

Milestone Hertford Rural Congregation

Bethlehem—Link With Famed Past

Bethlehem Baptist Church has managed to span the course of history to be almost the only connecting link between modern times and a period when the area in which the church is located was a center of Hertford County life.

When Bethlehem Baptist Church was organized in 1835, the "Pitch Landing" area, which stretched along the road from present-day Harrellsville to the bustling

waters of Chinkapin Creek (where the village of Pitch Landing was located) on to the Bethlehem crossroads, was an area of large, fertile farms. The village of Pitch Landing was an important water commerce point, the starting place for shipments of naval stores (tar) which gave it its name.

The village was perhaps third largest in Hertford County, only Winton and

Murfreesboro were larger. It was one of the four voting places in Hertford County during pre-Civil War days.

The importance of its "port" on the Chinkapin Creek, a tributary of Wicacoan River, is evidenced by the fact that an "inspector of naval stores" for the landing was regularly appointed by the county court during the entire pre-Civil War period.

This area, one of the first settled in Hertford (there is evidence of settlement here within a few years after the turn of the 18th century), was—when Bethlehem Baptist Church was formed—the county's most prosperous farm area.

Today, Bethlehem Baptist Church stands as the link with the past in this historic corner of Hertford County.

Church Facts

FORMED—1835. One of two Baptist churches formed that year in Hertford, the other at Buckhorn, present-day Como.

Membership mostly from Ahsokie Baptist (formed 1804).

FIRST PASTOR was Elder Thomas Hoggard, who probably started service about 1837.

THE FIRST BUILDING was constructed during early period, another in 1858, and the present church building constructed in 1902.

SOME EARLY PASTORS were Elder Hoggard, 1837-47; Elder John Nowell, 1847-50; Elder James Deik, 1850, six months supply; W. P. Britton, Jr., 1851-52; James Deik, 1852-54, supply; Aaron J. Spivey, 10 months 1854; William W. Kane, 1855-59; Andrew M. Craig, 1859-63; J. M. C. Luke, 1864-67; John Mitchell, 1868-71; John N. Hoggard, 1872-81; John Mitchell, 1882; T. G. Wood, seven months 1883; D. A. Woodson, 1883-87; L. E. Pruitt, 1887-89; C. N. Donalson, 1890-91; L. M. Curtis, 1892-1908.

CHURCH CLERKS have not changed as frequently as pastors. Until the early 1900's there had only been five church clerks. The first was Abraham Thomas, 1842-60, who also donated land for the church site; William J. Perry followed him for a few months from August to November, 1860; John W. Harrell served from 1850-71, with a few months off during the Civil War; N. L. Shaw, 1871-73, was followed by A. B. Adkins, who served from 1873 until past the turn of the century. The present clerk is J. Raynor Moore of Powellsville.

On an acre of land, and the women were asked to donate money from the sale of eggs.

W. R. Willoughby recalls that on the third Sunday of each November for five years, beginning in 1926, the "acre and egg money" was placed on the altar to pay for the new building. T. S. Overton of Ahsokie was contractor for the church building, a brick veneer structure which he completed for the handsome sum of \$5,000.

While work was proceeding on the new building, the church held services in the school house across the road. The old frame building was sold to J. W. Godwin of Ahsokie, who dismantled it and moved it to the new building could be erected on the same spot.

Cornerstone Laying
The ceremony of laying the cornerstone for the new building was conducted on Sunday, August 6, 1926, by the Woodmen of the World, of whom the Rev. Mr. Kiff was an official. The Hertford County Herald recorded the event in its issue of August 12, 1926, describing the large crowd who attended the homecoming services and the "impressive" cornerstone ceremony that afternoon.

Among those present for the great day were four charter members of the church, says the Herald: George Holloman of Woodland, Joe Holloman of Aulander, T. S. Overton and Mrs. Nannie Brantley, both of Brantley's Grove.

Money to build the church in 1926 was borrowed from a bank in Ahsokie. Mr. Willoughby was one of the trustees, who signed the note, and he remembers that within five years the church was paid for. For the first four years, the money flowed in so fast those third Sundays in November that we could hardly get it all in the plate," he says. "But the last year, when there was just a little left to pay, it didn't come so easy." That is understandable, since 1931 was a bad year for everyone.

An example of depression-days pay for preachers is shown in the church minutes of 1931, when the Rev. Oscar Crech agreed to preach two sermons monthly for \$300 a year. On the other hand, inflation boomed the salary of the Rev. Earl Sapp to \$1,200 and \$200 for travel, to preach two sermons monthly in 1949. The Rev. A. J. Mustian of Ahsokie served the church for a number of years in the last decade, until forced to resign because of ill health. The present minister is the Rev. W. E. Carter.

