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HISTORY OF RICHLAND BAPTIST CHURCH

Louis C. Alderman, Jr.

Address delivered at the 160th Anniversary of Richland Baptist Church, Twiggs County, Georgia, on Sunday, October 3, 1971.

Richland Creek Baptist Church was constituted on October 5, 1811, by Rev. Edmund Talbot of Jones County and Eden Taylor of Baldwin County with twelve charter members.

It was received first into the Ocmulgee Baptist Association. It later numbered among the thirteen original churches constituting the Ebenezer Association in 1814. Its first pastor was the Rev. Micajah Fulghum who served from 1811 to October, 1820. He was the first Moderator of the Ebenezer Association and delivered the introductory sermon at the first associational meeting on August 13, 1814. His sermon was from the 32nd Chapter of Isaiah, 17th verse: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever." He served as Moderator from 1814 through 1818. An old church record book that has been preserved dates back to October 5, 1811, and shows a roster of members with twelve white names listed as charter members, namely; four males, John Denson, Jacob Ricks, the first clerk of the church; Edward Nix, and William Coates; eight females, Sarah Denson, Susannah Ricks, Elizabeth Lipham, Elizabeth Truluck, Sally Parrott, Anna Hammock, Sara Glenn, Nancy Powell, and a colored woman, Chloe Hodges.

Fifty years ago Dr. Walter M. Lee in his history of Old Richland had written:

"Formative gospel influences had issued from this old church in years gone by, which had influenced the intellectual and spiritual life of all Georgia. The First Baptist Church of Atlanta, the church at Marietta, and many other prominent city and town churches of the state had received pecuniary aid from the Richland saints in the period of their weakness and infancy. Missions, education, temperance, and Sunday Schools had found a loyal friend and promoter in old Richland for more than three quarters of a century. The best and most cultural ministry was in demand, most liberal and magnanimous sentiments of Christian altruism had throbbed in the hearts of its generous and princely constituency, and influences here found birth which flowed with vitalizing and fruitifying stimulus along the channels of Georgia Baptist educational and missionary life.

Here history was both made and written. Here Jesse H. Campbell both studied the past and planned for and influenced the future. Here preached on occasions C. D. Mallory, the prince of Georgia pulpiteers. Here the ponderous and studious G. R. McCall indoctrinated the saints of God. Here James McConnell called forth the narration of religious experience, which was fruitful of regeneration. Here James Williamson, pioneer pastor and builder, received inspiration for his work in Evergreen, Hawkinsville, and Eastman. Who can compute the formative forces set in motion in this sacred spot? How many are there who have been baptized by those who

were baptized by M. Fulghum, V. A. Tharpe, John Ross, Charnic Tharpe, John M. Gray, Ellison Culpepper - and others?"

The Rules of Conference and Decorum as adopted July 4, 1828, (revised May 2, 1896) stated:

"We the Baptist Church of Christ at Richland Meeting House are convinced of the necessity of assembling ourselves together to worship our God and to watch over each other as we are commanded to do in his word. Nehemiah 10:39, "...we will not forsake the house of our God." Hebrews 10:25, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is..."

A roll call of the families early associated with Richland Creek would begin with Anderson and Asbell, pass through names like Bunn, Combs, Denson, Faulk, Glover, Hart, and others too numerous to list and end with Walker, Wimberly, and Wood.

The first meeting-house, of log construction and costing perhaps fifty dollars in its erection was built near the banks of Richland Creek which flows into the Ocmulgee River. Early records refer to the church as the Richland Creek Meeting-house. About 1819, or later, a new building was erected near Duke Hart's Spring. This was no doubt used until about 1845 when the church bought the building and lot of the recently-dissolved New Hope Baptist Church and moved its meeting place from the old log church, a short distance away, to the beautiful elevated location of New Hope. The church was built on property owned formerly by John and Elisha Asbell. It was on this spot that the present stately colonial church edifice was erected by members of Richland Church about 1850. Thomas Glover, Church treasurer and deacon, was chairman of the Building Committee.

