

# History of Turner Primitive Baptist Church

(Constituted July 13, 1866)



The history of Turner Primitive Baptist Church goes back to the 1860s when the war between the states took place. Georgia was overwhelmingly rural in this wire grass region which was one of the most sparsely populated areas in the state. The war had claimed 30% of all southern white males aged 18-40. Georgia wasn't even part of the union. That would not happen until 1870.

The road system for travel back then was mere trails in most places. It was rough on families and livestock traveling a lot of distance. Livestock had to be taken care of on the road the entire time the family traveled. Then rainy, cold weather had its effect. Most of those roads were carved out by landowners and a lot were old Creek Indian trails widened, such as Fire Tower Road.

Church locations were far apart and travel was by foot or horse and buggy. The nearest Primitive Baptist church was Emmaus Primitive Baptist established 1827 some twenty odd miles away. There was a post office there which was on a star route leading from Hawkinsville to Troupeville and was served once a week. It was the distributing point for a wide territory. People traveling such a distance often spent the night with other members along the way before attending church services the next day. Visitors slept in houses, barns, under wagons and the stars. People tell of nights when there was no walking room in their homes because of visiting brethren sleeping on the floor.

A three-day service called "Big Meeting" (usually Friday, Saturday and Sunday) was often held. People would prepare food for days in anticipation of goodly numbers of visiting churches to attend. Hogs were slaughtered and chickens killed and dressed along with much baking. At times,

lunch would be spread all three days. It was a grand time. People not only worshipped God, but also caught up on news and visited as they met.

They were very serious and reverent when it came to church attendance. Meetings were usually held once a month on Saturday and the following Sunday. Congregations collectively assumed responsibility of church discipline. Causes for expulsion from church reflected a heavy emphasis on saintly living. Members might be excluded for non-attendance, joining another denomination or failing to observe rules of the church decorum. Church minutes were explicit about an excommunicate's particular failure such as betting, drunkenness, adultery, failure to be baptized, etc. Every member assumed responsibility to keep an eye on the church flock. Charges could be brought against a member. The church, according to scripture, voted to send an elder or deacon to confront the offending member and ask for an answer of the charge before the congregation. He could deny or acknowledge his fault and ask the church's forgiveness. The congregation was indulgent in forgiving a repentant sinner who "made his acknowledgement." With this Godly discipline intact, a community was kept in line to a certain degree and was blessed to have a church.

So, the need of a closer gathering place for worship became very important to the people and community of this area. Thus in 1863, the community people began to congregate for church. The war being in progress at this time hindered the church from constituting. They met beneath a brush arbor on a farm owned by Judge Smith Turner. He was also a sheriff and state senator for Irwin County. He and his wife were members of New Hope Primitive Baptist Church and both are buried there. It is assumed Turner Meeting House got its name from this landowner and outstanding individual.

The charter members were: Malcolm and Rachel McMillan, Daniel and Margaret Griffin, Richard and Saphronia Gibbs and Louis Griffin. At least two of the organizers were in the war: Malcolm McMillan at age 51 and Richard Gibbs who came home minus a lung. Richard's wife was full blooded Cherokee native American.

In May of 1866, Malcolm McMillan applied for letters of dismissal for himself and wife from Emmaus Primitive Baptist Church to constitute Turner Meeting House. Elders Richard Tucker and Andrew Connell were present at Emmaus at this time. Brushy Creek Primitive Baptist Church minutes note that on June 23, 1866 as they met for conference, a letter was read from the Turner Meeting House requesting ministerial aid to assist them in constituting the church in which was granted. In July of 1866, ministerial aid was requested by Turner Meeting House to Emmaus Primitive Baptist Church to assist them in constituting the church of which they agreed. Thus Turner Meeting House was constituted July 13, 1866. John McMillan and Ryan Kinard built the church out of logs.

