

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 11)

Reports published in *The Gospel Messenger*, weekly magazine of the Church of the Brethren, from 1896 to 1905 definitively document the origin of White Oak Grove Church. Initially associated with the Free Will Baptists himself, Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908) started the work by the mid-1890s under the Christian Union (now, Church of God) banner. The church was officially named, White Oak Grove and chartered by the Church of the Brethren in September, 1900.

No longer standing, a small congregation of fewer than twenty Bucklesberrians worshipped for several years as a Brethren church in the twenty-by-thirty-foot, unfinished building that Louis erected on the corner of Bear Creek and Ben F. Herring Roads. With waning support from locals and national governance, White Oak Grove ceased to operate as a Brethren work around 1905, or soon thereafter. The *Gospel Messenger* published Louis' obituary in 1908, crediting him as the founder of White Oak Grove.

Strangely enough, during the same time period that the Brethren were establishing White Oak Grove Church on the west side of Bear Creek, a second church with the same name was being built on the east side of Bear Creek, a mere mile away. With his own funds and on land he donated, another White Oak Grove church was constructed by Bucklesberrian, Josiah Sutton, Jr. (1835-1902) by the spring of 1899.

Aligned with the Free Will Baptists, the White Oak Grove Church that Josiah erected remains to the present day. The building, renovated and expanded since its original construction, is situated on the corner of Kennedy Home and Jim Sutton Roads. Documented by a local reporter in the spring of 1898, the groundbreaking included clearing a wooded tract:

1898, May 3: "Saturday morning [April 30], as the sun was rising, a good many of the young boys met at Josiah Sutton's [Jr.] to trim down an acre of woods for the purpose of building a Free Will Baptist church, which will be built immediately. Mr. Josiah Sutton [Jr.] gave \$50 and one acre of land, which we appreciate very much. It seems that the love of God has been shed abroad in the hearts of a good many young people." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

This news report was initially believed to have referenced Josiah's father, Josiah Sutton, Sr. (1810-1898). But two recently identified documents leave little doubt that the White Oak Grove Church property was given by Josiah, Jr.

One document, the will of Josiah Sutton, Sr., directed that all of Josiah, Sr.'s "land not deeded away" was to be bequeathed to his wife, Nancy Hill Sutton (1818-1905). Implied in this clause was that Josiah, Sr. had already deeded shares of land to his surviving sons and daughters prior to preparation of his will. Much of the cropland and woodland in the vicinity of White Oak Grove today on both sides of Kennedy Home Road was part of the share of land that Josiah, Jr. received from his father. Thus, the acre of land donated to the Church in the spring of 1898 was Josiah, Jr.'s to give.

Interestingly, after more than a century, the homeplace of Josiah, Jr. and Martha (Patsy) Hill (1831-1882) Sutton is still standing about a quarter-mile south of the Church, directly across the highway and back in the field. Beautifully restored with additions, the house is now the residence of second great-grandson, Finley Lee Sutton and wife, Robbie Southerland Sutton.

One other document, Josiah, Jr.'s obituary, dismisses any lingering question that he, not his father, gifted the acre of land to White Oak Grove. The obituary will be shared in next week's Bucklesberry article.