LOW  E  CAPE FEAR  
HISTORICAL  SOCIETY,  Inc. 
BULLETIN 

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Wilmington, N. C. 28401 
October 1978 

ORIGIN OF THE MASONBORO BAPTIST CHURCH 

By Crockett W. Hewlett 

For well over a hundred years the Masonboro Baptist Church has stood on a hill, surrounded by hickories and oaks, a focal point in the little sound community of Masonboro. Its original walls, built just after the War Between the States, are still encased in the structure which is visible today. But the church organization actually goes back to the year 1856, making it one of the oldest churches in New Hanover County, North Carolina.

It is thought that worship services began as early as 1848 or 1850. The church sprang from a community need. Some of its charter members belonged to the First Baptist Church in the city, but found it difficult to travel the distance required to attend services there, a distance of about seven miles, by horse and buggy or wagon, over sandy, rutted lanes through the woods.

A membership roll of the First Baptist Church in 1846 listed the following Masonboro Sound residents: John Hewlett, Eliza Hewlett (wife of John), Alexander Hewlett (deceased 1843), Serena Hewlett (widow of Alexander), Martha Weeks (mother of John and Alexander Hewlett), John Farrow, Matilda Farrow, Ellen Curtis, Mrs. Lavinia Fowler, and Rebecca Beasley.

In those days it was a punishable offense not to be regular in one's attendance at worship services, and Masonboro residents, because of their distance from the church, were at a disadvantage. Hard-working, God-fearing folk, they had no wish to neglect their religious duties and greatly desired an opportunity for group worship. Taking the lead in making their own arrangements, John Hewlett, captain of a seine crew, invited neighbors to his home and often conducted services himself. When possible, he obtained an itinerant missionary to preach.

One of the missionaries who came was A. B. Alderman, another John B. Barlow, a cooper by trade, who often walked twenty-five miles to fill a preaching engagement. Others were Reuben Grant, A. D. Betts, and Joe E. King.

Soon people began coming in such numbers there were not enough chairs to seat them. Someone thought of placing boards across blocks made of tree trunk sections and setting up these improvised benches in the yard when the weather permitted.

In 1856 the church undertook to organize. Myles C. Walton, a Masonboro native who twice served as pastor of the church, stated:

"I remember as if it had been yesterday, the first fruits of this little church organization as they continued to meet at the home of Uncle Jackie (John Hewlett) just after the war when Brethren John J. Beasley and Aaron Hewlett united with the church upon profession of faith under the preaching of Dr. John Elwell, who was a medical doctor and also a Baptist minister of great ability."

Myles Walton remembered an incident which happened when he was a young boy, a time when his mother was very ill, so ill that little hope could be held for her recovery. His mother requested that John Hewlett be asked to come and pray for her. Hewlett was a tall, robust man, and when dressed in his Prince Albert coat and high beaver hat, cut quite a figure. When Hewlett arrived at the house, he first gathered the children around him and very quietly took the hand of each child in turn. Then he took them with him into their mother's room and told them to kneel beside the bed. Myles never forgot that moment beside his mother's bed. As he knelt there, he was as certain that God would hear the prayer of this man and that his mother would soon be well as he was sure of anything. True to his expectation, his mother began to improve. Soon she was able to go to the church service being held in the Hewlett home.

Some of the people who formed the Masonboro church seemed to keep their memberships in the First Baptist Church also and did not request their church letters until after the church house had been built, after the war. On December 5, 1864, the name of Ellen Curtis (called "Aunt Nelly" by the neighborhood children who flocked around her) was brought before the Standing Committee of the First Baptist Church for being absent from services. Upon investigation it was found that "she lives at the sound, is quite aged, very pious, and unable to get to the church." Thereupon it was decided not to exclude her.

The war did not destroy the small beginning of this church; instead, it seemed to weld members together in mutual concern. As Masonboro boys responded to the call to arms, John Hewlett shook hands with each of them and said: "Boys, I don't know where you will be called upon to go, or how long you will be compelled to stay, but remember, wherever you are and however you fare, I am praying for you that God will send you all home again to assist in building up the Kingdom of God in our neighborhood."

Masonboro boys were seen at such places as Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, in front of Petersburg, and in (continued on Page Two)
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RECEPTION

November 19, 1978, Sunday, 4:30-6:30 p.m., Latimer House

THE WASSAIL BOWL

(a benefit)

You are cordially invited to attend

The Wassail Bowl

Friday, the eighth of December

from eight until ten o'clock

at the Latimer House

128 South Third Street

Wilmington, North Carolina

Subscription: Twenty-five dollars per person

Limited to one hundred twenty-five

The Wassail Bowl is a benefit to provide funds for the preservation and interpretation of the Latimer House complex. It includes the Wassail, entertainment, a gourmet's delight with suckling pig, and a ticket for the tour.

