HISTORY OF OLD LIBERTY CHURCH
Compiled by
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"A Lost Arcadia" written by the late Walter A. Clark and published in 1909 is a delightful story of the development of a community, Brothersville and its peoples, only a few miles west of this spot. He collected a lot of information about most of the families and made the statement that the Rhodes family was connected with more of these early settlers than any other family. For years this challenge has hung over my head—to follow these thru to the present time 56 years later. Clark was unable to get but very very little accurate information about Aaron Rhodes who was my ancestor and whose property was at the 19 mile post of the Walker Bridge Road. I have spent much time the last several years seeking records in Court Houses, family bibles and notes and old family cemeteries, many of which have been deserted for a hundred years or more.

Here may I urge each of you to be on the lookout for and pick up any copies of this book which is out of print. I have had inquiries about it from Texas, California, Salt Lake City, Utah and other places. It is of particular interest to you because it is the first book I have found that gives a reasonably accurate account of this Old Liberty Church. My tie into this church is when my father married Feb. 18, 1885 my mother whose grandmother had raised her since he owned much since her own mother died when she was 8 months old. This grandmother was Sam Collins' youngest child born Aug. 2, 1794 married Oct. 24, 1812 William Matthews Jr. and after his death Jan 9, 1821 she married his brother Aquilla Jr. July 20, 1822. They had 8 children, my grandfather Dr. Lewis Daniel Matthews being one of the youngest born Moh. 2 1829.

Much of the information I shall give you today comes from my mother's notes and her grandmother, together they left voluminous material much of which I had gone over with her during her life, having lived to 1947. Suffering a stroke of paralysis 3 years before her death which destroyed her right hand that at age 80 she had to teach herself to write with her left hand. Struck at a time when she was busily engaged in compiling and compiling her collected data.

In the last revision of Francis Asbury's Journal and Letters edited by Dr. Elmer T. Clark of Nashville, the Methodist Publishing House published by the Abington Press the foot note explanation of the "S.C. Church" of the earlier editions referred to in Asbury's Journal is so far from the truth to be ridiculous were it not more tragic to make such a glaring error. He evidently had never heard of A Lost Arcadia or made any local inquiry to ascertain the facts.

From these Journals and Letters we find that Asbury arrived in this country Aug. 7, 1771 and took up residence in Baltimore which he always used as his headquarters. His first years were spent in traveling and preaching in the northern states, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania with an occasional trip into Virginia. After several years he began to move southward and on April 1, 1783 "We crossed the Savannah at the forks of the Savannah and the Broad" (Site of Old Petersburg now inundated). He stag in this region until the 11th when he left for S.C. which he also left on the 20th and went to Rutherford N.C. Page 627 of these Journals for 1790 states "Monday Moh. 1 we crossed at Augusta in Georgia and rode to Sandy Creek Church (Elmer Clark's translation of the "S.C. church" of previous editions). I had some enlargement on Luke 4, 18, 19. Thence we proceeded to Briar Creek." Foot note on this page says "The Sandy Creek Church was the first one in Richmond County. Its exact location is not known. The church at Briar Creek was on a bluff near the great
great Briar Creek Swamp and was probably the first in Burke County. It was later turned over to the negroes (Reference Smith's Georgia Methodism 410). Whatcoat says they rode to old Sandy Run Church on Nov. 21. Thus ended the footnote. Asbury recorded "Tuesday 2. I preached in an old church near Waynesborough; at Thomas Wyche's in the evening; and next day at Galphin's, Old Town. The house was open and the day cold."