In 1870, Mr. Sampson Gibbs purchased the entire land, lot #274 of 490 acres from Judge Smith Turner. On January 7, 1876, he deeded 1 acre of land on which the church building was on to Turner Meeting House for five dollars. Later W.W. Gaskins, son of William and Jane McMillan

Gaskins, purchased land lot #274. He deeded 4 acres of land on the north side of the church for a cemetery on September 6, 1883. Also, on that date, G.W. Pope deeded ¼ acre of land to be used for church and cemetery.

In 1914, the home of the church clerk, John H. McMillan, was destroyed by fire which also destroyed the church records.

The first pastors were Elders Richard Tucker and Andrew Connell both serving the first year. The first deacons were Richard Gibbs and M.L. McMillan. Both are buried at Turner. Before 1914, the pastors were Elders Jacob Young, John Churchwell, James Gibbs, John McMillan, Joseph Mixon and Frank Smith.

Stories have been told of the thrill the young people would get on Big Meeting and Sabbath mornings when Elder Jacob Young would appear on the opposite side of the river on a fine white horse and someone would row the flat across to get the preacher and his horse. People for miles around would arise early, prepare big baskets of food, gather their families together and go marching to Turner Meeting House to take part in the singing of grand old gospel hymns and listen to the ministers of God expound the gospel at length. Then would come lunch hour and a great feast was spread under the trees and southern hospitality reigned supreme. When singing was heard in the church, the members returned for communion and foot washing at communion time.

In those days, people came from all directions in road carts, two wheeled carts drawn by oxen, on mule back, in wagons, on foot and in buggies. Many say they never missed a service though they had to walk many miles. They carried their shoes till they reached the river near the church. There they rested, bathed their feet in the water and pulled on their shoes and entered the church.

It is told of a severe drought in this area in the 1940s. Crops were withering and dying. Most all the church members were farmers. Livelihoods were greatly dependent upon rain. The community men, not just church members, decided to go to Turner Meeting House and pray for rain. Elder J.L. McMillan owned a truck with a long bed and readily drove around the community to pick up the men and their sons. The flatbed was filled from front to back and on both sides with legs dangling off the sides on the way to church. The day was hot with a clear blue sky with no clouds. The men and boys marched into the church with hats in hand and most of them barefooted. Each knelt on his knees and proceeded to pray until God would send rain. They prayed 3 ½ hours. Then all arose and went outside to view the sky. There was a tiny dot of a cloud in the far-off distance. All were of one mind and accepted the fact they hadn't prayed long enough. Back to the inside of the church they went falling on their knees once again. After 3 more hours of praying there was a clap of thunder and the rain came. They happily rode home in the rain on the back of the truck praising and thanking God for His mercy.

The church had all day sings on Saturday often after crops were in. So many people would come that the church house could not hold them. People sat in windows and outside with doors and windows open. From time to time the inside crowd would come out and swap with the outside crowd. This would go on all day. Lunch was spread at noon and everyone fellowshiped together.

It was told that the main song leader would go to the Tifton jail to get a prisoner who could play hymns well. He would be responsible for the prisoner and at the end of the sing he would take him back to jail.

Baptizing was conducted in the Alapaha River on the north side of the church. Usually, baptisms were held on Sunday before regular preaching service. They would meet early on the riverbank, sing a hymn and then proceed with the baptizing. They would then go in church, hold regular service and then extend a right hand of fellowship to the new member. Sometimes baptizing would follow immediately after a service and the right hand of fellowship would be extended on the riverbank. Either way it was a serious but joyful occasion.

One thing church minutes' show is that every year a day was set aside for fasting and praying for pastor-calling and God's blessings on the church for the new year. Many of the years they called two pastors for the entire year.

From time to time members would request funds from the church to help pay doctor bills and the church would oblige.

Mount Olive Primitive Baptist Church was organized as an arm of Turner Meeting House and was constituted in 1904.

At times, a day would be set aside for members to reason with one another and confess wrongs to each other that they might reunite as a body of worshippers as they had been. In 1918 they went to Emmaus Primitive Baptist Church to make such a confession.

