

# Big Pigeon Celebrates

By Nancy L. O'Neill

Lifestyles Editor

Sunday, December 6, dawned crisp and cold. The winter sun shone brightly as it filtered through the windows of the third building to house the Big Pigeon Primitive Baptist Church.

Members and friends gathered there on the first Sunday of this month just as members have done for exactly two hundred years. The warmth which radiated from the wood stove at the front of this small country church was more than equaled by the warmth of friendship as members extended the hand of fellowship to friend and stranger alike.

For two centuries the Big Pigeon Primitive Baptist Church of Cocke County has provided spiritual leadership for its members. The oldest church in the county, it was organized December 6, 1787, with 12 members. Today, many of the descendants of early county pioneers such as the Bryants, Clevengers, and Sisks are still members.

Fortunately for genealogists and historians, the minutes of this church survive. A photostatic copy is available in the Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection of the Knox County Public Library system in Knoxville, and a typed transcript is available at Stokely Memorial Library in Newport.

Of the extant Cocke County records, Peter Fine's store ledger dates from approximately 1790. County occupancy land grant surveys were recorded circa 1807. The earliest census for the county

earliest known written document available for Cocke County.

They record the names of husbands, wives, and children; dates of coming and going; community events. They provide

insight into the lives of these early settlers.

## Church Founded

The minutes establish that many of the members had lived in the area since 1785 and wanted a church located near them. Rev. Jonathan Mulky and William Reno, both from Buffalo Ridge Baptist Church in Washington County, assisted their organization.

The Holston Association found them "ripe for constitution" in 1787. On December 6, 12 men and women met at the home of James English on the Big Pigeon River. English and "Nickless" Woodfin were "received by experience"—more familiar terminology would be "saved." The other 10, William Whitson, David Jobe, Abraham McKay, Elizabeth Whitson, Lezann Jobe, Rachel McKay, Mourning Pryor, Mourning Denton, Darcus Jobe, and Mary White, evidently had letters from their home churches.

James English was a charter member who quickly shook the dust of Cocke County from his feet. A minute for June 1791 notes that the "church considered the disorder of James English for not applying for a letter of dismissal." The last trace of him is found in Governor John Sevier's Commission Book where he is appointed an ensign in the Grainger County militia June 16, 1800.

Nicholas Woodfin signed the oath of allegiance to the United States in Montgomery County, Virginia, in 1777. He was a Revolutionary War soldier and was Greenbrier County, Virginia, now West Virginia.

He married Hannah Mary Ashbrook in 1786. She was born May 3, 1766, and died August 9, 1845. Their children were: Sarah,

Mary, Samuel, Elizabeth, Phoebe, Jane, Hannah, and John. The church minutes for June 11, 1791, state "Nickless Woodfin, Ledy parkes and Elizabeth shall all being about to remove

granted to them..." (sic). The "Woodfins" moved to Buncombe County, North Carolina, where they resided for several years before moving to McMinn County, Tennessee, where he died.

William Whitson and Elizabeth, his wife, founded Whitson's Fort near Wilton Springs. Jefferson County (Cocke County in 1797) deeds indicate they were buying and selling land in that area in the 1790s.

David Jobe was the seventh child of Abraham and Elizabeth Jobe of Shenandoah County, Virginia. He married Lezannah Whitson, sister of the above William Whitson. They had the following children: Abraham, William, and Joshua. David and his wife moved to Kentucky. Abraham McKay, son of Moses and Mary Jobe McKay, and his wife, Rachel O'Dell McKay, migrated circa 1783 to Cocke County from Shenandoah County, Virginia. McKay, an officer during the American Revolution,

was a very educated man. They had 10 children: David, Abe, Jeremiah, Isaac, Leah, Merium, Betsy, Lidia, Elizabeth, and Abigail. Two of his descendants are L.S. McKay and Mary Barger Ford.

McKay was chosen the church's first clerk and served in that capacity for 36 years. On July 5, 1823, he resigned on "account of old age and being feeble..." His son, Jeremiah, assumed the clerkship.

Mourning Thomson Pryor was the wife of Richard Pryor. They migrated early from Cocke County to Sumner County, Tennessee, where they remained only a short time before moving to Logan County, Kentucky, where Richard Pryor died in 1797.

Family genealogists differ as to what happened to Mourning Hogg Denton, wife of Abraham Denton. Some believe she died here, others that she migrated west with other family members.

Darcus McKay Jobe was the wife of Samuel Jobe, who received a land grant from North Carolina for his Revolutionary War service. Dorcas was a daughter of Zachariah McKay and his wife Lydia (Whitson?) McKay.

The Jobes had five children: Jacob, Caleb, Abraham, Isaac, and Daniel.

Darcus and Samuel migrated first to Monroe County, Kentucky, where her name is recorded as a member of the Mill Creek Baptist Church in 1798-99, then to Missouri where Samuel died circa 1819. Her death date is unknown.

Of all the charter members of Big Pigeon Church, Mary White poses the biggest enigma. A deed between William Whitson and Matthew Mattox, recorded in Jefferson County, shows that a John White had land which bounded Whitson.

