

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 6)

The sign in front of White Oak Grove Church could leave passersby with two false impressions. One is that the Church has always operated as Free Will Baptist. The other is that the current Church building is the original structure.

Historian, Roger E. Sappington, PhD in 1971 authored a little-known book about the Church of the Brethren movement in the Carolinas that definitively documents the origin of White Oak Grove (or Oak Grove). Not named until 1900, White Oak Grove was initially organized in 1896 as a Brethren church by Bucklesberrian, Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908).

But its earliest roots were with the Church of God. A letter written by Louis' great-grandson, Dr. Leo Richard Anderson, MD, stated that Louis was ordained in 1893 by the Church of God (or Christian Union Church). Led by licensed Baptist preachers, the Church of God departed from certain Baptist positions of the day not believed to have been in keeping with New Testament directives, for example, an inordinate emphasis on creeds.

As for the Church building, two other meeting houses predated the current White Oak Grove structure, according to Dr. Sappington. Both were located on the west side of Bear Creek, a mile or so from the present Kennedy Home Road Church site. Based on a written account from Louis, the congregation first met in an old log house in the early- to mid-1890s.

The second meeting house was a small building constructed by Louis after his decision to adopt Brethren church doctrine. The Pelletier family eventually obtained the building and converted it to a homeplace. No longer standing, it was formerly situated on the corner of Bear Creek and Ben F. Herring Roads.

The founding of White Oak Grove Church was documented in a series of reports from 1896 to 1905 that either referenced, or were written by, Louis and his associate, Rev. Noah N. Garst. The reports were published in *The Gospel Messenger*, weekly magazine of the Church of the Brethren and were summarized decades later in Dr. Sappington's book.

These first-hand accounts provided important details about White Oak Grove's early years. The previous Bucklesberry article shared reprints of the actual reports published in 1896 and 1897. Strangely, there were no updates about the Church or communications from Louis published in *The Gospel Messenger* over the next three years.

The odd silence may have signaled problems, possibly resistance, that Louis was facing in planting a Brethren church in a rural community dominated largely by Baptists and Methodists. Louis persisted nonetheless. By the fall of 1900, White Oak Grove Church was officially chartered, and the following report was published by year's end:

1900, November 10: "North Carolina—Bro. H. C. Early has made two trips to La Grange County [sic.], N. C. The last time he was accompanied by Bro. J. M. Cline. Twelve were baptized, a church organized, Lewis [Louis] Foss was elected to the ministry and Jerry Foss made deacon. Bro. Early was chosen elder, and the Committee authorized him to visit this congregation as frequently as he deems best for their growth. The congregation will be known as the White Oak Grove congregation." (p. 719, *The Gospel Messenger*)

This report revealed significant, historical information not widely known about the beginning of White Oak Grove. It identified Louis as an official minister of the church. It further identified Louis' brother, Jerry M. Foss (1864-1936) as an active member and leader in the church. Possibly most important, the report named the Brethren church as White Oak Grove.