Let's analyze the above. Sandy Run Creek is a small stream flowing into Briar Creek west of Keysville. The area was uninhabited by white people in 1790, there was no church in that area until after the civil war when the Baptists built a small church beside a mill pond on this creek about a mile south on U.S. Hwy. 1. It was burned about the turn of this century and was never rebuilt. My mother's side of the family settled in the northwestern end of Jefferson County in 1791, William Sr. and Aquilla Sr. Matthew in and around the present town of Matthews about 5 miles further south of Sandy Run Creek, 30 miles from Augusta. The editor refers to "White: Georgia Methodism", Walter Clark explored the ideas advanced by White and also those of George Smith who tried to link "S.C." with Samuel Clark who as he said did not appear upon the scene until some 30 years later. Neither Smith, White, or Elmer Clark have been too careful about some of their statements. For instance Whatcoat was not with Asbury on his 1790 trip but did travel with him several years later. The only name Asbury knew was the Sam Collins Church of which he was the founder and for which he was literally sent by Asbury. From this church he went on to the Briar Creek church thence to Galphin's trading post at Old Town. Galphin also had a trading post on the Savannah at Silver Bluff, both in operation before the arrival of Oglethorpe in 1733. Walter Clark is in error when he says that they arrived after the revolutionary war. As a matter of fact Samuel, Stephen and Moses fought through the war from this region and were granted land grants in Washington County for their services. Because of blurring of the last figure whether 1774 or 1775 in the notes was the date of their arrival and they at once began the erection of a log church. Therefore the marker of the Georgia Historical Society is inaccurate as to Thomas Humphries and John Major founding it, as to this being the third church "on this hollow site"-- the two preceding log churches were on the ridge about two miles west of this spot. Why should they have gone out into a sparsely settled part of the county to set up a church? Why not have worked in Augusta which was woefully in need of churches? I do not know when its name was changed from "S.C. to liberty but I suspect about the time this plank church was built which was very close to 1810. Nor do I know when it was made a part of the North Georgia Conference.

In December 1773 a family of Collins-Samuel, Stephen, Moses, Lewis, James and others landed in Boston directly from Ireland, their destination was Baltimore. They being hale hearty and husky and as any good Irishman always ready for a fight were easily persuaded to participate in the Boston Tea Party Dec. 16, 1773. As you recall your history this was not done by Bostonians, lest they be recognized by the Colonial Officials but by colonists brought in from the outlying districts and all were made up to appear as Indians. As one of their fellow countryman who had come over earlier, upon landing inquired as to what form of government in this country but before anyone could reply he said "I don't give a ding what kind I'm a gin it anyway". So the Collins must have felt to get so quickly into a fight but their later histories proved them otherwise. You recall also that the colonists brought in to participate in the Tea Party were quickly hurried out of Boston and back to their homes. So with the Collins tribe they were hastily transported on to Baltimore before any of them could be recognized as having participated in the Tea Party.
In Baltimore Samuel in particular, soon became acquainted with Rev. Frances Asbury before he was an ordained minister and later Bishop, but he was a local and itinerant preacher at that time. He was quite distressed by his information about the ungodliness of Georgia and his inability to go there and preach where Oglethorpe had settled in 1733 (Savannah and Augusta in 1735). You recall that the first preacher brought over by Oglethorpe to Savannah lasted only two or three years when he gave up and went back to England. The same was true in Augusta.

I do not know if Sam Collins was already converted before coming to America or was converted by Asbury after arrival but I do know that he was a most earnest convert so that Asbury urged him and his people to go on to Georgia to settle where there was so much need and the field so wide for religious workers.

They came and settled in this area and he began to preach the gospel and he himself cut the first log for the church he and some neighbors built on the ridge a mile or two west of here. When in a few years it was outgrown they tore it down and built a larger one which lasted until after his death.

In his will he named two or three men to select a site within two miles of the old church and to build a modern plank church upon it and all expenses to be paid from his estate. This was brought out in a paper by the daughter of the late Robert Collins before one of these homecomings several years ago, she was ill and could not be present but sent the paper to be read by the pastor. This LIBERTY church was the first in this area and I know of no older one in Richmond County. It is the MOTHER church. The old log church was given to the negroes.

