

The History of Rayburn Chapel A.M.E. Church

By L. Jarod Pearson

Rayburn Chapel A.M.E. Church was built in 1889 and is the oldest African-American church in Cowan. The historical roots of this congregation can be traced back to the 1830's when a Methodist circuit rider came to evangelize the Cherokee Indians.

The early 19th Century was a period of nationwide revival known as the Second Great Awakening. The Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians made an extraordinary effort to evangelize the pioneer settlers in the Appalachian region and in the growing western settlements. Area revivals, also known as camp meetings or brush arbors, were organized for the preaching of the gospel and made way for churches to be built some years later.

During and after this period of revival, the Methodists commissioned circuit riders to venture into the wild frontier and minister to small populations dispersed throughout the Appalachian region. The Methodist circuit riders not only preached to white settlers but also preached to the indigenous populations, especially the predominate Cherokee.

Rev. Cummins, one such Methodist circuit rider, made his way up the Boiling Fork Creek in the 1830's and brought the gospel to Cherokee Indians living in the greater Hawkins Cove, Miller Cove, and Keith Cove areas. Rev Cummins planted a Cherokee congregation, presumably in Hawkins Cove where the Cherokee population was heavily concentrated.

The Reverend's two daughters, Ellen Jane and Elizabeth Cummins, married into a Cherokee family. William Coker, a Cherokee, married Ellen Jane Cummins while his brother, John, married Elizabeth Cummins. William and John both became lay Methodist ministers and William pastored the congregation founded by his father-in-law.

The sustainability of the church ended in 1838 when the Cherokee Indians left on the Trail of Tears. The Coker family was among thousands of Tennessee Cherokee residents that moved west to Indian Territory. According to Rev. Cummins' descendants, the church was turned over to the slave families living in the same area. We do not know how long the church operated after the departure of the Coker family. We can be certain that the church disbanded prior to the American Civil War.

Following the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, several former slave families, namely the Millers, Holders, and Shedd's, remained in Cowan. Some built homes in the Miller Cove area while industrialization prompted others to move into the middle of town. Cowan's largest employer, The Sewanee Furnace, designated a black neighborhood in the southeast quadrant of town where the railroad crosses Boiling Fork Creek. This neighborhood is affectionately known as "The Bottom" because of its low elevation.

The Millers, Holders, Shedd's and their extended relatives were among the families that built new homes in The Bottom in the mid-1880's. The need for a new church to serve the needs of a tight-knit and growing black community was realized immediately. The faith heritage of their immediate ancestors prompted the families in The Bottom to build a new Methodist Church.

A deed filed in Franklin County on November 11th, 1889 records the sale of an acre of land “on the waters of Boiling Fork, on the South side of the N + C R.R. + adjoining the town of Cowan”. The land was sold by a Mr. Joseph Holder to a Col. Wiley Rayburn for a sum of twenty dollars. A wood frame church was built on this plot of land in 1890 that became the home of Cowan's first black congregation. The congregation affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an African-American denomination founded in 1816. The church was named Rayburn Chapel to honor Col. Wiley Rayburn for his generosity.

The African Methodist Episcopal church in The Bottom had a successful start, but the location in a flood-prone area was an ongoing problem. The church was completely surrounded by flood waters in each and every downpour. Seeking higher ground, the trustees of the church agreed in 1906 to purchase a small piece of land about 150 feet from Col. Rayburn's property. The property owner, Mr. W.M. Bryson, issued a promissory note to the church receiving \$33.25 as a down payment with the remaining \$66.75 payable on May 30th, 1906. The church deed says that the note was paid in full and exactly on time. Mr. Bryson released all claims to the property on May 30th, 1906 (even though the instrument was not registered with the county until August 29, 1909).

The church building was moved that same year from its original location to the newly acquired plot of land. From that point onward flood waters were no longer a problem. In fact, the relocated church served as a temporary flood shelter several times over the years whenever the creek rose. Some of the families who still live in The Bottom remember waiting in the church for flood waters to clear, sometimes for days at a time!

The wood frame church was small by all measures, but it housed a vibrant congregation through most of its history. There are many fond memories of revivals, gospel singings, pot-luck dinners and Easter egg hunts at Rayburn Chapel. There were Sunday school classes and soft ball teams as well. Looking back on these fond memories one has to wonder how a small facility could hold so much!

To create additional space the trustees acquired a piece of land behind the church from Mrs. Mattie Amacher and Mr. James Solomon on May 17th, 1982. Thereafter a slab of concrete was poured on the northwest corner of the new property as part of a plan to move the historic building. The new location would give the church easier access, more parking, and room for future expansion. The move never took place and the reason was never fully explained.

The 1980's proved to be an extremely difficult time in Cowan history and very poor timing for Rayburn Chapel's growth plan. Cowan's two largest employers – Marquette Cement and Genesco Shoe – closed forcing dozens of Cowan families to relocate. The economic decline and population decline took a terrible toll on local churches and Rayburn Chapel was no exception. By the late 1980's almost all of the younger families that supported Rayburn Chapel had moved away. In subsequent years the church dwindled as older members passed away.

Weekly services at Rayburn Chapel ceased sometime in the mid-1990's. The last scheduled service was held in the fall of 1997. In December 1998 all utility services were cancelled and the

building was quietly abandoned. Following the church's closure the simple, handsome structure fell to vandals and varmints and some years later was completely covered in vegetation.

Seeing the need to preserve Rayburn Chapel, Cowan Ministerial Association partnered with the 13th Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to repair the building, maintain the property, and commemorate the church's beautiful history. The two organizations formed the Rayburn Chapel Preservation Society in June 2008 for this very purpose.

Rayburn Chapel's Inconsistent Naming Convention

One of the more interesting quirks about Rayburn Chapel is that it did not have a consistent naming convention like most other churches in the area. We know that the name Rayburn Chapel was given to commemorate Col. Wiley Rayburn, but we do not know when the name was officially adopted. The earliest church documents we have found so far refer to the congregation merely as the "A.M.E. Church" but do not give a specific name. In fact, the name Rayburn Chapel was not well known or well publicized because the church did not have a road sign like most other churches in the community. A local Cowan newspaper, the Cowan Bell, once referred to the church erroneously as the "Cowan C.M.E. Church". When the property acquisitions took place in 1982, one document refers to the church as "Raybun Church Methodist Chapel" while the other says "Raybun Chapel A.M.E. Church" with the name misspelled in both cases. When the preservation effort first began, it seemed most Cowan residents never knew the church existed. Some locals knew of a "little Methodist church in The Bottom" but did not know the name of it, if it ever had one! After a few conversations with elder members of the black community, the church's official name was finally confirmed as Rayburn Chapel A.M.E. Church.

Other Interesting Facts about Rayburn Chapel

Mr. and Mrs. Jinks Hartsfield have fond memories of Rayburn Chapel. Mrs. Hartsfield pointed out that, in her youth, there were only two black churches in Cowan - Rayburn Chapel A.M.E. and Mt. Sinai Baptist. Mt. Sinai held services on the first and third Sunday of each month while Rayburn Chapel held services on the second and forth Sunday. It was common practice in those days for families to attend both churches. "The truth is," Mrs. Hartsfield shared, "we really didn't know who was Baptist or who was Methodist because we were all in church together every Sunday."

Mrs. Annie Shedd was one of Rayburn Chapel's most prominent members, and she was a descended from the families that inherited the former Cherokee Methodist church. Mrs. Shedd taught the children's Sunday School at Rayburn Chapel through most of her adult life. She was also a well-known public school teacher in Franklin County both before and after school integration.