In 1792, the church considered the "distress of the Widow White." On April 2, 1796, "Mary and Jem.i White" applied for letters of dismission. It is possible that John was Mary's husband and died here. Jem.i could be an abbreviation for the name Jemini who is believed to have been Mary's daughter.

Although William Lillard, the first state representative from Cocke County; Peter Fine, an early pioneer and civic leader; and Joshua Kelley, the first preacher, were not charter members, they joined Big Pigeon during its first decade and played major roles in its activities. Toliver Sisk, the third clerk, served for more than 40 years in that capacity.

For several years, church members met in various

of 1794, the minutes show that a suitable place for a meeting house was found near Thomas Dillon's. This site is near the present home of Robert Clevenger in Edwina. It is in the "bottoms" of his property and is beside the river. The members supplied logs and labor and built the church themselves.

According to the minutes, Clevenger's grandfather, the late Samuel Carson Clevenger, purchased the original building in 1877 for "five or ten dollars and used the timbers for a tobacco barn," said Clevenger. The huge handhewn logs used in the church were poplar and pine and are still sound. A close look at the barn shows that the corners were "saddle-notched." Clevenger pointed out different logs and said "some of those people were better at hewing logs than others."

An entry for April 4, 1789, states, "Whereas the times looking very Defioualt in respect of the Indians being so trobelsom and in Case the Church should be Disolv.d under such a unhappy circumstance the Church doth herareby impower Abram McKay as Clark of sd Church to give any Ordily Member so Disolv.d A letter of Dismition in behalf of sd. Church."

A large migration began from Cocke County in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Several church members banded together and moved: some to Kentucky, many to Missouri.

Between September 1797 and March 1798, Philip Mulkey and wife, Enoch Jobe and wife, John McQueary and wife, Jane Odell,

Mark Mitchell and wife, Thomas Sullivan, John Mulkey, and Abraham Heaston's and David Jobe's families moved to Monroe County, Kentucky. They carried with them the Big Pigeon Church covenant and inserted it into the front of the Mill Creek Baptist Church's record book. The first entry is dated September 11, 1798. This church, which they organized, was called "Old Mulkey."

### Social Mores

Big Pigeon's minutes also reveal the social mores of the day. The church discussed moral issues as well as community concerns for those who might be in need. Regular attendance was expected. No one could miss three consecutive meetings without a good excuse. Offenses were quickly dealt with by the church.

"Fiddle playing," "watching the slight of hand (magic)," and, heaven forbid, dancing, were frowned upon. Joining another denomination such as the Methodists or leaving without a letter were considered serious offenses.

Two degrees of judgment are recorded in the minutes. A member could have been excluded from fellowship for a minor offense which meant he or she was simply no longer a member. For more serious offenses, members were excommunicated. Excommunication carried with it a moral judgment or condemnation by the

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# Big Pigeon

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congregation.

In the 1830s, the churches in the Nolachuckey Association, to which Big Pigeon then belonged, split over the issues of Sunday schools; temperance tracts; manumission; societies involved in freeing slaves; and home missionary societies. Big Pigeon remained faithful to its original doctrine and, on April 2, 1836, declared its non-fellowship with anyone who embraced these beliefs.

In 1863, the war "becoming troublesome," they discontinued regular services and did not meet again until 1872. At that time, the meeting house had fallen into such a state of disrepair that they met in homes and at the Butler school house. Realizing the meeting house was beyond repair, they sold the property and building and moved to the present site where they built a log church.

## Deaths Recorded

If the old church had a cemetery, and local historians believe that it did, it has long since been destroyed. Fortunately, some far-sighted church member suggested that some of the

members' deaths be recorded in the minutes.

"...The Church agree to have the Decest members names Recorded 1840 Elizabeth Huff Decest; Benjamin Odell Decest 28 May formerly a Dacon; Sary Huff Decest July 1840; Jane Mantuth Decost March 1842; Samuel Yats Decest March 1844; 1844 William Colman Decest October 1; 1844 George Roberts Decest November 1845; Elder Thomas Hill Decest March who was pastor of big pigeon church; in 1847 Elizabeth Woods Decest 15 Apriel; Maryann McKay or Fatbion 1st Decest the 1849"

Throughout the minutes four other deaths are recorded. "Feburary, 1810, Thomas Clevenger and David McKay departed this life," is notated on June 30, 1810. Clevenger was a Revolutionary patriot who married Syche Pittman and McKay was a son of Abraham McKay.

"1874 March 10th day Elder Thomas Smith our beloved Brother and Moderator untill his dath Deceased on this date above written."

Toliver Sisk (my great-great-grandfather), clerk for more than 40 years, "...dath tuck place on

the 10th day of November in 1 year of bur lord 1880 at half p. ten oclock in the night."

The names of the clerks & preachers have changed throuout the years. Three of the known preachers were Thor Hill, Thomas Smith, and Brumit Bryant. Currently, Zen Whaley is elder and C.H. Bryant is church clerk.

As the church begins its th century, it belongs to a fo church circuit. Elder Whal preaches at Big Pigeon, Lit Pigeon, Laurel Springs, a Greenbrier churches in rotati. The members of these church travel with him from one chur to another.

"We may be small commented one member, "b you don't have to belong to a church to worship the Lord."