Sam Collins served throughout the Revolutionary War as a private and some years afterwards was given a land grant in Washington County for his service. "The Story of Georgia and the Georgia People" 1732-1860 by George S. Smith published Macon Georgia 1900 in the appendix lists various ones who obtained these land grants from the colonial and State Governments. He mentions Samuel, Stephen, Moses, John Collins as having received grants for Revolutionary War services.

Since Sam Collins was the instigator and the builder it was known as Sam Collins church certainly till after Rev. Asbury’s visit in 1790 when he dedicated it. Later it was given the name of Liberty. Just when this building was erected I do not know nor do I know when it was taken into the Methodist Conference or just when Sam Collins died.

Soon after the end of the Revolutionary War a family of Allens moved into the area of what is now Hephzibah, some settling there others going on into Burke County. Among those in the Hephzibah area was Robert Allen who established a machine shop in the region of the spring back of the store where the Walker Bridge Road turns south from highway 88. This spring has borne the name Allen Spring ever since. He owned the lands southward and established the cemetery in this field in which are buried some of his descendants who are also my antecedents. This cemetery owns itself and 4 acres of land in a rectangle up to the Walker Bridge Road to provide for its perpetual care. This deed is currently in my possession for safe keeping.

Robert Allen was the inventor of the Allen Plow extensively used for many years until machinery drove the mule from the farms. He was one of Sam Collins’ converts and became also a local preacher. From about 1790 to 1815 his name is signed to 3/4 of the marriage certificates recorded in the Ordinary’s Office. He came into Augusta in his preaching and was the instigator of the building of St. John Methodist Church in 1793 and one of its 10 Trustees.

Another of Collins and Liberty’s Converts who played a big part in the history of this region was Nicholas Murphey who married Nancy Ann Collins, grand daughter of Samuel, daughter of Lewis Daniel Collins whose wife was Martha Allen sister of Robert. He also became a minister and the antecedent of the large family of Murphys.
Robert Allen and Nicholas Murphy were the most ardent proponents of the gospel in this area for a good many years. I own Robert Allen's pocket hymnal, coming down thru his daughter who married my great grandfather, Judge William J. Rhodes and both are buried in the above mentioned cemetery.

Samuel Collins and wife, name unknown had five children:
1. Leven Collins born 1775-76 died Aug 25, 1836 married 8/25/1796 Ann Catherine Odom of Barnwell S.C. Children were Lewis, Moses, Sarah and James and that is all I know about them. After Leven's death she married 9/15/08 Benjamin Wright and moved away. She died 6/27/1823.
2. Lewis Daniel Collins born 1778 died 10/4/1815 married 1/2/99 Martha Allen sister of Robert Allen. My grand father was named for him. He had a large family and his descendents are well scattered.
3. Elizabeth Ann born 6/1/34 d. 3/19/35 m. 1/10/67 Rev John Way founder of Ways Baptist Church in Stellaville which later grew up around the church situated on the banks of Brushy Creek, founded in 1817. They are both buried in that church cemetery in the corner nearest the church. Some of their descendents are still in that area.
4. Sarah Jane m. 1/20/08 Elijah Johnson d 3/2 5/27. I have never been able to get one clue of data concerning her except the above taken from the family bible.
5. Catherine Louisa Collins b 8/2/96 d. 4/23/1874 m. 10/24/12 William Matthews, they had 3 children, he died 1/19/21 and is buried in old Loftin Church cemetery on the south side of Brushy Creek about half way between Wrens and Stellaville land now owned by Prof. McCallum. This church was moved to between Wrens and Stapleton in the late 1860s and subsequently merged into the Wrens Methodist Church when it was formed a few years back. She married his brother Aquilla Jr 7/20/23. He was born 8/2/02 died 5/20/34 buried in the old section of Mt. Moriah Cemetery. She and her son, Lewis D. Matthews are buried on the old home place at Matthews, now owned by me.
Catherine Louisa was quite active in the development of Mt. Moriah Camp Ground and Church, established in 1824. She was one of the founders and was the chief pursuer in getting William Parker and his wife Bathsheba Matthews to give the original 40 acres of land for this purpose. These two are also buried under heavy granite slabs in old Loftin cemetery. Several other smaller tracts of land have been added to the original.