After 85 years of service, it seems unlikely that Brantley's Grove will ever revert to the estate of its donor. All of the Brantley family is gone, but the church still stands in the grove of trees beside the road running from Catherine Creek towards Sally Archer's Crossroads, now called Coffield.

—MARY ELLEN ALBARES

(Information for this article was secured from the 1926 files of the Hertford County Herald; conference minutes of the Brantley's Grove Baptist Church and the original deed for the land, dated March 4, 1873, now in custody of W. R. Willoughby, Route 3, Ahsokie; church minutes from Herbert Willoughby, church clerk, Route 3, Ahsokie; and minutes of the West Chowan Baptist Association, Oct. 27-28, 1896.)



"WORKMANLIKE" BUILDING—Bethlehem Baptist Church, midway between Ahsokie and Harrellsville, stands today on the same two-acre plot of ground given by Abraham Thomas in 1835 for the church site. The immaculate, white frame building was ordered built in 1902, at a cost of \$375, replacing two earlier structures. (Staff photo.)

History of Famous Church

The year 1835 was a good one for Hertford County Baptists. In that year, two of the surest offshoots of the mother church at Meherrin were formed—Buckhorn at Como, and Bethlehem, midway between Ahsokie and Harrellsville. Most of the members of the new church at Bethlehem came from the Ahsokie church, according to the history compiled by Miss Mary Thomas in 1935.

Miss Thomas was the logical person to write the history of Bethlehem, for it was her grandfather, Abraham Thomas, who gave the two acres of land on which the church stands today. Abraham Thomas was the son of a Revolutionary War soldier, James Thomas, who lived in Bertie County. Abraham was born in Bertie in 1799, the year of George Washington's death, and married Nancy Mitchell. It was Nancy's land in Hertford County which brought the Thomas family to live near Bethlehem Church in the early 1800's.

Abraham Thomas is pictured in Winborne's history of Hertford County as a "most faithful servant," both of his adopted county and of his church. He served as a member of the county's special court from 1830-40, and was the first clerk for Bethlehem Church, serving for 25 years.

The earliest records of Bethlehem Church, from 1835-42, have been lost, but judging from the records of 1843, the first building would have been considered "comfortable" by the standards of that day. In 1848, according to the church minutes, H. M. Jones was delegated to raise a subscription fund to build "good benches with backs" to put in the church. In 1849, the meeting house was lengthened by 16 feet, and larger windows installed.

First Pastor
Elder Thomas Hoggard was the first pastor of Bethlehem Church, reports Miss Thomas. He moved to the Bethlehem community in 1842, as learned from his obituary written by the Rev. R. R. Savage and recorded in the Chowan Baptist Association minutes of 1882, and verified by an old "certificate of exoneration" granted him by Bethlehem Church on Sept. 11, 1847. This certificate showed that he had been pastor of Bethlehem for ten years, which places the beginning of his ministry in 1837.

Among the earliest names recorded in Bethlehem's church minutes are those of Abraham Thomas, A. Bass, William Pearce, Wade Adkins (who later moved to Murfreesboro), John Harrell and William Hoggard. No record was kept of the slaves who were members of the church, although the records tell of the acceptance into the church fellowship of black women and men, with the names of their masters.

Apparently the Bethlehem congregation was dedicated to keeping their place of worship neat and in good condition, for in the minutes of 1847 there is an

authorization for "tarring the meeting house." Again, in July, 1858, "the committee appointed to stop round the house to keep the stock out is to continue and have suitable blocks put under the house."

The fervent interest of the early church is evidenced in the fact that in 1847, only 12 years after it was formed, the church sent forth William P. Britton, Jr., to be ordained as a minister. Britton obviously was held in great esteem by his home church, for in 1850 he was called as the fourth minister of the church.

Elder John Nowell had succeeded Elder Hoggard as the second minister, serving from 1847 to 1850. He was followed by Elder James Deik, who had held membership with Bethlehem since 1848, when he and his wife, Elizabeth, brought letters from Cole-rain. Elder Deik is noted in the records of several Hertford County churches as a fine preacher, and he served the Bethlehem Church, preaching on first Sundays without pay.

The Rev. Mr. Britton was Bethlehem's pastor in 1851, when the old Chowan Baptist Association met there. Included in the minutes of the meeting was the catalogue of the Chowan Female Collegiate Institute, founded only three years previously at Murfreesboro. Mr. Britton was preaching at Meherrin, Bethlehem and other churches when he met a tragic death in 1852. Meherrin dropped the pulpit and each door in mourning for 30 days.

