

Historic Rural Churches

PINE HILL CHRISTIAN CHURCH

ARTICLE BY CLAYTON H. RAMSEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE ROBINSON

Hidden in a pine forest off Livingston Road in South Georgia's Brooks County stands a work of courage, humanity, and hope that emerged during the dark years when the nation laid its sons as a "costly sacrifice upon the altar of freedom." This work of courage is not a marble statue of a heroic figure or a bronze plaque commemorating a significant historical event. It is a simple, primitive saltbox-style church with a squat steeple, four square pillars, and a double door entrance. African-Americans who were no longer confined to slave galleries in white churches, or pushed to the periphery of plantation property, or denied the privilege of church attendance entirely, built Pine Hill Christian Church as a meeting place: their own spiritual home, refuge of a new age and the fulfillment of a promise of new beginnings.

Pine Hill took shape in the crucible of the American Civil War. By the end of the war the Union had been preserved, but the culture of the South had been decimated. Reconstruction was by no means a benign process. Southern slave owners were faced with ruin, and newly liberated slaves were confronted

with the challenges of freedom in a land devastated by conflict. Adapting to the notion that all men, black and white, were created equal was a course fraught with difficulties.

For two hundred and fifty years Africans had been imported as chattel property, bringing with them elements of their native religious practices. In America, they were exposed to Christianity—usually some variety of Protestant Christianity—on Southern plantations. Some masters required their slaves to attend Christian services in separate galleries, anticipating the ministers would draw on Biblical passages in their sermons that affirmed the inviolability and necessity of the master-slave relationship. Others refused their slaves access to religious services, fearful their religious education might encourage ideas of liberty or insurgence.

Whatever the enforced policy on any given plantation, the religious impulse of the slaves was not crushed by their subjugation. Some embraced Christianity genuinely and some to gain favor with their masters. Others practiced a mixture of what they encountered in America and what they brought





African-Americans, a radical practice at the time. The first exclusively African-American congregation within the Stone-Campbell ministry was the Colored Christian Church, established in 1834 at Midway, Kentucky. The oldest African-American Disciples church in Georgia was formed in 1857 at Bethesda, in Washington County, by Thomas Mercer Harris.³

By 1862, there were some 7,000 members of African-American Stone-Campbell churches in five states. By 1876, that number had ballooned to 20,000 in fifteen states.⁴ The reason for

with them. Still others met secretly, sharing worship with illiterate slave leaders. And whether allowed to worship or not, many slaves found solace and release in the spiritual expressions of music, dance, and animated preaching, all practices that came to define what can only be called the “African American Church tradition.”

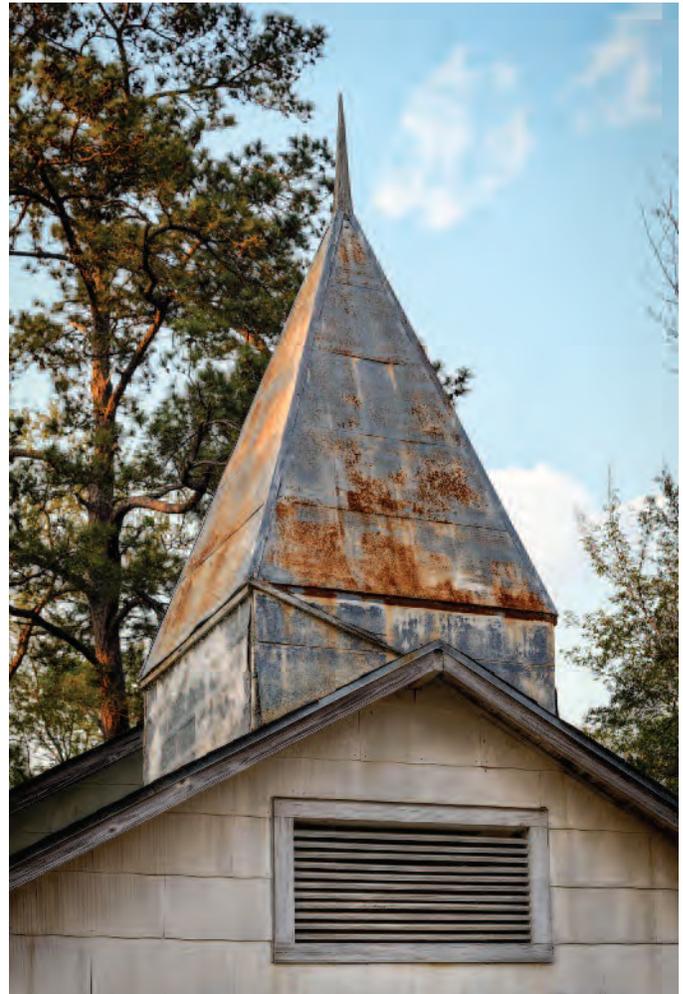
That is one arc of this story: the struggle and faith of African slaves over the course of centuries to endure the severity of restrictions while searching for a source of spiritual strength.