A church decorum was adopted in 1925 which originally came from Hickory Springs Primitive Baptist Church.

In 1949 the church building was covered. Turner Meeting House began to be called Turner Church. Pastor-calling time changed from January to June.

More improvements began to be made as time went forward. In 1953 new windows, gas heaters and seats were put in the church. In 1954, a front porch and new steps were added and a discussion about changing the piano. Twenty-five new Progressive Primitive Baptist hymnals were purchased in 1955. In 1956, the church was electrically wired and painted, two more heaters were added along with venetian blinds. This was also the year the church voted to keep the church segregated. Voted by standing 100%. They also started having song practice every Friday night. In 1957, 25 more hymnals were bought. The light bill was \$1.03 per month.

During this year the associational meeting was held at Turner with 13 different elders preaching. Sunday mornings brought the men into the church (most with hats) to the front of the church placing their hats on wall hangers and seating themselves on either side of the pulpit. If this area was filled, they started filling the right front pews to the back. The ladies wore hats too but didn't remove them. The ladies and the children sat on the left side of the church from the front to the back. Singing would start with prayer mingled in. During prayer the men of the church knelt on

their knees with heads bowed. After arising from prayer, there would be a silence as if God Himself were stepping up to the pulpit. A holy hush would fill the church building as the pastor expounded the word.

Memories of southern hospitality was genuine and real among the congregational members and to guests as well. That was especially evident when lunch was spread outdoors on the south side of the church on a long lace fence wire table. Fence post were lined up in two rows. The wire was stretched from one end of the two rows to the other end. Food was laid out like a smorgasbord. Fried chicken, potato salad, chicken and dressing and dumplings, old-fashioned jelly cakes sometimes with 10-12 thin layers as well as the thin layer chocolate cakes were always on tab. A wash tub with a dipper was sat at one end of the table and was filled with tea and a big block of ice. There also was a bucket with dipper filled with water and a chunk of ice. Ladies always brought newspapers and sometimes used church fans to fan the food table from insects. Usually, four or five ladies would fan as others ate, then they would swap out. People stood to eat most of the time, using hoods of cars and tailgates of trucks.

At the end of church service, everyone stood outside with the women kissing each other on the cheek and men hugging and blessing each other. If dinner wasn't at church, the people invited everyone to come eat with them. It was nothing for Elder Leonard McMillan to bring home 3 or 4 families for lunch. They would have 3 tables of food. The men ate at the first table, the women at the 2nd table and children at the 3rd table. One man said he was about 12 or 14 years old before he knew a chicken had any part but a back to eat.

During the early years, very often visiting preacher brethren attended Sunday services. Especially because the churches only met once or twice a month, it gave preacher brethren and church members a chance to visit other churches. The preacher brethren were always invited to preach. At times as many as 2 or 3 would preach followed sometimes and sometimes not by the regular church pastor. Preferring your brother was definitely practiced.

Steps were added to the back of the church in 1961. In 1969, the well was filled in with dirt on the church grounds.

Up until 1969, the church cemetery had always been bare of grass and was kept hoed of weeds. Most grave markers were wooden or simple head stones with mounds of dirt swept up over actual graves themselves. At cemetery cleaning, which was held at least once sometimes twice a year, families came bearing hoes, shovels, brooms and wheelbarrows. From cleaning to cleaning, the rain and wind would wear down the mounds of dirt and they would have to be swept up in mounds again at each cleaning. Families brought lunches and worked most all day keeping the cemetery up. But in 1969, grass was planted in the cemetery. People began dressing up plots more and as time went on, they started mowing it. The next year in 1970, trees were cut down in the cemetery for more cemetery lot space.

In 1974, an attic fan was donated to the church and installed.

The year of 1978, Turner was without a pastor part of the time. Several pastors filled in until Licentiate Tom L. Henry was called and accepted the church. A letter was sent to Silver Leaf Primitive Baptist Church to have him ordained.

