

**THE HISTORY  
OF  
BETHLEHEM  
BAPTIST CHURCH**

**FROM 1865 THROUGH 1941**

## **THE HISTORY OF BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH**

**FROM THE 130TH ANNIVERSARY BOOK**

When you search the Church records you would find that 4 miles west of Rappahannock Academy and 11 miles north of Bowling Green stood Bethlehem Baptist Church from 1865 until May 31, 1941. The Army had placed a sign on a tree to mark the spot. The sign read "Bethlehem Baptist Church, one of the first Colored Churches in America." Today, in the midst of the Fort A. P. Hill Base in CAROLINE County, Virginia, on a dusty dirt road, there are only near-buried foundations and the worn mound of church steps on the church grounds to say Bethlehem Baptist Church was here among the towering trees.

"In the year 1865, the old patriots began to work on the project of organizing one of the first colored churches in Caroline County, Virginia. This was a first step toward independent Negro Worship. [The Colored people of Caroline County-slave and free blacks - had been allowed to worship in the gallery of the Baptist Church of Caroline.] (This was done by most white Baptist Churches)After having come through slavery, these free people thought it best that they establish a place to worship in which to thank God for His goodness"

In 1865 Rev. Richard Henry Washington Buckner gave one acre of land and a brush church was built. The first service was held in this brush arbor in June, 1865. The congregation names the church Bethlehem. As cold weather approached a log cabin was built to replace the brush arbor. Rev. Buckner helped the church until they ordained a minister for themselves. Rev. John W. Pendleton (1865 - 1897)

The Rev. John William Pindleton, born in 1824, was a slave in Caroline County. He was taught to read and write by his owners. He accompanied his master to war during the Civil War. He was one of the organizers of Bethlehem and was ordained to the ministry on June 12, 1870. Rev. Pendleton was the founding ministers to many churches in Caroline, Spotsylvania and Orange Counties. In addition to Bethlehem, some of these were Mt. Dew, Zion Grove, and Second New Hope.

At this time the spirit of the church was kept alive by the weekly prayer meetings. Felling the spirit of progress, the members began the sacrificial task of erecting the first frame church. Its membership was 416. The work of the church other than to serve God, was to do extensive missionary and educational work. The money for this task was raised by free will offerings.

On the 23rd of November, 1897 the old warrior dropped his mantle and the great work he had started passed to another.

Courthouse records show that in 1870 the trustees paid \$10 for a second acre of land to build a frame church. In 1893 the trustees paid \$20 for three more acres of land for Bethlehem and in 1910 trustees borrowed \$800 (with \$5 down) to build a new Church.

## **BETHLEHEM CHURCH (CONT.)**

A building program was initiated. According to the 1933 Church history the great task of this period was the erection of (the then) present structure. A beautiful spacious church was erected. The church was a white frame building with green shutters. It had a slate roof, a steeple, bell, stained glass windows, double doors, a red carpet runner down two wide aisles that separated three sets of long pews, gas lamps and two huge potbelly stoves. The choir loft and amen corner were down front near the pulpit. A black iron fence surrounded the building and large oak trees shaded the churchyard. A curvy dusty dirt road led to the church site in rural Mica, Virginia. The cemetery and housing for the carbolic mixture to fuel the lights were to the rear.

The members were inspired and \$999.44 was raised in one year. (One thousand dollars in the 1920 is equivalent to almost ten times that amount in 1969). It is said that missions and educational activities raised more funds than ever before in the history of this people. Taxation seemed to be the favored plan of raising finance at this time. To encourage his willing and struggling people, "Work Together" was the church motto. The members responded and rounded out a very successful period in the religious history of the Bethlehem Community. In May 1921 the Church was insured for \$3,600 and had a metal roof, brick chimney flues and a portable organ. The organ was insured for \$1000.00.

The membership rolls show 416 members in the 1880's, 316 members in 1898 and 361 in 1900. Mt. Dew, Zion Grove and other churches were founded out of the membership to more conveniently serve the people. Sometimes the membership rolls fell but the work continued, even rose to new heights.

Bethlehem was attending to the Lord's business at home and abroad. The records show educational efforts and home and foreign missions donation to the sick, poor and widowed; participation in the Mattaponi Convention, The Virginia State Baptist Convention, organization of auxiliaries and neighborhood clubs; and the faithful giving of the membership. A dime, a Quarter, maybe an dollar given by members and rallies are recorded by name for every month and every year - for every member. Bethlehem helped to found the Mattaponi Association - an Association of African-American Baptist churches in Caroline and surrounding counties. The Church always sent delegates to the General Baptist Convention. The church always supported foreign missions, local missions, home missions. Every auxiliary know to functional Baptist churches was organized and flourished in Bethlehem - the Sunday School, BYPU, Missionaries, sectional clubs, Usher Board, Brotherhood, choirs and music programs.

In 1941 a bombshell fell on Bethlehem - the United States government decided to take 70,000 acres in Caroline County Virginia to create an army Camp—A. P. Hill. The Church and its members had to make plans for moving out. Bethlehem was the only Church, black or white, in the area to keep its doors open. The Mattaponie Association voted to disband Bethlehem and give members their letters, but a faithful few members, "with hope and faith in the Lord Jesus

## **BETHLEHEM CHURCH (CONT.)**

**Christ, stood firm in their conviction that the Bethlehem Baptist Church would have a new resurrection, that its name and past God-related works would not be defeated," prayed and decided to continue.**

**The government purchased the Church for \$800.00 and ordered everyone out of Area 1 by May 31, 1941. The Church was physically disassembled and the timbers, windows and other furnishings were packed. The pews were for sale. A buyer was found and arrived to take them. The ladies of the Church refused to let the pews be released to the buyer. The Church paid the buyers travelling expenses. The pews were packed with the other furnishings. They were used in the "new" Bethlehem until the most recent renovation. The Church had two Church Bibles. One Bible had been given by Brother Massey Robinson. One was given to Trustee Robert Jones in recognition his having served on the Trustee Board longer than anyone else. At his death in 1972 his tenure of serves was 44 years. The cemetery was moved by the government very hastily (in the middle of the night) to avoid the distress many members would have experienced had they watched the process. Mount Lawn, in Woodford, Virginia was given by the government as a substitute cemetery for all the black churches that were displaced. Brother James "Eddie" Taylor was a member of the committee that oversaw the moving and placing of the graves and headstones. Some members personally moved the grave of members of their family.**