

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 12)

White Oak Grove did not originate exclusively from one building, one property, or one congregation. An important part of its history is recognition that there were two separate and distinct churches established in the late-1890s, both operating simultaneously under the name of White Oak Grove. Families from the two assemblies eventually merged as one fellowship by the 1920s.

Shared previously, published records confirm Bucklesberrian, Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908) was the founder of the first White Oak Grove Church by the mid-1890s. In September, 1900 they obtained a charter from the Church of the Brethren and officially adopted the name, White Oak Grove. Although they initially held meetings in a log cabin, the small congregation continued to meet as a Brethren work in a twenty-by-thirty foot unfinished building erected by Louis on the west side of Bear Creek until its doors closed around 1905, or soon thereafter.

The reason for the dissolution of Louis' church is unknown. Persecution from naysayers, as reported by Louis, may have worsened and could have contributed to loss of interest among congregants. Perhaps Louis, aging at the time, began to show ill health by 1905, which could have physically prevented him from assisting Brethren home missionary, Rev. Noah N. Garst, in growing the church. Possibly still, the death of Louis' wife, Nancy Dawson Foss in 1905, a charter member who supported the work, may have impacted the short life of Louis' church. For certain, though, records show that the national Brethren leadership withdrew its presence in Bucklesberry and the surrounding area for church planting purposes by the end of 1905.

At the same time Louis and his followers were meeting as a Brethren church under the name, White Oak Grove, another group of worshippers were establishing a church with the same name on the east side of Bear Creek. Approximately one mile away, Josiah Sutton, Jr. (1835-1902) donated an acre of land on the corner of Kennedy Home and Jim Sutton Roads along with fifty dollars in the spring of 1898 "for the purpose of building a Free Will Baptist church, which will be built immediately," (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston, NC, May 3, 1898).

Famed attorney-author and Bucklesberry admirer, Council Simmons Wooten (1840-1930) described Josiah, Jr. as a godly man with impeccable character whose legacy included establishing a local church:

1902, November 6: "Josiah Sutton, [Jr.] died at his home, four miles south of La Grange on November 1st in the 68th year of his age. His father was Josiah Sutton, Sr., who lived to be 88

years old. His mother survives him and is now 85 years old. Deceased leaves four children, Albert [Hardy, 1858-1911], John [William, "Johnnie," 1860-1906], Kirby [Edward, 1866-1930] and Bettie [Elizabeth Ann, "Betsy," 1868-1945]. When the hot blast of [Civil] War was upon this land in 1861 he was one of the first men to offer his services in defense of the South....He went not to war with visions of glory and honor that thrilled the bosom of the officer, but with the purest and loftiest motives of the patriot....He was a benevolent man, charitable to the poor and left as a monument a church [i.e., White Oak Grove] which he erected out of his own private property, from which will radiate Christian influence like beams of light to illumine, to gladden and bless the community for generations yet unknown....I was a frequent visitor to his house and he dispensed a generous, old fashioned, Southern hospitality. He was modest, plain, unassuming in his manners, unostentatious in dress and was a true type of a model farmer and country gentleman. He lived like his noble father, not owing any man a cent. He leaves an honorable name, the sweetest and richest legacy a father can leave his children....C. S. Wooten, LaGrange, Nov, 4th, 1902." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)