

## HISTORICAL SKETCH OF OLD PALESTINE BAPTIST CHURCH

Old Palestine, first called Palestine Baptist Church, west of Nicholson, was the first church organized in what is now Pearl River, Hancock, and parts of several other adjoining counties in south Mississippi. The church was constituted with seven charter members in 1842, according to The Complete History of Mississippi Baptists (1904) by Leavell and Bailey. Charter members were Thomas J. Stockstill and wife; Joshua Stockstill and wife; John Penton and wife, and W. H. Varnado. Eld. Calvin Magee, pastor of churches in Pike county, Miss. and Washington Parish, Louisiana, assisted Bro. Varnado in the organization of the church, traditionally believed to have been in the home of Bro. and Mrs. Thomas J. Stockstill.

When Bro. W. H. Varnado first came to this area from Pike County about 1840, he preached in the home of Thomas J. Stockstill and other scattered settlers in the community before it was decided to establish a church.

William H. Varnado, the first missionary to old Hancock county, and most of the gulf coast area, for that matter, was born in South Carolina March 5, 1804. He moved to Pike County, Mississippi, with his parents by pack-horses about 1809 when only five years old. At the age of 30 years he made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord, and was baptized into the fellowship of Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Pike County. He soon afterward felt the call to preach the gospel and was licensed to preach about 1838 or '39. He was ordained to the full work of the ministry by Mt. Olive church on August 8, 1840.

Soon after the organization of the church, land, believed to have been given by Thomas Stockstill along the historic Columbia-to-Gainesville river road, was cleared and a rustic log house of worship was erected by the men of the community. In 1942 this writer heard some of the older members give a vivid description

Page 2

of the roomy log building and some of the early customs and activities of the church. These included Mrs. Sarah Wheat Slaydon, born in 1857, the daughter-in-law of Elder Andrew M. Slaydon, the first minister ever ordained in this country; "Uncle" James T. "Fiddlin' Jim" Stockstill, born in 1857; and Eld. Walter A. Burks, born in 1859, a former member and former pastor of Palestine. More recently their description was confirmed by Mrs. Ella Davis and Mrs. Letha Thigpen, life-long members who can well remember attending services in the large rustic log building which stood about 300 feet south of the Baptist Memorial marker on the south side of the lower Jackson Landing Road between Nicholson and Walker Hill near Jackson Landing. It was fondly described as being a rustic structure of modest proportions and starkly simple in its appointments. Being somewhat larger than most such structures of its time, it was somewhat typical of the early meeting houses of the frontier, with no ceiling inside. "Uncle Jim" Stockstill told of the seating which was of puncheon benches of logs hewn flat on one side with holes into the under side allowing the legs to be firmly inserted. The long, well selected, heart pine logs were skillfully hewn, and notched and pegged together at the corners. It was one single pen or inclosure facing northeast with a double-doors front entrance. There was another door on the east side toward the rear. It had six board-shutter window openings. The structure rested on large hand-hewn log sills on blocks. The roof was of hand-riven cypress boards. After some years, rough wide boards and batten were fastened up and down on the outside. The building was not painted. Actually, it needed none. ~~The materials were all pure heart.~~ This structure served the congregation for more than sixty years, or until about 1902 or 1903. A second frame building was constructed after this a short distance southeast of the original church site. A third building later. The present neat red brick structure, older members says, is the fourth building over these 135 years (1842-1977).

Unfortunately the church's early records have been lost. According to older members living about 1941 and 1942, Thaddeus B. Mitchell and his wife were the first people in Hancock County (including Pearl River and surrounding areas) to be baptized.

Page 3

They were baptized in Pearl River by Eld. W. H. Varnado into the fellowship of Palestine Church. There was no other Baptist church in this section of Mississippi at the time. Thadeus B. Mitchell was later ordained to the Gospel Ministry on September 24, 1860. He was the first citizen home-steader in what is now Picayune. He was a leader in organizing Antioch Church, Picayune's first church, about 1882. Other ministers beside A. M. Slaydon (the first man to be ordained in this area) who were ordained or held membership at Palestine were Thadeus Mitchell, Hardy Smith, Roland Burks and his son, Walter Burks.

The Hobolochitto Baptist Association was organized at (Old) Palestine Church in September, 1856, with messengers from seven churches - namely: Palestine, Bethel, Elem, Union, Gainesville, Zion Hill and Salem. Bethel, Elem and Salem ceased to exist within a few years. Eld. William H. Varnado was elected the first Moderator, and Eld. Andrew M. Slaydon the first clerk. Andrew M. Slaydon was baptized into the fellowship of Palestine Church in Pearl River by W. H. Varnado following a revival in 1855. He soon afterward surrendered to preach the gospel, was licensed, and in 1856 was ordained to the full work of the Gospel Ministry.

A group of members, including one of the Stockstill families, were granted letters to form a new church a few miles to the north in 1898. The new church was named New Palestine. Since that time the old church has been known as Old Palestine.

Pastors in addition to William H. Varnado, have included Andrew M. Slaydon, Thadeus B. Mitchell, before 1891. W. W. Mitchell was pastor in 1891-1893. Thomas Dossett, 1894-1896; and 1902-1911; C. N. Woodcock, 1898; J. Q. Sones, 1913-1917; Walter A. Burks, 1918-1920; A Jack Spiers, 1921-1922; Thomas Entrikin, 1923--1924; J. M. Gordon, 1925-1926; Charles Calhoun, in the late 1920's. These were followed by J. M. Stuart, L. N. Jones, J. W. Sones, G. W. Riley, Carl Sullivan, G. H. Byrd, Andrew McCain, Crawford Sullivan and James McCraney.

The old church historically cooperated in the work of Landmark Association Baptists - Hobolochitto, Peace and Union, State Line - with the exception of a few years during and after World War I when it cooperated with the "Convention" work (Pearl River County Association). It returned in 1921 to the old-line Baptist.

Page 4

It voted to withdraw from the Hobolochitto Association about 1946 because of a unfortunate falsehood brought against the Association by a pastor. The church now cooperates in the work of the Interstate and Foreign Landmark Missionary Baptist Association of America. This group is sometimes known as "Faithway" Baptists. This Association was organized about 1951. The movement was actually started about 1948 when a group of pastors and churches pulled away from the associational fellowship they had worked with for many years.

Prepared for the Mississippi Baptist Commission on History by  
L. S. Walker.

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