

The Beginnings of a Community

Churches, of course, are the people of faith whom God calls out from the midst of communities. Each individual church carries with It all of the good flavorings of the community from which It arises. So ...it is important to know something about that community in order to fully appreciate that church and It's members.

The Alabama region drew the interest of alternately the French, Spanish, and then the British during the 1500's to the 1700's. But the greatest and oldest population of the state (8000 years) were the Creek Indians. The French gave up their claim to Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris and in the War of 1812 the United States claimed ownership of the entire state.

When General Andrew Jackson drove the Indians from the state in 1814 the region opened wide for settlement from pioneers coming down from the northeast through Tennessee.

The state was given 'territory' status in 1817, but even before that time (1808) an Englishman named Lewis Tillman came to the north Alabama area and laid claim to property in several locations of what later became Limestone County. In 1820, one year after Alabama achieved statehood, Tillman sold a select portion of land in Limestone County to a speculator named Joel Wooley.

When Wooley took possession of his new property he stocked it with cattle which immediately prospered beyond his estimation. He discovered that the source of his livestock's health and vigor was a 'foul smelling spring' that the beasts seemed to favor. The sulphur spring,

(Wooley Springs) sparked an idea that would take Joel Wooley from the land/cattle business into the health/ hotel business.

Before leaping indiscriminately into a risky venture, however, Wooley had a sample of the water tested by comparison to similar water in White Sulphur Springs in Greenbrier, West Virginia. There was a popular "sulphur spring cure" phenomena taking place all across the continent at that time (which is evidenced by the remnant of so many "springs" cities and towns across America today). The rich and well-to-do would travel for hundreds of miles for a "cure" at one of these medicinal retreats. Joel Wooley was on to something valuable.

At first campers came from miles away to partake of a nasty liquid that was touted to cure everything from gout, rheumatism to infertility and dropsy. In 1830 Wooley made his investment and earnings a little more concrete and socially acceptable by building a hotel. The rustic hotel eventually advertised thirty rooms with dining and sitting rooms, but was never a fine establishment, being characterized by its critics of the day as being "mostly wooley."

The hotel did serve as a nucleus for a fledgling community. It brought commerce and trade and was a part of the reason for a growing population to the area and certainly added color and flare to the neighborhood. It is even reported that a J.B Howard attended the Thomas Atkins/Margaret Meals wedding and reception that was held at the Wooley Springs Hotel in 1876. J.B. Howard was an often used alias of the infamous Jesse James.

In 1832 (Dooley sold his land and hotel to a Quaker named John Milhouse (later transferred to a Maples and finally to John R. Mitchell). The hotel ceased to function in about 1900. After sitting vacant for many years the structure was destroyed by a fire.

Settlers were drawn to the area from the north. A sizable immigrant German community transplanted itself to within a stone's throw from the spring. Taft, Elkwood, Bobo, and Capshaw communities were thriving and were connected by their citizens for trade by the area's first railroad. A man named Berry Adams established a mill and store near Wooley Springs and a mail route was created with a "Mr. Higgins" as the first official mail carrier.

People were moving in, homes were being built, businesses were being established, and a community was clearly coming to be. A turning point which opened the floodgates to settlers from the north was the building of a railroad between Nashville and Decatur by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad in 1910. In 1911 an industrious investor named Alen Austin bought land at the Alabama/Tennessee state line to set up a store on the new rail line and the city of "Austin." Austin became the city of Ardmore and became an important element in the continued growth of Limestone County.

Schooling and education had at first been family and home oriented but as the community grew efforts were established to build "schoolhouses," hire teachers, and call the children to formal education. The Rhodes School was established on what is now "Old Schoolhouse Road" (North of Bethel Road).

When the county purchased land at the corner of the Bethel Road (in the area that many still know as "Bethel Community") and the old highway 31 to build a schoolhouse it carried with it the title for which the community had become most commonly known. It became the Wooley Springs School.

The Beginnings of a Church

The pioneers who settled in the North Alabama region were people of faith in Christ and worshipped Him individually and devotionally, in their homes, and soon in their communities. The most popular Protestants were the Baptists and Methodists who moved into the area at the same time. R Baptist Church was organized in Ardmore in 1915 and a Methodist Church was founded from a brush arbor a year later."