OLD WILMINGTON

BY CANDLELIGHT

December 9 and 10, 1978

4:00-8:00 P.M.

MEETING

Date: Thursday, October 26, 1976

Time: 8:00 P.M.

Gifts and Loans

The following items have been placed on loan to the Latimer House:

Dresden figurine—Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Shepard

Pair of Empire side chairs—Mr. and Mrs. John Kalmar

Portrait of Lady Middleton by Sir Godfrey Kneller

Louis XV armchair—Mr. and Mrs. Roger Beale, Jr.

The following gifts have been presented to the Latimer House:

Pair of glass hurricane shades, Victorian side chair

Miniatures of Herbert and Empie Latimer, Photographs of the Latimer House, Latimer summer house, and Herbert Latimer—Mrs. Herbert R. Latimer

Black satin and lace cape—Mrs. Frederick Burr

Cut glass decanter, Etched glass shade for chandelier—Mrs. Paul Jenevein

Etched glass shade for chandelier—Mr. Troy Henry

Lady's writing pen—Mr. John Robert Lane Jr.

MASONBORO BAPTIST CHURCH

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defense of nearby Fort Fisher when it fell under bombardment near the close of the war. Some of them were badly wounded, but all came back after the struggle was over and assisted in doing the thing John Hewlett had said he wished them to do.9

Following a revival, a strong sentiment prevailed to build a house of worship. The highest hill on Masonboro was just south of the Hewlett home, and this seemed to be the logical place to put it. The hill belonged to Dr. Edwin A. Anderson, who had a home on the soundfront. When Dr. Anderson was approached, he made a deed to the church trustees: Elijah Hewlett, John G. Wagner, and John J. Beasley, a deed dated February 11, 1809.19

In the hard years after the war there were many difficulties to be overcome in trying to build, but church members went into the woods and cut tall straight pines and hauled them to the mill to be cut into lumber. The foundation of the building was made of cedar trunk sections. Everyone who could spare a few hours was hard at work, sawing and hammering. The carpenter in charge was Henry Risley (John Hewlett's son-in-law), and his assistant was Frank Hewlett (John's son).

Soon a frame building measuring 25 by 75 feet stood facing the dirt road which ran by Beasley's to Wilmington.
The room was not ceiled until February, 1872, when laths and ceiling materials were bought from CLARENDON SAWMILL for $21.50.11

When the building was completed, Serena Hewlett made application, on December 8, 1869, to the First Baptist Church for a letter of dismissal, as she stated she was now a member of the Masonboro church.12 On January 3, 1870, John Hewlett and his wife, Eliza, wrote a letter in answer to a complaint of the Standing Committee of the First Baptist Church with regard to their absences from meetings, giving their excuses for not having complied with the requirements of the church, and requesting their letters to join the Masonboro church.13 In September, 1870, John Hewlett's daughter, Catherine, was expelled from the First Baptist Church for her failure to appear at services.14

About this time the First Baptist Church began to take note of the active little church on the sound and sent a delegation to pay its respects. Members of this delegation were: George R. French, Alfred L. Alderman, Dr. Freeman, Joseph Taylor, John Hamilton, and A. Paul Repiton.15

Whereupon the Rev. A. Paul Repiton, pastor of the First Baptist Church, began to hold a revival at Masonboro. The first person in the new building to go forward upon profession of faith was Sarah Hollis Hewlett, who was followed by her husband, Alonzo (a son of John Hewlett). They were soon followed by Kate and Maria Hewlett (daughters of John's son, Elijah) and Jane Johnson (who later married John A. Farrow).16

In 1870, John B. Barlow came to the church as pastor, and it was reported that at one time he baptized as many as forty persons in the sound at Elijah Hewlett's landing. The 1878 Cape Fear Baptist Association Minute Book listed 52 baptisms at the Masonboro church, none received by letter, 2 restored, none dismissed, 1 excluded, 1 died. There were 72 males, 91 females, and 3 colored members, making a total of 166 members.17 The preacher, when he came to Masonboro, stayed at Elijah Hewlett's home in a shed room built especially for him and always thereafter called "Mr. Barlow's room."

