

Unity Presbyterian Church
1828-1920
Lowndes County, Mississippi

The “Buttahatchie Settlements” were primarily settled by pioneers coming from the northern back country of South Carolina via Madison and Tuscaloosa Counties, Alabama, where government lands were being sold after being obtained from the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians. In these Alabama counties, they learned of new lands being opened along the Buttahatchie River, then thought to fall within the boundaries of the Alabama Territory.

One of the “Buttahatchie Settlements” originating, around 1822-23, and later falling into what became Lowndes County (1830), became known as Caledonia. The early settlers first built their original homes from materials at hand and cleared lands to do what they knew to do, farm.

Many of these pioneers were of Scotch-Irish heritage and Presbyterian by faith and did not long wait to continue their religious traditions. Early churches soon followed the construction of homes and settlers usually wasted little time in replacing temporary structures, such as brush arbors, with permanent church buildings, usually made of log.

About one-half mile south of what became the town of Caledonia, on a hill above a small creek, was built around 1828, a church which became a focal point in the lives of many who played a major role in the early history of this community. The name of Unity Presbyterian Church was selected and a chapter of Lowndes County history was opened. It became the place where families met regularly to hear their occasional preacher, sing hymns, enjoy the company of one another in the midst of hardships, educate their young, celebrate special events, and bury their loved ones across the road in the church burying ground.

Today, all that remains of this church are a few scattered records and the weathered and broken stones in the cemetery, only faint reminders of a time rich in human experience that required much faith, courage, strength, long suffering, and appreciation for the small matters of life.

Mayhew Mission

The origin of the Unity Presbyterian Church is closely connected with the history of the Mayhew Mission. According to the article *Mayhew Mission to the Choctaw Indians* by Libba Johnson, it appears that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which was organized by the Massachusetts General Association of Congregational Churches, began to set up a series of mission stations among the Indians in 1817. One in Chattanooga, Tennessee, called Brainerd, was established with Cyrus Kingsbury and L. S. Williams in charge. When the Choctaws learned of the school at Brainerd, two Choctaw chiefs were sent to request a similar mission. They are reported to have said “...they wished their children taught the better way of life, which was found in the ‘White Man’s Book,’ that they were equally as worthy as the Cherokees...that never had a white man’s blood been shed by a Choctaw at war.”

As a result of this petition, another station was set up at Eliot in 1818 with Kingsbury becoming the Superintendent of the Choctaw Missions. After one year, Eliot was so successful that another station was established in 1820 on the Tombigbee River, fifteen miles west of Plymouth, named Mayhew in honor of the two missionaries, Thomas Mayhew and son, who were very successful in preaching the gospel among the Indians in New England.

Among the new missionaries sent from Massachusetts were Messrs. Byington, Hooper, Cushman, Smith and Misses Frissels, Varnum, Chase, and Thatches, from Pennsylvania. On April 30, 1820, the Mayhew school opened with twelve students and grew rapidly. On May 6,

1821, a church was organized at Mayhew which was named "The Church of Christ. In November 1823 David Wright and his wife, Lucinda Washburn Wright, were sent to Mississippi, where he became director of the Mayhew Station. Membership grew rapidly and many Indians joined, the church becoming a part of the Tombigbee Presbytery in January 1830.

Mayhew continued to grow as a business, educational, and religious center until 1830 when, through the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the Choctaws were forced to cede all their land in Mississippi in exchange for land west of the Mississippi River. Most Indians and many of the missionaries, left. However, David Wright moved to Columbus where he continued his ministerial efforts. Although their primary goal was to work with the Choctaws, these missionaries also became involved in helping establish and nurture early churches among the white settlers pouring into the region. Among churches which trace their origins to this mission are First Presbyterian Churches of Columbus and Starkville, Bethel Presbyterian Church in the Prairie, and Unity Presbyterian Church.

Unity Church of Caledonia

The WPA Source Material for Mississippi History (Lowndes County provides the following regarding Unity church.

The organization of Unity Presbyterian Church was effected in 1828. The first building of hewn logs stood about one-half mile south of Caledonia ... a man by the name of Furr built this church on contributions made by the neighborhood members, and its earliest pastor, Rev. Thomas Archibald awaits the Resurrection in this quiet and beautifully kept "City of the Dead".

