

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 13)

Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908) was the founding pastor of the first White Oak Grove Church. Organized in the mid-1890s, the small congregation initially met in a log cabin as a Christian Union (later, Church of God) work. Louis eventually erected a twenty-by-thirty foot unfinished building on the west side of Bear Creek in Bucklesberry where they were officially chartered by the Church of the Brethren and named, White Oak Grove in September, 1900.

Meanwhile, on the east side of Bear Creek, only a mile from Louis' church, and with the goal of establishing a Free Will Baptist (FWB) work, Josiah Sutton, Jr. (1835-1902) erected another church with the same name by 1899. Situated on the corner of Kennedy Home and Jim Sutton Roads, the building that Josiah constructed is the current site of White Oak Grove Church, which remains a FWB church today. One of the earliest meetings was reported in 1899, the year before Louis' church was chartered:

1899, May 19: "At [White] Oak Grove, in Bucklesberry, Saturday night and Sunday morning, there will be religious services conducted by Rev. H[enry] D. Harper and Rev. John Grubbs." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

Just as Louis' church was not initially aligned with the Brethren Church, Josiah's church similarly sprang from denominational roots other than FWB. Indeed, Revs. Harper and Grubbs were affiliated with the Christian Church, also known as Disciples of Christ.

Both ministers resided locally. Rev. Dr. Harper was a dentist in Kinston. Affiliated with the Disciples of Christ as early as 1879, he was also a preacher of the Gospel. He and brother, Rev. John J. Harper were integrally involved in establishing the Disciples Church in La Grange in 1886, where John was appointed pastor the next year.

Dr. Harper's colleague, Rev. Grubbs, was a farmer in the Kinston area, according to the 1870 Census, and later farmed in Contentnea. A noted preacher, Rev. Grubbs conducted the marriage ceremony of Dr. Harper's daughter in 1902, thus explaining their tag-team services at White Oak Grove in 1899. Rev. Grubbs later pastored a Disciples church near Greenville in 1905.

The early appearance of Disciples preachers at Josiah's church is not a happenstance. Historically, the Disciples Church had direct ties with the FWB. In a 1960 historical record of North Carolina Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), Charles C. Ware wrote:

"While the [Disciples of Christ] Church at its beginning in 1830 was 'The Free Will Baptist Church of Christ,' in August, 1838, the clerk designated it, 'The Baptist Church of Christ.' In August, 1853, it was named...'The Church of Christ...' while in August, 1868, it was called "The Christian Church..." (*Hookerton History*, p. 30)

Interestingly, although not associated with the FWBs per se, Rev. Grubbs had a previous and close connection with the Baptists. Mr. Ware further wrote:

"The Union Baptist [Association]...in North Carolina, which grew slowly until the War Between the States...decline[d] under Bushrod Washington Nash, who led until their last surviving congregation perished several decades ago....From this group of believers came many sturdy accessions to the Disciples, among whom [was]...J[ohn] T. Grubbs." (*Hookerton History*, p. 8)

Josiah may have been aware of Rev. Grubbs' connection with the Baptists, and by extension, the FWBs, in 1899 when he and Dr. Harper held services at White Oak Grove. For certain, though, Josiah had direct knowledge of Rev. Grubbs' associate, Rev. Bushrod Washington Nash, a name all too familiar to Josiah and his family, including his father, Josiah Sutton, Sr. (1810-1898). More will be shared in the next Bucklesberry article.