The other arc involved the Stone-Campbell Movement, centered in Kentucky and Pennsylvania in the 1830s. This Protestant movement strived to emulate the New Testament Church, relying upon Scripture and emphasizing unity and ecumenism. Named for Barton W. Stone and for Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son, this movement gave birth to the “Christian Association” of churches, including Disciples of Christ. Followers of this movement used the reason of Enlightenment philosophers to distinguish essential spiritual practices like weekly communion, baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and the autonomy of local congregations, from the non-essential, like the holy kiss, foot-washing, and the use of deaconesses in church governance.¹

Both the story-arcs of African slaves and those of the Stone-Campbell Christians surprisingly converged within this little church in the Georgia pines, a structure significant not for its magnificent architecture but for the drama enacted within its walls, indeed for the very fact of its existence.

According to records dating to 1820, African-Americans were involved with both of the earliest congregations of the Stone-Campbell Movement: the congregation at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, and the Brush Run congregation in Pennsylvania.² The founders of the Movement wished to overcome every obstacle to free and open worship, and that included racial barriers. The Church should be big enough for all, they taught, and both Stone and the Campbells held Bible classes for

this significant growth appears to have been the indefatigable evangelistic work of African-American preachers. Some were fortunate to have the backing of white religious associations, like the Georgia Christian Missionary Convention, or to be the recipients of the philanthropy of wealthy benefactors, like



Emily Harvey Tubman of Augusta. Most, however, received either a pittance or no external financing at all. For these poor souls the so-called “Nashville Committee” arranged to extend a benevolence fund, established in 1866 for the destitute, to include needy Disciple preachers a year later.⁵

Although there is some uncertainty about the date of the founding of Pine Hill Christian Church, ranging from 1861 to the early 1920s, the strongest evidence seems to point to a date that falls between the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and toward the end of Reconstruction in 1873.⁶ E.L. Whaley, Joe Corbett, and George Linder have all been proposed as founders of the church.⁷ Dr. W.H. Hooker, Madison Love, and James S. Havron, all Tennessee transplants, were also known to have worked in Brooks County during these years.⁸ In the early 1870s Thomas Mercer Harris organized African-American Disciples of Christ churches into a state convention to help guide evangelistic efforts.⁹ Perhaps Pine Hill was one result of such focused endeavor.

The historical record is filled with gaps, making definitive conclusions difficult. The church building and two neighboring churches are the only physical evidence that is certain. Pine Hill Church and two white churches, Grooverville Methodist and Liberty Baptist, provide clues to the genesis of Pine Hill. Liberty had a slave gallery, indicating segregated but simultaneous worship. Grooverville did not, suggesting either separate worship at different times in the same building or outright exclusion of African-Americans from Methodist worship on the property.

