Dear Bennett,

This leaves us all well as usual. Hope it will find you the same. Bennett I got that flour last night but cannot use it. It is so musky and old and just full of worms as can be. I baked some of it this morning and the children (seven children) would not eat it. It is as black as ashes. I would not mind that if it was not for the smell and taste.

I got 32 pounds to night from Mr. Rorer. I thought it would last until you came back. When you come back come by the mill and see if he will take it back. Mr. Rorer said he did not expect he would.

Get through with your work so you will not have to back any more. I am so tired of staying here by myself so long. Write if you can't come soon.

So good night, from your wife,

S. A. Yeatts

Three more children were born to Coleman and Susan after she wrote the letter. Dewey was the youngest and the only child that was born on the Dry Fork farm.

Prior to moving to the farm in Dry Fork there was a struggle to provide for the growing family. The times were tough as they faced adversity under the cloud of the Civil War and Reconstruction of the South. It is evident that Susan's strength and tenacity was a factor in developing a strong family that was based on a struggling experience for survival which was evident in letters she wrote to Bennett. She learned that one can overcome adversity by having a strong yearning to succeed. There is evidence that Coleman was a good person with a sincere objective to provide for his family even if it meant sacrificing his own wishes by leaving home to find work. The determination, the strength, and the struggle of this couple to survive gave the children a model for achievement. It was from this tenacious strength that was bathed in the pioneer spirit that gave direction to their children to become successful in their own careers.

The Coleman Yeatts family moved to the Dry Fork farm and from here each of the children found their lifelong companion. It is interesting to note that all of the children found their companions within a short distance of their home. All of the husbands and wives had a similar farming background with the exception of Artie Watlington. She was from Victoria, Virginia and her stepfather was an engineer on the Virginian Railroad.

. Walter Averette, a farmer, was the oldest child in the family. He was born in 1877 and died in 1945. He married L'Wilda Jane Hearp who was born in 1878 and died in 1957. They married in 1898. Her home was less than a mile away just across the Dixon Creek that had to be forded to reach their farm. They are buried in the Hollywood Baptist Church cemetery west of Chatham.

John Webster, a contractor and farmer, was born in 1878 and died in 1932. He married Rosa Davis who lived on an adjoining farm. She was born in 1877 and died in 1948. They married in 1907. They are buried on the Yeatts family farm at Dry Fork.

David Callahill, a farmer and merchant, was born in 1880 and died in 1944. He married Kate Johnson who lived about two miles from him on what is now the Johnson Road. She was born in 1895 and died in 1980. They were married in 1912. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

Benjamin" Bennie," a rural mail carrier and farmer, was born in 1883 and died in 1941. He married Madie Jones who lived near the Irish Road about four miles from his home. She was born 1881 and died in 1989. They were married in 1906. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville. Virginia

Charles Samuel, "Sam" was born in 1885 and died in 1953. He married Addie Stowe who lived about a mile from his home. She was born in 1881 and died in 1976. They married in 1910. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville. Virginia

Richard White, retired from Dan River Mills, was born in 1888 and died in 1963. He married Minne Powell in 1915 who lived about five miles away just off the Irish Road. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

Carrie Sue, a housewife was born in 1890 and died in 1917. She married Charles "Charlie" Jones in 1907 who lived about four miles away near the Irish Road. Charlie was born in 1881 and died in 1974. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

Stanley Hubbard, a farmer, was born in 1892 and died in 1927. He married Nellie Stowe in 1915 she lived on an adjoining farm. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

Cora Alice, a housewife, was born in 1893 and died in 1982. She married Robert “Rob” Jones in 1913. He was born in 1890 and died in 1983. Rob lived near the Irish Road about four miles away. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

George Dewey, a minister, was born in 1900 and died in 1980. He married Artie Watlington in 1920. She lived in Victoria, Virginia but often visited her sister at Dry Fork. Her visits provided an opportunity for them to meet which made it possible for Dewey to find his spouse less than one half mile away since he and his mother, Susan, lived with Charlie Jones due to the death of his wife, Carrie, a sister of Dewey. Artie was born in 1903 and died in 2000. They are buried at Hyland Burial Park in Danville, Virginia.

