

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 16)

Churches within close proximity are not uncommon. For example, north of Snow Hill, NC on the outskirts of Farmville, three churches are bunched together on U.S. Highway 13: New Life Church of Faith; St. Paul Free Will Baptist (FWB) Church; and Tru (no sic.) Praise and Worship Outreach Center. Remarkably, they are one-fifth of one-tenth of one mile from each other.

Similarly, by the end of the nineteenth century, three churches were established in Bucklesberry, all within about a two-mile span. One is the current Hickory Grove Church, located on Kennedy Home Road. Founded around 1860, it operated as a Baptist work until 1885 at which time the congregation decided to align with the Methodist Protestant Church.

The two other churches, oddly enough, each were named White Oak Grove. Situated on the corner of Bear Creek and Ben F. Herring Roads, the first White Oak Grove church was organized by 1896 as a Brethren work under the leadership of founding pastor, Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908). The second White Oak Grove church, a FWB work, was built on the corner of Jim Sutton and Kennedy Home Roads by Josiah Sutton, Jr. (1834-1902) by 1899.

For the next six years, both White Oak Grove churches operated in tandem. Each provided worship services to the close-knit community that reflected its respective church governance and doctrine. Unfortunately, Louis' Brethren church dissolved around 1905 or shortly thereafter.

Josiah, Jr.'s church also went silent about the same time. There are no records of church activity from 1905 to 1914, likely suggesting that services were not held regularly during those years, if at all. A 1915 report indicated church doors were closed for certain. The same year, Rev. Samuel W. Sumrell of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) preached a series of meetings in an attempt to revive the church.

The outcome of the 1915 evangelistic meetings is unknown, but likely fell short in reactivating Josiah, Jr.'s church. In his manuscript on the history of White Oak Grove FWB Church, Oscar E. Herring, Jr. stated that church doors were purportedly closed for a six-year period from about 1919. The absence of reports on White Oak Grove in local newspapers over that time period supports his claim.

Oscar identified three events in 1923-1924 that led to reactivation of the church. One was a revival meeting at the Fairview School in Bear Creek. Another was the influence of local lay minister, Levi Carlyle (1891-1971), who preached the Gospel and offered encouragement to

church leaders. Finally, a gift deed to the church property, much desired by the congregation, was provided by Josiah, Jr.'s daughter, Elizabeth (Betsy) Ann Sutton (1860-1945) in 1924.

Archived minutes of a March, 1926 church business meeting marked what is believed to be the reawakening of White Oak Grove FWB Church from its long dormancy. A membership list that year named 58 members, which included descendants of Josiah Sutton, Jr. and Rev. Louis Barkley Foss.

Representation of the Foss and Sutton families in the 1926 membership signaled the historically significant merge of two White Oak Grove church congregations into one body of worship. Rather than a merge, perhaps it was a reunion of God-fearing believers known to each other, who, from the beginning, separated over differences in which form of church governance and doctrine would guide the founding of a local church. This would explain why Louis' church and Josiah, Jr.'s church both were named White Oak Grove.

A vital ministry to Bucklesberry and beyond to the present day, the doors of White Oak Grove FWB Church have remained open for almost a century to the glory of God.