In those early days there were three sons of the church to enter the ministry. The first was John J. Beasley, a Masonboro native, son of charter member Rebecca Beasley and her husband, Richard Beasley. He was ordained in 1877 and served churches in the Wilmington area until 1882, when he took churches in the central part of the State. He moved back to Masonboro in 1886 to become pastor of his home church, and died a year later. The second son of the church to enter the ministry was Myles C. Walton, who twice served his home church as pastor. The third was Robert H. Hewlett (grandson of John Hewlett), who served several churches in the Wilmington area.

Members looked with pride at their little church each time they passed. They saw it lacked one thing—a steeple with a bell. With money bequeathed to the church in the will of Catherine May (widow of Alexander May),18 a bell was purchased, but it lay for a long time in the churchyard, as there was no steeple in which to place it. After a time, A. G. Call built the steeple, and Alonzo Hewlett rang the bell on Sunday mornings, its fine deep tones being heard over field and meadow for miles around.

The history of the church and the history of the Masonboro community became almost as one. Members lived within a short radius of the church, and social events were often organized through the church.

When revival time came, people would come from as far as Burgaw. "Big Jim" Walton and his wife, Betsy, would make pallets upstairs in the big attic room for some of the people. Then he would go out in the sound and catch fish and dig clams. Baskets of fried fish and cornbread were carried to the revival meetings. It was said that people came as much for the food as for the preaching.

In 1926, while W. J. Hall was serving as pastor of both the Masonboro church and the Winter Park Baptist Church, the Masonboro church began a remodeling program. It changed not only the appearance of the building, but its direction as well. The building was shifted about from facing south on the old dirt road by Beasley's to facing east, looking toward the newly paved Masonboro Loop Road. Two wings were added to the sanctuary, and four classrooms at the rear, the whole structure bricked, and a shingled roof put on. This was done at a cost of $5,500. When it was completed, the dedicatory address was made by former pastor and son Myles C. Walton, who reviewed the history of the church and memorialized in eloquent terms its early members.

A disastrous fire in 1938, which consumed the dwelling of church clerk Rob Hollis, destroyed all church records. Even though all records were lost, the humble beginnings of the church were faithfully passed on by word of mouth, not always the most accurate way, but in this case the only possible source of information.

On January 1, 1939, at the first business session of the church after the fire, it was ascertained that there were 201 members on the church roll, 155 in Sunday School, 29 in Training Union, and 12 in the Women's Missionary Union. The church at that date had a deficit of $13.90, but the Sunday School had a balance of $19.70.19

On an adjacent hill lies the church cemetery, which was formerly the Hewlett family burying ground. The first grave here was that of Alexander Hewlett, who died September 23, 1843, at the age of forty. Alexander left a widow and a houseful of quite young children. At the foot of his grave John's wife, Eliza, planted a small oak tree, which today has grown to massive proportions and casts a wide shadow over many upthrust tombstones of the church cemetery. Easter Sunrise Services were begun in the cemetery in 1947 by the church's first full-time pastor, James H. Blackmore, and these services have continued to the present day.

The once little rural church has through the years grown and developed, serving an expanding suburb of Wilmington. With a present membership of 550, it reaches out to touch the lives of young and old, rich and poor, farmer and fisherman, businessman and professional man, and persons far beyond its community radius.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sermon by Myles C. Walton, delivered at the Masonboro Baptist Church, 1926, in which he related the best available facts on the history of the church. Some of these facts were of his own personal knowledge, some were obtained from Ethel Herrick Hewlett, who wrote them down in 1930 in a history of her own. Ethel Herrick Hewlett obtained her information from her father-in-law, Elijah Hewlett, son of John Hewlett.


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. First Baptist Church Minutes [State Archives, Raleigh, N.C. On microfilm] December 5, 1954; hereinafter referred to as the First Baptist Church Minutes.


9. Ibid.

11. Statements from Clarendon Sawmill to Elijah Hewlett, dated November 1871 and February 1872, for laths and ceiling materials bought for the church. Found among the private papers of Elijah Hewlett.

12. First Baptist Church Minutes, December 6, 1869.

13. ibid, January 3, 1870.

14. ibid. September — 1870.

15. Sermon by Myles C. Walton, 1928.

16. ibid.

17. Cape Fear Baptist Association Minute Book for the year 1878.

18. New Hanover County Will Books, Office of the Clerk, New Hanover County Courthouse, Wilmington, N.C., Will Book H, p. 260, will of Catherine May, probated January 23, 1900, which bequeathed $100 to the Masonboro Baptist Church.

19. Masonboro Baptist Church Minutes, January 1, 1939.


LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED.