

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 14)

Between 1898 and 1905, two churches operated in Bucklesberry with the name, White Oak Grove. In some records, they were called simply, Oak Grove. Families from the two congregations would eventually merge into one fellowship years later.

The first White Oak Grove Church was established by Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908). He and a small congregation organized themselves as a Brethren church by November, 1896 and held worship services in a log cabin.

Louis' assembly was officially chartered by the Church of the Brethren in September, 1900, at which time they adopted the name, White Oak Grove. By this date, the congregation met in a twenty-by-thirty foot, unfinished building erected by Louis on the west side of Bear Creek. Formerly situated on the corner of Ben F. Herring and Bear Creek Roads, the Brethren church dissolved in 1905 or soon thereafter.

At the same time Louis was establishing his church, Josiah Sutton, Jr. (1834-1902) was building a Free Will Baptist (FWB) church on the east side of Bear Creek. Completed by May, 1899, Josiah, Jr.'s church was located on the corner of Jim Sutton and Kennedy Home Roads, where the current White Oak Grove FWB Church remains today.

Josiah, Jr.'s motivation to build a FWB church is unknown. He may have had doctrinal differences with his family's church, Hickory Grove, just a mile away on Kennedy Home Road. Hickory Grove was the only established house of worship available to Bucklesberrians prior to that time. Founded in 1860, Josiah, Jr.'s father, Josiah Sutton, Sr. (1810-1898) was a charter member.

Hickory Grove operated as a Baptist work until 1885 when the congregation voted unanimously to align with the Methodist Protestant (M. P.) Church. It was still an M. P. Church in 1898 when Josiah, Jr. decided to build a FWB church. Perhaps he yearned for Hickory Grove to return to its Baptist roots. His decision to erect a new church possibly reflected his realization that Hickory Grove's departure from the Baptists was irreversible and permanent.

In addition to doctrinal differences, Josiah, Jr. and his family may have become increasingly discouraged at Hickory Grove's ongoing, seemingly endless legal battles. In 1898, the year of the groundbreaking for Josiah, Jr.'s church, a sixth lawsuit was filed against Hickory Grove by the family of Rev. Bushrod Washington Nash, former pastor and agent of the Union Baptist

Association (UBA). The suit alleged, as did all previous claims, that Church trustees had deeded the property to the UBA years earlier in 1872, and that the Church building and grounds were no longer theirs.

The fallout from yet another lawsuit in 1898 was severe and may have been the tipping point for Josiah, Jr. and his aging father. Hickory Grove went without a pastor for several years, suggesting its doors may have been closed. More than a decade later in 1910, the Court ruled in their favor, as it did in all previous suits filed by Rev. Nash, the first in 1889.

Interestingly, Josiah, Jr.'s father was the only charter member never named as a defendant in the lawsuits directed against Hickory Grove by Rev. Nash. One explanation is that the two enjoyed a kindred relationship. In 1875, Josiah, Sr. entrusted the marriage ceremony of his daughter, Sarah (Sally) Ann Sutton Bizzell (1844-1888) to Rev. Nash.

It stands to reason that Josiah, Sr.'s family and Rev. Nash likely shared a mutual regard for Baptist church governance. Josiah, Sr. died in September, 1898 with the knowledge that his son had broken ground months earlier for a FWB church to be established in Bucklesberry.