The Church building is rectangular with four large simple square white columns supporting the pediment of the portico. Built in an adaptation of the Greek Revival style of that day, the old church's graceful architecture imparts serenity and dignity today. There are four doors on the front, two main doors each leading down an aisle. The ladies entered on the right side and took their seats, while the gentlemen entered on the left and were seated on that side. The center section of the pews were shared by both, with the center section divided by a solid partition that came to the top of the pews, dividing them in half. The front bench, undivided, was called the "Mourner's" bench. On each side of the pulpit are short sections of pews at right angles to the main pews and facing the pulpit. These were reserved for the elderly men and women, men on the left and women on the right. These are referred to as the "Amen" corners.

During the crucial Civil War years the church functioned as near normal as possible despite political distractions and the many hardships that were endured. This body continued its religious work in the community and among the soldiers in their midst. The ladies would meet at the church to make necessary articles and prepare first aid kits for the soldiers. Also, a Confederate flag was made. In June, 1861, from the steps of Richland Baptist Church Mrs. Isolene Minter Wimberly made a farewell address and presented this flag to the departing soldiers. Her husband was Captain Frederick Davis Wimberly of Co. I, 6th Georgia Regiment, Confederate States of America. The Color-bearer, Sergeant Warren of Company I, received the Confederate Flag in behalf of Twiggs Guards.

Prior to the year 1800 a number of new settlers moved into the territory now occupied by the counties of Wilkinson, Twiggs, Jones, Baldwin, Laurens, and Bibb. These were fearless pioneers who came to the virgin forests still occupied by the Creek Indians. After the beginning of the new century settlements of whites rapidly multiplied in the new Purchase. Log cabins were erected, clearings made, crops planted, and cattle and sheep browsed along the creek branches. Early houses of worship, usually of simple log construction, were rapidly built as the new settlers moved into the vast virgin wilderness between the Oconee and Ocmulgee Rivers and beyond. Pastors were few and far between, necessitating much travel away from home. Out of such humble circumstances developed the early churches which combined to form the Ebenezer Association in 1814.

Let us briefly examine the conditions which surrounded the church life at the time of the constitution of this body. The United States Government cleared the country of the remaining Creek Indians during the early part of the century, and about 1812 a great wave of settlers came into the country west of the Ocmulgee. Among them came many Baptists from North and South Carolina, Virginia, and from the counties of northeast Georgia.

Those gospel ministers, who braved the frontier on horseback, forded the creeks and threaded the forests to bring the precious news of salvation to the early settlements. The first sermons were preached in the cabins of the settlers, under the shade limbs of the forest oaks, or in the primitive log-pin churches. Happy baptismal scenes occurred in the dark creek bottoms, and the singing voices of the observers could be heard as the minister led the candidate into the crystal clear waters for the ordinance of baptism. New church organizations sprang up rapidly. Newly constituted churches united themselves first with the Hephzibah and Ocmulgee Associations, which had been formed respectively in 1794 and 1810 out of churches dismissed from the Georgia Association.

As the territory covered by the associations was very excessive, delegates from the churches to the Associational meetings often had to travel distances as great as a hundred miles from the churches of the new settlements. Many traveled on horseback. Consequently, for territorial and geographical convenience, some of the churches desired the organization of a new association to the west of the Ocmulgee River. For this purpose thirteen churches were dismissed from two associations, the Hephzibah and the Ocmulgee Associations, to form a new association, the Ebenezer Association. In 1813 Richland Baptist Church was dismissed from the Ocmulgee Association to be constituted into the new association. The Ebenezer Association, the sixth Baptist Association to be formed in Georgia, was organized at Cool Springs Church in Wilkinson County on "Saturday before the first Sabbath in March (March 6), 1814, for the purpose of organizing the Baptist Churches lying in the forks of the Oconee and Ocmulgee Rivers into a Baptist Association." Richland Church minutes show that they sent delegates Brethren Denson and Hammock to Cool Springs Church to be constituted into this association. The first regular session of the Ebenezer Association was held at Mount Moriah Meetinghouse in Twiggs County in August, 1814. Messengers from Richland Creek were John Denson and Jacob Ricks.