The list of the early members and ministers of this period cannot be obtained, as the record book disappeared after the death of Dr. Molloy in 1900, who was an elder at that time. The Presbytery sold the old building which succeeded the log structure and the few remaining members, having no church home, allied themselves with the Cumberland Presbyterians.

As noted, the establishment of Unity church was assisted by Presbyterian missionaries connected with the work among the Choctaw Indians at the Mayhew Mission. In early records of the Presbyterian church in the Presbyterian Archives in Montreat, North Carolina, a list of such ministers in 1827 was given as Cyrus Kingsbury, John Smith, Calvin Cushman, William Hooper, Anson Dyer, Anson Gleason, David Wright (who came from New England in 1823), and Timothy Painter. The creation of the Tombigbee (Tombeckbee) Presbytery was described in the following manner:

In 1828, Alfred Wright, Rev. Thomas Archibald, and Cyrus Kingsbury, members of the Presbytery of South Alabama, met at Mayhew. On 5 June 1829, they constituted a new Presbytery, the Tombigbee Presbytery. Major William M. Craven, ruling elder of the church at Columbus took his seat in the presbytery. Rev. Robert W. B. Kennedy (a member of the Alabama presbytery) was invited. Rev. Cyrus Byington was added.

The Tombigbee Presbytery held regular meetings at which they would encourage one another and address church matters. Meetings, consisting of ministers and representative elders from member churches, seem to have been held at least twice a year, the meeting place rotated among congregations. A partial listing of those meetings found in the Montreat Presbyterian Archives gave the names of elders representing Unity.

10 November 1829	William Wright , an Elder of Unity, was present.
26 March 1830	William Givens , an Elder of Unity present.
7 March 1833	William G. Wright , Elder, represented Unity. It was also recorded at this time that Rev. D. Wright would supply Unity

once a month and **Archibald** would labor as a missionary three sabbaths of each month at Unity, Beersheba and Luxsupalia. This would indicate that, at this time, Archibald was sharing ministerial responsibilities with David Wright and perhaps others.

- 1834 **William G. Wright** was “taken ill” and **Robert Dowdle**, Elder, took his seat in presbytery.
- 5 March 1835 Presbytery met at the Unity Church. Cyrus Kingsbury, Thomas Archibald, Stuart, David Wright were present. **Elzy Williams**, Elder, represented Unity.
- 19 October 1838 **J. Elliott** represented Unity
- 4 April 1839 **John Elliot**, Elder, represented Unity
- 5 October 1845 **J. F. Gardner** represented Unity
- 1850 **J. J. Mayfield**, Elder, represented Unity
- 18 October 1857 In a treasurer’s report showed the receipt of \$1.00 from **J. Murphy**

From the *Southern Argus*, Saturday, February 14, 1835, the following announcement was found.

Tombigbee Presbytery will meet at Unity church near Capt. Dowdle’s on Thursday, the 5th of March, commencing a four day meeting.

The Tombigbee Presbytery consisted of a union of churches that included those in Lowndes, Winston, Octibbaheha, Monroe, and other counties in the area.

The deed for land on which Unity was built, dated 18 April 1836, showed that James Gardner sold a 99 year lease to **Robert Dowdle, John Elliott, William Cockerham** and **Elzey Williams**, “Trustees of Unity”, six and one-half acres of 16th Section land for thirteen dollars (*Deed Book 5, page 403*). However, the dates on grave stones indicate that the cemetery was in use prior to 1836.

When the original log structure was replaced by a new wooden building is not known. It must have been an event that caused great pride among the members. A few older citizens in the Caledonia community (1985) still remembered this building that stood until the 1920’s. James and Willie Belle Wiggins, both in their 80’s in the 1980’s and whose grandfather, Thomas Wiggins, was a member, remembered it as being a fairly large unpainted wooden structure which sat low on the ground, had a low-pitched roof, no porch or windows on the front and large double, hand-hewn doors. Inside was one large room with windows along the sides and two sections of rough pews (described as the hardest in the world) with a single slat for a back in which the men sat on one side of the building and the women on the other. The unraised pulpit was located in the east end of the building. Located close to the building at the bottom of a hill was an excellent spring where members would go to get a cold mug (and would need another when you got back to the top of the hill) and in which the children would wade.