Dewey attended, Piedmont, a community school that was about a mile from his home. It was an un-graded school. The way a student knew he/she had accomplished a level of learning was by “finishing the books” as it was said by those who were enrolled there and moving to a more difficult set of books. It was believed by his children and others who completed high school and college, that the rural three room Piedmont School must have taught well into high school due to the broad knowledge that was displayed by the alumni.

If a student wanted to be educated beyond the community school he had to go to a distant school and board in some person’s home or attend a boarding school. Transportation was limited mostly to wagon or buggy travel and distance was a barrier to quick travel in the early 1900’s in rural Virginia. At that time only a very few students, if any, at Piedmont School chose to attend a school in another community probably because the future for the boys was apparent. They and their parents believed that farming was the major direction for their children’s career and it was felt that the skills learned by working at home would suffice for making a living. The future for girls was becoming a housewife since hardly any woman worked outside the home.

As Dewey grew older, he had a strong yearning to become a minister and committed himself to that desire in the late nineteen twenties. He began to take correspondence courses, in his early days of ministry that would help him in his call to preach. In the evening as his family gathered for evening devotion, Dewey often read to them about what he had most recently studied. He was especially fond of poetry and stories that provided a good direction for life. It was during these times that his children were introduced to Shakespeare, Tennyson, and other classic writers that were studied later in life. Even though classic literature was interesting his family was always taught that the Bible was more important for living and salvation. In his early days of preaching he was aware that good grammar was important. Often he asked his children to listen to his sermons and if he used grammar that was incorrect to tell him what it was when they got home.

He joined the Western North Carolina Conference of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church in 1932 to begin his formal ministry. He was assigned to pastor his first church in 1932, the Swansonville Pentecostal Holiness Church, and served one year. In 1933 he was assigned as pastor of the Emmanuel Pentecostal Holiness Church, his home church in Dry Fork, Virginia. He served there until 1947.

During his tenure as pastor of the Emmanuel P. H. Church the church was blessed with steady and solid growth that added to the strength of the congregation. In 1939 there were about one hundred members added to the church. At two baptismal services there were eighty-six candidates baptized in the nearby Banister River.

The church building that was constructed in the early twenties was being used when Dewey became the pastor. It was thirty feet wide and forty-five feet long. It was lighted with a Delco generator that was located in a nearby building. If that failed, lamps were available for light. When the church building was completed in 1918 it had a value of nine hundred dollars. There were no Sunday school rooms and the building was heated by a large stove that sat near the middle of the church. During the summer one class usually met in the tabernacle that was located just to the east of the main building.

In the mid thirties, the congregation had outgrown the building and the church was completely renovated and enlarged. A foyer and four Sunday school rooms were added, with two of them designed to open for an expanded sanctuary. The building was lengthened so as to include a larger choir loft, and a furnace was added. This enlarged building soon became too small for the worshippers; therefore, a large brick structure was erected in 1949 – 1950 to meet the growing needs of the church.

Campmeeting was conducted in the tabernacle for ten nights in July of each year. There were three services each day, one in the morning, again in the afternoon, and the main one at night. Music from various churches, and special singers and an invited minister were featured. The campmeeting attracted people from a wide area and from many denominations. Most of the church pews were taken from the church and placed under the tabernacle for added seating.

Fresh straw was brought in by local farmers and was placed on the ground in the tabernacle to cover the dirt. Straw mattresses (straw ticks) were placed in the church for ladies who desired to stay overnight. Some storage buildings were made available for men and straw ticks were provided for them. A church sponsored restaurant provided food for the people. It was the highlight of the community for many years. At the height of the camp meeting days the parking lot was filled with cars, wagons, and buggies. People filled the open air tabernacle but it gradually lost its appeal as people found more public work as the country neared World War II. It was decided in the early forties to end the camp meeting since it was obvious that it had lost its popularity.

During those years as pastor of the Emmanuel Church, Dewey Yeatts, established churches in other communities and neighboring counties. He pioneered a church at Buffalo Ridge in Patrick County, another one in Henry County at Mountain Valley, one in Chatham and another at Pittsville. He was also a part of establishing a church at Gretna. He preached for many years at a community church at Round Pond which is located near what is now Smith Mountain Lake.

