

Notes on Bethel's Early History

The following notes were put together in preparation for Bethel's "Heritage Sunday" celebration, May 3, 2015. Bethel's current pastor, Karen Alford, had asked me to speak a few minutes on Bethel's history on that occasion. In particular she asked about those that might have been there during that first camp-meeting, on the banks of Bethel Pond, back in 1834. I said that I would do that, although I didn't think that Bethel's written history, first entered into a Bethel membership book in 1947 and updated several times through 1989, had much information about persons that far back.

To my surprise, the 1947 history did have a list of pastors dating back to 1838 when John W. Yarbrough served and listed 11 names thru 1847 when Ira L. Potter was listed as serving at the time that the first two acres of the present property were deeded to "The Trustees of Bethel Methodist Church" by Joseph and Thirza Hale.

The church history did list those "conducting" that first camp-meeting by position as: "the pastor of Trinity Methodist Church in Tallahassee, the Presiding Elder of Tallahassee District and the pastor of Gadsden Circuit". (The "Presiding Elder" at that time corresponds to today's "District Superintendent" in the church hierarchy.) I checked the Trinity UMC web-site and found that among the historical records on that site are copies of church registers in 6 volumes dating back to 1856. Of these, volume two contains a hand-written list of pastors from 1825-1836. The pastor in 1834 was listed as Archelaus H. Mitchell. In the same volume, John W. Talley is identified as the "PE", or Presiding Elder, in that year. I haven't yet found who the "pastor of Gadsden Circuit" was.

Those hand-written entries also note that the "Tallahassee Mission" and "Tallahassee district" were first established as part of the South Carolina Conference in the Jan 20, 1825 meeting in Fayetteville, N.C. This became the "Tallahassee Station" of the "Leon Circuit" in the 1828 meeting in Camden SC. The membership for the Tallahassee Mission was noted as "White Members 60, Colored 13" in 1826 and had increased to "235 White, 52 colored" in 1828.

Bethel's history states that the trustees in 1847 when the first parcel of the current land was donated by Joseph & Thirza Hale were: Silas D. Allen, John L. Mooring, Thompson F. Cocker, Council B. Allen, Martial Smith, Joseph L. Bryan and Lewis Robertson. The genealogical record in the local booklet "20 Faces and Places, A History of the People of Highway 20 and the Ochlockonee River Area" actually provides a little more about this as the section on the Allen family, which begins with a photo of Bethel as it appears today, recording that "Council Bryan Allen and Silas Decatur Allen, and their families, came here together from Allendale, Barnwell District, South Carolina". It also says that Silas married Frances Hale in 1833 (the daughter of Joseph and Thirza) and that Council Bryan was 50 years old in 1850, making him 34 at the time of the camp-meeting at Bethel Pond...might he and his family have been among those present? It also mentions that "Silas was a minister" and "Council B. was a Justice of the Peace".

We should also note that Omar B. Allen jr., well known to many here at Bethel, is a direct descendant of Council Bryan Allen and that a descendant of the Hale family is also known to some current members of Bethel.

Read excerpt from "Fifty Two Years in Florida" (1877) p50 concerning camp-meeting in Tallahassee,
Read excerpt from "History of Methodism in Georgia and Florida, 1785-1865" (1899) p 331-2 about
Indian activity in Florida, esp Monticello

Note current building begun in 1909...workers included Westcott Crowder, Father of Annie Ruth Hartsfield, Grandfather of Maurice Hartsfield and ggfather of Tina Oakes.