The membership was reported as 29

The great Luther Rice, a recently returned foreign missionary converted to the Baptist faith with Ann and Adoniram Judson on their way to India, was present at the Ebenezer Association session in November, 1816, held at Mr. Horeb Church in Pulaski County. At which time the Association voted to correspond with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions in the United States of America, later to be known as the Baptist Tri-ennial Convention. This was done under the direct influence of Rice's powerful appeal for missionary endeavor. Although the very next year at Wood's Meeting House, the Association voted to cease its correspondence with this body, in 1818 correspondence with the General Convention was begun again, and in the following year the body agreed to cooperate with the Ocmulgee Association in Indian reform.

Among the early moderators of the Ebenezer Association were pastors of Richland Creek Church. These were Micajah Fulghum from 1814 through 1818, V. A. Tharpe in 1819, and 1820, and 1822-24; Theophilus Pearce in 1821, and 1825-26; John Ross in 1827-29; Adam Jones in 1830-31, and for the next twenty-four years from 1832-1855 Rev. C. A. Tharpe, with the exception of 1846, when C. D. Mallary was moderator. For the next twelve years, from 1856 through 1867, Henry Bunn was moderator; then for fourteen years, 1868 through 1881, George R. McCall was moderator; and finally for the next ten years, from 1882 through 1891, Edward J. Coates was moderator. Thus, for 73 of the first 78 years in the history of the Ebenezer Association, Richland Creek pastors served as moderators.

Richland was active in the associational work during the entire period of her life. She is still in the territory of the Ebenezer Association.

The fiftieth session of the Ebenezer Association met at Richland, September 8, 1827. The pastor, Rev. John Ross, delivered the doctrinal message. Richland entertained the Association again in 1845, 1862, and 1871. The last Annual Associational meeting held here was in 1884 with Rev. E. J. Coates as Moderator. At all times a warm hospitality was found at the church. In 1839, Richland was host to the Georgia Baptist Convention, with the notable Rev. Jesse Mercer presiding and 43 delegates attending.

Association statistics indicate that in 1820 Richland Creek had 54 members, in 1830, 30 members; in 1840, 163 members, making her the largest of the 27 churches in the association; in 1850, 217 members, 92 white and 125 Negro, largest of the 32 church members; in 1860, 239 members, 74 white and 165 Negro, second in size to Stone Creek among the 30 churches; and in 1870, 258 members, 60 white and 198 Negro. Beginning about 1850 the community began losing population which was reflected in church membership and influence. Also to be noted was the increase in Negro members while sustaining a loss in white members. By 1880 only a total membership of 155 was listed; in 1890, a membership of 80; in 1900 there was no report, although in 1901 a membership of 38 was reported. In 1913 the final unofficial report was received by the Association listing the membership as 36 but without church officers or pastor.

Some Richland Creek families migrated to other sections of the state, some to Florida, and several relocated in neighboring communities, moving their membership to the more active churches of Evergreen, Jeffersonville, Friendship, and Stone Creek. Soon this section of Twiggs County became so devoid of population that Marion, the Twiggs County seat of government, was abandoned in favor of Jeffersonville.

On August 9, 1911, a deacon and active member, G. W. Faulk, Jr., passed away, and then in October 1911, the pastor, Rev. Francis Bartow Asbell, resigned. No other pastor was called, and therefore no regular services were held and the church doors were closed.

In 1948 when the Richland Restoration League was organized, there were four surviving members. John H. Arnold, Mrs. Laura Wimberly Faulk, Mrs. Maude Newby Sanders, and Mrs. Clara Wimberly Pope; and the last pastor, the Rev. Francis Bartow Asbell. Another remaining church member, Henry Glenn Faulk, passed away on the eve of the organization of the Richland Restoration League. His daughter, Mary Faulk Harrison, was President of the League. She and many others are to be commended for the fine work done in the effort to restore and preserve this grand old

church, thereby keeping alive the faith of the dearly departed families, relatives, and friends.

The final removal of the white people from the community left the old church very weak in its constituency, and attempts to revive it and re-affiliate with the old Association have proved fruitless. But the handsome old building which looked upon the beauty of the aristocracy and the wealth of more than a century ago, still stands proudly among the majestic oaks that surround it. The ashes of many who loved the old church lie in the graveyard nearby. Those who have loved her have restored the temple to her former glory. Many are her sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters who have gone out to bless the world. The record of eternity alone will disclose the results of her spiritual ministrations during the years.