The Wooley Springs School building had become a center for town meetings, socials, and religious gatherings after it's construction and become the regular meeting place for a small bi-monthly meeting Baptist congregation and a Methodist congregation.

The members of each congregation were all close friends who did not let denominational dogma stand in the way of their joy in worshipping together. They shared the school building on alternating Sundays; shared worship leadership and fellowship.

On August 12, 1934 ordained leaders from duly established congregations in the Ardmore area joined with the recognized leaders and lay people of the Wooley Springs Community to formally constitute a Baptist Church at the location of the Wooley Springs School.

The members of the founding presbytery were: Rev. L.M. Latin, Rev. B.W. Chritfer, Rev. F.E. Durham, Rev. E.W. Whitt, Willie Lewter, Tommy Ferguson, Jerome Ferguson, Warden Broadway, Bennie Reyer, Jim Mitchell, Orman Ferguson, F.O. Hall, and Jerry Broadway.

Twenty-five people who had already been worshipping regularly in the old school house with the Baptists joined together on that day to become the charter members of the Wooley Springs Baptist Church.

The Members of the Wooley Springs Baptist Church

There were very good churches in the area of north Limestone county in the early 30's. But people still traveled by horse and buggy or walked for the most part. Some had motorized vehicles but only a few. The concept of the "community church" was a very sound one. God's people thrive on fellowship and closeness and having to travel even a few miles in those days was an all day commitment.

So, local people would begin congregating closer to home. In a barn, a depot, a meeting hall, or a school. On August 12, 1934 the families that had been meeting in the Wooley Springs School constituted themselves into a viable, formal congregation. The minutes record:

"Twenty-two [25) members from other churches presented themselves as charter members as follows: Mr. and Mrs. W.E. Swanner, Alvin Swanner, Annie Swanner, Mr. and Mrs. White Whitt, Thelvin, Mercedous, and Buddy Whitt, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Ferguson, Jerome, James, Cassie and Mabel Ferguson, Mrs. Ada Fowler, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Mitchell, Mr. and Mrs. Bennie Reyer, Mr and Mrs. Warden Broadway, Claude and Pearl Broadway, and Mr. Orman Ferguson."¹⁹

They called Brother F.E. Durham, a member of the founding presbytery who had preached for the school congregation, as the first pastor and drafted and approved a church covenant. They had a good beginning and some very good and hard-working people with which to serve the Lord in Wooley Springs Community.

The following pages list the members of WSBC from 1934 to 1994. The charter members are given special attention for the church owes its life and existence to their following of their heart at God's leadership. fill others that are on record are listed according to church clerk listing and in alphabetical order.

Some records are missing, some are faded or stained, but here is a faithful attempt at honoring FILL whom God has called to himself in this place who have been proud to be MEMBERS at WSBC.

The Pastors of the Church

Over the years God has called men and their families to serve as Shepherd Families of His flock at WS. A special relationship exists between a pastor and God's church and each man leaves an impression on the church and carries away an impression of the church in his own heart.

Here is a listing of all of the men who served as pastor at WS from 1934 until the present. Frank E. Durham was our first pastor. There is some question about R.B. Kennedy, who also served as the pastor of the Piney Grove Baptist Church, as to whether or not he ever served officially as pastor. He may have only supplied during the absence of a pastor but the WS minutes record: "A motion was made and carried to appoint a committee to see Bro. Kennedy and ask him to accept the church for another year." Find also: "Wooley Springs Baptist Church met in conference Aug., to accept the resignation of Bro. Kennedy."

There was also a Brother Denny (first name not known) whom Doris Whitt recalls as the fifth pastor. A man who lived in Cullman, Alabama and drove to WS for their Sunday services during his service. Nothing else is available about him.

Following is a listing of each of these men by name. Don't forget that their wives and children were a part of their ministry and message and the members themselves were, during the time of their service here, a part of their extended family.

The pastor never accomplishes anything by himself and all of his success are God's. But if you wish to see what God did during the pastors term you may check the Time Line section and the Tables to get an idea of the things the Pastor/Flock at WSBC has achieved in 60 years