The first minister is thought to be Thomas Archibald who, although may have shared early ministerial responsibilities with others, was a very early, powerful force within this congregation. In an early historical account of Unity, the author makes the following statement.

The first pastor was probably, Dr. Thomas Archibald, who was a missionary at Mayhew, and it is known, he was the minister of this church until his death, as dates are given on his tomb in Unity grave-yard as born 1786 and died in 1846.

*In Memory of
The Rev. Thomas Archibald
Pastor of Unity Church
Born August 13, 1786
Died October 17, 1846
He left a wife and infant child
whose only solace is the hope of
meeting him in Heaven,
Where fragrant flowers immortal bloom
Beyond the confines of the tomb
Appears the dawn of Heaven.*



Another minister of this church buried in its cemetery is **W. G. Oden** (Born February 24, 1814 - Died October 17, 1861). He is listed as a minister in the 1860 census where he is found with his wife, Louisa, and children, Henry C., Jane, Newel and Julia. In the diary of James Egger Sr. (found in the Caledonia Library), W. G. Oden is mentioned as preaching at Unity in 1858 on a regular basis. Others mentioned by Egger as preaching at Unity during this time were Martin, Saverengen (sp?) and Smith. During 1863 - 1864, William Bond Kolb, himself a Baptist minister, mentioned in his diary attending services at Unity in which **T. B. Wood, Dr. Mitchell** and **Rev. J. Kerr** preached. Kerr is mentioned on several occasions by Kolb. The entry for October 15, 1863 indicated that J. W. Kerr preached at Unity and remained overnight with Kolb in order to conduct the funeral of Mrs. Margaret Murphy, wife of John Murphy Jr., evidently a member, the next day (Kerr also performed the marriage of S. Swanzy and Elizabeth Stephenson).

The identity of many families who were regular members of this church is forever lost. Seeing that most churches had services only once or twice a month, there were those in the community who would attend at different churches representing different denominations even though they may consider themselves closely identified with a particular one. From diaries, conversations, and the materials, the following is a list of some who are believed to have headed households that considered themselves members.

Robert Dowdle, Andrew Dowdle, Robert A. Dowdle, John Elliott, William Cockerham, Elzey Williams, John Stephenson, Hugh Stephenson, John Murphy, Thomas Wiggins, William Greer, William G. Wright, Minter, John J. Mayfield, Lawrence, Molloy, Montgomery, John M. Russell, Groves, Elam Robinson, Morris and Gardner.

It is not always easy to determine which of those buried in a church burying ground were members of the church. However, many found in Unity Cemetery were indeed a part of the church family at Unity Presbyterian Church. Family names found in the cemetery are as follows: *Archibald (1), Barnes (1), Bowdoin (1), Burns (1), Caldwell (2), Cockerham (2), Dale (1), Dowdle (22), Egger (4), Ellis (1), Gallagher (3), Gardner (12), Greer (4), Griffin (2), Groves (3), Harper (1), Jones (1), Kidd (2), Loftis (3), Lawrence (2), Mayfield (1), McElroy (1), Minter (3), Montgomery (13), Morris (20), Murphy (9), Oden (91), Robinson (3), Russell (6), Simmons (1), Stephenson (20), Swanzy (3), Verner (3), Webb (2), White (3), and Wiggins (7).*

The identity of many who are buried in Unity Cemetery is lost forever due to large number of unmarked graves.

Caledonia Academy

Early settlers were not only interested in the spiritual needs of their families but were also concerned with the education of their children. Academies were established in several locations within the Caledonia region. One was located at the Unity church building and is likely the one described in the ad appearing in the 1836 Columbus paper. Notice that the names of trustees of the school are also associated with Unity Church.