If slaves were worshiping in the area before their emancipation, it probably would have been at one of these two churches, with their white overseers. As such, it is tempting to believe that when the time came to start an African-American congregation nearby after the watershed year of 1865, one or both provided freed African-American congregants with financial support and supervised oversight, even if black evangelists funded by outside sources actually started the church. But that is purely speculative.

And there are factors that might belie such an assumption of support. At the 1868 Georgia Baptist Convention meeting in Augusta, Prof. J.P. Boyce of Greenville, South Carolina, called the Disciples denomination “rank heretics” in his address to the delegates.¹⁰ This sentiment did not seem to be unusual among Baptists.

If there were such a widespread disdain for the Disciples, then a

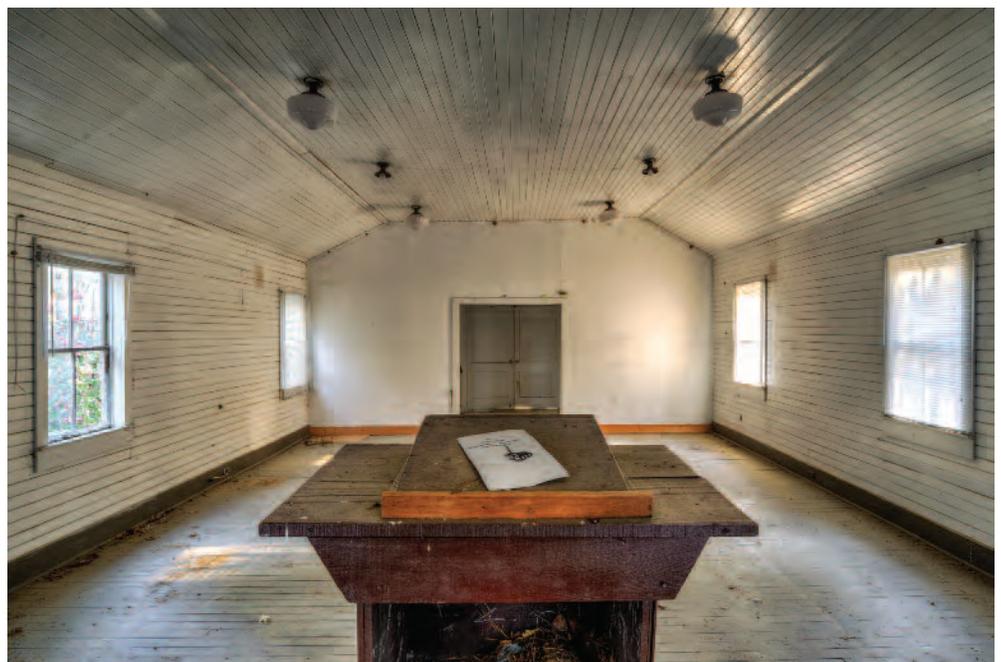
formal Liberty sponsorship of Pine Hill would seem unlikely.

And if Grooverville Methodist did not bother to install a gallery for slaves when it built the church in 1857, then it might also be unlikely that they would have made substantial provision for emancipated slaves.

Many newly liberated slaves formerly associated with these two white congregations no doubt became the core membership of Pine Hill. Sheer geography suggests so. But the extent of formal support, if any, from these established churches remains uncertain. Following emancipation, Georgia experienced a loss of \$272 million worth of investment in the slave “industry.” Combined with the death and maiming of 40,000 Georgians during the war, it would be challenging for defeated whites in rural South Georgia to fund an autonomous church for men and women that recently had been enslaved.

While we might not know how to place Pine Hill on the spectrum that runs from “mission church of Grooverville and Liberty” to “absolutely independent church,” we can rightly infer that it tends to settle closer to the latter, based on their self-designation. Since Pine Hill did not take the name of either the Baptist or Methodist denominations to signify its affiliation, even if there had been a contribution of freedmen members, money, or direction from either of the white churches, the predominant influence must surely have been from the Stone-Campbell tradition of Restorationists. One might suspect it was even a point of pride and fierce independence that Pine Hill was both Disciples of Christ and exclusively African-American, both minority groupings in this part of the South.