Hopeful Baptist church was born 1815 under the influence of Liberty. So was New Hope located at about what is now Hephzibah, the southern end and served that region from 1803 or 04 to 1848 when it was abandoned. Nicholas Murphy often preached in it in its earlier days. Its decline was due to the building of Berlin church in the 1830s, Clarks Chapel in 1847 and to Brothersville in 1853 to which my family moved their memberships and I think my grandfather was the first marriage in it in 1855. This church was rolled intact in 1890 from beside the old Brothersville Cemetery to its present location in Hephzibah where it has served and continues to serve as the Hephzibah Methodist Church. I asked the late Mrs. Laura Rhodes who was church secretary for many years and she could find no record of an earlier marriage. You may know that the late Mrs. Eddie Clark Melton left to Clarks Chapel fund the income from which is to be used to keep the church in repairs in tribute to her grandfather who founded it.
Walter Clark's last paragraph of old Liberty may interest you—"In further evidence of its antiquity my friend Jodiah M. Seago has informed me that his grandfather Rev. James Neatherland preached in this church in 1818 and that the building in which he ministered was the third house of worship that had sanctified the site. During its more than a hundred years of holding sacred services a religious center its pulpit has been blessed by the labors of many honored and useful men. In this connection it is an interesting fact that the late Rev. Alfred T. Mann, one of the ablest and most eloquent ministers known to Georgia Methodism, preached his maiden sermon in old Liberty Church and after fifty years or more of distinguished and successful service in his Master's cause the same hallowed walls echoed the last public utterance that came from his gifted lips and consecrated heart." 

What a Glorious Record for Old Liberty and a Heritage unequaled for you! The souls that have been saved by this church and its ramifications it is unequaled by any other church of which I know -- May the Lord bless you and keep you and help you to carry on.
ADDENDA to the History Of Liberty Church presented to you in last year.

A year ago I presented to you the history of Liberty Church obtained from records in my family from Sam Collins youngest daughter Katherine Louise who was my mothers grandmother and who raised her to girlhood because mothers mother had died when mother was 8 months old. I indicated two thoughts expressed elsewhere that I questioned and which I disagreed.

As to the oldest Methodist church in Georgia I stated that Liberty was first built as a log church by Sam Collins who himself cut the first log and with the assistance of several others it was completed in 1774 or 1775, I could not be certain because of blurring of the last figure. I wrote the Rev J. Sanford McDonald, pastor of the First Methodist Church of Washington, Ga. organized 1819 as an outgrowth of Grants Meeting House for information concerning this latter. His reply Feb.15 1966 "A copy of the history of our church (First Methodist) says Grants Meeting House was a 'little frame house of worship' built in 1737 by Daniel Grant and his son, Thomas. It was located five miles southeast of Washington just off the old Wrightsboro Road." Signed, J. Sanford McDonald, minister First Methodist Church. Thus you see that Liberty antedated by 10-12 years, and that it antedated the Revolutionary War.

Concerning Elmer Clark's foot note attempting to explain "S.C." in the text of Francis Asbury's notes, these being recently revised under his supervision, as meaning Sandy Run Creek which as you recall I refuted. I wish to add the following as further information-- The only church on Sandy Run Creek was a Baptist church built on land donated by Dr. McNair, Mr Morris was the builder in 1843. Under the pastorate of Rev. Joe Wells it was rebuilt in 1906 by the members under the supervision of John Moore. Rev. Wells died in 1929. The church was burned in 1942 or 43 and was never rebuilt. This information was obtained from his daughter and other descendents in this area, and positively refutes Elmer Clark's explanation.