Caledonia Academy

Will be opened on the 11th day of July, 1836, for the reception of English and Classical scholars, on the following terms. For spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic \$7.50 per session; geography and English grammar, \$10.00; for the Latin and Greek languages and mathematics \$15.00. The Trustees of said Academy having engaged the services of Mr. Samuel Morrow, Junr., feel no hesitancy in recommending him as a teacher of youth, as his qualifications and moral character are unimpeachable.

Caledonia is situated in Lowndes County, Mi. about sixteen miles north east of Columbus, in a section of country which is surpassed by none for good health and correct moral principles. Boarding can be had on good terms, convenient to the Institution.

Robert Dowdle

John Elliott

W. G. Oden

Trustees

July 14, 1836

Although no records are known to exist of the names of families who sent their children to the Caledonia Academy, those found among members should have been well represented. James and Willie Belle Wiggins, livelong residents at Caledonia, indicated that their grandfather, John Daniel Murphy, attended the Feemster School (Ridgeway Academy) for awhile. About the time Salem Church (associated with Ridgeway) was taking a strong, public, anti-slavery stands, he, and perhaps others, traveled several miles further up Wolf Road to the academy at Unity.

Center for Military Drills

Unity was more than a house of worship and school, but also served as the scene of community events. It is known that the local militia met and practiced on the grounds on a regular basis. At the time of the Civil War, men from the area who had joined with Captain M. M. Rowan's Caledonia Rifles met at Unity and there camped until their departure for active duty. Reunions were held on the same grounds after the war to commemorate the events and give honor to those who fought and returned and remember the many who never came home from serving their cause. The newspaper accounts give some indication of these events.

Sketches of the Civil War

(Reunion of the Rowan Company - Sept. 25, 1915)

By Dr. Emmett Jamison

Dear Editor:

I am reproducing the following sketch of the civil war, and the leaving here of the Caledonia company, in command of their gallant Captain M. M. Rowan, from Unity Church, Friday, Sept. 25, 1861, which I am sure will be enjoyed by all lovers of historical events. Very few if any are living today who will remember, Friday, Sept. 25, 1861 when weeping mothers were bidding their sons good-bye, some for the last time; wives bidding their husbands goodbye, some never returning. Lovers also leaving for the battlefield; when at the tap of the drum, Capt. Rowan and his company of brave men marched away from old Unity Church, one mile from Caledonia, to meet the boys in blue on the battlefield, for four long years of war.

Friday, Sept. 25th 1861, was a day that will long remain green in the history of Caledonia, as on the above date, Capt. Rowan and his company marched away from home and

loved ones to meet the boys in blue. There are no names that shine brighter, and offer loftier examples of true patriotism than the illustrious sons of Caledonia, who were brave and gallant young men.

For thirty years it has been the custom to give an annual barbecue to the surviving members of this good old company, The originators of this annual reunion were Capt. J. L. Egger, James C. Nelson, and J. H. Lance. These gallant old soldiers have all answered the last roll call, and are resting under the shade of the trees on the other shore.

Other sources indicate that on the day Captain Rowan's Caledonia Rifles marched off to war, there was a grand farewell gathering of sober-minded family members and friends to see the boys and men off to war. Miss Annie Parham presented the men a flag made at the loving hands of the community ladies followed by a barbecue on the grounds of the Amzi D. Murphy home.

Much more is then provided by Dr. Jamison of the actual 1915 reunion which took place at the high school building with around 2000 in attendance. He mentions at the roll call, only six members of the original Caledonia Rifle Company were living; five of the number being present and had seats of honor on the rostrum, under the old flag that they all loved so dearly. Of the 115 in this company that left old Unity Church on that beautiful September morning, 63 went down on the battlefield in death.

In another article, which may have been written by Dr. Jamison, additional facts are found within a similar account.

At this historical old church Capt. Rowan organized the old Caledonia Rifle Company and remained in camp there till September 25, 1861, when this band of brave Confederate soldiers broke camp and marched to the front for a four years war. Several years after the close of the war, on September 25, 1882, at the annual reunion of this old company, Capt. J. L. Egger and Capt. J. C. Nelson, Capt. J. H. Land, with a few other members of the old Rowan company, organized the Caledonia Rifle Company or National Guard, with J. L. Egger as captain, J. C. Nelson first lieutenant, J. H. Land second lieutenant. This company drilled once a month, taking part in all the state encampments up until the Spanish-American war, when the boys hiked for Spain in command of Capt. A. M. Lawrence.....