The existence and possible connection between these three historic rural churches in Brooks County, two white, one black, three different denominational affiliations, is a tantaliz-





ing historical mystery. If the relationship between them wasn't one of full support, it was at the very least peaceful coexistence. In those years of turmoil, upheaval, and lack, that is noteworthy: an achievement worthy of celebration as a story of hope for any age divided by identities and affiliations.

Pine Hill Christian Church did not wither away in the nineteenth century. It survived to see the post-Reconstruction years and no doubt participated, as resources allowed, in the push for "evangelism, conventions, and education" that defined the Disciple Movement at that time. By 1900 there were 307 Disciples of Christ churches in the South, with 33,145 members (a majority of the 56,300 members in the entire country).¹¹ Pine Hill kept preaching, worshiping, serving, and giving through the establishment of the African American National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC) in 1917 as an auxiliary of the International Convention, and through the formation of the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1969, when African-American congregations formally joined the mainstream of Disciples of Christ life and ministry. They even saw the day in 1989 when seventy African-American Disciples of Christ members met in Indianapolis to form an African American Network to "affirm, share and improve" the lives of those who participated in the rich history of African-Americans in the movement.

The Rev. Carl M. Dasher was the last known minister at Pine Hill in the 1990s, more than a century after the founding of the church. According to the *Disciples of Christ Office of Year Book and Directory*, the church closed briefly in 1987 and was recognized as an active congregation again by the Convention in 1992. They filed their last report in 1995, and officially shuttered this historic church in December 2005.

Living witnesses to the ministry of Pine Hill are scant and quickly disappearing. Lorene Everett, whose mother, Willie Mae "Mother" Everett, was a member of the church for more than 60 years, remembers meeting there every third Sunday for services. The building didn't have running water or bathroom facilities. Worshipers brought pitchers of ice water down the dirt road from a nearby house to have something to drink. Henry "Snap" Whitfield, son of a sharecropper who lived on

the property, remembers going to primary school in the church building in the 1930s. These are two of the voices left of the many lives touched by Pine Hill over the decades. When they pass, so will the memories of this place.

Pine Hill Christian Church could not boast of a membership roll in the thousands. Its treasury was probably never full and its programs were no doubt limited. But the fact that the people began worshiping together here, having survived the ravages of war, the destitution and violence of Reconstruction, the humiliations of Jim Crow, and the uproar of the Civil Rights movement, to pass into the twenty-first century, was a notable achievement.

Pine Hill remains as an emblem of the best of human impulses in an age known more for division and destruction than for faith and harmony. Its history has a beautiful ending that could not possibly have been anticipated at the beginning of the story. But that is what makes this building, and the people who worshiped here, so remarkable. While most of the details have been lost to time, the message of hope and inspiration that generations of believers at this church radiated have rippled through the community and the years. What began in war, ended in peace. What started in slavery led to freedom of body and soul. And truly that is a story to celebrate.

For more photos of Pine Hill Christian Church and many other historic rural churches, visit www.hrcga.org. ■

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Endnotes

1. "A Brief History of the Stone-Campbell Tradition," Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Disciples History, <http://www.discipleshistory.org/history/brief-history-stone-campbell-tradition>, accessed July 24, 2017.
2. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 11.
3. J. Edward Moseley, *Disciples of Christ in Georgia* (St. Louis, MO: The Bethany Press, 1954), 187.
4. Hap Lyda, *A History of Black Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in the United States Through 1899*. PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University. (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1973), 77.
5. Moseley, *Disciples*, 208.
6. Lyda, *History*, 47.
7. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 12.
8. Moseley, *Disciples*, 223.
9. Lyda, *History*, 108.
10. Moseley, *Disciples*, 219.
11. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 13.