Sandy Creek Separate Baptist Church

by Warren Dixon

Sandy Creek Baptist Church is not only the oldest organized church in Randolph County, but also the oldest surviving religious structure.

Lefler and Newsome in their North Carolina, A History of a Southern State, say that "the most significant landmark in Baptist history was the founding of Sandy Creek Baptist Church". The Southern Baptist Convention, in marking the site of the original church, stated that "it is a mother, nay a grandmother, and great grandmother. All the Separate Baptists sprang hence..."

On November 22, 1755, Shubal Stearns and fifteen others officially constituted themselves into the Sandy Creek Separate Baptist Church on land that is now the corner of Sandy Creek Church Road and Ramseur Julian Road, overlooking Sandy Creek. Stearns, born in Boston in 1706, had come to the Sandy Creek area of what was then Orange County at the urging of friends who had told him of the dire need in the religiously barren backwoods.

Stearns immediately went to work and between November, 1755 and January, 1758, had baptized over 900 people, 590 of whom became members of Sandy Creek Church itself. In 1758, he formed the Sandy Creek Association, the oldest Baptist association in North Carolina and the fourth oldest in the nation. In 1769, a Sandy Creek Association meeting drew 1200 people to the tiny church. Before Stearns' death in 1771, 42 churches and 125 ministers had branched out from his parent church. C.B. Hassell wrote in 1829 that, "as of now, more than a thousand churches are existing which arose from this beginning".

Lefler and Newsome speak of the importance of the Separate Baptists in our nation's history: "The Baptists had become the leading opponents of the Established Anglican Church...their democratic organization and government, the local autonomy and religious democracy had a great appeal to the common people and a marked influence on the growth of political democracy".

In many congregations, the Separate Baptists allowed whites and blacks to worship together. One Anglican critic wrote of the Baptists in 1766 that "the most illiterate among them are their Teachers, even Negroes speak at their meetings."

But the Separate Baptist propensity for democracy almost spelled the end of Stearns' Sandy Creek Church. Many Baptists, along with their Quaker neighbors, became involved in the War of the Regulation, led in part by Stearns' one-time friend Herman Husband. In 1771, after the Battle of Alamance had ended in the Regulator's defeat, Sandy Creek Church membership fell from 606 to 15.

Undoubtedly heart broken, Shubal Stearns died on November 20, 1771, not knowing that the church he started would eventually spread throughout the South. Former Regulators fled to Tennessee and Georgia, establishing Baptist churches in remote parts of America, their beliefs planting the seeds for common people to revolt against Great Britain during the American Revolution.

The first meeting house built in 1762 was 26 X 30. Before this, services were held under a brush arbor or out in the open. The original site is marked by an obelisk at the edge of Sandy Creek's historic cemetery.

The present log meeting house is the third on the site and, according to Sandy Creek minutes, was built around 1802. In 1835 the Sandy Creek Baptist Church split, with members who supported the missionary movement of the Southern Baptist Convention leaving and forming a church near a school known as Shady Grove. Members who opposed the "new institutions of the day", among which were the Baptist State Convention, the Missionary Society, the Sunday School and other societies, withdrew from the Sandy Creek Association and now stand independent as the Sandy Creek Primitive Baptist Church. The Primitive Baptists own and maintain the old log meeting house and have restored it much as it was in the early 1800's.

In 1902, membership in the Primitive Baptist Church had dropped to only one member, Vedelia Jones. From about 1904 to 1909, no services were held. It is said, however, that she refused to accept the closing of the church and continued to come and sit on the steps of the old building each meeting day and sang the old hymns she loved so well.

In 1905, some of the descendants of those who had left, representing the "missionary side", returned to the original location and built the present Sandy Creek Baptist Church, just slightly west and down the hill of the old building.

In 1926, services of the Sandy Creek Primitive Baptist Church were resumed and, in 1929, the church was reorganized back into a church body and has continued ever since.

Today the two churches, Primitive Baptist and Missionary Baptist, stand alongside the site of the original church and share ownership and maintenance of the grave of Shubal Stearns. Around 1905 the original gravestone of Shubal Stearns, a native stone with "S.S. 1771" carved on it, was removed from his grave. Today a new monument marks his final resting place.

The first church building burned ca. 1785, and the second, built across the road, was blown down by a storm.

The existing 1802 building is of log construction and still houses the original stand or pulpit, pinned with wooden pegs, and some original benches. The 1802 meeting house originally had raked balconies across each end of the structure which were said to have been used for slaves. The

balconies were removed around 1936 but now have been restored by Hal Younts. There are now two doors and two windows. Even though the old church was weather boarded in 1870 and asphalt siding was added in 1953, today the siding has been removed to show the log construction.

Henry S. Strouope, historian at Wake Forest University, called the founding of Sandy Creek "the most significant landmark in North Carolina Baptist history in the eighteenth century". This site is not only a Randolph County Historic Landmark, but is also a National treasure and one that deserves to be preserved for posterity.

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