There is only about six of the old Rowan company still living, among them Messrs. D. B. Andrews, James Dodson, Judge J. L. Williamson and one or two others. Last year this historical old church that has been the seen of so many of the young men of the Caledonia section leave for war, was sold to Mr. C. H. Robertson and moved to Columbus, where he is using this old house as a general store and will house.

Men remaining in the region during the war still participated in regular drills at Unity. William Bond Kolb mentions in his diary participating "attending drill at Unity" on February 21 and April 18, 1864. The Caledonia Rifles continued through the Spanish-American War with drills on the Unity grounds. The photograph below is of the Caledonia Rifles of 1898 in uniform. Some identified in the picture are Capt. Jim Egger, Robert Egger, Abe Vaughn, Met Lawrence, Bart Lawrence, Steve Vaughn, and Tom Blewett. It is likely that the building seen in the background is Unity, the only photograph of this structure known to exist.



Southern Musical Association

In the article quoted immediately above, the author's main thrust was to report on another kind of event that took place at Unity in 1860 which gives some insights into church-related activities in which these pioneers participated and the identity of some of those actively involved.

The following history and growth of the Lowndes County Singing Convention and short sketch of the church, where the Southern Musical Association was held in 1860, will be of interest to the readers of the Dispatch. (The author then gives the account of Capt. Rowan's company given above)

The following are the proceedings of the Southern and Western Vocal Musical Association from which sprang the Lowndes County Singing Convention, which was held in this church.

Proceedings of the Southern and Western Musical Association

This association held its Fourth Annual session in Unity church house, Lowndes county, Miss. on Thursday August 23d, 1860 at 10 a.m.

The meeting was called to order by the Rev. S. C. Johnson, and after singing and prayer, went into an election for officers:

W. W. Pool was elected president; R. R. Osburn, vice-president, and John A. Egger secretary.

On motion a committee was appointed to transact business, consisting of Dr. A. M. Lawrence, M. M. Rowan and J. M. Ussery.

Recess one hour.

The house being called to order by the president, the following committees were appointed:

Committee on Communication.. Wm. McCown, S. C. Johnson and A. J. Egger Executive Committee.. D. W. Stokes, M. M. Rowan, E. G. Story and Wm. Greer

On motion, the correspondence was called for, and the delegates admitted to seats in the body.

The musical exercises were then conducted by Messrs. Osburn and Pool. 30 minutes each.

Prayer by Osburn, adjourned till Friday morning.

Friday Morning, 9 O'clock

Singing and prayer by Rev. W. G. Oden.

The committee on business being absent, the president was requested to conduct a lesson in music, while the committee make up a report.

Report of the Committee

Lessons by D. W. Stokes and James L. Egger, 20 minutes each

Business one hour.

Recess 15 minutes.

On motion and second the constitution be read.

Report of the committees for 1 1/2 hours

The musical exercises conducted by Messrs. Randolph, Prof. Davenport and Murphy, 30 minutes each.

Recess one hour.

Evening Session, 1 O'clock

Lessons conducted by A. C. Molloy and R. S. Murphy, 30 minutes each.

Recess 15 minutes

Report of the committee for the closing exercises of the evening. Musical lessons conducted by Messrs. W. McCown, Wm. Eggar and R. R. Osborn, 20 minutes each.

Prayer, and the association adjourned until Saturday morning, 9 o'clock

Saturday Morning

The Association met pursuant to adjournment. Prayer by Osburn and the musical exercises were Then conducted by Wm. Greer, followed by C. G. Story, 40 minutes.

Recess 15 minutes

After recess, the meeting met in the hour, and devoted one hour to business.

On motion, a committee was appointed to assist the secretary in printing the minutes, consisting of James Egger, M. M. Rowan and L. H. Wood.

