

Liberty, Arkansas

By: Lenora Anderson Kelly as presented to the Ouachita/Calhoun Genealogical Society at a meeting, September 2012

The Liberty Methodist Church is located at Liberty, Arkansas in Ouachita County. It was established in 1848 as a Methodist Protestant Church by the Reverend John Livingston Wells, a pioneer of Methodist Protestant Churches. He organized all the M.P. Churches in South Arkansas.

According to old letters and land deeds the early church was composed mainly of the Smith and Wells families and their connections. The Smiths came into the area in the early 1840s and the Wells soon after. Mrs. Mary Ann Smith, by then a widow, was the earliest church leader. She was known as a devout Christian and a "shouting Methodist." It was said "she could shout down a good meeting any time." Her sons and daughters entered the church at an early age and John William and Francis Marion remained active members until their deaths.

John and Susan Anderson Burns and Sam Haltom donated land to build a church and school. Early known members came from the Wells, Neely, Smith, Wilson, Haltom, Shirey, Clawson, Petty, Myatt, Burns, Sims, and Cramer families. No doubt there were many more but the court house in Camden was destroyed twice and our records are incomplete.

This area had been populated since the Middle Ages when the aboriginal Indians lived here. The later tribes included the Quapaws, part of the great Sioux Nation. By the 1700s fur traders and explorers had moved upriver from Monroe and white settlers followed, some bringing their slaves to the rich farm lands. Frenchport and Ecore Fabre were major trading posts along the river.

When the Rev. Wells arrived he found a community anxious for a church. At the beginning they met in a one room log school house that stood on the old Caleb Gipson place near the big spring that provided water around there.

There is no record as to why the church was moved to its present location but the major wagon roads changed and this was a more central location. A school and a two story church were erected facing the East. The top floor was leased to a Masonic order for their meetings. In the winter of 1865-1866 Albert Wells moved here from Columbia County and became church leader, succeeding Mrs. Mary Smith. He remained leader until his death.

Sometime in the late 1800s after the Civil War ended, the church and school burned and the present house was built. John F. and Susan Burns added more land to the church holdings to accommodate the church, cemetery, and school. Mr. Vernon Myatt, a carpenter who built churches, was an active member here and he along with Jack Sims and Isaiah Smith constructed the present building. The ship lap lumber was donated by I. T. Wells, a member who owned a saw mill in Kirkland. No doubt the entire membership gave of their resources and labor to complete the task. Few structural changes have been made over the years and the original pine floor still remains.

In 1924 J. E. and Sue Anderson and W. A. Smith donated more land to the church and school. The old Liberty School consolidated with Louann in the early 1940s and the building was moved. In 1939 Liberty Church voted to merge with the Arkansas Methodist Conference which later became the United Methodist Church.

The congregation remained active for several years but by 1978 such a few were left Liberty had to withdraw from the Conference of the United Methodist church. They managed to remain their church worship with extension pastors until Winston Roden came to preach in 1982. With such determined members, the church has remained strong, adhering to the scripture, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Liberty," I Corinthians 3:17