In the mid forties Dewey entered into an educational pursuit and earned a high school diploma from Schoolfield High School, and a Bachelor of Theology Degree from Lighthouse Bible College. Upon his retirement he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity Degree by a college of his denomination for his dedication to the principles of Christianity and for his contribution to the cause of Christ.

His tender relationship, wise counsel, and indulgent leadership among his peers were acknowledged by being elected by them in 1953 as their conference Superintendent, a position he held until his retirement in 1966. His total years of service as a member of

the Western North Carolina Conference Board were twenty years as Secretary, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent. He was also appointed to a variety of other duties in the service of his denomination and was called upon to preside over many conferences throughout America and in other countries.

His skills, knowledge of the Bible, and preaching ability were known throughout the denomination to the extent he was in demand as a campmeeting speaker, a Bible teacher, and a counselor for ministers. Some of the states he conducted services were, Kansas, Oklahoma, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania. The revivals that he held beginning with his early tent meetings days are too numerous to calculate.

In addition to a very busy schedule of ministering he served on many boards of the denomination. He chaired the official board of the Western North Conference while serving as its Superintendent. He served on the General Administration Board, a member of the Falcon Children's Home, Chairman of the Board of Foreign Missions, Chairman of the Board of Institutions, and a member of the Board of Home Missions.

It has been said that during his tenure as the Denominational Conference Superintendent the growth of the churches produced a membership that encouraged ministers to maintain the doctrine that the church was founded upon. As he was growing old and his health was failing he asked to speak at the last conference he was able to attend. He slowly made his way to the front of the auditorium and stood before the microphone. His face had creases that old age brings, his hair was completely white, and his voice was weakened as a result of illness and age. He lifted his voice as best he could and warned the ministers of the enticement to compromise for the sake of personal success and popularity. He then quoted the words of Paul to Timothy, who was a minister of the Gospel. "Preach the word; be instant in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." II Timothy 4:2. He then added these words, "When you come to the place that I now have come, when you are near the time to cross the river to your eternal day, you will be glad that you were faithful to your calling."

In many ways the Twentieth Century appeared to duplicate the early times of the Yates/Yeatts in the New World. A large number of them yielded to the tugging of the desire to minister either by serving the church as laymen or to lead churches as pastors. Also from the Yates/Yeatts families, many entered into a teaching career that reached from elementary through colleges and universities to satisfy the unexplainable urge to guide both young and older people to a good and meaningful life. Based on the history of the Yates/Yeatts, it appears the same motivation to serve people in the 1600's still exists today. Many pulpits in different denominations continue to be filled by Yates/Yeatts and many classrooms are being guided by teachers who bear the same last name of the early Yates/Yeatts settlers of America.

Dewey Yeatts had an insatiable desire to learn and preach. When he was a child he was sick and prayed a simple child's prayer, the first prayer he remembered praying. He asked God to let him live until he was eighty years old. In his mid seventies he became ill and was confined to bed for many months. His desire to learn followed him into his old age even to his sick bed. He often said during his waning days when asked why he was studying so much, his answer was always, "I am preparing sermons to preach when I am able, the desire to preach still burns in my soul." He died at the age of eighty and was buried at the Hyland Burial Park, a cemetery in Danville, Virginia. He

was buried near his parents and most of his brothers and sisters. He was also buried next to his first grandson who bore his name, George Dewey “Little Henry” Taylor.

His compassion extended to his family even in death. Soon after, “Little Henry” died, he purchased grave sites in the Hyland Burial Park that would be sufficient for the burial of his family. Later in life after the marriage of his children, some of the family members purchased their lots from him for burial.

Since the burial of Dewey in 1980 other family members now rest near him and in other cemeteries. His faithful wife who died at the age of ninety-seven now lies next to him. It continues a closeness that began in 1920 when they were married. They now await the resurrection of the dead at the coming of Jesus Christ who brought peace to their hearts and gave them a family who also found a Savior in Him.

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Dail Yeatts

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