

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALEXANDER CHAPEL BAPTIST
CHURCH

1889 - September 1984

The history of the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church in Leicester, North Carolina is intertwined with that of the Methodist Church in Western North Carolina. Methodism, because of its "itinerating" doctrines and its appeal to simplicity, endured well in the mountains of Western North Carolina. According to the history of Central United Methodist Church in Asheville, meetings of the Methodist Society were held in 1837 at Colonel James M. Alexander's farm, a few miles north of Asheville in a building known as "Alexander's Chapel". Blacks were allowed to attend these services, and to become members of the Society. Also, according to oral accounts, Blacks did attend a Methodist Society in Leicester before the establishment of a separate place of worship in the area.

Historically, Blacks were treated badly when they attended a white service. They were relegated to sitting on the floors or standing outside to listen to the sermons. Such treatment led to the movement for the establishment of separate churches for Blacks throughout the United States. The American church, that in 1880, had the largest Black membership of all, was the Methodist Church.

After the disagreement on the slavery issue and the powers of the General Conference, much of the influence of the Methodist Church was diminished after the split of the Church into the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The influence of the Baptist Church spread rapidly into the South and into Western North Carolina. It remained for the Baptists, the "rifle, axe, and saddlebag men" to come in and possess the land, particularly the more remote areas. The independence of the Baptist Churches and the independence of the Baptist preachers who worked at regular jobs through the week, were well suited to the rugged frontier conditions.

The preceding general historical overview of the western region of North Carolina and the background of the coming of the Baptist faith is necessary to know if one is to understand how Black residents of Leicester began Alexander Chapel Baptist Church.

The beginnings of the Alexander Chapel Baptist marked the birth of an independent Black denomination in the Leicester Township of Buncombe County. On June 28, 1889, the Trustees of the Colored Missionary Baptist Church were granted a parcel of land by John F. Alexander and wife of Leicester Township. In the deed recorded in the Buncombe County Courthouse, "one lot of land which, adjoined the land of the Colored District School House," was sold to the Trustees for one dollar. The names of the Trustees were: J.F. Alexander; Isaac Wells; H.E. Gudger; and Thomas McAfee. J.F. Alexander was a white relative of John F. Alexander who granted the land. At this time in history, whites often supervised the business affairs of Blacks. It is further stated in the deed, items of language which connote Feudalism. Feudalism was an ancient European practice in which a powerful landowner allowed peasants to hold and use the land contingent upon the peasants pledging their loyalty to him in return for the protection of the landowner. In return, John F. Alexander promised to defend the land, provided that it was used for a place of public worship at least once in five consecutive years - less the land revert back to the Alexander heirs.

It is not documented exactly when the church structure was built. From oral accounts, we know that it was completed before 1900. Also, according to oral history, the foundation was hand-hewn from logs by Thomas McAfee, later to become a minister of the church. Upon completion of the church, it was named "Alexander Chapel Baptist Church", in honor of the chapel on the Alexander estate where area Blacks worshipped in a structure for one of the first times in Western North Carolina.

Little is known about the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church in its early years - its congregation or its pastors. What is known, is rooted deeply in oral tradition. Evidently, the Church was thriving in its early years as a result of the sizeable Black population in Leicester who established it as their place of worship. According to the 1900 Census of the Leicester Township, there were 131 Black residents. Most of the adults listed their occupations as farmers, waswomen, or day laborers whose work places were within Leicester. In the same census, there was the exception of only one Black man listed as a

preacher - a Reverend Smiterson Wilson.

The passage which follows is one which was related by a ninety-one year old native born resident of Asheville who is Black. This lady visited Alexander Chapel Baptist Church in 1901 or 1902 at the age of eight or nine years. Her account is vivid and very informative as it pertains to the early physical characteristics of the Church:

When I was a girl living in Emma around 1901 or 1902, I visited the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church in Leicester. Our family moved to Emma (a community west of Asheville) as a result of my father having built a twelve room brick house there in 1900. To get to Leicester in those days, you had to go through Emma. The Love family had moved to Emma from Leicester. The Love family children were Robert, Myrtle, and Alice. We boarded the horse-drawn wagon which was laden down with food enough for all day for both horses and people. We headed off to the church in Leicester. The church building was a one room log structure. Inside, there were backless, wooden benches for the congregation to sit on, and hand-hewn pulpit furniture. I remember seeing an old pot-belly stove which was idle - it being summer and all. The preacher who delivered the sermon was Reverend Harve Gudger. His text was, "I Was Running From a Bear and I Met a Lion". The song they sang was, "Give Me That Old Time Religion".

This lady remembers at this time, she saw no cemetery around the church property. Only until later, as an adult did she notice one adjoining the church when she attended the funeral of a Reverend Manning in the early teens or twenties. She stated that Reverend Manning was another of Alexander Chapel's pastors.

There are approximately twenty-two minute books of the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church in existence. They span the years 1924 - 1965. In the minute books are names of some of the members of the Church: Roberts; Lowerys; Penlands; James; Wells; McAfees; Barnards; Halls; Whitsons; Loves; Stephens; Johnsons; Gudgers; Colemans; Polks; Clemmons; Ratcliffs; Doggets; Wilsons; Williams; Gillespies; Parks; Ramseys; and Paynes.

In 1907, another deed was conveyed on August 17. It was be-

preacher - a Reverend Peterson Wilson.

The passage which was related by ninety-between D. A. Alexander and wife and the Trustees of the Colored Missionary Baptist Church. This deed conveyed a parcel of land adjacent to the church. According to oral accounts, this land was acquired for the establishment of a church cemetery. It has been used for such from 1907 until the present. The Alexander Chapel Baptist Church and the cemetery have both been maintained through the collective efforts of the descendants of the Black families of Leicester.

The Black population in Leicester has dwindled over the years. The old ones who farmed for a living have died out, and the young ones have moved away to pursue employment in industry and in other sectors of the job market. There are only three families who are Black that remain. Alexander Chapel Baptist Church does not hold service on a weekly basis any longer. Yearly, on the second Sunday in September, descendants of the Black families in Leicester gather at the church for the Annual Homecoming of the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church. Everyone who comes brings a covered dish and plans to spend the entire day remembering the past and renewing old acquaintances. The holding of such an event is consistent with the terms of the deed to which the church property was made in 1889, which states that services be held within a span of five consecutive years.

Alexander Chapel Baptist Church is the cornerstone of Black Theritage in Leicester. It has, and still serves as the "navel cord" for Black natives of Leicester Township. It served as the unifying force of an entire community of persons. It is an indication of that community's pride in itself. It is a demonstration of one Black community's determination to direct its own destiny. It remains as a monument of the faith in God who "helps those who help themselves."

In the minute books are names of some of the following: Roberts; Loveys; DeRothea Goodman; Williams; Whitson; Loves; Stephen; August; 1984; Reuliff; Boygets; Wilson; Williams; and Payne.

In 1907, another deed was approved.

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15. Interview with Mr. & Mrs. Calvin McAfee by Dee Williams, July 1984.

 which states that services be held over a span of five consecutive years.
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Asheville District United Methodist Church, Asheville, North Carolina
 Central United Methodist Church, Asheville, North Carolina
 Mrs. Annie M. Bolden, Asheville, North Carolina
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 Mr. & Mrs. W.S. Roberts, Leicester, North Carolina
 Ms. Sandra Stover, UNC Asheville
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