First Sunday School
The earliest record of the organization of a Sunday school is found in 1854, when A. Bass, Sr., was appointed superintendent. The Sunday school struggled for a number of years, and was sometimes discontinued. In the church conference minutes of June, 1862, the clerk recorded the fact that the congregation voted to have a Sunday school "by a very slim margin," with J. A. Meazles and A. Bass, Jr., as superintendents.

The prosperous days before the Civil War saw the erection of a new house of worship at Bethlehem. In 1858, a committee was named to be in charge of the construction of the new church. The conference agreed that there would be "four doors to the meeting house," and that the new one would stand back of the old one.

Into the new church went a handsome pulpit Bible and silver communion service, given as a legacy by Mrs. Ann Askew. Mrs. Askew's death occurred during the pastorate of Elder W. W. Kone, whom the church gave \$38.33% to help him move into the Association. She is the first woman to have the honor of having her death recorded in the minutes of the church, for women had no voice in conference except when they joined the church or were reprieved by it.

The communion service, donated in 1855, is now in the custody of Miss Mary Thomas. The silver serving plates fell apart

several years ago, and are beyond repair, but the silver pitcher is still beautiful.

According to the records, construction of the new building was begun in September, 1858, when Abraham Thomas, W. J. Perry, H. M. Jones, A. Mizell, J. W. Harrell, W. W. Sessoms, George Valentine, John Baker, David Harrell and George Baker became responsible for \$100 each. George T. Holloman and James Shaw agreed to pay \$50 each. The building was completed in 1859, when Elder A. M. Craig was pastor. In 1860, John Wilson Harrell was appointed church clerk, succeeding Abraham Thomas, who had served for a quarter of a century.

During Civil War
The War Between the States hit Bethlehem Church hard, for many of its young men volunteered. In August, 1861, a collection was taken at conference to send the soldiers testaments and tracts. In December, 1861, the minutes record a letter to the church from John W. Birch, asking their prayers while he was in the Confederate Army. A long letter from Alanson Holley, also in the Confederate Army, is recorded in December, 1862.

Not every member joined the Confederate forces, however, judging from a query posed to the conference of February, 1863. A member asked, "Is it right or proper to hold a member in full fellowship who has voluntarily taken an oath to fight in the Confederate Army and now has taken up arms against it?" The conference decided to postpone answering this tricky question indefinitely.

The fortunes of war came closer to home to Bethlehem on February 12, 1864, when the church clerk, John Wilson Harrell, wrote this in the minutes: "This day I turn over the church books to the assistant clerk, in consequence of my being in the service of my country. May God, in his wisdom, and goodness, soon restore peace and harmony to this once happy, but now distracted land and country, and that He may watch over me in the vicissitudes of a camp life, and keep me from the evils, and sins, that doth so easily beset one in the army."

Apparently Harrell survived the "vicissitudes" of war and returned for his name in again signed to the church minutes in March, 1865. Despite the war, however, the church brooked no foolishness, for A. Askew was expelled in March, 1865, for "fiddling and dancing."

The strict adherence to decorum was also noted in March, 1866, when the conference was asked, "Should the church tolerate these singing and promiscuous plays," to which it answered a hearty "no."

Dr. John Mitchell, one of the beloved Baptist pastors, became the Bethlehem pastor in 1868, and the following year, the church again was host to the Association. The church went on record as op-

posing the selling of confectioneries, liquor, lemonade or anything to disturb the peace of the Association within two miles of the church, and respectfully requested all persons to refrain from such.

Church Roll
The church roll, revised in 1871, showed that 194 males and 236 females had been affiliated with the church. No revision was made of the colored roll, but the last colored members on record were Allen Harrell and Gammer Harrell, who asked for letters of dismission in 1871. Before the close of the war, in 1864 Noah of W. P. Shaw, Peter of J. A. Meazles, and Bob of John W. Simons were appointed to keep order in the gallery.

In 1872, Elder John W. Hoggard accepted a call to the Bethlehem Church at a salary of \$200 yearly. During Mr. Hoggard's pastorate, says Miss Thomas, the church held its own in spite of the very hard times of Reconstruction period. At the close of 1876, the minutes show that Mr. Hoggard "very graciously agreed to reduce his salary."

It was during this period that women began to be recognized in a small way. The first committee of women was appointed to solicit money for a new church carpet—but the committee to purchase it was composed of men! More than ever, during this period, the church came to the assistance of needy members, of whom there seemed to be a postwar abundance.

It was during the Reconstruction period that another Thomas rose to prominence in the history of the Baptist church. Abraham Thomas, one of the "founding fathers" of Bethlehem, died in April, 1879, leaving four children out of the 11 he had fathered. His youngest son, Roscius P. Thomas, had returned from medical studies at the University of Virginia and New York University to practice medicine for a short while at his home. Although lame from what was probably polio, Dr. Thomas had volunteered for the Confederate Army, but had been refused. In the last year of the war, however, he had served in the commissary department.

His medical practice was limited to a few years, due to ill health, but Dr. Thomas became one of the most important farmers of the Bethlehem community. He married the year that his father, Abraham, died, and soon after built a handsome new home for his bride, on the road running from Bethlehem to Coffield. It is in this home that Dr. Thomas's children, William A. Thomas, Miss Mary Thomas and Miss Ruth Thomas, live today.

Dr. Thomas was for many years superintendent of the Bethlehem Sunday School. One of the students, Major John W. Moore, had distinguished himself in the Third Artillery Battalion of the Confederate Army. When the West Chowan Baptist Association was



BETHLEHEM RELICS—Among the wealth of valuable historical items in the possession of Misses Mary and Ruth Thomas and their brother, William, are these articles denoting the history of the Bethlehem Baptist Church. The original communion set, including a pitcher, two cups and two plates of heavy silver, dates back nearly to the formation of the church in 1835, when the Thomases' grandfather, Abraham Thomas, gave two acres of land for the church site. A handwritten receipt is also shown on the table, made to Abraham Thomas for his payment of \$9.29 in 1833 for a preaching station at "Slaughter's old house." The wooden gavel was presented to Dr. Roscius P. Thomas, Abraham's son, who was the first moderator of the West Chowan Baptist Association. (Staff photo.)

formed from the Chowan Association in 1883, Dr. Thomas was chosen as moderator, serving until 1896. He was also president of the board of trustees for the Chowan Baptist Female Institute in 1887.

In 1833, the Rev. D. A. Woodson came to the pastorate. In the four years he served, the church was at its strongest. It raised his salary, any sent him to the Southern Baptist Convention at Baltimore, Md., contributed to the endowment of C. B. F. Institute and Wake Forest College, and to the building of other churches in the Association.

Later, the church also gave to the salary of Mr. and Mrs. T. C. Britton, who went to China as missionaries from the Association. Mrs. Britton was a niece of Mrs. A. B. Adkins, who with her husband contributed the church pulpit and desk furniture.

It was during the 16-year pastorate of the Rev. L. M. Curtis, which began in 1892, that the present Bethlehem Church building was constructed. An agreement between Willis Hoffer of Gates County and the church

committee—Dr. R. P. Thomas, W. P. Britton, Sr., A. B. Adkins, C. C. Sessoms, W. A. Perry and the Rev. Mr. Curtis—is contained in the church records. By virtue of this agreement, Hoffer contracted to build "a nice, handsome, workmanlike building" on the order of the Connaritis Church, for \$375, to be finished by the fall of 1902.

The building, standing today, is indeed, "nice, handsome, and workmanlike." It serves a congregation somewhat diminished in this century from the larger numbers of the late 19th century, but still energetic and enthusiastic. Many of its members are descendants of the men whose names were enrolled in 1842.

Chief among these would be William A. Thomas, long-time church treasurer, Sunday School superintendent, and grandson of Abraham Thomas, and his sisters; Mrs. Mary Jordan, at 87 the oldest member; and J. Raynor Moore, grandson of Major John W. Moore of Confederate fame. Moore is at present church clerk, and the Rev. Levi Gillikin has served as pastor for three years.

(Material for this article was obtained from conference minutes of Bethlehem Baptist Church, 1842-91, in the custody of Miss Mary Thomas; the history of the church, written by Miss Thomas for the centennial in 1935; clippings and articles in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. J. Raynor Moore of Powellsville; the 1835 files of the Hertford County Herald; minutes of the 27th annual session, West Chowan Baptist Association, Oct. 27-28, 1909; and B. B. Winborne's "History of Hertford County.")

BRANTLEY'S

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16, 1926, members were delegated to canvass and see "who would give an acre, and the Sunday eggs." With the encouragement of the pastor, the Rev. Oscar A. Crech (now assistant to the president of Chowan College in Murfreesboro), the men of the congregation were invited to donate the proceeds from what was raised



THOMAS HOME—Set far back from the road between Bethlehem Church and Coffield is the massive, ornate frame home built by Dr. Roscius P. Thomas for his bride in 1880. Surrounded by two fences, the home sits shaded by immense pecan and magnolia trees. It is filled with antiques and memories of the affluent days of the 19th century. Misses Mary and Ruth Thomas, with their brother, William, have spent their lives in this house which their father built. (Staff photo.)