All through the minutes, Mother's Day dinners seemed to be big affairs, but in 1979 it was voted not to have Mother's Day dinner because mothers and grandmothers wanted to be home with their children.

In 1981, two new pair of blinds were added to the church. In 1982, communion date was changed from Sunday before Easter to Thursday before Easter. Also, it was voted to begin the annual meeting on Friday night instead of Saturday morning. There was a discussion on putting a new roof on the south side of church building. In October of 1982 was the first mention of serving lunch at the Ferry Lake Club House.

In March of 1985, two more ceiling fans were donated, and the inside of the church building was painted while the outside was washed.

In 1988, the possibility of closing the church doors because of the lack of attendance and few members (4) was brought up. It was voted to continue at that time.

In 1991, indoor/outdoor carpet was installed on the front porch.

In 1992, Sister Montecal Coker donated 25 hymnals in memory of her mother, Sis. Theta Gibbs.

They obtained permits for well and septic tanks as well as restroom pipes. It was announced at this time the church would hold services at 3:00 PM on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month until a pastor would accept the church.

In October 1993, the underpinning of the church building was completed. The brick was given by Sis. Montecal Coker.

In 1994, the church air conditioner was purchased.

Communion was held with Hickory Springs in April 1994 and 1995. More painting was done on the church and a lawn mower was purchased for the church yard.

In 1997, three more huge oak trees were cut from the cemetery.

In 1998, they agreed to check on vinyl siding and some painting. Trees were cut down that had been struck by lightning on the south side of the church.

In 2000, it was voted to recover front porch with indoor/outdoor carpet.

In 2004, it was voted to erect a metal building with a concrete floor and insulation. Also at this time, a cemetery policy was adopted of asking for a \$200 donation for each cemetery plot and placed in the cemetery trust fund. Contacts would be Bro. G-Hugh Tucker and Bro. Jimmy Dees.

October 2004, 50 folding chairs, eight tables and lights were donated for the social hall by Bro. J.L. McMillan. A long food table was given by Bro. Jerry Stoner. On October 9, 2004, the first meal was served in the new building. In November 2004 a refrigerator was donated to the church in memory of Elder Leonard McMillan by grandchildren.

In January 2005, cabinets were built and a stove donated to the social hall by Henderson Chapel.

In April of 2005, Elder Phillip Nichols accepted the call to pastor the church full time. Bibles were placed in the church in June of 2005 and bathrooms were installed.

In the latter years, there were continued improvements. In 2006, insurance was purchased for the church and social hall along with concrete for storage building and porch for social hall. The roof was repaired and handrails were added to back steps. In 2007, a handicap ramp was completed.

God was continually blessing this body of believers. They were continually giving to the needs of others, such as the pregnancy Crisis center and numerous individuals with medical needs. As the church gave, so did God.

In 2009, a new roof was added to the church and an air conditioner in 2011. Then came new ceiling fans and an ice maker in the social hall with a sound system coming in 2013 for the church building.

Elder Lavone Anderson accepted to call to pastor in 2015 but had to resign because of vocal cord problems. Elder Phillip Nichols accepted the call to pastor the church again early 2016.

During all this time, the church still adhered to its decorum and guidelines with removal of membership when necessary and strictly following the word of God no matter what. This is to be admired in the world today.

As the bible speaks of life being as a vapor, so have the years been with Turner Church. The building has stood in testimony of God's faithfulness. God has met with His people there for 150 years, blessing generations. The woodwork is engrained with God's word preached from its pulpit. Prayers of thanksgiving and seeking divine guidance have gone up through its timbers. Sacred communions and foot washing services have been God honoring through the years. Voices of praise through singing of hymns still echo the one true God. The hearts of its congregations have always felt blessed having been in the presence of God in the meeting place He chose to be called Turner Primitive Baptist Church.

Submitted by Sis. Rita McMillan Hall