On motion, an examining committee of five was appointed to test the qualifications of anyone wishing to teach vocal music, whereupon the following gentlemen were elected by ballot: W. W. Pool, R. R. Osburn, Prof. Davenport, Wm. Greer, and A. C. Molloy, after which lessons were conducted by R. S. Murphy and D. W. Stokes, 20 minutes each. Prayer offered by Rev. Mr. Carr.

Meeting adjourned until Sunday morning.

Sunday Morning, 9 O'clock

The Association met pursuant to adjournment. Singing, and prayer by Rev. W. G. Oden; Lessons conducted by Messrs. Osburn and Greer

Little is known of the decline of this old church and its eventual death. The W.P.A. historical materials give the following information.

In 1924, a vain effort was made to reunite the two sects of Presbyterians of this section and Dr. T. D. Bateman, pastor of Columbus Presbyterian church, preached a few years twice a month.

Dr. A. C. Molloy was a leading spirit at Unity church for years during the latter part of the 1800's. The list of the early members and ministers of this period were lost as the record books disappeared after the death of Dr. Molloy in 1900, an elder at that time.

Thus, something that had been created nearly a century before and played such a significant role in the lives of both the community and its people faded into the realm of faint memories which may soon be forgot altogether.

The Reorganized Church

The following information comes from reproduced pages titled *History of the Unity Presbyterian Church*, by Miss Florence Molloy.

The Presbytery sold the old church which succeeded the log structure, and the few remaining members, having no church home, allied themselves to the Cumberland Presbyterian. In 1924, a vain effort was made to re-unite the various sects of Presbyterians at Caledonia, and Dr. T. D. Bateman, pastor of the church at Columbus, preached a few years to the congregation; during his pastorate much interest was taken, The church building in Caledonia where services were held was painted outside and decorated inside. (Note: This is the Presbyterian church building in downtown Caledonia). After Dr. Bateman, Dr. Coker preached a few years, and now we are served by Rev. C. T. Stewart. Ten or twelve paying members keep things going by paying the pastor; keeping up the church standing in the Presbytery; Sunday School meeting regularly. There are about thirty members, but all do not pay to the support of the church.

Presbyterian Church, N.S. Caledonia, was reorganized November 9, 1924, by Rev. T. D. Bateman with the following charter members:

<i>Bennett, O. O.</i>	<i>Hughson, Katie</i>
<i>Bennett, Mrs. Opal</i>	<i>Lawrence, A. M.</i>
<i>Barrentine, Ola</i>	<i>Lawrence, L. B.</i>
<i>Cockerham, Ira</i>	<i>Lawrence, Annie</i>
<i>Cockerham, Mrs. Nettie</i>	<i>Molloy, Florence</i>
<i>Cockerham, Clarence</i>	<i>Molloy, Will D.</i>
<i>Cockerham, James</i>	<i>Molloy, Sidney</i>
<i>Cockerham, Billups</i>	<i>Molloy, Jessie Wilson</i>
<i>Dale, J. A.</i>	<i>Morris, S. A.</i>

<i>Dale, Mrs. Ollie</i>	<i>Morris, Mrs. Martha Fleeta</i>
<i>Dale, Selma</i>	<i>Morris, Elizabeth</i>
<i>Dale, Grace</i>	<i>Morris, Katherine</i>
<i>Egger, Mrs. Martha</i>	<i>Morris, James Clark</i>
<i>Egger, E. D.</i>	<i>Stephenson, W. D.</i>
<i>Egger, Mrs. Robbie</i>	<i>Stephenson, Harris</i>
<i>Harper, E. O.</i>	<i>Thomas, Mrs. Siddie</i>
<i>Harris, Mrs. Augusta</i>	<i>Van Diver, Morgan</i>
<i>Hughson, Clarence</i>	<i>Van Diver, Fleeta</i>
<i>Elders - J. A. Dale, L. B. Lawrence, S. A. Morris and W. D. Stephenson</i>	

As the reader will note, the families that one sees in the reorganized church at Caledonia and the names associated with old Unity significantly overlap.



Old Unity Church Cemetery

Taken from *Unity Church and Cemetery, Lowndes County, Mississippi: Pioneers of the Buttahatchie Settlements*, by James L. Murphy, 1998, Buttahatchie Publications (jmurphy2@knology.net)